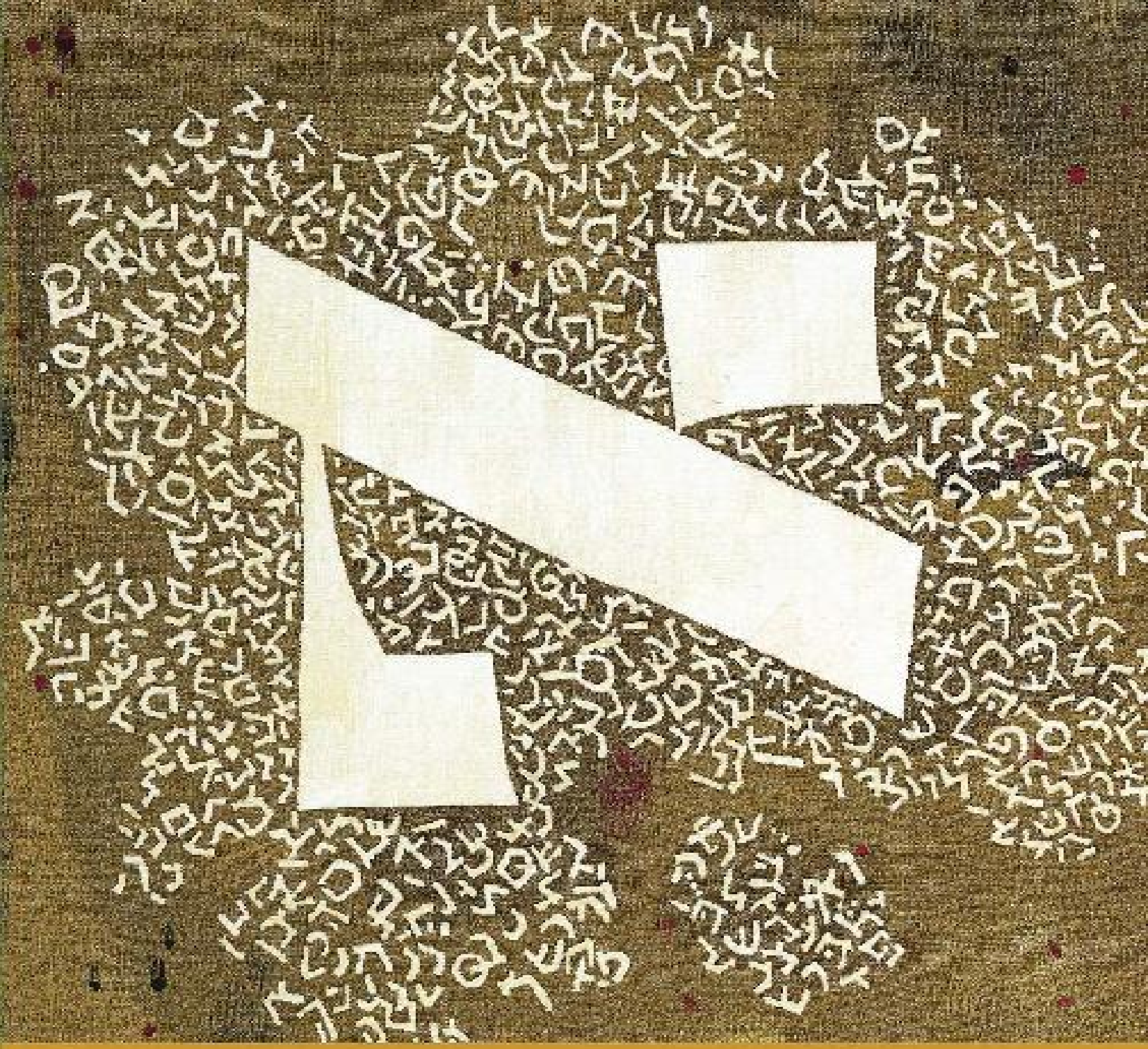

THE HEBREW BIBLE

A Translation with Commentary

ROBERT ALTER

Publisher's Notice: Superscript note numbers in the ebook correspond to verse numbers. Only verse numbers with corresponding footnotes will be linked.

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THE HEBREW BIBLE

VOLUME 1

THE FIVE BOOKS OF MOSES

TORAH

■

A TRANSLATION WITH COMMENTARY

ROBERT ALTER

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For Jonas, Judah, Amos,
and, especially, Michael,
dear friends now gone whose
presence in my life made a
difference in all this.

About the Author

Robert Alter's translation of the Hebrew Bible, the magnificent capstone to a lifetime of distinguished scholarly work, has won the PEN Center Literary Award for Translation and the Koret Jewish Book Award. His immense achievements in scholarship ranging from the eighteenth-century European novel to contemporary Hebrew and American literature earned Alter the Robert Kirsch Award for Lifetime Achievement from the *Los Angeles Times*. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society, Alter is Emeritus Class of 1937 Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley.

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Introduction to the Hebrew Bible

I. THE BIBLE IN ENGLISH AND THE HERESY OF EXPLANATION

Why, after so many English versions, a new translation of the Hebrew Bible? There is, as I shall explain in detail, something seriously wrong with all the familiar English translations, traditional and recent, of the Hebrew Bible. Broadly speaking, one may say that in the case of the modern versions, the problem is a shaky sense of English and in the case of the King James Version, a shaky sense of Hebrew. The present translation is an experiment in re-presenting the Bible —and, above all, biblical narrative prose—in a language that conveys with some precision the semantic nuances and the lively orchestration of literary effects of the Hebrew and at the same time has stylistic and rhythmic integrity as literary English. I shall presently give a more specific account of the kind of English I have aimed for and of the features of the Hebrew that have prompted my choices, but I think it will be helpful for me to say something first about why

English translations of the Bible have been problematic—more problematic, perhaps, than most readers may realize.

It is an old and in some ways unfair cliché to say that translation is always a betrayal, but modern English versions of the Bible provide unfortunately persuasive evidence for that uncompromising generalization. At first thought, it is rather puzzling that this should be the case. In purely quantitative terms, we live in a great age of Bible translation. Several integral translations of the Bible have been done since the middle of the twentieth century, and a spate of English versions of individual biblical books has appeared. This period, moreover, is one in which our understanding of ancient Hebrew has become considerably more nuanced and precise than it once was, thanks to comparative Semitic philology aided by archaeology, and also thanks to the careful reanalysis of the formal structures—syntax, grammar, morphology, verb tenses—of biblical Hebrew. One might have expected that this recent flurry of translation activity, informed by the newly focused awareness of the meanings of biblical Hebrew, would have produced at least some English versions that would be both vividly precise and closer to the feel of the original than any of the older translations. Instead,

the modern English versions—especially in their treatment of Hebrew narrative prose—have placed readers at a grotesque distance from the distinctive literary experience of the Bible in its original language. As a consequence, the King James Version, as Gerald Hammond, an eminent British authority on Bible translations, has convincingly argued, remains the closest approach for English readers to the original—despite its frequent and at times embarrassing inaccuracies, despite its archaisms, and despite its insistent substitution of Renaissance English tonalities and rhythms for biblical ones.

Some observers have sought to explain the inadequacy of modern Bible translations in terms of the general decline of the English language. It is certainly true that there are far fewer people these days with a cultivated sensitivity to the expressive resources of the language, the nuances of lexical values, the force of metaphor and rhythm; and one is certainly much less likely to find such people on a committee of ecclesiastical or scholarly experts than one would have in the first decade of the seventeenth century. There are, nevertheless, still some brilliant stylists among English prose writers; and if our age has been graced with remarkable translations of Homer, Sophocles, and Dante, why not of the Bible?

Part of the explanation, I suspect, is in the conjunction of philological scholarship and translation. I intend no churlish disrespect to philology. On the contrary, without it, our reading of the Bible, or indeed of any older text, is no better than walking through a great museum on a very gloomy day with all the lights turned out. To read the Bible over the shoulder of a great philological critic, like Abraham ibn Ezra (1092–1167), one of the earliest and still eminently worth studying, is to see many important things in fine focus for the first time. There is, however, a crucial difference between philology as a tool for understanding literary texts and philology as an end in itself, for literature and philology work with extremely different conceptions of what constitutes knowledge. To be fair to the broad enterprise of philology, which has included some great literary critics, I use the term here as shorthand for "biblical philology," a discipline that, especially in its Anglo-American applications, has often come down to lexicography and the analysis of grammar.

For the philologist, the great goal is the achievement of clarity. It is scarcely necessary to say that in all sorts of important, but also delimited, ways clarity is indispensable in a translator's wrestling with the original text. The simplest case, but a pervasive

one, consists of getting a handle on the meaning of particular terms. It is truly helpful, for example, to know that biblical *naḥal* most commonly indicates not any sort of brook, creek, or stream but the kind of freshet, called a *wadi* in both Arabic and modern Hebrew, that floods a dry desert gulch during the rainy months and vanishes in the heat of the summer. Suddenly, Job's "my brothers betrayed like a *naḥal*" (Job 6:14) becomes a striking poetic image, where before it might have been a minor puzzlement. But philological clarity in literary texts can quickly turn into too much of a good thing. Literature in general, and the narrative prose of the Hebrew Bible in particular, cultivates certain profound and haunting enigmas, delights in leaving its audiences guessing about motives and connections, and, above all, loves to set ambiguities of word choice and image against one another in an endless interplay that resists neat resolution. In polar contrast, the impulse of the philologist is—here a barbarous term nicely catches the tenor of the activity—"to disambiguate" the terms of the text. The general result when applied to translation is to reduce, simplify, and denature the Bible. These unfortunate consequences are all the more pronounced when the philologist, however acutely trained in that discipline, has an

underdeveloped sense of literary diction, rhythm, and the uses of figurative language; and that, alas, is often the case in an era in which literary culture is not widely disseminated even among the technically educated.

The unacknowledged heresy underlying most modern English versions of the Bible is the use of translation as a vehicle for *explaining* the Bible instead of representing it in another language, and in the most egregious instances this amounts to explaining away the Bible. This impulse may be attributed not only to a rather reduced sense of the philological enterprise but also to a feeling that the Bible, because of its canonical status, has to be made accessible—indeed, transparent—to all. (The one signal exception to all these generalizations is Everett Fox's 1995 American version of the Torah. Emulating the model of the German translation by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig [begun in 1925, completed in 1961], which flaunts Hebrew etymologies, preserves nearly all repetitions of Hebrew terms, and invents German words, Fox goes to the opposite extreme of other modern versions: his English has the great virtue of reminding us verse after verse of the strangeness of the Hebrew original, but it does so at the cost of often being not quite English and consequently of becoming a text for study rather than

a fluently readable version that conveys the stylistic poise and power of the Hebrew.) Modern translators, in their zeal to uncover the meanings of the biblical text for the instruction of a modern readership, frequently lose sight of how the text intimates its meanings—the distinctive, artfully deployed features of ancient Hebrew prose and poetry that are the instruments for the articulation of all meaning, message, insight, and vision.

One of the most salient characteristics of biblical Hebrew is its extraordinary concreteness, manifested especially in a fondness for images rooted in the human body. The general predisposition of modern translators is to convert most of this concrete language into more abstract terms that have the purported advantage of clarity but turn the pungency of the original into stale paraphrase. A good deal of this concrete biblical language based on the body is what a linguist would call lexicalized metaphor—imagery, here taken from body parts and bodily functions, that is made to stand for some general concept as a fixed item in the vocabulary of the language (as "eye" in English can be used to mean "perceptiveness" or "connoisseur's understanding"). Dead metaphors, however, are the one persuasive instance of the resurrection of the dead—for at least the ghosts of the

old concrete meanings float over the supposedly abstract acceptations of the terms, and this is something the philologically driven translators do not appear to understand. “Many modern versions,” Gerald Hammond tartly observes, “eschew anything which smacks of imagery or metaphor—based on the curious assumption, I guess, that modern English is an image-free language.” The price paid for this avoidance of the metaphorical will become evident by considering two characteristic and recurrent Hebrew terms and the role they play in representing the world in the biblical story.

The Hebrew noun *zera* ʿ* has the general meaning of “seed,” which can be applied either in the agricultural sense or to human beings, as the term for semen. By metaphorical extension, semen becomes the established designation for what it produces, progeny. Modern translators, evidently unwilling to trust the ability of adult readers to understand that “seed”—as regularly in the King James Version—may mean progeny, repeatedly render it as offspring, descendants, heirs, progeny, posterity. But I think there is convincing evidence in the texts themselves that the biblical writers never entirely forgot that their term for offspring also meant semen and had a precise equivalent in the vegetable world. To cite a distinctly

physical example, when Onan "knew that the seed would not be his," that is, the progeny of his brother's widow should he impregnate her, "he would waste his seed on the ground, so to give no seed to his brother" (Genesis 38:9). Modern translators, despite their discomfort with body terms, can scarcely avoid the wasted "seed" here because without it the representation of spilling semen on the ground in coitus interruptus becomes unintelligible. E. A. Speiser substitutes "offspring" for "seed" at the end of the verse, however, and the Revised English Bible goes him one better by putting "offspring" at the beginning as well ("Onan knew that the offspring would not count as his") and introducing "seed" in the middle as object of the verb "to spill" and scuttling back to the decorousness of "offspring" at the end—a prime instance of explanation under the guise of translation. But the biblical writer is referring to "seed" as much at the end of the verse as at the beginning. Onan adopts the stratagem of coitus interruptus in order not to "give seed"—that is, semen—to Tamar, and, as a necessary consequence of this contraceptive act, he avoids providing her with offspring. The thematic point of this moment, anchored in sexual practice, law, and human interaction, is blunted by not preserving "seed" throughout.

Even in contexts not directly related to sexuality, the concreteness of this term often amplifies the meaning of the utterance. When, for example, at the end of the story of the binding of Isaac, God reiterates His promise to Abraham, the multiplication of seed is strongly linked with cosmic imagery—harking back to the Creation story—of heaven and earth: "I will greatly bless you and will greatly multiply your seed, as the stars in the heavens and as the sand on the shore of the sea" (Genesis 22:17). If "seed" here is rendered as "offspring" or "descendants," what we get are two essentially mathematical similes of numerical increase. That is, in fact, the primary burden of the language God addresses to Abraham, but as figurative language it also imposes itself visually on the retina of the imagination, and so underlying the idea of a single late-born son whose progeny will be countless millions is an image of human seed (perhaps reinforced by the shared white color of semen and stars) scattered across the vast expanses of the starry skies and through the innumerable particles of sand on the shore of the sea. To substitute "offspring" for "seed" here may not fundamentally alter the meaning but it diminishes the vividness of the statement, making it just a little harder for readers to sense why these ancient texts have been so compelling down through the ages.

The most metaphorically extended body part in biblical Hebrew is the hand, though head and foot are also abundantly represented in figurative senses. Now it is obvious enough, given the equivalent usages in modern Western languages, that "hand" can be employed figuratively to express such notions as power, control, responsibility, and trust—to which biblical Hebrew adds one meaning peculiar to itself, commemorative monument. But most modern translators substitute one or another of these abstract terms, introducing supposed clarity where things were perfectly clear to begin with and subverting the literary integrity of the story. In the two sequential episodes that end with Joseph's being cast into a pit—the first is a dry cistern, the second an Egyptian prison, but the two are explicitly linked by the use of the term *bor* for both—the recurrently invoked "hand" is a focusing device that both defines and complicates the moral themes of the story. Reuben, hearing his brothers' murderous intentions, seeks to rescue Joseph "from their hands." He implores his brothers, "Lay not a hand upon him," just as, in the other strand of the story, Judah says, "Let not our hand be against him." E. A. Speiser, faithful to the clarifying impulse of the modern Bible scholar's philological imagination, renders both these phrases as "do away with,"

explaining that it would be illogical to have Reuben, or Judah, say “Don’t lay a hand on him,” since in fact the counsel proffered involves seizing him, stripping him, and throwing him into the pit. But in fact this alleged illogic is the luminous logic of the writer’s moral critique. Reuben pleads with his brothers not to lay a hand on Joseph, that is, not to shed his blood (this is the phrase he uses at the beginning of his speech), but neither his plea nor Judah’s proposal is an entirely innocent one: although each urges that the brothers lay no hand on Joseph, there is a violent laying on of hands necessitated by the course of action each proposes. Even more pointedly, once Joseph is headed south with the caravan, those same fraternal hands will take his ornamented tunic (the King James Version’s “coat of many colors”), slaughter a kid, dip the garment in the blood, and send it off to Jacob.

The image of hands holding a garment belonging to Joseph that is turned into false evidence brilliantly returns at the climactic moment of the next episode involving him, in Genesis 39. When Joseph flees from the lust of his master’s wife, “he left his garment in her hand” because she has virtually torn it off his back in trying to effect her reiterated “Lie with me” by seizing him. In her accusation of Joseph, she alters the narrator’s twice-stated “in her hand” to “by me,”

implying that he disrobed deliberately before attempting to rape her. But the narrator's cunning deployment of repeated terms has conditioned us to zero in on these two pivotal words, *waya'azov beyad,* "he left in the hand of," for in the six initial framing verses of the story, "hand" appears four times, with the last, most significant occurrence being this summary of the comprehensiveness of Joseph's stewardship: "And he left all that he had in Joseph's hands" (39:6). (Hebrew idiom allows the writer to use "hand" in the singular, thus creating an exact phrasal identity between the figurative reference to the hand in which the trust of stewardship is left and the literal reference to the hand in which the garment belonging to the object of sexual desire is left.) The invocation of "hand" in chapters 37 and 39—the story of Judah and Tamar lies between them—forms an elegant A B A B pattern: in chapter 37 hands are laid on Joseph, an action carried forward in the resumptive repetition at the very beginning of chapter 39 when he is bought "from the hands of the Ishmaelites"; then we have the supremely competent hand, or hands, of Joseph, into which everything is placed, or left, and by which everything succeeds; then again a violent hand is laid on Joseph, involving the stripping of his garment, as in the episode with the brothers; and at the end of the

chapter, Joseph in prison again has everything entrusted to his dependable hands, with this key term twice stated in the three and a half verses of the closing frame. A kind of dialectic is created in the thematic unfolding of the story between hand as the agency of violent impulse and hand as the instrument of scrupulous management. Although the concrete term is probably used with more formal precision in this particular sequence than is usually the case elsewhere, the hands of Joseph and the hands upon Joseph provide a fine object lesson about how biblical narrative is misrepresented when translators tamper with the purposeful and insistent physicality of its language, as here when "hand" is transmuted into "trust" or "care." Such substitutions offer explanations or interpretations instead of translations and thus betray the original.

There are, alas, more pervasive ways than the choice of terms in which nearly all the modern English versions commit the heresy of explanation. The most global of these is the prevalent modern strategy of repackaging biblical syntax for an audience whose reading experience is assumed to be limited to *Time, Newsweek,* the *New York Times* or the *Times* of London, and the internet. Now, it is often asserted, with seemingly self-evident justice, that the

fundamental difference between biblical syntax and modern English syntax is between a system in which parallel clauses linked by “and” predominate (what linguists call “parataxis”) and one in which the use of subordinate clauses and complex sentences predominates (what linguists call “hypotaxis”). Modern English has a broad array of modal and temporal discriminations in its system of verbs and a whole armament of subordinate conjunctions to stipulate different relations among clauses. Biblical Hebrew, on the other hand, has only two aspects† (they are probably not tenses in our sense) of verbs, together with one indication of a jussive mode—when a verb is used to express a desire or exhortation to perform the action in question—and a modest number of subordinate conjunctions. Although there are certainly instances of significant syntactic subordination, the characteristic biblical syntax is additive, working with parallel clauses linked by “and”—which in the Hebrew is not even a separate word but rather a particle, *waw*‡ (it means “hook”), that is prefixed to the first word of the clause.

The assumption of most modern translators has been that this sort of syntax will be either unintelligible or at least alienating to modern readers, and so should be entirely rearranged as modern

English. There are two basic problems with this procedure. First, it ignores the fact that parataxis is the essential literary vehicle of biblical narrative: it is the way the ancient Hebrew writers saw the world, linked events in it, artfully ordered it, and narrated it, and one gets a very different world if their syntax is jettisoned. Second, rejection of biblical parataxis presupposes a very simplistic notion of what constitutes modern literary English. The implicit model seems to be, as I have suggested, the popular press, as well as perhaps high-school textbooks, bureaucratic directives, and ordinary conversation. But serious writers almost never accept such leveling limitation to a bland norm of popular usage. If one thinks of the great English stylists among twentieth-century novelists—writers like Joyce, Nabokov, Faulkner, and Virginia Woolf—there is not one among them whose use of language, including the deployment of syntax, even vaguely resembles the workaday simplicity and patly consistent orderliness that recent translators of the Bible have posited as the norm of modern English. It is also well to keep in mind that literary style, like many other aspects of literature, is constantly self-recapitulative, invoking recollections of its near and distant literary antecedents, so that modernists like Joyce and Faulkner sometimes echo biblical language and

cadences, and a mannered stylist like Hemingway, in making “and” his most prominent connective, surely has the King James Version of the Bible in mind. And in any event, the broad history of both Semitic and European languages and literatures evinces a strong differentiation in most periods between everyday language and the language of literature.

The assumption of biblical philologists that parallel syntax is alien to modern literary English is belied by the persistent presence of highly wrought paratactic prose even at the end of the twentieth century and beyond. A variety of self-conscious English stylists in the modern era, from Gertrude Stein to Cormac McCarthy, have exhibited a fondness for chains of parallel utterances linked by “and” in which the basic sentence-type is the same structurally as that used again and again in biblical prose. What such a style makes manifest in a narrative is a series of more or less discrete events, or micro-events, in a chain, not unlike the biblical names of begetters and begotten that are strung one after another in the chains of the genealogical lists. The biblical writers generally chose not to order these events in ramified networks of causal, conceptual, or temporal subordination, not because hypotaxis was an unavailable option, as the opening verses of the second Creation story (Genesis

2:4–5) clearly demonstrate. The continuing appeal, moreover, for writers in our own age of this syntax dominated by "and," which highlights the discrete event, suggests that parallel syntax may still be a perfectly viable way to represent in English the studied parallelism of verbs and clauses of ancient Hebrew narrative.

Since a literary style is composed of very small elements as well as larger structural features, an English translator must confront the pesky question of whether the ubiquitous Hebrew particle that means "and" should be represented at all in translation. This is obviously not a problem when the *waw* simply connects two nouns—as in "the heavens and the earth"—but what of its constant use at the beginning of sentences and clauses prefixed to verbs? The argument against translating it in these cases is that the primary function of the *waw* appended to a verb is not to signify "and" but to indicate that the Hebrew prefix conjugation, which otherwise is used for actions yet to be completed, is reporting past events (hence its designation in the terminology of classical Hebrew grammar as "the *waw* of conversion"). It is far from clear, as modern Bible scholars tend to assume, that the fulfillment of one linguistic function by a particle of speech automatically excludes any others; on the

contrary, it is entirely likely that for the ancient audience the *waw* appended to the verb both converted its temporal aspect and continued to signify "and." But, semantics aside, the general practice of modern English translators of suppressing the "and" when it is attached to a verb has the effect of changing the tempo, rhythm, and construction of events in biblical narrative. Let me illustrate by quoting a narrative sequence from Genesis 24 first in my own version, which reproduces every "and" and every element of parataxis, and then in the version of the Revised English Bible. The Revised English Bible is in general one of the most compulsive repackagers of biblical language, though in this instance the reordering of the Hebrew is relatively minor. Its rendering of these sentences is roughly interchangeable with any of the other modern versions—the Jerusalem Bible, the New Jewish Publication Society, Speiser—one might choose. I begin in the middle of verse 16, where Rebekah becomes the subject of a series of actions.

> And she came down to the spring and filled her jug and came back up. And the servant ran toward her and said, "Pray, let me sip a bit of water from your

> jug.” And she said, “Drink, my lord,” and she hurried and tipped down her jug on one hand and let him drink. And she let him drink his fill and said, “For your camels, too, I shall draw water until they drink their fill.” And she hurried and emptied her jug into the trough, and she ran again to the well to draw water and drew water for all his camels.

And this is how the Revised English Bible, in keeping with the prevailing assumptions of most recent translations, renders these verses in what is presumed to be sensible modern English:

> She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and came up again. Abraham’s servant hurried to meet her and said, “Will you give me a little water from your jar?” “Please drink, sir,” she answered, and at once lowered her jar on her hand to let him drink. When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, “I shall draw water also for your camels until they have had enough.” She quickly emptied her jar into the water trough, and then hurrying again to the well she drew water and watered all the camels.

There is, as one would expect, some modification of biblical parataxis, though it is not so extreme here as elsewhere in the Revised English Bible: “And she let him drink his fill” is converted into an introductory adverbial clause, “When she had finished giving him a drink” (actually in consonance with the otherwise paratactic King James Version): “and she hurried” is compressed into “quickly”; “and she ran again” becomes the participial “hurrying again.” (Moves of this sort, it should be said, push translation to the verge of paraphrase—recasting and interpreting the original instead of representing it.) The most striking divergence between these two versions is that mine has fifteen “and’s,” corresponding precisely to fifteen occurrences of the particle *waw* in the Hebrew, whereas the Revised English Bible manages with just five. What difference does this make? To begin with, it should be observed that the *waw,* whatever is claimed about its linguistic function, is by no means an inaudible element in the phonetics of the Hebrew text: we must keep constantly in mind that these narratives were composed to be *heard*, not merely to be decoded by a reader’s eye. The reiterated “and,” then, plays an important role in creating the rhythm of the story, in phonetically punctuating the forward-driving movement of the prose. The elimination of the “and”

in the Revised English Bible and in all its modern cousins produces—certainly to my ear—an abrupt, awkward effect in the sound pattern of the language, or to put it more strictly, a kind of narrative arrhythmia.

More is at stake here than pleasing sounds, for the heroine of the repeated actions is in fact subtly but significantly reduced in all the rhythmically deficient versions. She of course performs roughly the same acts in the different versions—politely offering water to the stranger, lowering her jug so that he can drink, rapidly going back and forth to the spring to bring water for the camels. But in the compressions, syntactical reorderings, and stop-and-start movements of the modernizing version, the encounter at the well and Rebekah's actions are made to seem rather matter-of-fact, however exemplary her impulse of hospitality. This tends to obscure what the Hebrew highlights, which is that she is doing something quite extraordinary. Rebekah at the well presents one of the rare biblical instances of the performance of an act of "Homeric" heroism. The servant begins by asking modestly to "sip a bit of water," as though all he wanted were to wet his lips. But we need to remember, as the ancient audience surely did, that a camel after a long desert journey can drink as much as twenty-five

gallons of water, and there are ten camels here whom Rebekah offers to water "until they drink their fill." The chain of verbs tightly linked by all the "and's" does an admirable job in conveying this sense of the young woman's hurling herself with prodigious speed into the sequence of required actions. Even her dialogue is scarcely a pause in the narrative momentum, but is integrated syntactically and rhythmically into the chain: "And she said, 'Drink, my lord,' and she hurried and tipped down her jug. . . . And she hurried and emptied her jug into the trough, and she ran again to the well to draw water and drew water for all his camels." The parallel syntax and the barrage of "and's," far from being the reflex of a "primitive" language, are as artfully effective in furthering the ends of the narrative as any device one could find in a sophisticated modern novelist.

Beyond these issues of syntax and local word choice lies a fundamental question that no modern translator I know of has really confronted: What level, or perhaps levels, of style is represented in biblical Hebrew? There is no reason, I believe, to be awestruck by the sheer antiquity of the text. If biblical Hebrew could be shown to reflect a pungent colloquial usage in the ancient setting, or a free commingling of colloquial and formal language, it would be only logical to render

it with equivalent levels of diction in modern English. As a matter of fact, all the modern translators—from Speiser to Fox to the sundry ecclesiastical committees in both America and England—have shown a deaf ear to diction, acting as though the only important considerations in rendering a literary text were lexical values and grammatical structures, while the English terms chosen could be promiscuously borrowed from boardroom or bedroom or scholar's word hoard, with little regard to the tonality and connotation the words carried with them from their native linguistic habitat.

Whatever conclusions we may draw about the stylistic level of biblical Hebrew are a little precarious because we of course have no record of the ancient spoken language, and if, as seems likely, there were extracanonical varieties or genres of Hebrew writing in the ancient world, the vestiges have long since crumbled into dust. Did, for example, the citizens of Judah in the time of Jeremiah speak in a parallel syntax, using the *waw* consecutive, and employing roughly the same vocabulary that we find in his prophecies, or in Deuteronomy and Genesis? Although there is no proof, my guess is that vernacular syntax and grammar probably differed in some ways from their literary counterparts. In regard to vocabulary, there is evidence that what we see in the canonical

books would not have been identical with everyday usage. First, there is the problem of the relative paucity of vocabulary in biblical literature. As the Spanish Hebrew scholar Angel Sáenz-Badillos has observed in his *History of the Hebrew Language* (1993), the biblical lexicon is so restricted that it is hard to believe it could have served all the purposes of quotidian existence in a highly developed society. The instance of the poetry of Job, with its unusual number of words not found elsewhere in Scripture, is instructive in this regard: the Job-poet, in his powerful impulse to forge a poetic imagery that would represent humankind, God, and nature in a new and even startling light, draws on highly specific language from manufacturing processes, food preparation, commercial and legal institutions, which would never be used in biblical narrative. The plausible conclusion is that the Hebrew of the Bible is a conventionally delimited language, roughly analagous in this respect to the French of the neoclassical theater: it was understood by writers and their audiences, at least in the case of narrative, that only certain words were appropriate for the literary rendering of events.

There is evidence, moreover, that people in everyday life may have had different words for many of the basic concepts and entities that are mentioned in

the Bible. This argument was persuasively made by the Israeli linguist Abba ben David in his still indispensable 1967 study, available only in Hebrew, *The Language of the Bible and the Language of the Sages*. Ben David offers a fascinating explanation for one of the great mysteries of the Hebrew language—the emergence, toward the end of the pre-Christian era, of a new kind of Hebrew, which became the language of the early rabbis. Now, it is widely recognized that this new Hebrew reflected the influence of the Aramaic vernacular in morphology, in grammar, and in some of its vocabulary, and that, understandably, it also incorporated a vast number of Greek and Latin loanwords. But what is puzzling is that rabbinic Hebrew also uses a good many indigenous Hebrew terms that are absent from the biblical corpus, or reflected only in rare and marginal biblical cognates. The standard terms in rabbinical Hebrew for sun and moon, and some of its frequently used verbs like to look, to take, to enter, to clean, are entirely different from their biblical counterparts, without visible influence from any of the languages impinging on Hebrew. Where did these words come from? Ben David, observing, as have others before him, that there are incipient signs of an emergent rabbinic Hebrew in late biblical books like Jonah and

the Song of Songs, makes the bold and, to my mind, convincing proposal that rabbinic Hebrew was built upon an ancient vernacular that for the most part had been excluded from the literary language used for the canonical texts. This makes particular sense if one keeps in mind that the early rabbis were anxious to draw a line between their own "Oral Torah" and the written Torah they were expounding. For the purposes of legal and homiletic exegesis, they naturally would have used a vernacular Hebrew rather than the literary language, and when their discourse was first given written formulation in the Mishnah in the early third century C.E., that text would have recorded this vernacular, which probably had a long prehistory in the biblical period. It is distinctly possible that when a ninth-century B.C.E. Israelite farmer mopped his brow under the blazing sun, he did not point to it and say *shemesh,* as it is invariably called in biblical prose texts, but rather *ḥamah*, as it is regularly designated in the Mishnah.

There is, of course, no way of plotting a clear chronology of the evolution of rabbinic Hebrew from an older vernacular, no way of determining how far back into the biblical period various elements of rabbinic language may go. It is sufficient for our effort to gauge the level of style of the Bible's literary prose

merely to grant the very high likelihood that the language of the canonical texts was not identical with the vernacular, that it reflected a specialized or elevated vocabulary, and perhaps even a distinct grammar and syntax. Let me cite a momentary exception to the rule of biblical usage that may give us a glimpse into this excluded vernacular background of a more formal literary language. It is well-known that in biblical dialogue all the characters speak proper literary Hebrew, with no intimations of slang, dialect, or idiolect. The single striking exception is impatient Esau's first speech to Jacob in Genesis 25: "Let me gulp down some of this red red stuff." Inarticulate with hunger, he cannot come up with the ordinary Hebrew term for "stew," and so he makes do with *haʾadom haʾadom hazeh*—literally "this red red." But what is more interesting for our purpose is the verb Esau uses for "feeding," *halʿiteini*. This is the sole occurrence of this verb in the biblical corpus, but in the Talmud it is a commonly used term with the specific meaning of stuffing food into the mouth of an animal. One cannot be certain this was its precise meaning in the biblical period because words do, after all, undergo semantic shifts in a period of considerably more than a thousand years. But it seems safe to assume, minimally, that even a millennium before the rabbis *halʿit* would have

been a cruder term for feeding than the standard biblical *ha'akhil*. What I think happened at this point in Genesis is that the author, in the writerly zest with which he sought to characterize Esau's crudeness, allowed himself, quite exceptionally, to introduce a vernacular term for coarse eating or animal feeding into the dialogue that would jibe nicely with his phrase "this red red stuff." After the close of the biblical era, this otherwise excluded term would surface in the legal pronouncements of the rabbis on animal husbandry, together with a host of vernacular words used in the ancient period but never permitted to enter the canonical texts.

All this strongly suggests that the language of biblical narrative in its own time was stylized, decorous, dignified, and readily identified by its audiences as a language of literature, in certain ways distinct from the language of quotidian reality. The tricky complication, however, is that in most respects it also was not a lofty style, and was certainly neither ornate nor euphemistic. If some of its vocabulary may have reflected a specialized literary lexicon, the language of biblical narrative also makes abundant use of ordinary Hebrew words that must have been in everyone's mouth from day to day. Just to mention the few recurrent terms on which I have commented,

“hand,” “house,” “all,” and “seed” are primary words in every phase of the history of Hebrew, and they continue to appear as such in the rabbinic language, where so much else is altered. Biblical prose, then, is a formal literary language but also, paradoxically, a plainspoken one, and, moreover, a language that evinces a strong commitment to using a limited set of terms again and again, making an aesthetic virtue out of the repetition. It should be added that the language of the Bible reflects not one level of diction but a certain range of dictions, as I shall explain presently.

What is the implication of this analysis for an appropriate modern English equivalent to ancient Hebrew style? The right direction, I think, was hit on by the King James Version, following the great model of Tyndale a century before it. There is no good reason to render biblical Hebrew as contemporary English, either lexically or syntactically. This is not to suggest that the Bible should be represented as fussily old-fashioned English, but a limited degree of archaizing coloration is entirely appropriate, employed with other strategies for creating a language that is stylized yet simple and direct, free of the overtones of contemporary colloquial usage but with a certain timeless homespun quality. An adequate English version should be able to indicate the small but

significant modulations in diction in the biblical language—something the stylistically uniform King James Version, however, entirely fails to do. A suitable English version should avoid at all costs the modern abomination of elegant synonymous variation, for the literary prose of the Bible turns everywhere on significant repetition, not variation. Similarly, the translation of terms on the basis of immediate context —except when it becomes grotesque to do otherwise —is to be resisted as another instance of the heresy of explanation. Finally, the mesmerizing effect of these ancient stories will scarcely be conveyed if they are not rendered in cadenced English prose that at least in some ways corresponds to the powerful cadences of the Hebrew. Let me now comment more particularly on the distinctive biblical treatment of diction, word choice, syntax, and rhythm and what it implies for translation.

The biblical prose writers favor what we may think of as a primary vocabulary. They revel in repetition, sometimes of a stately, refrainlike sort, sometimes deployed in ingenious patterns through which different meanings of the same term are played against one another. Elegant synonymity is alien to biblical prose,

and it is only rarely that a highly specialized term is used instead of the more general word. Here is a characteristic biblical way of putting things: “And God made the two great lights, the great light for dominion of day and the small light for dominion of night, and the stars” (Genesis 1:16). In addition to the poised emphasis of the internal repetitions in the sentence, one should note that the primary term for a source of light—*maʾor,* transparently cognate with *ʾor*, the light that is divided from the darkness in 1:4—is placed in the foreground. In fact, there are half a dozen biblical synonyms for “light,” suggesting a range roughly equivalent to English terms like “illumination,” “effulgence,” “brilliance,” and “splendor,” but these are all reserved for the more elaborate vocabulary of poetry, whereas in prose the writer sticks to the simplicity of *ʾor* and *maʾor,* and everywhere it behooves a translator to do the same with English equivalents.

Some biblical scholars might object that my example is skewed because it is taken from the so-called Priestly source (P), which has a stylistic predilection for high decorousness and cadenced repetitions. But the stylistic difference in this regard between P and the two other conjectured source documents of the Pentateuch, designated J and E, is

one of degree, not kind. Thus, when the second version of the Creation story, commonly identified as J's, begins in Genesis 2:4, we do get some greater degree of specification in the language, in keeping with the way creation is here imagined. Instead of the verbs "to create" (*bara'*) and "to make" (*'asah*) that accompany God's speaking the world into being in chapter 1 we are given the potter's term "to fashion" (*yatsar*) and the architectural term "to build" (*banah*). These remain, however, within the limits of a primary vocabulary. The nuanced and specialized lexicon of manufacturing processes one encounters in the poetry of Job and of Deutero-Isaiah is firmly excluded from the stylistic horizon of this narrative prose, though the subject might have invited it.

The translator's task, then, is to mirror the repetitions as much as is feasible. Let me cite one small example, where I learned from my own mistake. When Joseph's brothers recount to Jacob what happened on their first trip to Egypt, they say, in the English of my first draft, "The man who is lord of the land spoke harshly to us and accused us of being spies in the land" (Genesis 42:30). (The verb "accused" is also used in the New Jewish Publication Society translation.) On rereading, I realized that I had violated the cardinal principle, not to translate

according to context. The Hebrew says, very literally, "gave us as spies," "give" in biblical usage being one of those all-purpose verbs that variously means "to set," "to place," "to grant," "to deem." I hastened to change the last clause to "made us out to be spies" because "to make," with or without an accompanying preposition, is precisely such a primary term that serves many purposes and so is very much in keeping with biblical stylistic practice.

What is surprising about the biblical writers' use of this deliberately limited vocabulary is that it can be so precise and even nuanced. Our own cultural preconceptions of writers scrupulously devoted to finding exactly the right word are associated with figures like Flaubert and Joyce, who meticulously choose the terms of their narratives from a large repertory of finely discriminated lexical items. Biblical prose often exhibits an analogous precision within the severe limits of its primary vocabulary. There are, for example, two paired terms, masculine and feminine, in biblical Hebrew to designate young people: *naʿar*/*naʿarah* (in this translation, "lad" and "young woman") and *yeled*/*yaldah* (in this translation, "child" and "girl"). The first pair is somewhat asymmetrical because *naʿar* often also means "servant" or anyone in a subaltern position, and sometimes means "elite

soldier," whereas *naʿarah* usually refers to a nubile young woman, and only occasionally to a servant girl. Though there are rare biblical occurrences of *yeled* in the sense of "young man," it generally designates someone younger than a *naʿar*—etymologically, it means "the one who is born," reflecting a development parallel to the French *enfant*.

With this little to work with, it is remarkable how much the biblical writers accomplish in their deployment of the terms. In the first part of the story of the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 21), Ishmael is referred to consistently as "the child," as was his infant half brother Isaac at the beginning of this chapter. The grief-stricken mother in the wilderness says to herself, "Let me not see when the child dies." From the moment God speaks in the story (verse 17), Ishmael is invariably referred to as "the lad"—evidently with an intimation of tenderness but also with the suggestion that he is a young man, *naʿar,* who will go on to have a future. In the elaborately parallel episode in the next chapter that features Abraham and Isaac in the wilderness, Isaac is referred to by man and God as "the lad," and the term is played off against "the lads" who are Abraham's servants accompanying him on his journey, and not his flesh and blood ("And Abraham said to his lads, 'Sit you

here with the donkey and let me and the lad walk ahead'").

In the story of the rape of Dinah (Genesis 34), she is first referred to as "Leah's daughter"—and not Jacob's daughter, for it is Leah's sons, Simeon and Levi, who will exact vengeance for her. The initial designation of "daughter" aligns her with both "the daughters of the land" among whom she goes out to see, and Shechem, Hamor's son ("son" and "daughter" are cognates in Hebrew), who sees her, takes her, and rapes her. After the act of violation, Shechem is overcome with love for Dinah, and he implores his father, "Take me this girl [*yaldah*] as wife." Speaking to his father, then, he identifies—tenderly?—the victim of his own lust as a girl-child. When he parleys with Dinah's brothers, asking permission to marry her, he says, "Give me the young woman [*naʿarah*] as wife," now using the term for a nubile woman that is strictly appropriate to betrothal negotiations. After the brothers stipulate their surgical precondition for the betrothal, the narrator reports, "And the lad [*naʿar*] lost no time in doing the thing, for he wanted Jacob's daughter." Suddenly, as the catastrophe of this gruesome tale becomes imminent, we learn that the sexually impulsive man is only a lad, probably an adolescent like Dinah—a discovery that is bound to

complicate our task of moral judgment. And now Dinah is called Jacob's daughter, not Leah's, probably because that is how Shechem sees her, not realizing that the significant relationship is through her mother to her two full brothers who are plotting a terrible retribution for her violation.

It should be clear from all this that a translation that respects the literary precision of the biblical story must strive to reproduce its nice discrimination of terms, and cannot be free to translate a word here one way and there another, for the sake of variety or for the sake of context. It must be admitted, however, that some compromises are inevitable because modern English clearly does not coincide semantically with ancient Hebrew in many respects. The stuff from which the first human is fashioned, for example, *ʾadamah,* manifestly means "soil," and it continues to have that meaning as it recurs at crucial junctures in the story of the Garden and the primordial banishment. But, alas, *ʾadamah* also means "land," "farmland," "country," and even "earth," and to translate it invariably as "soil" for the sake of terminological consistency (as Everett Fox does) leads to local confusions and conspicuous peculiarities. To take a more extreme example, a term that has no semantic analogue in English, the Hebrew *nefesh,*

which the King James Version, following the Vulgate, often translates as “soul,” refers to the breath of life in the nostrils of a living creature and, by extension, “lifeblood” or simply “life,” and by another slide of association, “person”; and it is also used as an intensifying form of the personal pronoun, having roughly the sense of “very self.” In the face of this bewildering diversity of meaning, one is compelled to abandon the admirable principle of lexical consistency and to translate, regretfully, according to immediate context.

Finally, though many recurring biblical terms have serviceable English equivalents (like “lad” for *naʿar*), there are instances in which a translation must make another kind of compromise because, given the differences between modern and biblical culture, the social, moral, and ideological connotations of terms in the two languages do not adequately correspond. Consider the tricky case of verbs for sexual intercourse. In English, these tend to be either clinical and technical, or rude, or bawdy, or euphemistic, and absolutely none of this is true of the verbs used for sex in the Bible. In Genesis, three different terms occur: “to know,” “to lie with,” and “to come into.” “To know,” with one striking antithetical exception, indicates sexual possession by a man of his legitimate

spouse. Modern solutions such as “to be intimate with,” “to cohabit with,” “to sleep with,” are all egregiously wrong in tone and implication. Fortunately the King James Version has established a strong precedent in English by translating the verb literally, and “carnal knowledge” is part of our language, so it is feasible to preserve the literal Hebrew usage in translation. (There is, I think, a good deal to be said for the general procedure of Tyndale and the King James Version in imitating many Hebrew idioms and thus giving the English a certain Hebraic coloration.) “Lie with” is a literal equivalent of the Hebrew, though in English it is vaguely euphemistic, whereas in Hebrew it is a more brutally direct or carnally explicit idiom for sexual intercourse, without, however, any suggestion of obscenity.

The most intractable of the three expressions is “to come into” or “to enter.” In nonsexual contexts, this is the ordinary biblical verb for entering, or arriving. “To enter,” or “to come into,” however, is a misleading translation because the term clearly refers not merely to sexual penetration but to the whole act of sexual consummation. It is used with great precision—not registered by biblical scholarship—to indicate a man’s having intercourse with a woman he has not yet had as a sexual partner, whether she is his wife, his

concubine, or a whore. The underlying spatial imagery of the term, I think, is of the man's entering the woman's sphere for the first time through a series of concentric circles: her tent or chamber, her bed, her body. A translator, then, ought not surrender the image of coming into, but "come into" by itself doesn't quite do it. My own solution, in keeping with the slight strangeness of Hebraizing idioms of the translation as a whole, was to stretch an English idiom to cover the biblical usage: this translation consistently renders the Hebrew expression in question as "come to bed with," an idiom that in accepted usage a woman could plausibly use to a man referring to herself ("come to bed with me") but that in my translation is extended to a woman's reference to another woman ("come to bed with my slavegirl") and to a reference in the third person by the narrator or a male character to sexual consummation ("Give me my wife," Jacob says to Laban, "and let me come to bed with her").

Biblical syntax, beyond the basic pattern of parallel clauses, provides another occasion for what I have called a slight strangeness. The word order in biblical narrative is very often as finely expressive as the lexical choices. In many instances, the significant sequence of terms can be reproduced effortlessly and idiomatically in English, and it is a testament to the

literary insensitivity of modern translators that they so often neglect to do so. Here, for example, is how the narrator reports Abimelech's discovery of the conjugal connection between Isaac and the woman Isaac had claimed was his sister: "Abimelech . . . looked out the window and saw—and there was Isaac playing with Rebekah his wife" (Genesis 26:8). The move into the character's point of view after the verbs of seeing is signaled by the so-called presentative, *wehineh* (rather like *voici* in French), which in this case I have represented by "there" but usually render as "look" (following the King James Version's "behold" and so deliberately coining an English idiom because the biblical term is so crucial for indicating shifts in narrative perspective). What follows "and there" is the precise sequence of Abimelech's perception as he looks out through the window: first Isaac, then the act of sexual play or fondling, then the identity of the female partner in the dalliance, and at the very end, the conclusion that Rebekah must be Isaac's wife. All this is perfectly fluent as English, and modern translations like the Revised English Bible, the New Jewish Publication Society, and Speiser that place "wife" before Rebekah spoil a nice narrative effect in the original.

But biblical syntax is also more flexible than modern English syntax, and there are hundreds of instances in the Hebrew Bible of significant syntactical inversions and, especially, emphatic first positioning of weighted terms. Syntactical inversion, however, is familiar enough in the more traditional strata of literary English, and if one adopts a general norm of decorous stylization for the prose of the translation, as I have done on the grounds I explained earlier, it becomes feasible to reproduce most of the Hebrew reconfigurations of syntax, preserving the thematic or psychological emphases they are meant to convey. The present translation does this, I think, to a greater degree than all previous English versions.

God repeatedly promises the patriarchs, “To your seed I will give this land” (e.g., Genesis 12:7), pointedly putting “your seed” at the beginning of the statement. Less rhetorically, more dramatically, when Hagar is asked by the divine messenger in the wilderness where she is going, she responds, “From Sarai my mistress I am fleeing” (Genesis 16:8), placing Sarai, the implacable source of her misery, at the beginning of the sentence. Still more strikingly, when Jacob is told by his sons that Simeon has been detained as a hostage in Egypt and that the Egyptian regent insists Benjamin be brought down to him, the

old man begins his lament by saying, “Me you have bereaved” (Genesis 42:36). It is profoundly revelatory of Jacob’s psychological posture that he should place himself as the object of suffering at the very beginning of his utterance (and again at the end, in a little formal symmetry). Normally, biblical Hebrew indicates a pronominal object of a verb by attaching a suffix to the verb itself. Here, however, instead of the usual accusative suffix we get an accusative first-person pronoun—*ʾoti*—placed before the verb, a procedure that beautifully expresses Jacob’s self-dramatization as anguished and resentful father continually at the mercy of his sons. The “me” urgently needs to be thrust into the ear of the listener. Many translations simply suppress the inversion, but to put it decorously as “It is I” (Everett Fox) or paraphrastically as “It is always me” (New Jewish Publication Society) is to dilute the dramatic force of the original.

The sharpness and vividness of biblical style are also diluted when it is represented in English, as virtually all the versions do, by a single, indifferent level of diction. As I noted earlier, there seems to be nothing genuinely colloquial in the prose used by the narrator; but there is a palpable variation between passages that are more cadenced, more inclined to balanced structures of terms and elevated language,

like the narrative of the Flood, and looser, more stylistically flexible passages. There are many instances, moreover, of single word choices that pointedly break with the stylistic decorum of the surrounding narrative, and for the most part these are fudged by the sundry English translations. When Hagar and Ishmael use up their supply of water in the wilderness, the despairing mother "flung the child under one of the bushes" (Genesis 21:15). The verb here, *hishlikh,* always means "to throw," usually abruptly or violently. This is somewhat softened by the King James Version and Fox, who use "cast." The Revised English Bible is uncomfortable with the idea of throwing a child and so translates "thrust." Speiser and the New Jewish Publication Society Bible altogether disapprove of spasmodic maternal gestures and hence dissolve "flung" into a gentler "left." In all such manipulation, the violence of Hagar's action and feelings disappears. When Laban berates Jacob for running off with his daughters, he says, "What have you done, . . . driving my daughters like captives of the sword?" (Genesis 31:26). All the English versions represent the verb here as "carrying away" or some approximation thereof, but *nahag* is a term for driving animals, and is used precisely in that sense earlier in this very chapter (verse 18). To translate it otherwise

is to lose the edge of brutal exaggeration in Laban's angry words. In the throes of the great famine, the destitute Egyptians say to Joseph, "Nothing is left for our lord but our carcasses and our farmland" (Genesis 47:18). Most English versions use "bodies" instead of "carcasses," with a couple of modern translations flattening the language even more by rendering the term as "persons." But the Hebrew *gewiyah,* with the sole exception of one famous mythopoeic text in Ezekiel, invariably means "corpse" or "carcass." What the miserable Egyptians are saying to their great overlord is that they have been reduced to little more than walking corpses, and he might as well have those. This sort of pungency can be conveyed if the translator recognizes that the Hebrew does not operate at a single bland level and that literary expression is not inevitably bound to decorous "logic."

These last two examples were taken from dialogue, and it is chiefly in dialogue that we get small but vivid intimations of the colloquial. Again, these are eliminated in the flat regularity of conventional Bible translation. When God rebukes Abimelech for taking Sarah into his harem, the king vehemently protests that he has acted in good conscience: "Did not he say to me, 'She is my sister'? and she, she, too, said, 'He is my brother'" (Genesis 20:5). The repetition of "she,

she, too" is a stammer or splutter of indignation clearly indicated in the Hebrew. In some English versions, it disappears altogether. The King James Version turns it into a rhetorical flourish: "she, even she herself." Everett Fox, because of his commitment to literalism, comes closer but without quite the requisite feeling of colloquial mimesis: "and also she, she said." The seventeen-year-old Joseph reports the first of his dreams to his brothers in the following manner: "And, look, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, look, my sheaf arose and actually [*wegam*] stood up, and, look, your sheaves drew round and bowed to my sheaf" (Genesis 37:7). The language here is surely crafted mimetically to capture the gee-gosh wonderment of this naïve adolescent who blithely assumes his brothers will share his sense of amazement at his dream. The presentative *hineh* ("look") is the conventional term dreamers use to report the visual images of their dreams, perhaps partly because it readily introduces a surprising new perception, but here Joseph repeats the term three times in one breathless sentence, and the effect of naïve astonishment is equally expressed in his redundant "arose and actually stood up" (the Hebrew adverb *gam* most often means "also" but fairly frequently serves as well as a term of emphasis or

intensification). The point is that the adolescent Joseph speaking to his brothers does not at all sound like the adult Joseph addressing Pharaoh, and a translation should not reduce either dialogue or narrator's language to a single dead level.

In the range of diction of the biblical text, the complementary opposite to these moments of colloquial mimesis occurs in the poetic insets. Most of these in the Torah are only a line or two of verse, though Genesis and Deuteronomy conclude with relatively long poems, and Exodus incorporates the Song of the Sea as Numbers does Balaam's oracles. Now, it has long been recognized by scholarship that biblical poetry reflects a stratum of Hebrew older than biblical prose: some of the grammatical forms are different, and there is a distinctive poetic vocabulary, a good deal of it archaic. No previous English translation has made a serious effort to represent the elevated and archaic nature of the poetic language in contradistinction to the prose, though that is clearly part of the intended literary effect of biblical narrative. The present translation tries to suggest this contrast in levels of style—through a more liberal use of syntactic inversion in the poetry, through a selective invocation of slightly archaic terms, and through the occasional deployment of rhetorical gestures broadly associated

with older English poetry (like the ejaculation “O”). I wish I could have gone further in this direction, but there is a manifest danger in sounding merely quaint instead of eloquently archaic, and so the stylistic baggage of “anent” and “forsooth” had to be firmly excluded.

Two minute examples will illustrate how these discriminations of stylistic level are made in the Hebrew and how they might be conveyed in English. The enigmatic notice about the Nephilim, the human-divine hybrids of the primeval age, concludes with these words: “They are the heroes of yore, the men of renown” (Genesis 6:4). This line could conceivably be a fragment from an old mythological poem; more probably, it reads in the original as a kind of stylistic citation of the epic genre. The clearest clue to this in the Hebrew is the word “they,” which here is *hemah* rather than the standard *hem*. This variant with the extra syllable is in all likelihood an older form: it occurs four times more often in poetry than in prose, and even in prose is often reserved for rather ceremonial gestures. There is no English variant of “they” that is similarly marked as poetic diction, and my translation compensates by using “of yore” instead of the phrase “of old” adopted by the King James Version and by most later English versions. In the next

chapter, the unleashing of the Deluge is reported in this line of verse, with emphatic semantic parallelism and four Hebrew accents against three in the two halves of the line: “All the wellsprings of the great deep burst, / and the casements of the heavens opened” (7:11). In order to convey a sense that this is poetry, beyond the mechanics of typography, a translator of course has to create a good deal of rhythmic regularity, but there remains a problem of diction. The Hebrew word represented by “casements” is *ʾarubot*. It is a rare term, occurring only a few times elsewhere in the Bible, and it clearly means “window” or “window-like niche.” The decision of several different modern translators to render it as “sluices” or “floodgates” has no philological warrant and is a conspicuous instance of translation by context. “Windows” in the King James Version is on target semantically but not stylistically. The occurrence of a cognate of *ʾarubot* in Ugaritic poetry, several centuries before the composition of Genesis, is further indication that the term is poetic and probably somewhat archaic for the later Hebrew audience. “Casements,” with its echoes of Keats and of Shakespeare behind Keats, seemed like a happy solution to the problem of diction. Though not all shifts in stylistic level in the Hebrew can be so readily

represented by English equivalents, a translation that tries to do justice to the richness of the Hebrew must aim for some approximation of the nuances of diction in the original.

The most pervasive aspect of the magic of biblical style that has been neglected by English translators is its beautiful rhythms. An important reason for the magnetic appeal of these stories when you read them in the Hebrew is the rhythmic power of the words that convey the story. The British critic A. Alvarez has aptly described the crucial role of rhythm in all literary art: "the rhythm—the way the sounds move, combine, separate, recombine—is the vehicle for the feeling. . . . And without that inner movement or disturbance, the words, no matter how fetching, remain inert. In this way at least, the dynamics of poetry—and probably of all the arts—are the same as the dynamics of dreaming." I know of no modern English translation of the Bible that is not blotted by constant patches of arrhythmia, and the result is precisely the sense of inertness of which Alvarez speaks. The King James Version, of course, has its grand rhythmic movements—cultivated people around 1611 clearly had a much firmer sense of expressive sound in language than has been true of recent generations. But these rhythms are more orotund, less powerfully compact, than those of

the Hebrew, and in fact there are far more local lapses in rhythm than nostalgic readers of the King James Version may recall.

The final arbiter of rhythmic effectiveness must be the inner ear of the sensitive reader, but I would like to show that there is a vital dimension of biblical prose that translation has to engage by quoting a couple of verses in transliteration and then in three English versions, together with my own. In regard to the transliteration, it should be kept in mind that we have an approximate notion, not an exact one, of how biblical Hebrew was originally pronounced. There is some question about vowels in particular because vowel-points were added to the consonantal texts by the Masoretes—the Hebrew scholars of sixth- to tenth-century Tiberias who fixed the text of the Bible, with full punctuation, standard since then—more than a millennium after the texts were composed. There was, however, a continuous tradition for recitation of the texts on which the Masoretes drew, and anyone who has listened to the Masoretic Text read out loud can attest to its strong rhythmic integrity, which argues that its system of pronunciation was by no means an arbitrary imposition. Here is the narrative report of Noah's entering the ark as the Deluge is unleashed (Genesis 7:13–14). (Acute accents are used to indicate

accented syllables. *W* is used for the letter *waw* [pronounced as *v* in modern Hebrew but as *w* in biblical times], especially to distinguish it from *bet* without *dagesh,* pronounced as *v*. *Ḥ* indicates a light fricative [something like Spanish *j*]; *kh* represents a heavier fricative, like the German *ch* in Bach.)

13. *Beʿétsem hayóm hazéh baʾ nóaḥ weshém-weḥám wayéfet benei-nóaḥ nóaḥ we'éshet nóaḥ ushlóshet neshéi-vanáw ʾitám ʾel hateváh.* 14. *Hémah wekhol-haḥayáh lemináh wekhol-habehemáh lemináh wekhol-harémes haromés ʿal-haʾárets leminéhu wekhol-haʿóf leminéhu kól tsipór kol-kanáf.*

The Hebrew rhythm unfolds in groupings of three or four words marked by three or four stresses, usually with no more than one or two unstressed syllables between the stressed ones, and the sense of the words invites a slight pause between one grouping and the next. The overall effect is that of a grand solemn sweep, a sort of epic march, and that effect is reinforced in the diction by the use of *hémah* instead of *hem* for "they" at the beginning of the second verse.

Here is the King James Version:

13. In the selfsame day entered Noah, and Shem, and Ham, and Japheth, the sons of Noah, and Noah's wife, and the three wives of his sons with them, into the ark; 14. they, and every beast after its kind, and all the cattle after their kind, and every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth after his kind, and every fowl after his kind, every bird of every sort.

The first of the two verses (up to "into the ark") is nearly perfect. I envy the freedom of the King James Version to follow the Hebrew syntax and write "entered Noah," an inversion feasible at the beginning of the seventeenth century but a little too odd, I am afraid, at the beginning of the twenty-first. But in the second verse rhythmic difficulties emerge. The repeated "after its kind," with its sequencing of a trochee and an iamb and its two stresses, is an ungainly equivalent of the Hebrew *leminάh*; "every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth" is a whole mouthful of syllables in exchange for the compactness of the Hebrew; and "every bird of every sort" falls flat as a final cadence (apart from being inaccurate as a translation).

Here is E. A. Speiser's version of these two verses —a version, to be sure, intended to be accompanied by a philological commentary, but one that helped set a norm for recent Bible translations:

> 13. On the aforesaid day, Noah and his sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, Noah's wife, and the three wives of his sons had entered the ark—14. they as well as every kind of beast, every kind of creature that creeps on earth, and every kind of bird, every winged thing.

The initial phrase, "on the aforesaid day," is an ill-starred beginning in regard to diction as well as to rhythm. Something as mechanical as the list of the passengers of the ark is divided up in a way that undercuts its rhythmic momentum: at best, one can say that this version has intermittent moments of escape into rhythm.

Everett Fox, the most boldly literal of modern Bible translators, does a little better, but his attention to rhythm is by no means unflagging.

> 13. On that very day came Noah, and Shem, Ham, and Yefet, Noah's sons, Noah's wife and his three

sons' wives with them, into the Ark, 14. they and all wildlife after their kind, all herd-animals after their kind, all crawling things that crawl upon the earth after their kind, all fowl after their kind, all chirping-things, all winged-things.

The first short clause, with the courageous inversion of verb and subject, rings nicely in the ear. But the simple deletion of the "and" between Shem and Ham collapses the rhythm, and Fox's grouping of the list is not much better rhythmically than Speiser's. As in the King James Version, the decision to use "after" four times introduces a series of unwelcome extra syllables, and rhythm is virtually lost in "all herd-animals after their kind, all crawling things that crawl upon the earth after their kind."

Here is my own version, far from perfect, but meant to preserve more of the phonetic compactness of the Hebrew and to avoid such glaring lapses into arrhythmia:

13. That very day, Noah and Shem and Ham and Japheth, the sons of Noah, and Noah's wife, and the three wives of his sons together with them, came into the ark, 14. they as well as beasts of

each kind and cattle of each kind and each kind of crawling thing that crawls on the earth and each kind of bird, each winged thing.

Biblical Hebrew, in sum, has a distinctive music, a lovely precision of lexical choice, a meaningful concreteness, and a suppleness of expressive syntax that by and large have been given short shrift by translators with their eyes on other goals. The present translation, whatever its imperfections, seeks to do fuller justice to all these aspects of biblical style in the hope of making the rich literary experience of the Hebrew more accessible to readers of English.

II. ON TRANSLATING THE NAMES OF GOD

The God of Israel is referred to through a variety of names in these texts, and it is by no means self-evident how to render the names in English. The most difficult of them is the Tetragrammaton, YHWH. Modern biblical scholarship has agreed to represent this as "Yahweh," but there are problems with using that form in translation. The original Hebrew texts of the Bible were entirely consonantal, vowel-points having been

added well over a millennium after the original composition of the texts. Because by then the Tetragrammaton was deemed ineffable by Jewish tradition, it was revocalized to be pronounced as though it read *ʾadonai*, LORD. The confidence of biblical scholarship that the original pronunciation was in fact Yahweh may not be entirely warranted. (See the comment on Exodus 3:14.) In any case, "Yahweh" would have given the English version a certain academic-archaeological coloration that I preferred to avoid, and it would also have introduced a certain discomfort at least for some Jewish readers of the translation. I rejected the option of using "YHWH" because it cannot be pronounced whereas the dimension of sound seemed to me vital to the translation. I have therefore followed the precedent of the King James Version in representing YHWH as the LORD, the last three letters in small uppercase to indicate that, like *ʾadonai*, it is an anomaly, a substitution for another name.

The other most common designation of the deity is *ʾelohim*, a word that is plural in form (perhaps, though this is far from certain, a plural of "majesty") but that is generally treated grammatically as a singular. "God" is the natural English equivalent, but in some contexts, where the generic character of the name seems

prominent, I have rendered it with a lowercase *g* as "god," and when the name is treated as a plural, especially when the narrative context involves polytheism, I have translated it as "gods." Three other names for the deity, all borrowed from the Canaanite pantheon, occur in these books—El, Elyon, and Shaddai. Especially in poetry and at narrative moments of high solemnity, the writers appear to play on the archaic resonances of these names, and so for the most part I have given them in their Hebrew form, for in the particular contexts in which they typically appear a touch of linguistic archaeology seemed to me entirely appropriate.

Admittedly, any of the choices I have described may be debatable, but in all of them my aim has been to name the deity in English in ways that would be in keeping with the overall concert of literary effects that the translation strives to create.

III. ABOUT THE COMMENTARY

My original intention when I set out to translate Genesis in the mid-1990s had been simply to provide brief translator's notes. Puns, wordplay in the sundry

naming-speeches, and other untranslatable maneuvers of the Hebrew needed to be glossed. The reader also had to be informed, I felt, of the occasional junctures where I adopted a reading that varied from the Masoretic Text, the received Hebrew text of the Bible. Similarly, it seemed proper to offer some explanation for translation choices that were likely to surprise either the general reader or the scholarly reader, or both. In some instances, such a choice reflects a proposed new solution to a crux in the Hebrew text. More often, it is an effort to represent a more precise understanding of the Hebrew than previous translations have shown (e.g., the tree of knowledge is "lovely to look at," not "lovely to impart wisdom"; Pharaoh puts a "golden collar" around Joseph's neck, not a "gold chain"). And most pervasively, the little surprises in the translation are attempts to find English equivalents for the nuances of implication and the significant changes of diction in the Hebrew that have not been much regarded by previous translators. Finally, since this translation is, within the limits of readable English style, quite literal—not out of fundamentalist principle but in an effort to reproduce some of the distinctive literary effects of the original—when the interests of English intelligibility compelled me to diverge from a literal translation, I have alerted

readers to the divergence and given the literal sense of the Hebrew words in a note. And beyond all such considerations of word choice and level of style, I thought it necessary to offer succinct explanations of some of the ancient Near Eastern cultural practices and social institutions that are presupposed by the narratives, for without an understanding of them it is sometimes hard to see exactly what is going on in the story.

This last category of explanation is, of course, standard fare in modern Bible commentaries, where it is sometimes dished out in very large portions, and it is admittedly intended here as an aid for the relatively uninitiated. But as I got caught up once again in this endlessly fascinating text, it struck me that there were important features that by and large had been given short shrift in the modern commentaries. In fact, a good many of my observations on stylistic choices already shaded into a discussion of the literary vehicle of the biblical narratives, and this was the point at which the tightly cinched annotation I had originally intended began to loosen its bonds and reach out to commentary. There were whole orders of questions, it seemed to me, that had been neglected or addressed only intermittently and impressionistically by the modern commentators. Where are there detectible

shifts of stylistic level in the Hebrew, and why do they occur? What are the reasons for the small poetic insets in the prose narratives? What are the principles on which dialogue is organized, and how are the speakers differentiated? Where and why are there shifts from the narrator's point of view to that of one of the characters? What are the devices of analogy, recurrent motifs, and key words that invite us to link and contrast one episode with another? How is the poetry formally constructed? And do these books, granted their composite origins, exhibit overarching thematic and structural unities or lines of development?

On all these challenging questions I have surely not said the last word. Rather I have aspired to say some helpful first words in a commentary that I have sought to hold to modest proportions. Clearly, there is no way of separating a literary illumination of the biblical text from a confrontation with philological issues, on the one side, and, perhaps more indirectly, with historical issues, on the other. In any case, the exploration of the Bible as literary expression is the central focus of this commentary, and I would hope it would be of interest to everyone, from reader at large to scholar, who is drawn to the imaginative liveliness, the complexities, the stylistic vigor, and the sheer inventiveness of these

splendid ancient stories and poems and legal and moral discourses.

* The symbol ʿ represents the Hebrew consonant *ayin,* a glottal stop that might sound something like the Cockney pronunciation of the middle consonant of “bottle,” in which the dentalized *t* is replaced by a gulping sound produced from the larynx.

† Instead of a clear-cut expression of the temporal frame in which actions occur—past, present, future, past perfect, and so forth—aspects indicate chiefly whether the action has been completed or is to be completed.

‡The modern Hebrew pronunciation is *vav,* with the vowel sounding like the short *a* in a French word like *bave,* with which it would rhyme.

Introduction to the Five Books

The rabbinic sage Resh Lakish once wondered why the Hebrew text in Genesis used a seemingly superfluous definite article in the phrase "And it was evening and it was morning, the sixth day." (The definite article is not used for the preceding five days.) He took this to be a hidden reference to the sixth day of the month of Sivan, when according to tradition the Torah was given to Israel: "to teach us that the Holy One made a condition with all created things, saying to them, 'If Israel accepts the Torah, you will continue to exist. If not, I shall return you to welter and waste'" (Babylonian Talmud: Shabbat 88A). This is surely an extraordinary notion to entertain about the cosmic status of a book, imagining that the very existence of the world depends on it and on Israel's embrace of it.

Jewish tradition abounds in such extravagant celebrations of the supreme importance of this book. What is it about this text that led to such a vision of its unique standing? Are the five literary units it

comprises in fact one book or five? How were they brought together? What are we to call them?

Let us begin with the question of the name for the whole. The fluctuations of the title reflect something of the oscillation of the text itself between multiplicity and unity. The Five Books of Moses does not translate any of the circulating Hebrew titles, though it does register the traditional attribution of authorship to Moses. The more compact English title, the Pentateuch, derives from a Greek equivalent for one popular Hebrew designation, the *Ḥumash.** Both names simply mean the Five Books (though the "book" element is merely implied in the Hebrew term). "Pentateuch" was once the prevalent English title but has come to enjoy less currency, perhaps because faintly forbidding polysyllabic Greek terms are now less in favor. It does sound a little ponderous to the contemporary ear, and on those grounds it has not been adopted for this volume.

The fuller Hebrew designation is *Ḥamishah ḥumshey torah*, literally, the five fifths of the Torah. More simply, these five books are very often referred to in Hebrew and by Jews using other languages as the Torah. Torah means "teaching," or in biblical contexts involving specific laws, something like "regulation" or "protocol," i.e., that which is to be taught as proper

procedure for a given topic. Of the Five Books, it is Deuteronomy that most often uses the term *torah*, sometimes joining it with *sefer*, "book" (as in "this book of teaching"), so that the reference widens at points from a specific teaching to all of Deuteronomy as a book. After Deuteronomy was brought together editorially with the four previous books, the designation Torah came to be extended to all five. In the traditional Hebrew division, the Torah then constituted the first, foundational unit of the three large units that make up the Hebrew Bible, which is called acronymically the Tanakh—that is, ***T****orah*, ***N****evi ʾim*† (the Prophets, Former and Latter), and ***K****etuvim* (the Writings, which is to say, everything else).

Scholarship for more than two centuries has agreed that the Five Books are drawn together from different literary sources, though there have been shifting debates about the particular identification of sources in the text and fierce differences of opinion about the dating of the sundry sources. Some extremists in recent decades have contended that the entire Torah was composed in the Persian period, beginning the late sixth century B.C.E., or even later, in Hellenistic times, but there is abundant evidence that argues against that view. Perhaps the most

decisive consideration is that the Hebrew language visibly evolves over the nine centuries of biblical literary activity, with many demonstrable differences between the language current in the First Commonwealth—approximately 1000 B.C.E. to 586 B.C.E.—and the language as it was written in the Persian and Hellenistic periods. There is very little in the Hebrew of the Torah that could have been written in this later era. (Ronald Hendel provides a concise and trenchant marshaling of the linguistic evidence against late dating in the appendix to his *Remembering Abraham*.) A recent revisionist approach, purportedly based on archaeological evidence, places the composition of our texts as well as most of the Former Prophets in the seventh century B.C.E., during the reign of King Josiah, the period when, according to scholarly consensus, most of Deuteronomy was written. This contention, however, flatly ignores the philological evidence that Deuteronomy was responding to, and revising, a long-standing written legal tradition, and that the editors of the so-called Deuteronomistic History (the national chronicle that runs from Deuteronomy to the end of 2 Kings) were manifestly incorporating much older texts often strikingly different from their own writing both in style and in outlook.

The standard account offered by modern scholars of the Torah identifies four principal literary strands (together with a number of lesser ones): J, the Yahwistic strand (the divine name Yahweh is spelled with a J in German); E, the Elohistic strand; P, the Priestly strand; and D, for Deuteronomy. The first three are unevenly intertwined through Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers; P predominates in Leviticus; and all of Deuteronomy is D. J and E are so designated because of the name for the deity each characteristically uses, respectively, Yahweh and Elohim. J is sometimes thought to be the oldest of these strands, though J and E might have been approximately contemporary, the former a product of the southern kingdom of Judah, the latter deriving from literary activity in the northern kingdom of Israel. The composition of J and E, or at least of J, was once often dated to the tenth century B.C.E., perhaps even to the time of Solomon, and this is a view that still cannot be entirely dismissed. It is more common now, however, to put both a little later, perhaps in the ninth or eighth century. P, like everything else a bone of contention, seems to be both relatively early and late: some of it may have been written as early as the eighth century B.C.E., though the principal stratum is in all likelihood a product of the sixth century B.C.E.,

when these same Priestly writers were also drawing together editorially all the previous sources with their own work into a single text. Deuteronomy, or at any rate the bulk of Deuteronomy, is usually identified with the book purportedly discovered during the Temple renovations in the reign of Josiah in 621 B.C.E. The book presumably would have been written quite close to that date, though it might conceivably have utilized some literary materials going back as far as a century, to the reign of Hezekiah.

These sundry literary sources were probably edited and fashioned into a single book—the first properly canonical book with binding authority on the national community—sometime in the sixth century B.C.E., in the Babylonian exile. It has been proposed—not without challenge—that Ezra the Scribe, who instituted public readings of the Torah for the Judahites returned from the Babylonian exile, perhaps soon after 458 B.C.E., may have overseen the final redaction of the Torah. The finished product, as one might expect, exhibits a good many duplications, contradictions, and inconsistencies, which have been abundantly analyzed by modern scholarship. But it also possesses a degree of cohesiveness as a book, and I would like to sketch out here the general literary design, which will then receive more specific attention

in the commentary and in the introductions to the individual books.

Genesis is the only one of the Five Books that is more or less continuous narrative from beginning to end, the only recurrent but limited exception being the genealogies (the "begats"), which, as I shall try to indicate in the commentary, have a function as structural and thematic markers. If this were the work of a single writer, one would say he begins at the top of his form, not slowly and circuitously, like the late Henry James, but with a tour de force, like Proust in the initial pages of *In Search of Lost Time*. Genesis opens with a narrative of origins—Creation and the Garden story—that is compelling in its archetypal character, its adaptation of myth to monotheistic ends, and that has set the terms, not scientifically but symbolically, for much of the way we have thought about human nature and culture ever since.

This legendary sequence, which moves from Eden at the beginning to the Tower of Babel in chapter 11, is followed by a different kind of narrative in the Patriarchal Tales that begin with Abraham in chapter 12. Nowhere else in ancient literature have the quirkiness and unpredictability of individual character and the frictions and tensions of family life—sibling rivalry, the jealousy of co-wives, the extravagance of

parental favoritism—been registered with such subtlety and insight. These stories were of course written more than half a millennium after the time of the purported events, and many details reflect political considerations of a later era involving power relations among the tribes and Israel's posture toward neighboring peoples. Yet the literary miracle of the stories is that the chief personages are nevertheless imagined with remarkable integrity and complexity as individual characters—Tamar fiercely resolved to take into her own hands her personal cause of justice; Jacob, relentlessly calculating yet also imprudently loving, who as an old man becomes a histrionic, tragically weakened father of the clan; Joseph, evolving from spoiled brat to mature and shrewd administrator; Judah, at first impetuous, in the end, penitent and lovingly devoted to his father in all his weaknesses. Only the David story would equal the Patriarchal Tales in psychological insight and in the representation of character growing and changing through long stretches of life-experience.

Genesis ends with the death of Joseph, and Exodus begins with an Egyptian king who "knew not Joseph" and with a flurry of allusions to early Genesis, so the two are clearly meant to be read in succession as a continuous narrative. The focus of the narrative,

however, shifts from the emotionally fraught lives of the founding fathers and mothers to the story of the origins of the nation. The account of the enslavement in Egypt, the liberation from slavery through God's great signs and wonders wrought against Egypt, and the march of the people led by Moses to the foot of Mount Sinai, is a kind of national epic, narrated in a cadenced prose, punctuated with refrainlike rhetorical flourishes, deploying a grand sweeping style only occasionally evidenced in Genesis. This imposing narrative has been shaped to show forth God's overwhelming power in history, exerted against one of the great ancient kingdoms, and the forging of the nation through a spectacular chain of divine interventions that culminates in the spectacle of the revelation on the mountain of God's imperatives to Israel.

After the Sinai epiphany, Exodus takes a turn that may seem perplexing to modern readers. Narrative is dropped—to return briefly with the arresting episode of the Golden Calf in chapters 32–34—and is replaced first by the articulation of a code of civil and criminal law and then by elaborate instructions for the erection of that Tabernacle that will be implemented in the closing chapters of the book with word-for-word repetition. Narrative continues to be set aside for

almost all of the next book, Leviticus, which is devoted to a complex body of legal injunctions, mainly but not exclusively cultic. Structurally, Leviticus is the capstone of the Five Books, balancing Genesis and Exodus on one side and Numbers and Deuteronomy on the other. It will strike many as an odd sort of capstone, given its concentration on sacrificial procedure, and one is inclined to suspect that the Priestly editors of the Torah are furthering the interests of their own guild in the central placement of this book.

It should be said, however, that if these Five Books are chiefly an account of the origins and definition of the nation from its first forebears who accepted a covenant with God to the moment when the people stands on the brink of entering the Promised Land, the ancient writers conceived three major constituents of national identity and cohesion. The first, and the one that we can most readily understand, is the trajectory of the collective and of its principal figures through the medium of history. In the tracing of this trajectory, the narrative shows us how historical events shape the people, how the people achieves a sense of its identity and purpose through the pressure of events. This, in essence, is the grand narrative arc from Genesis 12 to Exodus 20. But the biblical writers assumed that

Israel's covenant with God had to be realized through institutional arrangements as well as through historical acts; and so the account of national origins and destiny required a body of cultic regulations, in which the people's relationship with God would be enacted regularly, repeatedly, through ritual, and a body of general law governing persons, property, acts of violence of man against man, social obligations, and ethical behavior. Although it is not clear whether all of these laws were actually implemented in ancient Israel, the effect of the lengthy legal passages, both cultic and civil or criminal, is to bridge the distance of the epic *illud tempus*, the time-back-when, of the narrative and bring the text into the institutional present of its audience.

The Book of Numbers begins with a long roll call of the tribes, what might be regarded as a statistically buttressed realization of the imposing extent of the Israelite hosts in the wilderness before the conquest of the land. After some intervening chapters of cultic and other laws, we at last return, with a few further interruptions, to narrative—a sequence of episodes in which the recalcitrant Israelites "murmur" against Moses and Aaron, the story of the twelve spies with its disastrous outcome, and, late in the book, a series of encounters between Israel and various hostile peoples

of the trans-Jordan region that block their approach to Canaan. The excitements, the grave dangers, and the grand hopes of swimming in the tide of history are all powerfully at play here, and these are vividly brought forth in the evocative poetry of Balaam's oracles that take up chapters 23 and 24.

Although Deuteronomy, as we have already noted, was originally composed quite independently of the preceding four books and actually before a good many of the Priestly passages they contain were even written, in the place it has been given in the process of redaction, it comes to serve as a grand summary of the themes and story we have read up to this point. To be sure, this last book was intended as a fundamental revision of much earlier law, with the emphasis on one exclusive national sanctuary the principal item of revision. Nevertheless, read in sequence with the other four books, it comes across as a strong recapitulation and conclusion. Moses, standing across the Jordan from the land he will never enter and on the verge of his own death, speaks the message of the book as a long valedictory address or, perhaps more precisely, a series of addresses. He picks up, in first-person singular or plural report, some of the principal narrative elements of the preceding three books (the Genesis stories are not much involved), usually

abridging them, sometimes subjecting them to revision according to the overall ideological aims of Deuteronomy. Because these speeches are represented as spoken words addressed to the people as audience, rhetoric is spectacularly prominent here in ways that have no counterparts in the first four books with their narrative and legal interests. The rhetoric itself makes this appropriate as a concluding book: after the narrative and the legislation of Genesis through Numbers, Moses on the rostrum in trans-Jordan delivers a tremendous peroration in which all the themes of liberation, revelation, and theological and ethical imperative of the previous books are deeply impressed on the imagination of the people.

All that I have said here of course does not constitute a claim that the Five Books from "When God began to create . . ." to "before the eyes of all Israel" form one continuous text. The Torah is manifestly a composite construction, but there is abundant evidence throughout the Hebrew Bible that composite work was fundamental to the very conception of what literature was, that a process akin to collage was assumed to be one of the chief ways in which literary texts were put together. What we have, then, in the Five Books is a work assembled by many hands, reflecting several different viewpoints, and

representing literary activity that spanned several centuries. The redacted whole nevertheless creates some sense of continuity and development, and it allows itself to be read as a forward-moving process through time and theme from book to book, yielding an overarching literary structure we can call, in the singular version of the title, the Torah. The Torah exhibits seams, fissures, and inner tensions that cannot be ignored, but it has also been artfully assembled through the ancient editorial process to cohere strongly as the foundational text of Israelite life and the cornerstone of the biblical canon.

*The symbol *ḥ* represents the Hebrew consonant *ḥet*, a light fricative that sounds something like *j* in Spanish.

†The symbol ʾ designates the Hebrew letter *aleph*, perhaps once a lightly aspirated sound but now a “silent” letter.

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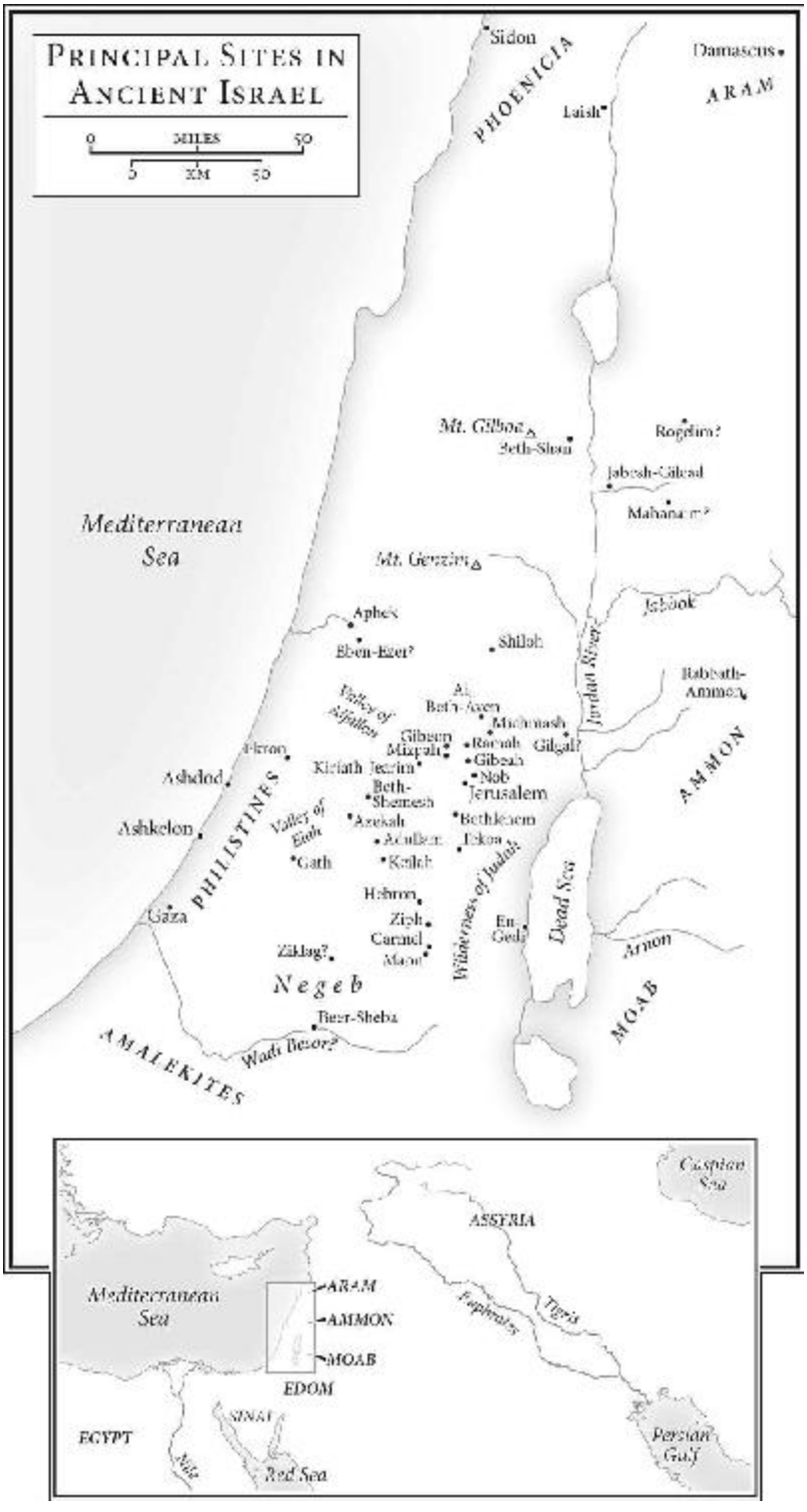
PRINCIPAL SITES IN ANCIENT ISRAEL
0 MILES 50
0 KM 50
Sidon
PHOENICIA
Damascus
ARAM
Laish
Mt. Gilboa
Beth-Shean
Rogelim?
Jabesh-Gilead
Mahanaim?
Mediterranean Sea
Mt. Gerizim
Aphek
Jabbok
Eben-Ezer?
Shiloh
Jordan River
Rabbath-Ammon
Valley of Ajalon
Ai
Beth-Aven
Michmash
Gibeon
Ramah
Gilgal?
Mizpah
Gibeah
Ekron
Kiriath Jearim
Nob
Ashdod
Beth-Shemesh
Jerusalem
AMMON
Valley of Elah
Azekah
Bethlehem
Ashkelon
PHILISTINES
Adullam
Tekoa
Gath
Keilah
Hebron
Ziph
En Gedi
Dead Sea
Wilderness of Judah
Carmel
Arnon
Gaza
Ziklag?
Maon
Negeb
MOAB
Beer-Sheba
Wadi Besor?
AMALEKITES
Caspian Sea
ASSYRIA
Mediterranean Sea
ARAM
AMMON
MOAB
EDOM
Euphrates
Tigris
SINAI
EGYPT
Nile
Red Sea
Persian Gulf

GENESIS

Introduction

Much of what I have to say in my commentary about the details of the narrative presupposes that Genesis is a coherent book, what we moderns would think of as a work of literature. But, as many readers may be aware, two centuries of biblical scholarship have generally assumed that Genesis—and indeed each of the Five Books of Moses as well as most other biblical texts—is not strictly speaking a book but rather an accretion of sundry traditions, shot through with disjunctions and contradictions, and accumulated in an uneven editorial process over several centuries. There are knotty issues of the dating and the evolution of the text that have been debated by generations of scholars and that I shall not pretend to resolve, but I do think that the historical and textual criticism of the Bible is not so damaging to a literary reading of the text as is often assumed.

The biblical conception of a book was clearly far more open-ended than any notion current in our own culture, with its assumptions of known authorship and legal copyright. The very difference in the technology of bookmaking is emblematic. For us, a book is a printed object boxed in between two covers, with title and author emblazoned on the front cover and the year of publication indicated on the copyright page. The biblical term that comes closest to "book" is *sefer*. Etymologically, it means "something recounted," but its primary sense is "scroll," and it can refer to anything written on a scroll—a letter, a relatively brief unit within a longer composition, or a book more or less in our sense. A scroll is not a text shut in between covers, and additional swathes of scroll can be stitched onto it, which seems to have been a very common biblical practice. A book in the biblical sphere was assumed to be a product of anonymous tradition. The only ones in the biblical corpus that stipulate the names of their authors, in superscriptions at the beginning, are the prophetic books, but even in this case, later prophecies by different prophet-poets could be tacked onto the earlier scrolls, and the earlier scrolls perhaps might even be edited to fit better into a continuous book with the later accretions.

Let me say just a few words about the different strands that are detectable in Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers, and then I shall explain why I make very little of them in my commentary. Since well back into the nineteenth century, it has been the consensus of biblical scholarship that Genesis, together with two of the next three books of the Pentateuch, is woven together from three distinct literary sources or "documents"—the Yahwistic document (spelled with an initial capital *J* in German and hence designated J), the Elohistic document (E), and the Priestly document (P). Most scholars have concluded that J and E are considerably earlier than P, which could be as late as the sixth century B.C.E. (the period after the return from the Babylonian exile). According to one older view, J would be a product of the tenth century B.C.E. (early in the Davidic dynasty) and E perhaps a century later, though many would make both at least several generations later; another common position is that J and E are roughly contemporary, the latter having been composed in the northern kingdom, Israel, the former in the southern kingdom, Judah. Scholars identify the different sources on the basis of different names used for the deity (emblematically, YHWH in J and Elohim in E), on the basis of certain stylistic features, and by virtue of what are claimed to be

different ideological and historical assumptions. It is generally thought that the three sources were redacted into a single text quite early in the period of the Return to Zion, probably in Priestly circles.

This rapid summary may make matters sound pat, but in fact all the details of the Documentary Hypothesis are continually, and often quite vehemently, debated. There are strong differences of opinion about the dating of the various sources, especially J and E. Serious questions have been raised as to whether either J or E is the work of a single writer or school, and various scholars have contended that in fact there is a J^1, J^2, J^3, and so forth. Enormous energy has been invested in discriminating the precise boundaries between one document and the next, but disagreement on minute identifications continues to abound: one scholar will break down a particular text into an alternation between J and E, with an occasional conflation of the two and perhaps a brief intrusion from P, seeking to refine the documentary categories phrase by phrase, while another will call the whole passage "an authentic production of J." (I should add that efforts to distinguish between J and E on stylistic grounds have been quite unconvincing.) It is small wonder that the Documentary Hypothesis, whatever its general validity, has begun to look as though it has

reached a point of diminishing returns, and many younger scholars, showing signs of restlessness with source criticism, have been exploring other approaches —literary, anthropological, sociological, and so forth —to the Bible.

The informing assumption of my translation and commentary is that the edited version of Genesis—the so-called redacted text—which has come down to us, though not without certain limited contradictions and disparate elements, has powerful coherence as a literary work, and that this coherence is above all what we need to address as readers. One need not claim that Genesis is a unitary artwork, like, say, a novel by Henry James, in order to grant it integrity as a book. There are other instances of works of art that evolve over the centuries, like the cathedrals of medieval Europe, and are the product of many hands, involving an elaborate process of editing, like some of the greatest Hollywood films. From where we stand, it is difficult to know to what extent the biblical redactors felt free to modify or reshape their inherited sources and to what extent they felt obliged to reproduce them integrally, permitting themselves only an occasional editorial bridge or brief gloss. What seems quite clear, however, is that the redactors had a strong and often subtle sense of thematic and narrative purposefulness

in the way they wove together the inherited literary strands, and the notion of some scholars that they were actuated by a mechanical compulsion to incorporate old traditions at all costs is not sustained by a scrutiny of the text, with only a few marginal exceptions.

It is quite apparent that a concept of composite artistry, of literary composition through a collage of textual materials, was generally assumed to be normal procedure in ancient Israelite culture. The technique of collage could come into play at two stages. A writer in the first instance might feel free to introduce into his own narrative, as an integral textual unit, a genealogy, an etiological tale, an ethnographic table, or a vestige of a mythological story, or perhaps to re-create one of the aforementioned without an explicit textual source. Then the redactor, in shaping the final version of the text, could place disparate textual materials at junctures that would give the completed text the thematic definition or the large formal punctuation he sought. I am deeply convinced that conventional biblical scholarship has been trigger-happy in using the arsenal of text-critical categories, proclaiming contradiction wherever there is the slightest internal tension in the text, seeing every repetition as evidence of a duplication of sources, everywhere tuning in to

the static of transmission, not to the complex music of the redacted story.

The reader will consequently discover that this commentary refers only occasionally and obliquely to the source analysis of Genesis. For even where such analysis may be convincing, it seems to me a good deal less interesting than the subtle workings of the literary whole represented by the redacted text. As an attentive reader of other works of narrative literature, I have kept in mind that there are many kinds of ambiguity and contradiction, and abundant varieties of repetition, that are entirely purposeful, and that are essential features of the distinctive vehicle of literary experience. I have constantly sought, in both the translation and the commentary, to make this biblical text accessible as a book to be read, which is surely what was intended by its authors and redactors. To that end, I discovered that some of the medieval Hebrew commentators were often more helpful than nearly all the modern ones, with their predominantly text-critical and historical concerns. Rashi (acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Itsḥaqi, 1040–1105, France) and Abraham ibn Ezra (1092–1167, traveled from Spain to Italy, France, and England) are the most often cited here; they are two of the great readers of the Middle Ages, and there is still much we can learn from them.

A few brief remarks about the structure of Genesis as a book are in order. Genesis comprises two large literary units—the Primeval History (chapters 1–11) and the Patriarchal Tales (chapters 12–50). The two differ not only in subject but to some extent in style and perspective. The approach to the history of Israel and Israel's relationship with God that will be the material of the rest of the Hebrew Bible is undertaken through gradually narrowing concentric circles: first an account of the origins of the world, of the vegetable and animal kingdom and of humankind, then a narrative explanation of the origins of all the known peoples, from Greece to Africa to Mesopotamia and Asia Minor, and of the primary institutions of civilization, including the memorable fable about the source of linguistic division. The Mesopotamian family of Terah is introduced at the end of this universal history in chapter 11, and then when God calls Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees at the beginning of chapter 12 we move on to the story of the beginnings of the Israelite nation, though the national focus of the narrative is given moral depth because the universal perspective of the first part of Genesis is never really forgotten. Some critics have plausibly imagined this whole large process of biblical literature as a divine experiment with the quirky and

unpredictable stuff of human freedom, an experiment plagued by repeated failure and dedicated to renewed attempts: first Adam and Eve, then the generation of Noah, then the builders of the Tower of Babel, and finally Abraham and his seed.

Although the Creation story with which the Primeval History begins does look forward to the proliferation of humanity and the human conquest of the natural world, by and large the first eleven chapters of Genesis are concerned with origins, not eventualities—with the past, not the future: "he was the first of all who play on the lyre and pipe" (4:21), the narrator says of Jubal, one of the antediluvians. The literal phrasing of the Hebrew here, as in a series of analogous verses, is "he was the father of. . . ." That idiom is emblematic of the Primeval History, which is really a record of the archetypal fathers, a genealogy of human institutions and of ethnic and linguistic identity. Although the Patriarchal Tales are in one obvious way also the story of a chain of fathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the horizon these tales constantly invoke is the future, not the past. God repeatedly tells Abraham what He intends to do with and for the offspring of Abraham in time to come, both in the impending near future of Egyptian enslavement and in the long-term future of national

greatness. It is perfectly apt that the Patriarchal Tales should conclude with Jacob's deathbed poem envisaging the destiny of the future tribes of Israel, which he prefaces with the words "Gather round, that I may tell you what shall befall you in the days to come" (49:1).

The Primeval History, in contrast to what follows in Genesis, cultivates a kind of narrative that is fablelike or legendary, and sometimes residually mythic. The human actors in these stories are kept at a certain distance, and seem more generalized types than individual characters with distinctive personal histories. The style tends much more than that of the Patriarchal Tales to formal symmetries, refrainlike repetitions, parallelisms, and other rhetorical devices of a prose that often aspires to the dignity of poetry, or that invites us to hear the echo of epic poetry in its cadences. As everywhere in biblical narrative, dialogue is an important vehicle, but in the Primeval History it does not have the central role it will play later, and one finds few of the touches of vivid mimesis that make dialogue in the Patriarchal Tales so brilliant an instrument for the representation of human—and human and divine—interactions. In sum, this rapid report of the distant early stages of the human story adopts something of a distancing procedure in the

style and the narrative modes with which it tells the story.

God's very first words to Abraham at the beginning of chapter 12 enjoin him to abandon land, birthplace, and father's house. These very terms, or at least this very sphere, will become the arena of the narrative to the end of Genesis. The human creature is now to be represented not against the background of the heavens and the earth and civilization as such but rather within the tense and constricted theater of the paternal domain, in tent and wheat field and sheepfold, in the minute rhythms of quotidian existence, working out all hopes of grand destiny in the coil of familial relationships, the internecine, sometimes deadly, warring of brothers and fathers and sons and wives. In keeping with this major shift in focus from the Primeval History to the Patriarchal Tales, style and narrative mode shift as well. The studied formality of the first eleven chapters—epitomized in the symmetries and the intricate repetition of word and sound in the story of the Tower of Babel—gives way to a more flexible and varied prose. Dialogue is accorded more prominence and embodies a more lively realism. When, for example, Sarai gives Abram her slavegirl Hagar as a concubine, and the proudly pregnant Hagar then treats her with disdain, the

matriarch berates her husband in the following fashion: "This outrage against me is because of you! I myself put my slavegirl in your embrace and when she saw she had conceived, I became slight in her eyes" (16:5). Sarai's first sentence here has an explosive compactness in the Hebrew, being only two words, *ḥamasi ʿalekha,* that resists translation. In any case, these lines smoldering with the fires of female resentment convey a sense of living speech and complexity of feeling and relationship one does not encounter before the Patriarchal Tales: the frustrated long-barren wife at cross-purposes with herself and with her husband, first aspiring to maternity through the surrogate of her slavegirl, then after the fact of her new co-wife's pregnancy, tasting a new humiliation, indignant at the slave's presumption, ready to blame her husband, who has been only the instrument of her will. Such vivid immediacy in the representation of the densely problematic nature of individual lives in everyday settings is an innovation not only in comparison with the Primeval History but also in comparison with virtually all of ancient literature.

What nevertheless strongly binds the two large units of the Book of Genesis is both outlook and theme. The unfolding history of the family that is to become the people of Israel is seen, as I have

suggested, as the crucial focus of a larger, universal history. The very peregrinations of the family back and forth between Mesopotamia and Canaan and down to Egypt intimate that its scope involves not just the land Israel has been promised but the wider reach of known cultures. National existence, moreover, is emphatically imagined as a strenuous effort to renew the act of creation. The Creation story repeatedly highlights the injunction to be fruitful and multiply, while the Patriarchal Tales, in the very process of frequently echoing this language of fertility from the opening chapters, make clear that procreation, far from being an automatic biological process, is fraught with dangers, is constantly under the threat of being deflected or cut off. Abraham must live long years with the seeming mockery of a divine promise of numberless offspring as he and his wife advance childless into hoary old age. Near the end of the book, Jacob's whole family fears it may perish in the great famine, and Joseph must assure his brothers that God has sent him ahead of them to Egypt in order to sustain life. Genesis begins with the making of heaven and earth and all life, and ends with the image of a mummy—Joseph's—in a coffin. But implicit in the end is a promise of more life to come, of irrepressible procreation, and that renewal of creation will be

manifested, even under the weight of oppression, at the beginning of Exodus. Genesis, then, works with disparate materials, puts together its story with two large and very different building blocks, but nevertheless achieves the cohesiveness, the continuity of theme and motif, and the sense of completion of an architectonically conceived book. Although it looks forward to its sequel, it stands as a book, inviting our attention as an audience that follows the tale from beginning to end.

CHAPTER 1

[1]When God began to create heaven and earth, [2]and
the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over
the deep and God's breath hovering over the waters,
[3]God said, "Let there be light." And there was light.
[4]And God saw the light, that it was good, and God
divided the light from the darkness. [5]And God called
the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And it
was evening and it was morning, first day. [6]And God
said, "Let there be a vault in the midst of the waters,
and let it divide water from water." [7]And God made
the vault and it divided the water beneath the vault
from the water above the vault, and so it was. [8]And
God called the vault Heavens, and it was evening and it
was morning, second day. [9]And God said, "Let the
waters under the heavens be gathered in one place so
that the dry land will appear," and so it was. [10]And
God called the dry land Earth and the gathering of
waters He called Seas, and God saw that it was good.
[11]And God said, "Let the earth grow grass, plants
yielding seed of each kind and trees bearing fruit of

each kind, that has its seed within it upon the earth."
And so it was. [12]And the earth put forth grass, plants
yielding seed, and trees bearing fruit of each kind, and
God saw that it was good. [13]And it was evening and it
was morning, third day. [14]And God said, "Let there be
lights in the vault of the heavens to divide the day from
the night, and they shall be signs for the fixed times
and for days and years, [15]and they shall be lights in the
vault of the heavens to light up the earth." And so it
was. [16]And God made the two great lights, the great
light for dominion of day and the small light for
dominion of night, and the stars. [17]And God placed
them in the vault of the heavens to light up the earth
[18]and to have dominion over day and night and to
divide the light from the darkness. And God saw that it
was good. [19]And it was evening and it was morning,
fourth day. [20]And God said, "Let the waters swarm
with the swarm of living creatures and let fowl fly over
the earth across the vault of the heavens." [21]And God
created the great sea monsters and every living
creature that crawls, which the water had swarmed
forth of each kind, and the winged fowl of each kind,
and God saw that it was good. [22]And God blessed
them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the
water in the seas and let the fowl multiply in the
earth." [23]And it was evening and it was morning, fifth

day. [24]And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living
creatures of each kind, cattle and crawling things and
wild beasts of each kind. And so it was. [25]And God
made wild beasts of each kind and cattle of every kind
and all crawling things on the ground of each kind,
and God saw that it was good. [26]And God said, “Let us
make a human in our image, by our likeness, to hold
sway over the fish of the sea and the fowl of the
heavens and the cattle and the wild beasts and all the
crawling things that crawl upon the earth.

[27]And God created the human in his image,
in the image of God He created him,
male and female He created them.

[28]And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be
fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and conquer it,
and hold sway over the fish of the sea and the fowl of
the heavens and every beast that crawls upon the
earth.” [29]And God said, “Look, I have given you every
seed-bearing plant on the face of all the earth and
every tree that has fruit bearing seed, yours they will
be for food. [30]And to all the beasts of the earth and to
all the fowl of the heavens and to all that crawls on the
earth, which has the breath of life within it, the green

plants for food." And so it was. [31]And God saw all that He had done, and, look, it was very good. And it was evening and it was morning, the sixth day.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *welter and waste*. The Hebrew *tohu wabohu* occurs only here and in two later biblical texts that are clearly alluding to this one. The second word of the pair looks like a nonce term coined to rhyme with the first and to reinforce it, an effect I have tried to approximate in English by alliteration. *Tohu* by itself means "emptiness" or "futility," and in some contexts is associated with the trackless vacancy of the desert.

hovering. The verb attached to God's breath-wind-spirit (*ruaḥ*) elsewhere describes an eagle fluttering over its young and so might have a connotation of parturition or nurture as well as rapid back-and-forth movement.

5. *first day.* Unusually, the Hebrew uses a cardinal, not ordinal, number. As with all the six days except the sixth, the expected definite article is omitted.

6. *vault.* The Hebrew *rakiʿa* suggests a hammered-out slab, not necessarily arched, but the English architectural term with its celestial associations created by poetic tradition is otherwise appropriate.

24. *wild beasts.* Literally, the phrase would mean "beast of the earth," but the archaic construct form for "beasts of," *ḥayto,* elsewhere regularly occurs in collocations that denote wild beasts. In verse 25, the archaic form is not used, but given the close proximity of *ḥayat haʾarets* there to *ḥayto ʾerets* here, it seems likely that the meaning is the same.

26. *a human.* The term *ʾadam,* afterward consistently with a definite article, which is used both here and in the second account of the origins of humankind, is a generic term for human beings, not a proper noun. It also does not automatically suggest maleness, especially not without the prefix *ben,*

"son of," and so the traditional rendering "man" is misleading, and an exclusively male *'adam* would make nonsense of the last clause of verse 27.

hold sway. The verb *radah* is not the normal Hebrew verb for "rule" (the latter is reflected in "dominion" of verse 16), and in most of the contexts in which it occurs it seems to suggest an absolute or even fierce exercise of mastery.

the wild beasts. The Masoretic Text reads "all the earth," *bekhol ha'arets,* but since the term occurs in the middle of a catalogue of living creatures over which humanity will hold sway, the reading of the Syriac version, *ḥayat ha'arets,* "wild beasts," seems preferable.

27. In the middle clause of this verse, "him," as in the Hebrew, is grammatically but not anatomically masculine. Feminist critics have raised the question as to whether here and in the second account of human origins, in chapter 2, *'adam* is to be imagined as sexually undifferentiated until the fashioning of woman, though that proposal leads to certain dizzying paradoxes in following the story.

CHAPTER 2

[1]Then the heavens and the earth were completed, and
all their array. [2]And God completed on the seventh day
the task He had done, and He ceased on the seventh
day from all the task He had done. [3]And God blessed
the seventh day and hallowed it, for on it He had
ceased from all His task that He had created to do.
[4]This is the tale of the heavens and the earth when they
were created.

On the day the LORD God made earth and heavens,
[5]no shrub of the field being yet on the earth and no
plant of the field yet sprouted, for the LORD God had
not caused rain to fall on the earth and there was no
human to till the soil, [6]and wetness would well from
the earth to water all the surface of the soil, [7]then the
LORD God fashioned the human, humus from the
soil, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and
the human became a living creature. [8]And the LORD
God planted a garden in Eden, to the east, and He

placed there the human He had fashioned. [9]And the
LORD God caused to sprout from the soil every tree
lovely to look at and good for food, and the tree of life
was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of
knowledge, good and evil. [10]Now a river runs out of
Eden to water the garden and from there splits off into
four streams. [11]The name of the first is Pishon, the one
that winds through the whole land of Havilah, where
there is gold. [12]And the gold of that land is goodly,
bdellium is there, and lapis lazuli. [13]And the name of
the second river is Gihon, the one that winds through
all the land of Cush. [14]And the name of the third river
is Tigris, the one that goes to the east of Ashur. And
the fourth river is Euphrates. [15]And the LORD God
took the human and set him down in the garden of
Eden to till it and watch it. [16]And the LORD God
commanded the human, saying, “From every tree of
the garden you may surely eat. [17]But from the tree of
knowledge, good and evil, you shall not eat, for on the
day you eat from it, you are doomed to die.” [18]And the
LORD God said, “It is not good for the human to be
alone, I shall make him a sustainer beside him.” [19]And
the LORD God fashioned from the soil each beast of
the field and each fowl of the heavens and brought
each to the human to see what he would call it, and
whatever the human called a living creature, that was

its name. [20]And the human called names to all the cattle and to the fowl of the heavens and to all the beasts of the field, but for the human no sustainer beside him was found. [21]And the LORD God cast a deep slumber on the human, and he slept, and He took one of his ribs and closed over the flesh where it had been, [22]and the LORD God built the rib He had taken from the human into a woman and He brought her to the human. [23]And the human said:

"This one at last, bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh,
"This one shall be called Woman,
for from man was this one taken."

[24]Therefore does a man leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife and they become one flesh. [25]And the two of them were naked, the human and his woman, and they were not ashamed.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

4. As many modern commentators have noted, the first Creation account concludes with the summarizing phrase in the first half of this verse: "This is

the tale [literally, these are the begettings] of the heavens and the earth when they were created," these two paired terms, "heavens" and "earth," taking us back in an envelope structure to the paired terms of the very first verse of the Creation story. Now, after the grand choreography of resonant parallel utterances of the cosmogony, the style changes sharply. Instead of the symmetry of parataxis, hypotaxis is initially prominent: the second account begins with elaborate syntactical subordination in a long complex sentence that uncoils all the way from the second part of verse 4 to the end of verse 7. In this more vividly anthropomorphic account, God, now called YHWH *ʾElohim* instead of *ʾElohim* as in the first version, does not summon things into being from a lofty distance through the mere agency of divine speech, but works as a craftsman, fashioning (*yatsar* instead of *baraʾ*, "create"), blowing life-breath into nostrils, building a woman from a rib. Whatever the disparate historical origins of the two accounts, the redaction gives us first a harmonious cosmic overview of creation and then a plunge into the technological nitty-gritty and moral ambiguities of human origins.

7. *the human, humus.* The Hebrew etymological pun is *ʾadam,* "human," from the soil, *ʾadamah*.

16–17. *surely eat . . . doomed to die*. The form of the Hebrew in both instances is what grammarians call the infinitive absolute: the infinitive immediately followed by a conjugated form of the same verb. The general effect of this repetition is to add emphasis to the verb, but because in the case of the verb "to die" it is the pattern regularly used in the Bible for the issuing of death sentences, "doomed to die" is an appropriate equivalent.

18. *sustainer beside him.* The Hebrew *ʿezer kenegdo* (King James Version "help meet") is notoriously difficult to translate. The second term means "alongside him," "opposite him," "a counterpart to him." "Help" is too weak because it suggests a merely auxiliary function, whereas *ʿezer* elsewhere connotes active intervention on behalf of someone, especially in military contexts, as often in Psalms.

22. *built.* Though this may seem an odd term for the creation of woman, it complements the potter's term, "fashion," used for the creation of first human, and is more appropriate because the LORD is now working with hard

material, not soft clay. As Nahum Sarna has observed, the Hebrew for "rib," *tsela* ʿ, is also used elsewhere to designate an architectural element.

23. The first human is given reported speech for the first time only when there is another human to whom to respond. The speech takes the form of verse, a naming-poem, in which each of the two lines begins with the feminine indicative pronoun, *zo* ʾ*t,* "this one," which is also the last Hebrew word of the poem, cinching it in a tight envelope structure.

24. *Therefore.* This term, *ʿal-ken,* is the formula for introducing an etiological explanation: here, why it is that man separates from his parents and is drawn to join bodily, and otherwise, to a woman.

25. *And the two of them.* But characteristically, the narrative immediately unsettles the neatness of the etiological certainty, for the first couple are two, not one flesh, and their obliviousness to their nakedness is darkened by the foreshadow of the moment about to be narrated in which their innocence will be lost.

CHAPTER 3

[1]Now the serpent was most cunning of all the beasts
of the field that the LORD God had made. And he
said to the woman, [2]“Though God said, you shall not
eat from any tree of the garden—” And the woman
said to the serpent, “From the fruit of the garden’s
trees we may eat, but from the fruit of the tree in the
midst of the garden [3]God has said, [4]“You shall not eat
from it and you shall not touch it, lest you die.’” And
the serpent said to the woman, [5]“You shall not be
doomed to die. For God knows that on the day you eat
of it your eyes will be opened and you will become as
gods knowing good and evil.” [6]And the woman saw
that the tree was good for eating and that it was lust to
the eyes and the tree was lovely to look at, and she
took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave to her man
with her, and he ate. [7]And the eyes of the two were
opened, and they knew they were naked, and they
sewed fig leaves and made themselves loincloths.

[8]And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking
about in the garden in the evening breeze, and the
human and his woman hid from the LORD God in the
midst of the trees of the garden. [9]And the LORD God
called to the human and said to him, “Where are you?”
[10]And he said, “I heard Your sound in the garden and I
was afraid, for I was naked, and I hid.” [11]And He said,
“Who told you that you were naked? From the tree I
commanded you not to eat have you eaten?” [12]And the
human said, “The woman whom you gave by me, she
gave me from the tree, and I ate.” [13]And the LORD
God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?”
And the woman said, “The serpent beguiled me and I
ate.” [14]And the LORD God said to the serpent,
“Because you have done this,

Cursed be you
of all cattle and all beasts of the
field.
On your belly shall you go
and dust shall you eat all the days
of your life.
[15]Enmity will I set between you and
the woman,
between your seed and hers.

He will bite your head
and you will boot him with the heel.”

16To the woman He said,

“I will terribly sharpen your birth pangs,
in pain shall you bear children.
And for your man shall be your longing,
and he shall rule over you.”

17And to the human He said, “Because you listened to the voice of your wife and ate from the tree that I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat from it,’

Cursed be the soil for your sake,
with pangs shall you eat from it all the days of your life.
18Thorn and thistle shall it sprout for you
and you shall eat the plants of the field.

[19]By the sweat of your brow shall you
eat bread
till you return to the soil,
for from there were you taken,
for dust you are
and to dust shall you return."

[20]And the human called his woman's name Eve, for she was the mother of all that lives. [21]And the LORD God made skin coats for the human and his woman, and He clothed them. [22]And the LORD God said, "Now that the human has become like one of us, knowing good and evil, he may reach out and take as well from the tree of life and live forever." [23]And the LORD God sent him from the garden of Eden to till the soil from which he had been taken. [24]And He drove out the human and set up east of the garden of Eden the cherubim and the flame of the whirling sword to guard the way to the tree of life.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *cunning*. In the kind of pun in which the ancient Hebrew writers delighted, *ʿarum,* "cunning," plays against *ʿarumim,* "naked," of the previous verse.

2. As E. A. Speiser has noted, the subordinate conjunction that introduces the serpent's first utterance does not have the sense of "truly" that most translators assign it, and is better construed as the beginning of a (false) statement that is cut off in midsentence by Eve's objection that the ban is not on *all* the trees of the Garden.

3. But, as many commentators have observed, Eve enlarges the divine prohibition in another direction, adding a ban on touching to the one on eating, and so perhaps setting herself up for transgression: having touched the fruit, and seeing no ill effect, she may proceed to eat.

6. *lust to the eyes.* There is a long tradition of rendering the first term here, *taʾawah*, according to English idiom and local biblical context, as "delight" or something similar. But *taʾawah* means "that which is intensely desired," "appetite," and sometimes specifically "lust." Eyes have just been mentioned in the serpent's promise that they will be wondrously opened; now they are linked to intense desire. In the event, they will be opened chiefly to see nakedness. *Taʾawah* is semantically bracketed with the next term attached to the tree, "lovely," neḥ*mad,* which literally means "that which is desired."

to look at. A venerable tradition renders this verb, *lehaskil*, as "to make one wise." But Amos Funkenstein has astutely observed to me that there is an internal parallelism in the verse, "lust to the eyes . . . lovely to look at." Although the usual sense of *lehaskil* in the *hiphʿil* conjugation does involve the exercise of wisdom, Funkenstein's suggestion leans on the meaning of the same root in the *hitpaʿel* conjugation in postbiblical Hebrew and Aramaic, "to look." And in fact, the Aramaic Targums of both Onkelos and Yonatan ben Uziel render this as *leʾistakala beih,* "to look at." At least one other biblical occurrence is almost certainly in the sense of "look," the beginning of Psalm 41: "Happy who *maskil* to the poor man"—surely, who looks at, has regard for, the poor man. A correlation between verbs of seeing and verbs of knowledge or understanding is common to many languages.

12. *gave by me, she gave me.* The repeated verb nicely catches the way the first man passes the buck, not only blaming the woman for giving him the fruit but virtually blaming God for giving him the woman. She in turn of course blames the serpent. God's curse, framed in verse, follows the reverse order, from serpent to woman to man.

15. *Enmity.* Although the serpent is by no means "satanic," as in the lens of later Judeo-Christian traditions, the curse records a primal horror of humankind before this slithering, viscous-looking, and poisonous representative of the animal realm. It is the first moment in which a split between man and the rest of the animal kingdom is recorded. Behind it may stand, at a long distance of cultural mediation, Canaanite myths of a primordial sea serpent.

bite . . . boot. The Hebrew uses what appear to be homonyms, the first verb probably referring to the hissing sound of the snake just before it bites, the second, identical in form, meaning "to trample."

17. *to the human.* The Masoretic Text vocalizes *le'adam* without the definite article, which would make it mean "to Adam." But since Eve in the parallel curse is still called "the woman," it seems better to assume the definite article here.

with pangs shall you eat. The noun *'itsavon* is the same used for the woman's birth pangs, confirming the lot of painful labor that is to be shared by man and woman.

18. The vista of thorn and thistle is diametrically opposed to the luscious vegetation of the Garden and already intimates the verdict of banishment that will be carried out in verses 23–24.

20. *Eve . . . all that lives*. Like most of the explanations of names in Genesis, this is probably based on folk etymology or an imaginative playing with sound. The most searching explanation of these poetic etymologies in the Bible has been offered by Herbert Marks, who observes, "In a verisimilar narrative, naming establishes and fixes identity as something tautologically itself; etymology, by returning it to the trials of language, compromises it, complicates it, renders it potentially mobile." In the Hebrew here, the phonetic similarity is between *ḥawah,* "Eve," and the verbal root *ḥayah*, "to live." It has been proposed that Eve's name conceals very different origins, for it sounds suspiciously like the Aramaic word for "serpent." Could she have been given the name by the contagious contiguity with her wily interlocutor, or, on the contrary, might there lurk behind the name a very different evaluation of the serpent as a creature associated with the origins of life?

23. *the soil from which he had been taken.* This reminder of the first man's clayey creatureliness occurs as a kind of refrain in this chapter, first in the act of God's fashioning man, then in God's curse, and now in the banishment. It is a mere thing shaped from clay that has aspired to be like a god.

24. The cherubim, a common feature of ancient Near Eastern mythology, are not to be confused with the round-cheeked darlings of Renaissance iconography. The root of the term means either "hybrid" or, by an inversion of consonants, "mount," "steed," and they are the winged beasts, probably of fearsome aspect, on which the sky god of the old Canaanite myths and of the poetry of Psalms goes riding through the air. The fiery sword, not mentioned elsewhere but referred to with the definite article as though it were a familiar image, is a suitable weapon to set alongside the formidable cherubim.

CHAPTER 4

[1]And the human knew Eve his woman and she
conceived and bore Cain, and she said, “I have got me
a man with the LORD.” [2]And she bore as well his
brother, Abel, and Abel became a herder of sheep
while Cain was a tiller of the soil. [3]And it happened in
the course of time that Cain brought from the fruit of
the soil an offering to the LORD. [4]And Abel too had
brought from the choice firstlings of his flock, and the
LORD regarded Abel and his offering [5]but He did not
regard Cain and his offering, and Cain was very
incensed, and his face fell. [6]And the LORD said to
Cain.

“Why are you incensed,
    and why is your face fallen?
[7]For whether you offer well,
    or whether you do not,
at the tent flap sin crouches
    and for you is its longing

but you will rule over it."

[8]And Cain said to Abel his brother, "Let us go out to the field." And when they were in the field, Cain rose against Abel his brother and killed him. [9]And the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" [10]And He said, "What have you done? Listen! your brother's blood cries out to me from the soil. [11]And so, cursed shall you be by the soil that gaped with its mouth to take your brother's blood from your hand. [12]If you till the soil, it will no longer give you its strength. A restless wanderer shall you be on the earth." [13]And Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is too great to bear. [14]Now that You have driven me this day from the soil and I must hide from Your presence, I shall be a restless wanderer on the earth and whoever finds me will kill me." [15]And the LORD said to him, "Therefore whoever kills Cain shall suffer sevenfold vengeance." And the LORD set a mark upon Cain so that whoever found him would not slay him.

[16]And Cain went out from the LORD's presence and dwelled in the land of Nod east of Eden. [17]And Cain

knew his wife and she conceived and bore Enoch.
Then he became the builder of a city and called the
name of the city, like his son's name, Enoch. [18]And
Irad was born to Enoch, and Irad begot Mehujael and
Mehujael begot Methusael and Methusael begot
Lamech. [19]And Lamech took him two wives, the name
of the one was Adah and the name of the other was
Zillah. [20]And Adah bore Jabal: he was the first of tent
dwellers with livestock. [21]And his brother's name was
Jubal: he was the first of all who play on the lyre and
pipe. [22]As for Zillah, she bore Tubal-Cain, who forged
every tool of copper and iron. And the sister of Tubal-
Cain was Naamah. [23]And Lamech said to his wives,

"Adah and Zillah, O hearken my
voice,
You wives of Lamech, give ear to
my speech.
For a man have I slain for my
wound,
a boy for my bruising.
[24]For sevenfold Cain is avenged,
and Lamech seventy and seven."

[25]And Adam again knew his wife and she bore a son and called his name Seth, as to say, “God has granted me other seed in place of Abel, for Cain has killed him.” [26]As for Seth, to him, too, a son was born, and he called his name Enosh. It was then that the name of the LORD was first invoked.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *knew*. The Hebrew verb suggests intimate knowledge and hence sexual possession. Amos Funkenstein notes that it is the one term for sexual intercourse associated with legitimate possession—and in a few antithetical instances, with perverse violation of legitimate possession. Given the clumsiness of modern English equivalents like “had experience of,” “cohabited with,” “was intimate with,” and, given the familiarity of the King James Version’s literal rendering, “to know” remains the least objectionable English solution.

I have got me a man with the LORD. Eve’s naming-speech puns on the verb *qanah*, “to get,” “to acquire,” or perhaps, “to make,” and *qayin,* “Cain.” His name actually means “smith,” an etymology that will be reflected in his linear descendant Tubal-Cain, the legendary first metalworker. (“Tubal” also means “smith” in Sumerian and Akkadian.) Eve, upon bringing forth the third human being, imagines herself as a kind of partner of God in man-making.

2. *Abel.* No etymology is given, but it has been proposed that the Hebrew *hevel,* “vapor” or “puff of air,” may be associated with his fleeting life span.

4–5. The widespread culture-founding story of rivalry between herdsman and farmer is recast in a pattern that will dominate Genesis—the displacement of the firstborn by the younger son. If there is any other reason intimated as to

why God would favor Abel's offering and not Cain's, it would be in the narrator's stipulation that Abel brings the very best of his flock to God.

6–7. This is the first of two enigmatic and probably quite archaic poems in the chapter. God's initial words pick up the two locutions for dejection of the immediately preceding narrative report and turn them into the parallel utterances of formal verse. The first clause of verse 7 is particularly elliptic in the Hebrew, and thus any construction is no more than an educated guess. The narrative context of sacrifices may suggest that the cryptic *s'eit* (elsewhere, "preeminence") might be related to *mas'eit,* a "gift" or "cultic offering."

8. *Let us go out to the field.* This sentence is missing in the Masoretic Text but supplied in the Greek, Syriac, and Aramaic versions.

his brother. In keeping with the biblical practice of using thematically fraught relational epithets, the victim of the first murder is twice called "his brother" here, and God will repeatedly refer to Abel in accusing Cain as "your brother."

9–12. There are several verbal echoes of Adam's interrogation by God and Adam's curse, setting up a general biblical pattern in which history is seen as a cycle of approximate and significant recurrences. Adam's being driven from the Garden to till a landscape of thorn and thistle is replayed here in God's insistence that Cain is cursed by—the preposition also could mean "of" or "from"—the soil (*'adamah*) that had hitherto yielded its bounty to him. The biblical imagination is equally preoccupied with the theme of exile (this is already the second expulsion) and with the arduousness or precariousness of agriculture, a blessing that easily turns into blight.

11. *that gaped with its mouth to take your brother's blood from your hand.* The image is strongly physical: a gaping *mouth* taking in *blood* from the murderer's *hand*.

14. *whoever finds me.* This, and the subsequent report of Cain with a wife in the land of Nod, are a famous inconsistency. Either the writer was assuming knowledge of some other account of human origins involving more than a single founding family, or, because the schematic simplicity of the single

nuclear-family plot impeded narrative development after Cain's banishment, he decided not to bother with consistency.

15. *a mark.* It is of course a mark of protection, not a stigma as the English idiom "mark of Cain" suggests.

16. *the land of Nod.* "Nod" in Hebrew is cognate with "wanderer" in verse 12.

17. *the builder of a city.* The first recorded founder of a city is also the first murderer, a possible reflection of the antiurban bias in Genesis.

20. *he was the first.* The Hebrew says literally "father of," in keeping with the predisposition of the language and culture to imagine historical concatenation genealogically.

22. *Naamah.* One might expect an identification that would align Naamah with her siblings as a founder of some basic activity of human culture, but if such an identification was part of the original epic roll call, it has been either lost or deleted. The Midrash recognized that the root of her name can refer to song: perhaps Naamah is meant to be associated with her half brother Jubal, the founder of instrumental music—he as accompanist, she as singer.

23–24. The narrative context of this poem is long lost, but it looks like a warrior's triumphal song, cast as a boast to his wives. Unlike the looser form of the earlier poetic insets, this poem follows the parallelistic pattern of biblical verse with exemplary rigor. Every term in each initial verset has its semantic counterpart in the second verset. In the Hebrew, the first pair of versets has four accented syllables in each; every subsequent verset has three accented syllables. The last pair of versets, with its numbers, provides a paradigm case for poetic parallelism in the Bible: when a number occurs in the first half of the line, it must be increased—by one, by a decimal, or by a decimal added to the original number, as here, in the second half of the line. In the same way, there is a pronounced tendency in the poetry to intensify semantic material as it is repeated in approximate synonymity. Perhaps, then, what Lamech is saying (quite barbarically) is that not only has he killed a man for wounding him, he has not hesitated to kill a mere boy for hurting him.

25. *Seth . . . granted me*. The naming-pun plays on the similarity of sound between "Seth," *shet,* and "granted," *shat*.

26. *Enosh.* The name is also a common noun in Hebrew meaning "man," and that conceivably might explain why, from the universalist perspective of the writer, the name YHWH began to be invoked in this generation. In any case, the narrative unit that begins with one general term for human being, *ʾadam,* in verse 1, here concludes with another, *ʾenosh,* and those two words elsewhere are bracketed together in poetic parallelism.

the name of the LORD *was first invoked*. That is, the distinctive Israelite designation for the deity, YHWH, represented in this translation, according to precedent in the King James Version, as the LORD. The existence of primordial monotheism is an odd biblical notion that seeks to reinforce the universalism of the monotheistic idea. The enigmatic claim, made here with an atypical and vague passive form of the verb, is contradicted by the report in Exodus that only with Moses was the name YHWH revealed to man.

CHAPTER 5

[1]This is the book of the lineage of Adam: On the day
God created the human, in the image of God He
created him. [2]Male and female He created them, and
He blessed them and called their name humankind on
the day they were created. [3]And Adam lived a hundred
and thirty years and he begot in his likeness by his
image and called his name Seth. [4]And the days of
Adam after he begot Seth were eight hundred years,
and he begot sons and daughters. [5]And all the days
Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years. Then
he died. [6]And Seth lived a hundred and five years and
he begot Enosh. [7]And Seth lived after he begot Enosh
eight hundred and seven years, and he begot sons and
daughters. [8]And all the days of Seth were nine hundred
and twelve years. Then he died. [9]And Enosh lived
ninety years and he begot Kenan. [10]And Enosh lived
after he begot Kenan eight hundred and fifteen years,
and he begot sons and daughters. [11]And all the days of
Enosh were nine hundred and five years. Then he died.
[12]And Kenan lived seventy years and he begot

Mahalalel. [13]And Kenan lived after he begot Mahalalel
eight hundred and forty years, and he begot sons and
daughters. [14]And all the days of Kenan were nine
hundred and ten years. Then he died. [15]And Mahalalel
lived sixty-five years and he begot Jared. [16]And
Mahalalel lived after he begot Jared eight hundred and
thirty years, and he begot sons and daughters. [17]And all
the days of Mahalalel were eight hundred and ninety-
five years. Then he died. [18]And Jared lived a hundred
and sixty-two years and he begot Enoch. [19]And Jared
lived after he begot Enoch eight hundred years, and he
begot sons and daughters. [20]And all the days of Jared
were nine hundred and sixty-two years. Then he died.
[21]And Enoch lived sixty-five years and he begot
Methuselah. [22]And Enoch walked with God after he
begot Methuselah three hundred years, and he begot
sons and daughters. [23]And all the days of Enoch were
three hundred and sixty-five years. [24]And Enoch
walked with God and he was no more, for God took
him. [25]And Methuselah lived a hundred and eighty-
seven years and he begot Lamech. [26]And Methuselah
lived after he begot Lamech seven hundred and eighty-
two years, and he begot sons and daughters. [27]And all
the days of Methuselah were nine hundred and sixty-
nine years. Then he died. [28]And Lamech lived a
hundred and eighty-two years and he begot a son.

[29]And he called his name Noah, as to say, “This one
will console us for the pain of our hands’ work from
the soil which the LORD cursed.” [30]And Lamech lived
after he begot Noah five hundred and ninety-five years,
and he begot sons and daughters. [31]And all the days of
Lamech were seven hundred and seventy-seven years.
Then he died. [32]And Noah was five hundred years old
and he begot Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

Nothing reveals the difference of the biblical conception of literature from later Western ones more strikingly than the biblical use of genealogies as an intrinsic element of literary structure. As J. P. Fokkelman (1987) has noted, the genealogical lists or “begats” (*toledot*) in Genesis are carefully placed compositional units that mark off one large narrative segment from another: here, the story of Creation and the antediluvian founding figures from the Deluge story. As Fokkelman also observes, the begettings of the genealogical lists are linked thematically with the initial injunction to be fruitful and multiply and with all the subsequent stories of a threatened or thwarted procreative drive.

Repetition of formula dominates the genealogical list stylistically. Here the procreative act and life span of each figure are conveyed in identical language, and when there is a divergence from the formula, in the case of Enoch, it is very significant. Formulaic numbers as well are characteristically used by the biblical writer to give order and coherence to the narrated world. The seven generations from Adam to Noah of chapter 4 are here displaced by a different formulaic number, ten. (Some critics have argued that the two lists reflect competing versions that deploy the same group of fathers and sons in different patterns: some of the names are identical in both lists, others—like

Cain-Kenan, Irad-Jared—may well be variants of each other.) This list incorporates both of the formulaic numbers: Lamech, the last of the antediluvians before Noah, lives 777 years; Noah, unlike his predecessors, becomes a begetter at the age of 500, halfway through a round millennium, which is the ten of the ten generations with two decimal places added. A millennium is the age most of the antediluvians come close to but never attain, as befits their mortality.

Surely part of the intention in using the genealogy is to give the history the look of authentically archaic documentation. If, as many assume, Priestly circles in the Second Temple period were ultimately responsible for the list here, they did not hesitate to include the fabulous ages of the antediluvians, which must have had their origins in hoary Semitic antiquity (as the old Mesopotamian parallels suggest), as well as the strange, evidently mythic fragment about Enoch, which could scarcely have been a late invention.

1. *This is the book.* The Hebrew *sefer,* which some render as "record," is anything written down, presumably in the form of a scroll. In any case, the introductory formula clearly announces this as a separate document.

Adam. The lack of a definite article would seem to indicate that the term is being used as a proper name. But the two subsequent occurrences of *ʾadam,* here and in the next verse, equally lack the definite article and yet clearly refer to "the human creature" or "humankind." God's calling "them" by the name *ʾadam* (verse 2) is also an explicit indication that the term is not exclusively masculine, and so it is misleading to render it as "man."

1–2. *in the image of God . . . Male and female He created them*. The pointed citation of the account in chapter 1 ties in the genealogical list with the initial story of human origins: creation is recapitulated, and continues.

3. *in his likeness by his image.* Adam, then, replicates God's making of the human being (with the order of "likeness" and "image" reversed) in his own act of procreation.

22. *And Enoch walked with God.* This cryptic verse has generated mountains of speculative commentary, not to speak of two whole books of the Apocrypha. The reflexive form of the verb "to walk" that occurs here is the same form used for God's walking about in the Garden. Instead of the flat report of death, as in the case of the other antediluvians, the euphemism "was

no more" (literally "was not"), which is also applied to Joseph, merely supposed by his brothers to be dead, is used. "Walked with" surely implies some sort of special intimate relationship with God, but what that might be is anyone's guess. This is one of several instances in the early chapters of Genesis of a teasing vestige of a tradition for which the context is lost. Enoch is the seventh generation from Adam, and some scholars have seen an instructive analogy in a Mesopotamian list of kings before the Deluge, in which the seventh antediluvian king, a certain Enmeduranki, is taken up to sit before the gods Shamash and Adad, and is granted preternatural wisdom. Shamash is the sun god, and the biblical Enoch lives as many years as the days of the solar year.

29. *This one will console us.* As usual, the sound-play on the name Noah, which lacks the final *mem* of the word for "console," naḥ*em*, is loose phonetic association. What the nature of the consolation might be is a cloudier issue. Rashi's proposal that Noah was the inventor of the plow has scant support in the subsequent text. Others, more plausibly, have linked the consolation with Noah's role as the first cultivator of the vine. The idea that wine provides the poor man respite from his drudgery (see Proverbs 31:6–7) is common enough in the biblical world. Wine, then, might have been thought of as a palliative to the curse of hard labor, which is also the curse of the soil: the language of Genesis 3:17–18 is explicitly echoed here.

the pain of our hands' work. Most translations render this as "our toil, our work," or something equivalent. But the second term, *ʿitsavon,* does not mean "labor" but rather "pain," and is the crucial word at the heart of Adam's curse, and Eve's. Given that allusion, the two terms in the Hebrew—which reads literally, "our work and the pain of our hands"—are surely to be construed as a hendiadys, a pair of terms for a single concept indicating "painful labor." It should be noted that the "work of our hands" is a common biblical collocation while "pain of our hands" occurs only here, evidently under the gravitational pull of "work" with which it is paired as a compound idiom. Equally noteworthy is that the word *ʿitsavon* appears only three times in the Bible (other nominal forms of the root being relatively common)—first for Eve, then for Adam, and now for Noah.

CHAPTER 6

[1]And it happened as humankind began to multiply over the earth and daughters were born to them, [2]that the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were comely, and they took themselves wives howsoever they chose. [3]And the LORD said, “My breath shall not abide in the human forever, for he is but flesh. Let his days be a hundred and twenty years.”

[4]The Nephilim were then on the earth, and afterward as well, the sons of God having come to bed with the daughters of man who bore them children: they are the heroes of yore, the men of renown. [5]And the LORD saw that the evil of the human creature was great on the earth and that every scheme of his heart’s devising was only perpetually evil. [6]And the LORD regretted having made the human on earth and was grieved to the heart. [7]And the LORD said, “I will wipe out the human race I created from the face of the earth, from human to cattle to crawling thing to the fowl of the

heavens, for I regret that I have made them." [8]But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. [9]This is the lineage of Noah—Noah was a righteous man, he was blameless in his time, Noah walked with God— [10]and Noah begot three sons, Shem and Ham and Japheth. [11]And the earth was corrupt before God and the earth was filled with outrage. [12]And God saw the earth and, look, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted its ways on the earth. [13]And God said to Noah, "The end of all flesh is come before Me, for the earth is filled with outrage by them, and I am now about to destroy them, with the earth. [14]Make yourself an ark of cypress wood, with cells you shall make the ark, and caulk it inside and out with pitch. [15]This is how you shall make it: three hundred cubits, the ark's length; fifty cubits, its width; thirty cubits, its height. [16]Make a skylight in the ark, within a cubit of the top you shall finish it, and put an entrance in the ark on one side. With lower and middle and upper decks you shall make it. [17]As for Me, I am about to bring the Flood, water upon the earth, to destroy all flesh that has within it the breath of life from under the heavens, everything on the earth shall perish. [18]And I will set up My covenant with you, and you shall enter the ark, you and your sons and your wife and the wives of your sons, with you. [19]And from all that lives, from all flesh,

two of each thing you shall bring to the ark to keep alive with you, male and female they shall be. [20]From the fowl of each kind and from the cattle of each kind and from all that crawls on the earth of each kind, two of each thing shall come to you to be kept alive. [21]As for you, take you from every food that is eaten and store it by you, to serve for you and for them as food." [22]And this Noah did; as all that God commanded him, so he did.

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1–4. This whole passage is obviously archaic and mythological. The idea of male gods coupling with mortal women whose beauty ignites their desire is a commonplace of Greek myth, and E. A. Speiser has proposed that both the Greek and the Semitic stories may have a common source in the Hittite traditions of Asia Minor. The entourage of celestial beings obscurely implied in God's use of the first-person plural in the Garden story (compare 3:22) here produces, however fleetingly, active agents in the narrative. As with the prospect that man and woman might eat from the tree of life, God sees this intermingling of human and divine as the crossing of a necessary line of human limitation, and He responds by setting a new retracted limit (three times the formulaic forty) to human life span. Once more human mortality is confirmed, this time in quantitative terms.

2. *man.* Here it seems better to render the generic *haʾadam* as "man" both because in the patrilineal imagination (compare the immediately preceding genealogy) males are seen as the begetters of daughters and sons, and because the term "daughters of man" is played against "sons of God."

comely. The Hebrew also means "good" but it very often occurs in the sense of goodly appearance, and is sometimes explicitly paired with the word for "beautiful." The same term is used for Eve's perception of the tree of knowledge (3:6).

3. *abide . . . is but*. Both pertinent Hebrew terms are cryptic, and the translation is somewhat speculative.

4. *Nephilim.* The only obvious meaning of this Hebrew term is "fallen ones"—perhaps, those who have come down from the realm of the gods; but then the word might conceivably reflect an entirely different, un-Hebraic background. In any case, the notion of semidivine, heroic figures—in Numbers the Nephilim are thought of as giants who are offspring of miscegenation between gods and women—again touches on common ground with Greek and other mythologies.

come to bed with. The Hebrew idiom is literally "come into," that is, "entered." It involves a more direct reference to the mechanics of the sexual act than "to know" and thus has a more carnal coloration, but at the same time it seems to be perfectly decorous. The English "entered" would be too clinical, and, in any case, the Hebrew idiom refers to the whole act of intercourse, not merely to penetration. Of the three expressions used for sexual intercourse in Genesis—the other two are "to know" and "to lie with"—this one is reserved for sexual intimacy with a woman with whom the man has not previously had carnal relations, whether or not she is his legitimate wife. The spatial imagery of the idiom of "coming into" appears to envisage entering concentric circles—the woman's private sphere, her bed, her body.

heroes of yore. The Hebrew style of this entire clause reflects a certain epic heightening, hence the archaizing turn in the translation. One suspects that these words are either a citation of an old heroic poem or a stylistic allusion to the epic genre.

5. *was great.* With a minor change in vocalization, this adjective could be read as a verb, "multiplied": in any case, the whole phrase echoes the "multiply over the earth" of verse 1. The nature of the evil, distinct from the preceding tale of human-divine miscegenation, is not specified, and God's subsequent indictment uses only general terms ("corruption" and "outrage" /

"lawlessness"). It is noteworthy that the sundry Mesopotamian Flood stories, on which this account draws heavily, present the Deluge as the gods' response to overpopulation or as an arbitrary act, whereas here it is evil, not humankind, that multiplies and fills the earth.

heart's devising. In the Bible the heart is usually thought of as the seat of intelligence, only occasionally as the seat of emotion; thus many modern translators use "mind" here. But man's evil heart is pointedly meant to stand in contrast to God's grieving heart (the same Hebrew word) in the next verse.

6. *grieved.* The same verbal root, *ʿ-ts-b,* is reflected in Eve's pangs, Adam's pain, and "the pain of our hands' work."

9. *lineage.* The listing of Noah's three sons in the next verse supports this sense of *toledot,* but it might also mean "story."

11. *filled with outrage.* Humankind had been enjoined to multiply and fill the earth, but the proliferation of human population leads to a proliferation of lawless behavior. This is one of several verbal echoes of the Creation story, suggesting, first, a perversion of creation by man and, then, a reversal of creation by God.

13–21. God's pronouncement of imminent doom and His instructions about the ark are the longest continuous speech up to this point in Genesis, considerably exceeding the triple curse in chapter 3. Most of the length is dictated by the necessity to provide specifications for the construction of the ark and the arrangements for the animals. But the writer also uses the speech as a vehicle for realizing God's awesome presence in the story: the language is not arranged in actual verse but it sounds a drumroll of grand formal cadences, stressing repeated terms and phrases that are rhythmically or semantically parallel.

13. *destroy.* The Hebrew verb is identical with the one used three times above in the sense of "corrupt" and so inscribes a pattern of measure for measure.

CHAPTER 7

[1]And the LORD said to Noah, “Come into the ark,
you and all your household, for it is you I have seen
righteous before Me in this generation. [2]Of every clean
animal take you seven pairs, each with its mate, and of
every animal that is not clean, one pair, each with its
mate. [3]Of the fowl of the heavens as well seven pairs,
male and female, to keep seed alive over all the earth.
[4]For in seven days’ time I will make it rain on the earth
forty days and forty nights and I will wipe out from the
face of the earth all existing things that I have made.”
[5]And Noah did all that the LORD commanded him.

[6]Noah was six hundred years old when the Flood
came, water over the earth. [7]And Noah and his sons
and his wife and his sons’ wives came into the ark
because of the waters of the Flood. [8]Of the clean
animals and of the animals that were not clean and of
the fowl and of all that crawls upon the ground [9]two
each came to Noah into the ark, male and female, as

God had commanded Noah. [10]And it happened after seven days, that the waters of the Flood were over the earth. [11]In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day,

All the wellsprings of the great deep
burst
and the casements of the heavens
were opened.

[12]And the rain was over the earth forty days and forty nights. [13]That very day, Noah and Shem and Ham and Japheth, the sons of Noah, and Noah's wife, and the three wives of his sons together with them, came into the ark, [14]they as well as beasts of each kind and cattle of each kind and each kind of crawling thing that crawls on the earth and each kind of bird, each winged thing. [15]They came to Noah into the ark, two by two of all flesh that has the breath of life within it. [16]And those that came in, male and female of all flesh they came, as God had commanded him, and the LORD shut him in. [17]And the Flood was forty days over the earth, and the waters multiplied and bore the ark upward and it rose above the earth. [18]And the waters

surged and multiplied mightily over the earth, and the ark went on the surface of the water. [19]And the waters surged most mightily over the earth, and all the high mountains under the heavens were covered. [20]Fifteen cubits above them the waters surged as the mountains were covered. [21]And all flesh that stirs on the earth perished, the fowl and the cattle and the beasts and all swarming things that swarm upon the earth, and all humankind. [22]All that had the quickening breath of life in its nostrils, of all that was on dry land, died. [23]And He wiped out all existing things from the face of the earth, from humans to cattle to crawling things to the fowl of the heavens, they were wiped out from the earth. And Noah alone remained, and those with him in the ark. [24]And the waters surged over the earth one hundred and fifty days.

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *for it is you I have seen righteous before Me in this generation*. God's words here reflect a frequently used technique of biblical narrative, in which the narrator's report or evaluation is confirmed by a near verbatim repetition in dialogue, or vice versa. The judgment that Noah is "righteous in this generation" explicitly echoes the narrator's declaration in 6:9 that Noah is "a righteous man . . . blameless in his time" (the Hebrew for "time" is literally "generations").

2. *Of every clean animal take you seven pairs.* Clean and unclean evidently refer to fitness for sacrificial use, not for eating, as in the later dietary prohibitions. As scholarship has often noted, two versions of the Flood story, the Priestly and the Yahwistic, are intertwined in a somewhat confusing fashion. According to the former, two of each species are to be brought into the ark and no distinction is made between clean and unclean. According to the latter, seven pairs of clean animals and one pair of the unclean are to be saved. Abraham ibn Ezra and other medieval exegetes rescue consistency by proposing that when God directed attention to the clean-unclean distinction, He had to add the difference in numbers because more animals were needed to be sacrificed. (Noah, like his counterpart in the Mesopotamian Flood stories, does in fact offer a thanksgiving sacrifice after the waters recede.) But the tensions between the two versions, including how they record the time span of the Flood, persist, and there are some indications that the editor himself struggled to harmonize them.

3. *seed.* The Hebrew term means both semen and the offspring that is its product. It is a very concrete way of conceiving propagation and the survival of a line, and seems worth preserving in a literal English rendering.

4. *I will make it rain.* The Hebrew uses a participial form indicating action virtually on the point of beginning, but in English the introductory temporal clause requires a simple future.

7. *because of.* The Hebrew also means "in the face of" and may have the implied sense here of fleeing from the rising waters, as ibn Ezra observes.

11. *In the six hundredth year.* The precise indications of age and date give the report of the inception of the Flood a certain epic solemnity.

All the wellsprings of the great deep burst. This line of poetry has been cited by Umberto Cassuto and others as a fragment from an old epic poem on the Flood. This is by no means a necessary assumption, however, because it is a regular practice of biblical narrative to introduce insets of verse at moments of high importance, and in many instances the composition of verse and prose may be by the same hand. The grand flourish of this line of poetry is perfectly consonant with the resonant repetitions and measured cadences of the surrounding prose. The surge of waters from the great deep below and from the heavens above is, of course, a striking reversal of the second day of

creation, when a vault was erected to divide the waters above from the waters below. The biblical imagination, having conceived creation as an orderly series of divisions imposed on primordial chaos, frequently conjures with the possibility of a reversal of this process (see, for example, Jeremiah 4:23–26): biblical cosmogony and apocalypse are reverse sides of the same coin. The Flood story as a whole abounds in verbal echoes of the Creation story (the crawling things, the cattle and beasts of each kind, and so forth) as what was made on the six days is wiped out in these forty.

17. *and the waters multiplied.* The very verb of proliferation employed in the Creation story for living creatures is here attached to the instrument of their destruction.

22. *the quickening breath of life.* The Hebrew, *nishmat ruaḥ ḥayim,* is unusual, the first two terms in a way doubling each other ("the breath of the breath of life"). Some recent scholars construe this as a minimizing idiom that implies something like "the faintest breath of life." But the one other occurrence of the phrase *nishmat ruaḥ*, in David's victory psalm (2 Samuel 22:16), is part of an anthropomorphic vision of God breathing fire on the battlefield ("By the LORD's roaring, / the blast of His nostrils' breath"); and so it is more plausible that the doubled terms are intensifiers, underlining the physical exhalation of breath from the nostrils that is the sign of life. In fact, we shall encounter other instances, in the Plagues narrative and in the Sinai epiphany in Exodus, where two synonyms joined together in the construct state signify intensification.

CHAPTER 8

[1]And God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all
the cattle that were with him in the ark. And God sent
a wind over the earth and the waters subsided. [2]And
the wellsprings of the deep were dammed up, and the
casements of the heavens, the rain from the heavens
held back. [3]And the waters receded from the earth
little by little, and the waters ebbed. At the end of one
hundred and fifty days [4]the ark came to rest, on the
seventeenth day of the seventh month, on the
mountains of Ararat. [5]The waters continued to ebb,
until the tenth month, on the first day of the tenth
month, the mountaintops appeared. [6]And it happened,
at the end of forty days, that Noah opened the window
of the ark he had made. [7]And he sent out the raven
and it went forth to and fro until the waters should dry
up from the earth. [8]And he sent out the dove to see
whether the waters had abated from the surface of the
ground. [9]But the dove found no resting place for its
foot and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters
were over all the earth. And he reached out and took it

and brought it back to him into the ark. [10]Then he
waited another seven days and again sent the dove out
from the ark. [11]And the dove came back to him at
eventide and, look, a plucked olive leaf was in its bill,
and Noah knew that the waters had abated from the
earth. [12]Then he waited still another seven days and
sent out the dove, and it did not return to him again.
[13]And it happened in the six hundred and first year, in
the first month, on the first day of the month, the
waters dried up from the earth, and Noah took off the
covering of the ark and he saw and, look, the surface
of the ground was dry. [14]And in the second month, on
the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was
completely dry. [15]And God spoke to Noah, saying,
[16]"Go out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons
and your sons' wives, with you. [17]All the animals that
are with you of all flesh, fowl and cattle and every
crawling thing that crawls on the earth, take out with
you, and let them swarm through the earth and be
fruitful and multiply on the earth." [18]And Noah went
out, his sons and his wife and his sons' wives with him.
[19]Every beast, every crawling thing, and every fowl,
everything that stirs on the earth, by their families,
came out of the ark. [20]And Noah built an altar to the
LORD and he took from every clean cattle and every
clean fowl and offered burnt offerings on the altar.

[21]And the LORD smelled the fragrant odor and the LORD said in His heart, “I will not again damn the soil on humankind’s score. For the devisings of the human heart are evil from youth. And I will not again strike down all living things as I did. [22]As long as all the days of the earth—

seedtime and harvest
and cold and heat
and summer and winter
and day and night
shall not cease.”

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *the wellsprings of the deep . . . and the casements of the heavens, the rain*. In keeping with the stately symmetry that governs the style of the whole Flood narrative, the ending of the Flood precisely echoes the terms in which its beginning was represented, in the same order: the poetic inset of 7:11 immediately followed by “rain” at the beginning of 7:12.

5. *the mountaintops appeared.* There is an echo here of “that the dry land will appear” of 1:9.

6. *at the end of forty days.* After the ark comes to rest, not the forty days of deluge.

13. *in the six hundred and first year.* Of Noah's life. The Septuagint adds these words, although whether that reflects a gloss or a more reliable text at this point is unclear.

ground. The Hebrew is *ʾadamah,* the word that also means "soil" and that figures importantly in the Garden story and its immediate aftermath. It recurs again in verse 21 in God's vow not to destroy the earth again.

14. *completely dry.* There is no "completely" in the Hebrew but that may be implied by the verb used. The verb for "was dry" in the preceding verse is *ḥarev*; the verb here is *yavesh*. The two are occasionally paired in poetic parallelism (e.g., Hosea 13:15), but they also occur twice in what looks like a temporal sequence (Isaiah 19:5 and Job 14:11): first a water source dries up (ḥ*arev*), then it is in a state of complete dryness (*yavesh*).

19. The verb *ramas* and the noun *remes* usually refer to crawling life-forms, but there are a few contexts in which they appear to designate any kind of moving creature. (The meaning of the root is probably linked with minute movement, shuffling, or trampling.) In Genesis 9:3, *remes* must indicate all kinds of animals because Noah's diet is surely not restricted to reptiles and insects. Here, the initial *romes* seems to mean "crawling things," because it stands in contradistinction to "every beast," whereas *romes* in the next clause summarizes the catalogue that precedes it, which includes birds.

21. *And the* LORD *smelled the fragrant odor.* Noah has followed in the literary footsteps of the hero of the Mesopotamian Flood stories in offering thanksgiving sacrifice after the waters recede. The frankly anthropomorphic imagination that informs Genesis has no difficulty in conceiving God's enjoying the aroma of the burnt offerings. What is rigorously excluded from the monotheistic version of the story is any suggestion that God eats the sacrifice—in the Mesopotamian traditions, the gods are thought to be dependent on the food men provide them through the sacrifices, and they swoop down on the postdiluvian offering "like flies." The word for "fragrance" (or perhaps, something pleasing or soothing), *niḥoaḥ*, is always attached to "odor" as a technical term linked with sacrifices, and it probably puns here on the name Noah.

The thanksgiving sacrifice is evidently a requisite narrative motif taken from the Mesopotamian antecedents, but the Hebrew writer's attitude toward

it may be more complicated than meets the eye. The first reported animal sacrifice, though equally pleasing to God, led to the murder of the sacrificer. Noah is about to be warned about the mortal danger of bloodguilt, and he himself will become the victim of an act of violation, but not as a consequence of his sacrifice. In any case, divine acceptance of ritual offerings does nothing to mitigate man's dangerous impulses.

and the LORD said in His heart. The idiom means "said to himself" but it is important to preserve the literal wording because it pointedly echoes 6:6, "and was grieved to the heart," just as "the devisings of the human heart are evil" explicitly echoes 6:5. The Flood story is thus enclosed by mutually mirroring reports of God's musing on human nature. Whether the addition here of "from youth" means, as some commentators claim, that God now has a more qualified view of the human potential for evil, is questionable. But after the Flood, God, once more recognizing the evil of which man is capable, concludes that, given what man is all too likely disposed to do, it is scarcely worth destroying the whole world again on his account.

damn. The Hebrew verb, from a root associated with the idea of lack of importance, or contemptibility, may occasionally mean "to curse," as in the Balaam story, but its usual meaning is to denigrate or vilify. Perhaps both senses are intimated here.

I will not again. The repetition of this phrase may reflect, as Rashi suggests, a formal oath, the solemnity of which would then be capped by the poetic inset at the end (which uses an unconventional short-line form, with only two accents in each verset). What is peculiar is that this is a pledge that God makes to Himself, not out loud to Noah. The complementary promise to Noah, in the next chapter, will be accompanied by the external sign of the rainbow. The silent promise in God's interior monologue invokes no external signs, only the seamless cycle of the seasons that will continue as long as the earth.

CHAPTER 9

[1]And God blessed Noah and his sons and He said to
them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. [2]And
the dread and fear of you shall be upon all the beasts
of the field and all the fowl of the heavens, in all that
crawls on the ground and in all the fish of the sea. In
your hand they are given. [3]All stirring things that are
alive, yours shall be for food, like the green plants, I
have given all to you. [4]But flesh with its lifeblood still
in it you shall not eat. [5]And just so, your lifeblood I
will requite, from every beast I will requite it, and
from humankind, from every man’s brother, I will
requite human life.

[6]He who sheds human blood
by humans his blood shall be
shed,
for in the image of God
He made humankind.
[7]As for you, be fruitful and multiply,

swarm through the earth, and hold
sway over it."

[8]And God said to Noah and to his sons with him,[9]
"And I, I am about to establish My covenant with you
and with your seed after you, [10]and with every living
creature that is with you, the fowl and the cattle and
every beast of the earth with you, all that have come
out of the ark, every beast of the earth. [11]And I will
establish My covenant with you, that never again shall
all flesh be cut off by the waters of the Flood, and
never again shall there be a Flood to destroy the
earth." [12]And God said, "This is the sign of the
covenant that I set between Me and you and every
living creature that is with you, for everlasting
generations: [13]My bow I have set in the clouds to be a
sign of the covenant between Me and the earth, [14]and
so, when I send clouds over the earth, the bow will
appear in the cloud. [15]Then I will remember My
covenant, between Me and you and every living
creature of all flesh, and the waters will no more
become a Flood to destroy all flesh. [16]And the bow
shall be in the cloud and I will see it, to remember the
everlasting covenant between God and all living
creatures, all flesh that is on the earth." [17]And God said

to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant I have established between Me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

18 And the sons of Noah who came out from the ark
were Shem and Ham and Japheth, and Ham was the
father of Canaan. 19 These three were the sons of Noah,
and from these the whole earth spread out. 20 And
Noah, a man of the soil, was the first to plant a
vineyard. 21 And he drank of the wine and became
drunk, and exposed himself within his tent. 22 And
Ham the father of Canaan saw his father’s nakedness
and told his two brothers outside. 23 And Shem and
Japheth took a cloak and put it over both their
shoulders and walked backward and covered their
father’s nakedness, their faces turned backward so they
did not see their father’s nakedness. 24 And Noah woke
from his wine and he knew what his youngest son had
done to him. 25 And he said,

“Cursed be Canaan,
the lowliest slave shall he be
to his brothers.”

26 And he said,

“Blessed be the LORD
the God of Shem,
unto them shall Canaan be
slave.
[27]May God enlarge Japheth,
may he dwell in the tents of
Shem,
unto them shall Canaan be
slave.”

[28]And Noah lived after the Flood three hundred and fifty years. [29]And all the days of Noah were nine hundred and fifty years. Then he died.

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1–7. God’s first postdiluvian speech to Noah affirms man’s solidarity with the rest of the animal kingdom—the covenant He goes on to spell out is, emphatically, with all flesh, not just with humankind—but also modifies the arrangement stipulated in the Creation story. Vegetarian man of the Garden is now allowed a carnivore’s diet (this might conceivably be intended as an outlet for his violent impulses), and in consonance with that change, man does not merely rule over the animal kingdom but inspires it with fear.

6. *He who sheds human blood / by humans his blood shall be shed.* “By humans” might alternately mean “on account of the human.” In either case, a system of retributive justice is suggested. As many analysts of the Hebrew

have noted, there is an emphatic play on *dam,* "blood," and *ʾadam,* "human," and the chiastic word order of the Hebrew formally mirrors the idea of measure for measure: *shofekh*/spills (a), *dam*/blood (b), *haʾadam*/of the human (c), *ba'adam*/by the human (c'), *damo*/his blood (b'), *yishafekh*/will be spilled (a'). Perhaps the ban on bloodshed at this point suggests that murder was the endemic vice of the antediluvians.

7. *hold sway.* The translation here follows some versions of the Septuagint, which read *uredu,* "and hold sway," instead of *urevu,* "and multiply," as in the Masoretic Text. The latter reading looks suspiciously like a scribal transposition of *urevu* from the end of the first clause. The entire line, of course, picks up the language of 1:28 as the process of human history is resumed after the Flood.

12. *And God said.* This is the first instance of a common convention of biblical narrative: when a speaker addresses someone and the formula for introducing speech is repeated with no intervening response from the interlocutor, it generally indicates some sort of significant silence—a failure to comprehend, a resistance to the speaker's words, and so forth. (Compare Judges 8:23–24: first Gideon declares to his men that he will not rule over them. Seeing their evident resistance, he proposes a concrete alternative they can understand, the collection of gold ornaments to make an ephod.) Here, God first flatly states His promise never to destroy the world again. The flood-battered Noah evidently needs further assurance, so God goes on, with a second formula for introducing speech, to offer the rainbow as outward token of His covenant. The third occurrence of the *wayomer* formula, at the beginning of verse 17, introduces a confirming summary of the rainbow as sign of the covenant.

20–27. Like the story of the Nephilim, this episode alludes cryptically to narrative material that may have been familiar to the ancient audience but must have seemed to the monotheistic writer dangerous to spell out. The big difference is that, for the first time in Genesis, the horizon of the story is the national history of Israel: Ham, the perpetrator of the act of violation, is mysteriously displaced in the curse by his son Canaan, and thus the whole story is made to justify the—merely hoped-for—subject status of the Canaanites in relation to the descendants of Shem, the Israelites. (Ham also

now figures as the youngest son, not the middle one.) No one has ever figured out exactly what it is that Ham does to Noah. Some, as early as the classical Midrash, have glimpsed here a Zeus–Chronos story in which the son castrates the father or, alternately, penetrates him sexually. The latter possibility is reinforced by the fact that "to see the nakedness of" frequently means "to copulate with," and it is noteworthy that the Hebrews associated the Canaanites with lasciviousness (see, for example, the rape of Dinah, Genesis 34). Lot's daughters, of course, take advantage of his drunkenness to have sex with him. But it is entirely possible that the mere seeing of a father's nakedness was thought of as a terrible taboo, so that Ham's failure to avert his eyes would itself have earned him the curse.

27. *enlarge Japheth.* The Hebrew involves a pun: *yaft leyafet.*

28–29. These verses resume the precise verbal formulas of the antediluvian genealogy in chapter 5. The story of Noah is given formal closure with this recording of his age, and the stage is set for the Table of Nations of the next chapter, which will constitute a historical divider between the tale of the Flood and the next narrative episode, the Tower of Babel.

CHAPTER 10

[1]And this is the lineage of the sons of Noah, Shem,
Ham, and Japheth. Sons were born to them after the
Flood. [2]The sons of Japheth: Gomer and Magog and
Madai and Javan and Tubal and Meshech and Tiras.
[3]And the sons of Gomer: Ashkenaz and Riphath and
Togarmah. [4]And the sons of Javan: Elishah and
Tarshish, the Kittites and the Dodanites. [5]From these
the Sea Peoples branched out. [These are the sons of
Japheth,] in their lands, each with his own tongue,
according to their clans in their nations. [6]And the sons
of Ham: Cush and Mizraim and Put and Canaan. [7]And
the sons of Cush: Seba and Havilah and Raamah and
Sabteca. And the sons of Raamah: Sheba and Dedan.
[8]And Cush begot Nimrod. He was the first mighty man
on earth. [9]He was a mighty hunter before the LORD.
Therefore is it said: Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter
before the LORD. [10]The start of his kingdom was
Babylon and Erech and Accad, all of them in the land
of Shinar. [11]From that land Asshur emerged, and he
built Nineveh and Rehoboth-Ir and Calah, [12]and

Resen, between Nineveh and Calah, which is the great
city. [13]And Mizraim begot the Ludites and the
Anamites and the Lehabites and the Naphtuhites, [14]and
the Pathrusites and the Casluhites, and the
Caphtorites, from whom the Philistines emerged.
[15]And Canaan begot Sidon, his firstborn, and Heth
[16]and the Jebusite and the Amorite and the Girgashite
[17]and the Hivvite and the Archite and the Sinite [18]and
the Arvadite and the Zemarite and the Hamatite.
Afterward the clans of the Canaanite spread out. [19]And
the border of the Canaanite was from Sidon till you
come to Gerar, as far as Gaza, till you come to Sodom
and Gomorrah and Admah and Zeboiim, as far as
Lasha. [20]These are the sons of Ham according to their
clans and their tongues, in their lands and their nations.
[21]Sons were born, too, to Shem, the father of all the
sons of Eber, the older brother of Japheth. [22]The sons
of Shem: Elam and Asshur and Arpachshad and Lud
and Aram. [23]And the sons of Aram: Uz and Hul and
Gether and Mash. [24]And Arpachshad begot Shelah and
Shelah begot Eber. [25]And to Eber two sons were born.
The name of one was Peleg for in his days the earth
was split apart; and his brother's name was Joktan.
[26]And Joktan begot Almodad and Sheleph and
Hazarmaveth and Jerah [27]and Hadoram and Uzal and
Diklah [28]and Obal and Abimael and Sheba [29]and Ophir

and Havilah and Jobab. All these were the sons of Joktan. [30]And their settlements were from Mesha till you come to Sephar, in the eastern highlands. [31]These are the sons of Shem according to their clans and tongues, in their lands and their nations. [32]These are the clans of the sons of Noah according to their lineage in their nations. And from these the nations branched out on the earth after the Flood.

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

As elsewhere, genealogy is adopted as a means of schematizing complex historical evolution, and thus the terms “father of” and “begot” are essentially metaphors for historical concatenation. The total number of figures in the Table of Nations (excluding Nimrod) comes to seventy, the biblical formulaic number for a sizable and complete contingent of any sort. It should be observed that representing the origins of nations as a genealogical scheme preserves a thematic continuity with the divine injunction after creation to be fruitful and multiply and sets the stage for the history of the one people whose propagation is repeatedly promised but continually threatened.

In keeping with the universalist perspective of Genesis, the Table of Nations is a serious attempt, unprecedented in the ancient Near East, to sketch a panorama of all known human cultures—from Greece and Crete in the west through Asia Minor and Iran and down through Mesopotamia and the Arabian peninsula to northwestern Africa. This chapter has been a happy hunting ground for scholars armed with the tools of archaeology, and in fact an impressive proportion of these names have analogues in inscriptions and tablets in other ancient Near Eastern cultures. The Table mingles geographic, ethnic, and linguistic criteria for defining nations, and the list intersperses place-names and gentilic designations (the latter appearing first in plural

forms and beginning with verse 16 in singular forms). Some analysts have argued for a splicing together of two different lists of nations. One may infer that the Table assumes a natural evolutionary explanation for the multiplicity of languages that does not involve an act of divine intervention of the sort that will be narrated in the next episode, the Tower of Babel.

5. *the Sea Peoples.* The probable reference is to the migrants from the Greek islands ("Javan" is Ion, or Greece) who established a foothold in the coastal region of Palestine during the twelfth century B.C.E.

These are the sons of Japheth. These words do not occur in the Masoretic Text, but the scholarly consensus is that there is a scribal omission here, as this is part of the formula used in verse 20 and verse 31 to summarize the list of the descendants of each of Noah's other two sons.

8. *He was the first mighty man on earth.* The Hebrew, which says literally, "he began to be a mighty man," uses the same idiom that is invoked for Noah's planting a vineyard. The implication, then, is that Nimrod, too, was the founder of an archetypal human occupation. The next verse suggests that this occupation is that of hunter, with his founding of a great Mesopotamian empire then introduced in verses 10–12 as an ancillary fact. Perhaps his prowess as hunter is put forth as evidence of the martial prowess that enabled him to conquer kingdoms, since the two skills are often associated in the ruling classes of older civilizations. Numerous Neo-Assyrian bas-reliefs depict royal lion hunts or royal bull hunts. Nimrod has been conjecturally identified with the thirteenth-century B.C.E. Tukulti-Ninurta I, the first Assyrian conqueror of Babylonia.

10. *all of them.* This translation adopts a commonly accepted emendation *wekhulanah,* instead of the Masoretic Text's *wekhalneh,* "and Calneh."

24. *Eber.* He is the eponymous father of the Hebrews, *ʿibrim*. Whatever the actual original meanings of the names, there is a clear tendency in the Table to intimate exemplary meanings in the names of these mythic founders: elsewhere, "Eber" is explicitly linked with the term that means "from the other side" (of the river).

25. *Peleg . . . in his days the earth split apart*. The three consonants of the name Peleg, which as a common noun means "brook," form the verbal root

that means “to split.” It is a stronger verb than “divide,” the term used by most English translators. Rabbinic tradition construes the splitting here as a reference to the Tower of Babel, but it is at least as plausible to see it as an allusion to an entirely different epochal event of “division,” such as a cataclysmic earthquake.

32. *branched out.* Literally, the Hebrew verb means “separated.” The whole Table of Nations is devised to explain how the many separate nations came into being. The immediately following verse, which begins the tale of the Tower of Babel, announces a primeval unity of all people on earth. This seeming flat contradiction might reflect a characteristically biblical way of playing dialectically with alternative possibilities: humankind is many and divided, as a consequence of natural history; and, alternately, humankind was once one, as a consequence of having been made by the same Creator, but this God-given oneness was lost through man’s presumption in trying to overreach his place in the divine scheme.

CHAPTER 11

[1]And all the earth was one language, one set of words.
[2]And it happened as they journeyed from the east that
they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled
there. [3]And they said to each other, “Come, let us bake
bricks and burn them hard.” And the brick served
them as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar.
[4]And they said, “Come, let us build us a city and a
tower with its top in the heavens, that we may make us
a name, lest we be scattered over all the earth.” [5]And
the LORD came down to see the city and the tower
that the human creatures had built. [6]And the LORD
said, “As one people with one language for all, if this
is what they have begun to do, now nothing they plot
to do will elude them. [7]Come, let us go down and
baffle their language there so that they will not
understand each other’s language.” [8]And the LORD
scattered them from there over all the earth and they
left off building the city. [9]Therefore it is called Babel,
for there the LORD made the language of all the earth

babble. And from there the LORD scattered them over all the earth.

10 This is the lineage of Shem: Shem was a hundred
years old when he begot Arpachshad two years after
the Flood. 11 And Shem lived after begetting
Arpachshad five hundred years and he begot sons and
daughters. 12 And Arpachshad lived thirty-five years
and he begot Shelah. 13 And Arpachshad lived after
begetting Shelah four hundred and three years and he
begot sons and daughters. 14 And Shelah lived thirty
years and he begot Eber. 15 And Shelah lived after
begetting Eber four hundred and three years and he
begot sons and daughters. 16 And Eber lived thirty-four
years and he begot Peleg. 17 And Eber lived after
begetting Peleg four hundred and thirty years and he
begot sons and daughters. 18 And Peleg lived thirty
years and he begot Reu. 19 And Peleg lived after
begetting Reu two hundred and nine years and he
begot sons and daughters. 20 And Reu lived thirty-two
years and he begot Serug. 21 And Reu lived after
begetting Serug two hundred and seven years and he
begot sons and daughters. 22 And Serug lived thirty
years and he begot Nahor. 23 And Serug lived after
begetting Nahor two hundred years and he begot sons

and daughters. [24]And Nahor lived twenty-nine years
and he begot Terah. [25]And Nahor lived after begetting
Terah one hundred and nineteen years and he begot
sons and daughters. [26]And Terah lived seventy years
and he begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran. [27]And this is
the lineage of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and
Haran, and Haran begot Lot. [28]And Haran died in the
lifetime of Terah his father in the land of his birth, Ur
of the Chaldees. [29]And Abram and Nahor took
themselves wives. The name of Abram's wife was
Sarai and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah
daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and the father
of Iscah. [30]And Sarai was barren, she had no child.
[31]And Terah took Abram his son and Lot son of
Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, the
wife of his son Abram, and he set out with them from
Ur of the Chaldees toward the land of Canaan, and
they came to Haran and settled there. [32]And the days
of Terah were two hundred and five years, and Terah
died in Haran.

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1–9. The story of the Tower of Babel transforms the Mesopotamian ziggurat, built with bricks (in contrast to Canaanite stone structures) and one of the

wonders of ancient technology, into a monotheistic fable. Although there is a long exegetical tradition that imagines the building of the Tower as an attempt to scale the heights of heaven, the text does not really suggest that. "Its top in the heavens" is a hyperbole found in Mesopotamian inscriptions for celebrating high towers, and to make or leave a "name" for oneself by erecting a lasting monument is a recurrent notion in ancient Hebrew culture. The polemic thrust of the story is against urbanism and the overweening confidence of humanity in the feats of technology. This polemic, in turn, is lined up with the stories of the tree of life and the Nephilim in which humankind is seen aspiring to transcend the limits of its creaturely condition. As in those earlier moments, one glimpses here the vestiges of a mythological background in which God addresses an unspecified celestial entourage in the first-person plural as He considers how to respond to man's presumption.

2. *a valley in the land of Shinar.* The Hebrew for "valley" might also mean "plain," as was recognized as long ago as Abraham ibn Ezra in the twelfth century. That would fit the Mesopotamian setting better.

3. *Come, let us.* As many commentators have noted, the story exhibits an intricate antithetical symmetry that embodies the idea of "man proposes, God disposes." The builders say, "Come, let us bake bricks," God says, "Come, let us go down"; they are concerned "lest we be scattered," and God responds by scattering them. The story is an extreme example of the stylistic predisposition of biblical narrative to exploit interechoing words and to work with a deliberately restricted vocabulary. The word "language" occurs five times in this brief text as does the phrase "all the earth" (and the "land" of Shinar is the same Hebrew word as that for earth). The prose turns language itself into a game of mirrors.

bake bricks and burn them hard. A literal rendering of the Hebrew would be something like "brick bricks and burn for a burning." This fusion of words reflects the striking tendency of the story as a whole to make words flow into each other. "Bitumen," *ḥeimar,* becomes *ḥomer,* "mortar." The reiterated "there," *sham,* is the first syllable of *shamayim,* "heavens," as well as an odd echo of *shem,* "name." Meaning in language, as the biblical writer realized long before the influential Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, is made possible through differences between terms in the linguistic system. Here difference is subverted in the very style of the story, with the blurring of

lexical boundaries culminating in God's confounding of tongues. The Hebrew *balal*, to "mix" or "confuse," represented in this translation by "baffle" and "babble," is a polemic pun on the Akkadian "Babel," which might actually mean "gate of the god." As for the phonetic kinship of "babble" and *balal,* *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* (1966) notes that a word like "babble" occurs in a wide spectrum of languages from Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit to Norwegian, and prudently concludes, "of echoic origin; probably not of continuous derivation but recoined from common experience."

10–26. There are ten generations from Shem to Abraham (as the universal history begins to focus down to a national history) as there are ten from Adam to Noah. In another formal symmetry, the ten antediluvian generations end with a father who begets three sons, just as this series of ten will end with Terah begetting Abram, Nahor, and Haran. This genealogy, which constitutes the bridge from the Flood to the beginning of the Patriarchal Tales, uses formulas identical with those of the antediluvian genealogy in chapter 5, omitting the summarizing indication of life span and the report of death of each begetter. Longevity now is cut in half, and then halved again in the latter part of the list, as we approach Abram. From this point, men will have merely the extraordinary life spans of modern Caucasian mountain dwellers and not legendary life spans. The narrative in this way is preparing to enter recognizable human time and family life. There is one hidden number-game here, as the Israeli Bible scholar Moshe Weinfeld has observed: the number of years from the birth of Shem's son to Abram's migration to Canaan is exactly a solar 365.

27–32. This is a second genealogical document, using different language, and zeroing in on Abram's immediate family and its migrations.

31. *he set out with them.* Two small changes in the vocalization of the two Hebrew words here yield "he took them out with him." This is the reading of the Septuagint and the Samaritan Version.

Haran. In the Hebrew there is no confusion with the name of Abram's deceased brother, because the latter begins with an aspirated *heh*, the former with a fricative *ḥet*.

CHAPTER 12

[1]And the LORD said to Abram, “Go forth from your land and your birthplace and your father’s house to the land I will show you. [2]And I will make you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. [3]And I will bless those who bless you, and those who damn you I will curse, and all the clans of the earth through you shall be blessed.” [4]And Abram went forth as the LORD had spoken to him and Lot went forth with him, Abram being seventy-five years old when he left Haran. [5]And Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew and all the goods they had gotten and the folk they had bought in Haran, and they set out on the way to the land of Canaan, and they came to the land of Canaan. [6]And Abram crossed through the land to the site of Shechem, to the Terebinth of Moreh. The Canaanite was then in the land. [7]And the LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your seed I will give this land.” And he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him. [8]And he pulled up his stakes from

there for the high country east of Bethel and pitched
his tent with Bethel to the west and Ai to the east, and
he built there an altar to the LORD, and he invoked
the name of the LORD. [9]And Abram journeyed
onward by stages to the Negeb.

[10]And there was a famine in the land and Abram went
down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was
grave in the land. [11]And it happened as he drew near to
the border of Egypt that he said to Sarai his wife,
“Look, I know you are a beautiful woman, [12]and so
when the Egyptians see you and say, ‘She is his wife,’
they will kill me while you they will let live. [13]Say,
please, that you are my sister, so that it will go well
with me on your count and I shall stay alive because of
you.” [14]And it happened when Abram came into Egypt
that the Egyptians saw the woman was very beautiful.
[15]And Pharaoh’s courtiers saw her and praised her to
Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh’s
house. [16]And it went well with Abram on her count,
and he had sheep and cattle and donkeys and male and
female slaves and she-asses and camels. [17]And the
LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his household with
terrible plagues because of Sarai the wife of Abram.
[18]And Pharaoh summoned Abram and said, “What is

this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me she was your wife? [19]Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her to me as wife? Now, here is your wife. Take her and get out!" [20]And Pharaoh appointed men over him and they sent him out, with his wife and all he had.

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Go forth from your land . . . to the land I will show you*. Abram, a mere figure in a notation of genealogy and migration in the preceding passage, becomes an individual character, and begins the Patriarchal narratives, when he is here addressed by God, though he himself as yet says nothing, responding only by obedience. The name Canaan is never mentioned, and the divine imperative to head out for an unspecified place resembles, as Rashi observes, God's terrible call to Abraham in chapter 22 to sacrifice his son on a mountain God will show him. Rashi also draws a shrewd connection between the triplet here—"your land and your birthplace and your father's house"—with the triplet in chapter 22—"your son, your only one, whom you love." The series in each case focuses the utterance more specifically from one term to the next. Thus the Hebrew *moledet* almost certainly has its usual sense of "birthplace" and not its occasional sense of "kinfolk," which would turn it into a loose synonym of "father's house" (*beyt 'av*, a fixed term for the family social unit). In 11:28 *moledet* appears as part of a genetive construction, *'erets moladeto,* "land of his birth." Here those two terms are broken out from each other to yield the focusing sequence: land–birthplace–father's house.

2. *you shall be a blessing.* The verb here as vocalized in the Masoretic Text literally means, "Be you a blessing," which makes the Hebrew syntax somewhat problematic. A change in vocalization would yield, "and it [your

name] will be a blessing." The Israeli biblical scholar Moshe Weinfeld has aptly noted that after the string of curses that begins with Adam and Eve, human history reaches a turning point with Abraham, as blessings instead of curses are emphatically promised.

3. *those who damn you.* The Masoretic Text uses a singular form, but the plural, attested in several manuscripts and ancient versions, makes better sense as parallelism. The balanced formulation of this and the preceding verse are almost scannable as poetry.

5. *the folk they had bought in Haran.* Slavery was a common institution throughout the ancient Near East. As subsequent stories in Genesis make clear, this was not the sort of chattel slavery later practiced in North America. These slaves had certain limited rights, could be given great responsibility, and were not thought to lose their personhood.

6. *The Canaanite was then in the land.* Abraham ibn Ezra famously detected a hint here that at the time of writing this was no longer the case. In any event, the point of the notation, as Gerhard von Rad has seen, is to introduce a certain tension with the immediately following promise that the land will be given to Abram's offspring.

8. *And he pulled up his stakes.* The Hebrew vocabulary (here, the verb *waya'teq*) in this sequence is meticulous in reflecting the procedures of nomadic life. The verb for "journey" in verse 9 also derives from another term for the pulling up of tent stakes, and the progressive form in which it is cast is a precise indication of movement through successive encampments.

10. *And there was a famine in the land.* The puzzling story of the sister-wife occurs three times in Genesis (here, chapter 20, and chapter 26:1–12). It is the first instance of type-scene in biblical narrative, in which the writer invokes a fixed sequence of narrative motifs, familiar as a convention to his audience, while pointedly modifying them in keeping with the needs of the immediate narrative context. The Midrash recognized that the tale of going down to Egypt at a time of famine was a foreshadowing of the sojourn in Egypt ("the actions of the fathers are a sign for the sons"). But in contrast to the versions in chapters 20 and 26, here, at the beginning of the whole Patriarchal cycle, the writer goes out of his way to heighten the connections

with the Exodus story. Only here is the land of sojourn Egypt and only here is the foreign potentate Pharaoh. Only here does the narrator speak explicitly of "plagues" (though a different term is used in Exodus). Only here is the danger of the husband's death set off by the phrase "you they will let live" attached to the wife, a pointed echo of Exodus 1:22, "Every boy that is born you shall fling into the Nile, and every girl you shall let live." This is also the most compact, and the most archetypal, of the three versions; the other two will elaborate and complicate the basic scheme, each in its own way.

11. *I know.* This is the construal of *yada ʿti* according to normative Hebrew grammar. But the *ti* ending could be an archaic second-person singular feminine, and "you know" would make better conversational sense here.

13. *my sister.* Chapter 20 reveals that Sarah is actually Abraham's half sister. It is not clear whether the writer means to endorse the peculiar stratagem of the patriarch in any of these three stories.

17. *plagues.* The nature of the afflictions is not spelled out. Rashi's inference of a genital disorder preventing intercourse is not unreasonable. In that case, one might imagine a tense exchange between Pharaoh and Sarai ending in a confession by Sarai of her status as Abram's wife. In the laconic narrative art of the Hebrew writer, this is left as a gap for us to fill in by an indeterminate compound of careful deduction and imaginative reconstruction.

19. *Take her and get out!* "Her" is merely implied in the Hebrew, which gives us three abrupt syllables, two of them accented: *qákh walékh*. There may be an intended counterpoint between the impatient brusqueness of this imperative, *lekh,* and the same imperative, softened by an ethical dative, *lekh lekha,* "go forth" (literally, "go you"), in God's words to Abram that inaugurate the Patriarchal cycle.

CHAPTER 13

[1]And Abram came up from Egypt, he and his wife
and all he had, and Lot together with him, to the
Negeb. [2]And Abram was heavily laden with cattle,
with silver and gold. [3]And he went on by stages from
the Negeb up to Bethel, to the place where his tent had
been before, between Bethel and Ai, [4]to the place of
the altar he had made the first time, and Abram
invoked there the name of the LORD.

[5]And Lot, too, who came along with Abram, had
flocks and herds and tents. [6]And the land could not
support their dwelling together, for their substance was
great and they could not dwell together. [7]And there
was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's flocks
and the herdsmen of Lot's flocks. The Canaanite and
the Perizzite were then dwelling in the land. [8]And
Abram said to Lot, "Pray, let there be no contention
between you and me, between your herdsmen and
mine, for we are kinsmen. [9]Is not all the land before

you? Pray, let us part company. If you take the left hand, then I shall go right, and if you take the right hand, I shall go left.” [10]And Lot raised his eyes and saw the whole plain of the Jordan, saw that all of it was well-watered, before the LORD’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, till you come to Zoar. [11]And Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward, and they parted from one another. [12]Abram dwelled in the land of Canaan and Lot dwelled in the cities of the plain, and he set up his tent near Sodom.

[13]Now the people of Sodom were very evil offenders against the LORD. [14]And the LORD had said to Abram after Lot parted from him, “Raise your eyes and look out from the place where you are to the north and the south and the east and the west, [15]for all the land you see, to you I will give it and to your seed forever. [16]And I will make your seed like the dust of the earth—could a man count the dust of the earth, so too, your seed might be counted. [17]Rise, walk about the land through its length and its breadth, for to you I will give it.” [18]And Abram took up his tent and came

to dwell by the Terebinths of Mamre, which are in Hebron, and he built there an altar to the LORD.

CHAPTER 13 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

7. *The Canaanite and the Perizzite*. This second notation of the indigenous population of Canaan, at the moment of friction between the two immigrants from Mesopotamia, suggests that they can scarcely afford such divisiveness when they are surrounded by potential enemies. (In the next episode, Abram will be compelled to bring military aid to his nephew.) There may also be a hint of irony in their dividing up a land here that already has inhabitants.

8–9. This is only the second report of direct speech of Abram. The first, his address to Sarai as they are about to enter Egypt, reveals a man fearful about his own survival. Here we get a very different image of Abram as the reasonable peacemaker and as a man conscious of family bonds in alien surroundings. The language in which he addresses Lot is clear, firm, and polite.

9. *Pray, let us part company.* The Hebrew is cast in the form of a polite imperative, literally: "Kindly part from me."

10. *saw that all of it was well-watered.* There is no repetition of "saw" in the Hebrew; Hebrew grammar allows the single verb to govern simultaneously the direct object ("the whole plain of the Jordan") and the relative clause that modifies the direct object. What is significant thematically is that the point of view of the entire clause is Lot's. The writer may well have drawn on a tradition that the whole plain of the Jordan down to the Dead Sea, before some remembered cataclysm, was abundantly fertile, but it is Lot who sees the plain in hyperbolic terms, likening it to "the garden of the LORD"—presumably, Eden, far to the east—and to the fabulously irrigated Egypt to the south. (Archaeologists have in fact discovered traces of an ancient irrigation system in the plain of the Jordan.)

12. *dwelled in the cities . . . set up his tent.* At least in this first phase of his habitation of the plain, Lot is represented ambiguously either living in a town or camping near one. From the writer's perspective, abandoning the seminomadic life for urban existence can only spell trouble. The verb *ʾahal* derived from the noun "tent" is relatively rare, and seems to mean both to set up a tent and (verse 18) to fold up a tent in preparation for moving on.

13. *Now the people of Sodom.* This brief observation, as many commentators have noted, suggests that Lot has made a very bad choice. The consequences will become manifest in chapter 19.

14. *And the LORD had said to Abram.* Although all previous translations treat this as a simple past, the word order—subject before verb—and the use of the suffix conjugation instead of the prefix conjugation that is ordinarily employed for past actions indicate a pluperfect. The definition of temporal frame is pointed and precise: once Lot actually parts from Abram, heading down to his fatal involvement in the cities of the plain, God proceeds to address His promise of the land to Abram. The utterance of the promise is already an accomplished fact as Lot takes up settlement in the plain to the east.

Raise your eyes and look. The location between Bethel and Ai is in fact a spectacular lookout point, and the already implicit contrast between Abram and Lot is extended—Abram on the heights, Lot down in the sunken plain.

16. *could a man count the dust of the earth.* Unusually for the use of simile in the Bible, the meaning of the simile is spelled out after the image is introduced. Perhaps this reflects the high didactic solemnity of the moment of promise, though the comparison with dust might also raise negative associations that would have to be excluded. (The great Yiddish poet Yakov Glatstein wrote a bitter poem after the Nazi genocide which proposes that indeed the seed of Abraham has become like the dust of the earth.)

17. *walk about the land through its length and its breadth.* Walking around the perimeter of a piece of property was a common legal ritual in the ancient Near East for taking final possession, and the formula "I have given it to So-and-so and to his sons forever" is a well-attested legal formula in the region for conveyance of property going back as far as the Ugaritic texts, composed in the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C.E.

CHAPTER 14

[1]And it happened in the days of Amraphel king of
Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of
Elam, and Tidal king of Goiim. [2]They made war on
Bera king of Sodom and Birsha king of Gomorrah, on
Shinab king of Admah and Shemeber king of Zeboiim
and the king of Bela, that is, Zoar. [3]All of them joined
forces in the Valley of Siddim, that is, the Dead Sea.
[4]Twelve years they had been subject to Chedorlaomer
and in the thirteenth year they rebelled. [5]And in the
fourteenth year Chedorlaomer and the kings who were
with him came and struck down the Rephaim at
Ashteroth-Karnaim and the Zuzim at Ham and the
Emim at Shaveh-Kiriathaim, [6]and the Horite in the
high country of Seir as far as El-Paran which is by the
wilderness. [7]And they swung back and came to En-
Mishpat, that is, Kadesh, and they struck all the
territory of the Amalekite and also the Amorite who
dwelled in Hazazon-Tamar. [8]And the king of Sodom
and the king of Gomorrah and the king of Admah and
the king of Zeboiim and the king of Bela, that is,

Zoar, went forth and joined battle with them in the Valley of Siddim, [9]with Chedorlaomer king of Elam and Tidal king of Goiim and Amraphel king of Shinar and Arioch king of Ellasar—four kings against the five. [10]And the Valley of Siddim was riddled with bitumen pits, and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled there and leaped into them, while the rest fled to the high country. [11]And the four kings took all the substance of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food, and went off. [12]And they took Lot, Abram's nephew, and all his substance, and went off, for he was then dwelling in Sodom.

[13]And a fugitive came and told Abram the Hebrew, for he was then encamped at the Terebinths of Mamre the Amorite, kinsman of Eshkol and Aner, who were Abram's confederates. [14]And Abram heard that his kinsman was taken captive and he marshaled his retainers, natives of his household, three hundred and eighteen of them, and gave chase up to Dan. [15]And he and his servants with him fanned out against them by night and he struck them and pursued them up to Hobah, which is north of Damascus. [16]And he brought back all the substance, and also Lot his kinsman and his substance he brought back, and the women and the

other people as well. [17]And the king of Sodom went
forth to meet him after he came back from striking
down Chedorlaomer and the kings that were with him,
to the Valley of Shaveh, that is, the Valley of the King.
[18]And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread
and wine, for he was priest to El Elyon. [19]And he
blessed him, and he said,

"Blessed be Abram to El Elyon,
possessor of heaven and earth,
[20]and blessed be El Elyon
who delivered your foes into your
hand."

And Abram gave him a tithe of everything. [21]And the
king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give me the folk, and
the substance take for yourself." [22]And Abram said to
the king of Sodom, "I raise my hand in oath to the
LORD, the Most High God, possessor of heaven and
earth, [23]that I will take not a single thread or sandal
strap of all that is yours, lest you say, 'I have made
Abram rich.' [24]Nothing for me but what the lads have
consumed. And as for the share of the men who came
with me, Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre, let them take their
share."

CHAPTER 14 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And it happened in the days of*. This introductory formula (just two words in the Hebrew, *wayehi biymey*) signals a drastic stylistic shift to an annalistic narrative. Because verse 2 has no explicit subject, E. A. Speiser, followed by later scholars, has conjectured that the first two Hebrew words of the text are a somewhat awkward Hebrew translation of an Akkadian idiom used at the beginning of literary narratives that simply means "when." This solution is a little strained, and would compromise the effect of introducing the audience to a historical account that is conveyed by the formula "And it happened in the days of such-and-such a king, or kings." Scholarship is virtually unanimous in identifying this chapter as the product of a different literary source from the three principal strands out of which Genesis is woven. The whole episode is in fact a prime instance of the technique of literary collage that is characteristic of biblical narrative. Abram, having been promised national tenure in the land in the immediately preceding episode, is now placed at the center of a different kind of narrative that makes him a figure on the international historical scene, doing battle with monarchs from the far-flung corners of Mesopotamia and treating with the king of Jerusalem (Salem), one of the principal cities of Canaan. The dating of the narrative is in dispute, but there are good arguments for its relative antiquity: at least four of the five invading kings have authentic Akkadian, Elamite, or Hittite names; and the repeated glossing of place-names ("Bela, that is, Zoar") suggests an old document that invoked certain names which usage had replaced by the time this text was woven into the larger Abraham narrative.

3. *joined forces.* The verb is a technical military term and initiates a whole chain of military or political terms not evident in the surrounding Patriarchal narratives: "had been subject," "rebelled" (verse 4), "joined battle" (verse 8), "marshaled his retainers" (verse 14), "fanned out against them" (verse 15). The narrative perspective is geostrategic, and there is no dramatic engagement of characters in dialogue until the rather ceremonial and didactic exchange between Melchizedek and Abram at the end.

11. *the four kings.* The subject is supplied for clarity by the translation: the Hebrew simply says "they." A similar employment of a verb without a stipulated subject, not uncommon in biblical usage, occurs at the end of verse 20, where the Hebrew does not state what the context implies, that it is Abram who gives the tithe.

13. *Abram the Hebrew.* Only here is he given this designation. Although scholars have argued whether "Hebrew" is an ethnic or social term or even the name for a warrior class, it is clear that it is invoked only in contexts when Abraham and his descendants stand in relation to members of other national groups.

14. *he marshaled his retainers.* The noun and the verb in this particular sense occur only here. The former may derive from a root that means "to train," and thus might imply "trained fighters." The latter is applied elsewhere to unsheathing a sword, and thus may be metaphorically extended to the "unsheathing" of warriors.

three hundred and eighteen. This number sounds quite realistic, whereas the geographical origins and the huge sweeping itinerary of the four kings, coming hundreds of miles to subdue five petty princelets in eastern Canaan, sound legendary.

18. *Melchizedek.* The name means "righteous king," which has suggested to many commentators a Davidic agenda in this tale of the founder of the people of Israel in ceremonial encounter with a priest-king of Jerusalem.

19–20. *El Elyon.* El is the proper name of the sky god in the Canaanite pantheon, and Elyon is evidently a distinct, associated deity, though here the two appear as a compound name. But the two terms are also plain Hebrew words that mean "God the Most High," and elsewhere are used separately or (once) together as designations of the God of Israel. Whatever Melchizedek's theology, Abram elegantly co-opts him for monotheism by using *El Elyon* in its orthodox Israelite sense (verse 22) when he addresses the king of Sodom.

19. *possessor.* Although conventional Semitic lexicography claims that the original meaning of this verb, *qanah,* is "to make," the overwhelming majority of biblical occurrences reflect the meaning "to buy," "to acquire,"

"to gain possession," which is the standard acceptation of the word in postbiblical Hebrew.

24. *lads.* The primary meaning of the word is "lads" but it also has a technical military sense of picked fighters. Its use here makes a neat contrast with "the men," who do not belong to Abram's household and are entitled to a share of the booty.

In all this, it is a little surprising that Abram should figure as a military hero, and some scholars (most forcefully, Yochanan Muffs) have seen this story as an Israelite adaptation of an old Akkadian literary form, the *naru,* a historical romance meant to glorify kings. One should note, however, that the military exploit—apparently, a surprise attack by night—is dispatched very quickly while the main emphasis is placed on the victorious Abram's magnaminity and disinterestedness. Thus the idea of the patriarch's maintaining fair and proper relations with the peoples of the land, already intimated in his dealings with Lot in the previous chapter, comes to displace the image of mere martial prowess.

CHAPTER 15

[1]After these things the word of the LORD came to
Abram in a vision, saying, “Fear not, Abram, I am
your shield. Your reward shall be very great.” [2]And
Abram said, “O my Master, LORD, what can You give
me when I am going to my end childless, and the
steward of my household is Dammesek Eliezer?” [3]And
Abram said, “Look, to me you have given no seed, and
here a member of my household is to be my heir.”
[4]And now the word of the LORD came to him, saying,
“This one will not be your heir, but he who issues from
your loins will be your heir.” [5]And He took him
outside and He said, “Look up to the heavens and
count the stars, if you can count them.” And He said,
“So shall be your seed.” [6]And he trusted in the LORD,
and He reckoned it to his merit.

[7]And He said to him, “I am the LORD who brought
you out of Ur of the Chaldees to give you this land to
inherit.” [8]And he said, “O my Master, LORD, how

shall I know that I shall inherit it?” [9]And He said to
him, “Take Me a three-year-old heifer and a three-
year-old she-goat and a three-year-old ram and a
turtledove and a young pigeon.” [10]And he took all of
these and clove them through the middle, and each set
his part opposite the other, but the birds he did not
cleave. [11]And carrion birds came down on the
carcasses and Abram drove them off. [12]And as the sun
was about to set, a deep slumber fell upon Abram and
now a great dark dread came falling upon him. [13]And
He said to Abram, “Know well that your seed shall be
strangers in a land not theirs and they shall be enslaved
and afflicted four hundred years. [14]But upon the nation
for whom they slave I will bring judgment, and
afterward they shall come forth with great substance.
[15]As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace, you
shall be buried in ripe old age. [16]And in the fourth
generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the
Amorites is not yet full.” [17]And just as the sun had set,
there was a thick gloom and, look, a smoking brazier
with a flaming torch that passed between those parts.
[18]On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram,
saying, “To your seed I have given this land from the
river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates:
[19]the Kenite and the Kenizite and the Kadmonite [20]and
the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim [21]and the

Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite."

CHAPTER 15 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the word of the LORD came to Abram*. This is a formula for revelation characteristic of the Prophetic books, not of the Patriarchal Tales. It is noteworthy that in Genesis 20 God refers to Abraham as a "prophet." The night-vision (maḥ*azeh)* invoked here is also a prophetic mode of experience.

2. *And Abram said.* Until this point, all of Abram's responses to God have been silent obedience. His first actual dialogue with God—in this, too, Prophetic precedents may be relevant—expresses doubt that God's promise can be realized: this first speech to God reveals a hitherto unglimpsed human dimension of Abram.

I am going to my end. The Hebrew says simply "I am going," but elsewhere "to go" is sometimes used as a euphemism for dying, and, as several analysts have argued, the context here makes that a likely meaning.

steward. The translation follows a traditional conjecture about the anomalous Hebrew *mesheq,* but the meaning is uncertain. The word might be a scribal repetition of the last three consonants in "Dammesek," or, alternately, it could be a deliberate play on words (Dammesek and *mesheq,* "household maintenance"). The enigma is compounded by the fact that only here is Abraham's majordomo named as Eliezer—a West Semitic name, moreover, that would be surprising in someone from Damascus.

3. *And Abram said.* God remains impassively silent in the face of Abram's brief initial complaint, forcing him to continue and spell out the reason for his skepticism about the divine promise.

5. *count the stars.* This is a complementary image to that of the numberless dust in chapter 13 but, literally and figuratively, loftier, and presented to

Abraham in the grand solemnity of a didactic display, not merely as a verbal trope to be explained.

6. *And he trusted.* After his initial skepticism, Abram is reassured by the imposing character of God's reiterated promise under the night sky, which for the first time stresses the concrete idea of Abram's biological propagation, "he who issues from your loins."

7–21. Since this covenant is sealed at sunset, it can scarcely be a direct continuation of the nocturnal scene just narrated. The two scenes are an orchestration of complementary covenantal themes. In the first, God grandly promises and Abram trusts; in the second, the two enter into a mutually binding pact, cast in terms of a legal ritual. In the first scene, progeny is promised; in the second, the possession of the land, together with the dark prospect of enslavement in Egypt before the full realization of the promise. The first scene highlights dialogue and the rhetorical power of the divine assurance; the second scene evokes mystery, magic, the troubling enigma of the future.

7. *I am the* LORD *who brought you out.* This formula—the initial words of self-identification are a commonplace of ancient Near Eastern royal decrees—used here for the first time, looks forward to "who brought you out of the land of Egypt" of the Decalogue and other texts. Compositionally, it also picks up "He took him outside" (the same verb in the Hebrew) at the end of the preceding scene.

8. *how shall I know that I shall inherit it?* In this instance, Abram's doubt is to be assuaged by a formal pact. Covenants in which the two parties step between cloven animal parts are attested in various places in the ancient Near East as well as in Greece. The idea is that if either party violates the covenant, his fate will be like that of the cloven animals. The Hebrew idiom *karat berit*, literally "to cut a covenant" (as in verse 18), may derive from this legal ritual.

10. *each set his part.* Existing translations fudge the vivid anthropomorphism of the Hebrew here: *ʾish,* literally, "man," means "each" but is a word applied to animate beings, not to things, so it must refer to the two parties to the covenant facing each other, not to the animal parts.

11. *carrion birds.* Unaccountably, most English translators render this collective noun as "birds of prey," though their action clearly indicates they belong to the category of vultures, not hawks and eagles.

12. *deep slumber.* This is the same Hebrew word, *tardemah*, used for Adam's sleep when God fashions Eve.

16. *the fourth generation.* This would seem to be an obvious contradiction of the previously stated four hundred years. Some scholars have argued that the Hebrew *dor* does not invariably mean "generation" and may here refer to "life span" or "time span."

17. *a smoking brazier with a flaming torch.* All this is mystifying and is surely meant to be so, in keeping with the haunting mystery of the covenantal moment. It seems unwise to "translate" the images into any neat symbolism (and the same is true of the ominous carrion birds Abram drives off). There may be some general association of smoke and fire with the biblical deity (Nahmanides notes a link with the Sinai epiphany), and the pillars of fire and cloud in Exodus also come to mind, but the disembodied brazier (or furnace) and torch are wonderfully peculiar to this scene. The firelight in this preternatural after-sunset darkness is a piquant antithesis to the star-studded heavens of the previous scene.

18. *To your seed I have given.* Moshe Weinfeld shrewdly observes that for the first time the divine promise—compare 12:1–3, 12:7, 13:14–17, 15:4–5—is stated with a perfective, not an imperfective, verb: that is, as an action that can be considered already completed. This small grammatical maneuver catches up a large narrative pattern in the Abraham stories: the promise becomes more and more definite as it seems progressively more implausible to the aged patriarch, until Isaac is born.

CHAPTER 16

[1]Now Sarai Abram's wife had borne him no children,
and she had an Egyptian slavegirl named Hagar. [2]And
Sarai said to Abram, "Look, pray, the LORD has kept
me from bearing children. Pray, come to bed with my
slavegirl. Perhaps I shall be built up through her." And
Abram heeded the voice of Sarai. [3]And Sarai Abram's
wife took Hagar the Egyptian her slavegirl after
Abram had dwelled ten years in the land of Canaan,
and she gave her to Abram her husband as a wife.
[4]And he came to bed with Hagar and she conceived
and she saw that she had conceived and her mistress
seemed slight in her eyes. [5]And Sarai said to Abram,
"This outrage against me is because of you! I myself
put my slavegirl in your embrace and when she saw
she had conceived, I became slight in her eyes. Let the
LORD judge between you and me!" [6]And Abram said
to Sarai, "Look, your slavegirl is in your hands. Do to
her whatever you think right." And Sarai harassed her
and she fled from her. [7]And the LORD's messenger
found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by

the spring on the way to Shur. [8]And he said, “Hagar,
slavegirl of Sarai! Where have you come from and
where are you going?” And she said, “From Sarai my
mistress I am fleeing.” [9]And the LORD’s messenger
said to her, “Return to your mistress and suffer abuse
at her hand.” [10]And the LORD’s messenger said to her,
“I will surely multiply your seed and it will be beyond
all counting.” [11]And the LORD’s messenger said to
her:

“Look, you have conceived and will
bear a son
and you will call his name
Ishmael.
for the LORD has heeded your
suffering.
[12]And he will be a wild ass of a man
—
his hand against all, the hand of
all against him,
he will encamp in despite of all
his kin.”

[13]And she called the name of the LORD who had
addressed her, “El-Roi,” for she said, “Did not I go on

seeing here after He saw me?” [14]Therefore is the well called Beer-Lahai-Roi, which is between Kadesh and Bered. [15]And Hagar bore a son to Abram, and Abram called his son whom Hagar had born Ishmael. [16]And Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

CHAPTER 16 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *slavegirl*. Hebrew *shifḥah*. The tradition of English versions that render this as “maid” or “handmaiden” imposes a misleading sense of European gentility on the sociology of the story. The point is that Hagar belongs to Sarai as property, and the ensuing complications of their relationship build on that fundamental fact. Later on, Hagar will also be referred to as *ʾamah*. The two terms designate precisely the same social status. The only evident difference is that *ʾamah,* the more international of the two terms, is often used in administrative lists whereas *shifḥah* occurs in contexts that are more narrative and popular in character.

2. *And Sarai said.* Sarai-Sarah’s first reported speech, like that of Rachel later on in the cycle, is a complaint about her childlessness. The institution of surrogate maternity to which she resorts is by no means her invention, being well attested in ancient Near Eastern legal documents. Living with the human consequences of the institution could be quite another matter, as the writer shrewdly understands: Sarai’s first two-sided dialogue with her husband (verses 5–6) vividly represents the first domestic squabble—her bitterness and her resentment against the husband who, after all, has only complied with her request; his willingness to buy conjugal peace at almost any price.

be built up through her. The Hebrew *ʾibaneh* puns on *ben,* “son,” and so also means, “I will be sonned through her.”

3. *as a wife.* Most English versions, following the logic of the context, render this as "concubine." The word used, however, is not *pilegesh* but *ʾishah,* the same term that identifies Sarai at the beginning of the verse. The terminological equation of the two women is surely intended, and sets up an ironic backdrop for Sarai's abuse of Hagar.

4. *in her eyes.* It is best to leave the Hebrew idiom literally in place in English because Hagar's sight will again be at issue in her naming of the divinity after the epiphany in the wilderness.

5. *your embrace.* Literally, "your lap," often a euphemism for the genital area. The emphasis is pointedly sexual.

7. *the LORD's messenger.* This is the first occurrence of an "angel" (Hebrew, *malʾakh,* Greek, *angelos*) in Genesis, though "the sons of God," the members of the divine entourage, are mentioned in chapter 6. "Messenger," or one who carries out a designated task, is the primary meaning of the Hebrew term, and there are abundant biblical instances of *malʾakhim* who are strictly human emissaries. One assumes that the divine messenger in these stories is supposed to look just like a human being, and all postbiblical associations with wings, halos, and glorious raiment must be firmly excluded. One should note that the divine speaker here begins as an angel but ends up (verse 13) being referred to as though he were God Himself. Gerhard von Rad and others have proposed that the angel as intermediary was superimposed on the earliest biblical tradition in order to mitigate what may have seemed an excessively anthropomorphic representation of the deity. But it is anyone's guess how the Hebrew imagination conceived agents of the LORD three thousand years ago, and it is certainly possible that the original traditions had a blurry notion of differentiation between God's own interventions in human life and those of His emissaries. Richard Elliott Friedman has actually proposed that the angels are entities split off, or emanated, from God, and that no clear-cut distinction between God and angel is intended.

in the wilderness, . . . on the way to Shur. Hagar is in the Negeb, headed south, evidently back toward her native Egypt. Shur means "wall" in Hebrew, and scholars have linked the name with the line of fortifications the Egyptians built on their northern border. But the same word could also be construed as a

verb that occurs in poetic texts, "to see" (or perhaps, more loftily, "to espy"), and may relate to the thematics of seeing in Hagar's story.

10. *And the LORD's messenger said to her.* The formula for introducing speech is repeated as Hagar stands in baffled silence in response to the command that she return to suffer abuse at Sarai's hand. Even the promise of progeny does not suffice to allay her doubts, so, with still another repetition of the introductory formula, the messenger proceeds (verse 11) to spell out the promise in a poetic oracle.

surely multiply. The repetition of the verb in an infinitive absolute could refer either to the certainty of multiplication or to the scale of multiplication ("I will mightily multiply").

11. *Ishmael.* The name means "God has heard," as the messenger proceeds to explain. The previous occurrence of hearing in the story is Abram's "heeding" (*shamaʿ*, the same verb) Sarai's voice. God's hearing is then complemented by His and Hagar's seeing (verse 13).

your suffering. The noun derives from the same root as the verb of abuse (or, harassment, harsh handling, humiliation) used for Sarai's mistreatment of Hagar.

12. *his hand against all.* Although this may be a somewhat ambiguous blessing, it does celebrate the untamed power—also intimated in the image of the wild ass or onager—of the future Ishmaelites to thrive under the bellicose conditions of their nomadic existence.

in despite of. The Hebrew idiom suggests defiance, as E. A. Speiser has persuasively shown.

13. *El-Roi.* The most evident meaning of the Hebrew name would be "God Who sees me." Hagar's words in explanation of the name are rather cryptic in the Hebrew. The translation reflects a scholarly consensus that what is at issue is a general Israelite terror that no one can survive having seen God. Hagar, then, would be expressing grateful relief that she has survived her epiphany. Though this might well be a somewhat garbled etiological tale to account for the place-name Beer-Lahai-Roi (understood by the writer to mean "Well of the Living One Who Sees Me"), it is made to serve the larger thematic ends of Hagar's story: the outcast slavegirl is vouchsafed a revelation which she

survives, and is assured that, as Abram's wife, she will be progenitrix of a great people.

CHAPTER 17

[1]And Abram was ninety-nine years old, and the
LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am El
Shaddai. Walk in My presence and be blameless, [2]and
I will grant My covenant between Me and you and I
will multiply you very greatly.” [3]And Abram flung
himself on his face, and God spoke to him, saying,
[4]“As for Me, this is My covenant with you: you shall
be father to a multitude of nations. [5]And no longer
shall your name be called Abram but your name shall
be Abraham, for I have made you father to a multitude
of nations. [6]And I will make you most abundantly
fruitful and turn you into nations, and kings shall come
forth from you. [7]And I will establish My covenant
between Me and you and your seed after you through
their generations as an everlasting covenant to be God
to you and to your seed after you. [8]And I will give unto
you and your seed after you the land in which you
sojourn, the whole land of Canaan, as an everlasting
holding, and I will be their God.”

[9]And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall
keep My commandment, you and your seed after you
through their generations. [10]This is My covenant which
you shall keep, between Me and you and your seed
after you: every male among you must be circumcised.
[11]You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin and it
shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.
[12]Eight days old every male among you shall be
circumcised through your generations, even slaves
born in the household and those purchased with silver
from any foreigner who is not of your seed. [13]Those
born in your household and those purchased with
silver must be circumcised, and My covenant in your
flesh shall be an everlasting covenant. [14]And a male
with a foreskin, who has not circumcised the flesh of
his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his folk.
My covenant he has broken.” [15]And God said to
Abraham, “Sarai your wife shall no longer call her
name Sarai, for Sarah is her name. [16]And I will bless
her and I will also give you from her a son and I will
bless him, and she shall become nations, kings of
peoples shall issue from her.” [17]And Abraham flung
himself on his face and he laughed, saying to himself,

"To a hundred-year-old will a child
be born,
will ninety-year-old Sarah give
birth?"

18 And Abraham said to God, "Would that Ishmael
might live in Your favor!" 19 And God said, "Yet Sarah
your wife is to bear you a son and you shall call his
name Isaac and I will establish My covenant with him
as an everlasting covenant, for his seed after him. 20 As
for Ishmael, I have heard you. Look, I will bless him
and make him fruitful and will multiply him most
abundantly, twelve chieftains he shall beget, and I will
make him a great nation. 21 But My covenant I will
establish with Isaac whom Sarah will bear you by this
season next year." 22 And He finished speaking with
him, and God ascended from Abraham.

23 And Abraham took Ishmael his son and all the slaves
born in his household and those purchased with silver,
every male among the people of Abraham's household,
and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskin on that
very day as God had spoken to him. 24 And Abraham
was ninety-nine years old when the flesh of his
foreskin was circumcised. 25 And Ishmael his son was

thirteen years old when the flesh of his foreskin was circumcised. [26]On that very day Abraham was circumcised, and Ishmael his son, [27]and all the men of his household, those born in the household and those purchased with silver from the foreigners, were circumcised with him.

CHAPTER 17 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *El Shaddai*. The first term, as in El Elyon (chapter 14), means God. Scholarship has been unable to determine the origins or precise meaning of the second term—tenuous associations have been proposed with a Semitic word meaning "mountain" and with fertility. What is clear (compare Exodus 6:3) is that the biblical writers considered it an archaic name of God.

Walk in My presence. Or "before me." In verse 18, the same preposition manifestly has the idiomatic sense of "in Your favor." The verb is the same used for Enoch's walking with God, but there the Hebrew preposition is actually "with." The meaning of this idiom is "to be devoted to the service of."

2. *My covenant.* The articulation of the covenant in this chapter is organized in three distinct units—first the promise of progeny and land, then the commandment of circumcision as sign of the covenant, then the promise of Sarah's maternity. The politics of the promise is now brought to the foreground as for the first time it is stipulated that both Abraham and Sarah will be progenitors of kings. Source critics have observed that this second covenantal episode, attributed to Priestly circles, abandons the sense of an almost equal pact between two parties of chapter 15 and gives us an Abraham who is merely a silent listener, flinging himself to the ground in fear and trembling as God makes His rather lengthy pronouncements. But Abraham's

emphatic skepticism in verses 17–18 suggests that there is more complexity in his characterization here than such readings allow.

5. *Abram . . . Abraham*. The meaning of both versions of the name is something like "exalted father." The longer form is evidently no more than a dialectical variant of the shorter one. The real point is that Abraham should undergo a name change—like a king assuming the throne, it has been proposed—as he undertakes the full burden of the covenant. Similarly in verse 15, the only difference between Sarai and Sarah is that the former reflects an archaic feminine suffix, the latter, the normative feminine suffix: both versions of the name mean "princess."

10. *every male among you must be circumcised.* Circumcision was practiced among several of the West Semitic peoples and at least in the priestly class in Egypt, as a bas-relief at Karnach makes clear in surgical detail. To Abraham the immigrant from Mesopotamia, E. A. Speiser notes, it would have been a new procedure to adopt, as this episode indicates. The stipulation of circumcision on the eighth day after birth dissociates it from its common function elsewhere as a puberty rite, and the notion of its use as an apotropaic measure (compare Exodus 4) is not intimated here. A covenant sealed on the organ of generation may connect circumcision with fertility—and the threat against fertility—which is repeatedly stressed in the immediately preceding and following passages. The contractual cutting up of animals in chapter 15 is now followed by a cutting of human flesh.

13. *silver.* If the language of the text reflects the realia of the Patriarchal period, the term would refer to silver weights. If it reflects the writer's period, it would refer to money, since by then coins had been introduced. The weighing-out of silver by Abraham in chapter 23 argues for the likelihood of the former possibility.

16. *and I will bless him.* The Masoretic Text has "bless her," evidently to make the verb agree with the following clause, but this looks like a redundance in light of the beginning of the verse, and several ancient versions plausibly read here "bless him."

17. *and he laughed.* The verb *yitsḥaq* is identical with the Hebrew form of the name Isaac that will be introduced in verse 19. The laughter here—hardly the

expected response of a man flinging himself on his face—is in disbelief, perhaps edged with bitterness. In the subsequent chapters, the narrative will ring the changes on this Hebrew verb, the meanings of which include joyous laughter, bitter laughter, mockery, and sexual dalliance.

To a hundred-year-old. Abraham's interior monologue is represented as a line of verse that neatly illustrates the pattern of heightening or intensification from first to second verset characteristic of biblical poetry: here, unusually (but in accord with the narrative data), the numbers go down from first to second verset, but the point is that, as incredible as it would be for a hundred-year-old to father a child, it would be even more incredible for a ninety-year-old woman, decades past menopause, to become a mother. The Abraham who has been overpowered by two successive epiphanies in this chapter is now seen as someone living within a human horizon of expectations. In the very moment of prostration, he laughs, wondering whether God is not playing a cruel joke on him in these repeated promises of fertility as time passes and he and his wife approach fabulous old age. He would be content, he goes on to say, to have Ishmael carry on his line with God's blessing.

20. *As for Ishmael, I have heard you.* Once again, the etymology of the name is highlighted. These seven English words reflect just two Hebrew words in immediate sequence, *uleyishma'el shema'tikha,* with the root *sh-m-'* evident in both.

CHAPTER 18

[1]And the LORD appeared to him in the Terebinths of
Mamre when he was sitting by the tent flap in the heat
of the day. [2]And he raised his eyes and saw, and, look,
three men were standing before him. He saw, and he
ran toward them from the tent flap and bowed to the
ground. [3]And he said, “My lord, if I have found favor
in your eyes, please do not go on past your servant.
[4]Let a little water be fetched and bathe your feet and
stretch out under the tree, [5]and let me fetch a morsel
of bread, and refresh yourselves. Then you may go on,
for have you not come by your servant?” And they
said, “Do as you have spoken.” [6]And Abraham hurried
to the tent to Sarah and he said, “Hurry! Knead three
seahs of choice semolina flour and make loaves.” [7]And
to the herd Abraham ran and fetched a tender and
goodly calf and gave it to the lad, who hurried to
prepare it. [8]And he fetched curds and milk and the calf
that had been prepared and he set these before them,
he standing over them under the tree, and they ate.
[9]And they said to him, “Where is Sarah your wife?”

[10]And he said, “There, in the tent.” And he said, “I will surely return to you at this very season and, look, a son shall Sarah your wife have,” and Sarah was listening at the tent flap, which was behind him. [11]And Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years, Sarah no longer had her woman’s flow. [12]And Sarah laughed inwardly, saying, “After being shriveled, shall I have pleasure, and my husband is old?” [13]And the LORD said to Abraham, “Why is it that Sarah laughed, saying, ‘Shall I really give birth, old as I am?’ [14]Is anything beyond the LORD? In due time I will return to you, at this very season, and Sarah shall have a son.” [15]And Sarah dissembled, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. And He said, “Yes, you did laugh.”

[16]And the men arose from there and looked out over Sodom, Abraham walking along with them to see them off. [17]And the LORD had thought, “Shall I conceal from Abraham what I am about to do? [18]For Abraham will surely be a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him. [19]For I have embraced him so that he will charge his sons and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD to do righteousness and justice, that the

LORD may bring upon Abraham all that He spoke
concerning him.” [20]And the LORD said,

“The outcry of Sodom and
Gomorrah, how great!
Their offense is very grave.

[21]Let Me go down and see whether as the outcry that
has come to Me they have dealt destruction, and if not,
I shall know.” [22]And the men turned from there and
went on toward Sodom while the LORD was still
standing before Abraham. [23]And Abraham stepped
forward and said, “Will You really wipe out the
innocent with the guilty? [24]Perhaps there may be fifty
innocent within the city. Will You really really wipe
out the place and not spare it for the sake of the fifty
innocent within it? [25]Far be it from You to do such a
thing, to put to death the innocent with the guilty,
making innocent and guilty the same. Far be it from
You! Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?”
[26]And the LORD said, “Should I find in Sodom fifty
innocent within the city, I will forgive the whole place
for their sake.” [27]And Abraham spoke up and said,
“Here, pray, I have presumed to speak to my Lord
when I am but dust and ashes. [28]Perhaps the fifty

innocent will lack five. Would you destroy the whole city for the five?" And He said, "I will not destroy if I find there forty-five." [29]And he spoke to Him still again and he said, "Perhaps there will be found forty." And He said, "I will not do it on account of the forty." [30]And he said, "Please, let not my Lord be incensed and let me speak, perhaps there will be found thirty." And He said, "I will not do it if I find there thirty." [31]And he said, "Here, pray, I have presumed to speak to my Lord. Perhaps there will be found twenty." And He said, "I will not destroy for the sake of the twenty." [32]And he said, "Please, let not my Lord be incensed and let me speak just this time. Perhaps there will be found ten." And He said, "I will not destroy for the sake of the ten." [33]And the LORD went off when He finished speaking with Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place.

CHAPTER 18 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And the Lord appeared*. The narrator at once apprises us of the divine character of Abraham's guests, but when Abraham peers out through the shimmering heat waves of the desert noon (verse 2), what he sees from his human perspective is three "men." The whole scene seems to be a monotheistic adaptation to the seminomadic early Hebrew setting of an episode from the Ugaritic *Tale of Aqhat* (tablet V: 6–7) in which the childless

Danʾel is visited by the craftsman-god Kothar. As Moshe Weinfeld has observed, there are several verbal links between the two texts: Danʾel also is sitting by an entrance, overshadowed by a tree; he also "lifts up his eyes" to behold the divine visitor; and similarly enjoins his wife to prepare a meal from the choice of the flock.

3. *My lord.* The Masoretic Text vocalizes this term of courtly address (*not* YHWH) to read "my lords," in consonance with the appearance of three visitors. But the vocative terms that follow in this verse are in the singular, and it is only in verse 4 that Abraham switches to plural verbs. Rashi, plausibly, suggests that Abraham initially addresses himself to "the greatest" of the three. As verses 10 and 13–15 make clear, that greatest one is God Himself, who will tarry to speak with Abraham while the two human-seeming angels of destruction who accompany Him head down to the cities of the plain.

4. *Let a little water be fetched.* With good reason, the Jewish exegetical tradition makes Abraham figure as the exemplary dispenser of hospitality. Extending hospitality, as the subsequent contrasting episode in Sodom indicates, is the primary act of civilized intercourse. The early Midrash (*Abot di Rabbi Nathan*) aptly noted that Abraham promises modestly, a little water and a morsel of bread, while hastening to prepare a sumptuous feast. "Fetch" appears four times in rapid succession, "hurry" three times, as indices of the flurry of hospitable activity.

9. *Where is Sarah.* The fact that the visitors know her name without prompting is the first indication to Abraham (unless one assumes a narrative ellipsis) that they are not ordinary humans.

10. *he said, "I will surely return."* Evidently, one of the three visitors, unless the text reflects a fusion of two traditions, one in which there were three visitors, another in which there was one (which would then explain the switch from singular to plural early in the story).

at this very season. This phrase, or its equivalent, recurs in the various annunciation type-scenes, of which this is the first instance. The narrative motifs of the annunciation type-scene, in sequence, are: the fact of barrenness, the promise of a son by God or angel or holy man, and the fulfillment of the promise in conception and birth. But only here is the

emphatically matriarchal annunciation displaced from wife to husband, with the woman merely eavesdropping on the promise; only here is the barren woman actually postmenopausal; and only here is there a long postponement, filled in with seemingly unrelated episodes, until the fulfillment of the promise (chapter 21). Thus the patriarch takes over the center-stage location of the matriarch, and the difficult—indeed, miraculous—nature of the fulfillment is underscored.

11–13. This sequence of three utterances is a brilliant example of how much fine definition of position and character can be achieved in biblical narrative through variation in repetition. First the narrator informs us, objectively and neutrally, of Abraham's and Sarah's advanced age, stating the fact, repeating it with the emphasis of a synonym, and reserving for last Sarah's postmenopausal condition, which would appear to make conception a biological impossibility. When Sarah repeats this information in her interior monologue, it is given new meaning from her bodily perspective as an old and barren woman: her flesh is shriveled, she cannot imagine having pleasure again (the term *ʿednah* is cognate with Eden and probably suggests sexual pleasure, or perhaps even sexual moistness), and besides—her husband is old. The dangling third clause hangs on the verge of a conjugal complaint: How could she expect pleasure, or a child, when her husband is so old? Then the LORD, having exercised the divine faculty of listening to Sarah's unspoken words, her silent laughter of disbelief, reports them to Abraham, tactfully editing out (as Rashi saw) the reference to the patriarch's old age and also suppressing both the narrator's mention of the vanished menses and Sarah's allusion to her withered flesh—after all, nothing anaphrodisiac is to be communicated to old Abraham at a moment when he is expected to cohabit with his wife in order at last to beget a son.

15. *I did not laugh . . . Yes, you did laugh*. Sarah's fearful denial and God's rejection of it afford an opportunity to foreground the verb of laughter, *tsaḥaq,* already stressed through Abraham's laughter in chapter 17, which will become the name of her son. After the birth, Sarah will laugh again, not in bitter disbelief but in joy, though perhaps not simply in joy, as we shall have occasion to see in chapter 21.

17. *And the LORD had thought.* The verb *ʾamar,* "say," is sometimes used elliptically for *ʾamar belibo,* "said to himself," and that seems clearly the case here. With the two divine messengers about to be sent off on their mission of destruction, God will be left alone with Abraham, and before addressing him, He reflects for a moment on the nature of His covenantal relationship with the patriarch and what that dictates as to revealing divine intention to a human partner. Abraham is in this fashion thrust into the role of prophet, and God will so designate him in chapter 20.

19. *to do righteousness and justice.* This is the first time that the fulfillment of the covenantal promise is explicitly made contingent on moral performance. The two crucial Hebrew nouns, *tsedeq* and *mishpat,* will continue to reverberate literally and in cognate forms through Abraham's pleas to God on behalf of the doomed cities, through the Sodom story itself, and through the story of Abraham and Abimelech that follows it.

20. *outcry.* The Hebrew noun, or the verb from which it is derived, *tsaʿaq* or *zaʿaq,* is often associated in the Prophets and Psalms with the shrieks of torment of the oppressed.

21. *Let Me go down.* The locution indicating God's descent from on high echoes the one in the story of the Tower of Babel.

dealt destruction. Some construe the Hebrew noun as an adverb and render this as "done altogether." But the verb "to do" (*ʿasah*) with the noun *kalah* as direct object occurs a number of times in the Prophets in the clear sense of "deal destruction."

22. *while the LORD was still standing before Abraham.* The Masoretic Text has Abraham standing before the LORD, but this reading is avowedly a scribal euphemism, what the Talmud calls a *tiqun sofrim,* introduced because the original formulation smacked of lèse-majesté.

23. *And Abraham stepped forward.* The verb, often used for someone about to deliver a legal plea, introduces an Abraham who is surprisingly audacious in the cause of justice, a stance that could scarcely have been predicted from the obedient and pious Abraham of the preceding episodes.

the innocent. The term *tsadiq* has a legal usage—the party judged not guilty in a court of law, though it also has the moral meaning of "righteous."

Similarly, the term here for guilty, *rasha'*, also means "wicked." *Tsadiq* is derived from the same root as *tsedaqah,* "righteousness," the very term God has just used in His interior monologue reflecting on what it is the people of Abraham must do.

25. *the Judge of all the earth.* The term for "judge," *shofet,* is derived from the same root as *mishpat,* "justice," which equally occurs in God's interior monologue about the ethical legacy of the seed of Abraham.

27. *Here, pray, I have presumed to speak to my* LORD *when I am but dust and ashes.* Like the previous verbal exchange with the three divine visitors, this whole scene is a remarkable instance of the use of contrastive dialogue in biblical narrative. In the preceding scene, Abraham is voluble in his protestations of hospitable intention, whereas the three visitors answer only impassively and tersely, "Do as you have spoken." Here, Abraham, aware that he is walking a dangerous tight rope in reminding the Judge of all the earth of the necessity to exercise justice, deploys a whole panoply of the abundant rhetorical devices of ancient Hebrew for expressing self-abasement before a powerful figure. At each turn of the dialogue, God responds only by stating flatly that He will not destroy for the sake of the number of innocent just stipulated. The dialogue is cast very much as a bargaining exchange—it is not the last time we shall see Abraham bargaining. After Abraham's second bid of forty-five, each time he ratchets down the number he holds back the new, smaller number, in good bargaining fashion, to the very end of this statement.

32. *just this time . . . ten*. Abraham realizes he dare not go any lower than ten, the minimal administrative unit for communal organization in later Israelite life. In the event, Lot's family, less than the requisite ten, will be the only innocent souls in Sodom.

33. *and Abraham returned to his place.* The report of a character's returning to his place or home is a formal convention for marking the end of an episode in biblical narrative. But this minimal indication has a thematic implication here—the contrast between Abraham's "place" in the nomadic, uncorrupted existence in the land of promise and Lot's location in one of the doomed cities of the plain.

CHAPTER 19

[1]And the two messengers came into Sodom at
evening, when Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom.
And Lot saw, and he rose to greet them and bowed,
with his face to the ground. [2]And he said, “O please,
my lords, turn aside to your servant’s house to spend
the night, and bathe your feet, and you can set off early
on your way.” And they said, “No. We will spend the
night in the square.” [3]And he pressed them hard, and
they turned aside to him and came into his house, and
he prepared them a feast and baked flatbread, and they
ate. [4]They had not yet lain down when the men of the
city, the men of Sodom, drew round the house, from
lads to elders, every last man of them. [5]And they called
out to Lot and said, “Where are the men who came to
you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we may
know them!” [6]And Lot went out to them at the
entrance, closing the door behind him, [7]and he said,
“Please, my brothers, do no harm. [8]Look, I have two
daughters who have known no man. Let me bring
them out to you and do to them whatever you want.

Only to these men do nothing, for have they not come
under the shadow of my roof-beam?” [9]And they said,
“Step aside.” And they said, “This person came as a
sojourner and he sets himself up to judge! Now we’ll
do more harm to you than to them,” and they pressed
hard against the man Lot and moved forward to break
down the door. [10]And the men reached out their hands
and drew Lot to them into the house and closed the
door. [11]And the men at the entrance of the house they
struck with blinding light, from the smallest to the
biggest, and they could not find the entrance. [12]And the
men said to Lot, “Whom do you still have here? Your
sons and your daughters and whomever you have in the
city take out of the place. [13]For we are about to destroy
this place because the outcry against them has grown
great before the LORD and the LORD has sent us to
destroy it.” [14]And Lot went out and spoke to his sons-
in-law who had married his daughters and he said,
“Rise, get out of this place, for the LORD is about to
destroy the city.” And he seemed to his sons-in-law to
be joking. [15]And as dawn was breaking the messengers
urged Lot, saying, “Rise, take your wife and your two
daughters who remain with you, lest you be wiped out
in the punishment of the city.” [16]And he lingered, and
the men seized his hand and his wife’s hand and the
hands of his two daughters in the LORD’s compassion

for him and led him outside the city. [17]And as they were bringing them out, he said, “Flee for your life. Don’t look behind you and don’t stop anywhere on the plain. Flee to the high country lest you be wiped out.” [18]And Lot said to them, “Oh, no, my lord. [19]Look, pray, your servant has found favor in your eyes, and you have shown such great kindness in what you have done for me in saving my life, but I cannot flee to the high country, lest evil overtake me and I die. [20]Here, pray, this town is nearby to escape there, and it is a small place. Let me flee there, for it is but a small place, and my life will be saved.” [21]And he said, “I grant you a favor in this matter as well, and I will not overthrow the town of which you spoke. [22]Hurry, flee there, for I can do nothing before you arrive there.” Therefore is the name of the town called Zoar. [23]The sun had just come out over the earth when Lot arrived at Zoar. [24]And the LORD rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD from the heavens. [25]And He overthrew all those cities and all the plain and all the inhabitants of the cities and what grew in the soil. [26]And his wife looked back and she became a pillar of salt. [27]And Abraham hastened early in the morning to the place where he had stood in the presence of the LORD. [28]And he looked out over Sodom and Gomorrah and over all the land of the

plain, and he saw and, look, smoke was rising like the smoke from a kiln.

[29]And it happened when God destroyed the cities of the plain that God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the upheaval as the cities in which Lot dwelled were overthrown. [30]And Lot came up from Zoar and settled in the high country, his two daughters together with him, for he was afraid to dwell in Zoar, and he dwelled in a certain cave, he and his two daughters. [31]And the elder said to the younger, “Our father is old, and there is no man on earth to come to bed with us like the way of all the earth. [32]Come, let us give our father wine to drink and let us lie with him, so that we may keep alive seed from our father.” [33]And they gave their father wine to drink that night, and the elder came and lay with her father, and he knew not when she lay down or when she arose. [34]And on the next day the elder said to the younger, “Look, last night I lay with my father. Let us give him wine to drink tonight as well, and come, lie with him, so that we may keep alive seed from our father.” [35]And on that night as well they gave their father wine to drink, and the younger arose and lay with him, and he knew not when she lay down or when she arose. [36]And the two daughters of

Lot conceived by their father. [37]And the elder bore a son and called his name Moab; he is the father of the Moab to this day. [38]And the younger as well bore a son and called his name Ben-Ammi; he is the father of the Ammonites of our days.

CHAPTER 19 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *came into Sodom at evening, when Lot was sitting in the gate*. The whole episode is framed in an elegant series of parallels and antitheses to Abraham's hospitality scene at the beginning of chapter 18. Both men are sitting at an entrance—the identical participial clause with the same verb—when the visitors appear. Lot's entrance is the city gate: he can sit "in" it because Canaanite cities had what amounted to a large chamber at the gateway; here people gathered to gossip, to do business, and above all, to conduct justice; the gate would have given on the town square, the area referred to by the messengers in verse 2. There is an antipodal thematic distance from tent flap to city gate, as the narrative quickly makes clear. Abraham's visitors, moreover, arrive at midday, whereas Lot's visitors come as darkness falls—a time when it is as dangerous to be out in the streets of Sodom as in those of some modern cities.

2. *turn aside.* Lot resembles his uncle in the gesture of hospitality. He uses the verb "turn aside" (*sur*) instead of Abraham's "go on past" (*ʿavar*) because, unlike the solitary tent in the desert, there are many habitations here, in addition to the public space of the square.

set off early. This may merely be to emphasize that he will not delay them unduly, but it could hint that they can depart at daybreak before running into trouble with any of the townsfolk.

3. *a feast . . . flatbread*. Perhaps an ellipsis is to be inferred, but this is a scanty-looking "feast." In contrast to Abraham's sumptuous menu, the only

item mentioned is the lowly unleavened bread (*matsot*) of everyday fare, not even the loaves from fine flour that Sarah prepares.

4–5. *the men of the city, the men of Sodom. . . . Where are the men.* Throughout this sequence there is an ironic interplay between the "men" of Sodom, whose manliness is expressed in the universal impulse to homosexual gang-rape, and the divine visitors who only seem to be "men."

7. *brothers.* Or "kinsmen," an appellation the Sodomites will vehemently reject in verse 9.

8. *I have two daughters who have known no man.* Lot's shocking offer, about which the narrator, characteristically, makes no explicit judgment, is too patly explained as the reflex of an ancient Near Eastern code in which the sacredness of the host-guest bond took precedence over all other obligations. Lot surely is inciting the lust of the would-be rapists in using the same verb of sexual "knowledge" they had applied to the visitors in order to proffer the virginity of his daughters for their pleasure. The concluding episode of this chapter, in which the drunken Lot unwittingly takes the virginity of both his daughters, suggests measure-for-measure justice meted out for his rash offer.

for have they not come under the shadow of my roof-beam? This looks like a proverbial expression for entering into someone's home and so into the bonds of the host-guest relationship. But "roof-beam" implies a fixed structure and so accords with the urban setting of Lot's effort at hospitality; Abraham, living in a tent, in the parallel expression in his hospitality scene, merely says, "for have you not come by your servant?"

9. *came as a sojourner . . . sets himself up to judge!* The verb "to sojourn" is the one technically used for resident aliens. "Judge," emphatically repeated in an infinitive absolute (*wayishpot shafot*), picks up the thematic words of judge and justice from God's monologue and His dialogue with Abraham in chapter 18.

12. *Your sons and your daughters.* The Masoretic Text prefaces these words with "son-in-law" (in the singular); but as numerous critics have observed, this makes no grammatical sense, and this particular term would not belong at the head of the list, before sons and daughters. It seems quite likely that the

word was erroneously transcribed from verse 14 and was not part of the original text.

13. *the outcry.* This term is a pointed repetition of the word God uses twice in His initial speech about Sodom.

14. *his sons-in-law who had married his daughters.* Especially because of the reference to the two virgin daughters in the next verse as ones "who remain with you" (literally, "are found with you"), it appears that Lot had other daughters already married, and not that the two in the house were betrothed but still unmarried.

he seemed to his sons-in-law to be joking. The verb, though in a different conjugation, is the same as the one used for Sarah's and Abraham's "laughter." It is, of course, a wry echo—the laughter of disbelief of those about to be divinely blessed, the false perception of mocking laughter by those about to be destroyed. The common denominator in the antithetical usages is skepticism about divine intentions, for good and for evil.

17. *he said.* The reader is meant to infer: one of the two of them.

19. *I cannot flee to the high country.* Lot seems a weak character—he has to be led out by the hand from the city—and his zigzagging determinations of flight make psychological sense. Accustomed to an urban setting, he is terrified at the idea of trying to survive in the forbidding landscape of cliffs and caves to the south and east of the Dead Sea. But once having settled in the little town of Zoar (verse 30), he has understandable premonitions of another cataclysm and so decides that, after all, the rocky wilderness is the lesser of two evils.

20. *a small place.* The Hebrew *miẓ'ar* plays on the name Zoar and for once this could be a correct etymology. Lot's point is that it is, after all, only a piddling town and so it would not be asking a great deal to spare it from destruction.

21. *overthrow.* This is the physical image presented by the Hebrew verb, though the obvious sense of the word throughout the story (and in later biblical references to Sodom) is something like "destroy by sudden cataclysm."

24. *rained . . . brimstone and fire from the* LORD *from the heavens*. The slightly awkward repetition of "from the LORD" with the added phrase "from the heavens," taken together with the verb "to rain" (*himtir*), underscores the connection with the Deluge story: the first time the Flood, the fire next time. Moshe Weinfeld has aptly observed a whole series of parallels between the two stories. In each case, God wipes out a whole population because of epidemic moral perversion, marking one family for survival. In each case, the idiom "to keep alive seed" is used for survival. In each case, the male survivor becomes drunk and is somehow sexually violated by his offspring, though only Lot is unambiguously represented as the object of an incestuous advance. One might add that the phrase used by the elder sister, "there is no man on earth [or, "in the land," *ba ʾarets*] to come to bed with us" (verse 31), equally reinforces the connection with the global cataclysm of the Flood story: she looks out upon the desolate landscape after the destruction of the cities of the plain and imagines that she, her sister, and their father are the sole survivors of humankind.

26. *And his wife looked back and she became a pillar of salt.* As has often been observed, this tale looks doubly archaic, incorporating both an etiological story about a gynemorphic rock formation in the Dead Sea region and an old mythic motif (as in the story of Orpheus and Euridyce) of a taboo against looking back in fleeing from a place of doom. But the blighted looking of Lot's wife is antithetically integrated with the "looking out" (a different verb) of Abraham in the next two verses over the scene of destruction from his safe vantage on the heights of Hebron.

27. *early in the morning.* There is a nice temporal dovetailing of the two scenes. Down in the plain, just as the sun rises, the LORD rains brimstone and fire. A few minutes later, still early in the morning, Abraham hurries to take in the awful panorama.

28. *he saw and, look, smoke was rising.* The visual setup also represents the tight closing of an envelope structure. The Sodom episode began with Abraham's dialogue with God on the heights of Hebron. Now at the end, in a definition of visual perspective unusual for biblical narrative, Abraham, standing in the same place, makes out from a distance of forty or more miles the cloud of smoke rising from the incinerated cities.

30–38. The narrator withholds all comment on the incestuous enterprise of the two virgin sisters. Perhaps the story may draw on old—pre-Israelite?—traditions in which the supposed origins of these two peoples in incest were understood as evidence of their purity, or their vitality. (One recalls that Tamar, the progenitrix of the future kings of Judah, became pregnant by her father-in-law through pretending to be a whore.) But from the Israelite perspective, this story might well have cast a shadow of ambiguity over these two enemy peoples. Both names are etymologized to refer to incest: Moab (which probably means "desired place") is construed as *me-ʾab*, "from the father," and Ben-Ammi (yielding the gentilic *benei-ʿammon*) is construed as "my own kinsman's son."

32. *let us lie with him.* Although "lie with" is a somewhat euphemistic reference to coitus in English, its uses in Scripture suggest it is a rather coarse (though not obscene) verb for sexual intercourse in biblical Hebrew. Two linked sexual assailants, the Egyptian woman in Genesis 39 and Amnon in 2 Samuel 13, use it in urging the objects of their lust to submit to them. When the verb is followed by a direct object in sexual contexts, the meaning seems close to "rape." Ironically, the more decorous verb "to know" is used twice here asexually (verses 33 and 35) to indicate the drunken Lot's unconscious state as he deflowers each of his daughters.

CHAPTER 20

[1]And Abraham journeyed onward from there to the
Negeb region and dwelled between Kadesh and Shur,
and he sojourned in Gerar. [2]And Abraham said of
Sarah his wife, “She is my sister.” And Abimelech the
king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. [3]And God came to
Abimelech in a night-dream and said to him, “You are
a dead man because of the woman you took, as she is
another’s wife.” [4]But Abimelech had not come near
her, and he said, “My LORD, will you slay a nation
even if innocent? [5]Did not he say to me, ‘She is my
sister’? and she, she, too, said, ‘He is my brother.’ With
a pure heart and with clean hands I have done this.”
[6]And God said to him in the dream, “Indeed, I know
that with a pure heart you have done this, and I on My
part have kept you from offending against Me, and so I
have not allowed you to touch her. [7]Now, send back
the man’s wife, for he is a prophet, and he will
intercede for you, and you may live. And if you do not
send her back, know that you are doomed to die, you
and all that belongs to you.”

[8]And Abimelech rose early in the morning and called
to all his servants, and he spoke these things in their
hearing, and the men were terribly afraid. [9]And
Abimelech called to Abraham and said to him, “What
have you done to us, and how have I offended you, that
you should bring upon me and my kingdom so great an
offense? Things that should not be done you have done
to me.” [10]And Abimelech said to Abraham, “What did
you imagine when you did this thing?” [11]And Abraham
said, “For I thought, there is surely no fear of God in
this place and they will kill me because of my wife.
[12]And, in point of fact, she is my sister, my father’s
daughter, though not my mother’s daughter, and she
became my wife. [13]And it happened, when the gods
made me a wanderer from my father’s house, that I
told her, ‘This is the kindness you can do for me: in
every place to which we come, say of me, he is my
brother.’” [14]And Abimelech took sheep and cattle and
male and female slaves and gave them to Abraham,
and he sent back to him Sarah his wife. [15]And
Abimelech said, “Look, my land is before you. Settle
wherever you want.” [16]And to Sarah he said, “Look, I
have given a thousand pieces of silver to your brother.
Let it hereby serve you as a shield against censorious
eyes for everyone who is with you, and you are now
publicly vindicated.” [17]And Abraham interceded with

God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his slave-women, and they gave birth. [18]For the LORD had shut fast every womb in the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

CHAPTER 20 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Abraham journeyed onward from there to the Negeb region*. This second instance of the sister-wife type-scene is in several ways fashioned to fit the particular narrative context in which it is inserted. The emphatic foreshadowing of the sojourn in Egypt of the episode in chapter 12 is deleted. Here there is no mention of a famine as the cause of the patriarch's migration, and the place he comes to is not Egypt but Gerar, a Canaanite city-state in the western Negeb.

3. *And God came to Abimelech.* This potentate is immediately given a higher moral status than Pharaoh in chapter 12: to Pharaoh God speaks only through plagues, whereas Abimelech is vouchsafed direct address from God in a night-vision.

You are a dead man. Or, "you are about to die." Abimelech's distressed response to this peremptory death sentence is understandable, and leads back to the preceding episodes in the narrative chain.

4. *will you slay a nation even if innocent?* This phrase, which might also be construed "slay a nation even with the innocent," sounds as peculiar in the Hebrew as in translation, and has led some critics to see the word "nation" (*goy*) as a scribal error. But the apparent deformation of idiom has a sharp thematic point. "Innocent" (*tsadiq*) is the very term Abraham insisted on in questioning God as to whether He would really slay the innocent together with the guilty in destroying the entire nation of Sodom. If the king of Gerar chooses, oddly, to refer to himself as "nation," leaning on the traditional

identification of monarch with people, it is because he is, in effect, repeating Abraham's question to God: Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?

5. *and she, she, too.* This repetitive splutter of indignation is vividly registered in the Hebrew, though the existing translations smooth it over.

6. *I have not allowed you to touch her.* The means by which consummation is prevented is intimated, cannily, only at the very end of the story.

9–10. *And Abimelech . . . said . . . and Abimelech said*. The repetition of the formula for introducing direct speech, with no intervening response from Abraham, is pointedly expressive. Abimelech vehemently castigates Abraham (with good reason), and Abraham stands silent, not knowing what to say. And so Abimelech repeats his upbraiding, in shorter form (verse 10).

11–12. When Abraham finally speaks up, his words have the ring of a speaker floundering for self-justification. Introducing the explanation of Sarah's half-sister status—there might be a Mesopotamian legal background to such a semi-incestuous marriage—he uses a windy argumentative locution, *wegam ʾomnah,* "and, in point of fact," that may hint at a note of special pleading.

and they will kill me because of my wife. What Abraham fears is that Gerar, without "fear of God," will prove to be another Sodom. In Sodom, two strangers came into town and immediately became objects of sexual assault for the whole male population. Here again, two strangers come into town, one male and one female, and Abraham assumes the latter will be an object of sexual appropriation, the former the target of murder. In the event, he is entirely wrong: Abimelech is a decent, even noble, man; and the category of "Sodom" is not to be projected onto everything that is not the seed of Abraham. On the contrary, later biblical writers will suggest how easily Israel turns itself into Sodom.

13. *the gods made me a wanderer.* The word *ʾelohim,* which normally takes a singular verb (though it has a plural suffix) when it refers to God, as everywhere else in this episode, is here linked with a plural verb. Conventional translation procedure renders this as "God," or "Heaven," but Abraham, after all, is addressing a pagan who knows nothing of this strange new idea of monotheism, and it is perfectly appropriate that he should choose his words accordingly, settling on a designation of the deity that ambiguously

straddles polytheism and monotheism. It is also noteworthy that Abraham, far from suggesting that God has directed him to a promised land, stresses to the native king that the gods have imposed upon him a destiny of wandering.

in every place to which we come. The writer, quite aware that this episode approximately repeats the one in chapter 12, introduces into Abraham's dialogue a motivation for the repetition: this is what we must do (whatever the problematic consequences) in order to survive wherever we go.

14. *And Abimelech took sheep and cattle.* Unlike Pharaoh in chapter 12, who bestows gifts on Abraham as a kind of bride-price, the noble Abimelech offers all this bounty *after* Sarah leaves his harem, as an act of restitution.

16. *to your brother.* Surely there is an edge of irony in Abimelech's use of this term.

a shield against censorious eyes. The Hebrew, which has long puzzled scholars, is literally "a covering of the eyes." That phrase may mean "mask," but its idiomatic thrust seems to be: something that will ward off public disapproval.

18. *For the LORD had shut fast every womb.* Contrary to some textual critics who conjecture that this verse was inadvertently displaced from an earlier point in the story, it is a lovely piece of delayed narrative exposition. Shutting up the womb is a standard idiom for infertility, which ancient Hebrew culture, at least on the proverbial level, attributes to the woman, not to the man. But given the earlier reference to Abimelech's having been prevented from touching Sarah, this looks suspiciously like an epidemic of impotence that has struck Abimelech and his people—an idea not devoid of comic implications —from which the Gerarite women would then suffer as the languishing partners of the deflected sexual unions. (Nahmanides sees an allusion to impotence here.) It is noteworthy that only in this version of the sister-wife story is the motif of infertility introduced. Its presence nicely aligns the Abimelech episode with what precedes and what follows. That is, first we have the implausible promise of a son to the aged Sarah; then a whole people is wiped out; then the desperate act of procreation by Lot's daughters in a world seemingly emptied of men; and now an entire kingdom blighted with an interruption of procreation. The very next words of the story—one must remember that there were no chapter breaks in the original Hebrew text, for

both chapter and verse divisions were introduced only in the late Middle Ages —are the fulfillment of the promise of progeny to Sarah: "And the LORD singled out Sarah as He had said." As several medieval Hebrew commentators note, the plague of infertility also guarantees that Abimelech cannot be imagined as the begetter of Isaac.

CHAPTER 21

[1]And the LORD singled out Sarah as He had said, and
the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken. [2]And
Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old
age at the set time that God had spoken to him. [3]And
Abraham called the name of his son who was born to
him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. [4]And Abraham
circumcised Isaac his son when he was eight days old,
as God had charged him. [5]And Abraham was a
hundred years old when Isaac his son was born to him.
[6]And Sarah said,

"Laughter has God made me,
Whoever hears will laugh at me."

[7]And she said,

"Who would have uttered to
Abraham—
'Sarah is suckling sons!'

For I have born a son in his old
age.”

[8]And the child grew and was weaned, and Abraham
made a great feast on the day Isaac was weaned. [9]And
Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she
had born to Abraham, laughing. [10]And she said to
Abraham, “Drive out this slavegirl and her son, for the
slavegirl’s son shall not inherit with my son, with
Isaac.” [11]And the thing seemed evil in Abraham’s eyes
because of his son. [12]And God said to Abraham, “Let
it not seem evil in your eyes on account of the lad and
on account of your slavegirl. Whatever Sarah says to
you, listen to her voice, for through Isaac shall your
seed be acclaimed. [13]But the slavegirl’s son, too, I will
make a nation, for he is your seed.”

[14]And Abraham rose early in the morning and took
bread and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar,
placing them on her shoulder, and he gave her the
child, and sent her away, and she went wandering
through the wilderness of Beersheba. [15]And when the
water in the skin was gone, she flung the child under
one of the bushes [16]and went off and sat down at a
distance, a bowshot away, for she thought, “Let me not

see when the child dies." And she sat at a distance and raised her voice and wept. [17]And God heard the voice of the lad and God's messenger called out from the heavens and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the lad's voice where he is.

[18]Rise, lift up the lad
and hold him by the hand,
for a great nation will I make
him."

[19]And God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water, and she went and filled the skin with water and gave to the lad to drink. [20]And God was with the lad, and he grew up and dwelled in the wilderness, and he became a seasoned bowman. [21]And he dwelled in the wilderness of Paran and his mother took him a wife from the land of Egypt.

[22]And it happened at that time that Abimelech, and Phicol captain of his troops with him, said to Abraham, saying, "God is with you in whatever you do. [23]Therefore swear to me by God that you will not deal falsely with me, with my kith and kin. Like the

kindness I have done you, so you shall do for me, and for the land in which you have sojourned.” [24]And Abraham said, “I indeed will swear it.” [25]But Abraham upbraided Abimelech concerning the well of water that Abimelech’s servants had seized. [26]And Abimelech said, “I do not know who has done this thing, and you, too, have not told me, and I myself never heard of it till this day.” [27]And Abraham took sheep and cattle and gave them to Abimelech, and the two of them sealed a pact. [28]And Abraham set apart seven ewes of the flock, [29]and Abimelech said to Abraham, “What are these seven ewes that you set apart?” [30]And he said, “Now, the seven ewes you shall take from my hand, so that they may serve me as witness that I have dug this well.” [31]Therefore did he call the name of that place Beersheba, for there did the two of them swear. [32]And they sealed a pact in Beersheba, and Abimelech arose, and Phicol captain of his troops with him, and they returned to the land of the Philistines. [33]And Abraham planted a tamarisk at Beersheba, and he invoked there the name of the LORD, everlasting God. [34]And Abraham sojourned in the land of the Philistines many days.

CHAPTER 21 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

6. *Laughter has God made me*. The ambiguity of both the noun *tseḥoq* ("laughter") and the accompanying preposition *li* ("to" or "for" or "with" or "at" me) is wonderfully suited to the complexity of the moment. It may be laughter, triumphant joy, that Sarah experiences and that is the name of the child Isaac ("he-who-laughs"). But in her very exultation, she could well feel the absurdity (as Kafka noted in one of his parables) of a nonagenarian becoming a mother. *Tseḥoq* also means "mockery," and perhaps God is doing something *to* her as well as for her. (In poetry, the verb *tsaḥaq* is often linked in parallelism with *laʿag,* to scorn or mock, and it should be noted that *laʿag* is invariably followed by the preposition *l*^{e}*,* as *tsaḥaq* is here.) All who hear of it may laugh, rejoice, with Sarah, but the hint that they might also laugh at her is evident in her language.

7. *uttered.* The Hebrew *milel* is a term that occurs only in poetic texts and is presumably high diction, perhaps archaic.

For I have born a son in his old age. In a symmetrical reversal of God's report in chapter 18 of Sarah's interior monologue, where Abraham's advanced age was suppressed, Sarah's postpartum poem, like the narrator's report that precedes it, mentions only *his* old age. Hers is implied by her marveling reference to herself as an old woman suckling infants, a pointed reversal of her own allusion in chapter 18 to her shriveled body.

9. *laughing.* Hebrew *metsaḥeq*. The same verb that meant "mocking" or "joking" in Lot's encounter with his sons-in-law and that elsewhere in the Patriarchal narratives refers to sexual dalliance. It also means "to play." (Although the conjugation here is *piʿel* and Sarah's use of the same root in verse 6 is in the *qal* conjugation, attempts to establish a firm semantic differentiation between the deployment of the root in the two different conjugations do not stand up under analysis.) Some medieval Hebrew exegetes, trying to find a justification for Sarah's harsh response, construe the verb as a reference to homosexual advances, though that seems far-fetched. Mocking laughter would surely suffice to trigger her outrage. Given the fact, moreover, that she is concerned lest Ishmael encroach on her son's inheritance, and given the inscription of her son's name in this crucial verb, we may also be invited to construe it as "Isaac-ing-it"—that is, Sarah sees

Ishmael presuming to play the role of Isaac, child of laughter, presuming to be the legitimate heir.

10. *Drive out this slavegirl.* In language that nicely catches the indignation of the legitimate wife, Sarah refers to neither Hagar nor Ishmael by name, but instead insists on the designation of low social status.

12. *listen to her voice.* The Hebrew idiom has the obvious meaning "to obey," but the literal presence of hearing a voice is important because it resonates with the occurrence of the same verb and object at the heart of the wilderness scene that immediately follows.

acclaimed. The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "called."

14. *rose early in the morning.* This is precisely echoed in the story of the binding of Isaac (22:3), as part of an intricate network of correspondences between the two stories.

and he gave her the child. The Hebrew has only "the child," with an accusative prefix. This has led many commentators to imagine that Abraham is putting Ishmael on Hagar's shoulders together with the bread and water—a most unlikely act, since the boy would be about sixteen. But biblical syntax permits the use of a transitive verb ("gave [them] to Hagar") interrupted by a participial clause ("placing [them] on her shoulder"), which then controls a second object ("the child"). The only way to convey this in English is by repeating the verb.

16. *a bowshot away.* This particular indication of distance is carefully chosen, for it adumbrates the boy's vocation as bowman spelled out at the end of the story.

when the child dies. Like the narrator in verses 14 and 15, Hagar refers to her son as *yeled,* "child" (the etymology—"the one who is born"—is the same as *enfant* in French). This is the same term that is used for Isaac at the beginning of verse 8. From the moment the angel speaks in verse 17, Ishmael is consistently referred to as *naʿar,* "lad"—a more realistic indication of his adolescent status and also a term of tenderness, as in the story of the binding of Isaac in the next chapter.

17. *And God heard the voice of the lad.* The narrator had reported only Hagar's weeping. Now we learn that the boy has been weeping or crying out,

and it is his anguish that elicits God's saving response. In the earlier version of the banishment of Hagar (chapter 16), the naming of her future son Ishmael stands at the center of the story. Here, as though the writer were ironically conspiring with Sarah's refusal to name the boy, Ishmael's name is suppressed to the very end. But the ghost of its etymology—"God will hear"—hovers at the center of the story.

20. *a seasoned bowman.* There is an odd doubling of the professional designation in the Hebrew (literally "archer-bowman"), which I construe as an indication of his confirmed dedication to this hunter's calling, or his skill in performing it.

22. This episode is clearly a continuation of the Abimelech story in chapter 20, interrupted by the linked episodes of the birth of Isaac and the expulsion of Ishmael. Abimelech had offered Abraham the right of settlement in his territories ("Look, my land is before you"). Now, as Abraham manifestly prospers ("God is with you in whatever you do"), Abimelech proposes a treaty which will ensure that the Hebrew sojourner does not unduly encroach on him or his land.

25. *concerning the well.* The particular instance of the clash between Abimelech's retainers and Abraham links this story with the immediately preceding one, in which Ishmael is rescued by the discovery of a well in the wilderness.

31. *the name of that place Beersheba.* The Hebrew makes a transparent etymological pun. *Be'er* means "well." *Sheba'* can be construed as "oath" but it is also the number seven, ritually embodied here in the seven ewes Abraham sets apart. A second etymology may be intimated, not for the place-name Beersheba but for the term *shev'uah,* "oath," which seems to be derived by the writer from the sacred number seven, made part of the oath-taking.

32. *the land of the Philistines.* This is an often-noted anachronism, the incursion of the Philistines from Crete to the coastal area of Canaan postdating the Patriarchal period by more than four centuries. The writer may mean merely to refer casually to this region in geographical terms familiar to his audience; it is not clear that Abimelech with his Semitic name is meant to be thought of as a "Philistine" king.

33. *at Beersheba.* The cultic tree is planted “at” rather than “in” Beersheba because it is evident that the site of the oath is a well in the wilderness, not a built-up town.

CHAPTER 22

[1]And it happened after these things that God tested
Abraham. And He said to him, “Abraham!” and he
said, “Here I am.” [2]And He said, “Take, pray, your
son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, and go forth
to the land of Moriah and offer him up as a burnt
offering on one of the mountains which I shall say to
you.” [3]And Abraham rose early in the morning and
saddled his donkey and took his two lads with him,
and Isaac his son, and he split wood for the offering,
and rose and went to the place that God had said to
him. [4]On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and
saw the place from afar. [5]And Abraham said to his
lads, “Sit you here with the donkey and let me and the
lad walk ahead and let us worship and return to you.”
[6]And Abraham took the wood for the offering and put
it on Isaac his son and he took in his hand the fire and
the cleaver, and the two of them went together. [7]And
Isaac said to Abraham his father, “Father!” and he
said, “Here I am, my son.” And he said, “Here is the
fire and the wood but where is the sheep for the

offering?” [8]And Abraham said, “God will see to the
sheep for the offering, my son.” And the two of them
went together. [9]And they came to the place that God
had said to him, and Abraham built there an altar and
laid out the wood and bound Isaac his son and placed
him on the altar on top of the wood. [10]And Abraham
reached out his hand and took the cleaver to slaughter
his son. [11]And the LORD’s messenger called out to
him from the heavens and said, “Abraham, Abraham!”
and he said, “Here I am.” [12]And he said, “Do not reach
out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him,
for now I know that you fear God and you have not
held back your son, your only one, from Me.” [13]And
Abraham raised his eyes and saw and, look, a ram was
caught in the thicket by its horns, and Abraham went
and took the ram and offered him up as a burnt
offering instead of his son. [14]And Abraham called the
name of that place YHWH-Yireh, as is said to this
day, “On the mount of the LORD there is sight.”
[15]And the LORD’s messenger called out to Abraham
once again from the heavens, [16]and He said, “By My
own Self I swear, declares the LORD, that because
you have done this thing and have not held back your
son, your only one, [17]I will greatly bless you and will
greatly multiply your seed, as the stars in the heavens
and as the sand on the shore of the sea, and your seed

shall take hold of its enemies' gate. [18]And all the nations of the earth will be blessed through your seed because you have listened to my voice." [19]And Abraham returned to his lads, and they rose and went together to Beersheba, and Abraham dwelled in Beersheba.

[20]And it happened after these things that it was told to Abraham, saying, "Look, Milcah, too, has borne sons to Nahor your brother. [21]Uz, his firstborn, and Buz his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram. [22]And Chesed and Hazo and Pildash and Jidlaph, and Bethuel. [23]And Bethuel begot Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother. [24]And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, she, too, gave birth—to Tebah, and to Gaham, and to Tahash, and to Maacah."

CHAPTER 22 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. The abrupt beginning and stark, emotion-fraught development of this troubling story have led many critics to celebrate it as one of the peaks of ancient narrative. Among modern commentators, Gerhard von Rad, Claus Westermann, and E. A. Speiser have all offered sensitive observations on the details of the story, and the luminous first chapter of Erich Auerbach's

Mimesis, which compares this passage with one from the *Odyssey*, remains a landmark of twentieth-century criticism.

2. *your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac.* The Hebrew syntactic chain is exquisitely forged to carry a dramatic burden, and the sundry attempts of English translators from the King James Version to the present to rearrange it are misguided. The classical Midrash, followed by Rashi, beautifully catches the resonance of the order of terms. Rashi's concise version is as follows: *"Your son*. He said to Him, 'I have two sons.' He said to him, *'Your only one.'* He said, 'This one is an only one to his mother and this one is an only one to his mother.' He said to him, *'Whom you love.'* He said to him, 'I love both of them.' He said to him, *'Isaac.'"* Although the human object of God's terrible imperative does not actually speak in the biblical text, this midrashic dialogue demonstrates a fine responsiveness to how the tense stance of the addressee is intimated through the words of the addresser in a one-sided dialogue.

your only one. Some scholars, bothered by the technical inaccuracy of the term, have followed an ancient reading of *yadid,* "favored one," instead of the Masoretic yaḥ*id*. This seriously misses the point that in regard to Abraham's feelings, Isaac, this sole son by his legitimate wife, is his only one. The phrase "your son, your only one," will return as a thematic refrain at the end of the story (verses 12, 16).

Moriah. Though traditional exegesis, supported by the reference to the Mount of the LORD at the end of the tale, identifies this with Jerusalem, the actual location remains in doubt. In any case, there is an assonance between "Moriah" and *yir'eh,* "he sees," the the matic key word of the resolution of the story.

3. *and Isaac his son.* The crucial item is left to the very end. The narrator does not miss a chance in the story to refer to Isaac as "his son" and Abraham as "his father," thus sharpening the edge of anguish that runs through the tale.

and he split wood. In a narrative famous for its rigorous economy in reporting physical details, this act of Abraham, wielding an axe and cutting things apart, is ominously singled out for attention.

5. *said to his lads . . . let me and the lad*. An identity of terms, an ironic divergence of meanings—the young men who are his servants (in fact, his

slaves) and the boy to whom he fondly refers, whom he thinks he is going to kill.

let me. The Hebrew uses a jussive form for the three verbs, a gentler mode of speech than a flat declarative about future actions.

6. *the cleaver.* E. A. Speiser notes, quite rightly, that the Hebrew term here is not the usual biblical term for knife, and makes a good argument that it is a cleaver. Other terms from butchering, rather than sacrifice, are used: to slaughter (verse 10) and to bind (verse 9—a verb occurring only here but used in rabbinic Hebrew for trussing up the legs of animals).

7. *Father!* The Hebrew is literally "My father," but that noun with the possessive ending is the form of intimate address in biblical Hebrew, like *Abba* in postbiblical Hebrew.

the fire and the wood. A moment earlier, we saw the boy loaded with the firewood, the father carrying the fire and the butcher knife. As Gerhard von Rad aptly remarks, "He himself carries the dangerous objects with which the boy could hurt himself, the torch and the knife." But now, as Isaac questions his father, he passes in silence over the one object that would have seemed scariest to him, however unwitting he may have been of his father's intention —the sharp-edged butcher knife.

8. *God will see to.* Literally, "see for himself." The idiomatic force is "provide," but God's seeing lines up with Abraham's seeing the place from afar, his seeing the ram, and the seeing on the Mount of the LORD. Beyond the tunnel vision of a trajectory toward child slaughter is a promise of true vision.

And the two of them went together. The impassive economy of this refrainlike repeated clause is haunting: two people, father and son, together for what threatens to be the last time, together "in one purpose" (Rashi), the father to sacrifice the son.

9–10. In contrast to the breathless pace of the narrative as a whole, this sequence inscribes a kind of slow motion: building the altar, laying out the wood, binding the child on top of the wood, reaching out the hand with the butcher knife—until the voice calls out from the heavens.

11. *And the LORD's messenger called out to him from the heavens.* This is nearly identical with the calling-out to Hagar in 21:17. In fact, a whole configuration of parallels between the two stories is invoked. Each of Abraham's sons is threatened with death in the wilderness, one in the presence of his mother, the other in the presence (and by the hand) of his father. In each case the angel intervenes at the critical moment, referring to the son fondly as *naʿar,* "lad." At the center of the story, Abraham's hand holds the knife, Hagar is enjoined to "hold her hand" (the literal meaning of the Hebrew) on the lad. In the end, each of the sons is promised to become progenitor of a great people, the threat to Abraham's continuity having been averted.

Here I am. The third time Abraham pronounces this word—*hineni*—of readiness: first to God, then to Isaac, now to the divine messenger.

13. *a ram.* The Masoretic Text reads "a ram behind [*aḥar*]," but scholarship is virtually unanimous in following numerous ancient versions in reading *eḥad,* "one," a very similar grapheme in the Hebrew.

14. *sight.* The place-name means "the LORD sees." The phrase at the end means literally either "he sees" or "he will be seen," depending on how the verb is vocalized, and this translation uses a noun instead to preserve the ambiguity. It is also not clear whether it is God or the person who comes to the Mount who sees / is seen.

16. *because you have done this thing.* The LORD's invocation of causation thickens the ambiguities of the story. Abraham has already been promised an innumerable posterity (chapters 15, 17). Perhaps now he has proved himself fully worthy of the promise. One might note that here for the first time a future of military triumph is added to the promise.

20–24. The genealogical list inserted here, which reflects a Mesopotamian confederation of twelve tribes akin to the twelve tribes of Abraham's descendants, is directed toward the introduction of Rebekah (verse 23), soon to join the Patriarchal narrative as a principal figure. The genealogy marks a kind of boundary in the larger narrative. Abraham has accomplished his chief actions; all that is really left to him is to acquire a suitable burial plot for Sarah, which will be his final gesture in laying claim to the land. At that point,

even before Abraham's death, the concerns of the next generation will take center stage (chapter 24).

CHAPTER 23

[1]And Sarah's life was a hundred and twenty-seven
years, the years of Sarah's life. [2]And Sarah died in
Kiriath-Arba, which is Hebron, in the land of Canaan,
and Abraham came to mourn Sarah and to keen for
her. [3]And Abraham rose from before his dead and he
spoke to the Hittites, saying: [4]"I am a sojourning settler
with you. Grant me a burial-holding with you, and let
me bury my dead now before me." [5]And the Hittites
answered Abraham, saying: [6]"Pray, hear us, my lord.
You are a prince of God among us! In the pick of our
graves bury your dead. No man among us will deny
you his grave for burying your dead." [7]And Abraham
rose and bowed to the folk of the land, to the Hittites.
[8]And he spoke with them, saying, "If you have it in
your hearts that I should bury my dead now before me,
hear me, entreat for me Ephron son of Zohar, [9]and let
him grant me the cave of Machpelah that belongs to
him, which is at the far end of his field. At the full
price let him grant it to me in your midst as a burial-
holding." [10]And Ephron was sitting in the midst of the

Hittites, and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, all the assembled in the gate of his town, saying: [11]"Pray, my lord, hear me. The field I grant you and the cave that is in it. I grant it to you in full view of my kinfolk. I grant it to you. Bury your dead." [12]And Abraham bowed before the folk of the land, [13]and he spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the folk of the land, saying: "If you would but hear me—I give the price of the field, take it from me, and let me bury my dead there." [14]And Ephron answered Abraham, saying: [15]"Pray, my lord, hear me. Land for four hundred silver shekels between me and you, what does it come to? Go bury your dead." [16]And Abraham heeded Ephron and Abraham weighed out to Ephron the silver that he spoke of in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred silver shekels at the merchants' tried weight. [17]And Ephron's field at Machpelah by Mamre, the field and the cave that was in it and every tree in the field, within its boundaries all around, [18]passed over to Abraham as a possession, in the full view of the Hittites, all the assembled in the gate of his town. [19]And then Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the Machpelah field by Mamre, which is Hebron, in the land of Canaan. [20]And the field and the cave that was in it passed over to Abraham as a burial-holding from the Hittites.

CHAPTER 23 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *years, the years*. The Hebrew is still more extravagant in its use of repetition, unusually repeating "year" after a hundred, after twenty, and after seven. The same device of stylistic emphasis is used in the obituary notices of Abraham and Ishmael.

2. *Kiriath-Arba, which is Hebron.* The older name of the town means "city of four," perhaps a reference to its being a federation (a possible meaning of "Hebron") of four townlets. (Alternately, the name might refer to "four hills.") But some scholars think the earlier name is a Hebraization of a non-Semitic place-name, which would have been given to the town by its "Hittite" inhabitants.

3. *Hittites.* Whether these are actually Hittites who have migrated from Anatolia into Canaan or a loose Hebrew designation for non-Semitic Canaanites is unclear.

4. *sojourning settler . . . Grant me a burial-holding*. The Hebrew, which reads literally, "sojourner and settler," is a legal term that means "resident alien," but the bureaucratic coloration of that English equivalent misrepresents the stylistic decorum of the Hebrew. At the very beginning of Abraham's speech, he announces his vulnerable legal status, a hard fact of institutional reality which stands in ironic tension with his inward consciousness that the whole land has been promised to him and his seed. "Grant"—literally "give"—is pointedly ambiguous both here and in the subsequent exchange with Ephron. Abraham avoids the frank term "sell," yet speaks of acquiring a "holding" (*ʾaḥuzah*), a word that clearly indicates permanent legal possession.

6. *Pray.* This translation follows E. A. Speiser, as well as the ancient Aramaic version of Yonatan ben Uziel, in reading *lu* for *lo* ("to him") and moving the monosyllabic term from the end of verse 5 to the beginning of verse 6. The identical emendation is made at the end of verse 14 moving into the beginning of verse 15. Although one critic, Meir Sternberg (1991), has made

an ingenious attempt to rescue the Masoretic Text at these two points, there is a simple compelling argument against it: the formula for introducing direct speech, *le'mor,* "saying," is always immediately followed by the direct speech, not by a preposition "to him" (*lo*). And the repetition of the optative particle *lu*, "pray," is just right for beginning each round of this elaborately polite bargaining.

You are a prince of God among us! In the pick of our graves bury your dead. On the surface, this is a courtly gesture of extravagant generosity. But as Sternberg (1991), who provides an acute reading of the sinuous turns of the subsurface bargaining, nicely shows, there is ambiguity of intention here: a certain exaggeration in calling Abraham a prince of God—which could simply mean "preeminent dignitary"—"among us" (*he* had claimed to be only "with" them); and a pointed deletion of any reference to a "holding" or to transfer of property.

9. *at the far end of his field.* In settling on this particular location for a burial cave, Abraham wants to make it clear that he will not need to pass through or encroach on the rest of the Hittite property. "Field," *sadeh,* a flexible term for territory that stretches from field to steppe, could mean something like "land" or "property" in context, but rendering it as "field" preserves the distinction from *'erets,* "land," as in the repeated phrase, "folk of the land."

At the full price. At this point Abraham makes it altogether unambiguous that the "grant" he has been mentioning means a sale. The Hebrew is literally "with full silver," and the phrase in verse 16, "the silver that he spoke of," refers back to this speech.

10. *in the hearing of the Hittites, all the assembled in the gate of his town.* Legal business was conducted in the gateway: the men assembled there constitute, as E. A. Speiser proposes, a kind of town council; and these two phrases in apposition are a legal formula. Scholarship has abundantly observed that the actual language used by Ephron and Abraham and the narrator bristles with set terms familiar from other ancient Near Eastern documents for the conveyance of property.

11. *Pray, my lord, hear me.* Reading here *lu* for the Masoretic *lo'* ("no"). This polite formula for initiating speech is not the sort of repetition that allows significant variation.

The field. As Meir Sternberg shrewdly notes, Abraham had wanted to buy only the cave at the far end of the field, and so Ephron's seeming generosity in throwing the unrequested field into the bargain is a ploy for demanding an exorbitant price.

I grant you . . . I grant it . . . I grant it. This is a performative speech-act, the repetition indicating that Ephron is formally conveying the plot to Abraham. Ephron, of course, knows that what Abraham really wants is to be able to buy the land and thus acquire inalienable right to it, and so this "bestowal" is really a maneuver to elicit an offer from Abraham.

15. *Land for four hundred silver shekels.* A comparison with the prices stipulated for the purchase of property elsewhere in the Bible suggests that this pittance is actually a king's ransom. Abraham, having tw lared his readiness to pay "the full price," is in no position to object to the extortionate rate. In fact, his only real bargaining aim has been to make a legitimate purchase, and he is unwilling to haggle over the price, just as he refused to accept booty from the king of Salem. Perhaps Ephron refers to the property as "land" (*ʾerets*) instead of *sadeh* in order to provide rhetorical mitigation for the huge sum, intimating, by way of a term that also means "country," that Abraham is free to imagine he is getting more than a field with a burial cave for his money.

16. *heeded.* That is, agreed. But it is the same verb, "to hear" (*shamaʿ*), repeatedly used at the beginning of the bargaining speeches.

weighed out . . . four hundred silver shekels. The transaction antedates the use of coins, and the silver is divided into weights (the literal meaning of shekel).

17–20. The language of these concluding verses is emphatically legalistic, recapitulating the phraseology that would appear in a contract for the conveyance of property. The verbal stem, *qanah,* "to buy," which was studiously avoided in the bargaining, finally surfaces in the term for "possession" (*miqnah*). Many interpreters view this whole episode as a final gesture of the aged Abraham toward laying future claim to possession of the land. Meir Sternberg, on the other hand, reads it as thematically coordinated with the previous episode of the binding of Isaac: first the promise of seed seems threatened in the command to sacrifice Isaac; then the promise of the

land seems to be mocked in Abraham's need to bargain with these sharp-dealing Hittites for a mere gravesite.

CHAPTER 24

[1]And Abraham was old, advanced in years, and the
LORD had blessed Abraham in all things. [2]And
Abraham said to his servant, elder of his household,
who ruled over all things that were his, “Put your
hand, pray, under my thigh, [3]that I may make you
swear by the LORD, God of the heavens and God of
the earth, that you shall not take a wife for my son
from the daughters of the Canaanite in whose midst I
dwell. [4]But to my land and to my birthplace you shall
go, and you shall take a wife for my son, for Isaac.”
[5]And the servant said to him, “Perhaps the woman will
not want to come after me to this land. Shall I indeed
bring your son back to the land you left?” [6]And
Abraham said to him, “Watch yourself, lest you bring
my son back there. [7]The LORD God of the heavens,
Who took me from my father’s house and from the
land of my birthplace, and Who spoke to me and Who
swore to me saying, ‘To your seed will I give this land,’
He shall send His messenger before you and you shall
take a wife for my son from there. [8]And if the woman

should not want to go after you, you shall be clear of this vow of mine; only my son you must not bring back there.” [9]And the servant put his hand under Abraham’s thigh and he swore to him concerning this thing. [10]And the servant took ten camels from his master’s camels, with all the bounty of his master in his hand, and he rose and went to Aram-Naharaim, to the city of Nahor.

[11]And he made the camels kneel outside the city by the well of water at eventide, the hour when the water-drawing women come out. [12]And he said, “LORD, God of my master Abraham, pray, grant me good speed this day and do kindness with my master, Abraham. [13]Here, I am poised by the spring of water, and the daughters of the men of the town are coming out to draw water. [14]Let it be that the young woman to whom I say, ‘Pray, tip down your jug that I may drink,’ if she says, ‘Drink, and your camels, too, I shall water,’ she it is whom You have marked for Your servant, for Isaac, and by this I shall know that You have done kindness with my master.” [15]He had barely finished speaking when, look, Rebekah was coming out, who was born to Bethuel son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham’s brother, with her jug on her shoulder.

16 And the young woman was very comely to look at, a
virgin, no man had known her. And she came down to
the spring and filled her jug and came back up. 17 And
the servant ran toward her and said, “Pray, let me sip a
bit of water from your jug.” 18 And she said, “Drink,
my lord,” and she hurried and lowered her jug onto her
hand and let him drink. 19 And she let him drink his fill
and said, “For your camels, too, I shall draw water
until they drink their fill.” 20 And she hurried and
emptied her jug into the trough and she ran again to
the well to draw water and drew water for all his
camels. 21 And the man was staring at her, keeping
silent, to know whether the LORD had granted
success to his journey. 22 And it happened, when the
camels had drunk their fill, that the man took a gold
nose ring, a *beqa* in weight, and two bracelets for her
arms, ten gold shekels in weight. 23 And he said,
“Whose daughter are you? Tell me, pray. Is there
room in your father’s house for us to spend the night?”
24 And she said to him, “I am the daughter of Bethuel
the son of Milcah whom she bore to Nahor.” 25 And she
said to him, “We have abundance of bran and feed as
well and room to spend the night.” 26 And the man did
obeisance and bowed to the LORD, 27 and he said,
“Blessed be the LORD, God of my master Abraham,
Who has not left off His steadfast kindness toward my

master—me on this journey the LORD led to the house of my master's kinsmen."

28 And the young woman ran and told her mother's household about these things. 29 And Rebekah had a brother named Laban, and Laban ran out to the man by the spring. 30 And it happened, when he saw the nose ring, and the bracelets on his sister's arms, and when he heard the words of Rebekah his sister, saying, "Thus the man spoke to me," he came up to the man and, look, he was standing over the camels by the spring. 31 And he said, "Come in, blessed of the LORD, why should you stand outside, when I have readied the house and a place for the camels?" 32 And the man came into the house and unharnassed the camels; and he gave bran and feed to the camels and water to bathe his feet and the feet of the men who were with him. 33 And food was set before him. But he said, "I will not eat until I have spoken my word," 34 and he said, "Speak." And he said, "I am Abraham's servant. 35 The LORD has blessed my master abundantly, and he has grown great. He has given him sheep and cattle and silver and gold and male and female slaves and camels and donkeys. 36 And Sarah, my master's wife, bore a son to my master after she had grown old, and he has

given him all that he has. [37]And my master made me swear, saying, ‘You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanite in whose land I dwell, [38]but to my father’s house you shall go and to my clan, and you shall take a wife for my son.’ [39]And I said to my master, ‘Perhaps the woman will not come after me.’ [40]And he said to me, ‘The LORD, in whose presence I have walked, shall send His messenger with you, and he shall grant success to your journey, and you shall take a wife for my son from my clan and my father’s house. [41]Then you shall be clear of my oath; if you come to my clan and they refuse you, you shall be clear of my oath.’ [42]And today I came to the spring and I said, ‘O LORD, God of my master Abraham, if You are going to grant success to the journey on which I come, [43]here, I am poised by the spring of water, and let it be that the young woman who comes out to draw water to whom I say, ‘Let me drink a bit of water from your jug,’ [44]and she says to me, ‘Drink, and for your camels, too, I shall draw water,’ she is the wife that the LORD has marked for my master’s son.’ [45]I had barely finished speaking in my heart and, look, Rebekah was coming out, her jug on her shoulder, and she went down to the spring and drew water and I said to her, ‘Pray, let me drink.’ [46]And she hurried and tipped down the jug that she carried and said, ‘Drink, and

your camels, too, I shall water,' and the camels, too, she watered. [47]And I asked her, saying, 'Whose daughter are you?' and she said, 'The daughter of Bethuel son of Nahor whom Milcah bore him.' And I put the ring in her nose and the bracelets on her arms, [48]and I did obeisance and bowed to the LORD and blessed the LORD, God of my master Abraham Who guided me on the right way to take the daughter of my master's brother for his son. [49]And so, if you are going to act with steadfast kindness toward my master, tell me, and if not, tell me, that I may turn elsewhere." [50]And Laban [and Bethuel] answered and said, "From the LORD this thing has come; we can speak to you neither good nor evil. [51]Here is Rebekah before you. Take her and go and let her be wife to your master's son as the LORD has spoken." [52]And it happened when Abraham's servant heard their words, that he bowed to the ground to the LORD. [53]And the servant took out ornaments of silver and ornaments of gold and garments and he gave them to Rebekah and he gave presents to her brother and her mother. [54]And they ate and drank, he and the men who were with him, and they spent the night and rose in the morning, and he said, "Send me off, that I may go to my master." [55]And her brother and her mother said, "Let the young woman stay with us ten days or so, then she

may go.” [56]And he said to them, “Do not hold me back
when the LORD has granted success to my journey.
Send me off that I may go to my master.” [57]And they
said, “Let us call the young woman and ask for her
answer.” [58]And they called Rebekah and said to her,
“Will you go with this man?” And she said, “I will.”
[59]And they sent off Rebekah their sister, and her nurse,
and Abraham’s servant and his men. [60]And they
blessed Rebekah and said to her,

“Our sister, become hence myriads
teeming.
May your seed take hold of the gate
of its foes.”

[61]And Rebekah rose, with her young women, and they
mounted the camels and went after the man, and the
servant took Rebekah and went off. [62]And Isaac had
come from the approach to Beer-Lahai-Roi, as he was
dwelling in the Negeb region. [63]And Isaac went out to
stroll in the field toward evening, and he raised his eyes
and saw and, look, camels were coming. [64]And
Rebekah raised her eyes and saw Isaac, and she
alighted from the camel. [65]And she said to the servant,
“Who is that man walking through the field toward

us?" And the servant said, "He is my master," and she took her veil and covered her face. [66]And the servant recounted to Isaac all the things he had done. [67]And Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother and took Rebekah as wife. And he loved her, and Isaac was consoled after his mother's death.

CHAPTER 24 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Put your hand . . . under my thigh*. Holding the genitals, or placing a hand next to the genitals, during the act of solemn oath-taking is attested in several ancient societies (a fact already noted by Abraham ibn Ezra in the twelfth century), though here it may have the special purpose of invoking the place of procreation as the servant is to seek a bride for the only son Isaac.

4. *to my land and to my birthplace you shall go.* These words are still another echo of the first words God speaks to Abraham at the beginning of chapter 12 sending him forth from his native land.

7. Abraham's language explicitly echoes the reiterated covenantal promises he has received. Later in the story, when the servant gives the family a seemingly verbatim report of this initial dialogue with his master, he discreetly edits out this covenantal language.

10. *camels.* The camels here and elsewhere in Genesis are a problem. Archaeological and extrabiblical literary evidence indicates that camels were not adopted as beasts of burden until several centuries after the Patriarchal period, and so their introduction in the story would have to be anachronistic. What is puzzling is that the narrative reflects careful attention to other details of historical authenticity: horses, which also were domesticated centuries later, are scrupulously excluded from the Patriarchal Tales, and when

Abraham buys a gravesite, he deals in weights of silver, not in coins, as in the later Israelite period. The details of betrothal negotiation, with the brother acting as principal agent for the family, the bestowal of a dowry on the bride and bethrothal gifts on the family, are equally accurate for the middle of the second millennium B.C.E. Perhaps the camels are an inadvertent anachronism because they had become so deeply associated in the minds of later writers and audiences with desert travel. There remains a possibility that camels may have already had some restricted use in the earlier period for long desert journeys, even though they were not yet generally employed. In any case the camels here are more than a prop, for their needs and treatment are turned into a pivot of the plot.

11. *by the well of water at eventide, the hour when the water-drawing women came out.* This is the first occurrence of the betrothal type-scene. The conventionally fixed sequence of motifs of this type-scene is: travel to a foreign land, encounter there with the future bride (almost always referred to as *naʿarah,* "young woman") at a well, drawing of water, "hurrying" or "running" to bring the news of the stranger's arrival, a feast at which a betrothal agreement is concluded. As a social institution, the well was probably a plausible place to encounter nubile maidens, though the well in a foreign land also has an archetypal look, suggesting fertility and the nuptial encounter with the otherness of the female. This version is the most elaborate and leisurely of the betrothal type-scenes, rich in detail, full of stately repetition. It is also the only version in which the bridegroom himself is not present but rather a surrogate, and in which the young woman, not the man, draws the water, with the verb of hurrying that is linked with the bringing of the news amply describing her actions at the well. There is surely some intimation in all this of the subsequent course of the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah—he in most respects the most passive of all the patriarchs, she forceful and enterprising.

17. *Pray, let me sip a bit of water.* With perfect politeness, the parched desert traveler speaks as though he wanted no more than to wet his lips. In the event, prodigious quantities of water will have to be drawn.

18–19. *Drink, my lord . . . and let him drink. And she let him drink his fill*. As Meir Sternberg (1985) acutely observes, this long delay before she finally

produces the requisite offer to water the camels is a heart-stopper, enough to leave the servant in grave momentary doubt as to whether God has answered his prayer.

onto her hand. The motion, as Rashi notes, is lowering the jug from her shoulder to her hand, so that she can pour water out.

20. *and drew water for all his camels.* This is the closest anyone comes in Genesis to a feat of "Homeric" heroism (though the success of Rebekah's son Jacob in *his* betrothal scene in rolling off the huge stone from the well invites comparison). A camel after a long desert journey drinks many gallons of water, and there are ten camels here to water, so Rebekah hurrying down the steps of the well would have had to be a nonstop blur of motion in order to carry up all this water in her single jug.

22. *beqa.* The term *beqaʿ* is derived from a verb that means "to split" and so may refer to half a shekel, the standard weight, though that is not certain. Following the convention of earlier English translations, I have not used the mark for *ayin* in the text.

25. *bran.* The Hebrew *teven* appears to have two different meanings in the Bible. In the brick-making process mentioned in Exodus, and in several other occurrences, it means "straw," and this becomes its only meaning in later Hebrew. But there are several texts in which *teven* is clearly edible (Isaiah 11:7, 65:25; 1 Kings 5:8), and despite the preponderance of English versions, both Renaissance and modern, that opt for "straw" here, edible grain makes more sense.

30. *when he saw the nose ring, and the bracelets.* A brilliant moment of exposition of character. The narrator makes no comment about what kind of person Laban may be. His sharp eye on the precious gifts surely invites us to wonder about him—though for the moment, we might conclude that he simply sees here evidence that Isaac comes of good family. Hovering suspicions about Laban's rapacity will be confirmed many decades later in narrated time in the course of his slippery dealings with Jacob. In contrast to the marriage so easily arranged for Isaac, Jacob will face immense difficulties, created by Laban, in working out the terms of his betrothal.

31. *Come in, blessed of the* LORD. Laban's gesture of hospitality stands in a direct sequence with Abraham's and Lot's. The language is courtly, the hospitality "Oriental," but we are not meant to forget his just noted observation of the nose ring and bracelets.

32. *the men who were with him.* The servant would of course have had men with him and his ten camels, but in keeping with the rigorous economy of biblical narrative, these are not mentioned until now, when they become requisite participants in the hospitality scene. Before this, they are only fleetingly intimated in the "us" of verse 23.

35. The servant's speech, in keeping with the biblical technique of near verbatim repetition, echoes in detail the language first of the narrator and then of his own dialogue with Abraham at the beginning of the chapter. But as several modern commentators have noted, he makes numerous adjustments of the language he is quoting because of the practical and diplomatic requirements of addressing this particular audience. Thus, the narrator simply said that "the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things." The servant, cognizant that this is a preamble to a proposal of marriage, fleshes out that flat statement by speaking of how his master has "grown great" in sheep and cattle and other livestock, in slaves and silver and gold.

40. *The* LORD*, in whose presence I have walked.* To "walk before," or live in devoted service to, a particular deity is an idea that would have been perfectly familiar to Abraham's polytheistic kinfolk back in Mesopotamia. What the servant is careful to delete in his repetition of the dialogue with his master are all the monotheistic references to the God of heaven and earth and the covenantal promises to give the land to the seed of Abraham. Similarly excluded is Abraham's allusion to having been taken by God from his father's house and the land of his birth—a notion the family, to whom this God has not deigned to speak, might construe as downright offensive.

from my clan and my father's house. Abraham had actually said, quite simply, "from there," but at this point the servant chooses to elaborate his master's meaning in terms that emphasize to the kinfolk Abraham's admirable sense of family loyalty.

47. *And I asked her. . . . And I put the ring in her nose*. The one significant divergence in the servant's report of the encounter at the well is that he claims

to have asked Rebekah about her lineage before placing the golden ornaments on her, whereas he actually did this as soon as she had drawn water for all the camels, and only afterward did he inquire about her family. This alteration of the order of actions is again dictated by considerations of audience. The servant, having seen the stipulation of his prayer completely fulfilled by the beautiful girl at the well, is entirely certain that she is the wife God has intended for Isaac. But to the family, he does not want to seem to have done anything so presumptuous as bestowing gifts—implicitly betrothal gifts—on a young woman without first ascertaining her pedigree. This is a small but strategic indication of the precision with which social institutions and values are adumbrated in the dialogue.

49. *turn elsewhere.* The Hebrew says literally, "turn to the right or the left," a biblical idiom for seeking alternatives to the course on which one is set.

50. *and Bethuel.* The convincing conclusion of many textual critics is that the appearance of Bethuel is a later scribal or redactorial insertion. The surrounding narrative clearly suggests that Bethuel is deceased when these events occur. Otherwise, it is hard to explain why the home to which Rebekah goes running is referred to as "her mother's household." It is her brother who is the male who speaks exclusively on behalf of the family; only her mother and brother are mentioned, never her father, elsewhere in the report of the betrothal transaction, and even in this verse, "answered" is in the singular, with an odd switch to the plural occurring only for "said."

neither good nor evil. The sense of this idiom is "nothing whatsoever."

55. *ten days or so.* The time indication in the Hebrew is not entirely clear, as the phrase—literally "days or ten"—has no parallels. The present translation reflects a modern consensus, but some medieval commentators note, correctly, that "days" (precisely in this plural form) sometimes means "a year," in which case the ten would refer to ten months. The request for such an extended prenuptial period at home might be more plausible than a mere week and a half.

59. *her nurse.* As in other societies, for a young woman to retain her old wet nurse as permanent companion is a sign of social status (one recalls Shakespeare's Juliet). The nurse's name will be given when she is accorded an obituary notice in chapter 35.

60. *Our sister.* Rebekah's family sends her off to her destiny in the west with a poem that incorporates the twofold blessing of being progenitrix to a nation multifarious in number and mighty in arms. The poem itself may in fact be authentically archaic: the prosodic form is irregular—the two "lines," approximately parallel in meaning, are too long to scan conventionally and each invites division into two very short versets—and the diction is elevated and ceremonial. "Myriads teeming" is literally "thousands of myriads," and the term for enemy at the end of the poem—literally, "haters"—is one that is generally reserved for poetry, hence the faintly archaic "foes" of this translation. The virtually identical phrase in the prose blessing bestowed on Abraham in 22:17 uses the ordinary word for "enemy."

63. *to stroll.* The translation reproduces one current guess, but the verb occurs only here, and no one is sure what it really means.

and he raised his eyes and saw and, look, camels were coming. The formulaic chain, "he raised his eyes and saw," followed by the "presentative" *look* (rather like *voici* in French), occurs frequently in these stories as a means of indicating a shift from the narrator's overview to the character's visual perspective. The visual discrimination here is a nice one: in the distance, Isaac is able to make out only a line of camels approaching; then we switch to Rebekah's point of view, with presumably a few minutes of story time elapsed, and she is able to detect the figure of a man moving across the open country.

65. *covered her face.* This is an indication of social practice, not of individual psychology: unmarried women did not wear a veil, but there is evidence that it was customary to keep the bride veiled in the presence of her bridegroom until the wedding.

67. *into the tent of Sarah his mother.* The proposal of some textual critics to delete "Sarah his mother" as a scribal error should be resisted. Rebekah fills the emotional gap left by Sarah's death, as the end of the verse indicates, and with the first matriarch deceased, Rebekah also takes up the role of matriarch in the family. It is thus exactly right that Isaac should bring her into his mother's tent. Interestingly, no mention whatever is made of Abraham at the end of the story. Many have construed his charging of the servant at the beginning of the story as a deathbed action: it would not be unreasonable to

surmise that he is already deceased when the servant returns (the genealogical notation concerning Abraham in the next chapter would be out of chronological order—a kind of pluperfect that ends by placing Isaac around Beer-Lahai-Roi, where in fact we find him upon Rebekah's arrival). The conclusion of the betrothal tale in this way creates a curious symmetry between the household of the bride and the household of the groom. She, evidently, is fatherless, living in "her mother's household." It is quite likely that he, too, is fatherless; and though he was bereaved of his mother still earlier, it is to "his mother's tent" that he brings his bride.

CHAPTER 25

[1]And Abraham took another wife, and her name was
Keturah. [2]And she bore him Zimran and Jokshan and
Medan and Midian and Ishbak and Shuah. [3]And
Jokshan begot Sheba and Dedan. And the sons of
Dedan were the Ashurim and the Letushim and the
Leummim. [4]And the sons of Midian were Ephah and
Epher and Enoch and Abida and Eldaah. All these
were the sons of Keturah. [5]And Abraham gave
everything he had to Isaac. [6]And to the sons of
Abraham's concubines Abraham gave gifts while he
was still alive and sent them away from Isaac his son
eastward, to the land of the east. [7]And these are the
days of the years of the life of Abraham which he
lived: a hundred and seventy-five years. [8]And Abraham
breathed his last and died at a ripe old age, old and
sated with years, and he was gathered to his kinfolk.
[9]And Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the
Machpelah cave in the field of Ephron son of Zohar
the Hittite which faces Mamre, [10]the field that
Abraham had bought from the Hittites, there was

Abraham buried, and Sarah his wife. [11]And it
happened after Abraham's death that God blessed
Isaac his son, and Isaac settled near Beer-Lahai-Roi.

[12]And this is the lineage of Ishmael son of Abraham
whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's slavegirl, bore to
Abraham. [13]And these are the names of the sons of
Ishmael, according to their lineage: Nebaioth, the
firstborn of Ishmael, and Kedar and Adbeel and
Mibsam, [14]and Mishma and Duma and Massa, [15]Hadad
and Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedmah. [16]These are
the sons of Ishmael and these are their names in their
habitations and their encampments, twelve chieftains
according to their tribes. [17]And these are the years of
the life of Ishmael: a hundred and thirty-seven years.
And he breathed his last and died and he was gathered
to his kinfolk. [18]And they ranged from Havilah to
Shur, which faces Egypt, and till you come to Asshur.
In despite of all his kin he went down.

[19]And this is the lineage of Isaac son of Abraham.
Abraham begot Isaac. [20]And Isaac was forty years old
when he took as wife Rebekah daughter of Bethuel the
Aramean from Paddan-Aram, sister of Laban the
Aramean. [21]And Isaac pleaded with the LORD on

behalf of his wife, for she was barren, and the LORD
granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived.
22 And the children clashed together within her, and she
said, “Then why me?” and she went to inquire of the
LORD. 23 And the LORD said to her:

“Two nations—in your womb,
two peoples from your loins shall
issue.
People over people shall prevail,
the elder, the younger’s slave.”

24 And when her time was come to give birth, look,
there were twins in her womb. 25 And the first one came
out ruddy, like a hairy mantle all over, and they called
his name Esau. 26 Then his brother came out, his hand
grasping Esau’s heel, and they called his name Jacob.
And Isaac was sixty years old when they were born.

27 And the lads grew up, and Esau was a man skilled in
hunting, a man of the field, and Jacob was a simple
man, a dweller in tents. 28 And Isaac loved Esau for the
game that he brought him, but Rebekah loved Jacob.
29 And Jacob prepared a stew and Esau came from the
field, and he was famished. 30 And Esau said to Jacob,

“Let me gulp down some of this red red stuff, for I am famished.” Therefore is his name called Edom. [31]And Jacob said, “Sell now your birthright to me.” [32]And Esau said, “Look, I am at the point of death, so why do I need a birthright?” [33]And Jacob said, “Swear to me now,” and he swore to him, and he sold his birthright to Jacob. [34]Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and he drank and he rose and he went off, and Esau spurned the birthright.

CHAPTER 25 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Abraham took another wife*. The actual place of this whole genealogical notice in the chronology of Abraham’s life might be somewhere after the burial of Sarah at the end of chapter 23, or perhaps even considerably earlier. The genealogy is inserted here as a formal marker of the end of the Abraham story. Perhaps a certain tension was felt between the repeated promise that Abraham would father a vast nation and the fact that he had begotten only two sons. This tension would have been mitigated by inserting this document at the end of his story with the catalogue of his sons by Keturah. In this list, Abraham figures as the progenitor of the seminomadic peoples of the trans-Jordan region and the Arabian peninsula. The second genealogical notice (verses 12–18), that of the descendants of Ishmael, covers a related group of tribes—twelve in number, like the Israelite tribes—in the same geographical region, but also extending up to northern Mesopotamia. Thus, as Ishmael definitively leaves the scene of narration, the list provides a “documentary” confirmation of the promise that he, too, will be the father of a great nation.

6. *concubines.* The plural form may imply that Keturah's status, like Hagar's, was that of a concubine.

8. *sated with years.* The Masoretic Text has only "sated," but the Syriac, Samaritan, and Septuagint versions as well as some manuscripts read "sated with years," which the context clearly requires.

16. *habitations.* The Hebrew term in urban architectural contexts means "court," but the older meaning is "dwelling place," or perhaps something like "unfortified village." The cognate in the Ugaritic texts means "house."

18. *And they ranged.* The verb *shakhan* suggests an activity less fixed than "to settle" or "to dwell," and this translation follows the lead of E. A. Speiser in using a verb that implies nomadism.

In despite of all his kin he went down. The translation reproduces the enigmatic character of the whole clause in the Hebrew. "In despite of all his kin" repeats exactly the words of Ishmael's blessing in 16:12, and so the ambiguous "he" here may also be Ishmael, who is mentioned in the previous verse. But some construe the initial preposition of the clause as "alongside" or "in the face of." The verb is equally opaque: its most common meaning is "to fall"; some have imagined it has a military meaning here ("to attack" or "to raid"); others have construed it as a reference to the "falling" of the inheritance.

19. *this is the lineage of Isaac.* Modern translations that render "lineage" (or, "begettings") as "story" are misconceived. The formula is pointedly used to suggest a false symmetry with "this is the lineage of Ishmael." In this case, the natural chain of procreation is interrupted, and can proceed only through divine intervention, as was true for Abraham.

21–23. In this second instance of the annunciation type-scene, the husband intercedes on behalf of the wife, and the annunciation to the future mother—here given the form of an oracle—is uniquely displaced from the period of barrenness to late pregnancy. The crucial point in this story of the birth of twins is not the fact of birth itself but the future fate of struggle between the siblings, which is the burden of the oracular poem.

22. *Then why me?* Rebekah's cry of perplexity and anguish over this difficult pregnancy is terse to the point of being elliptical. Her words might even be construed as a broken-off sentence: Then why am I . . . ?

23. *the elder, the younger's slave.* Richard Elliott Friedman has made the interesting suggestion that the Hebrew oracle here has the ambiguity of its Delphic counterpart: the Hebrew syntax leaves unclear which noun is subject and which is object—"the elder shall serve the younger," or, "the elder, the younger shall serve."

25. *ruddy, like a hairy mantle . . . Esau*. There is an odd displacement of etymology in the naming sentence, perhaps because the writer was not sure what "Esau" actually meant. "Ruddy," *ʾadom,* refers to another name for Esau, Edom (as in verse 30), and the "hairy" component of the mantle simile, *seʿar,* refers to Edom's territory, Seir.

26. *they called his name Jacob.* The Masoretic Text has a singular verb, but some manuscript versions have the plural, as when the same phrase is used for Esau. In this instance, the etymology is transparent: *Yaʿaqob,* "Jacob," and *ʿaqeb,* "heel." The grabbing of the heel by the younger twin becomes a kind of emblem of their future relationship, and the birth, like the oracle, again invokes the struggle against primogeniture. The original meaning of the name Jacob was probably something like "God protects" or "God follows after."

And Isaac was sixty years old. With the most deft economy of delayed exposition, the narrator reveals that Rebekah had been childless for twenty years—an extraordinarily long period for a woman to suffer what in the ancient setting was an acutely painful predicament.

27. *a simple man.* The Hebrew adjective *tam* suggests integrity or even innocence. In biblical idiom, the heart can be crooked (*ʿaqob,* the same root as Jacob's name—cf. Jeremiah 17:9), and the idiomatic antonym is pureness or innocence—*tom*—"of heart" (as in Genesis 20:5). There may well be a complicating irony in the use of this epithet for Jacob, since his behavior is very far from simple or innocent in the scene that is about to unfold.

28. *for the game that he brought him.* The Hebrew says literally, "for the game in his mouth." It is unclear whether the idiom suggests Esau as a kind of lion bringing home game in its mouth or rather bringing game to put in his

father's mouth. The almost grotesque concreteness of the idiom may be associated with the absurdity of the material reason for Isaac's paternal favoritism. Pointedly, no reason is assigned for Rebekah's love of Jacob in the next clause.

29. *And Jacob prepared a stew.* Oraḥ Ḥaim, an eighteenth-century Hebrew commentary, brilliantly suggests that Jacob, seeing that Esau had won their father's heart with food, tries to compete by preparing his own (hearty vegetarian) culinary offering.

30. *Let me gulp down some of this red red stuff.* Although the Hebrew of the dialogues in the Bible reflects the same level of normative literary language as the surrounding narration, here the writer comes close to assigning substandard Hebrew to the rude Esau. The famished brother cannot even come up with the ordinary Hebrew word for "stew" (*nazid*) and instead points to the bubbling pot impatiently as (literally) "this red red." The verb he uses for "gulping down" occurs nowhere else in the Bible, but in rabbinic Hebrew it is reserved for the feeding of animals. This may be evidence for Abba ben David's contention that rabbinic Hebrew developed from a biblical vernacular that was excluded from literary usage: in this instance, the writer would have exceptionally allowed himself to introduce the vernacular term for animal feeding in order to suggest Esau's coarsely appetitive character. And even if one allows for semantic evolution of this particular verb over the millennium between the first articulation of our text and the Mishnah, it is safe to assume it was always a cruder term for eating than the standard biblical one.

Edom. The pun, which forever associates crude impatient appetite with Israel's perennial enemy, is on *ʾadom-ʾadom,* "this red red stuff."

31. *Sell now your birthright to me.* Each of Jacob's words, in striking contrast to Esau's impetuous speech, is carefully weighed and positioned, with "me" held back until the end of the sentence. If Esau seems too much a creature of the imperious body to deserve the birthright, the dialogue suggests at the same time that Jacob is a man of legalistic calculation. Perhaps this is a quality needed to get and hold onto the birthright, but it hardly makes Jacob sympathetic, and moral ambiguities will pursue him in the story.

32. *so why do I need.* The words he uses, *lamah zeh li,* are strongly reminiscent of the words his mother used when she was troubled by the

churning in her womb, *lamah zehʾanokhi*.

34. *and he ate and he drank and he rose and he went off.* This rapid-fire chain of verbs nicely expresses the precipitous manner in which Esau gulps down his food and, as the verse concludes, casts away his birthright.

CHAPTER 26

[1]And there was a famine in the land besides the former famine that was in the days of Abraham, and Isaac went to Abimelech king of the Philistines in Gerar. [2]And the LORD appeared unto him and said, “Do not go down to Egypt. Stay in the land that I shall say to you. [3]Sojourn in this land so that I may be with you and bless you, for to you and your seed I will give all these lands and I will fulfill the oath that I swore to Abraham your father, [4]and I will multiply your seed like the stars in the heavens and I will give to your seed all these lands, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed through your seed [5]because Abraham has listened to my voice and has kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My teachings.”

[6]And Isaac dwelled in Gerar. [7]And the men of the place asked of his wife and he said, “She is my sister,” fearing to say, “My wife”—“lest the men of the place kill me over Rebekah, for she is comely to look at.”

[8]And it happened, as his time there drew on, that
Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out the
window and saw—and there was Isaac playing with
Rebekah his wife. [9]And Abimelech summoned Isaac
and he said, “Why, look, she is your wife, and how
could you say, ‘She is my sister’?” And Isaac said to
him, “For I thought, lest I die over her.” [10]And
Abimelech said, “What is this you have done to us?
One of the people might well have lain with your wife
and you would have brought guilt upon us.” [11]And
Abimelech commanded all the people saying,
“Whosoever touches this man or his wife is doomed to
die.” [12]And Isaac sowed in that land and he reaped that
year a hundredfold, and the LORD blessed him. [13]And
the man became ever greater until he was very great.
[14]And he had possessions of flocks and of herds and
many slaves, and the Philistines envied him. [15]And all
the wells that his father’s servants had dug in the days
of Abraham his father, the Philistines blocked up,
filling them with earth. [16]And Abimelech said to Isaac,
“Go away from us, for you have grown far too
powerful for us.” [17]And Isaac went off from there and
encamped in the Wadi of Gerar, and he dwelled there.
[18]And Isaac dug anew the wells of water that had been
dug in the days of Abraham his father, which the
Philistines had blocked up after Abraham’s death, and

he gave them names, like the names his father had called them. [19]And Isaac's servants dug in the wadi and they found there a well of fresh water. [20]And the shepherds of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's shepherds, saying, "The water is ours." And he called the name of the well Esek, for they had contended with him. [21]And they dug another well and they quarreled over it, too, and he called its name Sitnah. [22]And he pulled up stakes from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it, and he called its name Rehoboth, and he said, "For now the LORD has given us space that we may be fruitful in the land."

[23]And he went up from there to Beersheba. [24]And the LORD appeared unto him on that night and said, "I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you, and I will bless you and I will multiply your seed for the sake of Abraham My servant." [25]And he built an altar there and he invoked the name of the LORD, and he pitched his tent there, and Isaac's servants began digging a well there. [26]And Abimelech came to him from Gerar, with Ahuzzath his councillor and Phicol captain of his troops. [27]And Isaac said to them, "Why have you come to me when you have been hostile toward me and have sent me away from you?"

[28]And they said, “We have clearly seen that the LORD
is with you, and we thought—Let there be an oath
between our two sides, between you and us, and let us
seal a pact with you, [29]that you will do no harm to us,
just as we have not touched you, and just as we have
done toward you only good, sending you away in
peace. Be you hence blessed of the LORD!” [30]And he
made them a feast and they ate and drank. [31]And they
rose early in the morning and swore to each other, and
Isaac sent them away, and they went from him in
peace. [32]And it happened on that day that Isaac’s
servants came and told him of the well they had dug
and they said to him, “We have found water.” [33]And he
called it Shibah, therefore the name of the town is
Beersheba to this day.

[34]And Esau was forty years old and he took as wife
Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite and Basemath
the daughter of Elon the Hittite. [35]And they were a
provocation to Isaac and to Rebekah.

CHAPTER 26 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

This chapter is the only one in which Isaac figures as an active protagonist. Before, he was a bound victim; after, he will be seen as a bamboozled blind old man. His only other initiated act is his brief moment as intercessor on behalf of his wife in 25:21. Textual critics disagree about whether this chapter is a "mosaic" of Isaac traditions or an integral literary unit, and about whether it is early or late. What is clear is that the architectonics of the larger story require a buffer of material on Isaac between Jacob's purchase of the birthright and his stealing of the blessing—a buffer that focuses attention on Isaac's right to the land and on his success in flourishing in the land. All of the actions reported here, however, merely delineate him as a typological heir to Abraham. Like Abraham he goes through the sister-wife experience, is vouchsafed a covenantal promise by God, prospers in flock and field, and is involved in a quarrel over wells. He remains the pale and schematic patriarch among the three forefathers, preceded by the exemplary founder, followed by the vivid struggler.

1. *besides the former famine.* The writer (some would say, the editor) signals at the outset that this story comes after, and explicitly reenacts, what happened before to Abraham.

king of the Philistines. In this version, the anachronistic identification of Gerar as a Philistine city, not strictly intrinsic to the Abimelech story in chapter 20, is insisted on. There is no obvious literary purpose for this difference; one suspects it simply reflects the historical context in which this version was formulated, in which the western Negeb would have been naturally thought of as Philistine country.

2. *Do not go down to Egypt.* That is, emulate the pattern of Abraham's second sister-wife episode, not the first. Following a coastal route, Isaac could well have used Gerar as a way station to Egypt, and Abraham's pact with Abimelech (chapter 21) would have provided some assurance that the Gerarites would grant him safe transit.

4. *all these lands.* "lands" occurs in the plural in this version of the promise because Isaac is in the land of the Philistines.

7. *the men of the place.* The sexual threat against the matriarch is displaced in this final version from the monarch to the local male populace. The likely reference of "one of the people" in verse 10 is what it seems to say, any male

Gerarite, despite an exegetical tradition (influenced by the earlier Abimelech story) that construes it as an epithet for the king.

she is comely to look at. Isaac's interior monologue uses the identical epithet invoked by the narrator in introducing Rebekah in chapter 24.

8. *as his time there drew on.* Rashi, with his characteristic acuteness of response to nuances of phrasing, construes this as a suggestion that Isaac became complacent with the passage of time ("From now on I don't have to worry since they haven't raped her so far") and so allowed himself to be publicly demonstrative with Rebekah.

looked out the window. This is the most naturalistic of the three versions of the story. The matriarch's marital status is conveyed not by divine plagues, nor by a dream-vision from God, but by ocular evidence.

playing. The meaning of the verb here is clearly sexual, implying either fondling or actual sexual "play." It immediately follows the name "Isaac," in which the same verbal root is transparently inscribed. Thus Isaac-the-laugher's birth is preceded by the incredulous laughter of each of his parents; Sarah laughs after his birth; Ishmael laughs-mocks at the child Isaac; and now Isaac laughs-plays with the wife he loves. Perhaps there is some suggestion that the generally passive Isaac is a man of strong physical appetites: he loves Esau because of his own fondness for venison; here he rather recklessly disports himself in public with the woman he has proclaimed to be his sister.

10. *One of the people might well have lain with your wife.* Though Abimelech's words approximately mirror those of the indignant king in chapter 20, this version is pointedly devised to put the woman first announced as Isaac's beautiful, strictly virgin bride in less danger than Sarah was in chapters 12 and 20: Rebekah is never taken into the harem; it is merely a supposition that one of the local men might seize her for sexual exploitation.

12. *And Isaac sowed.* In keeping with the emphasis of this version on human action, the bounty that comes to the patriarch after the deflection of the sexual danger to his wife is not a gift from the monarch but the fruit of his own industry as agriculturalist and pastoralist. There is a continuity between his sojourning in the western Negeb near Gerar and his movement somewhat to the east, to Beersheba, where his father had long encamped. All this

creates a direct connection between the sister-wife episode and the theme of Isaac inheriting and growing prosperous in the land.

14. *and the Philistines envied him.* The jealousy over Isaac's spectacular prosperity and the contention over precious water resources that follows lay the ground for the story of the two brothers struggling over the blessing of land and inheritance in the next episode. Isaac's being "sent away" by the Philistines adumbrates Jacob's banishment to the east after having procured the blessing by stealth.

17. *wadi.* The Arabic term, current in modern English and Hebrew usage, designates, as does the biblical *naḥal,* a dry riverbed that would be filled with water only during the flash floods of the rainy season. But the floor of a wadi might conceal, as here, an underground source of water.

20. *Esek.* Roughly, "contention," as in the verb that follows in the etiological explanation of the name.

21. *Sitnah.* The transparent meaning is "accusation" or "hostility," though the sentence lacks an etiological clause.

22. *another well.* The struggle over wells, which replays an episode in the Abraham stories but is given more elaborate emphasis, works nicely as part of the preparation for the next round of the Jacob–Esau conflict: a water source is not easily divisible; the spiteful act of the Philistines in blocking up the wells expresses a feeling that if we can't have the water, nobody should; at the end, Isaac's workers discover a new, undisputed well and call it Rehoboth, which means "open spaces." We are being prepared for the story in which only one of the two brothers can get the real blessing, in which there will be bitter jealousy and resentment; and which in the long run will end with room enough for the two brothers to live peaceably in the same land.

27. *sent me away from you.* It is a mistake to render the verb, as several modern translations do, as "drive away." The verb Isaac chooses is a neutral one, even though the context of the sentence strongly indicates hostile intention. Abimelech in his response (verse 29) uses exactly the same word, adding the qualifier "in peace" in order to put a different face on the action: this was no banishment, we sent you off as a reasonable act of goodwill. The

narrator then uses the same verb and qualifier—which might conceivably be a formula for parting after the completion of a treaty—in verse 31, "and Isaac sent them away, and they went from him in peace." (Compare David and Abner in 2 Samuel 3.)

33. *Shibah.* Though the word in this form means "seven," the etymology of the name intimated by the narrative context obviously relates it to *shevuʿah,* "oath," whereas the earlier story about Beersheba (chapter 21) appears to link the name with both "seven" and "oath."

34. *And Esau . . . took as wife*. This brief notice about Esau's exogamous unions obviously is distinct from the preceding stories about Isaac. It is probably placed here to remind us of his unworthiness to be the true heir (thus forming a kind of envelope structure with the spurning of the birthright in the last verse of chapter 25), and in this way serves to offer some sort of justification in advance for Jacob's stealing the blessing in the next episode. It also lays the ground for the end of the next episode in which Rebekah will invoke the need for Jacob to find a wife from his own kin as an excuse for his hasty departure for Mesopotamia.

35. *provocation.* Some commentators construe the first component of the compound noun *morat-ruaḥ* as a derivative of the root *m-r-r,* "bitter"—hence the term "bitterness" favored by many translations. But the morphology of the word points to a more likely derivation from *m-r-h,* "to rebel" or "to defy," and thus an equivalent such as "provocation" is more precise.

CHAPTER 27

[1]And it happened when Isaac was old, that his eyes
grew too bleary to see, and he called to Esau his elder
son and said to him, “My son!” and he said, “Here I
am.” [2]And he said, “Look, I have grown old; I know
not how soon I shall die. [3]So now, take up, pray, your
gear, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field,
and hunt me some game, [4]and make me a dish of the
kind that I love and bring it to me that I may eat, so
that I may solemnly bless you before I die.” [5]And
Rebekah was listening as Isaac spoke to Esau his son,
and Esau went off to the field to hunt game to bring.

[6]And Rebekah said to Jacob her son, “Look, I have
heard your father speaking to Esau your brother,
saying, [7]‘Bring me some game and make me a dish that
I may eat, and I shall bless you in the LORD’s
presence before I die.’ [8]So now, my son, listen to my
voice, to what I command you. [9]Go, pray, to the flock,
and fetch me from there two choice kids that I may

make them into a dish for your father of the kind he
loves. [10]And you shall bring it to your father and he
shall eat, so that he may bless you before he dies."
[11]And Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, "Look, Esau
my brother is a hairy man and I am a smooth-skinned
man. [12]What if my father feels me and I seem a cheat
to him and bring on myself a curse and not a
blessing?" [13]And his mother said, "Upon me your
curse, my son. Just listen to my voice and go, fetch
them for me." [14]And he went and he fetched and he
brought to his mother, and his mother made a dish of
the kind his father loved. [15]And Rebekah took the
garments of Esau her elder son, the finery that was
with her in the house, and put them on Jacob her
younger son, [16]and the skins of the kids she put on his
hands and on the smooth part of his neck. [17]And she
placed the dish, and the bread she had made, in the
hand of Jacob her son. [18]And he came to his father and
said, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am. Who are you,
my son?" [19]And Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau
your firstborn. I have done as you have spoken to me.
Rise, pray, sit up, and eat of my game so that you may
solemnly bless me." [20]And Isaac said to his son, "How
is it you found it this soon, my son?" And he said,
"Because the LORD your God gave me good luck."
[21]And Isaac said to Jacob, "Come close, pray, that I

may feel you, my son, whether you are my son Esau or
not.” [22]And Jacob came close to Isaac his father and he
felt him and he said, “The voice is the voice of Jacob
and the hands are Esau’s hands.” [23]But he did not
recognize him for his hands were, like Esau’s hands,
hairy, and he blessed him. [24]And he said, “Are you my
son Esau?” And he said, “I am.” [25]And he said, “Serve
me, that I may eat of the game of my son, so that I
may solemnly bless you.” And he served him and he
ate, and he brought him wine and he drank. [26]And
Isaac his father said to him, “Come close, pray, and
kiss me, my son.” [27]And he came close and kissed
him, and he smelled his garments and he blessed him
and he said, “See, the smell of my son is like the smell
of the field that the LORD has blessed.

[28]May God grant you
from the dew of the heavens and
the fat of the earth,
and abundance of grain and
drink.
[29]May peoples serve you,
and nations bow before you.
Be overlord to your brothers,

may your mother's sons bow
before you.
Those who curse you be cursed,
and those who bless you, blessed."

30 And it happened as soon as Isaac finished blessing
Jacob, and Jacob barely had left the presence of Isaac
his father, that Esau his brother came back from the
hunt. 31 And he, too, made a dish and brought it to his
father and he said to his father, "Let my father rise and
eat of the game of his son so that you may solemnly
bless me." 32 And his father Isaac said, "Who are you?"
And he said, "I am your son, your firstborn, Esau."
33 And Isaac was seized with a very great trembling and
he said, "Who is it, then, who caught game and
brought it to me and I ate everything before you came
and blessed him? Now blessed he stays." 34 When Esau
heard his father's words, he cried out with a great and
very bitter outcry and he said to his father, "Bless me,
too, Father!" 35 And he said, "Your brother has come in
deceit and has taken your blessing." 36 And he said,

"Was his name called Jacob
that he should trip me now twice
by the heels?

My birthright he took,
and look, now, he's taken my
blessing."

And he said, "Have you not kept back a blessing for me?"

[37]And Isaac answered and said to Esau, "Look, I made him overlord to you, and all his brothers I gave him as slaves, and with grain and wine I endowed him. For you, then, what can I do, my son?" [38]And Esau said to his father, "Do you have but one blessing, my father? Bless me, too, Father." And Esau raised his voice and he wept. [39]And Isaac his father answered and said to him,

"Look, from the fat of the earth be
your dwelling
and from the dew of the heavens
above.
[40]By your sword shall you live
and your brother shall you serve.
And when you rebel
you shall break off his yoke from
your neck."

41 And Esau seethed with resentment against Jacob over
the blessing his father had blessed him, and Esau said
in his heart, “As soon as the time for mourning my
father comes round, I will kill Jacob my brother.”
42 And Rebekah was told the words of Esau her elder
son, and she sent and summoned Jacob her younger
son and said to him, “Look, Esau your brother is
consoling himself with the idea he will kill you. 43 So
now, my son, listen to my voice, and rise, flee to my
brother Laban in Haran, 44 and you may stay with him a
while until your brother’s wrath subsides, 45 until your
brother’s rage against you subsides and he forgets what
you did to him, and I shall send and fetch you from
there. Why should I be bereft of you both on one
day?” 46 And Rebekah said to Isaac, “I loathe my life
because of the Hittite women! If Jacob takes a wife
from Hittite women like these, from the native girls,
what good to me is life?”

CHAPTER 27 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *his eyes grew too bleary to see*. Isaac, the man of taste (25:28) and of touch (26:8), is deprived of sight in his infirm old age. In the central episode of this story, he will rely in sequence on taste, touch, and smell, ignoring the evidence of sound, to identify his supposed firstborn.

4. *I may solemnly bless you.* The Hebrew says literally, "my life-breath [*nafshi*] may bless you." *Nafshi* here is an intensive synonym for "I," and hence something like "solemnly bless" or "absolutely bless" is suggested.

5. *And Rebekah was listening as Isaac spoke to Esau.* According to the convention of biblical narrative, there can be only two interlocutors in a dialogue (as in Aeschylean tragedy), though one of them may be a collective presence—e.g., a person addressing a crowd and receiving its collective response. Within the limits of this convention, the writer has woven an artful chain. The story, preponderantly in dialogue, is made up of seven interlocking scenes: Isaac–Esau, Rebekah–Jacob, Jacob–Isaac, Isaac–Esau, Rebekah–Jacob, Rebekah–Isaac, Isaac–Jacob. (The last of these occupies the first four verses of chapter 28). The first two pairs set out the father and his favorite son, then the mother and her favorite son, in opposing tracks. Husband and wife are kept apart until the penultimate scene; there is no dialogue at all between the two brothers—sundered by the formal mechanics of the narrative—or between Rebekah and Esau. Although one must always guard against the excesses of numerological exegesis, it is surely not accidental that there are just seven scenes, and that the key word "blessing" (*berakhah*) is repeated seven times.

to bring. The Septuagint reads instead "for his father," which is phonetically akin to the word in the Masoretic Text (either variant is a single word in the Hebrew). The Septuagint reading has a slight advantage of syntactic completeness, but subsequent exchanges in the story insist repeatedly on the verb "to bring" as an essential element in the paternal instructions.

7. *and I shall bless you in the LORD's presence.* Rebekah substitutes this for "that I may solemnly bless you" in the actual speech on which she eavesdropped, thus heightening the sense of the sacred and irrevocable character of the blessing she wants Jacob to steal.

8. *So now.* There is a pointed verbal symmetry in Rebekah's use of the same introductory term, *we'atah,* that Isaac used to preface his instructions to Esau.

9. *two choice kids.* Kids will again be an instrument of deception, turned on Jacob, when his sons bring him Joseph's tunic soaked in kids' blood. And in the immediately following episode (Genesis chapter 38), Judah, the engineer

of the deception, will promise to send kids as payment to the woman he imagines is a roadside whore, and who is actually his daughter-in-law Tamar, using deception to obtain what is rightfully hers.

11. *Look, Esau my brother is a hairy man.* It is surely noteworthy that Jacob expresses no compunction, only fear of getting caught.

15–16. *the garments of Esau . . . the skins of the kids*. Both elements point forward to the use of a garment to deceive first Jacob, then Judah, with the tunic soaked in kids' blood combining the garment motif and the kid motif.

18. *Who are you, my son?* The inclination of several modern translations to sort out the logic of these words by rendering them as "Which of my sons are you?" can only be deplored. Isaac's stark question, as Tyndale and the King James Version rightly sensed, touches the exposed nerve of identity and moral fitness that gives this ambiguous tale its profundity.

19. *I am Esau your firstborn.* He reserves the crucial term "firstborn" for the end of his brief response. As Nahum Sarna notes, the narrator carefully avoids identifying Esau as firstborn, using instead "elder son." The loaded term is introduced by Jacob to cinch his false claim, and it will again be used by Esau (verse 32) when he returns from the hunt.

Rise, pray, sit up. It is only now that we learn the full extent of Isaac's infirmity: he is not only blind but also bedridden.

23. *he did not recognize him.* This crucial verb of recognition will return to haunt Jacob when he is deceived by his sons and then will play through the story of Judah and Tamar and of Joseph and his brothers.

24. *Are you my son Esau?* Doubt still lingers in Isaac's mind because of the voice he hears, and so he is driven to ask this question again. His doubt may seem assuaged when he asks his son to kiss him just before the blessing, but that, as Gerhard von Rad observes, is evidently one last effort to test the son's identity, through the sense of smell. The extent of Rebekah's cunning is thus fully revealed: one might have wondered why Jacob needed his brother's garments to appear before a father incapable of seeing them—now we realize she has anticipated the possibility that Isaac would try to smell Jacob: it is Esau's smell that he detects in Esau's clothing.

30. *as soon as Isaac finished.* This entire sentence makes us aware of the breakneck speed at which events are unfolding. Rebekah and Jacob have managed to carry out her scheme just in the nick of time, and the physical "bind" between this scene and the preceding one is deliberately exposed, just as the bind between the first and second scene was highlighted by Rebekah's presence as eavesdropper.

31. *Let my father rise and eat of the game of his son . . . bless me*. Jacob's more nervous and urgent words for his father to arise from his bed were cast in the imperative (with the particle of entreaty, *na᾽,* "pray"). Esau, confident that he has brought the requisites for the ritual of blessing, addresses his father more ceremonially, beginning with the deferential third person. (The movement from third person to second person at the end of the sentence is perfectly idiomatic in biblical Hebrew when addressing a figure of authority.)

32. *Who are you?* This is the very question Isaac put to Jacob, but, significantly, "my son" is deleted: Isaac is unwilling to imagine that a second "Esau" stands before him, and so at first he questions the interlocutor as though he were a stranger.

I am your son, your firstborn, Esau. The small but crucial divergences from Jacob's response (verse 18) could scarcely be more eloquent. Esau begins by identifying himself as Isaac's son—the very term his father had omitted from his question, and which Jacob did not need to invoke because it was part of the question. Then he announces himself as firstborn—a condition to which he has in fact sold off the legal rights—and, finally, he pronounces his own name. Jacob, on his part, first got out the lie, "Esau," and then declared himself "firstborn."

33. *Who is it, then, who caught game.* As a final move in the game of false and mistaken identities, Isaac pretends not to know who it is that has deceived him, finding it easier to let Esau name the culprit himself. Isaac must of course realize at once who it is that has taken the blessing because he already had his doubts when he heard the son speaking with the voice of Jacob.

34. *he cried out . . . "Bless me, too, Father!"* Esau, whose first speech in the narrative was a half-articulate grunt of impatient hunger, had achieved a certain stylistic poise when he addressed his father after returning from the hunt, imagining he was about to receive the blessing. Now, however, faced

with irreversible defeat, his composure breaks: first he cries out (the Hebrew meaning is close to "scream" or "shout"), then he asks in the pathetic voice of a small child, "Bless me, too, Father." Esau strikes a similar note at the end of verse 36 and in verse 38.

36. *Was his name called Jacob / that he should trip me now twice by the heels?* At birth, Jacob's name, *Yaʿaqob,* was etymologized as "heel-grabber" (playing on *ʿaqeb,* "heel"). Now Esau adds another layer of etymology by making the name into a verb from *ʿaqov,* "crooked," with the obvious sense of devious or deceitful dealing.

39. *from the fat of the earth . . . from the dew of the heavens*. The notion put forth by some commentators that these words mean something quite different from what they mean in the blessing to Jacob is forced. Isaac, having recapitulated the terms of the blessing in his immediately preceding words to Esau (verse 37), now reiterates them at the beginning of his blessing to Esau: the bounty of heaven and earth, after all, can be enjoyed by more than one son, though overlordship, as he has just made clear to Esau, cannot be shared. (The reversal of order of heaven and earth is a formal variation, a kind of chiasm, and it would be imprudent to read into it any symbolic significance.)

40. *By your sword shall you live.* Yet Esau's blessing, like Ishmael's, is an ambiguous one. Deprived by paternal pronouncement of political mastery, he must make his way through violent struggle.

And when you rebel. The Hebrew verb is obscure and may reflect a defective text. The present rendering steps up the conventional proposal, "grow restive," lightly glancing in the direction of an emendation others have suggested, *timrod,* "you shall rebel," instead of *tarid* (meaning uncertain). This whole verse, however obscurely, alludes to the later political fortunes of Edom, the trans-Jordanian nation of which Esau is said to be the progenitor. One of the miracles of the story, and of the story of Joseph and his brothers that follows, is that the elements that adumbrate future political configurations in no way diminish the complexity of these figures as individual characters. To the extent that there is a kind of political allegory in all these tales, it remains a secondary feature, however important it might have been for audiences in the First Commonwealth period.

42. *And Rebekah was told the words of Esau.* This is a shrewd ploy of oblique characterization of Esau. He had "spoken" these words only to himself, in what is presented as interior monologue. But one must infer that Esau was unable to restrain himself and keep counsel with his own heart but instead blurted out his murderous intention to people in the household.

43. *So now, my son, listen to my voice.* Introducing her counsel of flight, Rebekah uses exactly the same words she spoke at the beginning of her instructions to Jacob about the stratagem of deception to get the blessing.

45. *Why should I be bereft of you both on one day?* The verb *shakhal* is used for a parent's bereavement of a child and so "you both" must refer to Jacob and Esau: although a physical struggle between the two would scarcely be a battle between equals, in her maternal fear she imagines the worst-case scenario, the twins killing each other, and in the subsequent narrative, the sedentary Jacob does demonstrate a capacity of unusual physical strength.

46. *I loathe my life because of the Hittite women.* Rebekah shows the same alacrity in this verbal manipulation that she evinced in preparing the kidskin disguise and the mock-venison dish, and, earlier, in her epic watering of the camels. Instead of simply registering that Jacob ought not to take a wife from the daughters of the Canaanite (compare 24:3 and 28:1), she brandishes a sense of utter revulsion, claiming that her life is scarcely worth living because of the native daughters-in-law Esau has inflicted on her. This tactic not only provides a persuasive pretext for Jacob's departure but also allows her—obliquely, for she does not pronounce his name—to discredit Esau.

what good to me is life? The phrase she uses, *lamah li ḥayim*, contains an echo of her question during her troubled pregnancy, *lamah zeh ʾanokhi,* "why then me?"

CHAPTER 28

[1]And Isaac summoned Jacob and blessed him and
commanded him and said to him, “You shall not take a
wife from the daughters of Canaan. [2]Rise, go to
Paddan-Aram to the house of Bethuel your mother’s
father, and take you from there a wife from the
daughters of Laban, your mother’s brother. [3]And may
El Shaddai bless you and make you fruitful and
multiply, so you become an assembly of peoples. [4]And
may He grant you the blessing of Abraham, to you and
your seed as well, that you may take hold of the land
of your sojournings, which God granted to Abraham.”
[5]And Isaac sent Jacob off and he went to Paddan-
Aram to Laban son of Bethuel the Aramean, brother
of Rebekah, mother of Jacob and Esau. [6]And Esau saw
that Isaac had blessed Jacob and had sent him off to
Paddan-Aram to take him a wife from there when he
blessed him and charged him, saying, “You shall not
take a wife from the daughters of Canaan.” [7]And
Jacob listened to his father and to his mother and he
went to Paddan-Aram. [8]And Esau saw that the

daughters of Canaan were evil in the eyes of Isaac his father. [9]And Esau went to Ishmael and he took Mahalath daughter of Ishmael son of Abraham, in addition to his wives, as a wife.

[10]And Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. [11]And he came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set, and he took one of the stones of the place and put it at his head and he lay down in that place, [12]and he dreamed, and, look, a ramp was set against the ground with its top reaching the heavens, and, look, messengers of God were going up and coming down it. [13]And, look, the LORD was poised over him and He said, “I, the LORD, am the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie, to you I will give it and to your seed. [14]And your seed shall be like the dust of the earth and you shall burst forth to the west and the east and the north and the south, and all the clans of the earth shall be blessed through you, and through your seed. [15]And, look, I am with you and I will guard you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done that which I have spoken to you.” [16]And Jacob awoke from his sleep and he said, “Indeed, the LORD is in this

place, and I did not know.” [17]And he was afraid and he said,

“How fearsome is this place!
This can be but the house of God,
and this is the gate of the
heavens.”

[18]And Jacob rose early in the morning and took the stone he had put at his head, and he set it as a pillar and poured oil over its top. [19]And he called the name of that place Bethel, though the name of the town before had been Luz. [20]And Jacob made a vow, saying, “If the LORD God be with me and guard me on this way that I am going and give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, [21]and I return safely to my father’s house, then the LORD will be my God. [22]And this stone that I set as a pillar will be a house of God, and everything that You give me I will surely tithe it to You.”

CHAPTER 28 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *and blessed him*. The Hebrew verb *berekh* also has the more everyday sense of "to greet," but it is quite unnecessary to construe it in that sense here, as some scholars have proposed. Isaac's clear intention is to give his son a parting blessing: the instructions about taking a wife from Mesopotamia intervene in the last half of this verse and in verse 2 before we reach the actual words of the blessing in verses 3 and 4, but this sort of proleptic introduction of a key verb is entirely in accordance with Hebrew literary usage.

4. *And may He grant you the blessing of Abraham, to you and your seed as well.* Documentary critics assign 27:46–28:9 to the Priestly source and argue that it contradicts the logic of the story told in chapter 27. Such readings, however, reflect an unfortunate tendency to construe any sign of tension in a narrative as an irreconcilable contradiction, and underestimate the resourcefulness of the Priestly writers in making their own version artfully answer the versions of antecedent traditions. Sending Jacob off to Paddan-Aram to find a wife and Jacob's flight from his vengeful brother are not alternate explanations for his departure: the bride search is clearly presented as an *excuse* for what is actually his flight, an excuse ably engineered by Rebekah with her melodramatic complaint (27:46). Now Isaac, whatever misgivings he may have about Jacob's act of deception, knows that his younger son has irrevocably received the blessing, and he has no choice but to reiterate it at the moment of parting. He does so at this point in the lofty language of procreation and proliferation and inheritance, harking back to the first Creation story, that is characteristic of the Priestly style, which is in a different register from the earthy and political language of the blessing articulated in the previous chapter. But far from contradicting or needlessly duplicating the earlier blessing, this scene is a pointed, low-key replay of the scene in the tent. When Isaac tells Jacob he will become an assembly of peoples and his seed will take possession of the land promised to Abraham, he is manifestly conferring on him the blessing that is the prerogative of the elder son—something he would have no warrant to do were he not simply confirming the blessing he has already been led to pronounce, through Jacob's subterfuge, upon his younger son. Esau once again fails to get things right. Overhearing Isaac's warning to Jacob about exogamous unions, he behaves as though endogamy were a sufficient condition for obtaining the blessing, and so after the fact of his two marriages with Hittite women—perhaps even

many years after the fact—he, too, takes a cousin as bride. There is no indication of his father's response to this initiative, but the marriage is an echo in action of his plaintive cry, "Do you have but one blessing, my Father? Bless me, too, Father."

11. *a certain place.* Though archaeological evidence indicates that Bethel had been a cultic site for the Canaanites centuries before the patriarchs, this pagan background, as Nahum Sarna argues, is entirely occluded: the site is no more than an anonymous "place" where Jacob decides to spend the night. Repetition of a term is usually a thematic marker in biblical narrative, and it is noteworthy that "place" (*maqom*) occurs six times in this brief story. In part, this is the tale of the transformation of an anonymous place through vision into Bethel, a "house of God."

one of the stones of the place. There is scant evidence elsewhere of a general (and uncomfortable) ancient Near Eastern practice of using stones as pillows. Rashi, followed by some modern scholars, proposes that the stone is not placed under Jacob's head but alongside it, as a kind of protective barrier. The stone by which Jacob's head rests as he dreams his vision will become the pillar, the commemorative or cultic marker (*matsevah*) at the end of the story. J. P. Fokkelman (1975) astutely notes that stones are Jacob's personal motif: from the stone at his head to the stone marker, then the stone upon the well he will roll away, and the pile of stones he will set up to mark his treaty with Laban.

12. *a ramp.* The Hebrew term occurs only here. Although its etymology is doubtful, the traditional rendering of "ladder" is unlikely. As has often been observed, the references to both "its top reaching the heavens" and "the gate of the heavens" use phrases associated with the Mesopotamian ziggurat, and so the structure envisioned is probably a vast ramp with terraced landings. There is a certain appropriateness in the Mesopotamian motif, given the destination of Jacob's journey. Jacob in general is represented as a border crosser, a man of liminal experiences: here, then in his return trip when he is confronted by Laban, and in the nocturnal encounter at the ford of the Jabbok.

13. *the* LORD *was poised over him.* The syntactic reference of "over him" is ambiguous, and the phrase could equally be construed to mean "on it" (i.e.,

on the ramp).

14. *And your seed shall be like the dust of the earth.* God in effect offers divine confirmation of Isaac's blessing (verses 3 and 4) in language that is more vivid—indeed, hyperbolic.

18. *took the stone . . . and he set it as a pillar*. Cultic pillars—Jacob ritually dedicates this one as such by pouring oil over its top—were generally several feet high. If that is the case here, it would have required, as Gerhard von Rad notes, Herculean strength to lift the stone. We are then prepared for Jacob's feat with a massive weight of stone in the next episode.

19. *though the name of the town before had been Luz.* In fact, there is no indication of any "town" in the story, although Luz-Bethel would have been familiar to Israelite audiences as a town and cultic center. Perhaps Jacob's vision is assumed to occur in the open, in the vicinity of Bethel.

20. *If the LORD God be with me.* The conditional form of the vow—if the other party does such and such, then I on my part will do such and such in return—is well attested elsewhere in the Bible and in other ancient Near Eastern texts. But its use by Jacob has a characterizing particularity. God has already promised him in the dream that He will do all these things for him. Jacob, however, remains the suspicious bargainer—a "wrestler" with words and conditions just as he is a physical wrestler, a heel-grabber. He carefully stipulated conditions of sale to the famished Esau; he was leery that he would be found out when Rebekah proposed her stratagem of deception to him; now he wants to be sure God will fulfill His side of the bargain before he commits himself to God's service; and later he will prove to be a sharp dealer in his transactions with his uncle Laban.

on this way that I am going. The "way" replicates the mission of Abraham's servant in chapter 24—to find a bride among his kinfolk in Mesopotamia. But unlike the servant, who crosses the desert in grand style with a retinue of camels and underlings, Jacob is fleeing alone on foot—in fact, it is a very dangerous journey. He will invoke an emblematic image of himself as refugee and pedestrian border crosser in his reunion with Esau years later: "For with my staff I crossed this Jordan" (32:11).

CHAPTER 29

[1]And Jacob lifted his feet and went on to the land of
the Easterners. [2]And he saw and, look, there was a well
in the field, and, look, three flocks of sheep were lying
beside it, for from that well they would water the
flocks, and the stone was big on the mouth of the well.
[3]And when all the flocks were gathered there, they
would roll the stone from the mouth of the well and
would water the sheep and put back the stone in its
place on the mouth of the well. [4]And Jacob said to
them, “My brothers, where are you from?” And they
said, “We are from Haran.” [5]And he said to them, “Do
you know Laban son of Nahor?” And they said, “We
know him.” [6]And he said to them, “Is he well?” And
they said, “He is well, and, look, Rachel his daughter is
coming with the sheep.” [7]And he said, “Look, the day
is still long. It is not time to gather in the herd. Water
the sheep and take them to graze.” [8]And they said,
“We cannot until all the flocks have gathered and the
stone is rolled from the mouth of the well and we
water the sheep.” [9]He was still speaking with them

when Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was
a shepherdess. [10]And it happened when Jacob saw
Rachel daughter of Laban his mother's brother and the
sheep of Laban his mother's brother that he stepped
forward and rolled the stone from the mouth of the
well and watered the sheep of Laban his mother's
brother. [11]And Jacob kissed Rachel and lifted his voice
and wept. [12]And Jacob told Rachel that he was her
father's kin, and that he was Rebekah's son, and she
ran and told her father. [13]And it happened, when
Laban heard the report of Jacob his sister's son, he ran
toward him and embraced him and kissed him and
brought him to his house. And he recounted to Laban
all these things. [14]And Laban said to him, "Indeed, you
are my bone and my flesh."

[15]And he stayed with him a month's time, and Laban
said to Jacob, "Because you are my kin, should you
serve me for nothing? Tell me what your wages should
be." [16]And Laban had two daughters. The name of the
elder was Leah and the name of the younger Rachel.
[17]And Leah's eyes were tender, but Rachel was comely
in features and comely to look at, [18]and Jacob loved
Rachel. And he said, "I will serve seven years for
Rachel your younger daughter." [19]And Laban said,

“Better I should give her to you than give her to
another man. Stay with me.” [20]And Jacob served seven
years for Rachel, and they seemed in his eyes but a few
days in his love for her. [21]And Jacob said to Laban,
“Give me my wife, for my time is done, and let me
come to bed with her.” [22]And Laban gathered all the
men of the place and made a feast. [23]And when
evening came, he took Leah his daughter and brought
her to Jacob, and he came to bed with her. [24]And
Laban gave Zilpah his slavegirl to Leah his daughter as
her slavegirl. [25]And when morning came, look, she was
Leah. And he said to Laban, “What is this you have
done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served you,
and why have you deceived me?” [26]And Laban said, “It
is not done thus in our place, to give the younger girl
before the firstborn. [27]Finish out the bridal week of this
one and we shall give you the other as well for the
service you render me for still another seven years.”
[28]And so Jacob did. And when he finished out the
bridal week of the one, he gave him Rachel his
daughter as wife. [29]And Laban gave to Rachel his
daughter Bilhah his slavegirl as her slavegirl. [30]And he
came to bed with Rachel, too, and, indeed, loved
Rachel more than Leah, and he served him still
another seven years. [31]And the LORD saw that Leah
was despised and He opened her womb, but Rachel

was barren. [32]And Leah conceived and bore a son and called his name Reuben, for she said, “Yes, the LORD has seen my suffering, for now my husband will love me.” [33]And she conceived again and bore a son, and she said, “Yes, the LORD has heard I was despised and He has given me this one, too,” and she called his name Simeon. [34]And she conceived again and bore a son, and she said, “This time at last my husband will join me, for I have borne him three sons.” Therefore is his name called Levi. [35]And she conceived again and bore a son, and she said, “This time I sing praise to the LORD,” therefore she called his name Judah. And she ceased bearing children.

CHAPTER 29 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *lifted his feet*. Although eyes are frequently lifted or raised in these narratives, the idiom of lifting the feet occurs only here. Rashi suggests that Jacob’s elation after the Bethel epiphany imparted a buoyancy to the movement of his feet as he began his long trek to the east. Perhaps this is a general idiom for beginning a particularly arduous journey on foot. In any case, a symmetry of phrasing is created when, at the end of the journey, having discovered Rachel, Jacob “lifted his voice and wept.”

2. *And he saw, and, look.* These sentences are an interesting interweave of Jacob’s perspective and the narrator’s. It is Jacob who sees first the well, then the flocks. It is the narrator who intervenes to explain that from this well the flocks are watered, but it is in all likelihood Jacob who sees the stone, notes

its bigness, observes how it covers the mouth of the well (the order of perception is precisely indicated by the word order). Then, in verse 3, the narrator again speaks out to explain the habitual procedures of the Haranites with the stone and the well.

7. *Look, the day is still long.* Jacob's scrupulousness about the shepherds' obligation to take full advantage of the daylight for grazing the flocks prefigures his own dedication to the shepherd's calling and his later self-justification that he has observed all his responsibilities punctiliously.

10. *he stepped forward and rolled the stone from the mouth of the well and watered the sheep.* The "Homeric" feat of strength in rolling away the huge stone single-handedly is the counterpart to his mother's feat of carrying up water for ten thirsty camels. Though Jacob is not a man of the open field, like Esau, we now see that he is formidably powerful—and so perhaps Rebekah was not unrealistic in fearing the twins would kill each other should they come to blows. The drawing of water after encountering a maiden at a well in a foreign land signals to the audience that a betrothal type-scene is unfolding. But Jacob is the antithesis of his father: instead of a surrogate, the bridegroom himself is present at the well, and it is he, not the maiden, who draws the water; in order to do so, he must contend with a stone, the motif that is his narrative signature. If, as seems entirely likely, the well in the foreign land is associated with fertility and the otherness of the female body to the bridegroom, it is especially fitting that this well should be blocked by a stone, as Rachel's womb will be "shut up" over long years of marriage.

11. *And Jacob kissed Rachel.* As Nahum Sarna notes, there is a pun between "he watered" (*wayashq*) and "he kissed" (*wayishaq*). The same pun is played on by the poet of the Song of Songs.

12. *and she ran and told.* The hurrying to bring home the news of the guest's arrival, generally with the verb *ruts* ("to run"), as here, is another conventional requirement of the betrothal type-scene.

13. *he ran toward him.* This may be standard hospitality, but Rashi, exercising his own hermeneutics of suspicion, shrewdly notes that Laban could be recalling that the last time someone came from the emigrant branch of the family in Canaan, he brought ten heavily laden camels with him. Rashi

pursues this idea by proposing that Laban's embrace was to see if Jacob had gold secreted on his person.

15. *Because you are my kin, should you serve me for nothing?* In a neat deployment of delayed revelation, a device of which the biblical writers were fond, we now learn that this "bone and flesh" of Laban's has already been put to work by his gracious host for a month's time.

17. *Leah's eyes were tender.* The precise meaning in this context of the adjective is uncertain. Generally, the word *rakh* is an antonym of "hard" and means "soft," "gentle," "tender," or in a few instances "weak." The claim that here it refers to dullness, or a lusterless quality, is pure translation by immediate context because *rakh* nowhere else has that meaning. Still, there is no way of confidently deciding whether the word indicates some sort of impairment ("weak" eyes or perhaps odd-looking eyes) or rather suggests that Leah has sweet eyes that are her one asset of appearance, in contrast to her beautiful sister.

18. *seven years for Rachel your younger daughter.* True to legalistic form, Jacob carefully stipulates the duration of the labor (in lieu of a bride-price that he does not possess), the name of the daughter, and the fact that she is the younger daughter. In the event, none of this avails.

20. *they seemed in his eyes but a few days in his love for her.* The writer's eloquent economy scarcely needs comment, but it should be observed that "a few days" (or, "a while," *yamim aḥadim*) is exactly the phrase his mother had used in advising him to go off to stay with her brother (27:44).

21. *and let me come to bed with her.* The explicitness of Jacob's statement is sufficiently abrupt to have triggered maneuvers of exegetical justification in the Midrash, but it is clearly meant to express his—understandable—sexual impatience, which is about to be given a quite unexpected outlet.

25. *why have you deceived me?* The verb Jacob uses to upbraid Laban reflects the same root as the key noun Isaac used when he said to Esau, "Your brother has come in deceit and has taken your blessing" (27:35).

26. *It is not done thus in our place, to give the younger girl before the firstborn.* Laban is an instrument of dramatic irony: his perfectly natural reference to "our place" has the effect of touching a nerve of guilty consciousness in Jacob, who in *his* place acted to put the younger before the firstborn. This effect is reinforced by Laban's referring to Leah not as the elder but as the firstborn (*bekhirah*). It has been clearly recognized since late antiquity that the whole story of the switched brides is a meting out of poetic justice to Jacob—the deceiver deceived, deprived by darkness of the sense of sight as his father is by blindness, relying, like his father, on the misleading sense of touch. The Midrash Bereishit Rabba vividly represents the correspondence between the two episodes: "And all that night he cried out to her, 'Rachel!' and she answered him. In the morning, 'and, . . . look, she was Leah.' He said to her, 'Why did you deceive me, daughter of a deceiver? Didn't I call out Rachel in the night, and you answered me!' She said: 'There is never a bad barber who doesn't have disciples. Isn't this how your father cried out Esau, and you answered him?'"

31. *Leah was despised and He opened her womb, but Rachel was barren.* The Hebrew term for "despised" (or "hated") seems to have emotional implications, as Leah's words in verse 33 suggest, but it is also a technical, legal term for the unfavored co-wife. The pairing of an unloved wife who is fertile with a barren, beloved co-wife sets the stage for a familiar variant of the annunciation type-scene (as in the story of Peninah and Hannah in 1 Samuel 1). But, as we shall see, in Rachel's case the annunciation is deflected.

32. *Reuben . . . seen my suffering*. All of the etymologies put forth for the names of the sons are ad hoc improvisations by the mother who does the naming—essentially, midrashic play on the sounds of the names. Thus "Reuben" is construed as *reʾu ben,* "see, a son," but Leah immediately converts the verb into God's seeing her suffering. The narrative definition of character and relationship continues through the naming-speeches, as, here, the emotionally neglected Leah sees a kind of vindication in having born a son and desperately imagines her husband will now finally love her.

33. *the LORD has heard . . . Simeon*. The naming plays on *shamaʿ*, "has heard," and *Shimʿon*. It is noteworthy that Jacob's first two sons are named after sight and sound, the two senses that might have detected him in his

deception of his father, were not Isaac deprived of sight and had not the evidence of touch and smell led him to disregard the evidence of sound. Leah's illusion that bearing a son would bring her Jacob's love has been painfully disabused, for here she herself proclaims that she is "despised" and that God has given her another son as compensation.

34. *my husband will join me . . . Levi*. The naming plays on *yilaveh,* "will join," and Levi. Once more, Leah voices the desperate hope that her bearing sons to Jacob will bring him to love her.

35. *Sing praise . . . Judah*. The naming plays on *'odeh,* "sing praise," and *Yehudah,* "Judah." The verb Leah invokes is one that frequently figures in thanksgiving psalms. With the birth of her fourth son, she no longer expresses hope of winning her husband's affection but instead simply gives thanks to God for granting her male offspring.

she ceased bearing children. This may be merely the consequence of natural process, though one possible reading of the mandrakes episode in the next chapter is not that the two sisters had their conjugal turns but rather that Jacob has ceased for a long period to cohabit with Leah.

CHAPTER 30

[1]And Rachel saw that she had born no children to
Jacob, and Rachel was jealous of her sister, and she
said to Jacob, “Give me sons, for if you don’t, I’m a
dead woman!” [2]And Jacob was incensed with Rachel,
and he said, “Am I instead of God, Who has denied
you fruit of the womb?” [3]And she said, “Here is my
slavegirl, Bilhah. Come to bed with her, that she may
give birth on my knees, so that I, too, shall be built up
through her.” [4]And she gave him Bilhah her slavegirl
as a wife, and Jacob came to bed with her. [5]And
Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. [6]And Rachel
said, “God granted my cause. Yes, He heard my voice
and He gave me a son.” Therefore she called his name
Dan. [7]And Bilhah, Rachel’s slavegirl, conceived again
and bore a second son to Jacob. [8]And Rachel said, “In
fearsome grapplings I have grappled with my sister
and, yes, I won out.” And she called his name
Naphtali. [9]And Leah saw that she had ceased bearing
children, and she took Zilpah, her slavegirl, and gave
her to Jacob as a wife. [10]And Zilpah, Leah’s slavegirl,

bore Jacob a son. [11]And Leah said, “Good luck has
come.” And she called his name Gad. [12]And Zilpah,
Leah’s slavegirl, bore a second son to Jacob. [13]And
Leah said, “What good fortune! For the girls have
acclaimed me fortunate.” And she called his name
Asher.

[14]And Reuben went out during the wheat harvest and
found mandrakes in the field and brought them to Leah
his mother. And Rachel said to Leah, “Give me, pray,
some of the mandrakes of your son.” [15]And she said,
“Is it not enough that you have taken my husband, and
now you would take the mandrakes of my son?” And
Rachel said, “Then let him lie with you tonight in
return for the mandrakes of your son.” [16]And Jacob
came from the field in the evening and Leah went out
to meet him and said, “With me you will come to bed,
for I have clearly hired you with the mandrakes of my
son.” And he lay with her that night. [17]And God heard
Leah and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son.
[18]And Leah said, “God has given my wages because I
gave my slavegirl to my husband,” and she called his
name Issachar. [19]And Leah conceived again and bore a
sixth son to Jacob. [20]And Leah said, “God has granted
me a goodly gift. This time my husband will exalt me,

for I have borne him six sons.” And she called his name Zebulun. [21]And afterward she bore a daughter and she called her name Dinah.

[22]And God remembered Rachel and God heard her and He opened her womb, [23]and she conceived and bore a son, and she said, “God has taken away my shame.” [24]And she called his name Joseph, which is to say, “May the LORD add me another son.”

[25]And it happened, when Rachel bore Joseph, that Jacob said to Laban, “Send me off, that I may go to my place and to my land. [26]Give me my wives and my children, for whom I have served you, that I may go, for you know the service that I have done you.” [27]And Laban said to him, “If, pray, I have found favor in your eyes, I have prospered and the LORD has blessed me because of you.” [28]And he said, “Name me your wages that I may give them.” [29]And he said to him, “You know how I have served you and how your livestock has fared with me. [30]For the little you had before my time has swollen to a multitude and the LORD has blessed you on my count. And now, when shall I, too, provide for my household?” [31]And he said, “What shall I give you?” And Jacob said, “You need give me

nothing if you will do this thing for me: Let me go back and herd your flocks and watch them. [32]I shall pass through all your flocks today to remove from them every spotted and speckled animal and every dark-colored sheep and the speckled and spotted among the goats, and that will be my wages. [33]Then my honesty will bear witness for me in the days to come when you go over my wages—whatever is not spotted and speckled among the goats and dark-colored among the sheep shall be accounted stolen by me." [34]And Laban said, "Let it be just as you say."

[35]And he removed on that day the spotted and speckled he-goats and all the brindled and speckled she-goats, every one that had white on it, and every dark-colored one among the sheep, and he gave them over to his sons. [36]And he put three days' journey between himself and Jacob while Jacob herded the remaining flocks of Laban. [37]And Jacob took himself moist rods of poplar and almond and plane-tree, and peeled white strips in them, laying bare the white on the rods. [38]And he stood the rods he had peeled in the troughs, in the water channels from which the flocks came to drink—opposite the flocks, which went into heat when they came to drink. [39]And the flocks went into heat at the

rods and the flocks bore brindled, spotted, and speckled young. [40]And the sheep Jacob kept apart: he placed them facing the spotted and all the dark-colored in Laban's flocks, and he set himself herds of his own and he did not set them with Laban's flocks. [41]And so, whenever the vigorous of the flocks went into heat, Jacob put the rods in full sight of the flocks in the troughs for them to go in heat by the rods. [42]And for the weaklings of the flocks he did not put them, and so the feeble ones went to Laban and the vigorous ones to Jacob. [43]And the man swelled up mightily and he had many flocks and female and male slaves and camels and donkeys.

CHAPTER 30 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Give me sons, for if you don't I'm a dead woman.* It is a general principle of biblical narrative that a character's first recorded speech has particular defining force as characterization. Surprisingly, although Rachel has been part of the story for nearly two decades of narrated time, this is the first piece of dialogue assigned to her. It is a sudden revelation of her simmering frustration and her impulsivity: in fact, she speaks with an impetuousness reminiscent of her brother-in-law Esau, who also announced to Jacob that he was on the point of death if Jacob did not immediately give him what he wanted.

2. *Am I instead of God.* Through Jacob's words, the writer shrewdly invokes a fateful deflection of the annunciation type-scene. According to the convention of the annunciation story, the barren wife should go to an oracle or be visited

by a divine messenger or a man of God to be told that she will give birth to a son. Rachel instead importunes her husband, who properly responds that he cannot play the role of God in the bestowal of fertility, or in the annunciation narrative. Rachel is then forced to fall back on the strategy of surrogate maternity, like Sarai with Hagar. One should note that she demands "sons," not a son. Eventually, she will have two sons, but will die in giving birth to the second one. Perhaps her rash words here, "Give me sons, for if you don't, I'm a dead woman," are meant to foreshadow her premature death.

3. *give birth on my knees.* Placing the newborn on someone's knees was a gesture of adoption.

built up through her. As with Sarai in chapter 16, the verb, *'ibaneh,* puns on *ben,* "son."

6. *God granted my cause.* The verb *dan* suggests vindication of a legal plea, and is offered as the etymology of the name Dan.

8. *grapplings.* The Hebrew *naftulim* plays on Naphtali. It is noteworthy that Rachel chooses an image of wrestling for her relationship with her sister that marks a correspondence to the relationship of Jacob, the "heel-grabber," with *his* older sibling.

11. *Good luck has come.* The translation follows a long-established practice in separating the enigmatic single word of the Masoretic Text, *bagad,* into *ba' gad*.

13. *What good fortune! For the girls have acclaimed me fortunate.* Asher's name is derived from *'osher,* "good fortune," and the entire naming is thus closely parallel to the naming of Gad. This noun *'osher* produces a common biblical verb *'isher,* the basic meaning of which is to call out to a lucky person, *'ashrei,* "happy is he" (or, here, "happy is she").

14. *mandrakes.* As in other, later cultures, these plants with tomato-shaped fruit were used for medicinal purposes and were thought to be aphrodisiac, and also to have the virtue of promoting fertility, which seems to be what Rachel has in mind. The aphrodisiac association is reinforced in the Hebrew by a similarity of sound (exploited in the Song of Songs) between *duda'im,* "mandrakes," and *dodim,* "lovemaking."

15. *Is it not enough that you have taken my husband.* The narrator has mentioned Rachel's jealousy of Leah, and Rachel has referred to "grappling" with her sister, but this is the first actual dialogue between the sisters. It vividly etches the bitterness between the two, on the part of the unloved Leah as well as of the barren Rachel. In still another correspondence with the story of Jacob and Esau, one sibling barters a privilege for a plant product, though here the one who sells off the privilege is the younger, not the elder.

16. *With me you will come to bed . . . And he lay with her that night*. In his transactions with these two imperious, embittered women, Jacob seems chiefly acquiescent, perhaps resigned. When Rachel instructs him to consort with her slavegirl, he immediately complies, as he does here when Leah tells him it is she who is to share his bed this night. In neither instance is there any report of response on his part in dialogue. The fact that Leah uses this particular idiom for sexual intercourse (literally, "to me you will come"), ordinarily used for intercourse with a woman the man has not previously enjoyed, is a strong indication that Jacob has been sexually boycotting Leah. That could be precisely what she is referring to when she says to Rachel, "You have taken my husband."

18. *God has given my wages.* In this case, as again with the birth of Joseph, there is a double pun in the naming-speech. The word for "wages" (or, "reward") is *sakhar,* which also means a fee paid for hiring something. Leah uses this same root when she tells Jacob (verse 16) that she has "clearly hired" him (*sakhor sekhartikha*). Thus Issachar's name is derived from both the circumstances of his conception and his mother's sense of receiving a reward in his birth. All this suggests that the naming etymologies may not have figured so literally in the ancient Hebrew imagination as moderns tend to imagine: the name is taken as a trigger of sound associations, releasing not absolute meaning but possible meaning, and in some instances, a cluster of complementary or even contradictory meanings.

20. *a goodly gift . . . my husband will exalt me*. The naming of Zebulun illustrates how free the phonetic associations can be in the naming-speeches. *Zebulun* and *zebed* ("gift") share only the first two consonants. The verb for "exalt" (this meaning is no more than an educated guess), *zabal,* then exhibits

a fuller phonetic correspondence to Zebulun and evidently represents an alternative etymology of the name.

This time my husband will exalt me. Having born Jacob half a dozen sons, half of the sanctified tribal grouping of twelve, Leah indulges one last time in the poignant illusion that her husband will now love her.

21. *and she called her name Dinah.* The absence of a naming etymology for Dinah is by no means an indication, as has often been claimed, that this verse derives from a different source. There is no naming-speech for Dinah because she is a daughter and will not be the eponymous founder of a tribe.

22–23. After the long years of frustrated hopes and prayers (the latter intimated by God's "hearing" Rachel), the gift of fertility is represented in a rapid-fire chain of uninterrupted verbs: remembered, heard, opened, conceived, bore.

23. *taken away my shame.* "Taken away," *ʾasaf,* is proposed as an etymology of *Yosef,* Joseph.

24. *May the LORD add me another son.* "Add," *yosef,* Rachel's second etymology, is a perfect homonym in Hebrew for Joseph (and hence the odd name used among American Puritans, Increase). Leah's double etymology for Issachar had referred in sequence to conception and birth. Rachel's double etymology refers to birth and, prospectively, to a future son. She remains true to the character of her initial speech to Jacob, where she demanded of him not a son but sons. She will be granted the second son she seeks, but at the cost of her life.

26. *for whom I have served you . . . for you know the service that I have done you*. Jacob's speech repeatedly insists on the service (*ʿavodah*) he has performed for Laban, the same word used in the agreement about the double bride-price. He has worked seven years before marrying the two sisters and, given Leah's seven childbirths with a few years' hiatus between the fourth and fifth sons, several years beyond the second seven he owed Laban as Rachel's bride-price.

27. *If, pray, I have found favor in your eyes.* This formula of deference is normally followed by a request. If the text is reliable here, Laban begins with

the deferential flourish and then, having mentioned how he has been blessed through Jacob, lets his voice trail off. A second formula for the introduction of speech ("and he said") is inserted, and only then does he proceed to his request: "Name me your wages." Could the thought of the prosperity he has enjoyed through Jacob's supervision of his flocks lead to this self-interruption, a kind of hesitation before he asks Jacob to name the separation pay that he knows he owes his nephew?

I have prospered. Everywhere else in the Bible, the verb *niḥesh* means "to divine," but that makes little sense here, and so there is plausibility in the proposal of comparative semiticists that this particular usage reflects an Akkadian cognate meaning "to prosper."

30. Once more in a bargaining situation, Jacob does not respond immediately to the request to name his wages but lays out the general justice of his material claims on Laban, something Laban himself has already conceded.

31. *You need give me nothing.* In a classic bargainer's ploy, Jacob begins by making it sound as though Laban will owe him nothing. As he goes on to name his terms, it seems as though he is asking for next to nothing: most sheep are white, not dark-colored; most goats are black, not speckled; and, Laban, by first removing all the animals with the recessive traits from the flocks, will appear to have reduced to nil Jacob's chances of acquiring any substantial number of livestock. One should note that, as in the stealing of the blessing, Jacob is embarked on a plan of deception that involves goats.

35–36. *And he removed . . . the spotted and speckled . . . And he put three days' journey between himself and Jacob*. Laban, taking Jacob at his word, seeks to eliminate any possibility of crossbreeding between the unicolored animals and the others by putting a long distance between the spotted ones and the main herds.

that had white on it. The Hebrew "white," *lavan,* is identical with the name Laban. As Nahum Sarna puts it, Jacob is beating Laban at his own game—or, with his own name-color.

38. *he stood the rods he had peeled in the troughs . . . opposite the flocks, which went into heat*. The mechanism of Jacob's ingenious scheme has long perplexed commentators. At least on the surface, it appears to involve the age-old belief that sensory impressions at the moment of conception affect

the embryo—here, the peeled rods, with their strips of white against the dark bark, would impart the trait of spots or brindle markings to the offspring conceived. (The same effect would then be achieved for the sheep by making them face the flocks of speckled goats during their own mating time.) Yehuda Feliks, an authority on biblical flora and fauna, has proposed that the peeled rods are only a dodge, a gesture to popular belief, while Jacob is actually practicing sound principles of animal breeding. Using a Mendelian table, Feliks argues that the recessive traits would have shown up in 25 percent of the animals born in the first breeding season, 12.5 percent in the second season, and 6.25 percent in the third season. Jacob is, moreover, careful to encourage the breeding only of the more vigorous animals, which, according to Feliks, would be more likely to be heterozygotes, bearing the recessive genes. It is noteworthy that Jacob makes no mention of the peeled rods when in the next chapter he tells his wives how he acquired the flocks.

CHAPTER 31

[1]And he heard the words of Laban's sons, saying, "Jacob has taken everything of our father's, and from what belonged to our father he has made all this wealth." [2]And Jacob saw Laban's face and, look, it was not disposed toward him as in time past. [3]And the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your birthplace and I will be with you."

[4]And Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah out to the field, to his flocks, [5]and he said to them, "I see your father's face, that it is not disposed toward me as in time past, but the God of my father has been with me. [6]And you know that with all my strength I have served your father. [7]But your father has tricked me and has switched my wages ten times over, yet God has not let him do me harm. [8]If thus he said, 'The spotted ones will be your wages,' all the flocks bore spotted ones. And if he said, 'The brindled ones will be your wages,' all the flocks bore brindled ones. [9]And God has

reclaimed your father's livestock and given it to me.
[10]And so, at the time when the flocks were in heat, I
raised my eyes and saw in a dream and, look, the rams
mounting the flocks were brindled, spotted, and
speckled. [11]And God's messenger said to me in the
dream, 'Jacob!' and I said, 'Here I am.' [12]And he said,
'Raise your eyes, pray, and see: all the rams mounting
the flocks are spotted, brindled, and speckled, for I
have seen all that Laban has been doing to you. [13]I am
the God who appeared to you at Bethel, where you
anointed a pillar and made me a vow. Now, rise, leave
this land, and return to the land of your birthplace.'"
[14]And Rachel and Leah answered and they said to him,
"Do we still have any share in the inheritance of our
father's house? [15]Why, we have been counted by him
as strangers, for he has sold us, and he has wholly
consumed our money. [16]For whatever wealth God has
reclaimed from our father is ours and our children's,
and so, whatever God has said to you, do." [17]And
Jacob rose and bore off his children and his wives on
the camels. [18]And he drove all his livestock and all his
substance that he had acquired, his property in
livestock that he had acquired in Paddan-Aram, to go
to Isaac his father in the land of Canaan.

[19]And Laban had gone to shear his flocks, and Rachel
stole the household gods that were her father's. [20]And
Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean, in not telling him
he was fleeing. [21]And he fled, he and all that was his,
and he rose and he crossed the Euphrates, and set his
face toward the high country of Gilead. [22]And it was
told to Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled.
[23]And he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him
a seven days' journey, and overtook him in the high
country of Gilead. [24]And God came to Laban the
Aramean in a night-dream and said to him, "Watch
yourself, lest you speak to Jacob either good or evil!"

[25]And Laban caught up with Jacob, and Jacob had
pitched his tent on the height, and Laban had pitched
with his kinsmen in the high country of Gilead. [26]And
Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done, deceiving
me, and driving my daughters like captives of the
sword? [27]Why did you flee in stealth and deceive me
and not tell me? I would have sent you off with festive
songs, with timbrel and lyre. [28]And you did not let me
kiss my sons and my daughters. O, you have played the
fool! [29]My hand has the might to do you harm, but the
god of your father said to me last night, 'Watch
yourself, lest you speak to Jacob either good or evil.'

[30]And so, you had to go because you longed so much
for your father's house, but why did you steal my
gods?" [31]And Jacob answered and said to Laban, "For I
was afraid, for I thought, you would rob me of your
daughters. [32]With whomever you find your gods, that
person shall not live. Before our kinsmen, make
recognition of what is yours with me, and take it." But
Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them. [33]And
Laban came into Jacob's tent, and into Leah's tent, and
into the tent of the two slavegirls, and he found
nothing. And he came out of Leah's tent and went into
Rachel's tent. [34]And Rachel had taken the household
gods and put them in the camel cushion and sat on
them. And Laban rummaged through the whole tent
and found nothing. [35]And she said to her father, "Let
not my lord be incensed that I am unable to rise before
you, for the way of women is upon me." And he
searched and he did not find the household gods. [36]And
Jacob was incensed and voiced his grievance to Laban,
and Jacob spoke out and said to Laban:

"What is my crime, what is my guilt,
that you should race after me?
[37]Though you rummaged through all
my things,

what have you found of all your
household things?
Set it here before my kin and yours
and they shall determine between
us two.
38 These twenty years I have been
with you,
your ewes and your she-goats did
not lose their young,
the rams of your flock I have
not eaten.
39 What was torn up by beasts I
brought not to you,
I bore the loss, from my hand you
could seek it—
what was stolen by day and
stolen by night.
40 Often—by day the parching heat
ate me up
and frost in the night,
and sleep was a stranger to my
eyes.

41 These twenty years in your household I served you,
fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for

your flocks, and you switched my wages ten times
over. [42]Were it not that the God of my father, the God
of Abraham and the Terror of Isaac, was with me, you
would have sent me off empty-handed. My suffering
and the toil of my hands God has seen, and last night
He determined in my favor." [43]And Laban answered
and said to Jacob, "The daughters are my daughters,
and the sons are my sons, and the flocks are my flocks,
and all that you see is mine. Yet for my daughters what
can I do now, or for their sons whom they bore? [44]And
so, come, let us make a pact, you and I, and let it be a
witness between you and me." [45]And Jacob took a
stone and set it up as a pillar. [46]And Jacob said to his
kinsmen, "Gather stones." And they fetched stones and
made a mound and they ate there on the mound. [47]And
Laban called it Yegar-Sahadutha but Jacob called it
Gal-Ed. [48]And Laban said, "This mound is witness
between you and me this day." Therefore its name was
called Gal-Ed, [49]and Mizpah, for he said, "May the
LORD look out between you and me when we are out
of each other's sight. [50]Should you abuse my daughters,
and should you take wives besides my daughters
though no one else is present, see, God is witness
between you and me." [51]And Laban said to Jacob,
"Look, this mound, and, look, the pillar that I cast up
between you and me, [52]witness be the mound and

witness the pillar, that I will not cross over to you past this mound and you will not cross over to me past this mound, and past this pillar, for harm. [53]May the god of Abraham and the god of Nahor"—the gods of their fathers—"judge between us." And Jacob swore by the Terror of his father Isaac. [54]And Jacob offered sacrifice on the height and called to his kinsmen to eat bread, and they ate bread and passed the night on the height.

CHAPTER 31 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the words of Laban's sons*. It is a reflection of the drastic efficiency of biblical narrative that Laban's sons, who play only a peripheral role in the story, are not introduced at all until the point where they serve the unfolding of plot and theme. They are never given names or individual characters, and the first mention of them is in the previous chapter when Laban places the segregated particolored flocks in their charge. Here they are used to dramatize in a single quick stroke the atmosphere of suspicion and jealousy in Laban's household: they make the extravagant claim that the visibly prospering Jacob "has taken everything of our father's," thus leaving them nothing. The anonymous sons would presumably be members of the pursuit party Laban forms to go after the fleeing Jacob.

2. *Jacob saw Laban's face.* The physical concreteness of the image should not be obscured, as many modern translators are wont to do, by rendering this as "manner" or "attitude." Although the Hebrew *panim* does have a variety of extended or figurative meanings, the point is that Jacob looks at his father-in-law's face and sees in it a new and disquieting expression of hostility and suspicion.

3. *and I will be with you.* God's words recall the language of the divine promise to Jacob in the dream-vision at Bethel.

4. *Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah out to the field.* Jacob proceeds in this fashion not only because he is busy tending the flocks, as he himself repeatedly reminds us in the dialogue, but also because he needs to confer with his wives in a safe location beyond earshot of Laban and his sons.

11. *God's messenger said to me in the dream.* According to the source critics, divine communication to men through dream-vision is a hallmark of the Elohist, whereas the direct narrative report of the Speckled Flock story in the previous chapter makes no mention of either a dream or divine instructions and is to be attributed to the Yahwist. Whatever the validity of such identifications, they tend to scant the narrative integrity of the completed text, the ability of the biblical Arranger—to borrow a term from the criticism of Joyce's *Ulysses*—to orchestrate his sources. Jacob wants to make it vividly clear to his wives at this tense juncture of imminent flight that God has been with him and will continue to be with him. It serves this purpose to explain his spectacular prosperity not as the consequence of his own ingenuity as animal breeder but as the revelation of an angel of God. It thus makes perfect narrative sense that he should omit all mention of the elaborate stratagem of the peeled rods in the troughs.

13. *the God who appeared to you at Bethel.* The Masoretic Text lacks "who appeared to you at" (which in the Hebrew would be just two words plus a particle), but both major Aramaic Targums, that of Onkelos and Yonatan ben Uziel, reflect this phrase, as does the Septuagint. Although the Targums are often predisposed to explanatory paraphrase, in this instance the Masoretic Hebrew sounds grammatically off, and it seems likely that they were faithfully representing a phrase that was later lost in transmission. (The Targums, which translated the Bible into the Aramaic that had become the vernacular of Palestinian Jewry, were completed in the early centuries of the Christian Era —Onkelos perhaps in the third century and Targum Yonatan at least a century later.)

14. *any share in the inheritance.* The Hebrew, literally, "share and inheritance," is a hendiadys (two words for one concept, like "part and

parcel"), with a denotative meaning as translated here and a connotation something like "any part at all."

15. *for he has sold us, and he has wholly consumed our money.* In a socially decorous marriage, a large part of the bride-price would go to the bride. Laban, who first appeared in the narrative (chapter 24) eyeing the possible profit to himself in a betrothal transaction, has evidently pocketed all of the fruits of Jacob's fourteen years of labor. His daughters thus see themselves reduced to chattel by their father, not married off but rather sold for profit, as though they were not his flesh and blood.

19. *Laban had gone to shear his flocks.* Rashi reminds us that Laban had earlier set a precedent of grazing his herds at a distance of three days' journey from Jacob's herds. In any case, other references to shearing of the flocks in the Bible indicate it was a very elaborate procedure involving large numbers of men, and accompanied by feasting, and so would have provided an excellent cover for Jacob's flight.

Rachel stole the household gods. The household gods, or *terafim* (the etymology of the term is still in doubt), are small figurines representing the deities responsible for the well-being and prosperity of the household. The often cited parallel with the Roman *penates* seems quite pertinent. There is no reason to assume that Rachel would have become a strict monotheist through her marriage, and so it is perfectly understandable that she would want to take with her in her emigration the icons of these tutelary spirits, or perhaps, symbols of possession.

20. *Jacob deceived Laban.* Rachel makes off with, or steals, the household gods; Jacob deceives—literally, "steals the heart of Laban" (the heart being the organ of attentiveness or understanding). This verb, *ganav,* which suggests appropriating someone else's property by deception or stealth, will echo through the denouement of the story. Jacob, in his response to Laban, will use a second verb, *gazal,* which suggests taking property by force, "to rob." In heading for Canaan with his wives, children, and flocks, Jacob is actually taking what is rightly his (note the emphasis of legitimate possession in verse 18), but he has good reason to fear that the grasping Laban will renege on their agreement, and so he feels compelled to flee in stealth, making off not with Laban's property but with his "heart."

Laban the Aramean. For the first time Laban is given this gentilic identification. The stage is being set for the representation of the encounter between Jacob and Laban as a negotiation between national entities.

21. *the Euphrates.* The Hebrew says "the River," a term that refers specifically to the Euphrates.

the high country of Gilead. The region in question is east of the Jordan, a little south of Lake Tiberias, and was part of Israelite territory in the First Commonwealth period. It is thus quite plausible as the setting for a border encounter between Laban the Aramean and Jacob the Hebrew.

23. *pursued him a seven days' journey.* Although it would have taken Jacob, encumbered with his flocks and family, far longer to cross this distance of nearly three hundred miles, it might have been feasible for a pursuit party traveling lightly, and so the formulaic seven days actually serves to convey the terrific speed of the chase. Jacob himself will allude to this speed when instead of the more usual verb for pursuit, he refers to Laban's "racing" after him (*dalaq,* a term that also means "to burn" and appears to derive from the rapid movement of fire).

24. *either good or evil.* As in 24:50, the idiom means "lest you speak . . . anything at all."

26. *driving my daughters.* The common translation "carrying off" fudges the brutality of Laban's language. The verb *nahag* is most often used for the driving of animals and is in fact the same term used in verse 18 to report Jacob's driving his livestock.

like captives of the sword. The daughters had spoken of their father's treating them like chattel. Laban on his part chooses a simile with ominous military implications, suggesting that Jacob has behaved like a marauding army that seizes the young women to serve as sexual and domestic slaves. It is surely not lost on Jacob that Laban is leading a group of armed men ("My hand has the might to do you harm").

27. *deceive me.* At this point, Laban drops the object "heart" from the verb "to steal" or "to make off with," and says instead "me," either because he is using the idiom elliptically, or because he wants to say more boldly to Jacob,

you have not merely deceived me ("stolen my heart") but despoiled me ("stolen me").

with festive songs, with timbrel and lyre. The extravagance of this fantastic scene conjured up by a past master of fleecing is self-evident. "Festive songs" is a hendiadys: the Hebrew is literally "with festivity and with songs."

28. *my sons.* In this case, the reference would have to be to grandsons, despite the fact that the term is bracketed with "my daughters," which would refer to Rachel and Leah.

30. *but why did you steal my gods?* Laban once more invokes the crucial verb *ganav* at the very end of his speech. Now the object is something that really has been stolen, though Jacob has no idea this is so. Laban refers to the missing figurines not as *terafim,* a term that may conceivably have a pejorative connotation, but as *ʾelohai,* "my gods," real deities.

32. *that person shall not live.* Jacob does not imagine that anyone in his household could be guilty of the theft. If he is not unwittingly condemning Rachel to death, his peremptory words at least foreshadow her premature death in childbirth.

make recognition. The thematically fraught verb *haker,* which previously figured in Jacob's deception of Isaac, will return to haunt Jacob, in precisely the imperative form in which it occurs here.

34. *put them in the camel cushion and sat on them.* The camel cushion may be a good hiding place, but Rachel's sitting on the *terafim* is also a kind of satiric glance by the monotheistic writer on the cult of figurines, as necessity compels Rachel to assume this irreverent posture toward them.

35. *for the way of women is upon me.* The impotence of the irate father vis-à-vis his biologically mature daughter is comically caught in the device she hits upon, of pleading her period, in order to stay seated on the concealed figurines. Her invention involves an ironic double take because it invokes all those years of uninterrupted menses before she was at last able to conceive and bear her only son.

36. *voiced his grievance.* The verb here (there is no object noun in the Hebrew) is cognate with *riv,* a grievance brought to a court of law. Jacob's

speech is manifestly cast as a rhetorically devised plea of defense against a false accusation. Although previous commentators have noted that his language is "elevated" (Gerhard von Rad), it has not been observed that Jacob's plea is actually formulated as poetry, following the general conventions of parallelism of biblical verse.

What is my crime, what is my guilt . . . ? These cadenced parallel questions signal the beginning of the formal plea of defense.

39. *What was torn up by beasts . . . / I bore the loss.* After stating in the previous verse that he took exemplary care of the flocks, Jacob goes on to declare that he assumed a degree of responsibility above and beyond what the law requires of a shepherd. Both biblical and other ancient Near Eastern codes indicate that a shepherd was not obliged to make good losses caused by beasts of prey and thieves, where no negligence was involved.

what was stolen by day and stolen by night. Again, the key verb *ganav* is invoked. The grammatical form of the construct state here—*genuvati*—uses an archaic suffix that is a linguistic marker of poetic diction.

40. *Often.* The Hebrew is literally "I was," but, as E. A. Speiser notes, this verb at the beginning of a clause can be used to impart an iterative sense to what follows.

sleep was a stranger to my eyes. The Hebrew says literally, "sleep wandered from my eyes." It is a general idiom for insomnia.

41. *These twenty years in your household.* When Jacob begins to work out the calculation of how many years he has served Laban in return for what, he switches from verse to prose. This enables him to repeat verbatim the words he had used in his (prose) dialogue with his wives, when he said that Laban had "switched my wages ten times over." Understandably, what he deletes from that earlier speech is the blunt accusation that Laban "tricked me."

42. *He determined in my favor.* Jacob uses the same verb of legal vindication that he invoked in his poetic self-defense—"they shall determine between us two."

43. *The daughters are my daughters.* Laban begins his response by refusing to yield an inch in point of legal prerogative. But he concedes that there is nothing he can do about his daughters and all his grandsons—on the face of

it, because of their evident attachment to Jacob, and, perhaps, because he fears to use the force he possesses against Jacob after the divine warning in the night-vision.

45. *Jacob took a stone.* Invited to make a pact, Jacob immediately resorts to the language of stones, as after the Bethel epiphany and in his first encounter with Rachel at the well. Thus, in sequence, the stones are associated with religious experience, personal experience, and now politics. Here, there is a doubling in the use of stones: a large stone as a commemorative pillar (and border marker) and a pile of smaller stones as a commemorative mound.

47. *Yegar-Sahadutha . . . Gal-Ed*. The international character of the transaction is nicely caught in Laban the Aramean's use of an Aramaic term while Jacob uses Hebrew. Both names mean "mound of witness."

49. *and Mizpah.* This is an alternate name for the height of Gilead. The meaning is "lookout point," as Laban's next words make etymologically clear.

51–52. *Look, this mound, and, look, the pillar . . . witness be the mound and witness the pillar*. The studied repetitions and rhetorical flourishes that characterize Laban's speech throughout reflect its function as a performative speech-act, stipulating the binding terms of the treaty.

I will not cross over to you . . . past this pillar. At this point, the story of bitter familial struggle is also made an etiology for political history. What Laban is designating here is clearly an international border.

53. *the gods of their fathers.* These words, with the pronoun referent "they," could not be part of Laban's dialogue and so must be a gloss, perhaps occasioned by the discomfort of a scribe or editor with the exact grammatical equation between the god of Abraham and the god of Nahor in Laban's oath.

Jacob swore by the Terror of his father Isaac. This denomination of the deity, which occurs only in this episode, is strange enough to have prompted some biblical scholars to argue, unconvincingly, that the name has nothing to do with terror or fear. What is noteworthy is that Jacob resists the universal Semitic term for God, *ʾelohim,* and the equation between the gods of Nahor and Abraham. He himself does not presume to go back as far as Abraham, but in the God of his father Isaac he senses something numinous, awesome, frightening.

54. *offered sacrifice . . . ate bread*. The treaty-vow is solemnly confirmed by a sacred meal. The term *zevaḤ* refers both to a ceremonial meal of meat and to sacrifice. In effect, the two are combined: the fat of the animal is burned as an offering, the meat is consumed by those who offer the sacrifice. As frequently elsewhere in biblical usage, “bread” is a synecdoche for the whole meal.

CHAPTER 32

[1]And Laban rose early in the morning and kissed his
sons and his daughters and blessed them, and Laban
went off and returned to his place. [2]And Jacob had
gone on his way, and messengers of God accosted
him. [3]And Jacob said when he saw them, “This is
God’s camp,” and he called the name of that place
Mahanaim. [4]And Jacob sent messengers before him to
Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the steppe of
Edom. [5]And he charged them, saying, “Thus shall you
say—‘To my lord Esau, thus says your servant Jacob:
With Laban I have sojourned and I tarried till now.
[6]And I have gotten oxen and donkeys and sheep and
male and female slaves, and I send ahead to tell my
lord, to find favor in your eyes.’” [7]And the messengers
returned to Jacob, saying, “We came to your brother,
to Esau, and he is actually coming to meet you, and
four hundred men are with him.” [8]And Jacob was
greatly afraid, and he was distressed, and he divided
the people that were with him, and the sheep and the
cattle and the camels, into two camps. [9]And he

thought, “Should Esau come to the one camp and
strike it, the remaining camp will escape.” [10]And Jacob
said: “God of my father Abraham and God of my
father Isaac! LORD who has said to me, ‘Return to
your land and your birthplace, and I will deal well with
you.’ [11]I am unworthy of all the kindness that you have
steadfastly done for your servant. For with my staff I
crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two
camps. [12]O save me from the hand of my brother, from
the hand of Esau, for I fear him, lest he come and
strike me, mother with sons. [13]And You Yourself said,
‘I will surely deal well with you and I will set your seed
like the sand of the sea multitudinous beyond all
count.’” [14]And he passed that same night there, and he
took from what he had in hand a tribute to Esau his
brother: [15]two hundred she-goats and twenty he-goats,
two hundred ewes and twenty rams; [16]thirty milch
camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls,
twenty she-asses and ten he-asses. [17]And he put them
in the hands of his servants, each herd by itself, and he
said to his servants, “Pass on before me, and put
distance between one herd and the next.” [18]And he
charged the first one, saying, “When Esau my brother
meets you and asks you, saying, ‘Whose man are you,
and where are you going, and whose are these herds
before you?,’ [19]you shall say, ‘They are your servant

Jacob's, a tribute sent to my lord Esau, and, look, he is actually behind us.'" [20]And he charged the second one as well, and also the third, indeed, all those who went after the herds, saying, "In this fashion you shall speak to Esau when you find him. And you shall say, 'Look, your servant Jacob is actually behind us.'" [21]For he thought, "Let me placate him with the tribute that goes before me, and after I shall look on his face, perhaps he will show me a kindly face." [22]And the tribute passed on before him, and he spent that night in the camp.

[23]And he rose on that night and took his two wives and his two slavegirls and his eleven boys and he crossed over the Jabbok ford. [24]And he took them and brought them across the stream, and he brought across all that he had. [25]And Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. [26]And he saw that he had not won out against him and he touched his hip socket and Jacob's hip socket was wrenched as he wrestled with him. [27]And he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." And he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." [28]And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." [29]And he said, "Not Jacob shall your name hence be said, but Israel,

for you have striven with God and men, and won out.”
30And Jacob asked and said, “Tell your name, pray.”
And he said, “Why should you ask my name?” and
there he blessed him. 31And Jacob called the name of
the place Peniel, meaning, “I have seen God face-to-
face and I came out alive.” 32And the sun rose upon
him as he passed Penuel and he was limping on his
hip. 33Therefore the children of Israel do not eat the
sinew of the thigh which is by the hip socket to this
day, for he had touched Jacob’s hip socket at the sinew
of the thigh.

CHAPTER 32 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. The verse numbering reflects the conventional division used in Hebrew Bibles. The King James Version, followed by some modern English Bibles, places the first verse here as a fifty-fifth verse in chapter 31, and then has verses 1–32 corresponding to verses 2–33 in the present version.

2. *messengers of God accosted him.* There is a marked narrative symmetry between Jacob’s departure from Canaan, when he had his dream of angels at Bethel, and his return, when again he encounters a company of angels. That symmetry will be unsettled when later in the chapter he finds himself in fateful conflict with a single divine being.

God’s camp . . . Mahanaim. The Hebrew for “camp” is *maḥaneh*. Mahanaim is the same word with a dual suffix and thus means twin camps, a signification that will be played out in a second narrative etymology when Jacob divides his family and flocks into two camps. The entire episode is notable for its dense exploitation of what Martin Buber and Franz

Rosenzweig called *Leitwortstil,* key-word style. J. P. Fokkelman (1975) has provided particularly helpful commentary on this aspect of our text. The crucial repeated terms are maḥ*aneh,* "camp," which is played against *minḥah,* "tribute"; *panim,* "face," which recurs not only as a noun but also as a component of the reiterated preposition "before," a word that can be etymologically broken down in the Hebrew as "to the face of"; and *ʿavar,* "cross over" (in one instance here, the translation, yielding to the requirements of context, renders this as "pass").

4. *Jacob sent messengers before him.* These are of course human messengers, but, in keeping with a common principle of composition in biblical narrative, the repetition of the term effects a linkage with the immediately preceding episode, in which the messengers, *malʾakhim,* are angels.

5. *Thus shall you say.* The syntactic division indicated by the cantillation markings in the Masoretic Text is: "Thus shall you say to my lord Esau." But E. A. Speiser has convincingly demonstrated that "To my lord Esau, thus says your servant Jacob," precisely follows the formula for the salutation or heading in ancient Near Eastern letters and so must be part of the text of the message.

my lord Esau . . . your servant Jacob. The narrator had referred to Esau as Jacob's "brother," as will the messengers. An elaborate irony of terms underlies the entire reunion of the twins: Jacob, destined by prenatal oracle and paternal blessing to be overlord to his brother, who is to be subject (*ʿeved*) to him, repeatedly designates himself *ʿeved* and his brother, lord (*ʾadon*). The formulas of deferential address of ancient Hebrew usage are thus made to serve a complex thematic end.

7. *he is actually coming . . . and four hundred men are with him*. There is no verbal response from Esau, who has by now established himself as a potentate in the trans-Jordanian region of Edom, but the rapid approach with four hundred men looks ominous, especially since that is a standard number for a regiment or raiding party, as several military episodes in 1 and 2 Samuel indicate.

8. *two camps.* A law of binary division runs through the whole Jacob story: twin brothers struggling over a blessing that cannot be halved, two sisters

struggling over a husband's love, flocks divided into unicolored and particolored animals, Jacob's material blessing now divided into two camps.

10. *and I will deal well with you.* The first part of the sentence is in fact a direct quotation of God's words to Jacob in 31:3 deleting "of your fathers." But for God's general reassurance, "I will be with you," Jacob, in keeping with his stance as bargainer (who at Bethel stipulated that God must provide him food and clothing) substitutes a verb that suggests material bounty.

14. *a tribute.* The Hebrew *minḥah* also means "gift" (and, in cultic contexts, "sacrifice"), but it has the technical sense of a tribute paid by a subject people to its overlord, and everything about the narrative circumstances of this "gift" indicates it is conceived as the payment of a tribute. Note, for instance, the constellation of political terms in verse 19: "They are *your servant* Jacob's, *a tribute sent to my lord* Esau."

21. *Let me placate him with the tribute that goes before me, and after I shall look on his face, perhaps he will show me a kindly face.* The Hebrew actually has "face" four times in this brief speech. "Placate" is literally "cover over his face" (presumably, angry face); and "before me" can be broken down as "to my face." To "look on his face" is a locution generally used for entering the presence of royalty; and "show me a kind face," an idiom that denotes forgiveness, is literally "lift up my face" (presumably, my "fallen" or dejected face).

23. *the Jabbok ford.* The word for "ford," *ma ʿavar,* is a noun derived from the reiterated verb *ʿavar,* "to cross over." The Jabbok is a tributary of the Jordan running from east to west. Jacob has been traveling south from the high country of Gilead, Esau is heading north from Edom to meet him.

25. *a man.* The initial identification of the anonymous adversary is from Jacob's point of view, and so all he knows of him is what he sees, that he is a "man."

wrestled with him. The image of wrestling has been implicit throughout the Jacob story: in his grabbing Esau's heel as he emerges from the womb, in his striving with Esau for birthright and blessing, in his rolling away the huge stone from the mouth of the well, and in his multiple contendings with Laban.

Now, in this culminating moment of his life story, the characterizing image of wrestling is made explicit and literal.

26. *he touched his hip socket.* The inclination of modern translations to render the verb here as "struck" is unwarranted, being influenced either by the context or by the cognate noun *nega'*, which means "plague" or "affliction." But the verb *naga'* in the *qal* conjugation always means "to touch," even "to barely touch," and only in the *pi'el* conjugation can it mean "to afflict." The adversary maims Jacob with a magic touch, or, if one prefers, by skillful pressure on a pressure point.

27. *Let me go, for dawn is breaking.* The folkloric character of this haunting episode becomes especially clear at this point. The notion of a night spirit that loses its power or is not permitted to go about in daylight is common to many folk traditions, as is the troll or guardian figure who blocks access to a ford or bridge. This temporal limitation of activity suggests that the "man" is certainly not God Himself and probably not an angel in the ordinary sense. It has led Claus Westermann to conclude that the nameless wrestler must be thought of as some sort of demon. Nahum Sarna, following the Midrash, flatly identifies the wrestler as the tutelary spirit (*sar*) of Esau. But the real point, as Jacob's adversary himself suggests when he refuses to reveal his name, is that he resists identification. Appearing to Jacob in the dark of the night, before the morning when Esau will be reconciled with Jacob, he is the embodiment of portentous antagonism in Jacob's dark night of the soul. He is obviously in some sense a doubling of Esau as adversary, but he is also a doubling of all with whom Jacob has had to contend, and he may equally well be an externalization of all that Jacob has to wrestle with within himself. A powerful physical metaphor is intimated by the story of wrestling: Jacob, whose name can be construed as "he who acts crookedly," is bent, permanently lamed, by his nameless adversary in order to be made straight before his reunion with Esau.

28. *What is your name?* Whatever the realm from which he comes, the stranger exercises no divine privilege of omniscience and must ask Jacob to tell him his name.

29. *Not Jacob . . . but Israel.* Abraham's change of name was a mere rhetorical flourish compared to this one, for of all the patriarchs Jacob is the one whose

life is entangled in moral ambiguities. Rashi beautifully catches the resonance of the name change: "It will no longer be said that the blessings came to you through deviousness [*ʿoqbah,* a word suggested by the radical of "crookedness" in the name Jacob] but instead through lordliness [*serarah,* a root that can be extracted from the name Israel] and openness." It is nevertheless noteworthy—and to my knowledge has not been noted—that the pronouncement about the new name is not completely fulfilled. Whereas Abraham is invariably called "Abraham" once the name is changed from "Abram," the narrative continues to refer to this patriarch in most instances as "Jacob." Thus, "Israel" does not really replace his name but becomes a *synonym* for it—a practice reflected in the parallelism of biblical poetry, where "Jacob" is always used in the first half of the line and "Israel," the poetic variation, in the second half.

striven with God. The Hebrew term *ʾelohim* is a high concentration point of lexical ambiguity that serves the enigmatic character of the story very well. It is *not* the term that means "divine messenger" but it can refer to divine beings, whether or not it is prefixed by "sons of" (as in Genesis 6). It can also mean simply "God," and in some contexts—could this be one?—it means "gods." In a few cases, it also designates something like "princes" or "judges," but that is precluded here by its being antithetically paired with "men." It is not clear whether the anonymous adversary is referring to himself when he says *ʾelohim* or to more-than-human agents encountered by Jacob throughout his career. In any case, he etymologizes the name *Yisraʾel,* Israel, as "he strives with God." In fact, names with the *ʾel* ending generally make God the subject, not the object, of the verb in the name. This particular verb, *sarah,* is a rare one, and there is some question about its meaning, though an educated guess about the original sense of the name would be: "God will rule," or perhaps, "God will prevail."

and won out. In almost all of his dealings, Jacob the bargainer, trader, wrestler, and heel-grabber *has* managed to win out. His winning out against the mysterious stranger consists in having fought to a kind of tie: the adversary has been unable to best him, and though he has hurt Jacob, he cannot break loose from Jacob's grip.

31. *Peniel.* The name builds on "face-to-face" (*panim ʾel panim*), the "face" component being quite transparent in the Hebrew. In verse 32, Penuel is an alternate form of this name.

God. Again the term is *ʾelohim,* and there is no way of knowing whether it is singular or plural.

I came out alive. The Hebrew says literally: "My life [or, life-breath] was saved."

32. *And the sun rose upon him.* There is another antithetical symmetry with the early part of the Jacob story, which has been nicely observed by Nahum Sarna: "Jacob's ignominious flight from home was appropriately marked by the setting of the sun; fittingly, the radiance of the sun greets the patriarch as he crosses back into his native land."

he was limping on his hip. The encounter with the unfathomable Other leaves a lasting mark on Jacob. This physical note resonates with the larger sense of a man's life powerfully recorded in his story: experience exacts many prices, and he bears his inward scars as he lives onward—his memory of fleeing alone across the Jordan, his fear of the brother he has wronged, and, before long, his grief for the beloved wife he loses, and then, for the beloved son he thinks he has lost.

33. *Therefore the children of Israel do not eat the sinew.* This concluding etiological notice is more than a mechanical reflex. For the first time, after the naming-story, the Hebrews are referred to as "the children of Israel," and this dietary prohibition observed by the audience of the story "to this day" marks a direct identification with, or reverence for, the eponymous ancestor who wrestled through the night with a man who was no man.

CHAPTER 33

[1]And Jacob raised his eyes and saw and, look, Esau
was coming, and with him were four hundred men.
And he divided the children between Leah and Rachel,
and between the two slavegirls. [2]And he placed the
slavegirls and their children first, and Leah and her
children after them, and Rachel and Joseph last. [3]And
he passed before them and bowed to the ground seven
times until he drew near his brother. [4]And Esau ran to
meet him and embraced him and fell upon his neck
and kissed him, and they wept. [5]And he raised his eyes
and saw the women and the children and he said,
“Who are these with you?” And he said, “The children
with whom God has favored your servant.” [6]And the
slavegirls drew near, they and their children, and they
bowed down. [7]And Leah, too, and her children drew
near, and they bowed down, and then Joseph and
Rachel drew near and bowed down. [8]And he said,
“What do you mean by all this camp I have met?” And
he said, “To find favor in the eyes of my lord.” [9]And
Esau said, “I have much, my brother. Keep what you

have.” [10]And Jacob said, “O, no, pray, if I have found favor in your eyes, take this tribute from my hand, for have I not seen your face as one might see God’s face, and you received me in kindness? [11]Pray, take my blessing that has been brought you, for God has favored me and I have everything.” And he pressed him, and he took it. [12]And he said, “Let us journey onward and go, and let me go alongside you.” [13]And he said, “My lord knows that the children are tender, and the nursing sheep and cattle are my burden, and if they are whipped onward a single day, all the flocks will die. [14]Pray, let my lord pass on before his servant, and I, let me drive along at my own easy pace, at the heels of the livestock before me and at the heels of the children, till I come to my lord in Seir.” [15]And Esau said, “Pray, let me set aside for you some of the people who are with me.” And he said, “Why should I find such favor in the eyes of my lord?” [16]And Esau returned that day on his way to Seir, [17]while Jacob journeyed on to Succoth. And he built himself a house, and for his cattle he made sheds—therefore is the name of the place called Succoth.

[18]And Jacob came in peace to the town of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from

Paddan-Aram, and he camped before the town. [19]And he bought the parcel of land where he had pitched his tent from the sons of Hamor, father of Shechem, for a hundred kesitahs. [20]And he set up an altar there and called it El-Elohei-Israel.

CHAPTER 33 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *he divided the children between Leah and Rachel*. Again, the principle of binary division running through the whole story comes into play. Here, there is a binary split between the two wives on one side and the two concubines on the other. The former of these categories is itself split between Rachel and Leah. Although the division at this point, unlike the previous day's division into two camps, appears to be for purposes of display, not defense, it looks as though Jacob retains a residual fear of assault, and so he puts the concubines and their children first, then Leah and her children, and Rachel and Joseph at the very rear.

2. *Leah and her children after them.* The Masoretic Text reads "last" instead of "after them" (in the Hebrew merely the difference of a suffix), but the context requires "after them," a reading that is supported by at least one ancient version.

3. *bowed to the ground seven times until he drew near.* This practice of bowing seven times as one approaches a monarch from a distance was common court ritual, as parallels in the Amarna letters and the Ugaritic documents (both from the middle of the second millennium B.C.E.) indicate.

4. *Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell upon his neck.* This is, of course, the big surprise in the story of the twins: instead of lethal grappling, Esau embraces Jacob in fraternal affection. The Masoretic Text has both brothers weeping, the verb showing a plural inflection, but some scholars have

conjectured that the plural *waw* at the end of the verb is a scribal error, duplicated from the first letter of the next word in the text, and that Esau alone weeps, Jacob remaining impassive.

5. *The children.* Jacob's response makes no mention of the women. It would have been self-evident that the women were the mothers of the children and hence his wives, and one senses that he feels impelled to answer his brother as tersely as possible, not spelling out what can be clearly inferred.

8. *What do you mean by all this camp.* The Hebrew is literally, "Who to you is all this camp," but both "who to you" (*mi lekha*) and "what to you" (*mah lekha*) have the idiomatic sense of "what do you mean, or want." "Camp" in this context means something like "retinue" or "procession of people," but the continuity with the twin camps of the preceding episode is obviously important for the writer.

9. *I have much, my brother.* Esau in fact has become a kind of prince, despite his loss of birthright and blessing, and he can speak to Jacob in princely generosity. It is striking that he addresses Jacob as "my brother"—the familial term with the first-person possessive suffix is generally a form of *affectionate* address in biblical Hebrew—while Jacob continues to call him "my lord," never swerving from the deferential terms of court etiquette.

10. *for have I not seen your face as one might see God's face, and you received me in kindness?* This most extravagant turn in the rhetoric of deferential address pointedly carries us back to Jacob's reflection on his nocturnal wrestling with the nameless stranger: "for I have seen God face-to-face and I came out alive." "And you received me in kindness" (just one word in the Hebrew) is significantly substituted for "I came out alive," the very thing Jacob feared he might not do when he met his brother.

11. *take my blessing.* The word for "blessing," *berakhah,* obviously has the meaning in context of "my gift," or, as Rashi interestingly proposes, invoking as an Old French equivalent, *mon salud,* my gift of greeting. But the term chosen brilliantly echoes a phrase Jacob could not have actually heard, which Esau pronounced to their father two decades earlier: "he's taken my blessing" (27:36). In offering the tribute, Jacob is making restitution for his primal theft, unwittingly using language that confirms the act of restitution.

I have everything. Jacob of course means "I have everything I need." But there is a nice discrepancy between his words and the parallel ones of his brother that is obscured by all English translators (with the exception of Everett Fox), who use some term like "enough" in both instances. Esau says he has plenty; Jacob says he has everything—on the surface, simply declaring that he doesn't need the flocks he is offering as a gift, but implicitly "outbidding" his brother, obliquely referring to the comprehensiveness of the blessing he received from their father.

13. *are my burden.* The Hebrew says literally, "are upon me."

14. *at the heels.* Literally, "at the foot."

till I come to my lord in Seir. This is a "diplomatic" offer, for in fact Jacob will head back northward to Succoth, in the opposite direction from Seir.

15. *Why should I find such favor in the eyes of my lord?* In this protestation of unworthiness, Jacob preserves the perfect decorum of deferential address to the very end of his dialogue with his brother. Clearly, he is declining the offer of Esau's retainers because he still doesn't trust Esau and intends to put a large distance between himself and Esau or any of Esau's men. One should note that the very last word (one word in the Hebrew) spoken by Jacob to Esau that is reported in the story is "my lord."

17. *Succoth.* The Hebrew *sukkot* means "sheds."

18. *came in peace.* The adjective *shalem* elsewhere means "whole," and this has led many interpreters to understand it here as "safe and sound." A tradition going back to the Septuagint, and sustained by Claus Westermann among modern commentators, construes this word as the name of a town, Salem, understood to be a synonym for Shechem. (The claim has been made that a *tell* about two and a half miles from the site of Shechem is the biblical Salem.) But the Salem where Abraham meets Melchizedek is at an entirely different location, and if that were also a designation for Shechem, one would expect here at the very least the explanatory gloss, "Salem, that is, the town of Shechem" (*Shalem, hiʾ ʿir Shekhem*). Because these three verses are an introduction to the story of the rape of Dinah, where in fact Hamor and Shechem say of the sons of Jacob, "these men come in peace (*sheleimim*) to us," it is more likely that "came in peace" is the sense here. Abraham ibn

Ezra argues for this meaning, similarly noting the link between the two passages.

when he came from Paddan-Aram. Now that Jacob has at last crossed the Jordan (Succoth is in trans-Jordan) and has taken up residence outside a Canaanite town, the long trajectory of his journey home is completed.

19. *a hundred kesitahs.* These are either measures of weight for gold and silver, or units for the barter of livestock, or a term derived from the latter that has been transferred to the former. The purchase of real estate, as with Abraham at Hebron, signals making a claim to permanent residence.

20. *El-Elohei-Israel.* The name means "El / God, God of Israel." Claus Westermann makes the interesting argument that Jacob marks his taking up residence in Canaan by subsuming the Canaanite sky god in his monotheistic cult: "El, the creator God, the supreme God in the Canaanite pantheon, now becomes the God of the people of Israel."

CHAPTER 34

[1]And Dinah, Leah's daughter, whom she had borne to
Jacob, went out to go seeing among the daughters of
the land. [2]And Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivvite,
prince of the land, saw her and took her and lay with
her and abused her. [3]And his very self clung to Dinah
daughter of Jacob, and he loved the young woman, and
he spoke to the young woman's heart. [4]And Shechem
said to Hamor his father, saying, "Take me this girl as
wife." [5]And Jacob had heard that he had defiled Dinah
his daughter, and his sons were with his livestock in
the field, and Jacob held his peace till they came. [6]And
Hamor, Shechem's father, came out to Jacob to speak
with him. [7]And Jacob's sons had come in from the
field when they heard, and the men were pained and
they were very incensed, for he had done a scurrilous
thing in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter, such as
ought not be done. [8]And Hamor spoke with them,
saying, "Shechem my son, his very self longs for your
daughter. Pray, give her to him as wife, [9]and ally with
us by marriage—your daughters you will give to us

and our daughters, take for yourselves, [10]and among us
you will settle, and the land is before you: settle and go
about it and take holdings in it.” [11]And Shechem said
to her father and to her brothers, “Let me find favor in
your eyes, and whatever you say to me, I will give.
[12]Name me however much bride-price and clan-gift, I
will give what you say to me, and give me the young
woman as wife.” [13]And the sons of Jacob answered
Shechem and Hamor his father deceitfully, and they
spoke as they did because he had defiled Dinah their
sister, [14]and they said to them, “We cannot do this
thing, to give our sister to a man who has a foreskin, as
that is a disgrace for us. [15]Only in this way may we
agree to you—if you will be like us, every male to be
circumcised. [16]Then we can give our daughters to you
and your daughters we can take for ourselves, and we
can settle among you and become one folk. [17]But if
you will not listen to us, to be circumcised, we will
take our daughter and go.” [18]And their words seemed
good in the eyes of Hamor and in the eyes of Shechem
son of Hamor.

[19]And the lad lost no time in doing the thing, for he
wanted Jacob’s daughter, and he was most highly
regarded of all his father’s house. [20]And Hamor, with

Shechem his son, came to the gate of their town, and they spoke to their townsmen, saying, [21]"These men come in peace to us. Let them settle in the land and go about it, for the land, look, is ample before them. Their daughters we shall take us as wives and our daughters we shall give to them. [22]Only in this way will the men agree to us, to settle with us to be one folk, if every male of us be circumcised as they are circumcised. [23]Their possessions in livestock and all their cattle, will they not be ours, if only we agree to them and they settle among us?" [24]And all who sallied forth from the gate of his town listened to Hamor, and to Shechem his son, and every male was circumcised, all who sallied forth from the gate of his town.

[25]And it happened on the third day, while they were hurting, that Jacob's two sons, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took each his sword, and came upon the city unopposed, and they killed every male. [26]And Hamor and Shechem his son they killed by the edge of the sword, and they took Dinah from the house of Shechem and went out. [27]Jacob's sons came upon the slain and looted the town, for they had defiled their sister. [28]Their sheep and their cattle and their donkeys, what was in the town and in the field, they took, [29]and

all their wealth, and all their young ones and their wives they took captive, and they looted everything in their houses. [30]And Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, “You have stirred up trouble for me, making me stink among the land’s inhabitants, among Canaanite and Perizzite, when I am a handful of men. If they gather against me and strike me, I shall be destroyed, I and my household.” [31]And they said, “Like a whore should our sister be treated?”

CHAPTER 34 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *to go seeing among the daughters of the land*. The infinitive in the Hebrew is literally “to see,” followed not by a direct object, as one might expect, but by a partitive (the particle *b*^{e}), which suggests “among” or “some of.” Although the sense of the verb in context may be something like “to make the acquaintance of” or “travel around among,” the decision of several modern translations to render it as “to visit” is misconceived. Not only does that term convey anachronistic notions of calling cards and tea, but it obliterates an important repetition of terms. This is one of those episodes in which the biblical practice of using the same word over and over with different subjects and objects and a high tension of semantic difference is especially crucial. Two such terms are introduced in the first sentence of the story: “to see” and “daughter.” Dinah, Jacob’s daughter, goes out among the daughters of the land, an identity of terms that might suggest a symmetry of position, but the fact that she is an immigrant’s daughter, not a daughter of the land, makes her a ready target for rape. (In the Hebrew, moreover, “sons” and “daughters,” *banim* and *banot,* are differently inflected versions of the same word, so Dinah’s filial relation to Jacob is immediately played against Shechem’s filial

relation to Hamor, and that in turn will be pointedly juxtaposed with the relation between Jacob and *his* sons.) Shechem's lustful "seeing" of Dinah is immediately superimposed on her "seeing" the daughters of the land.

2. *saw . . . took . . . lay with . . . abused*. As elsewhere in Genesis, the chain of uninterrupted verbs conveys the precipitousness of the action. "Took" will become another thematically loaded reiterated term. "Lay with" is more brutal in the Hebrew because instead of being followed by the preposition "with" (as, for example, in Rachel's words to Leah in 30:15), it is followed by a direct object—if the Masoretic vocalization is authentic—and in this form may denote rape.

3. *his very self clung.* The Hebrew *nefesh* (life-breath) is used here as an intensifying synonym of the personal pronoun. ("His very self" in verse 8 represents the same Hebrew usage.) The psychology of this rapist is precisely the opposite of Amnon's in 2 Samuel 13, who, after having consummated his lust for his sister by raping her, despises her. Here, the fulfillment of the impulse of unrestrained desire is followed by love, which complicates the moral balance of the story.

4. *Take me this girl.* "Take," which indicated violent action in the narrator's report of the rape, now recurs in a decorous social sense—the action initiated by the father of the groom in arranging a proper marriage for his son. In verse 17, Jacob's sons will threaten to "take" Dinah away if the townsmen refuse to be circumcised, and in the report of the massacre, they take first their swords and then the booty. Shechem refers to Dinah as *yaldah,* "girl" or "child," a term that equally suggests her vulnerability and the tenderness he now feels for her.

7. *a scurrilous thing in Israel.* This use of this idiom here is a kind of pun. "A scurrilous thing in Israel" (*nevalah beYisra'el*) is in later tribal history any shocking act that the collective "Israel" deems reprehensible (most often a sexual act). But at this narrative juncture, "Israel" is only the other name of the father of these twelve children, and so the phrase also means "a scurrilous thing against Israel."

for he had done a scurrilous thing in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter, such as ought not be done. This entire clause is a rare instance in biblical narrative of free indirect discourse, or narrated monologue. That is, the

narrator conveys the tenor of Jacob's sons' anger by reporting in the third person the kind of language they would have spoken silently, or to each other. It is a technical means for strongly imprinting the rage of Jacob's sons in the presence of their father who has kept silent and, even now, gives no voice to his feelings about the violation of his daughter.

10. *go about it.* The Hebrew verb *saḥar* has the basic meaning of "to go around in a circle" and the extended meaning of "to trade." But at this early point of tribal history, Jacob and his sons are seminomadic herdsmen, not at all merchants, so the commercial denotation of the term seems unlikely in context.

11. *And Shechem said . . . ". . . whatever you say to me, I will give."* The father had begun the negotiations by asking for Dinah as wife for his son and then immediately opened up the larger issue of general marriage-alliances with Jacob's clan and the acquisition of settlement rights by the newcomers. Shechem now enters the discussion to speak more personally of the marriage and the bride-price. (According to biblical law, a man who raped an unbetrothed girl had to pay a high fine to her father and was obliged to marry her.) After the two instances of "taking" earlier in the story, he insists here on "giving": he will give whatever the brothers stipulate in the expectation that they will give him Dinah as wife.

12. *give me the young woman.* Addressing the brothers, Shechem does not refer to Dinah now as *yaldah,* "girl," but as *naʿarah,* the proper term for a nubile young woman.

13. *deceitfully.* This is the same term, *mirmah,* that was first attached to Jacob's action in stealing the blessing, then used by Jacob to upbraid Laban after the switching of the brides.

they spoke as they did because he had defiled Dinah their sister. "As they did because" is merely a syntactically ambiguous "that" in the Hebrew—quite possibly a means for introducing another small piece of free indirect discourse.

14. *We cannot do this thing.* They begin as though their response were a flat refusal. Then they ignore the offer of generous payment and instead stipulate

circumcision—to be sure, a physical sign of their collective identity, but also the infliction of pain on what is in this case the offending organ.

16. *become one folk.* This ultimate horizon of ethnic unification was perhaps implied but certainly not spelled out in Hamor's speech.

19. *the lad.* There was no previous indication of Shechem's age. The term *naʿar* is the masculine counterpart of the term he used for Dinah in verse 12 and suggests that he, too, is probably an adolescent.

23. *Their possessions in livestock and all their cattle.* Although, in keeping with the biblical convention of near verbatim repetition, Hamor's speech repeats the language used by the sons of Jacob, there had been no mention before of the Hivvites becoming masters of the newcomers' livestock. This may reflect a tactic of persuasion on the part of Hamor; it may equally reflect the Hivvites' cupidity.

24. *all who sallied forth.* In Abraham's negotiations with the Hittites in chapter 23, the town elders or members of the city council are referred to as "all the assembled [or, those who come in] in the gate of [the] town." Here they are designated as "all who go out from the gate." There are good grounds to suppose that the latter idiom has a *military* connotation: troops came out of the gates of walled cities to attack besiegers or to set out on campaigns, and "to go out and come in" is an idiom that means "to maneuver in battle." The reference to the Hivvites as fighting men makes sense in context because they are about to render themselves temporarily helpless against attack through the mass circumcision.

26. *by the edge of the sword.* The Hebrew idiom is literally "the mouth of the sword"—hence the sword is said to "consume" or "eat" in biblical language.

and they took Dinah from the house of Shechem. Meir Sternberg (1985), who provides illuminating commentary on the interplay of opposing moral claims in this story, shrewdly notes that this is a shocking revelation just before the end of the story: we might have imagined that Shechem was petitioning in good faith for Dinah's hand; now it emerges that he has been holding her captive in his house after having raped her.

27. *for they had defiled their sister.* This angry phrase becomes a kind of refrain in the story. Again, it sounds like the free indirect discourse of Simeon and Levi, offered as a justification for the massacre they have perpetrated. Precisely in this regard, the element of exaggeration in these words should be noted: only one man defiled Dinah, but here a plural is used, as though all the males of the town could in fact be held accountable for the rape.

30. *stirred up trouble.* The root meaning of the verb is "to muddy."

31. *Like a whore should our sister be treated?* The very last words of the story are still another expression—and the crudest one—of the brothers' anger and their commitment to exact the most extravagant price in vindication of what they consider the family's honor. (The Hebrew might also be rendered as "shall he treat our sister," referring to Shechem, but the third-person singular does sometimes function in place of a passive.) It is surely significant that Jacob, who earlier "kept his peace" and was notable for his failure of response, has nothing to say, or is reported saying nothing, to these last angry words of his sons. (Only on his deathbed will he answer them.) This moment becomes the turning point in the story of Jacob. In the next chapter, he will follow God's injunction to return to Bethel and reconfirm the covenant, but henceforth he will lose much of his paternal power and will be seen repeatedly at the mercy of his sons, more the master of self-dramatizing sorrow than of his own family. This same pattern will be invoked in the David story: the father who fails to take action after the rape of his daughter and then becomes victim of the fratricidal and rebellious impulses of his sons.

CHAPTER 35

[1]And God said to Jacob, “Rise, go up to Bethel and
dwell there and make an altar there to the God Who
appeared to you when you fled from Esau your
brother.” [2]And Jacob said to his household and to all
who were with him, “Put away the alien gods that are
in your midst and cleanse yourselves and change your
garments. [3]And let us rise and go up to Bethel, and I
shall make an altar there to the God Who answered me
on the day of my distress and was with me on the way
that I went.” [4]And they gave Jacob all the alien gods
that were in their hands and the rings that were in their
ears, and Jacob buried them under the terebinth that is
by Shechem. [5]And they journeyed onward, and the
terror of God was upon the towns around them, and
they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. [6]And Jacob
came to Luz in the land of Canaan, that is, Bethel, he
and all the people who were with him. [7]And he built
there an altar and he called the place El-Bethel, for
there God was revealed to him when he fled from his
brother.

[8]And Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was
buried below Bethel under the oak, and its name was
called Allon-Bacuth.

[9]And God appeared to Jacob again when he came
from Paddan-Aram, and He blessed him, [10]and God
said to him, "Your name Jacob—no longer shall your
name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name."
And He called his name Israel. [11]And God said to him,

"I am El Shaddai.
Be fruitful and multiply.
A nation, an assembly of nations
shall stem from you,
and kings shall come forth from
your loins.

[12]And the land that I gave to Abraham and to Isaac, to
you I will give it, and to your seed after you I will give
the land." [13]And God ascended from him in the place
where He had spoken with him. [14]And Jacob set up a
pillar in the place where He had spoken with him, a
pillar of stone, and he offered libation upon it and
poured oil on it. [15]And Jacob called the name of the
place where God had spoken with him Bethel.

16 And they journeyed onward from Bethel, and when
they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel
gave birth, and she labored hard in the birth. 17 And it
happened, when she was laboring hardest in the birth,
that the midwife said to her, “Fear not, for this one,
too, is a son for you.” 18 And it happened, as her life ran
out, for she was dying, that she called his name Ben-
Oni, but his father called him Benjamin. 19 And Rachel
died and she was buried on the road to Ephrath, that
is, Bethlehem. 20 And Jacob set up a pillar on her grave,
it is the pillar of Rachel’s grave to this day.

21 And Israel journeyed onward and pitched his tent on
the far side of Migdal-Eder. 22 And it happened, when
Israel was encamped in that land, that Reuben went
and lay with Bilhah, his father’s concubine, and Israel
heard.

And the sons of Jacob were twelve. 23 The sons of
Leah: Jacob’s firstborn Reuben and Simeon and Levi
and Judah and Issachar and Zebulun. 24 The sons of
Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. 25 And the sons of
Bilhah, Rachel’s slavegirl: Dan and Naphtali. 26 And the
sons of Zilpah, Leah’s slavegirl: Gad and Asher. These
are the sons of Jacob who were born to him in

Paddan-Aram. [27]And Jacob came to Isaac his father in Mamre, at Kiriath-Arba, that is, Hebron, where Abraham, and Isaac, had sojourned. [28]And Isaac's days were one hundred and eighty years. [29]And Isaac breathed his last, and died, and was gathered to his kin, old and sated with years, and Esau and Jacob his sons buried him.

CHAPTER 35 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

After Jacob's disastrous inaction in response to his daughter's rape in the face of his vengeful sons, the narrative unit demarcated by this chapter is a collection of miscellaneous notices about Jacob and his household: the consecration of the altar at Bethel; the death of Rebekah's nurse; a reiteration of Jacob's name change coupled with a repetition of the covenantal promise delivered to his father and grandfather; Rachel's death in childbirth; Reuben's cohabitation with his father's concubine; the death of Isaac. This miscellaneous overview of Jacob's later career—just before his sons entirely preempt the narrative foreground—bears the earmarks of a literary source different from that of the immediately preceding material. Nevertheless, thematic reverberations from the pivotal catastrophe at Shechem sound through it.

1. *Who appeared to you when you fled from Esau your brother.* This clause, which takes us back to the dream-vision revelation and promise vouchsafed the young Jacob in chapter 28, signals this injunction to build an altar as a ritual completion of that early promise. (See the comment on verse 3.)

2. *the alien gods.* Although many interpreters associate these icons or figurines with the booty taken from Shechem, Rachel's attachment to her father's household gods suggests that others in this large retinue of emigrating

relatives and slaves may have brought cultic figurines with them from Mesopotamia.

cleanse yourselves. Nahum Sarna aptly notes, "chapter 34 is dominated by the theme of defilement; this chapter opens with the subject of purification."

3. *to the God Who answered me on the day of my distress and was with me.* When Jacob approximately echoes God's words to him in verse 1, he replaces God's revelation with God's answering him in his trouble and being with him, thus confirming that God has fully responded to the terms he stipulated in 28:20, "If the LORD God be with me and guard me on this way that I am going."

4. *the rings . . . in their ears*. As archaeology has abundantly discovered, earrings were often fashioned as figurines of gods and goddesses.

buried. The verb *taman* is generally used for placing treasure in a hidden or safe place, and is quite distinct from the term for burial that appears in verses 8, 19, and 29, which is a verb reserved for burying bodies.

5. *the terror of God.* Perhaps, in the view of this writer, which is more insistently theological than that of the immediately preceding narrative, the phrase means literally that God casts fear on the Canaanites in order to protect Jacob and his clan. But the phrase is deliberately ambiguous: it could also be construed as meaning "a fearsome terror," with *ʾelohim* serving as an intensifier rather than referring to divinity. In that case, the shambles to which Simeon and Levi reduced Shechem might be sufficient reason for the terror.

8. *Allon-Bacuth.* The name means "oak of weeping." Beyond the narrative etiology of a place-name, there is not enough evidence to explain what this lonely obituary notice is doing here.

9. *And God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-Aram.* The adverb "again," as Rashi notes, alludes to God's appearance to Jacob at this same place, Bethel, when he fled to Paddan-Aram. This second version of the conferring of the name of Israel on Jacob is thus set in the perspective of a large overview of his career of flight and return, with both his eastward and westward trajectory marked by divine revelation and promise at the same spot. The first story of Jacob's name change is folkloric and mysterious, and the new name is given him as a token of his past victories in his sundry

struggles with human and divine creatures. Here, the report of the name change is distinctly theological, God's words invoking both the first creation ("be fruitful and multiply") and His promise to Abraham ("kings shall come forth from your loins"). In this instance, moreover, the new name is a sign of Jacob's glorious future rather than of the triumphs he has already achieved, and the crucial element of struggle is not intimated. As elsewhere in biblical narrative, the sequencing of different versions of the same event proposes different, perhaps complementary views of the same elusive subject—here, the central and enigmatic fact of the origins of the theophoric name of the Hebrew nation.

14. *And Jacob set up a pillar.* The cultic or commemorative pillar, *matsevah,* figures equally in the first episode at Bethel, in chapter 28. There, too, Jacob consecrates the pillar by pouring oil over it, but here, in keeping with the more pervasively ritualistic character of the story, he also offers a libation, and he builds an altar before setting up the pillar.

in the place where He had spoken with him. This phrase occurs three times in close sequence. The underlining of "place" recalls the emphasis on that key term in the earlier Bethel episode, where an anonymous "place" was transformed into a "house of God." In the present instance, "place" is strongly linked through reiteration with the fact of God's having spoken to Jacob: before the place is consecrated by human ritual acts, it is consecrated by divine speech.

16. *some distance.* The Hebrew, *kivrat ha'arets,* occurs only three times in the Bible, and there has been debate over what precisely it indicates. Abraham ibn Ezra, with his extraordinary philological prescience, suggested that the initial *ki* was the prefix of comparison (*kaf hadimyon*) and that the noun *barat* was "the royal measure of distance." In fact, modern Semitic philologists have discovered an Akkadian cognate, *beru,* which is the ancient mile, the equivalent of about four and a half English miles.

17. *for this one, too, is a son for you.* Rachel, in her naming-speech for Joseph, had prayed for a second son, just as in her earlier imperious demand to her husband, she had asked him to give her sons, not a son. The fulfillment of her uncompromising wish entails her death.

18. *Ben-Oni.* The name can be construed to mean either "son of my vigor" or, on somewhat more tenuous philological grounds, "son of my sorrow." Given the freedom with which biblical characters play with names and their meanings, there is no reason to exclude the possibility that Rachel is punningly invoking both meanings, though the former is more likely: in her death agony, she envisages the continuation of "vigor" after her in the son she has born (the tribe Benjamin will become famous for its martial prowess).

but his father called him Benjamin. In the reports given in biblical narrative, it is more often the mother who does the naming. This is the sole instance of competing names assigned respectively by the mother and father. Jacob's choice of *Bin-yamin* also presents a possibility of double meaning. The most likely construal would be "son of the right hand," that is, favored son, the one to whom is imparted special power or "dexterity." But the right hand also designates the south in biblical idiom, so the name could mean "dweller in the south." Again, the *yamin* component might be, as some have proposed, not the word for right hand but a plural of *yom,* "day" or "time," yielding the sense "son of old age."

22. *Reuben went and lay with Bilhah.* This enigmatic notice of Reuben's violation of his father's concubine is conveyed with gnomic conciseness. The Talmud saw in the story an intention on the part of Reuben to defile the slavegirl of his mother's dead rival, Rachel, and so to make her sexually taboo to Jacob. More recent commentators have observed with justice that in the biblical world cohabitation with the consort of a ruler is a way of making claim to his authority (as when the usurper Absalom cohabits with his father David's concubines), and so Reuben would be attempting to seize in his father's lifetime his firstborn's right to be head of the clan.

and Israel heard. The same verb is used when the report of the rape of Dinah is brought to Jacob. In both instances, he remains silent. The fact that he is referred to in this episode as Israel, not Jacob, may be dictated by the context of sexual outrage, for which the idiom "a scurrilous thing in Israel," *nevalah beYisra'el,* is used, as in the story of Dinah.

And the sons of Jacob were twelve. The genealogical list of the sons of Jacob, followed by the list of the sons of Ishmael in the next chapter, marks a major transition in the narrative. When the story picks up again at the beginning of chapter 37, though old Jacob is very much alive and an important figure in the background of the narrative, it will become the story

of Joseph and his brothers—a tale that in all its psychological richness and moral complexity will take up the rest of the Book of Genesis.

29. *And Isaac breathed his last.* The actual chronological place of this event is obviously considerably earlier in the narrative. The biblical writers observe no fixed commitment to linear chronology, a phenomenon recognized by the rabbis in the dictum "there is neither early nor late in the Torah."

Esau and Jacob his sons buried him. At this end point, they act in unison, and despite the reversal of birthright and blessing, the firstborn is mentioned first.

CHAPTER 36

[1]And this is the lineage of Esau, that is, Edom. [2]Esau took his wives from the daughters of Canaan—Adah daughter of Elon the Hittite and Oholibamah daughter of Anah son of Zibeon the Hivvite, [3]and Basemath daughter of Ishmael, sister of Nebaioth. [4]And Adah bore to Esau Eliphaz while Basemath bore Reuel, [5]and Oholibamah bore Jeush and Jalam and Korah. These are the sons of Esau who were born to him in the land of Canaan. [6]And Esau took his wives and his sons and his daughters and all the folk of his household and his livestock and all his cattle and all the goods he had gotten in the land of Canaan and he went to another land away from Jacob his brother. [7]For their substance was too great for dwelling together and the land of their sojournings could not support them because of their livestock. [8]And Esau settled in the high country of Seir—Esau, that is, Edom.

[9]And this is the lineage of Esau, father of Edom, in the high country of Seir. [10]These are the names of the sons of Esau: Eliphaz son of Adah, Esau's wife, Reuel son of Basemath, Esau's wife. [11]And the sons of Eliphaz were Teman, Omar, Zepho, and Gatam and Kenaz. [12]And Timna was a concubine of Eliphaz son of Esau, and she bore to Eliphaz Amalek. These are the sons of Adah, Esau's wife. [13]And these are the sons of Reuel: Nahath and Zerah, Shammah and Mizzah. These were the sons of Basemath, Esau's wife. [14]And these were the sons of Esau's wife Oholibamah, daughter of Anah son of Zibeon—she bore to Esau Jeush and Jalam and Korah.

[15]These are the chieftains of the sons of Esau. The sons of Eliphaz, firstborn of Esau: the chieftain Teman, the chieftain Omar, the chieftain Zepho, the chieftain Kenaz, [16]the chieftain Korah, the chieftain Gatam, the chieftain Amalek. These are the chieftains of Eliphaz in the land of Edom, these are the sons of Adah. [17]And these are the sons of Reuel son of Esau: the chieftain Nahath, the chieftain Zerah, the chieftain Shammah, the chieftain Mizzah. These are the chieftains of Reuel in the land of Edom, these are the sons of Basemath, Esau's wife. [18]And these are the sons of Oholibamah,

Esau's wife: the chieftain Jeush, the chieftain Jalam,
the chieftain Korah. These are the chieftains of
Oholibamah daughter of Anah, Esau's wife. [19]These
are the sons of Esau, that is, Edom, and these their
chieftains.

[20]These are the sons of Seir the Horite who had settled
in the land: Lotan and Shobal and Zibeon and Anah,
[21]and Dishon and Ezer and Dishan. These are the
Horite chieftains, sons of Seir, in the land of Edom.
[22]And the sons of Lotan were Hori and Hemam, and
Lotan's sister was Timna. [23]And these are the sons of
Shobal: Alvan and Manahoth and Ebal, Shepho and
Onam. [24]And these are the sons of Zibeon: Aiah and
Anah, he is Anah who found the water in the
wilderness when he took the asses of his father Zibeon
to graze. [25]And these are the children of Anah: Dishon
and Oholibamah daughter of Anah. [26]And these are
the sons of Dishon: Hemdan and Eshban and Ithran
and Cheran. [27]These are the sons of Ezer: Bilhan and
Zaavan and Akan. [28]These are the sons of Dishan: Uz
and Aran. [29]These are the Horite chieftains: the
chieftain Lotan, the chieftain Shobal, the chieftain
Zibeon, the chieftain Anah, [30]the chieftain Dishon, the

chieftain Ezer, the chieftain Dishan. These are the Horite chieftains by their clans in the land of Seir.

[31]These are the kings that reigned in the land of Edom before any king reigned over the Israelites. [32]And Bela son of Beor reigned in Edom and the name of his city was Dinhabah. [33]And Bela died and Jobab son of Zerah from Bozrah, reigned in his stead. [34]And Jobab died, and Husham from the land of the Temanite reigned in his stead. [35]And Husham died and Hadad son of Bedad reigned in his stead, he who struck down Midian on the steppe of Moab, and the name of his city was Avith. [36]And Hadad died and Samlah of Masrekah reigned in his stead. [37]And Samlah died and Saul from Rehobothon-the-River reigned in his stead. [38]And Saul died and Baal-Hanan son of Achbor reigned in his stead. [39]And Baal-Hanan son of Achbor died and Hadad reigned in his stead, and the name of his city was Pau and the name of his wife was Mehetabel daughter of Matred daughter of Me-Zahab.

[40]And these are the names of the chieftains of Esau by their clans and places name by name: the chieftain of Timna, the chieftain Alvah, the chieftain Jetheth, [41]the chieftain of Oholibamah, the chieftain Elah, the

chieftain Pinon, [42]the chieftain Kenaz, the chieftain Teman, the chieftain Mibzar, [43]the chieftain Magdiel, the chieftain Iram. These are the chieftains of Edom by their settlements in the land of their holdings—that is, Esau, father of Edom.

CHAPTER 36 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

Chapter 36 offers the last of the major genealogies in Genesis. These lists of generations (*toledot*) and of kings obviously exerted an intrinsic fascination for the ancient audience and served as a way of accounting for historical and political configurations, which were conceived through a metaphor of biological propagation. (In fact, virtually the only evidence we have about the Edomite settlement is the material in this chapter.) As a unit in the literary structure of Genesis, the genealogies here are the marker of the end of a long narrative unit. What follows is the story of Joseph, a continuous sequence that is the last large literary unit of Genesis. The role of Esau's genealogy is clearly analogous to that of Ishmael's genealogy in chapter 25: before the narrative goes on to pursue the national line of Israel, an account is rendered of the posterity of the patriarch's son who is not the bearer of the covenantal promise. But Isaac had given Esau, too, a blessing, however qualified, and these lists demonstrate the implementation of that blessing in Esau's posterity.

The chapter also serves to shore up the narrative geographically, to the east, before turning its attention to the south. Apart from the brief report in chapter 12 of Abraham's sojourn in Egypt, which is meant to foreshadow the end of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus, the significant movement beyond the borders of Canaan has all been eastward, across the Jordan to Mesopotamia and back again. Esau now makes his permanent move from Canaan to Edom—the mountainous region east of Canaan, south of the Dead Sea and stretching down toward the Gulf of Aqabah. Once this report is finished, our attention will be turned first to Canaan and then to Egypt.

1–8. This is the first of the six different lists—perhaps drawn from different archival sources by the editor—that make up the chapter. Although it does record Esau's sons, the stress is on his wives. There are both overlap and inconsistency among the different lists. These need not detain us here. The best account of these sundry traditions, complete with charts, is the discussion of this chapter in the Hebrew *Encyclopedia ʿOlam haTanakh,* though Nahum Sarna provides a briefer but helpful exposition of the lists in his commentary.

2. *Anah son of Zibeon.* The Masoretic Text has "daughter of," but Anah is clearly a man (cf. verse 24), and several ancient versions read "son."

6. *another land.* The translation follows the explanatory gloss of the ancient Targums. The received text has only "a land."
away from. Or, "because of."

7. *the land . . . could not support them*. The language of the entire passage is reminiscent of the separation between Lot and Abraham in chapter 13. It is noteworthy that Esau, in keeping with his loss of birthright and blessing, concedes Canaan to his brother and moves his people to the southeast.

9–14. The second unit is a genealogical list focusing on sons rather than wives.

12. *Timna . . . a concubine . . . bore . . . Amalek*. If Amalek is subtracted, we have a list of twelve tribes, as with Israel and Ishmael. Perhaps the birth by a concubine is meant to set Amalek apart, in a status of lesser legitimacy. Amalek becomes the hereditary enemy of Israel, whereas the other Edomites had normal dealings with their neighbors to the west.

15–19. The third unit is a list of chieftains descended from Esau.

15. *chieftains.* It has been proposed that the Hebrew *ʾaluf* means "clan," but that seems questionable because most of the occurrences of the term elsewhere in the Bible clearly indicate a person, not a group. The difficulty is obviated if we assume that an *ʾaluf* is the head of an *ʾelef,* a clan. The one problem with this construction, the fact that in verses 40 and 41 *ʾaluf* is joined with a feminine proper noun, may be resolved by seeing a construct form there ("chieftain of Timna" instead of "chieftain Timna").

20–30. The fourth unit of the chapter is a list of Horite inhabitants of Edom. The Horites—evidently the term was used interchangeably with Hittite—were most probably the Hurrians, a people who penetrated into this area from Armenia sometime in the first half of the second millennium B.C.E. They seem to have largely assimilated into the local population, a process reflected in the fact that, like everyone else in these lists, they have West Semitic names.

20. *who had settled in the land.* "Settlers [or inhabitants] of the land" is closer to the Hebrew. That is, the "Horites" were the indigenous population by the time the Edomites invaded from the west, during the thirteenth century B.C.E.

24. *Aiah.* The Masoretic Text reads "and Aiah."

who found the water in the wilderness. The object of the verb in the Hebrew, *yemim,* is an anomalous term, and venerable traditions that render it as "mules" or "hot springs" have no philological basis. This translation follows E. A. Speiser's plausible suggestion that a simple transposition of the first and second consonants of the word has occurred and that the original reading was *mayim,* "water." Discovery of any water source in the wilderness would be enough to make it noteworthy for posterity.

26. *Dishon.* The Masoretic Text reads "Dishan," who is his brother, and whose offspring are recorded two verses later. There is support for "Dishon" in some of the ancient versions.

30. *by their clans.* The translation revocalizes the Masoretic *ʾalufeyhem* as *ʾalfeyhem* (the consonants remain identical) to yield "clans."

31–39. The fifth unit of the chapter is a list of the kings of Edom. They do not constitute a dynasty because none of the successors to the throne is a son of his predecessor.

31. *before any king reigned over the Israelites.* The phrase refers to the establishment of the monarchy beginning with Saul and not, as some have proposed, to the imposition of Israelite suzerainty over Edom by David, because of the particle *l*^{e} ("to," "for," "over"), rather than *mi* ("from") prefixed to the Hebrew for "Israelites." This is one of those brief moments

when the later perspective in time of the writer pushes to the surface in the Patriarchal narrative.

37. *Rehoboth-on-the-River.* Rehoboth means “broad places”: in urban contexts, in the singular, it designates the city square; here it might mean something like “meadows.” Rehobothon-the-River is probably meant to distinguish this place from some other Rehoboth, differently situated.

39. *Hadad.* The Masoretic Text has “Hadar,” but this is almost certainly a mistake for the well-attested name Hadad, as Chronicles, and some ancient versions and manuscripts, read. In Hebrew, there is only a small difference between the graphemes for *r* and for *d*.

40–43. The sixth and concluding list of the collection is another record of the chieftains descended from Esau. Most of the names are different, and the list may reflect a collation of archival materials stemming from disparate sources. This sort of stitching together of different testimonies would be in keeping with ancient editorial practices.

CHAPTER 37

[1]And Jacob dwelled in the land of his father's
sojournings, in the land of Canaan. [2]This is the lineage
of Jacob—Joseph, seventeen years old, was tending
the flock with his brothers, assisting the sons of Bilhah
and the sons of Zilpah, the wives of his father. And
Joseph brought ill report of them to their father. [3]And
Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, for he was
the child of his old age, and he made him an
ornamented tunic. [4]And his brothers saw it was he
their father loved more than all his brothers, and they
hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.
[5]And Joseph dreamed a dream and told it to his
brothers and they hated him all the more. [6]And he said
to them, "Listen, pray, to this dream that I dreamed.
[7]And, look, we were binding sheaves in the field, and,
look, my sheaf arose and actually stood up, and, look,
your sheaves drew round and bowed to my sheaf."
[8]And his brothers said to him, "Do you mean to reign
over us, do you mean to rule us?" And they hated him
all the more, for his dreams and for his words. [9]And he

dreamed yet another dream and recounted it to his brothers, and he said, “Look, I dreamed a dream again, and, look, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing to me.” [10]And he recounted it to his father and to his brothers, and his father rebuked him and said to him, “What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall we really come, I and your mother and your brothers, to bow before you to the ground?” [11]And his brothers were jealous of him, while his father kept the thing in mind.

[12]And his brothers went to graze their father’s flock at Shechem. [13]And Israel said to Joseph, “You know, your brothers are pasturing at Shechem. Come, let me send you to them,” and he said to him, “Here I am.” [14]And he said to him, “Go, pray, to see how your brothers fare, and how the flock fares, and bring me back word.” And he sent him from the valley of Hebron and he came to Shechem. [15]And a man found him and, look, he was wandering in the field, and the man asked him, saying, “What is it you seek?” [16]And he said, “My brothers I seek. Tell me, pray, where are they pasturing?” [17]And the man said, “They have journeyed on from here, for I heard them say, ‘Let us go to Dothan.’” And Joseph went after his brothers

and found them at Dothan. [18]And they saw him from
afar before he drew near them and they plotted against
him to put him to death. [19]And they said to each other,
“Here comes that dream-master! [20]And so now, let us
kill him and fling him into one of the pits and we can
say, a vicious beast has devoured him, and we shall see
what will come of his dreams.” [21]And Reuben heard
and came to his rescue and said, “We must not take his
life.” [22]And Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood!
Fling him into this pit in the wilderness and do not
raise a hand against him”—that he might rescue him
from their hands to bring him back to his father. [23]And
it happened when Joseph came to his brothers that
they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the ornamented tunic
that he had on him. [24]And they took him and flung him
into the pit, and the pit was empty, there was no water
in it. [25]And they sat down to eat bread, and they raised
their eyes and saw and, look, a caravan of Ishmaelites
was coming from Gilead, their camels bearing gum
and balm and ladanum on their way to take down to
Egypt. [26]And Judah said to his brothers, “What gain is
there if we kill our brother and cover up his blood?
[27]Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and our hand
will not be against him, for he is our brother, our own
flesh.” And his brothers agreed. [28]And Midianite
merchantmen passed by and pulled Joseph up out of

the pit and sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty
pieces of silver, and they brought Joseph to Egypt.
[29]And Reuben came back to the pit and, look, Joseph
was not in the pit, and he rent his garments, [30]and he
came back to his brothers, and he said, “The boy is
gone, and I, where can I turn?” [31]And they took
Joseph’s tunic and slaughtered a kid and dipped the
tunic in the blood, [32]and they sent the ornamented
tunic and had it brought to their father, and they said,
“This we found. Recognize, pray, is it your son’s tunic
or not?” [33]And he recognized it, and he said, “It is my
son’s tunic.

A vicious beast has devoured him,
Joseph is torn to shreds!”

[34]And Jacob rent his clothes and put sackcloth round
his waist and mourned for his son many days. [35]And all
his sons and all his daughters rose to console him and
he refused to be consoled and he said, “Rather I will
go down to my son in Sheol mourning,” and his father
keened for him.

[36]But the Midianites had sold him into Egypt to
Potiphar, Pharaoh’s courtier, the high chamberlain.

CHAPTER 37 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1–2. *And Jacob dwelled in the land of . . . Canaan. This is the lineage of Jacob*. The aptness of these verses as a transition from the genealogy of Esau to the story of Joseph is nicely observed by Abraham ibn Ezra: "The text reports that the chieftains of Esau dwelled in the high country of Seir and Jacob dwelled in the Chosen Land. And the meaning of 'This is the lineage of Jacob' is, 'These are the events that happened to him and the incidents that befell him.'" Ibn Ezra's remark demonstrates that there is no need to attach these two verses to the end of the preceding genealogy, as some modern scholars have argued. The writer exploits the flexibility of the Hebrew *toledot,* a term that can equally refer to genealogical list and to story, in order to line up the beginning of the Joseph story with the *toledot* passage that immediately precedes it.

2. *assisting.* The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "he was a lad with the sons of Bilhah." But the Hebrew for "lad," *naʿar,* has a secondary meaning, clearly salient here, of assistant or subaltern. The adolescent Joseph is working as a kind of apprentice shepherd with his older brothers.

brought ill report. The first revelation of Joseph's character suggests a spoiled younger child who is a tattletale. The next revelation, in the dreams, intimates adolescent narcissism, even if the grandiosity eventually is justified by events.

3. *And Israel loved Joseph . . . for he was the child of his old age*. The explanation is a little odd, both because the fact that Joseph is the son of the beloved Rachel is unmentioned and because it is the last-born Benjamin who is the real child of Jacob's old age. It is noteworthy that Jacob's favoritism toward Joseph is mentioned immediately after the report of questionable behavior on Joseph's part. One recalls that Jacob was the object of his mother's unexplained favoritism.

an ornamented tunic. The only clue about the nature of the garment is offered by the one other mention of it in the Bible, in the story of the rape of

Tamar (2 Samuel 13), in which, incidentally, there is a whole network of pointed allusions to the Joseph story. There we are told that the *ketonet pasim* was worn by virgin princesses. It is thus a unisex garment and a product of ancient haute couture. E. A. Speiser cites a cuneiform text with an apparently cognate phrase that seems to indicate a tunic with appliqué ornamentation. Other scholars have pointed to a fourteenth-century B.C.E. Egyptian fresco showing captive Canaanite noblemen adorned with tunics made of longitudinal panels sewed together.

5. *And Joseph dreamed.* As has often been noted, the dreams in the Joseph story reflect its more secular orientation in comparison with the preceding narratives in Genesis. They are not direct messages from God, like His appearance in the dream-visions to Abimelech and to Jacob: they may be literally portentous, but they require human interpretation (here the meaning is obvious enough), and they may also express the hidden desires and self-perception of the dreamer.

6. *Listen, pray, to this dream that I dreamed.* In keeping with the rule about the revelatory force of a character's first words, this whole speech shows us a young Joseph who is self-absorbed, blithely assuming everyone will be fascinated by the details of his dreams.

7. *And, look.* It is standard technique for the dreamer reporting his dream to use the presentative *hineh,* "look," to introduce what he has "seen" in the dream. But Joseph repeats the term three times in a single sentence, betraying his own wide-eyed amazement, and perhaps his naïveté. The same attitude is reflected in his exclamatory "arose and actually stood up."

8. *for his dreams and for his words.* It is misguided to construe this as a hendiadys ("for speaking about his dreams") since the sharp point is that they hated him both for having such dreams and for insisting on talking about them.

9. *And he dreamed yet another dream.* Later (41:32) we shall learn that the doubling of the dream is a sign that what it portends will really happen, but it should also be observed that doublets are a recurrent principle of organization in the Joseph story, just as binary divisions are an organizing principle in the Jacob story. Joseph and Pharaoh have double dreams; the chief butler and the

chief baker dream their pair of seemingly parallel, actually antithetical dreams. Joseph is first flung into a pit and later into the prison-house. The brothers make two trips down to Egypt, with one of their number seemingly at risk on each occasion. And their descent to Egypt with goods and silver mirrors the descent of the merchant caravan, bearing the same items, that first brought Joseph down to Egypt.

the sun and the moon and eleven stars. Both Hermann Gunkel and Gerhard von Rad have proposed that the eleven stars are actually the eleven constellations known in the ancient Near East, but these should then be twelve, not eleven, and at least in the biblical record, knowledge of definite constellations is reflected only in postexilic literature. The two parallel dreams operate on different levels of intensity. The agricultural setting of the first one reflects the actual setting—Freud's "day's residue"—in which Joseph does his dreaming, and so is attached to the first part of the story, even if the brothers detect in it aspirations to regal grandeur. The second dream shifts the setting upward to the heavens and in this way is an apt adumbration of the brilliant sphere of the Egyptian imperial court over which Joseph will one day preside. From a strict monotheistic view, the second dream teeters on the brink of blasphemy.

10. *I and your mother.* This particular episode seems to assume, in flat contradiction of the preceding narrative, that Rachel is still alive, though Benjamin has already been born (there are eleven brothers in the dream bowing to Joseph). Attempts to rescue consistency on the ground that dreams may contain incoherent elements are unconvincing, because it is a perfectly lucid Jacob who assumes here that Rachel is still alive.

12. *Shechem.* As several medieval commentators note, Shechem has already been linked with disaster in these stories.

14. *the valley of Hebron.* The validity of this designation can be defended only through ingenious explanation because Hebron stands on a height.

15. *And a man found him.* The specificity of this exchange with an unnamed stranger is enigmatic. Efforts to see the "man" as an angel or messenger of fate have little textual warrant. What it is safe to say is that the question and answer in a field outside Shechem reinforce the sense that Joseph is being directed, unwitting, to a disastrous encounter.

17. *for I heard them.* The Masoretic Text has only "I heard," but several ancient versions supply the *mem* suffix to the verb that would indicate "them" as its object.

19. *that dream-master.* Although time-honored tradition renders this in English simply as "dreamer," the Hebrew term baʿal haḥ*alomot* is stronger, and thus in context more sarcastic. The *baʿal* component suggests someone who has a special proprietary relation to, or mastery of, the noun that follows it.

20. *let us kill him and fling him into one of the pits.* The flinging after the killing underscores the naked brutality of the brothers' intentions. The denial of proper burial was among the Hebrews, as among the Greeks, deeply felt as an atrocity.

21–22. *We must not take his life. . . . Shed no blood.* Reuben eschews the two verbs for killing used respectively by the narrator and the brothers and instead invokes language echoing the primal taboo against taking—literally, "striking down"—life and spilling human blood (compare the powerful prohibition in 9:6). In the event, the substitute blood of the slaughtered kid will figure prominently in the brothers' course of action.

Fling him into this pit. At the same time, Reuben tries not to contradict the violence of his brothers' feelings toward Joseph and uses the same phrase, to fling him into a pit, with the crucial difference that in his proposal it is a live Joseph who will be cast into the pit. This is precisely the verb used for Hagar (21:15) when she flings Ishmael under a bush in the wilderness.

23. *his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he had on him.* Only now do we learn that Joseph has the bad judgment to wear on his errand the garment that was the extravagant token of his father's favoritism. Thus he provokes the brothers' anger, and they strip him—not part of their original plan—and thus take hold of what will be made into the false evidence of his death as their plan changes.

24. *they . . . flung him into the pit*. Contrary to the original plan, they do not kill him straightaway. Perhaps they have decided instead to let him perish trapped in the pit.

the pit was empty, there was no water in it. Deep cisterns of this sort—too deep to climb out of—were commonly used for water storage.

25. *Ishmaelites.* This is a generic term for the seminomadic traders of Arab stock whose homeland was east of the Jordan, but it is also an anachronism, since at the time of the story, the eponymous Ishmael, the great-uncle of the twelve brothers, was still alive (though he would be near the end of his 127-year life span), and the only "Ishmaelites" would be their second cousins.

gum and balm and ladanum. The precise identity of these plant extracts used for medicinal purposes and as perfume is in doubt, but it is clear that they are costly export items.

26. *What gain is there if we kill our brother and cover up his blood?* Judah's argument for sparing Joseph's life—which most scholars regard as the manifestation of an originally different version of the story from the one in which the firstborn Reuben tries to save Joseph—is based on the consideration of gain, not on the horror of the taboo against shedding blood that Reuben invokes. To cover up blood means to conceal bloodguilt.

27. *for he is our brother, our own flesh.* It is, of course, a dubious expression of brotherhood to sell someone into the ignominy and perilously uncertain future of slavery.

28. *And Midianite merchantmen . . . pulled Joseph up out of the pit and sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites*. This is the one signal moment when the two literary strands out of which the story is woven seem awkwardly spliced. Up to this point, no Midianites have been mentioned. Elsewhere, Midianites and Ishmaelites appear to be terms from different periods designating the selfsame people (compare Judges 8:22 and 24), so the selling of Joseph to the Ishmaelites looks like a strained attempt to blend two versions that respectively used the two different terms. And the Midianite intervention contradicts the just stated intention of the brothers to pull Joseph out of the pit themselves and sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites for profit.

29. *And Reuben came back to the pit.* The contradiction between the two versions continues, since one is driven to assume that Reuben was not present at the fraternal meal during which the selling of Joseph was discussed, though there is no textual indication of his absence.

30. *The boy is gone.* The Hebrew says literally, "the boy is not." The phrase could be a euphemism for death or could merely indicate disappearance. It is a crucial ambiguity the brothers themselves will exploit much later in the story.

31. *slaughtered a kid and dipped the tunic in blood.* Jacob had used both a slaughtered kid and a garment in the deception he perpetrated on his own father.

32. *they sent . . . and had it brought.* The brothers operate indirectly, through the agency of a messenger, letting the doctored evidence of the blood-soaked tunic speak for itself.

Recognize. When the disguised Jacob deceived his father, we were told, "he did not recognize him."

33. *And he recognized it, and he said . . . "A vicious beast has devoured him*." Jacob's paternal anxiety turns him into the puppet of his sons' plotting. Not only does he at once draw the intended false conclusion, but he uses the very words of their original plan, "a vicious beast has devoured him." It is noteworthy that his cry of grief takes the form of a line of formal verse, a kind of compact elegy that jibes with the mourning rituals which follow it.

33–35. All this language of mourning and grieving suggests a certain extravagance, perhaps something histrionic. As the next verse tersely indicates, at the very moment Jacob is bewailing his purportedly dead son, Joseph is sold into the household of a high Egyptian official.

36. *Pharaoh's courtier, the high chamberlain.* The word for "courtier" in other contexts can also mean "eunuch," but the evidence suggests that the original use was as the title of a court official and that the sense of "eunuch" became associated with the term secondarily because of an occasional Mesopotamian practice of placing eunuchs in court positions. (The Hebrew *saris* is a loanword from the Akkadian *sa resi,* "royal official.") The second title attached to Potiphar is associated with a root involving slaughter and in consequence sometimes with cooking (hence the "chief steward" or, alternately, "chief executioner" of various English versions). The actual responsibilities of this high imperial post remain unclear.

CHAPTER 38

[1]And it happened at this time that Judah went down
from his brothers and pitched his tent by an
Adullamite named Hirah. [2]And Judah saw there the
daughter of a Canaanite man named Shua, and he took
her and came to bed with her. [3]And she conceived and
bore a son and called his name Er. [4]And she conceived
again and bore a son and called his name Onan. [5]And
she bore still another son and called his name Shelah,
and he was at Chezib when she bore him. [6]And Judah
took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was
Tamar. [7]And Er, Judah's firstborn, was evil in the eyes
of the LORD, and the LORD put him to death. [8]And
Judah said to Onan, "Come to bed with your brother's
wife and do your duty as brother-in-law for her and
raise up seed for your brother." [9]And Onan knew that
the seed would not be his and so when he would come
to bed with his brother's wife, he would waste his seed
on the ground, so to give no seed to his brother. [10]And
what he did was evil in the eyes of the LORD, and He
put him to death as well. [11]And Judah said to Tamar

his daughter-in-law, “Stay a widow in your father’s house until Shelah my son is grown up,” for he thought, Lest he, too, die like his brothers. And Tamar went and stayed at her father’s house.

12 And a long time passed and the daughter of Shua, Judah’s wife, died, and after the mourning period Judah went up to his sheepshearers, he with Hirah the Adullamite his friend, to Timnah. 13 And Tamar was told, saying, “Look, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep.” 14 And she took off her widow’s garb and covered herself with a veil and wrapped herself and sat by the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah, for she saw that Shelah had grown up and she had not been given to him as wife. 15 And Judah saw her and he took her for a whore, for she had covered her face. 16 And he turned aside to her by the road and said, “Here, pray, let me come to bed with you,” for he knew not that she was his daughter-in-law. And she said, “What will you give me for coming to bed with me?” 17 And he said, “I personally will send a kid from the flock.” And she said, “Only if you give a pledge till you send it.” 18 And he said, “What pledge shall I give you?” And she said, “Your seal-and-cord, and the staff in your hand.” And

he gave them to her and he came to bed with her and she conceived by him. [19]And she rose and went her way and took off the veil she was wearing and put on her widow's garb. [20]And Judah sent the kid by the hand of his friend the Adullamite to take back the pledge from the woman's hand, and he did not find her. [21]And he asked the men of the place saying, "Where is the cult-harlot, the one at Enaim by the road?" And they said, "There has been no cult-harlot here." [22]And he returned to Judah and said, "I could not find her, and the men of the place said as well, 'There has been no cult-harlot here.'" [23]And Judah said, "Let her take them, lest we be a laughingstock. Look, I sent this kid and you could not find her."

[24]And it happened about three months later that Judah was told, saying, "Tamar your daughter-in-law has played the whore and what's more, she's conceived by her whoring." And Judah said, "Take her out to be burned." [25]Out she was taken, when she sent to her father-in-law, saying, "By the man to whom these belong I have conceived," and she said, "Recognize, pray, whose are this seal-and-cord and this staff?" [26]And Judah recognized them and he said, "She is more in the right than I, for have I not failed to give

her to Shelah, my son?” And he knew her again no more.

[27]And it happened at the time she gave birth that, look, there were twins in her womb. [28]And it happened as she gave birth that one put out his hand and the midwife took it and bound a scarlet thread on his hand, to say, this one came out first. [29]And as he was drawing back his hand, look, out came his brother, and she said, “What a breach you have made for yourself!” And she called his name Perez. [30]And afterward out came his brother, on whose hand was the scarlet thread, and she called his name Zerah.

CHAPTER 38 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And it happened at this time*. The formulaic indication of time is deliberately vague. The entire story of Judah and the sons he begets spans more than twenty years. It reads as though it began after the moment Joseph is sold down to Egypt, but the larger chronology of the Joseph story and the descent into Egypt suggests that the first phase of this story about Judah may considerably antedate Joseph’s enslavement. Many readers have sensed this tale of Judah and Tamar as an “interruption” of the Joseph story, or, at best, as a means of building suspense about Joseph’s fate in Egypt. In fact, there is an intricate network of connections with what precedes and what follows, as close attention to the details of the text will reveal.

went down. The verb is justified by topography because Judah is coming down from the hill country to the eastern edge of the coastal plain inhabited by the Canaanites. But "going down" is also the verb used for travel to Egypt (compare the end of verse 25 in the preceding chapter), and the next episode, which returns to the Joseph story, will begin with the words, "And Joseph was brought down to Egypt."

3. *she . . . called*. The Masoretic Text has "he called," but the more likely naming of the child by the mother, as in verse 4, is supported by several manuscript traditions.

7. *And Er, Judah's firstborn, was evil in the eyes of the* LORD. The nature of his moral failing remains unspecified, but given the insistent pattern of reversal of primogeniture in all these stories, it seems almost sufficient merely to be firstborn in order to incur God's displeasure: though the firstborn is not necessarily evil, he usually turns out to be obtuse, rash, wild, or otherwise disqualified from carrying on the heritage. It is noteworthy that Judah, who invented the lie that triggered his own father's mourning for a dead son, is bereaved of two sons in rapid sequence. In contrast to Jacob's extravagant grief, nothing is said about Judah's emotional response to the losses.

8. *do your duty as brother-in-law.* In the Hebrew, this is a single verb, *yabem,* referring to the so-called levirate marriage. The legal obligation of *yibum,* which was a widespread practice in the ancient Near East, was incurred when a man died leaving his wife childless. His closest brother in order of birth was obliged to become his proxy, "raising up seed" for him by impregnating his widow. The dead brother would thus be provided a kind of biological continuity, and the widow would be able to produce progeny, which was a woman's chief avenue of fulfillment in this culture.

9. *the seed would not be his.* Evidently, Onan is troubled by the role of sexual proxy, which creates a situation in which the child he begets will be legally considered his dead brother's offspring.

he would waste his seed on the ground. Despite the confusion engendered by the English term "onanism" that derives from this text, the activity referred to is almost certainly *coitus interruptus*—as Rashi vividly puts it, "threshing within, winnowing without."

11. *Stay a widow in your father's house.* The childless Tamar is not only neglected but must submit to a form of social disgrace in having to return to her father's house after having been twice married. Since enough time elapses for Shelah to grow from prepuberty to at least late adolescence (see verse 14), this period of enforced return to the status of an unmarried daughter proves to be a very long one. Amos Funkenstein has observed to me that Tamar remains silent in the face of her father-in-law's condemnation, saying nothing of Onan's sexual aberration and leaving Judah to suppose that the death of both sons is somehow her fault. And although he banishes her to her father's house, she evidently remains under his legal jurisdiction, as his issuing of a death sentence against her (verse 24) indicates.

12. *after the mourning period.* The Hebrew says literally, "and Judah was consoled," a verb that may refer to actual feelings or to the simple end of the prescribed period of mourning. Either way, we pick up the antithetical echo of Jacob's refusal of consolation at the end of the previous chapter. The death of Judah's wife and the ensuing mourning set up the condition of sexual neediness that motivates his encounter with Tamar.

sheepshearers. As we know from elsewhere in the Bible, sheepshearing was the occasion for elaborate festivities, with abundant food and drink. In this way, Judah's going up to join his sheepshearers is itself an indication that he is done with the rites of mourning and is perhaps in a holiday mood. The verb twice used for this journey is to "go up," the complementary opposite of the going down with which the chapter begins.

14. *sat by the entrance to Enaim.* If, as is quite likely, this place-name means "Twin Wells," we probably have here a kind of wry allusion to the betrothal type-scene: the bridegroom encountering his future spouse by a well in a foreign land. One wonders whether the two wells might resonate with her two marriages, or with the twins she will bear. In any case, instead of a feast and the conclusion of a betrothal agreement, here we have a brusque goods-for-services business dialogue, followed by sex.

16. *Here, pray, let me come to bed with you.* Despite the particle of entreaty *na'*, "pray," this is brutally direct: there is no preface of polite greeting to the woman, and the Hebrew idiom, repeatedly used in this story, says literally,

"let me come into you." Judah's sexual importunacy becomes a background of contrast for Joseph's sexual restraint in the next chapter.

What will you give me for coming to bed with me? Tamar is careful to speak in character with her role as a roadside whore, but as the events unfold, it becomes clear that she also has an ulterior consideration in mind.

17. *a kid from the flock.* Though this is plausible enough payment coming from a prosperous pastoralist in a barter culture, it also picks up the motif of the slaughtered kid whose blood was used by Judah and his brothers to deceive Jacob (as Jacob before them used a kid to deceive his father). This connection was aptly perceived a millennium and a half ago in the Midrash Bereishit Rabba. The other material element in the brothers' deception of their father was a garment; Tamar uses a garment—the whore's dress and veil—to deceive her father-in-law.

Only if you give a pledge. Tamar is not only bold and enterprising in getting for herself the justice Judah has denied her but also very shrewd: she realizes it is crucial for her to retain evidence of the paternity of the child she may conceive.

18. *Your seal-and-cord, and the staff in your hand.* The seal was a cylinder seal attached to a cord and usually worn around the neck. Rolled over documents incised in clay, it would be the means of affixing a kind of self-notarized signature. It is less clear that the staff had a legal function, though of course in political contexts it is a symbol of authority. Tamar's stipulated pledge, then, is an extravagant one: taking the instruments of Judah's legal identity and social standing is something like taking a person's driver's license and credit cards in modern society.

he gave them to her and he came to bed with her and she conceived by him. The rapid chain of verbs suggests the pragmatically focused nature of the transaction for both participants. The last of the three verbs reveals that Tamar gets exactly what she has aimed for.

20. *by the hand . . . the woman's hand*. As elsewhere, the physical concreteness of the terms of the narrative is salient: Hirah brings in his hand a kid in order to take back the pledge from the hand of the roadside whore. Since she remains anonymous for Judah, the narrator is careful to refer to her here as "the woman" rather than by name.

21. *the place.* The Masoretic Text has "her place," but the more plausible "the place," as in the next verse, is supported by several of the ancient versions.

the cult-harlot. Hirah substitutes the more decorous term *qedeshah,* a woman who practices ritual prostitution in a fertility cult, for the narrator's frank *zonah,* "whore."

23. *Let her take them, lest we be a laughingstock.* Let her keep the pledge, and we will keep our mouths shut, lest it become known that I have given such valuable objects for a fleeting pleasure. Abraham ibn Ezra shrewdly observes: "In his great lust, he gave three [precious] things for a trivial thing."

24. *played the whore . . . conceived by her whoring*. The very term that Hirah fastidiously avoided is twice thrust into Judah's attention, *zantah* (played the whore) and *zenunim* (whoring).

And Judah said, "Take her out to be burned." The precipitous speed of Judah's judgment, without the slightest reflection or call for evidence, is breathtaking. The peremptory character of the death sentence—and burning was reserved in biblical law only for the most atrocious crimes—is even more evident in the Hebrew, where Judah's decree consists of only two words, a verb in the imperative ("take-her-out") followed by "that-she-beburned," *hotsiʾuha wetisaref*.

25. *Out she was taken.* There is no pause between the enunciation of the death sentence and the beginning of its implementation. This speed is highlighted grammatically in the Hebrew by the unusual use of a passive present participle (cognate with "take her out")—*hiʾmutsʾeit,* literally, "she is-being-taken-out."

when she sent . . . "Recognize, pray." Like a trap suddenly springing closed, the connection with the preceding story of the deception of Jacob is now fully realized. In precise correspondence to Judah and his brothers, Tamar "sends" evidence—in this case, true evidence—to argue her case. Like them, she confronts the father figure with the imperative, "Recognize, pray" (*haker-naʾ*)—this echo, too, was picked up by the Midrash—and, like his father, Judah is compelled to acknowledge that he recognizes what has been brought to him.

26. *She is more in the right than I.* The verb used, *tsadaq,* is a legal term: it is she who has presented the convincing evidence. But in the next clause Judah

also concedes that he has behaved unjustly toward Tamar, so that in a sense her taking the law into her own hands, however unconventional the act, is vindicated by his words.

27–30. The twins of course recall Jacob and Esau and the whole chain of paired brothers struggling over the right of the firstborn. Zerah, sticking his hand out first, seems to be the firstborn, but he is overtaken by Perez, who makes a "breach" or "bursts forth" (the meaning of the Hebrew *Perets*). Tamar seems to address the energetic newborn in a tone of wondering affection in the exclamation she pronounces as preface to naming him. Again, the Masoretic Text has "he called his name," but the reading of several of the ancient versions, "she called," makes much better sense. Perez will become the progenitor of the kings of Judah. The name Zerah means "shining," as in the dawning of the sun, and so is linked with the scarlet thread on his hand. The scarlet in turn associates Zerah with Esau-the-Red, another twin displaced from his initial position as firstborn.

CHAPTER 39

[1]And Joseph was brought down to Egypt, and
Potiphar, courtier of Pharaoh, the high chamberlain,
an Egyptian man, bought him from the hands of the
Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. [2]And
the LORD was with Joseph and he was a successful
man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master.
[3]And his master saw that the LORD was with him, and
all that he did the LORD made succeed in his hand,
[4]and Joseph found favor in his eyes and he ministered
to him, and he put him in charge of his house, and all
that he had he placed in his hands. [5]And it happened
from the time he put him in charge of his house and of
all he had, that the LORD had blessed the Egyptian's
house for Joseph's sake and the LORD's blessing was
on all that he had in house and field. [6]And he left all
that he had in Joseph's hands, and he gave no thought
to anything with him there save the bread he ate. And
Joseph was comely in features and comely to look at.

[7]And it happened after these things that his master's
wife raised her eyes to Joseph and said, "Lie with me."
[8]And he refused. And he said to his master's wife,
"Look, my master has given no thought with me here
to what is in the house, and all that he has he has
placed in my hands. [9]He is not greater in this house
than I, and he has held back nothing from me except
you, as you are his wife, and how could I do this great
evil and give offense to God?" [10]And so she spoke to
Joseph day after day, and he would not listen to her, to
lie by her, to be with her. [11]And it happened, on one
such day, that he came into the house to perform his
task, and there was no man of the men of the house
there in the house. [12]And she seized him by his
garment, saying, "Lie with me." And he left his
garment in her hand and he fled and went out. [13]And
so, when she saw that he had left his garment in her
hand and fled outside, [14]she called out to the people of
the house and said to them, saying, "See, he has
brought us a Hebrew man to play with us. He came
into me to lie with me and I called out in a loud voice,
[15]and so, when he heard me raise my voice and call
out, he left his garment by me and fled and went out."
[16]And she laid out his garment by her until his master
returned to his house. [17]And she spoke to him things of
this sort, saying, "The Hebrew slave came into me,

whom you brought us, to play with me. [18]And so, when I raised my voice and called out, he left his garment by me and fled outside." [19]And it happened, when his master heard his wife's words which she spoke to him, saying, "Things of this sort your slave has done to me," he became incensed. [20]And Joseph's master took him and placed him in the prison-house, the place where the king's prisoners were held.

[21]And he was there in the prison-house, and God was with Joseph and extended kindness to him, and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison-house warden. [22]And the prison-house warden placed in Joseph's hands all the prisoners who were in the prison-house, and all that they were to do there, it was he who did it. [23]The prison-house warden had to see to nothing that was in his hands, as the LORD was with him, and whatever he did, the LORD made succeed.

CHAPTER 39 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

This chapter is the most elegantly symmetrical episode in Genesis. It comprises an introductory narrative frame (verses 1–6), a closing frame (20–23) that elaborately echoes the introductory verses, and the central story of

the failed seduction, which is intricately linked to the framing verses by a network of recurring thematic key words.

1. *an Egyptian man.* This slightly odd designation of the high chamberlain might perhaps be used here in order to be played off against the derogatory identification of Joseph as "a Hebrew man" in verse 14. The household staff are also referred to as "men" (see verse 11), although that plural form can include both sexes, which it probably does when the mistress calls in the "people of the house" in verse 14, as she will go on to stress their collective sexual vulnerability to the Hebrew intruder.

2–6. The thematic key words, emphatically repeated in phrase after phrase, are: "all," "hand," "house," "blessing," "succeed"—the last two terms being the manifestation of the reiterated "the LORD was with Joseph."

2. *master.* Only in the introductory verse is Potiphar referred to by name. Afterward he is designated consistently as Joseph's master. Although the source critics may be right in attributing this difference between verse 1 and the rest of the chapter to a difference in literary strands, the stylistic peculiarity of referring to Joseph's lord only by role serves the thematic purpose of constantly highlighting the master-slave relationship and the concomitant issue of trust and stewardship.

6. *And Joseph was comely in features and comely to look at.* These are exactly the words used to describe Joseph's mother in 29:17. They signal an unsettling of the perfect harmony of Joseph's divinely favored stewardship—that comprehensive management of "all" that is in the "house"—as they provide the motivation for the sexual campaign of his mistress.

7. *Lie with me.* The extraordinary bluntness of this sexual imperative—two words in the Hebrew—makes it one of the most striking instances of revelatory initial dialogue in the Bible. Against her two words, the scandalized (and perhaps nervous) Joseph will issue a breathless response that runs to thirty-five words in the Hebrew. It is a remarkable deployment of the technique of contrastive dialogue repeatedly used by the biblical writers to define the differences between characters in verbal confrontation.

8. *in the house . . . all that he has . . . placed in my hands*. Joseph's protestation invokes the key terms "house," "all," "hand" of the introductory frame, reminding us of the total trust given him as steward.

10. *to lie by her.* The narrator, by altering the preposition, somewhat softens the bluntness of the mistress's sexual proposition. This led Abraham ibn Ezra to imagine that she adopted the stratagem of inviting Joseph merely to lie down in bed next to her.

12. *she seized him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me."* The two-word sexual command, which is all she is ever reported saying to Joseph, is now translated from words into aggressive action. "Garment" (*beged*) is a generic term. It is certainly not an outside garment or "coat," as E. A. Speiser has it, though the Revised English Bible's "loincloth" probably goes too far in the opposite direction. In any case, Joseph would be naked, or nearly naked, when he runs off leaving the garment behind in her grasping hand.

13. The narrator repeats the terms of the preceding sentence both in order to build up momentary suspense—what will she do now?—and in order to review the crucial evidence and sequence of events, which she is about to change.

14. *he has brought us a Hebrew man to play with us.* Rather contemptuously, she refers to her husband neither by name nor title. The designation "Hebrew" is common when the group is referred to in contradistinction to other peoples, but it may well have had pejorative associations for Egyptians. "Play" can mean sexual dalliance or mockery, and probably means both here. "Us" suggests they all could have been game for this lascivious—or, mocking—barbarian from the north and is an obvious attempt on her part to enlist their sense of Egyptian solidarity. She is probably suggesting that the very supremacy of this foreigner in the household is an insult to them all.

He came into me. She plays shrewdly on a double meaning. Though all she is saying is that he came into the house, or chamber, where she was alone, the idiom in other contexts can mean to consummate sexual relations. (It is the expression that in sexual contexts is rendered in this translation as "come to bed with.")

15. *when he heard me raise my voice.* We, of course, have been twice informed that the raising of the voice came after the flight, as a strategy for coping with it, and not before the flight as its cause.

he left his garment by me. She substitutes the innocent "by me" for the narrator's "in her hand." A verbal spotlight is focused on this central evidentiary fact that she alters because of the earlier "left all that he had in Joseph's hands" (the Hebrew actually uses the singular "hand"), and we are repeatedly informed that trust was placed in his hand. Now we have a literal leaving of something in *her* hand, which she changes to by her side.

16. *she laid out his garment by her.* She carefully sets out the evidence for the frame-up. This is, of course, the second time that Joseph has been stripped of his garment, and the second time the garment is used as evidence for a lie.

17. *The Hebrew slave came into me.* Talking to her husband, she refers to Joseph as "slave," not "man," in order to stress the outrageous presumption of the slave's alleged assault on his mistress. She avoided the term "slave" when addressing the household staff because they, too, are slaves. Again, she uses the ambiguous phrase that momentarily seems to say that Joseph consummated the sexual act.

whom you brought us, to play with me. The accusation of her husband in her words to the people of the house is modulated into a studied ambiguity. The syntax—there is of course no punctuation in the Hebrew—could be construed either with a clear pause after "brought us," or as a rebuke, "you brought us to play with me."

19. *Things of this sort your slave has done to me.* Rashi is no doubt fanciful in imagining that the first words here are to be explained by the fact that she is talking to her husband in the midst of lovemaking, but the comment does get into the spirit of her wifely manipulativeness.

20. *the prison-house.* The reiterated Hebrew term for prison, *beyt sohar,* occurs only here. It should be noted that the term includes a "house" component which helps establish a link with the opening frame and the tale of attempted seduction. Joseph, though cast down once more, is again in a "house" where he will take charge.

And he was there in the prison-house. The division of the text follows the proposal of the nineteenth-century Italian Hebrew scholar S. D. Luzatto in

attaching these words to the concluding frame. In this way, the last part of verse 20 together with verse 21 becomes a perfect mirror image of verse 2.

21–23. The great rhythm of Joseph's destiny of successful stewardship now reasserts itself as the language of the introductory frame is echoed here at the end: "God was with Joseph," "granted him favor in the eyes of," "placed in Joseph's hands," "all," and, as the summarizing term at the very conclusion of the narrative unit, "succeed."

CHAPTER 40

[1]And it happened after these things that the cupbearer
of the king of Egypt and his baker gave offense to
their lord, the king of Egypt. [2]And Pharaoh was
furious with his two courtiers, the chief cupbearer and
the chief baker. [3]And he put them under guard in the
house of the high chamberlain, the prison-house, the
place where Joseph was held. [4]And the high
chamberlain assigned Joseph to them and he
ministered to them, and they stayed a good while
under guard.

[5]And the two of them dreamed a dream, each his own
dream, on a single night, each a dream with its own
solution—the cupbearer and the baker to the king of
Egypt who were held in the prison-house. [6]And Joseph
came to them in the morning and saw them and, look,
they were frowning. [7]And he asked Pharaoh's courtiers
who were with him under guard in his lord's house,
saying, "Why are your faces downcast today?" [8]And

they said to him, “We dreamed a dream and there is
no one to solve it.” And Joseph said to them, “Are not
solutions from God? Pray, recount them to me.” 9And
the chief cupbearer recounted his dream to Joseph and
said to him, “In my dream—and look, a vine was
before me. 10And on the vine were three tendrils, and
as it was budding, its blossom shot up, its clusters
ripened to grapes. 11And Pharaoh’s cup was in my
hand. And I took the grapes and crushed them into
Pharaoh’s cup and I placed the cup in Pharaoh’s
palm.” 12And Joseph said, “This is its solution. The
three tendrils are three days. 13Three days hence
Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your
place, and you will put Pharaoh’s cup in his hand, as
you used to do when you were his cupbearer. 14But if
you remember I was with you once it goes well for
you, do me the kindness, pray, to mention me to
Pharaoh and bring me out of this house. 15For indeed I
was stolen from the land of the Hebrews, and here,
too, I have done nothing that I should have been put in
the pit.” 16And the chief baker saw that he had solved
well, and he said to Joseph, “I, too, in my dream—and
look, there were three openwork baskets on my head,
17and in the topmost were all sorts of food for Pharaoh,
baker’s ware, and birds were eating from the basket
over my head.” 18And Joseph answered and said, “This

is its solution. The three baskets are three days.
19Three days hence Pharaoh will lift up your head from
upon you and impale you on a pole and the birds will
eat your flesh from upon you."

20And it happened on the third day, Pharaoh's
birthday, that he made a feast for all his servants, and
he lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer and the
head of the chief baker in the midst of his servants.
21And he restored the chief cupbearer to his
cupbearing, and he put the cup in Pharaoh's hand;
22and the chief baker he impaled—just as Joseph had
solved it for them. 23But the chief cupbearer did not
remember Joseph, no, he forgot him.

CHAPTER 40 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

4. *And the high chamberlain assigned Joseph to them and he ministered to them*. The source critics take this as a flat contradiction of the end of chapter 39, where Joseph is appointed as general supervisor of the prison, serving as a kind of managing warden. But, in fact, Joseph's "ministering" to the two courtiers need not imply a menial role. These two prisoners had occupied important places in the court, and Pharaoh may yet pardon them, so it makes perfect sense that they should be singled out for special treatment in prison, to be attended personally by the warden's right-hand man. There is another seeming discrepancy with the preceding report of Joseph's incarceration: there, the prison was run by a prison warden (*sar beyt hasohar*) whereas here

it is governed by the high chamberlain (*sar hatabaḥim*), the title assigned to Potiphar himself at the beginning of chapter 39. But it is easy enough to imagine the high chamberlain as a kind of minister of justice, bureaucratically responsible for the royal prisons, with the warden answering to him.

5. *solution.* Although a long tradition of translations opts for "interpretation" here, the Hebrew verb *patar* and its cognate noun suggest decipherment (compare the related term *pesher* used in the Dead Sea Scrolls). There is one conclusive decoding for every dream, and a person who is granted insight can break the code.

6. *they were frowning.* The Hebrew *zoʿafim* can refer either to a grim mood or to the grim facial expression that it produces. Because both the narrative report in this verse and Joseph's words in the next verse make clear that he sees something is wrong when he looks at their faces, this translation opts for facial expression, against all the previous English versions.

8. *Are not solutions from God?* Joseph in Egyptian captivity remains a good Hebrew monotheist. In Egypt, the interpretation of dreams was regarded as a science, and formal instruction in techniques of dream interpretation was given in schools called "houses of life." Joseph is saying, then, to these two high-ranking Egyptians that no trained hermeneut of the oneiric—no professional *poter*—is required; since God possesses the meanings of dreams, if He chooses, He will simply reveal the meanings to the properly attentive person. But one should note that Joseph immediately proceeds to ask the cupbearer to recount his dream, unhesitantly assuming that he, Joseph, is such a person whom God will favor with insight into the meaning of the dream.

10. *and as it was budding, its blossom shot up, its clusters ripened to grapes.* Like Joseph's pair of dreams, both these dreams are stylized, schematic, and nearly transparent in regard to meaning. The only item requiring any effort of interpretation is the three tendrils representing three days. (Numbers stand out in each of the three sets of dreams in the Joseph story—first twelve, here three, and then seven.) The one manifestly dreamlike element in the cupbearer's dream occurs at this point, when time is speeded up as he looks at the vine, and in a rapid blur the vine moves from bud to blossom to ripened grapes to wine.

13. *lift up your head.* As almost any reader of the Hebrew quickly sees, the biblical idiom, here rendered quite literally, is doubly punned on in the story. To lift up someone's head, in administrative and royal contexts, means to single out (as in a census), to invite, to grant favor or extend reconciliation (as when a monarch lifts up with a gesture the downcast head of a contrite subject). When Joseph addresses the baker in verse 19, he begins as though he were using the idiom in the same positive sense as here, but by adding "from upon you," he turns it into a reference to beheading, the first such reference in the Bible. In verse 20, when both courtiers are the object of the idiom, it is used in the neutral sense of "to single out."

15. *put in the pit.* In the previous verse, Joseph refers to the place of his incarceration as "this house" (invoking elliptically the "house" component of "prison-house"). Now he calls it a pit, perhaps because it is a kind of underground dungeon, but also to make us see the link with the empty cistern into which he was flung by his brothers—twice he has been put in a pit for what he must feel is no good reason.

17. *in the topmost . . . all sorts of food for Pharaoh . . . and birds were eating*. The cupbearer in his dream performs his normal court function, though at fast-forward speed. The baker executes a kind of bizarre parody of his normal function, balancing three baskets of bread one on top of the other. This precarious arrangement may imply, as Amos Funkenstein has proposed to me, a sense that the baker has been negligent in his duties. The pecking of birds at this tower of baked goods is of course an explicitly ominous element. The two dreams parallel Joseph's two dreams in that the first is anchored in an agricultural setting and involves harvesting while the second is oriented toward the sky above. But instead of the glorious celestial bodies, here we have the swooping down of ravenous birds from the sky.

19. *impale.* Despite the fact that the Hebrew verb generally means "to hang," hanging was not a common means of execution anywhere in the ancient Near East, and there is evidence elsewhere that the same verb was used for impalement, which was frequently practiced. The baker's dire fate would seem to be first decapitation and then exposure of the body on a high stake.

23. *did not remember Joseph, no, he forgot him.* The verb for remembering also means "to mention," and Joseph employs both senses of the root in his

words to the cupbearer in verse 14. Now, with the emphasis of synonymity (did not remember, forgot), attention is drawn to the cupbearer's failure to respond to the plea of the man who helped him in prison. It will take another pair of dreams—with which the next episode begins—to elicit that mention / remembering. It should also be kept in mind that remembering is central to the larger story of Joseph and his brothers. When he sees them again after more than twenty years of separation, this same crucial verb of memory, *zakhar,* will be invoked for him, and the complicated strategy he adopts for treating his brothers is a device for driving them into a painful process of moral memory.

CHAPTER 41

[1]And it happened at the end of two full years that
Pharaoh dreamed, and, look, he was standing by the
Nile. [2]And, look, out of the Nile came up seven cows,
fair to look at and fat in flesh, and they grazed in the
rushes. [3]And, look, another seven cows came up after
them out of the Nile, foul to look at and meager in
flesh, and stood by the cows on the bank of the Nile.
[4]And the foul-looking meager-fleshed cows ate up the
seven fair-looking fat cows, and Pharaoh awoke. [5]And
he slept and dreamed a second time, and, look, seven
ears of grain came up on a single stalk, fat and goodly.
[6]And, look, seven meager ears, blasted by the east
wind, sprouted after them. [7]And the meager ears
swallowed the seven fat and full ears, and Pharaoh
awoke, and, look, it was a dream. [8]And it happened in
the morning that his heart pounded, and he sent and
called in all the soothsayers of Egypt and all its wise
men, and Pharaoh recounted to them his dreams, but
none could solve them for Pharaoh. [9]And the chief
cupbearer spoke to Pharaoh, saying, “My offenses I

recall today. [10]Pharaoh had been furious with his servants and he placed me under guard in the house of the high chamberlain—me and the chief baker. [11]And we dreamed a dream on the same night, he and I, each of us dreamed a dream with its own solution. [12]And there with us was a Hebrew lad, a slave of the high chamberlain, and we recounted to him and he solved our dreams, each of us according to his dream he solved it. [13]And it happened just as he had solved it for us, so it came about—me he restored to my post and him he impaled."

[14]And Pharaoh sent and called for Joseph, and they hurried him from the pit, and he shaved and changed his garments and came before Pharaoh. [15]And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I dreamed a dream and none can solve it, and I have heard about you that you can understand a dream to solve it." [16]And Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying, "Not I! God will answer for Pharaoh's well-being." [17]And Pharaoh spoke to Joseph: "In my dream, here I was standing on the bank of the Nile, [18]and, look, out of the Nile came up seven cows fat in flesh and fair in feature, and they grazed in the rushes. [19]And, look, another seven cows came up after them, gaunt and very foul-featured and meager in flesh, I had

not seen their like in all the land of Egypt for foulness.
[20]And the meager, foul cows ate up the first seven fat
cows, [21]and they were taken into their bellies and you
could not tell that they had come into their bellies, for
their looks were as foul as before, and I woke. [22]And I
saw in my dream, and, look, seven ears of grain came
up on a single stalk, full and goodly. [23]And, look, seven
shriveled, meager ears, blasted by the east wind,
sprouted after them. [24]And the meager ears swallowed
the seven goodly ears, and I spoke to my soothsayers
and none could tell me the meaning." [25]And Joseph
said to Pharaoh, "Pharaoh's dream is one. What God
is about to do He has told Pharaoh. [26]The seven goodly
cows are seven years, and the seven ears of grain are
seven years. The dream is one. [27]And the seven meager
and foul cows who came up after them are seven
years, and the seven meager ears of grain, blasted by
the east wind, will be seven years of famine. [28]It is just
as I said to Pharaoh: what God is about to do He has
shown Pharaoh. [29]Look, seven years are coming of
great plenty through all the land of Egypt. [30]And seven
years of famine will arise after them and all the plenty
will be forgotten in the land of Egypt, and the famine
will ravage the land, [31]and you will not be able to tell
there was plenty in the land because of that famine
afterward, for it will be very grave. [32]And the repeating

of the dream to Pharaoh two times, this means that the thing has been fixed by God and God is hastening to do it. [33]And so, let Pharaoh look out for a discerning, wise man and set him over the land of Egypt. [34]Let Pharaoh do this: appoint overseers for the land and muster the land of Egypt in the seven years of plenty. [35]And let them collect all the food of these good years that are coming and let them pile up grain under Pharaoh's hand, food in the cities, to keep under guard. [36]And the food will be a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which will be in the land of Egypt, that the land may not perish in the famine." [37]And the thing seemed good in Pharaoh's eyes and in the eyes of his servants. [38]And Pharaoh said to his servants, "Could we find a man like him, in whom is the spirit of God?" [39]And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "After God has made known to you all this, there is none as discerning and wise as you. [40]You shall be over my house, and by your lips all my folk shall be guided. By the throne alone shall I be greater than you." [41]And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt." [42]And Pharaoh took off his ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand and had him clothed in fine linen clothes and placed the golden collar round his neck. [43]And he had him ride in the chariot of his viceroy, and they called out before him

Abrekh, setting him over all the land of Egypt. [44]And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I am Pharaoh! Without you no man shall raise hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.” [45]And Pharaoh called Joseph’s name Zaphenath-Paneah, and he gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, as wife, and Joseph went out over the land of Egypt.

[46]And Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh king of Egypt, and Joseph went out from Pharaoh’s presence and passed through all the land of Egypt. [47]And the land in the seven years of plenty made gatherings. [48]And he collected all the food of the seven years that were in the land of Egypt and he placed food in the cities, the food from the fields round each city he placed within it. [49]And Joseph piled up grain like the sand of the sea, very much, until he ceased counting, for it was beyond count.

[50]And to Joseph two sons were born before the coming of the year of famine, whom Asenath daughter of Potiphera priest of On bore him. [51]And Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh, meaning, God has released me from all the debt of my hardship, and of all my father’s house. [52]And the name of the second he

called Ephraim, meaning, God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.

53 And the seven years of the plenty that had been in
the land of Egypt came to an end. 54 And the seven
years of famine began to come, as Joseph had said,
and there was famine in all the lands, but in the land of
Egypt there was bread. 55 And all the land of Egypt was
hungry and the people cried out to Pharaoh for bread,
and Pharaoh said to all of Egypt, “Go to Joseph. What
he says to you, you must do.” 56 And the famine was
over all the land. And Joseph laid open whatever had
grain within and sold provisions to Egypt. And the
famine grew harsh in the land of Egypt. 57 And all the
earth came to Egypt, to Joseph, to get provisions, for
the famine had grown harsh in all the earth.

CHAPTER 41 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *at the end of two full years*. The Hebrew says literally “two years of days.” The expression might simply mean “two years’ time,” but it is equally plausible, as the King James Version surmised, that the addition of “days” emphasizes that a full period of two years has elapsed before the course of events compel the chief cupbearer to recall his neglected promise to Joseph.

by the Nile. Given the Nile’s importance as the source of Egypt’s fertility, it is appropriate that this dream of plenty and famine should take place on its

banks, a point made as long ago as the thirteenth century in Narbonne by the Hebrew exegete David Kimhi. As this story set in the pharaonic court unfolds, its Egyptian local color is brought out by a generous sprinkling of Egyptian loanwords in the Hebrew narrative: "Nile" (*ye'or*), "soothsayers" (*ḥartumim*), "rushes" (*'aḥu*), "ring" (*taba'at*), "fine linen" (*shesh*).

3. *and stood by the cows.* There is a small ominous note in the fact that the second set of seven cows do not graze in the rushes, as the first seven do, and as one would expect cows to do. In a moment, they will prove themselves carnivores.

4. *and Pharaoh awoke.* Although Pharaoh's dreams, like Joseph's, are quite stylized, the one element of psychological realism is his being shaken out of sleep by the nightmarish turn of the dream plot.

6. *blasted by the east wind.* The desert lies to the east, and the wind that blows from there (the *ḥamsin*) is hot and parching.

7. *And the meager ears swallowed the seven fat and full ears.* The nightmare image of carnivorous cows is intensified in the second dream by this depiction of devouring stalks of grain. The imagery of Pharaoh's second dream corresponds to the grain imagery of Joseph's first dream, but an act of depredation is substituted for the ritual of obeisance.

8. *his heart pounded.* The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "his spirit pounded."

none could solve them for Pharaoh. Since it is implausible to imagine that the soothsayers had no interpretation at all to offer, one must assume that none could offer a convincing decipherment, as Rashi observes: "they interpreted [the dreams] and he was dissatisfied with their interpretation, for they would say: seven daughters you will beget, seven daughters you will bury."

9. *I recall.* The verb means both "to mention" and "to cause to remember" and so is linked with the theme of remembrance and forgetting that is central both to this episode and to the larger Joseph story.

12. *a slave.* Although the Hebrew *ʿeved* is the same term the chief cupbearer has just used in the sense of "servant" (and which is used in verses 37 and 38 to refer to Pharaoh's courtiers), it is likely that he invokes it here to highlight Joseph's status as slave.

14. *and he shaved and changed his garments.* It is obvious that an imprisoned slave would have to make himself presentable before appearing in court, but, in keeping with the local color of the story, he does this in a distinctively Egyptian fashion. In the ancient Near East, only the Egyptians were cleanshaven, and the verb used here can equally refer to shaving the head, or close-cropping it, another distinctive Egyptian practice. The putting on of fresh garments is realistically motivated in the same way, but we are probably meant to recall that each of Joseph's descents into a pit was preceded by his being stripped of his garment. When Pharaoh elevates him to viceroy, he will undergo still another change of clothing, from merely presentable dress to aristocratic raiment.

15. *I have heard about you that you can understand a dream.* "Heard" and "understand" are the same verb (*shamaʿ*), which has both these senses, precisely like the French *entendre*. Although the second clause has often been construed as a kind of hyperbole—you need only hear a dream to reveal its meaning—the straightforward notion of understanding dreams makes better sense.

19. *gaunt and very foul-featured and meager in flesh, I had not seen their like in all the land of Egypt.* In keeping with the biblical convention of near verbatim repetition, Pharaoh, in recounting his dreams to Joseph, uses virtually the same words that the narrator used in first reporting them. The piquant difference, as Meir Sternberg (1985) has noted, is that his language underlines his own sense of horror at what he has seen in his dream: "foul to look at and meager in flesh" is elaborated and intensified in Pharaoh's repetition, and he adds the emphatic exclamation "I had not seen their like. . . ." (The phrase "in all the land of Egypt" will become a verbal motif to indicate the comprehensiveness of the plenty, of the famine, and of the measures that Joseph adopts.) The comment in verse 21 about the unchanging lean look of the cows after swallowing their fat predecessors again reflects Pharaoh's horrified perspective.

meager in flesh. Here, and again in verses 20 and 27, I read *daqot,* "meager," instead of the Masoretic *raqot* ("flat," or perhaps "hollow"). The Hebrew graphemes for *d* and *r* are similar in form, and several of the ancient versions reflect *daqot* in these verses.

24. *and none could tell me the meaning.* The Hebrew uses an ellipsis here, "and none could tell me."

25. *Pharaoh's dream is one.* Joseph, it should be observed, doesn't miss a beat here. The moment he has heard the dreams, he has everything in hand: the meaning of all their details, and the explanation for the repetition.

28. *what God is about to do He has shown Pharaoh.* Although the framework of the Joseph story is "secular" in comparison to the preceding narratives, and though Joseph's exercise of *ḥokhmah* (wisdom) in dream interpretation and economic planning has led scholars to detect a strong imprint of ancient Near Eastern Wisdom literature, he himself is careful to attribute the determination of events as well as his own "wisdom and discernment" to God (compare verse 16). Whatever the considerations of source criticism, moreover, the name he uses for the deity in speaking with Pharaoh is *ʾelohim,* the term that has general currency among polytheists and monotheists, and not the particularist YHWH.

33. *And so, let Pharaoh look out for a discerning, wise man.* The advice after the interpretation has not been requested. Joseph perhaps runs the risk of seeming presumptuous, but he must have a sense that he has captivated Pharaoh by the persuasive force of his interpretation, and he sees that this is his own great moment of opportunity. One wonders whether Pharaoh's two dreams also make him remember his own two dreams of future grandeur.

34. *muster the land of Egypt.* The meaning of the verb *ḥimesh* is disputed. It could be derived from *ḥamesh,* "five," and thus refer to a scheme of dividing the land into fifths or perhaps taking a levy of 20 percent from the crops of the good years. (In chapter 47, once the great famine is under way, Joseph institutes a 20 percent tax on the produce of the lands that have been made over to Pharaoh.) But the same root is also used for the arming or deployment of troops, and the idea here may be that Joseph is putting the whole country on a quasimilitary footing in preparation for the extended famine.

35. *under Pharaoh's hand.* Joseph deferentially and diplomatically indicates that everything will be under Pharaoh's jurisdiction, though it will really be the "hand"—authority, power, trust—of the "discerning, wise man" that will run the country.

38. *Could we find a man like him, in whom is the spirit of God?* Pharaoh produces exactly the response Joseph would have hoped for. Again, the flexibility of *'elohim* serves the dialogue well. The Egyptian monarch has not been turned into a monotheist by Joseph, but he has gone along with Joseph's idea that human wisdom is a gift of God, or the gods, and the expression he uses could have the rather general force of "divine spirit."

40. *by your lips all my folk shall be guided.* The Hebrew says literally "by your mouth." The clear meaning is "by your commands," "by the directives you issue." There is some doubt about the verb *yishaq*. The usual sense of "will kiss" is extremely unlikely here, unless this is a peculiar idiom for civil obedience not otherwise attested. It is best to associate it with the noun *mesheq* (15:2), which appears to refer to economic administration.

41. *And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you."* This is a nice deployment of the convention of a second iteration of the formula for introducing direct discourse without an intervening response from the interlocutor. Joseph for the moment has remained silent, uncertain what to say to Pharaoh's astounding proposal, even if eliciting such a proposal may have been his express intention. So Pharaoh must repeat himself—this time in a performative speech-act in which he officially confers the high office on Joseph and confirms the act by adorning the Hebrew slave with regal insignia: the signet ring, the golden collar, and the fine linen dress.

42. *the golden collar.* Although English translators have repeatedly rendered this as "chain," Egyptian bas-reliefs show a more elaborate ceremonial ornament made out of twisted gold wire that covered part of the shoulders and upper chest as well as the neck. In fact, the Hebrew word is not the normal term for "chain," and reflects a root that means "to plait," "to cushion," "to pad."

43. *Abrekh.* Despite the ingenuity of traditional commentators in construing this as a Hebrew word, it is evidently Egyptian (in consonance with the

loanwords in the surrounding narrative) and may mean something like "make way." Gerhard von Rad calls attention to this meaning while canvassing other possibilities and sensibly concluding that the term is not entirely certain.

44. *I am Pharaoh.* Most commentators and translators have construed this as an implied antithesis: though I am Pharaoh, without you no man shall raise hand or foot. . . . But this is unnecessary because we know that royal decrees in the ancient Near East regularly began with the formula: I am King X. The sense here would thus be: By the authority invested in me as Pharaoh, I declare that without you, etc.

45. *Zaphenath-Paneah.* The change to an Egyptian name is of a piece with the assumption of Egyptian dress and the insignia of high office. The name may mean "God speaks, he lives," as Moshe Weinfeld, following the lead of Egyptologists, surmises.

Potiphera. This is the full form of the same name borne by Joseph's old master, Potiphar, but evidently refers to a different person, since Potiphar was identified as courtier and high chamberlain, not as priest. *On* is not a deity but the name of a city, later designated Heliopolis by the Greeks because of the sun worship centered there.

Joseph went out over the land. The wording is a little odd. It may be associated with the end of verse 46.

46. *when he stood before Pharaoh.* This could mean, idiomatically, when he entered Pharaoh's service, though it is equally possible that the verb refers literally to the scene just reported, when he stood before Pharaoh and made his way to greatness by interpreting the dreams.

47. *made gatherings.* The Hebrew *qematsim* elsewhere means "handfuls," and there is scant evidence that it means "abundance," as several modern versions have it. But *qomets* is a "handful" because it is what the hand gathers in as it closes, and it is phonetically and semantically cognate with *wayiqbots,* "he collected," the very next word in the Hebrew text. The likely reference here, then, is not to small quantities (handfuls) but to the process of systematically gathering in the grain, as the next sentence spells out.

49. *like the sand of the sea, very much, until he ceased counting.* The language here is strongly reminiscent of the covenantal language in the promise of

progeny to Abraham and thus provides a kind of associative link with the notice of Joseph's progeny in the next three verses. Upon the birth of Ephraim, Joseph himself will invoke the verb for making fruitful that is featured in the repeated promises of offspring to the patriarchs.

51. *Manasseh . . . released me from all the debt*. The naming-pun is on the verbal stem *n-sh-h*. The virtually universal construction of this term here is "made me forget," but it must be said that the root in that sense occurs only five times in the biblical corpus, and at least two or three of those are doubtful. It is also somewhat odd that Joseph should celebrate God for having made him forget his father's house. But a very common usage of *n-sh-h* is "to hold in debt," and a natural meaning of that stem in the *pi'el* conjugation, as here, would be "to relieve from the condition of debt." Such an unambiguously positive verb is a better parallel to "made me fruitful" in the next verse. I am grateful to Amos Funkenstein for this original suggestion.

52. *Ephraim . . . made me fruitful*. The naming-pun is on the verbal stem *p-r-h*.

55. *all the land of Egypt was hungry.* The contradiction between this report and the preceding statement that there was bread in Egypt is pointed. There is food in storage, not to be had from the wasted fields, but Joseph metes it out to the populace, and at a price.

56. *Joseph laid open whatever had grain within.* The Masoretic Text, which lacks "whatever had grain," is problematic at this point. The Aramaic Targums supply these missing words. Other ancient versions presume a phrase like "stores of grain."

CHAPTER 42

[1]And Jacob saw that there were provisions in Egypt,
and Jacob said to his sons, “Why are you fearful?”
[2]And he said, “Look, I have heard that there are
provisions in Egypt. Go down there, and get us
provisions from there that we may live and not die.”
[3]And the ten brothers of Joseph went down to buy
grain from Egypt. [4]But Benjamin, Joseph’s brother,
Jacob did not send with his brothers, for he thought,
Lest harm befall him.

[5]And the sons of Israel came to buy provisions among
those who came, for there was famine in the land of
Canaan. [6]As for Joseph, he was the regent of the land,
he was the provider to all the people of the land. And
Joseph’s brothers came and bowed down to him, their
faces to the ground. [7]And Joseph saw his brothers and
recognized them, and he played the stranger to them
and spoke harshly to them, and said to them, “Where
have you come from?” And they said, “From the land

of Canaan, to buy food.” [8]And Joseph recognized his
brothers but they did not recognize him. [9]And Joseph
remembered the dreams he had dreamed about them,
and he said to them, “You are spies! To see the land’s
nakedness you have come.” [10]And they said to him,
“No, my lord, for your servants have come to buy
food. [11]We are all the sons of one man. We are honest.
Your servants would never be spies.” [12]And he said to
them, “No! For the land’s nakedness you have come to
see.” [13]And they said, “Twelve brothers your servants
are, we are the sons of one man in the land of Canaan,
and, look, the youngest is now with our father, and one
is no more.” [14]And Joseph said to them, “That’s just
what I told you, you are spies. [15]In this shall you be
tested—by Pharaoh! You shall not leave this place
unless your youngest brother comes here. [16]Send one
of you to bring your brother, and as for the rest of you,
you will be detained, and your words will be tested as
to whether the truth is with you, and if not, by
Pharaoh, you must be spies!” [17]And he put them under
guard for three days. [18]And Joseph said to them on the
third day, “Do this and live, for I fear God. [19]If you are
honest, let one of your brothers be detained in this
very guardhouse, and the rest of you go forth and
bring back provisions to stave off the famine in your
homes. [20]And your youngest brother you shall bring to

me, that your words may be confirmed and you need
not die.” And so they did. [21]And they said each to his
brother, “Alas, we are guilty for our brother, whose
mortal distress we saw when he pleaded with us and
we did not listen. That is why this distress has
overtaken us.” [22]Then Reuben spoke out to them in
these words: “Didn’t I say to you, ‘Commit no offense
through the boy,’ and you would not listen? And now,
look, his blood is requited.” [23]And they did not know
that Joseph understood, for there was an interpreter
between them. [24]And he turned away from them and
wept and returned to them and spoke to them, and he
took Simeon from them and placed him in fetters
before their eyes.

[25]And Joseph gave orders to fill their baggage with
grain and to put back their silver into each one’s pack
and to give them supplies for the way, and so he did
for them. [26]And they loaded their provisions on their
donkeys and they set out from there. [27]Then one of
them opened his pack to give provender to his donkey
at the encampment, and he saw his silver and, look, it
was in the mouth of his bag. [28]And he said to his
brothers, “My silver has been put back and, look, it’s
actually in my bag.” And they were dumbfounded and

trembled each before his brother, saying, “What is this
that God has done to us?” [29]And they came to Jacob
their father, to the land of Canaan, and they told him
all that had befallen them, saying, [30]“The man who is
lord of the land spoke harshly to us and made us out to
be spies in the land. [31]And we said to him, ‘We are
honest. We would never be spies. [32]Twelve brothers we
are, the sons of our father. One is no more and the
youngest is now with our father in the land of Canaan.’
[33]And the man who is lord of the land said to us, ‘By
this shall I know if you are honest: one of your
brothers leave with me and provisions against the
famine in your homes take, and go. [34]And bring your
youngest brother to me that I may know you are not
spies but are honest. I shall give you back your brother
and you can trade in the land.’” [35]And just as they were
emptying their packs, look, each one’s bundle of silver
was in his pack. And they saw their bundles, both they
and their father, and were afraid. [36]And Jacob their
father said to them, “Me you have bereaved. Joseph is
no more and Simeon is no more, and Benjamin you
would take! It is I who bear it all.” [37]And Reuben
spoke to his father, saying, “My two sons you may put
to death if I do not bring him back to you. Place him
in my hands and I will return him to you.” [38]And he
said, “My son shall not go down with you, for his

brother is dead, and he alone remains, and should harm befall him on the way you are going, you would bring down my gray head in sorrow to Sheol."

CHAPTER 42 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *provisions*. Most of the biblical occurrences of this noun *shever*, as well as the transitive verb *shavar* (verse 3, "to buy") and the causative verb *hishbir* (verse 6) are in this story. The root means "to break," and the sense seems to be: food provisions that serve to break an imposed fast, that is, a famine (hence "provisions to stave off the famine," *shever ra'avon,* in verse 19). The term "rations" adopted by at least three recent translations has a misleading military connotation.

fearful. All English versions construe this as a reflexive of the verb for seeing (*r-'-h*) and render it along the lines of "staring at one another." But the four other occurrences of this root in the reflexive in the Bible invariably link it with *panim* ("face"), and staring as a gesture of inaction is not characteristically biblical. The Targum of Yonatan derived the verb from the root meaning "to fear" (*y-r-'*), a construction feasible without emendation because the *yod* can be elided. Fearing and the injunction to fear not are recurrent elements in the story of the brothers' descent to Egypt.

2. *And he said.* The repetition of the formula introducing speech with no intervening response from the person or persons addressed accords with the general biblical convention we have observed elsewhere: such repetition is an indication of a failure of response by the interlocutors. The brothers here do not know how to respond to their father's challenge.

that we may live and not die. The almost excessive spelling out in Jacob's words may reflect his impatience with his sons, who are acting as though they did not grasp the urgency of the situation.

3. *the ten brothers.* Biblical narrative is meticulous in its choice of familial epithets. When the ten go down to Egypt to encounter the man who will prove to be their supposedly dead brother, they are identified as Joseph's brothers, not Jacob's sons.

4. *Benjamin, Joseph's brother.* The identification of Benjamin as Joseph's brother is formally identical to the familial epithet in the previous verse, with the pointed difference that only Benjamin is Joseph's full brother.

5. *among those who came.* This economical phrase indicates a great crowd of people, from "all the earth," driven by the famine to Egypt, where there was food to be bought.

7. *and recognized them, and he played the stranger to them.* The verb for "recognize" and the verb for "play the stranger" are derived from the same root (the latter being a reflexive form of the root). Both uses pick up the thematically prominent repetition of the same root earlier in the story: Jacob was asked to "recognize" Joseph's blood-soaked tunic and Tamar invited Judah to "recognize" the tokens he had left with her as security for payment for sexual services.

8. *And Joseph recognized his brothers but they did not recognize him.* Given the importance of the recognition theme and the verb to which it is linked, it is fitting that the fact of Joseph's recognizing his brothers should be repeated, along with their failure to recognize him (in other words, the success of his playing the stranger).

9. *And Joseph remembered the dreams.* This brief memory-flashback is a device rarely used in biblical narrative. Its importance here is that the brothers, prostrated before Joseph, are, unbeknownst to them, literally fulfilling his two prophetic dreams, the very dreams that enraged them and triggered the violence they perpetrated against him. There is surely an element of sweet triumph for Joseph in seeing his grandiose dreams fulfilled so precisely, though it would be darkened by his recollection of what the report of his dreams led his brothers to do. The repetition of Joseph's angry accusation thus has psychological resonance: he remembers, and he remembers the reason for his longstanding anger.

the land's nakedness. The idiom refers to that which should be hidden from an outsider's eyes, as the pudenda are to be hidden from all but the legitimate sexual partner. Joseph's language thus casts the alleged spies as *violators* of the land.

11. *We are all the sons of one man. We are honest. Your servants would never be spies.* This series of three brief sentences, without connecting "and's," is uncharacteristic of biblical style, and may well be intended to reflect the brothers' emphatic, anxious defensiveness in the face of Joseph's wholly unexpected accusation.

13. *Twelve brothers your servants are.* The Hebrew places the number twelve at the very beginning of the brothers' speech. They use the euphemism "is no more" (literally, "is not") to indicate that Joseph is dead, not imagining, in the strong dramatic irony of the scene, that the brother who makes the full complement of twelve stands before them. It is thematically pointed that they identify themselves as "twelve brothers," although only ten of them stand before Joseph.

15–16. Joseph's swearing by Pharaoh at first seems merely part of his playing his role as Egyptian. Not until verse 23 do we learn that he is addressing them through an interpreter, so the locution also probably reflects the fact that he is speaking Egyptian.

20. *And your youngest brother you shall bring to me.* The "test" of bringing Benjamin to Egypt is actually a test of fraternal fidelity. Joseph may have some lingering suspicion as to whether the brothers have done away with Benjamin, the other son of Rachel, as they imagine they have gotten rid of him.

21. *Alas, we are guilty.* The psychological success of Joseph's stratagem is confirmed by the fact that the accusation and the hostage taking immediately trigger feelings of guilt over their behavior toward Joseph. Notably, it is only now, not in the original report (37:23–24), that we learn that Joseph pleaded with them when they cast him into the pit, a remarkable instance of withheld narrative exposition. Reuben, who tried to save him, now becomes the chief spokesman for their collective guilt.

23. *And they did not know that Joseph understood.* The verb for understanding, which also means "to hear" or "to listen," plays ironically against its use in the immediately preceding verse, "and you would not *listen*."

24. *And he turned away from them and wept.* This is the first of three times, in a clear crescendo pattern, that Joseph is moved to tears by his brothers.

25. *to put back their silver into each one's pack.* The return of the silver is also associated with the brothers' guilt, for it repeats their receiving of silver from the Ishmaelites for the sale of Joseph as a slave. If the story reflects the realia of the Patriarchal period, the silver would be weights of silver, not coins, and the weighing out of silver in Abraham's purchase of the burial site from the Hittites suggests that is what is to be imagined here.

28. *My silver has been put back and, look, it's actually in my bag.* These words of astonishment, with their virtual redundance and their locutions of emphasis —*wegam hineh be'amtaḥti,* "it's actually in my bag"—ironically correspond to the language of amazement used by the young Joseph in reporting his dream (compare 37:7).

dumbfounded. The Hebrew says literally, "their heart went out."

What is this that God has done to us? This is a kind of double dramatic irony. It is of course Joseph who has done this to them, but we are also invited to think of him as God's instrument—an idea he himself will emphasize after he reveals himself to his brothers. Thus a double system of causation, human and divine, is brought to the fore.

31–34. The near verbatim repetition of reported speech, as we have seen elsewhere, is standard biblical practice, though more commonly there are subtly significant variations in the repetition. Here, the one notable change is that in addressing Jacob directly, they substitute "our father" for "one man."

33. *provisions against the famine.* The Hebrew here uses an ellipsis, simply, "famine."

34. *trade.* The primary meaning of the verb is "to go around," and by extension, "to engage in commerce." Given the situation of going back and forth to Egypt to buy grain, the sense of trading seems more likely here.

35. *look, each one's bundle of silver was in his pack.* The second discovery of the silver in the baggage of course contradicts the first discovery at the encampment and probably reflects the splicing together of two variant traditions—unless one assumes that the brothers deliberately act out a discovery in the presence of their father in order to impress upon him how they are all at the mercy of a superior power.

36. *Me you have bereaved.* As earlier in the story, Jacob speaks as a prima donna of paternal grief: hence the "me" at the beginning of his discourse (the Hebrew has an accusative pronoun before the verb instead of the normal accusative suffix appended to the verb), and hence the emphatic rhythmic arrangement of his speech in a formal symmetry that verges on poetry: "Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more, and Benjamin you would take!" In a small envelope structure, the "me" at the beginning is balanced by the "It is I" at the end (the last sentence is literally: "Upon me they all were"). Jacob's equation of Joseph and Simeon with the verb "is no more" teeters ambiguously between two possibilities: either he gloomily assumes that Simeon is already as good as dead, or, despite his protestations of grief, he clings to the hope that Joseph, like Simeon, is absent, not dead.

37. *My two sons you may put to death.* Reuben, as usual, means well but stumbles in the execution: to a father obsessed with the loss of sons, he offers the prospect of killing two grandsons. David Kimhi catches this nicely: "[Jacob] said: 'Stupid firstborn! Are they your sons and not my sons?'" This is not the only moment in the story when we sense that Reuben's claim to preeminence among the brothers as firstborn is dubious, and he will be displaced by Judah, the fourth-born.

38. *My son shall not go down with you.* The extravagant insensitivity of Jacob's paternal favoritism continues to be breathtaking. He speaks of Benjamin as "my son" almost as though the ones he is addressing were not his sons. This unconscious disavowal of the ten sons is sharpened when Jacob says, "he alone remains," failing to add "from his mother." The histrionic refrain of descending in sorrow to Sheol, the underworld, is one Jacob first recited when he was handed Joseph's blood-soaked tunic. "Should harm befall him" is a formula first spoken by Jacob in an interior monologue (verse 4) and now repeated in actual speech to the sons. Jacob is of course fearful of

another dreadful accident like the one in which he believes Joseph was torn to pieces by a wild beast. There is, then, an ironic disparity between Jacob's sense of a world of unpredictable dangers threatening his beloved son and Joseph's providential manipulation of events, unguessed by his father and his brothers.

CHAPTER 43

[1]And the famine grew grave in the land. [2]And it happened when they had eaten up the provisions they had brought from Egypt, that their father said to them, “Go back, buy us some food.” [3]And Judah said to him, saying, “The man firmly warned us, saying, ‘You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.’ [4]If you are going to send our brother with us, we may go down and buy you food, [5]but if you are not going to send him, we will not go down, for the man said to us, ‘You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.’” [6]And Israel said, “Why have you done me this harm to tell the man you had another brother?” [7]And they said, “The man firmly asked us about ourselves and our kindred, saying, ‘Is your father still living? Do you have a brother?’ And we told him, in response to these words. Could we know he would say, ‘Bring down your brother?’” [8]And Judah said to Israel his father, “Send the lad with me, and let us rise and go, that we may live and not die, neither we, nor you, nor our little ones. [9]I will be his pledge, from my hand you

may seek him: if I do not bring him to you and set him before you, I will bear the blame to you for all time. [10]For had we not tarried, by now we could have come back twice." [11]And Israel their father said to them, "If it must be so, do this: take of the best yield of the land in your baggage and bring down to the man as tribute some balm and some honey, gum and ladanum, pistachio nuts and almonds. [12]And double the silver take in your hand, and the silver that was put back in the mouths of your bags bring back in your hand. Perhaps it was a mistake. [13]And your brother take, and rise and go back to the man. [14]And may El Shaddai grant you mercy before the man, that he discharge to you your other brother, and Benjamin. As for me, if I must be bereaved, I will be bereaved."

[15]And the men took this tribute and double the silver they took in their hand, and Benjamin, and they rose and went down to Egypt and stood in Joseph's presence. [16]And Joseph saw Benjamin with them and he said to the one who was over his house, "Bring the men into the house, and slaughter an animal and prepare it, for with me the men shall eat at noon." [17]And the man did as Joseph had said, and the man brought the men to Joseph's house. [18]And the men

were afraid at being brought to Joseph's house, and they said, "Because of the silver put back in our bags the first time we've been brought, in order to fall upon us, to attack us, and to take us as slaves, and our donkeys." [19]And they approached the man who was over Joseph's house, and they spoke to him by the entrance of the house. [20]And they said, "Please, my lord, we indeed came down the first time to buy food, [21]and it happened when we came to the encampment that we opened our bags and, look, each man's silver was in the mouth of his bag, our silver in full weight, and we have brought it back in our hand, [22]and we have brought down more silver to buy food. We do not know who put our silver in our bags." [23]And he said, "All is well with you, do not fear. Your God and the God of your father has placed treasure for you in your bags. Your silver has come to me." And he brought Simeon out to them. [24]And the man brought the men into Joseph's house, and he gave them water and they bathed their feet, and he gave provender to their donkeys. [25]And they prepared the tribute against Joseph's arrival at noon, for they had heard that there they would eat bread. [26]And Joseph came into the house, and they brought him the tribute that was in their hand, into the house, and they bowed down to him to the ground. [27]And he asked how they were, and

he said, “Is all well with your aged father of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?” [28]And they said, “All is well with your servant, our father. He is still alive.” And they did obeisance and bowed down. [29]And he raised his eyes and saw Benjamin his brother, his mother’s son, and he said, “Is this your youngest brother of whom you spoke to me?” And he said, “God be gracious to you, my son.” [30]And Joseph hurried out, for his feelings for his brother overwhelmed him and he wanted to weep, and he went into the chamber and wept there. [31]And he bathed his face and came out and held himself in check and said, “Serve bread.” [32]And they served him and them separately and the Egyptians who were eating with him separately, for the Egyptians would not eat bread with the Hebrews, as it was abhorrent to Egypt. [33]And they were seated before him, the firstborn according to his birthright, the youngest according to his youth, and the men marveled to each other. [34]And he had portions passed to them from before him, and Benjamin’s portion was five times more than the portion of all the rest, and they drank, and they got drunk with him.

CHAPTER 43 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *The man firmly warned us*. "The man" refers elliptically to the phrase the brothers previously used in their report to their father, "the man who is lord of the land" (42:30). Their repeated use of this designation aptly dramatizes their ignorance of Joseph's identity. In the second half of this chapter, there is pointed interplay between the references to the brothers as "the men"—almost as though they were represented from an Egyptian point of view—and to Joseph's majordomo as "the man."

You shall not see my face. The Hebrew idiom has distinct regal overtones: you shall not come into my presence.

5. *You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.* Judah reiterates this sentence word for word, at the end of his first speech to Jacob as at the beginning. The effect is to spell out the inexorable condition with heavy emphasis for the reluctant Jacob: it is only by bringing Benjamin along that we can return to Egypt.

6. *Why have you done me this harm.* Consistent with his character from chapter 37 onward, Jacob flaunts his sense of personal injury.

8. *that we may live and not die, neither we, nor you, nor our little ones.* The phrase "live and not die" was used by Jacob to his sons before their first journey to Egypt (42:2), and Judah now throws it back in his face. By adding to it, "neither we, nor you, nor our little ones," Judah makes a vividly persuasive point: as Rashi sees, the implicit argument is that if we risk taking Benjamin, he may or may not be seized, but if we stay here, every one of us will perish from hunger.

9. *I will be his pledge, from my hand you may seek him.* The repetition through synonymity signals a performative speech-act, a legally binding vow. Judah, who conceived the scheme of selling Joseph into slavery, now takes personal responsibility for Benjamin's safety. But befitting the son who will displace Reuben as the progenitor of the kings of Israel, he asserts solemn responsibility without Reuben's rash offer to put two of his own sons to death if harm befalls Benjamin.

11. *the best yield of the land.* The Hebrew *zimrat ha'arets* occurs only here. The most plausible construction of the first term links it with a root that

means “strength” or “power,” though it could be related to *zemorah,* “branch” or “sprout.”

some balm and some honey, gum and ladanum. The tribute or gift (minḥ*ah*) to Joseph includes three of the same items as those in the briefer list of luxury export goods carried by the Ishmaelite traders (37:25) who bought Joseph from the brothers and sold him as a slave in Egypt. As with the silver sent back and forth, the brothers are thus drawn unwittingly into a process of repetition of and restitution for their fraternal crime.

12. *And double the silver take.* Now they are to go to Egypt with three times the original amount of silver: the amount they intend to return to Joseph, and double that amount besides. Nahum Sarna construes the second clause, “and the silver that was put back . . .,” as an explanation of the first, concluding that only double the amount in sum was taken, but his reading dismisses the clear additive sense of “and” in “and the silver.” Rashi, with characteristic shrewdness, suggests that extra silver was taken because the brothers were fearful that the price of grain might have gone up steeply—a plausible possibility, given Egypt’s monopoly of food supplies and the persisting famine.

take in your hand. The addition of “in your hand,” which is not strictly required by Hebrew idiom, is repeated several times in the story. One suspects it is linked with the theme of restitution: the very hands that were “raised against” Joseph (37:22 and 27) now bear tribute to him.

13. *And your brother take.* Jacob holds back the detail that is most painful to him, the sending down of Benjamin, until the very end of his instructions. Pointedly, he does not refer to Benjamin by name but instead calls him “your brother,” stressing the fraternal responsibility his nine older sons have for their half brother.

14. *he discharge to you your other brother, and Benjamin.* Jacob’s fearful formulation virtually presupposes that Benjamin will be seized by the Egyptians, just as Simeon was.

As for me, if I must be bereaved, I will be bereaved. Jacob is of course remembering his grief over the loss of Joseph and perhaps as well his concern over Simeon’s imprisonment. But he is also once more playing his role as histrion of paternal sorrow, echoing his dirgelike words to his sons (42:36),

"Me you have bereaved," using the same verb that refers specifically in Hebrew to the loss of children and again placing the first-person singular pronoun at the beginning of his statement.

16. *the one who was over his house.* Virtually all the English versions represent this as "steward," but the Hebrew opts for this more circumlocutionary phrase (which does occur, in a clear administrative sense, in notices about the later Israelite royal bureaucracy) instead of one of the available biblical terms for steward or majordomo. This roundabout designation reflects an Egyptian title and may at the same time intimate the perspective of the Hebrew brothers toward this Egyptian "man who was over the house" with whom they have to deal. It also enables the writer to play "man" against "men" in his narrative report.

17. *Joseph's house.* The phrase is repeated three times in rapid sequence, and amplified by the secondary references to "the man who was over his house." For the ten Hebrew men to go into Joseph's house is a momentous thing, politically and thematically. Since they are aware that it is not customary for foreigners who have come to buy grain to be introduced into the residence of the viceroy, they are afraid it may be a trap (verse 18). Their last encounter with Joseph in Canaan, more than two decades earlier, was in an open field, where he was entirely in their power. Now, crossing the threshold of his house, they will be entirely in his power—whether for evil or for good they cannot say. Pointedly, their actual sitting down at Joseph's table is prefaced by a literally liminal moment: they stand at the entrance, expressing their anxiety to Joseph's steward.

18. *to fall upon us.* The Hebrew verb might well have the sense of "to find a pretext against us," as many English versions render it, but it is at least as plausible to construe it as a verb of physical assault, in apposition to the term that follows it.

and our donkeys. This odd addendum at the very end of the sentence looks suspiciously like a comic inadvertency.

23. *has placed treasure for you in your bags.* The majordomo dismisses their fears by introducing a kind of fairy-tale explanation for the silver they found in their bags.

Your silver has come to me. These words take the form of a legal declaration meaning "I have duly received payment."

25. *they would eat bread.* "Bread," as in the English expression, "to eat the king's bread," is obviously a synecdoche for food, but it diminishes the literary dignity of the narrative to render this, as many modern translations have done, simply as "dine."

29. *God be gracious to you, my son.* Benjamin, although considerably younger than Joseph, would be at least in his late twenties at this point. In addressing him as "my son," Joseph faithfully maintains his role as Egyptian viceroy, though "my brother" is hiding in the word he uses. The great medieval Hebrew poet Shmuel Hanagid (eleventh-century Granada) would brilliantly catch this doubleness in a moving elegy to his brother by altering the end of the phrase: "God be gracious to you, my brother."

30. *And Joseph hurried out . . . and he wanted to weep, and he went into the chamber and wept there*. In the pattern of incremental repetition, this second weeping of Joseph's is much more elaborately reported than the first (42:24), including as it does the flight to a private chamber and (in the next verse), his bathing his face to remove evidence of the tears and his effort of self-restraint when he returns to the brothers.

his feelings . . . overwhelmed him. The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "his mercy [the same term used by Jacob in verse 14] burned hot."

32. *for the Egyptians would not eat bread with the Hebrews.* The dietary exclusionism of the Egyptians is also attested by Herodotus. Both medieval and modern commentators have linked this taboo with an Egyptian prohibition against eating lamb, a staple of Hebrew diet.

as it was abhorrent to Egypt. The consensus of English translations treats this as "to the Egyptians," but the Masoretic vocalization of the final noun—*mitsrayim* and not *mitsrim*—construes it as "to Egypt," which makes perfectly good sense.

33. *And they were seated before him.* The seating in order of age of course has been done at Joseph's direction: it constitutes a kind of dramatization of the contrast between knowledge and ignorance—"and he recognized them but

they did not recognize him”—that has been paramount from the moment the brothers first set foot in Egypt.

34. *they drank, and they got drunk with him.* In the Hebrew, these are two entirely distinct verbs. The meeting between the eleven brothers and the man who is lord of the land of Egypt appears to end on a note of conviviality, which will quickly be reversed in the next scene of the drama Joseph has carefully devised for his brothers. It should be noted that the drinking at the conclusion of this scene anticipates the mechanism of what is to follow, for it is the alleged theft of Joseph’s silver goblet that will bring the brothers back to his house under strict arrest.

CHAPTER 44

[1]And he charged the one who was over his house,
saying, “Fill the men’s bags with as much food as they
can carry, and put each man’s silver in the mouth of
his bag. [2]And my goblet, the silver goblet, put in the
mouth of the bag of the youngest, with the silver for
his provisions.” And he did as Joseph had spoken. [3]The
morning had just brightened when the men were sent
off, they and their donkeys. [4]They had come out of the
city, they were not far off, when Joseph said to the one
who was over his house, “Rise, pursue the men, and
when you overtake them, say to them, ‘Why have you
paid back evil for good? [5]Is not this the one from
which my lord drinks, and in which he always divines?
You have wrought evil in what you did.’” [6]And he
overtook them and spoke to them these words. [7]And
they said to him, “Why should our lord speak words
like these? Far be it from your servants to do such a
thing! [8]Why, the silver we found in the mouth of our
bags we brought back to you from the land of Canaan.
How then could we steal from your master’s house

silver or gold? [9]He of your servants with whom it be found shall die, and, what's more, we shall become slaves to our lord." [10]And he said, "Even so, as by your words, let it be: he with whom it be found shall become a slave to me, and you shall be clear." [11]And they hurried and each man set down his bag on the ground and each opened his bag. [12]And he searched, beginning with the oldest and ending with the youngest, and he found the goblet in Benjamin's bag. [13]And they rent their garments, and each loaded his donkey and they returned to the city.

[14]And Judah with his brothers came into Joseph's house, for he was still there, and they threw themselves before him to the ground. [15]And Joseph said to them, "What is this deed you have done? Did you not know that a man like me would surely divine?" [16]And Judah said, "What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak and how shall we prove ourselves right? God has found out your servants' crime. Here we are, slaves to my lord, both we and the one in whose hand the goblet was found." [17]And he said, "Far be it from me to do this! The man in whose hand the goblet was found, he shall become my slave, and you, go up in peace to your father." [18]And Judah approached him and said,

“Please, my lord, let your servant speak a word in my
lord’s hearing and let your wrath not flare against your
servant, for you are like Pharaoh. [19]My lord had asked
his servants, saying, ‘Do you have a father or brother?’
[20]And we said to my lord, ‘We have an aged father and
a young child of his old age, and his brother being
dead, he alone is left of his mother, and his father
loves him.’ [21]And you said to your servants, ‘Bring him
down to me, that I may set my eyes on him.’ [22]And we
said to my lord, ‘The lad cannot leave his father.
Should he leave his father, he would die.’ [23]And you
said to your servants, ‘If your youngest brother does
not come down with you, you shall not see my face
again.’ [24]And it happened when we went up to your
servant, my father, that we told him the words of my
lord. [25]And our father said, ‘Go back, buy us some
food.’ [26]And we said, ‘We cannot go down. If our
youngest brother is with us, we shall go down. For we
cannot see the face of the man if our youngest brother
is not with us.’ [27]And your servant, our father, said to
us, ‘You know that two did my wife bear me. [28]And
one went out from me and I thought, O, he’s been torn
to shreds, and I have not seen him since. [29]And should
you take this one, too, from my presence and harm
befall him, you would bring down my gray head in evil
to Sheol.’ [30]And so, should I come to your servant, my

father, and the lad be not with us, for his life is bound to the lad's, [31]when he saw the lad was not with us, he would die, and your servants would bring down the gray head of your servant, our father, in sorrow to Sheol. [32]For your servant became pledge for the lad to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him to you, I will bear the blame to my father for all time.' [33]And so, let your servant, pray, stay instead of the lad as a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers. [34]For how shall I go up to my father, if the lad be not with us? Let me see not the evil that would find out my father!"

CHAPTER 44 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *put each man's silver in the mouth of his bag*. This detail is a small puzzle because nothing is made of the discovery of silver when the majordomo searches through the bags. This seeming discrepancy has led critics to write off the return of the silver as a later addition made to harmonize this episode with the one in chapter 42, but that is by no means a necessary conclusion. Joseph's scheme, after all, is to make the brothers feel they are trapped in a network of uncanny circumstances they can neither control nor explain. A repetition of the device of returning the silver would nicely serve this purpose. The majordomo, however, is exclusively focused on the retrieval of a particular silver object, the divining goblet, and so does not even deign to mention the weights of silver in the bags, as though their appearance there were a matter of course, whatever consternation it might cause the brothers. Meanwhile, as in dream logic—or perhaps one should say, guilt logic—the

brothers, who once took silver when they sold Joseph down into Egypt, seem helpless to "return" the silver to Egypt, as much as they try. The returned silver, moreover, makes the purported stealing of the silver goblet look all the more heinous.

2. *And my goblet, the silver goblet.* The double formulation highlights both the fact that the goblet is Joseph's special possession and that it is made of silver.

3. *they and their donkeys.* Again the donkeys are tacked onto the end of the sentence, perhaps because the donkeys are carrying the packs, which will have to be set down on the ground and then reloaded (verses 11 and 12), in one of which the goblet has been secreted.

5. *Is not this the one from which my lord drinks, and in which he always divines?* The fact that the goblet is referred to only by a demonstrative pronoun ("the one from which") may reflect a flaunting of the assumption that, as all concerned should recognize, the only thing at issue here is the goblet. The brothers may well have seen Joseph drinking from the goblet at the dinner the day before, whereas its use for divination would have been news to them. The probable mechanism of divination in a goblet would be to interpret patterns on the surface of the liquid it contained or in drops running down its sides. Divination would have been a plausible activity on the part of a member of the high Egyptian bureaucracy, with its technology of soothsaying, but the emphasis it is given here is also linked with Joseph's demonstrated ability to predict the future and his superiority of knowledge in relation to his brothers.

9. *He of your servants with whom it be found shall die.* This pronouncement of a death sentence for stealing may be excessive in relation to the standards of ancient Near Eastern law, though Gerhard von Rad has proposed that stealing a sacred object would have been deemed a capital crime. The brothers' words are quite similar to those spoken by their father to Laban (31:32) before he rummaged through the belongings of Jacob's wives in search of his missing household gods. It is a teasing parallel with crucial differences: Laban does not find what he is looking for, but the death sentence pronounced on the actually guilty party—Benjamin's mother, Rachel—appears to be carried out later when she dies bearing him.

and . . . we shall become slaves to our lord. This gratuitous additional condition, a reflex of their perfect confidence in their innocence of the theft, carries forward the great theme of moral restitution: the brothers who sold Joseph into slavery now offer themselves as slaves. The term *ʿeved* means both servant and slave, and the speeches in this episode pointedly play the two meanings against each other. When the brothers refer to themselves as "your servants," they are clearly using courtly language of self-abasement; when they, or Judah, offer to be slaves, they are proposing to surrender their freedom and enter into a condition of actual servitude.

10. *Even so, as by your words, let it be.* These first words of response by the majordomo may constitute a kind of bureaucratic, or legal, flourish. He begins by seeming to concur in the stern sentence the brothers have pronounced on themselves should the goblet be found among them; but, having accepted the principle they enunciated that the guilty party should be punished and a distinction made between him and his brothers, the majordomo modifies the sentence to make it more reasonable—the guilty brother will be made a slave and the others allowed to go free.

14. *And Judah with his brothers came.* The Hebrew says, "Judah and his brothers" but uses a characteristic grammatical device, a verb conjugated in the singular instead of the plural, to indicate that the first-stated noun (Judah) is the principal agent, the thematically focused subject of the verb. In a moment, Judah will step forward and become the spokesman for all the brothers, the ringing voice of their collective conscience.

15. *Did you not know that a man like me would surely divine?* Like much else in this story, Joseph's words are contrived to yield a double meaning. He is saying they should have known that a person of his standing would practice divination and so the goblet they purloined was no mere silver cup but a dedicated instrument of divination. But, in keeping with the sustained theme of his knowledge and his brothers' ignorance, he is also suggesting that a man of his powers would be able to divine such a theft, and its perpetrator.

16. *God has found out your servants' crime.* In this case, the double meaning expresses a buried psychological dimension in Judah's plea to Joseph. On the surface, he is simply conceding guilt as his only recourse because one of his brothers had been caught with the evidence and he has no counterarguments

to offer. But he speaks out of the consciousness of a real guilt incurred by him and his brothers more than two decades earlier—compare their response at their first detention, 42:21—and thus expresses a real sense that God has at last exacted retribution for that act of fraternal betrayal. He of course cannot guess that the man whom he is addressing perfectly understands both references. One should note that guilt is assumed by Judah in the first-person plural and is not restricted to "the one in whose hand the goblet was found."

Here we are, slaves to my lord. Again, an unconscious principle of retribution asserts itself: the ten who condemned Joseph to slavery offer themselves as slaves to him, together with Benjamin.

in whose hand the goblet was found. In fact, it was found in the mouth of his bag. But the reiterated image of the hand holding the goblet links up with all the previous focusing on hands in the story and stresses the idea of agency and responsibility.

17. *he shall become my slave.* This is, of course, the last turn of the screw in Joseph's testing of his brothers: will they allow Rachel's other son to be enslaved, as they did with her elder son?

20. *an aged father and a young child of his old age.* The phrase suggests the intimate connection between father and child ("aged," "old age") as well as Benjamin's vulnerability as youngest (the Hebrew for "young" also means "little").

his brother being dead, he alone is left of his mother, and his father loves him. Either Judah assumes that after more than twenty years of slavery in a foreign land Joseph is likely to be dead or he states Joseph's absence as death for the sake of rhetorical simplicity, to make clear that the son is irrevocably lost to his doting father. What is remarkable is that now Judah can bring himself, out of concern for his old father, to accept the painful fact of paternal favoritism ("and his father loves him") that was the root of the brothers' hostility to Joseph.

21. *that I may set my eyes on him.* This phrase, which in other contexts can mean something like showing royal favor toward someone, and which for Joseph has the personal meaning of wanting to behold his full brother, momentarily seems to have been given a sinister twist by the course of events.

22. *The lad cannot leave his father.* Although Benjamin is considerably beyond adolescence, "lad" (*naʿar*), as in a number of other notable occurrences, is a designation that suggests tenderness, and perhaps the vulnerability of the person so designated, and Judah also uses it here because Benjamin is the youngest. Joseph, it should be noted, had coldly referred to the purportedly guilty Benjamin as "the man" (verse 17).

Should he leave his father, he would die. The translation reflects the ambiguity of the Hebrew, and one may be skeptical of the often made claim that the second "he" must refer to Jacob. It seems more likely that this is a studied ambiguity on Judah's part: he leaves it to Joseph to decide whether the old man would die if he were separated from Benjamin, or whether Benjamin could not survive without his father, or whether both dire possibilities might be probable.

25. *Go back, buy us some food.* Judah quotes Jacob's words to his sons (43:2) verbatim. The report of their response in the next verse is a more approximate quotation.

27. *two did my wife bear me.* In Judah's report, Jacob speaks characteristically as though Rachel were his only wife. Judah appears now to accept this outrageous favoritism as part of what his father is, part of the father he must still love.

28. *he's been torn to shreds, and I have not seen him since.* In the first clause, Jacob is represented as quoting verbatim his actual response to Joseph's supposed death, yet the second clause has the look of clinging to the hope that Joseph has merely disappeared but has not been killed.

31. *when he saw the lad was not with us.* The Masoretic Text lacks "with us," though it is reflected in the Septuagint and in one version of the Samaritan Bible.

32. *For your servant became pledge.* Judah then proceeds to quote the actual formula of his pledge of surety to Jacob. As many commentators have noted, his invocation of his pledge is a way of explaining why he should have put himself forward as spokesman for the brothers.

33. *let your servant, pray, stay instead of the lad as a slave.* Judah, who conceived the plan of selling Joseph into slavery, now comes around 180 degrees by offering himself as a slave in place of Benjamin.

34. *Let me see not the evil that would find out my father.* This of course stands in stark contrast to his willingness years before to watch his father writhe in anguish over Joseph's supposed death. The entire speech, as these concluding words suggest, is at once a moving piece of rhetoric and the expression of a profound inner change. Joseph's "testing" of his brothers is thus also a process that induces the recognition of guilt and leads to psychological transformation.

CHAPTER 45

[1]And Joseph could no longer hold himself in check
before all who stood attendance upon him, and he
cried, “Clear out everyone around me!” And no man
stood with him when Joseph made himself known to
his brothers. [2]And he wept aloud and the Egyptians
heard and the house of Pharaoh heard. [3]And Joseph
said to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still
alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, for they
were dismayed before him. [4]And Joseph said to his
brothers, “Come close to me, pray,” and they came
close, and he said, “I am Joseph your brother whom
you sold into Egypt. [5]And now, do not be pained and
do not be incensed with yourselves that you sold me
down here, because for sustenance God has sent me
before you. [6]Two years now there has been famine in
the heart of the land, and there are yet five years
without plowing and harvest. [7]And God has sent me
before you to make you a remnant on earth and to
preserve life, for you to be a great surviving group.
[8]And so, it is not you who sent me here but God, and

He has made me father to Pharaoh and lord to all his
house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. [9]Hurry and
go up to my father and say to him, ‘Thus says your son
Joseph: God has made me lord to all Egypt. Come
down to me, do not delay. [10]And you shall dwell in the
land of Goshen and shall be close to me, you and your
sons and the sons of your sons and your flocks and
your cattle and all that is yours. [11]And I will sustain
you there, for yet five years of famine remain—lest
you lose all, you and your household and all that is
yours.’ [12]And, look, your own eyes can see, and the
eyes of my brother Benjamin, that it is my very mouth
that speaks to you. [13]And you must tell my father all
my glory in Egypt and all that you have seen, and
hurry and bring down my father here.” [14]And he fell
upon the neck of his brother Benjamin and he wept,
and Benjamin wept on his neck. [15]And he kissed all his
brothers and wept over them. And after that, his
brothers spoke with him.

[16]And the news was heard in the house of Pharaoh,
saying, “Joseph’s brothers have come.” And it was
good in Pharaoh’s eyes and in his servants’ eyes. [17]And
Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Say to your brothers: ‘This
now do. Load up your beasts and go, return to the land

of Canaan. [18]And take your father and your households
and come back to me, that I may give you the best of
the land of Egypt, and you shall live off the fat of the
land.' [19]And you, charge them: 'This now do. Take you
from the land of Egypt wagons for your little ones and
for your wives, and convey your father, and come.
[20]And regret not your belongings, for the best of all the
land of Egypt is yours.'"

[21]And so the sons of Israel did, and Joseph gave them
wagons, as Pharaoh had ordered, and he gave them
supplies for the journey. [22]To all of them, each one, he
gave changes of garments, and to Benjamin he gave
three hundred pieces of silver and five changes of
garments. [23]And to his father he sent as follows: ten
donkeys conveying from the best of Egypt, and ten
she-asses conveying grain and bread and food for his
father for the journey. [24]And he sent off his brothers
and they went, and he said to them, "Do not be
perturbed on the journey."

[25]And they went up from Egypt and they came to the
land of Canaan to Jacob their father. [26]And they told
him, saying, "Joseph is still alive," and that he was
ruler in all the land of Egypt. And his heart stopped,

for he did not believe them. [27]And they spoke to him
all the words of Joseph that he had spoken to them,
and he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to convey
him, and the spirit of Jacob their father revived. [28]And
Israel said, “Enough! Joseph my son is still alive. Let
me go see him before I die.”

CHAPTER 45 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *And he wept aloud*. The Hebrew says literally, “and he gave his voice in weeping.” This is the third, climactic weeping of Joseph: now he no longer turns aside to weep in secret but sobs uncontrollably in the presence of his brothers, so audibly that he is heard by the Egyptians outside and heard all the way to the palace of Pharaoh. As in English, “house” may refer either to the physical structure or to the people associated with it.

3. *I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?* His very first utterance, after his sobs have subsided, is the essential revelation of identity, a two-word (in the Hebrew) bombshell tossed at his brothers. He follows this by asking whether his father is alive, as though he could not altogether trust the assurances they had given him about this when he questioned them in his guise of Egyptian viceroy. His repeated reference to “my father” serves double duty: the first-person singular possessive expresses his sense of personal connection with old Jacob (he is, after all, *my* father, he is saying to his brothers); but it is also idiomatic usage for the familiar “Father” in biblical Hebrew (rather like *ʾabba* in Aramaic and later Hebrew).

4. *And Joseph said to his brothers, “Come close to me, pray.”* The purblindness to which a mechanical focus on source criticism can lead is nowhere more vividly illustrated than in the contention of some critics that this verse reflects a different source from the preceding verse because it is a “doublet” of it.

What should be obvious is that this repeated speech is a brilliant realization of the dramatic moment. When Joseph first reveals himself to his brothers, they are, quite understandably, "dismayed." And so he must speak again, first asking them to draw close. (The proposal of the Midrash Bereishit Rabba that he invites them to come close in order to show them that he is circumcised is of course fanciful, but the closing of physical space does reflect his sense that he must somehow bridge the enormous distance he has maintained between himself and them in his Egyptian persona.)

I am Joseph your brother whom you sold into Egypt. The qualifying clause Joseph now adds to his initial "I am Joseph" is surely a heart-stopper for the brothers, and could be construed as the last—inadvertent?—gesture of his test of them. Their most dire imaginings of retribution could easily follow from these words, but instead, Joseph immediately proceeds in the next sentence to reassure them.

5. *do not be incensed with yourselves.* The literal Hebrew wording is "let it not be incensed in your eyes."

for sustenance God has sent me before you. Joseph's speech is a luminous illustration of the Bible's double system of causation, human and divine. Commentators have tended to tilt the balance to one side, making Joseph a mouthpiece of piety here. His recognition of a providential plan may well be admirable from the viewpoint of monotheistic faith, but there is no reason to assume that Joseph has lost the sense of his own brilliant initiative in all that he has accomplished, and so when he says "God" (*ʾelohim,* which could also suggest something more general like "providence" or "fate"), he also means Joseph. "Before you" is the first intimation that he intends the whole clan to come down to Egypt after him.

8. *father to Pharaoh.* The obvious meaning of "father" is "authority," and there are biblical parallels for this sense of the term. It is a matter of debate among specialists whether the term also reflects an actual Egyptian administrative title. Joseph's characterization of his political power moves outward through concentric circles from Pharaoh to the court ("all his house") to the whole land of Egypt.

9. *Thus says your son Joseph.* This is the so-called messenger formula that is regularly used in biblical Hebrew as a kind of salutation to introduce letters or

orally conveyed messages.

10. *the land of Goshen.* "Land" here obviously means a region, not a country. The area referred to is the rich pastureland of the Nile delta, which would also be close to the border of the Sinai. In historical fact, Semitic nomads from the Sinai were granted permission by the Egyptian government to graze their flocks in this region.

11. *lest you lose all.* The Hebrew verb here has often been confused with another one, with which it shares two consonants, meaning "to become poor." The literal meaning of the verb used by Joseph is "to be inherited," that is, to lose all of one's possessions, either through bankruptcy or by being conquered by an enemy.

12. *it is my very mouth that speaks to you.* As Abraham ibn Ezra nicely observed, until the crucial moment when Joseph said, "Clear out everyone around me," all his communications with the brothers would have been through an interpreter, as we were reminded in 42:23. Now he has been speaking to them directly in their native Hebrew, a fact they may have barely assimilated in their dumbfounded condition, and of which he reminds them now at the end of his speech as confirmation of his identity.

14. *and he wept, and Benjamin wept.* After the three times Joseph wept apart from his brothers, there is at last a mutual weeping in the reunion of the two sons of Rachel.

15. *And after that, his brothers spoke with him.* The brothers' silence through Joseph's long speech is an eloquent expression of how overwhelmed they are by this amazing revelation. Only now, after he embraces them and weeps over them, are they able to speak, but the writer preserves the dramatic asymmetry between Joseph and his brothers by merely referring to their speaking without assigning actual dialogue to them.

18. *the best of the land of Egypt.* The source critics have noted an apparent contradiction with Joseph's instructions, which are to settle specifically in the region of Goshen—unless one construes "the best of the land" as a reference to that fertile area, something supported by 47:11.

live off the fat of the land. The Hebrew says literally, "eat the fat of the land."

19. *And you, charge them.* The Masoretic Text has "And you [singular] are charged," which is a little incoherent in light of what follows. Both the Septuagint and the Vulgate read "charge them." Evidently, Joseph is enjoined by Pharaoh to transmit this royal directive to his brothers conferring special status on their clan (Nahum Sarna).

20. *regret not your belongings.* The literal meaning of the Hebrew idiom used is "let not your eye spare."

21. *as Pharaoh had ordered.* This reflects the Hebrew locution that means literally "according to Pharaoh's mouth."

22. *he gave changes of garments, and to Benjamin he gave three hundred pieces of silver.* The bestowal of garments, as Nahum Sarna notes, is a kind of antithetical response to Joseph's having been stripped of his garment. The regal amount of silver given to Benjamin is the final gesture of "restitution" for the twenty pieces of silver the brothers took for the sale of Joseph.

23. *as follows.* Because a whole list of items is being introduced, the narrator announces it with *kezoʾt,* a term prefaced to catalogues or inventories.

24. *Do not be perturbed on the journey.* There has been some dispute about the meaning of the verb here. It is occasionally used in contexts that associate it with anger, and so many interpreters have imagined that Joseph is warning his brothers not to yield to mutual recrimination and perhaps fall to blows on the way home. But the primary meaning of the verb is "to quake" or "to shake," either physically (as a mountain in an earthquake) or emotionally (as a person trembling with fear), and it is the antonym of being tranquil or at peace. In all likelihood, Joseph is reassuring his brothers that they need not fear any lurking residue of vengefulness on his part that would turn the journey homeward into a trap.

26. *his heart stopped.* Translations like "his heart fainted" (King James Version), "his heart was numb" (Speiser and New Jewish Publication Society), and "he was stunned" (Revised English Bible) blunt the force of the

original. The Hebrew verb plainly means to stop, or more precisely, to intermit. Judah had warned that the loss of Benjamin would kill the old man. Now the tremendous shock of this news about Joseph, which at first he cannot believe—does he imagine his less-than-trustworthy sons are perpetrating a cruel hoax?—induces a physical syncope.

27. *And they spoke to him all the words of Joseph . . . and he saw the wagons*. Jacob's incredulity begins to yield to the circumstantial account of Joseph's own story that his sons give him. Then he fully registers the presence of the wagons, which would have been oxen-drawn vehicles of a distinctive Egyptian design that would not normally be seen in Canaan and that mere foreign buyers of grain would surely not be able to obtain. At this point his "spirit. . . . revived," that is, came back to life: he emerges from the state of temporary heart failure, or heart pause, triggered by the astounding report. One should note that the only hint of direct discourse given to the brothers in this scene is "Joseph is still alive" (just three words, four syllables, in the Hebrew). The effect is to keep them in the background, even though they are actually speaking to Jacob. Joseph looms in the foreground in the first half of the chapter, as does Jacob—the father from whom he has been so long separated —in the second half.

28. *Joseph my son is still alive. Let me go see him before I die*. The wonderful poignancy of these words should not deflect us from noting that Jacob is again invoking a kind of self-defining motif. Ever since Joseph's disappearance twenty-two years earlier in narrated time, he has been talking about going down to the grave. By now, he has in fact attained advanced old age (see 47:9), and so the idea that he has little time left is quite reasonable. The brief seizure he has just undergone is of course evidence of his physical frailty. Jacob's story, like David's, is virtually unique in ancient literature in its searching representation of the radical transformations a person undergoes in the slow course of time. The powerful young man who made his way across the Jordan to Mesopotamia with only his walking staff, who wrestled with stones and men and divine beings, is now an old man tottering on the brink of the grave, bearing the deep wounds of his long life.

CHAPTER 46

[1]And Israel journeyed onward, with all that was his,
and he came to Beersheba, and he offered sacrifices to
the God of his father Isaac. [2]And God said to Israel
through visions of the night, “Jacob, Jacob,” and he
said, “Here I am.” [3]And He said, “I am the god, God
of your father. Fear not to go down to Egypt, for a
great nation I will make you there. [4]I Myself will go
down with you to Egypt and I Myself will surely bring
you back up as well, and Joseph shall lay his hand on
your eyes.” [5]And Jacob arose from Beersheba, and the
sons of Israel conveyed Jacob their father and their
little ones and their wives in the wagons Pharaoh had
sent to convey him. [6]And they took their cattle and
their substance that they had gotten in the land of
Canaan and they came to Egypt, Jacob and all his seed
with him. [7]His sons, and the sons of his sons with him,
his daughters and the daughters of his sons, and all his
seed, he brought with him to Egypt.

[8]And these are the names of the children of Israel who
came to Egypt, Jacob and his sons: Jacob's firstborn,
Reuben, [9]and the sons of Reuben, Enoch and Pallu and
Hezron and Carmi. [10]And the sons of Simeon, Jemuel
and Jamin and Ohad and Jachin and Zohar and Saul
the son of the Canaanite woman. [11]And the sons of
Levi, Gershon, Kohath, and Merari. [12]And the sons of
Judah, Er and Onan and Shelah and Perez and Zerah
—and Er and Onan died in the land of Canaan—and
the sons of Perez were Hezron and Hamul. [13]And the
sons of Issachar, Tola and Puvah and Iob and
Shimron. [14]And the sons of Zebulun, Sered and Elon
and Jahleel. [15]These are the sons of Leah whom she
bore to Jacob in Paddan-Aram, and also Dinah his
daughter, every person of his sons and daughters,
thirty-three. [16]And the sons of Gad, Ziphion and
Haggi, Shuni and Ezbon, Eri and Arodi and Areli.
[17]And the sons of Asher, Imnah and Ishvah and Ishvi
and Beriah and Serah their sister, and the sons of
Beriah, Heber and Malchiel. [18]These are the sons of
Zilpah whom Laban gave to Leah his daughter, and
she bore these to Jacob, sixteen persons. [19]The sons of
Rachel, Jacob's wife, Joseph and Benjamin. [20]And to
Joseph were born in the land of Egypt, whom Asenath
daughter of Potiphera priest of On bore to him,
Manasseh and Ephraim. [21]And the sons of Benjamin,

Bela and Becher and Ashbel, Gera and Naaman, Ehi
and Rosh, Muppim and Huppim and Ard. [22]These are
the sons of Rachel who were born to Jacob, fourteen
persons in all. [23]The sons of Dan, Hushim. [24]And the
sons of Naphtali, Jahzeel and Guni and Jezer and
Shillem. [25]These are the sons of Bilhah whom Laban
gave to Rachel his daughter, and she bore these to
Jacob, seven persons in all. [26]All the persons who came
with Jacob to Egypt, issue of his loins, aside from the
wives of Jacob's sons, sixty-six persons in all. [27]And
the sons of Joseph who were born to him in Egypt,
were two persons. All the persons of the household of
Jacob coming to Egypt were seventy.

[28]And Judah he had sent before him to show him the
way to Goshen, and they came to the land of Goshen.
[29]And Joseph harnessed his chariot and went up to
meet Israel his father in Goshen, and appeared before
him and fell on his neck, and he wept on his neck a
long while. [30]And Israel said to Joseph, "I may die
now, after seeing your face, for you are still alive."
[31]And Joseph said to his brothers and to his father's
household, "Let me go up and tell Pharaoh and let me
say to him, 'My brothers and my father's household
that was in the land of Canaan have come to me. [32]And

the men are shepherds, for they have always been handlers of livestock, and their sheep and their cattle and all that is theirs they have brought.’ [33]And so, when Pharaoh calls for you and says, ‘What is it you do?,’ [34]you should say, ‘Your servants have been handlers of livestock from our youth until now, we and our fathers as well,’ that you may dwell in the land of Goshen. For every shepherd is abhorrent to Egypt.”

CHAPTER 46 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Israel journeyed onward*. The choice of the verb is a little surprising, as one might have expected something like “he arose and set out” or “he went forth.” It seems likely that this particular verb, with its etymological background of pulling up tent pegs and moving from one encampment to another, is intended to signal that the beginning of the sojourn in Egypt is to be construed as a resumption of the nomadic existence that characterized the lives of Abraham and Isaac. Thus the clan of Jacob does not head down to Egypt as a permanent place of emigration but as a way station in its continued wanderings.

2. *Jacob, Jacob . . . Here I am*. This is an exact verbal parallel, as Amos Funkenstein has observed to me, to the exchange between God and Abraham at the beginning of the story of the binding of Isaac. Perhaps there is a suggestion that the sojourn in Egypt is also an ordeal, with an ultimately happy ending.

3. *Fear not . . . for a great nation I will make you*. Both the language and the action of this whole scene are framed as an emphatic recapitulation of the earlier Patriarchal Tales now that they are coming to an end as the last of the

patriarchs with his offspring leaves Canaan for the long stay in Egypt. Jacob, traveling south from Hebron, stops at Beersheba, where his father built an altar, and offers sacrifice just as both Isaac and Abraham did. God appears to him and speaks to him, as He did to Abraham and Isaac. The language of the dream-vision strongly echoes the language of the covenantal promises to Jacob's father and grandfather.

4. *I Myself will go down with you.* The first-person pronoun is emphatic because God uses the pronoun *ʾanokhi,* which is not strictly necessary, followed as it is by the imperfect tense of the verb conjugated in the first-person singular. The reassurance God offers—which is already the kernel of a theological concept that will play an important role in national consciousness both in the Babylonian exile and after the defeat by the Romans in 70 C.E.—is necessary because in the polytheistic view the theater of activity of a deity was typically imagined to be limited to the territorial borders of the deity's worshippers. By contrast, this God solemnly promises to go down with His people to Egypt and to bring them back up.

Joseph shall lay his hand on your eyes. The reference is to closing the eyes at the moment of death.

5. *and the sons of Israel conveyed Jacob their father.* The repeated stress, in the previous chapter and in this one, on "conveying" or carrying Jacob, together with the women and children, reminds us that he is very old and infirm, no longer an active participant in the journey.

7. *His sons, and the sons of his sons.* This last verse of the narrative report of the departure for Egypt becomes an apt transition to the genealogy, purposefully inserted at this point from what scholarly consensus deems a different literary source.

8–27. Once again, the genealogical list is used to effect closure at the end of a large narrative unit. The tales of the patriarchs in the land of Canaan are now concluded, and as Jacob and his clan journey southward for the sojourn in Egypt, we are given an inventory of his offspring, a large family already exhibiting in embryo the configuration of the future tribes of Israel.

23. *The sons of Dan, Hushim.* Only one son is mentioned, but this need not reflect a contradiction in the text, as "the sons of" may be a fixed formula for

each new item in the list.

27. *All the persons of the household of Jacob coming to Egypt were seventy.* The traditional commentators resort to interpretive acrobatics in order to make the list come out to exactly seventy—debating as to whether Jacob himself should be included in the count, whether Joseph and his two sons are part of the sum, and so forth. In fact, the insistence on seventy at the end of the list vividly illustrates the biblical use of numbers as symbolic approximations rather than as arithmetically precise measures. Seventy is a fullness, a large round number, ten times sacred seven, and its use here indicates that Jacob, once a solitary fugitive, has grown to a grand family, the nucleus of a nation.

28. *And Judah he had sent before him to show him the way.* Judah, who pledged to guarantee Benjamin's safety (and from whose descendants the royal line will spring), is now Jacob's choice as guide for the rest. The phrase "to show him the way" is a little odd in the Hebrew (there are two variant readings reflected in the ancient versions), and its meaning is not entirely certain.

29. *And Joseph harnessed his chariot.* The specification of the vehicle is another strategic reminder of the Egyptian accoutrements Joseph employs as a matter of course, even as he hurries to meet his father, who comes from a world where there are neither chariots nor wagons. Realistically, "harnessed," as Abraham ibn Ezra and many others have noted, would mean, "he gave orders to harness." Nevertheless, there is thematic point in the sense of immediacy conveyed by the transitive verb with Joseph as subject, and Rashi registers this point, even if his reading is too literal, when he says: "He himself harnessed the horses to the chariot in order to make haste in honor of his father."

and appeared before him. This is a slightly odd phrase, since it is more typically used for the appearance of God before a human. Perhaps the sight of the long-lost Joseph, in Egyptian royal raiment, riding in his chariot, is a kind of epiphany for Jacob. In any case, "appeared before" accords with Jacob's own emphasis on seeing Joseph's face.

and fell on his neck, and he wept on his neck a long while. The absence of reciprocal weeping on the part of Jacob can scarcely be attributed to ellipsis

or inadvertent narrative omission, for in the identically worded report of Joseph's falling on Benjamin's neck and weeping, we are told, "and Benjamin wept on his neck" (45:14). We are invited to imagine, then, a sobbing Joseph who embraces his father while the old man stands dry-eyed, perhaps even rigid, too overcome with feeling to know how to respond, or to be able to respond spontaneously, until finally he speaks, once more invoking his own death, but now with a sense of contentment: "I may die now, after seeing your face, for you are still alive."

32. *handlers of livestock.* The Hebrew phrase, *ʾanshei miqneh,* which occurs only here and in verse 34, literally means "men of livestock." It is perhaps influenced by the designation of the brothers as "the men" at the beginning of this verse.

34. *that you may dwell in the land of Goshen. For every shepherd is abhorrent to Egypt*. This claim is puzzling because there is an indication in the next chapter that Pharaoh had his own flocks (see 47:6b), and there is no extrabiblical evidence that shepherding was a taboo profession among the Egyptians, as the categorical language of the last sentence here appears to suggest. The least convoluted explanation is that the Egyptians, who were by and large sedentary agriculturalists and who had large urban centers, considered the semi-nomadic herdsmen from the north as inferiors (an attitude actually reflected in Egyptian sources) and so preferred to keep them segregated in the pasture region of the Nile delta not far from the Sinai border.

CHAPTER 47

[1]And Joseph came and told Pharaoh and said, “My
father and my brothers and their flocks and their cattle
and all that is theirs have come from the land of
Canaan and here they are in the land of Goshen.” [2]And
from the pick of his brothers he took five men and
presented them to Pharaoh. [3]And Pharaoh said to his
brothers, “What is it you do?” And they said to
Pharaoh, “Your servants are shepherds, we, and our
fathers as well.” [4]And they said to Pharaoh, “We have
come to sojourn in the land, for there is no pasture for
your servants’ flocks because the famine is grave in the
land of Canaan. And so, let your servants, pray, dwell
in the land of Goshen.” [5a-6b]*And Pharaoh said to
Joseph, saying,* “Let them dwell in the land of Goshen,
and if you know there are able men among them,
make them masters of the livestock, over what is
mine.” *And Jacob and his sons had come to Egypt, to
Joseph, and Pharaoh king of Egypt heard*. [5]And
Pharaoh said to Joseph, saying, “Your father and your
brothers have come to you. [6a]The land of Egypt is

before you. In the best of the land settle your father
and your brothers. Let them dwell in the land of
Goshen.” 7And Joseph brought Jacob his father and
stood him before Pharaoh, and Jacob blessed Pharaoh.
8And Pharaoh said to Jacob, “How many are the days
of the years of your life?” 9And Jacob said to Pharaoh,
“The days of the years of my sojournings are a
hundred and thirty years. Few and evil have been the
days of the years of my life, and they have not attained
the days of the years of my fathers in their days of
sojourning.” 10And Jacob blessed Pharaoh and went
out from Pharaoh’s presence.

11And Joseph settled his father and his brothers and
gave them a holding in the land of Egypt in the best of
the land, in the land of Rameses, as Pharaoh had
commanded. 12And Joseph sustained his father and his
brothers and all his father’s household with bread,
down to the mouths of the little ones. 13And there was
no bread in all the earth, for the famine was very
grave, and the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan
languished because of the famine. 14And Joseph
collected all the silver to be found in the land of Egypt
and in the land of Canaan in return for the provisions
they were buying, and Joseph brought the silver to the

house of Pharaoh. [15]And the silver of the land of Egypt and of the land of Canaan ran out, and all Egypt came to Joseph, saying, “Let us have bread, for why should we die before your eyes? For the silver is gone.” [16]And Joseph said, “Let me have your livestock, that I may give you in return for your livestock if the silver is gone.” [17]And they brought their livestock to Joseph, and he gave them bread in return for the horses and the stocks of sheep and the stocks of cattle and the donkeys, and he carried them forward with bread in return for all their livestock that year. [18]And that year ran out and they came to him the next year and said to him, “We shall not conceal from my lord that the silver has run out and the animal stocks are my lord’s. Nothing is left for our lord but our carcasses and our farmland. [19]Why should we die before your eyes? Both we and our farmland—take possession of us and our farmland in return for bread, and we with our farmland will be slaves to Pharaoh, and give us seed, that we may live and not die, and that the farmland not turn to desert.” [20]And Joseph took possession of all the farmland of Egypt for Pharaoh, for each Egyptian sold his field, as the famine was harsh upon them, and the land became Pharaoh’s. [21]And the people he moved town by town, from one end of the border of Egypt to the other. [22]Only the farmland of the priests he did not

take in possession, for the priests had a fixed allotment from Pharaoh and they ate from their allotment that Pharaoh had given them. Therefore they did not sell their farmland. [23]And Joseph said to the people, "Look, I have taken possession of you this day, with your farmland, for Pharaoh. Here is seed for you, and sow the land. [24]And when the harvests come, you shall give a fifth to Pharaoh and four parts shall be yours for seeding the field and for your food, for those in your households and for your little ones to eat." [25]And they said, "You have kept us alive! May we find favor in the eyes of our lord, in being Pharaoh's slaves." [26]And Joseph made it a fixed law, to this very day, over the farmland of Egypt, that Pharaoh should have a fifth. Only the farmland of the priests, it alone did not become Pharaoh's.

[27]And Israel dwelled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen, and they took holdings in it, and were fruitful and multiplied greatly. [28]And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years, and Jacob's days, the years of his life, were one hundred and forty-seven years. [29]And Israel's time to die drew near, and he called for his son, for Joseph, and he said to him, "If, pray, I have found favor in your eyes, put your hand,

pray, under my thigh and act toward me with steadfast kindness—pray, do not bury me in Egypt. [30]When I lie with my fathers, carry me from Egypt and bury me in their burial place." [31]And he said, "I will do as you have spoken." And he said, "Swear to me." And he swore to him. And Israel bowed at the head of the bed.

CHAPTER 47 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *And from the pick of his brothers*. The Hebrew prepositional phrase miqtseh *ʾeḥaw* has elicited puzzlement, or evasion, from most translators. The common meaning of *miqtseh* is "at the end of," but it is also occasionally used in the sense of "from the best of" or "from the pick of," which would be appropriate here, since Joseph wants to introduce the most presentable of his brothers to Pharaoh. The use of *miqtseh* in Judges 18:2 in reference to elite soldiers nicely illustrates the likely meaning in our own text: "And the Danites sent out from their clans, from the pick of them *[miqtsotam]*, five men . . . to spy out the land." It might be noted that this term in Judges is associated with "capable men" (benei *ḥayil*)—a phrase that in a military context might also be rendered "valiant men"—just as an equivalent phrase, *ʾanshei ḥayil,* is associated with Joseph's brothers at this point. There are, however, other occurrences of *miqtseh* or *miqtsot* that suggest it might also have the sense of "a representative sample."

five men. The insistence of various modern commentators that "five" both here and earlier in the story really means "several" is not especially convincing. One should note that the whole Joseph story exhibits a fondness for playing with recurrent numbers: the fraternal twelve, first signaled in Joseph's dreams, then subtracted from by his disappearance, with the full sum made up at the end; the triple pairs of dreams; the two pairs of seven. Five is one half the number of the brothers who enslaved Joseph; Benjamin was

given a fivefold portion at Joseph's feast and five changes of garments; and the Egyptians are obliged to pay a tax of one-fifth of their harvest.

4. *to sojourn in the land . . . dwell in the land*. First they use a verb of temporary residence, then one of fixed settlement.

[5a–6b.] The Masoretic Text is clearly problematic at this point because it has Pharaoh speaking to Joseph, appearing to ignore the brothers who have just addressed a petition to him, and also announcing, quite superfluously in light of verse 1, "Your father and your brothers have come to you." Coherence in the sequence of dialogues is improved by inserting the clauses italicized here, which are reflected in the Septuagint and by changing the order of the verses.

7. *and Jacob blessed Pharaoh.* The Hebrew verb here also has the simple meaning of "to greet," but it seems likely that in this context it straddles both senses. Jacob of course accords Pharaoh the deferential greeting owed to a monarch, but it would be entirely in keeping with his own highly developed sense of his patriarchal role that he—a mere Semitic herdsman chief addressing the head of the mighty Egyptian empire—should pronounce a blessing on Pharaoh.

9. *The days of the years of my sojournings.* The last noun here probably has a double connotation: Jacob's life has been a series of wanderings or "sojournings," not a sedentary existence in one place, and human existence is by nature a sojourning, a temporary dwelling between non-being and extinction.

Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life. Jacob's somber summary of his own life echoes with a kind of complex solemnity against all that we have seen him undergo. He has, after all, achieved everything he aspired to achieve: the birthright, the blessing, marriage with his beloved Rachel, progeny, and wealth. But one measure of the profound moral realism of the story is that although he gets everything he wanted, it is not in the way he would have wanted, and the consequence is far more pain than contentment. From his "clashing" (25:22) with his twin in the womb, everything has been a struggle. He displaces Esau, but only at the price of fear and lingering guilt and long exile. He gets Rachel, but only by having Leah imposed on him, with all the domestic strife that entails, and he loses Rachel early in childbirth. He is given a new name by his divine adversary,

but comes away with a permanent wound. He gets the full solar-year number of twelve sons, but there is enmity among them (for which he bears some responsibility), and he spends twenty-two years continually grieving over his favorite son, who he believes is dead. This is, in sum, a story with a happy ending that withholds any simple feeling of happiness at the end.

and they have not attained the days of the years of my fathers. In fact, Jacob, long-lived as he is, will not attain the prodigious life spans of Abraham and Isaac. At this point, however, he can scarcely know how much longer he has to live (seventeen years, as it turns out), and so his words must reflect that feeling of having one foot in the grave that he has repeatedly expressed before. One should not exclude the possibility that Jacob is playing up the sense of contradiction, making a calculated impression on Pharaoh, in dismissing his own 130 years as "few." The ideal life span for the Egyptians was 110.

11. *the land of Rameses.* Medieval and modern commentators agree that this designation is a synonym for Goshen. The term looks like an anachronism because Rameses is the city later built with Israelite slave labor. Perhaps its use here is intended to foreshadow the future oppression.

13. *And there was no bread in all the earth.* The tension with the preceding verse, in which Joseph is reported sustaining his whole clan, down to the little ones, with bread, is of course pointed, and recalls a similar surface contradiction between verses 54 and 55 in chapter 41. The writer shuttles here between the two common meanings of *'erets,* "earth" and "land," as in his previous accounts of the famine.

15. *why should we die before your eyes?* The last term in the Hebrew is literally "opposite you." In the parallel speech in verse 19, the Egyptians actually say "before your eyes."

17. *he carried them forward with bread.* The usual meaning of the verb is "to lead"; the context here suggests it may also mean something like "to sustain."

18. *our carcasses and our farmland.* Previous translations have rendered the first of these terms blandly as "our bodies" or "our persons." But the Hebrew *gewiyah* refers specifically to a dead body and is often used in quite negative contexts. The Egyptians here are speaking sardonically of their own miserable

condition: they have nothing left but their carcasses, they have been reduced to walking corpses. The present translation uses "farmland" for the Hebrew *ʾadamah*. That term usually means arable land—it is the reiterated "soil" of the Garden story—but "soil" would be a little off in these sentences. It cannot be rendered throughout simply as "land" because that would create a confusion with "land" *(ʾerets),* which is also used here several times to refer to Egypt as a country. The fact that the farmland referred to by the Egyptians is not yielding much produce suggests that in their eyes it is scarcely worth more than the "carcasses" with which it is bracketed.

19. *slaves to Pharaoh.* The reduction of the entire population to a condition of virtual serfdom to the crown in all likelihood was meant to be construed not as an act of ruthlessness by Joseph but as an instance of his administrative brilliance. The subordination of the Egyptian peasantry to the central government, with the 20 percent tax on agriculture, was a known fact, and our story provides an explanation (however unhistorical) for its origins.

that the farmland not turn to desert. As the famine continues, without seed-grain to replant the soil, the land will turn to desert.

21. *And the people he moved town by town.* Despite many English versions, it is problematic to construe the last term as "into the towns," for it would make no sense to move all the farmers into the cities if there are to be crops in the future, unless one imagines a temporary gathering of the rural population in the towns for the distribution of food. But the Hebrew particle *le* in *leʿarim* can also have the sense of "according to"—that is, Joseph rounded up rural populations in groups according to their distribution around the principal towns and resettled them elsewhere. The purpose would be to sever them from their hereditary lands and locate them on other lands that they knew were theirs to till only by the grace of Pharaoh, to whom the land now belonged.

25. *in being Pharaoh's slaves.* Most translations construe this as a future verb, "we shall be." But the introductory clause of obeisance, "May we find favor . . .," does not necessarily preface a declaration about a future action, and the Egyptians are already Pharaoh's slaves, both by their own declaration (verse 19) and Joseph's (verse 23). In point of historical fact, Egypt's centralization

of power, so unlike tribal Israel and Canaan with its city-states, must have astounded and perhaps also troubled the Hebrew writer.

28. *And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years.* The symmetry with Joseph's seventeen years until he was sold into Egypt was aptly observed in the Middle Ages by David Kimhi: "Just as Joseph was in the lap of Jacob seventeen years, Jacob was in the lap of Joseph seventeen years."

CHAPTER 48

[1]And it happened after these things that someone said
to Joseph, “Look, your father is ill.” And he took his
two sons with him, Manasseh and Ephraim. [2]And
someone told Jacob and said, “Look, your son Joseph
is coming to you.” And Israel summoned his strength
and sat up in bed. [3]And Jacob said to Joseph, “El
Shaddai appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan
and blessed me, [4]and said to me, ‘I am about to make
you fruitful and multiply you and make you an
assembly of peoples, and I will give this land to your
seed after you as an everlasting holding.’ [5]And so now,
your two sons who were born to you in the land of
Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, shall be mine—
Ephraim and Manasseh, like Reuben and Simeon,
shall be mine. [6]And those you begot after them shall
be yours; by their brothers’ names they shall be called
in their inheritance. [7]As for me, when I was coming
from Paddan, Rachel died to my grief in the land of
Canaan on the way, still some distance from Ephrath,
and I buried her there on the way.” Ephrath is

Bethlehem. [8]And Israel saw Joseph's sons and he said,
"Who are these?" [9]And Joseph said to his father,
"They are my sons whom God has given me here."
And he said, "Fetch them, pray, to me, that I may
bless them." [10]And Israel's eyes had grown heavy with
age, he could not see. And he brought them near him,
and he kissed them and embraced them. [11]And Israel
said to Joseph, "I had not thought to see your face,
and, look, God has also let me see your seed!" [12]And
Joseph drew them out from his knees, and he bowed,
his face to the ground. [13]And Joseph took the two of
them, Ephraim with his right hand to Israel's left and
Manasseh with his left hand to Israel's right, and
brought them near him. [14]And Israel stretched out his
right hand and placed it on Ephraim's head, yet he was
the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh's head—
he crossed his hands—though Manasseh was the
firstborn. [15]And he blessed them and said,

"The God in whose presence my
fathers walked,
Abraham and Isaac,
the God who has looked after me
all my life till this day,

[16]the messenger rescuing me from all
evil,
may He bless the lads,
let my name be called in them
and the name of my fathers,
Abraham and Isaac,
let them teem multitudinous in the
midst of the earth."

[17]And Joseph saw that his father had placed his right hand on Ephraim's head, and it was wrong in his eyes, and he took hold of his father's hand to remove it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. [18]And Joseph said to his father, "Not so, my father, for this one is the firstborn. Put your right hand on his head." [19]And his father refused and he said, "I know, my son. I know. He, too, shall become a people, and he, too, shall be great. But his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his seed shall be a fullness of nations." [20]And he blessed them that day, saying,

"By you shall Israel bless, saying,
'May God set you as Ephraim and
Manasseh,'"

and he set Ephraim before Manasseh.

[21]And Israel said to Joseph, “Look, I am about to die, but God shall be with you and bring you back to the land of your fathers. [22]As for me, I have given you with single intent over your brothers what I took from the hand of the Amorite with my sword and with my bow.”

CHAPTER 48 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And he took his two sons with him*. Joseph, even before he receives any word from his father in this regard, anticipates that Jacob will confer some sort of special eminence on his own two sons in a deathbed blessing, and so he brings them with him.

3. *Luz.* This is the older name for Bethel, where Jacob was vouchsafed his dream-vision of divine messengers ascending and descending the ramp to heaven.

5. *your two sons . . . shall be mine—Ephraim and Manasseh, like Reuben and Simeon, shall be mine*. These words are equally fraught with thematic and legal implications. Jacob explicitly equates Joseph’s two sons with his own firstborn and second-born, intimating that the former are to have as good an inheritance, or better, as the latter, and thus once more invokes the great Genesis theme of the reversal of primogeniture. (Note that he already places Ephraim, the younger, before Manasseh when he names Joseph’s sons.) The fact that Reuben has violated Jacob’s concubine and Simeon (with Levi) has initiated the massacre at Shechem may suggest that they are deemed unworthy to be undisputed first and second in line among Jacob’s inheritors.

The language Jacob uses, moreover, is a formula of legal adoption, just as the gesture of placing the boys on the old man's knees (see verse 12) is a ritual gesture of adoption. The adoption is dictated by the fact that Ephraim and Manasseh will become tribes, just as if they were sons of Jacob.

6. *And those you begot after them.* It is difficult to square this phrase with the narrative as we have it, which indicates that Joseph has only two sons. The efforts of some commentators to make the verb a future is not at all warranted by the Hebrew grammar, and, in any case, Joseph has been married more than twenty-five years.

by their brothers' names they shall be called in their inheritance. Although the idiom is familiar, the meaning is not entirely transparent. What Jacob probably is saying is that it is Ephraim and Manasseh who will have tribal status in the future nation, and thus any other sons of Joseph would be "called by their name," would have claim to land that was part of the tribal inheritance of Ephraim and Manasseh and so designated.

7. *As for me, when I was coming from Paddan, Rachel died.* This verse is one of several elements in this chapter that have been seized on by textual critics as evidence of its highly composite nature and of what is claimed to be a concomitant incoherence in its articulations. But such conclusions seriously underestimate the degree of integrative narrative logic that the writer—or perhaps one must say, the redactor—exhibits. At first glance, Jacob's comment about the death of his beloved Rachel in the midst of blessing his grandsons seems a non sequitur. It is, however, a loss to which he has never been reconciled (witness his extravagant favoritism toward Rachel's firstborn). His vivid sense of anguish, after all these decades, is registered in the single word *ʿalai* ("to my grief," but literally, "on me," the same word he uses in 42:36, when he says that all the burden of bereavement is on him), and this loss is surely uppermost in his mind when he tells Pharaoh that his days have been few and evil. On his deathbed, then, Jacob reverts obsessively to the loss of Rachel, who perished in childbirth leaving behind only two sons, and his impulse to adopt Rachel's two grandsons by her firstborn expresses a desire to compensate, symbolically and legally, for the additional sons she did not live to bear.

8. *Who are these?* Perhaps, as several commentators have proposed, he could barely make out their features because he was virtually blind (see verse 10). "And Israel saw," then, would mean something like "he dimly perceived," and it need not be an out-and-out contradiction of the indication of blindness in verse 10. But the question he asks might also be the opening formula in the ceremony of adoption.

14. *he crossed his hands.* This image, extended in the exchange with Joseph in which the old man says he knows what he is doing, is a kind of summarizing thematic ideogram of the Book of Genesis: the right hand of the father conferring the blessing reaches across to embrace the head of the younger brother, and the elder, his head covered by the old man's left hand, receives a lesser blessing.

15. *he blessed them.* The Masoretic Text has, illogically, "he blessed Joseph," but "them" as object of the verb is reflected in the Septuagint, the Syriac, and the Vulgate.

16. *the name of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac, / let them teem multitudinous.* Jacob, after recapitulating the story of his personal providence in the first line of the blessing-poem, invokes the benediction of the patriarchal line, and then, going back still further in the biblical history, the promise, or injunction, of fertility from the Creation story.

20. *And he blessed them that day.* The introduction of a second blessing is hardly evidence of a glitch in textual transmission. After the exchange with Joseph, which follows the full-scale blessing and also explains its implications, Jacob reaffirms his giving precedence to Ephraim over Manasseh (a real datum of later tribal history) by stating a kind of summary blessing in which the name of the younger precedes the name of the elder. "By you shall Israel bless" is meant quite literally: when the future people of Israel want to invoke a blessing, they will do it by reciting the words, "May God set you as Ephraim and Manasseh."

22. *I have given you with single intent over your brothers what I took from the hand of the Amorite.* The phrase represented here by "with single intent" is a notorious crux, but previous interpreters may have been misled by assuming it must be the object of the verb "have given." The Hebrew *shekhem ʾaḥad*

means literally “one shoulder.” Many commentators and translators, with an eye to the immediate context of inheritance, have construed this as “one portion,” but the evidence elsewhere in the Bible that *shekhem* means “portion” is weak. Others have proposed, without much more warrant than the shape of the shoulder, that the word here means “mountain slope.” A substantial number of scholars, medieval and modern, read this as a proper noun, the city of Shechem, encouraged by the fact that the Joseph tribes settled in the vicinity of Shechem. That construction, however, entails two difficulties: if the city were referred to, a feminine form of the word for “one” (not *ʾaḥad* but *ʾaḥat*) would be required; and at least according to the preceding narrative, Jacob, far from having conquered Shechem with his own sword, was horrified by the massacre his sons perpetrated there. But the very phrase used here, *shekhem ʾaḥad,* occurs at one other place in the Bible, Zephaniah 3:9, where it is used *adverbially* in an idiomatic sense made clear by the immediate context: “for them all to call in the name of the LORD, / to serve Him with single intent [*shekhem ʾeḥad*; King James Version, with one consent; Revised English Bible and New Jewish Publication Society Bible, with one accord].” This is, then, an expression that indicates concerted, unswerving intention and execution, and as such is perfectly appropriate to the legal pronouncement of legacy by Jacob in which it appears. Once the phrase is seen as adverbial, the relative clause “what I took . . .” falls into place with grammatical preciseness as the object of the verb “have given,” and in this reading, no particular city or region need be specified.

CHAPTER 49

[1]And Jacob called his sons and said, “Gather round,
that I may tell you what shall befall you in the days to
come.

[2]Assemble and hearken, O Jacob’s
sons,
and hearken to Israel your father.
[3]Reuben, my firstborn are you—
my strength and first yield of my
manhood,
prevailing in rank and
prevailing in might.
[4]Unsteady as water, you’ll no more
prevail!
for you mounted the place where
your father lay,
you profaned my couch, you
mounted!
[5]Simeon and Levi, the brothers—

weapons of outrage their trade.
[6]In their council let me never set
foot,
their assembly my presence shun.
For in their fury they slaughtered
men,
at their pleasure they tore down
ramparts
[7]Cursed be their fury so fierce,
and their wrath so remorseless!
I will divide them in Jacob,
disperse them in Israel.
[8]Judah, you, shall your brothers
acclaim—
your hand on your enemies' nape
—
your fathers' sons shall bow to
you.
[9]A lion's whelp is Judah,
from the prey, O my son, you
mount.
He crouched, he lay down like a
lion,
like the king of beasts, and who
dare arouse him?

[10]The scepter shall not pass from
Judah,
nor the mace from between his
legs,
that tribute to him may come
and to him the submission of
peoples.
[11]He binds to the vine his ass,
to the grape-bough his ass's foal.
He washes in wine his garment,
in the blood of the grape his
cloak.
[12]O eyes that are darker than wine
and teeth that are whiter than
milk!
[13]Zebulun near the shore of the sea
shall dwell,
and he by the haven of ships,
his flank upon Sidon.
[14]Issachar, a big-boned donkey,
crouched amidst hearths.
[15]He saw that the homestead was
goodly,
that the land was delightful,
and he put his shoulder to the load,
became a toiling serf.

[16]Dan, his folk will judge
as one of Israel's tribes.
[17]Let Dan be a snake on the road,
an asp on the path,
that bites the horse's heels
and its rider topples backward.
[18]Your deliverance I await, O
LORD!
[19]Gad shall be goaded by raiders
yet he shall goad their heel.
[20]Asher's bread shall be rich
and he shall bring forth kingly
dishes.
[21]Naphtali, a hind let loose
who brings forth lovely fawns.
[22]A fruitful son is Joseph,
a fruitful son by a spring,
daughters strode by a rampart.
[23]They savaged him, shot arrows
and harassed him, the archers did.
[24]But taut was his bow,
his arms ever-moving,
through the hands of the Champion
of Jacob,
through the name of the
Shepherd, and Israel's Rock.

[25]From the God of your fathers, may
He aid you,
Shaddai, may He bless you—
blessings of the heavens above,
blessings of the deep that lies
below,
blessings of breasts and womb.
[26]Your father's blessings surpassed
the blessings of timeless heights,
the bounty of hills everlasting.
May they rest on the head of Joseph,
on the brow of the one set apart
from his brothers.
[27]Benjamin, ravening wolf,
in the morn he consumes the
spoils,
at evening shares out plunder."

[28]These are the tribes of Israel, twelve in all, and this is what their father spoke to them, blessing them, each according to his blessing, he blessed them. [29]And he charged them and said to them, "I am about to be gathered to my kinfolk. Bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, [30]in the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which faces

Mamre, in the land of Canaan, the field that Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite as a burial-holding. [31]There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife, there they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife, and there I buried Leah—[32]the field and the cave within it, bought from the Hittites." [33]And Jacob finished charging his sons, and he gathered his feet up into the bed, and he breathed his last, and was gathered to his kinfolk.

CHAPTER 49 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

As with the life-histories of Moses and David, the extended narrative of Jacob and his sons (with the entire Patriarchal Tale behind it) is given literary closure by the introduction of a long poem. Although the poem chiefly looks forward to the future tribal history of Jacob's twelve sons, it begins by harking back to incidents in the preceding narrative and so preserves some sense of the sons as individual characters, not merely eponymous founders of the tribes. There is debate among scholars as to whether the poem is a single composition or rather a kind of cento of poetic fragments about the fate of the various tribes that were in circulation in the early phase of Israelite history. It is generally agreed, however, that this is one of the oldest extended texts in the Bible. The representation of Levi as a tribe deprived of inheritance, with no hint of its sacerdotal function and the concomitant privileges, suggests a very early date—conceivably even before the completion of the conquest and settlement, as Nahum Sarna has proposed. The royal imagery, on the other hand, associated with Judah seems to reflect a moment after David's founding of his dynasty shortly before 1000 B.C.E. In any case, the antiquity of the poem, as well as the fact that it may be a collage of fragments, means that there are words, phrases, and occasionally whole clauses that are not very well understood. Sometimes this is because of the

use of a rare, presumably archaic, term, though there are also at least a few points where the received text looks defective. Differences of interpretive opinion are such that in two instances there is no agreement about whether the language refers to animal, vegetable, or mineral! At such junctures, a translator can do no more than make an educated guess. In any event, the poetic beauty and power of Jacob's testament cannot be separated from its lofty antique style—its archaic grammatical forms and strange turns of syntax, its rare poetic terms, its animal and vegetal imagery, at some points recalling the old Ugaritic poems—and an English version should seek at least to intimate these qualities.

2. *Assemble and hearken . . . hearken*. It is a common convention of biblical poetry to begin with a formal exhortation for those addressed to listen closely. What is slightly odd about the opening line here is that "hearken" is repeated in the second half of the line instead of introducing a synonym like "give ear" (compare the beginning of Lamech's poem, Genesis 4:23).

3. *first yield of my manhood.* The word for "manhood," *ʾon*, means "vigor," but it is particularly associated with male potency. "First yield," *rei'shit,* is a word also used for crops. The biological image of Reuben as the product of Jacob's first inseminating seed sharpens the evocation in the next line of his violation of his father's concubine.

4. *you'll no more prevail.* The verb here may rather mean "you'll not remain" (or pun on that meaning)—a reference to the early disappearance of the tribe of Reuben, perhaps before the period of the monarchy.

the place where your father lay. The plural form used, *mishkevei ʾavikha,* has an explicitly sexual connotation, whereas the singular *mishkav* can also mean simply a place where one sleeps.

you profaned my couch, you mounted. The translation here emends *ʿalah* ("he mounted") to *ʿalita* ("you mounted"), though there is some possibility that the archaic poetic style permitted this sort of abrupt switch in pronominal reference.

5. *their trade.* The meaning of *mekheroteyhem* is highly uncertain. The translation here conjecturally links the term with the root *m-kh-r,* "to sell."

6. *let me never set foot.* Literally, "let my person not come."

their assembly my presence shun. The Hebrew says literally, "in their assembly let my presence not join," but this is clumsy as English, and in any case the point is that Jacob is ostracizing the two brothers.

they tore down ramparts. With many critics, the translation here reads *shur*, a poetic term for "wall," instead of *shor*, "ox," as the Masoretic Text has it. The verb, if it refers to oxen, would mean "to maim" or "to hamstring." It was sometimes the ancient practice to hamstring the captured warhorses of an enemy, but it would have been foolish to hamstring captured oxen, which could be put to peaceful use. Moreover, since Jacob is speaking of the massacre at Shechem, the narrative there explicitly noted that the cattle and other livestock were carried off, not maimed.

8. *Judah, you, shall your brothers acclaim.* This line in the Hebrew is a fanfare of sound-play, including a pun on Judah's name, *Yehudah, 'atah yodukha 'a'ekha*. Up to this point, Jacob's testament to his first three sons has actually been nothing but curses. Rashi neatly catches the transitional force of "Judah, you . . ." when he notes, "Inasmuch as he had heaped condemnations on the previous ones, Judah began to back away and his father called to him with words of encouragement, 'Judah, you are not like them.'" Judah now displaces the three brothers born before him, and his claim to preeminence ("your brothers acclaim") is founded on his military prowess ("your hand on your enemies' nape"). All this has a distinctly Davidic coloration. "Acclaim" is a more precise equivalent for the verb in context than the usual "praise" because what is involved is recognition of Judah's royal status.

9. *from the prey, O my son, you mount.* Amos Funkenstein has astutely suggested to me that there is an ingenious double meaning here. The Hebrew could also be construed as "from the prey of my son you mounted," introducing a shadow reference to Judah's leading part in the plan to pass off Joseph as dead. When the bloodied tunic was brought to Jacob, he cried out, "Joseph is torn to shreds" (*tarof toraf*), and the term for "prey" here is *teref*.

you mount. This is the same verb that is used above for Reuben's act of sexual violation, but here it refers to the lion springing up from the prey it has slain. The proposal that the verb means "to grow" is forced, with little warrant elsewhere in the Bible.

the king of beasts. This English kenning is necessary in the poetic parallelism because there are no English synonyms for "lion," whereas biblical

Hebrew has five different terms for the same beast.

10. *mace.* The Hebrew meḥ*oqeq* refers to a ruler's long staff, a clear parallel to "scepter." There is no reason to construe it, as some have done, as a euphemism for the phallus, though the image of the mace between the legs surely suggests virile power in political leadership.

that tribute to him may come. This is a notorious crux. The Masoretic Text seems to read "until he comes to Shiloh," a dark phrase that has inspired much messianic interpretation. The present translation follows an exegetical tradition that goes back to the Middle Ages, which breaks up the word "Shiloh" and vocalizes it differently as *shai lo*.

11. *He binds to the vine his ass.* The hyperbole has been explained most plausibly by Abraham ibn Ezra: "The yield of his vineyards will be so abundant that his ass can turn aside to the vine and he won't care if it eats the grapes." This explanation jibes nicely with the next image of washing garments in wine—the wine will be so plentiful that it can be treated as water.

the blood of the grape. This vivid poetic epithet for wine, with its intensifying effect, is reminiscent of the Ugaritic kenning for wine, "blood of the tree," and hence a token of the stylistic antiquity of the poem.

12. *O eyes that are darker than wine.* The Hebrew, like this English version, gives no pronoun references for these striking images, though they presumably refer to Judah, whose descendants will flourish in beauty in the midst of their viticultural abundance. The word for "darker," *ḥakhlili,* is still another rare poetic term, cognate with the Akkadian *elelu*, "to be dark."

14. *hearths.* The term occurs only here and in Judges 5:16. Because of the pastoral setting of the latter text, it is frequently construed as "sheepfolds," a meaning it seems to have in Judges 5:16, but the verbal stem from which it appears to derive means "to set a pot on the fire."

16. *Dan, his folk will judge.* Dan has always been construed as the subject of the verb "judge" (or "govern"), not its object. But Hebrew grammar makes it equally possible to read "Dan" as object of the verb, and that would explain the otherwise obscure second clause: in historical fact, the tribe of Dan, far from assuming a role of leadership, was obliged to migrate from south to

north. Despite its marginal existence, the Israelite people will judge or govern it as one of Israel's tribes.

17. *Let Dan be a snake on the road.* The sudden lethal attack from below on the roadside is an image of the tactic of ambush in guerilla warfare adopted against invaders by the Danite fighters. Again, the image suggests that this tribe, unlike the others, did not enjoy the security of fortified settlement.

19. *Gad shall be goaded by raiders.* The sound-play in the Hebrew is *gad gedud yegudenu*.

yet he shall goad their heel. The phrase may be a reminiscence of "and you shall boot him with the heel," which is addressed to the serpent in the Garden (3:15). There would be a carryover, then, from the snake imagery of the preceding lines. The snake, one should keep in mind, is not "demonic" but an image of darting, agile, lethal assault.

20. *Asher's bread.* The Masoretic Text reads "from Asher, his bread," but several ancient versions, quite plausibly, attach the initial consonant *mem* ("from") to the end of the preceding word *ʿaqev* ("heel"), turning it into "their heel."

21. *lovely fawns.* The Hebrew *ʾimrei shafer* is in doubt. The translation follows one prevalent conjecture in deriving the first word from the Aramaic *ʾimeir,* which usually means "lamb."

22. *A fruitful son.* The morphology of the reiterated noun in this line is so peculiar that some scholars have imagined a reference to branches, others to a wild ass. There is little philological warrant for the former, and the connection between the term used here, *porat,* and *pereʾ,* "wild ass," seems strained. (The main argument for the wild ass is that it preserves the animal imagery, but there are several other tribes in the poem that have no animal icons.) A link between *porat* and the root *p-r-h,* "to be fruitful," is less of a grammatical stretch, and is encouraged by Joseph's play on that same root in naming his son Ephraim. Joseph and Judah, as the dominant tribes of the north and the south respectively, get far more elaborate attention in the poem than do any of their brothers.

daughters strode. This is another crux because the verb "strode" appears to be in the feminine singular. But there are good grounds to assume that the

verbal suffix *ah,* which in normative grammar signals third-person feminine singular perfect tense, was also an archaic third-person plural feminine form. There are a number of instances in which the consonantal text (*ketiv*) shows this form with a plural subject and the Masoretes correct it in the *qeri* (the indicated pronunciation) to normative grammar: e.g., Deuteronomy 21:7, "Our hands did not shed [*ketiv: shafkhah*] this blood." Without emendation, then, the text suggests that Joseph has the twin blessing of fruitfulness and military security. The young women of the tribe can walk in safety alongside the rampart because they will be protected by Joseph's valorous skill in battle (verses 23–24).

by a rampart. This is the same word as the one at the end of verse 6. There is scant warrant for extending it metonymically to "hillside," as some translators have done.

24. *taut was his bow, / his arms ever-moving.* There is some doubt about "taut," though the context makes this a reasonable educated guess. There is also some dispute over the verb represented here as "ever-moving," but its likely literal meaning is "to move about rapidly," "to be nimble."

through the hands. This picks up the previous phrase, referring to Joseph, which is literally, "the arms of his hands" (unless "of his hands" is a scribal slip, a dittography of the next word in the text). In any case, the idea is that the hands of the human warrior are given strength by God's hands.

through the name. Along with some of the ancient versions, the translation here reads *mishem* for the Masoretic *misham,* "from there," which is obscure.

25. *blessings of breasts and womb.* The fertility of the female body is aligned with the fertility of creation, the heavens above and the deep below—a correspondence not lost on the bawdy fourteenth-century Hebrew poet Emanuel of Rome, who exploited this verse in an erotic poem.

26. *the blessings of timeless heights, / the bounty of hills everlasting.* The Masoretic Text is not really intelligible at this point, and this English version follows the Septuagint for the first part of the verse, which has the double virtue of coherence and of resembling several similar parallel locutions elsewhere in biblical poetry. Instead of the Masoretic Text's *horai ʿad* ("my forebears" [?] "until" [?]), the Septuagint has the equivalent in Greek of the idiomatic *harerei ʿad* ("timeless heights"). The noun *taʾawat* that immediately

follows may also reflect a defective text, but it could mean "that which is desired," hence, "bounty" or "riches." The apparent sense of the whole line is: the blessings granted Joseph and his fathers will be even greater than the blessings manifested throughout time in the natural world, as seen in the verdant, fruit-bearing hillsides.

the brow. The Hebrew is actually a poetic synonym for "head" (something like "pate"), but "brow" is used here for the sake of the English idiom of blessings, or honors, resting on that part of the anatomy.

27. *Benjamin, ravening wolf.* The last brief vignette of the poem, for the youngest of the twelve sons, is one of its sharpest images of death-dealing animals, and later biblical accounts, especially in Judges, indicate that the tribe of Benjamin was renowned for its martial prowess.

the spoils. The rare noun *ʿad* has been variously construed as "prey" (because of the wolf image) and "enemy," and the compactness of the line even leaves doubt as to whether it is a noun and not an adverb (revocalizing *ʿad* as *ʿod,* "still"). But both its sole other occurrence in the Bible (Isaiah 33:23) and the poetic parallelism argue for the sense of spoils.

29. *in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite.* Jacob in his last words to his sons exhibits an elaborate consciousness of the legal transaction between his grandfather and Ephron the Hittite. Like the account of the purchase in chapter 25, he emphasizes the previous owner, the exact location of the property, and the fact that it was acquired as a permanent holding. Thus, at the end of Genesis, legal language is used to resume a great theme—that Abraham's offspring are legitimately bound to the land God promised them, and that the descent into Egypt is no more than a sojourn.

CHAPTER 50

[1]And Joseph flung himself on his father's face and
wept over him and kissed him. [2]And Joseph charged
his servants the physicians to embalm his father, and
the physicians embalmed Israel. [3]And forty full days
were taken for him, as such is the full time of
embalming, and the Egyptians keened for him seventy
days. [4]And the days for keening him passed, and
Joseph spoke to the household of Pharaoh, saying, "If,
pray, I have found favor in your eyes, speak, pray, in
Pharaoh's hearing, as follows: [5]'My father made me
swear, saying, Look, I am about to die. In the grave I
readied me in the land of Canaan, there you must bury
me.' And so, let me go up, pray, and bury my father
and come back." [6]And Pharaoh said, "Go up and bury
your father as he made you swear." [7]And Joseph went
up to bury his father, and all Pharaoh's servants, the
elders of his household, and all the elders of the land
of Egypt, went up with him, [8]and all the household of
Joseph, and his brothers, and his father's household.
Only their little ones and their flocks and their cattle

they left in the land of Goshen. [9]And chariots and horsemen as well went up with him, and the procession was very great. [10]And they came as far as Goren ha-Atad, which is across the Jordan, and there they keened a great and heavy keening, and performed mourning rites for his father seven days. [11]And the Canaanite natives of the land saw the mourning in Goren ha-Atad and they said, “This heavy mourning is Egypt’s.” Therefore is its name called Abel-Mizraim, which is across the Jordan. [12]And his sons did for him just as he charged them. [13]And his sons conveyed him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave of the Machpelah field, the field Abraham had bought as a burial-holding from Ephron the Hittite, facing Mamre. [14]And Joseph went back to Egypt, he and his brothers and all who had gone up with him to bury his father, after he had buried his father.

[15]And Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, and they said, “If Joseph bears resentment against us, he will surely pay us back for all the evil we caused him.” [16]And they charged Joseph, saying, “Your father left a charge before his death, saying, [17]‘Thus shall you say to Joseph, We beseech you, forgive, pray, the crime and the offense of your brothers, for evil they

have caused you. And so now, forgive, pray, the crime of the servants of your father's God.'" And Joseph wept when they spoke to him. [18]And his brothers then came and flung themselves before him and said, "Here we are, your slaves." [19]And Joseph said, "Fear not, for am I instead of God? [20]While you meant evil toward me, God meant it for good, so as to bring about at this very time keeping many people alive. [21]And so fear not. I will sustain you and your little ones." And he comforted them and spoke to their hearts.

[22]And Joseph dwelled in Egypt, he and his father's household, and Joseph lived a hundred and ten years. [23]And Joseph saw the third generation of sons from Ephraim, and the sons, as well, of Machir son of Manasseh were born on Joseph's knees. [24]And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die, and God will surely single you out and take you up from this land to the land He promised to Isaac and to Jacob." [25]And Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "When God indeed singles you out, you shall take up my bones from this place." [26]And Joseph died, a hundred and ten years old, and they embalmed him and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.

CHAPTER 50 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Joseph flung himself on his father's face and wept over him and kissed him*. These three gestures by now are strongly associated with Joseph's character. In the great recognition scene in chapter 45, he flings himself on Benjamin's neck, embraces and kisses him, and then does the same with his ten half brothers, and before this he has wept three times over the encounter with his brothers. Joseph is at once the intellectual, dispassionate interpreter of dreams and central economic planner, and the man of powerful spontaneous feeling. At his father's deathbed, he only weeps, he does not speak.

2. *his servants the physicians.* Although the Hebrew term means "healer," these are obviously experts in the intricate process of mummification, and the wording indicates that Joseph had such specialists on his personal staff. Mummification would be dictated by Jacob's status as father of the viceroy of Egypt and also by the practical necessity of carrying the body on the long trek to central Canaan.

3. *forty full days.* A Hebrew formulaic number is used rather than the number of days prescribed by Egyptian practice.

seventy days. Evidently, the Egyptian period of mourning for a royal personage, seventy-two days, has been rounded off to the Hebrew formulaic seventy.

4. *Joseph spoke to the household of Pharaoh.* It is a little puzzling that Joseph, as Pharaoh's right-hand man, is compelled to approach him through intermediaries. Some commentators have explained this by invoking Joseph's condition as mourner, which, it is claimed, would prohibit him from coming directly into Pharaoh's presence. A more reliable key to his recourse to go-betweens may be provided by the language of imploring deference with which he introduces his message to Pharaoh—"If, pray, I have found favor in your eyes, speak, pray. . . ." Joseph is aware that he is requesting something extraordinary in asking permission to go up to Canaan with his entire clan,

for Pharaoh might be apprehensive that the real aim was repatriation, which would cost him his indispensable viceroy and a whole guild of valued shepherds. Joseph consequently decides to send his petition through the channel of Pharaoh's trusted courtiers, to whom he turns in deferential court language.

5. *In the grave I readied me.* The usual meaning of the Hebrew verb *karah* is "to dig," though it can also mean "to purchase." The latter sense is unlikely here because it would be confusing to use *karah* for buying a grave, when it is so naturally applied to digging the grave. But since the burial site in question is actually a cave, one must assume an extrapolation from the primary meaning of the verb to any preparation of a place for burial.

and come back. This final verb is of course a crucial consideration for Pharaoh.

7. *and all Pharaoh's servants, the elders of his household, and all the elders of the land of Egypt, went up with him.* This vast entourage of Egyptian dignitaries betokens Pharaoh's desire to accord royal honors to Jacob. The presence of chariots and horsemen (verse 9) might also serve as protection against hostile Canaanites, but the whole grand Egyptian procession is surely an effective means for ensuring that Joseph and his father's clan will return to Egypt.

8. *Only their little ones.* The children and flocks are left behind as a guarantee of the adults' return.

10. *Goren ha-Atad.* The place name means "threshing floor of the bramble."

across the Jordan. The logical route from Egypt would be along the Mediterranean coast, which would necessitate construing this phrase from the perspective of someone standing to the east of the Jordan. That, however, is implausible because "across the Jordan" in biblical usage generally means just what we mean by trans-Jordan in modern usage—the territory east of the Jordan. Perhaps a circuitous route through the Sinai to the east and then back across the Jordan is intended to prefigure the itinerary of the future exodus and return to Canaan. Perhaps local traditions for the etiology of a place-name Abel-Mizraim in trans-Jordan led to the intimation of this unlikely route.

11. *Abel-Mizraim.* This is construed in the folk etymology as "mourning of Egypt," though *ʾabel* is actually a watercourse. *Mizraim* means "Egypt."

16. *And they charged Joseph.* The verb, which most commonly refers either to giving instructions or delivering the terms of a last will and testament, is a little peculiar. If the received text is reliable here, the choice of verb would be influenced by the fact that the brothers are conveying to Joseph the terms of what they claim (perhaps dubiously) is their father's "charge" before his death. In any case, they send this message through an intermediary, for only in verse 18 are they represented as coming before Joseph—"And his brothers then [*gam*] came"—so perhaps the odd use of the verb indicates indirection here.

17. *the servants of your father's God.* In the imploring language of their plea for forgiveness, they conclude by calling themselves not his brothers but the faithful servants of the God of Jacob. Rashi nicely observes, "If your father is dead, his God exists, and they are his servants."

20. *While you meant evil toward me, God meant it for good.* This whole final scene between Joseph and his brothers is a recapitulation, after Jacob's death, of the recognition scene in Egypt. Once more the brothers feel guilt and fear. Once more Joseph weeps because of them. Once more they offer to become his slaves. (The physical act of prostration, as the early-twentieth-century German scholar Hermann Gunkel observes, carries us back full circle to Joseph's two dreams at the beginning of the story.) And once more Joseph assures them that it has been God's purpose all along to turn evil into good, for the end of "keeping many people alive," with Joseph continuing in his role as sustainer of the entire clan.

23. *were born on Joseph's knees.* This gesture serves as a ritual either of adoption or of legitimation.

24. *God will surely single you out and take you up from this land.* The ground is laid at the end of Genesis for the great movement out of Egypt in Exodus.

25. *take up my bones.* Although Joseph knows that Egyptian science will turn his body into a mummy, he still thinks of his remains in Hebrew terms as he invokes his eventual restoration to the land of the Hebrews.

26. *a hundred and ten years.* This is a last Egyptian touch, since this is the ideal Egyptian life span, as against 120 in the Hebrew tradition.

and he was put in a coffin in Egypt. The book that began with an image of God's breath moving across the vast expanses of the primordial deep to bring the world and all life into being ends with this image of a body in a box, a mummy in a coffin. (The Hebrews in Canaan appear not to have used coffins, and the term occurs only here.) Out of the contraction of this moment of mortuary enclosure, a new expansion, and new births, will follow. Exodus begins with a proliferation of births, a pointed repetition of the primeval blessing to be fruitful and multiply, and just as the survival of the Flood was represented as a second creation, the leader who is to forge the creation of the nation will be borne on the water in a little box—not the *ʾaron,* "the coffin," of the end of Genesis but the *tevah,* "the ark," that keeps Noah and his seed alive.

EXODUS

Introduction

As the long historical narrative of the Five Books of Moses moves from the patriarchs to the Hebrew nation in Egypt, it switches gears. The narrative conventions deployed, from type-scenes and thematic key words to the treatment of dialogue, remain the same, but the angle from which events are seen and the handling of characters are notably different. Genesis ended with the death, and the distinctly Egyptian mummification, of Joseph. Exodus begins with a listing of the sons of Jacob who came down to Egypt, thus establishing a formal link with the concluding chapters of Genesis in which a more detailed list of the emigrants from Canaan (46:8–27) is provided. The rapid enumeration here of the sons of Jacob is concluded by a notation of the formulaic number of seventy said to constitute the Hebrew migration from Canaan to Egypt, and this is followed by a restatement of the death of Joseph—a

device that biblical scholars call “resumptive repetition,” whereby, after an interruption of narrative continuity, a phrase is repeated from the point at which the narrative broke off (the phrase here is “And Joseph died”) in order to mark the resumption of the story. In this second report of Joseph’s death, however, the focus is not on the mummy in the coffin but on the dying out of a whole generation, which thus propels us forward in historical time (four centuries, according to God’s prophetic revelation to Abraham in Genesis 15) to a moment when *beney yisraʾa el*, the sons of Israel (or Jacob), have swelled to a people, the Israelites, which is the meaning of that Hebrew phrase from now on in the narrative. Instead of the sharply etched individuals who constituted a family in all its explosive dynamics in Genesis, we now have teeming multitudes of Israelites whose spectacular prolificness introduces to the story the perspective of the whole wide world of creation announced at the beginning of Genesis: “And the sons of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and multiplied and grew very vast, and the land [the Hebrew word also means “earth,” as in Genesis] was filled with them” (Exodus 1:7).

In keeping with this new wide-angle lens through which the characters and the events are seen, the narrative moves from the domestic, moral, and

psychological realism of the Patriarchal Tales to a more stylized, sometimes deliberately schematic, mode of storytelling that in a number of respects, especially in the early chapters of the book, has the feel of a folktale. At the beginning of the story, Pharaoh is referred to several times as “the king of Egypt” rather than by his Egyptian title, which was used in Genesis and will become his set designation as the story goes on. This has the effect of casting him as the archetypal evil king (one who kills babies) in a folktale confrontation between the forces of good and of evil. Other folktale elements are evident: the many thousands of childbearing Hebrew women are attended to, in the charming schematic simplicity of a folktale, by just two virtuous midwives; in a folkloric motif that has been profusely documented in many traditions of the ancient Near East and elsewhere, the future hero is threatened with death by the evil king and is saved by being hidden and then rescued. The betrothal type-scene of the young woman encountered at the well in a foreign land, which in the instances of Rebekah and (the absent) Isaac and of Rachel and Jacob was pregnant with intimations of the character and the future relationship of the two people involved, here has undergone a certain stylization. Aspects of Moses’s subsequent career as national leader are adumbrated,

but there are no indications about his future relationship with Zipporah, and her character is not in the least at issue. Indeed, it is only here that the young woman at the well is multiplied into seven young women, Zipporah and her six sisters, a move that diminishes her individuality while recasting the encounter between the future spouses as a meeting between one man and seven maidens, according to the sanctified formulaic number.

The general rule in Exodus, and again in Numbers when the story continues, is that what is of interest about the character of Moses is what bears on his qualities as a leader—his impassioned sense of justice, his easily ignited temper, his selfless compassion, his feelings of personal inadequacy. Alone among biblical characters, he is assigned an oddly generic epithet, "the man Moses." There may be some theological motive for this designation, in order to remind us of his plainly human status, to ward off any inclination to deify the founding leader of the Israelite people, but it also suggests more concretely that Moses as forger of the nation and prince of prophets is, after all, not an absolutely unique figure but a man like other men, bringing to the soul-trying tasks of leadership both the moral and temperamental resources and the all-too-human weaknesses that many men may possess. In

regard to our experience of the character and the story, all this means that "the man Moses" remains somewhat distanced from us, that we never get the sense of intimate acquaintance with his inner life and his distinctive traits of personality that we are so memorably afforded in the stories of Jacob and Joseph.

There is a certain correlation between the distancing of the central character and the distancing of the figure of God in Exodus (a procedure that, again, is continued into Numbers). God in Genesis, as one detects in a glimpse of Him in the Garden story and as one can see quite clearly in His encounter with Abraham in Genesis 18, walks about the earth looking very much like a man—indeed, being easily mistaken for a man until He chooses to reveal His identity—and at some points engaging a human being in what is clearly represented as face-to-face conversation. God in Exodus has become essentially unseeable, overpowering, and awesomely refulgent. Barriers to access accompany Him everywhere, just as they will be instituted architecturally in the tripartite structure of the sanctuary that He orders the Israelites to build. The first manifestation of God's presence to Moses is in the anomaly of the fire burning in a bush without consuming it, and then the divine voice enjoins Moses,

“Come no closer here,” and proceeds to speak to him without being in any way visible to him. Fire, which betokens potent energy and which is something one cannot touch without being hurt or destroyed, is the protective perimeter out of which God addresses Moses and the Israelites throughout the story: all of Mount Sinai will be smoking like a firebrand, with celestial fireworks of lightning and thunder crackling round its peak, when God reveals the Ten Commandments to Moses. Later, as we shall see, Deuteronomy, for its own theological reasons, will pick up and dramatically amplify this image of a barrier of fire around God at the defining moment of revelation. God in Exodus has become more of an ungraspable mystery than He seems in Genesis; and as He moves here from the sphere of the clan that is the context of the Patriarchal Tales to the arena of history, His sheer power as supreme deity and His implacability against those who would thwart His purposes emerge as the most salient aspects of the divine character.

Exodus, like Genesis, is made up of two large panels, though they are notably different in nature from the two panels that constitute Genesis. The first unit, running from chapter 1 through chapter 20, is a grand narrative sweep that culminates in what is, at

least in national-historical and theological terms, the great climax and point of reference of all biblical literature—the revelation through Moses to Israel of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. There are, one should note, legal passages along the way in chapters 12 and 13 regarding the spring rituals of the paschal offering and the Festival of Flatbread as well as the dedication of the firstborn, but these are to a large degree integrated into the general narrative, coming as they do when the first Passover rite is observed in Egypt and when the Israelite firstborn have been spared while Egypt's are stricken. This narrative is one of national triumph after the most painful abjection, although the triumph is complicated by the fact that it concludes with the imposition of a set of imperatives that for the Israelites will prove to be a great challenge to obey.

The narrative is organized around three thematically defined spaces: Egypt, the place of bondage; the wilderness, a liminal space where freedom will be realized and new obligations incurred, where a tense struggle between leader and people will play out as part of the initiatory experience of nationhood; and the promised destination of the Exodus from Egypt, the land that remains beyond the horizon of this book. Egypt is associated with water,

almost everything there being linked with its central waterway, the Nile, where baby Moses is saved from drowning and where the Ten Plagues begin; and a barrier of water must be crossed to effect the escape of the Israelites, with that very water then drowning the pursuing Egyptian hosts as they had sought to drown the Israelite infant boys. The wilderness is, antithetically, a zone of parched dryness—arid sand and rugged rock formations, where the people more than once desperately thirst for water and are dependent on its miraculous discovery. The shepherd Moses first encounters God in the wilderness on a mountain later called Sinai (a name perhaps meant to recall *seneh*, the Hebrew word for "bush") but in this episode referred to as Horeb, which as the twelfth-century Hebrew exegete Abraham ibn Ezra shrewdly saw, means "dryness" or "parched place." God appears to Moses through a token of supernatural burning on the mountain of the parched place. He will then lead the Israelites through the wilderness with a pillar of fire by night that banks down to a pillar of cloud by day. The culmination of this narrative in the Sinai epiphany, as we have already noted, will make the mountain itself incandescent and rake the sky around its summit with divine fire. The climax of this whole story is a set of lapidary legal injunctions, but they are

in no way anticlimactic for being that. Framed as a series of imperatives in the second-person singular and thus addressing every man and woman of the Israelite nation, they express the keenest sense of urgency, much like the urgency in dialogue between human characters that marks many of the dramatic high points of biblical narrative elsewhere. Later, in the episode of the Golden Calf, we learn that God has incised the ten imperative utterances on two tablets of stone (32:15–16), but here no mention is made of writing. The omission is dictated, I think, by a desire to convey the potent immediacy of God's speech to Israel through Moses: "And God spoke these words, saying" is the formula pointedly used to introduce the Decalogue.

Finally, beyond well-watered Egypt and the burning desert where uncanny fires flare, the new Israelite nation is repeatedly told of a third space, a land flowing not with water but, hyperbolically, with milk and honey. This utopian space will be beyond reach for forty years, and in a sense it can never be fully attained. When the twelve spies enter it on a reconnaissance mission in Numbers, they confirm its fabulous fecundity, but ten of the twelve also deem it unconquerable, calling it "a land that consumes its inhabitants." As the biblical story continues through

Numbers and Deuteronomy and ultimately on to the history of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, the land flowing with milk and honey will begin to seem something like the Land of Cockaigne of medieval European folklore, a dream of delighted, unimpeded fulfillment beyond the grating actualities of real historical time. Treated with poetic hyperbole by the Prophets, it will eventually generate eschatological visions not within the purview of these early books of the Bible.

It is the second large panel of Exodus that is likely to cause perplexity for a good many modern readers. After the riveting narrative of liberation and revelation, the second half of the book, with the exception of the Golden Calf story (chapters 32–34), is devoted to legal material—first a code of criminal and tort law, with some ritual injunctions at the end (chapters 21–23), which is often referred to by scholars as the Book of the Covenant, and then the elaborate instructions for the building of the Tabernacle (chapters 25–31), instructions that will be carried out, more or less word for word, just as one would expect, after the resolution of the confrontation over the Golden Calf (chapters 35–40). Readers attached to the notion of story are bound to find these seventeen chapters of laws and architectural

instructions something of a letdown, but one must assume that the ancient writers and their audience had different ideas about literary unity and about how story related to law.

The Book of the Covenant could be understood as a detailed extension of the Decalogue, but the Tabernacle passages pose more of a problem. The easiest explanation for this lavishing of attention on the construction of the Tabernacle is that it reflects the professional interests of the Priestly writers who were responsible for the bulk of this material. That explanation seems plausible enough, but it is too simple a way of stating the case. An analogy between the two-panel structure of Exodus and the complementary interaction between the two versions of the Creation story in Genesis may be helpful. The Priestly editors of Genesis had inherited J's old story (beginning in chapter 2, the middle of the fourth verse) full of dynamism and danger, in which the acts of creation are represented in powerfully concrete anthropomorphic terms. This story, one may infer, represented a strong set of traditional truths for the editors, but truths that had to be complemented by a different perspective on the same events. And so, before the first human male shaped out of clay and Eve built from his rib and the seduction by the serpent,

the Priestly writer placed his own magisterial version of creation, in which the world is called into being through a succession of divine speech-acts and in which everything proceeds in harmonious order, registered in the balanced cadences of the stately prose, from the first day to the seventh, coming to a formal conclusion in the primordial sabbath. The first half of Exodus is a compelling story, punctuated, as some scholars have proposed, by certain epic gestures, that moves from enslavement to liberation to epiphany. It is also a story marked by danger, doubt, and what looks like a national destiny of endless trouble. Moses the future leader barely escapes being murdered as an infant; kills a man, an act that compels him to flee Egypt; harbors grave doubts about his capacity for the daunting mission God imposes on him; and on occasion is angry, impatient, almost despairing in his leadership. The Israelites on their part can scarcely bring themselves to trust Moses and Aaron when the two brothers come to lead them out of slavery, and once in the wilderness, the people will repeatedly prove to be recalcitrant in a long series of backslidings or “murmurings,” both in Exodus and in Numbers. The crowning instance of these episodes of rebellion is the incident of the Golden Calf, carefully introduced

between the instructions for the building of the Tabernacle and the carrying out of the instructions.

The Tabernacle, I would suggest, was imagined by these writers as a vision of perfectly orchestrated harmony, enacted through the meticulous crafts of architecture, weaving, dyeing, wood carving, and metalwork—an implementation by human artisans, following divine directives, of the sort of comprehensive harmony figured in the Priestly account of creation. After the tense story of rupture and recrimination of national experience in history, the Priestly writers, themselves intimately associated with a realm of ordered ritual, provide an elaborately imagined representation of the beautiful ordering of sacred space, a zone of choreographed repetition set off against the unsettled peregrinations of the Wilderness generation. The satisfaction this material gives its audience is not story but pageantry: the splendor of the many-colored textiles displayed along the walls of the Tabernacle, the bronze loops on which they are hung, the wrought precious metals and inlaid gems of the various ritual implements. When at the end of all the building we are told, “And Moses completed the task” (40:33), we hear a significant echo of “And God completed on the seventh day the task He had done” (Genesis 2:2). Human labor,

scrupulously following a divine plan, creates an ordered space that mirrors the harmony of God's creation. But the concluding image of the book is the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night that leads the Israelites on their march through the wilderness. On that long way, more trouble awaits them, as readers will discover when the narrative resumes in Numbers.

CHAPTER 1

[1]And these are the names of the sons of Israel who
came to Egypt with Jacob, each man with his
household they came. [2]Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and
Judah. [3]Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin. [4]Dan and
Naphtali, Gad and Asher. [5]And all these persons
springing from the loins of Jacob were seventy
persons, but Joseph was in Egypt. [6]And Joseph died,
and all his brothers with him, and all that generation.
[7]And the sons of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and
multiplied and grew very vast, and the land was filled
with them.

[8]And a new king arose over Egypt who knew not
Joseph. [9]And he said to his people, “Look, the people
of the sons of Israel is more numerous and vaster than
we. [10]Come, let us be shrewd with them lest they
multiply and then, should war occur, they will actually
join our enemies and fight against us and go up from
the land.” [11]And they set over them forced-labor

foremen so as to abuse them with their burdens, and they built store-cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Rameses. [12]And as they abused them, so did they multiply and so did they spread, and they came to loathe the Israelites. [13]And the Egyptians put the Israelites to work at crushing labor, [14]and they made their lives bitter with hard work with mortar and bricks and every work in the field—all their crushing work that they performed. [15]And the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other was named Puah. [16]And he said, "When you deliver the Hebrew women and look on the birth-stool, if it is a boy, you shall put him to death, and if it is a girl, she may live." [17]And the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt had spoken to them, and they let the children live. [18]And the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, "Why did you do this thing and let the children live?" [19]And the midwives said to Pharaoh, "For not like the Egyptian women are the Hebrew women, for they are hardy. Before the midwife comes to them they give birth." [20]And God made it go well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and became very vast. [21]And inasmuch as the midwives feared God, He made households for them. [22]And Pharaoh charged his whole people, saying, "Every boy

that is born you shall fling into the Nile, and every girl you shall let live."

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And these are the names*. The initial "and" (the particle *waw*) serves an important thematic end, as several of the medieval Hebrew commentators have noticed. It announces that the narrative that follows is a direct continuation of the Book of Genesis, which ended with Joseph's death. The list of Jacob's sons harks back to the longer list of sons and grandsons at the moment of the descent into Egypt in Genesis 46:8–27. It should be noted that the dominant Hebrew tradition assigns names to each of the Five Books of Moses based on the first significant word in the text, and so this book is called *Shemot*, "Names." The English tradition of titles follows the Greek practice, which is to use topical names, hence Exodus.

the sons of Israel. Although the masculine plural form of the Hebrew *ben* could also mean "children," it is clear here and in Genesis 46 that only the male offspring are used to make up the count of seventy, and only the names of sons are given.

2–4. *Reuben, Simeon . . . Asher.* In order to endow the list of eleven with formal symmetry, the writer arranges them in two groups of four with a group of three in the middle.

5. *the loins.* The Hebrew *yarekh* means "thigh" and is probably a euphemistic metonymy for testicles, as in Genesis 24:2.

seventy persons. Some ingenuity is required to come up with an exact total of seventy, but the Bible uses numbers as symbolic approximations: after seven and ten, one moves to forty (which is used for units of time rather than people), then ten times seven, or seventy—here indicating a substantial clan, the nucleus of a people. (See the comment on Genesis 46:27.)

but Joseph was in Egypt. The particle *waw*, which usually means "and," either is the indication of a pluperfect or, as here, has an adversative sense

when it is followed by the subject and then a perfective verb (instead of the normal imperfective verb in initial position and then the subject).

7. *the sons of Israel.* Though the phrase is identical with the one used at the beginning of verse 1, historical time has been telescoped and so the meaning of the phrase has shifted: now it signifies not the actual sons of Israel/Jacob but Israelites, the members of the nation to which the first Israel gave his name. In subsequent occurrences this translation will use "Israelites."

were fruitful and swarmed and multiplied. These terms are all of course pointed verbal allusions to the Creation story, as is the final clause of the verse since the Hebrew for "land," *ʾarets*, can also mean "earth." Despite exile and impending slavery, the dynamic of the first creation is resumed by the Israelites in Egypt. In fact, the thematic grounds of the Patriarchal Tales have notably shifted: instead of the constantly perilous struggle for procreation of the patriarchs, the Hebrews now exhibit the teeming fecundity of the natural world. It is for this reason that the verb "swarm" (*sharats*), which in the Creation story is attached to creeping things, is assigned to the Israelites. The verbal root for becoming vast (King James Version, "mighty") does not figure at the beginning of Genesis, but it is part of God's covenantal promise—"For Abraham will surely be a great and mighty nation" (Genesis 18:18).

9. *the people of the sons of Israel.* This oddly redundant phrase—it should be either "sons of Israel" or "people of Israel"—is explained by Pharaoh's alarmed recognition that the sons, the lineal descendants, of Israel have swelled to a people.

10. *be shrewd with them.* The Hebrew says "it," i.e., the people, but later switches to the plural.

they will actually join our enemies. The adverb *gam*, which generally means "also," here has an emphatic sense. Compare Genesis 37:7.

go up from the land. The most plausible meaning, as the consensus of medieval Hebrew commentators understood, is that after joining the enemy, the Israelites would leave Egypt—probably to return to their country of origin in the north, as the verb "go up" may suggest. The notion that the phrase could mean "rise up from the ground" (New Jewish Publication Society) or "become masters of the land" (Revised English Bible) seems far-fetched.

12. *as they abused them, so did they multiply.* Like a force of nature (compare verse 7), the Israelites respond to oppression by redoubling their procreative surge. Compare Rashi: "The Divine Spirit says, 'So—you say, "lest they multiply," and I say, "so did they multiply."'"

and they came to loathe the Israelites. William H. C. Propp has made the ingenious suggestion that the loathing is a response to the reptilian "swarming" of reproductive activity exhibited by the Israelites.

13. *at crushing labor.* The Hebrew is an adverbial form derived from a root that means "to break into pieces," "to pulverize."

14. *work . . . work . . . work*. Following a prevalent stylistic practice of Hebrew narrative, the writer underscores his main topic, the harshness of slavery, by repeating a central thematic key word. Indeed, the Hebrew literally says, "their crushing work that they worked," but in English that cognate accusative form sounds awkward except for a limited number of idioms (e.g., "sing a song").

15. *the Hebrew midwives.* "Hebrew" is regularly the designation of Israelites from a foreign perspective.

Shiphrah . . . Puah. The first name suggests "beauty"; the second name, as the Ugaritic texts indicate, might originally have meant "fragrant blossom" and hence "girl." But since the root *pa ʿah* can also mean "to murmur" or "to gurgle," Rashi inventively suggests it is the sound a nurturing woman makes to soothe an infant. In any case, the introduction of just two heroic midwives reflects the way this entire narrative, in contrast to Genesis, has been stylized and simplified. Abraham ibn Ezra appears to grasp this principle of schematization when he proposes that Shiphrah and Puah in fact would have had to be supervisors of whole battalions of midwives.

16. *birth-stool.* Literally, "double stones." Although there is some debate about the meaning of the term, there are persuasive grounds to understand it as the double stone or brick structure that the childbearing woman gripped as she kneeled, the standard position to give birth. There is an Egyptian magical papyrus that announces it is to be recited "over the two bricks of birthing."

19. *for they are hardy.* "Hardy," *ḥayot*, is derived from the verb "to live," which has just been used twice in connection with the newborn. (Hence the

King James Version's "lively," though in modern English that unfortunately suggests vivaciousness or bounciness.) The fact that *ḥayot* as a noun means "animals" may reinforce the strong connection between the Israelites and the procreative forces of the natural world: like animals, the Hebrew women need no midwife.

21. *He made households for them.* Although some have seen Pharaoh as the antecedent of "he," God seems considerably more likely. The sense would then be that they were rewarded for their virtue with social standing, establishing their own families, or something of the sort.

22. *Pharaoh charged his whole people.* Despairing of cooperation from the Hebrew midwives in his genocidal project, Pharaoh now enlists the entire Egyptian population in a search-and-destroy operation.

Every boy . . . you shall fling into the Nile, and every girl you shall let live. The schematic—as against historical or even historylike—character of the narrative is evident in this folktale antithetical symmetry. The idea is presumably that the people would be eradicated by cutting off all male progeny while the girls could be raised for the sexual exploitation and domestic service of the Egyptians, by whom they would of course be rapidly assimilated. Pharaoh's scheme will again be frustrated, as the future liberator of the Hebrews will be placed (not flung) in the Nile and emerge eventually to cause grief to Egypt. There is also an echo here of Abram's words to Sarai when they come down to Egypt, adumbrating the destiny of their descendants, during a famine: "they will kill me while you they will let live" (Genesis 12:12).

CHAPTER 2

[1]And a man from the house of Levi went and took a
Levite daughter, [2]and the woman conceived and bore a
son, and she saw that he was goodly, and she hid him
three months. [3]And when she could no longer hide
him, she took a wicker ark for him and caulked it with
resin and pitch and placed the child in it and placed it
in the reeds by the banks of the Nile. [4]And his sister
stationed herself at a distance to see what would be
done to him. [5]And Pharaoh's daughter came down to
bathe in the Nile, her maidens walking along the Nile.
And she saw the ark amidst the reeds and sent her
slavegirl and took it. [6]And she opened it up and saw
the child, and, look, it was a lad weeping. And she
pitied him and said, "This is one of the children of the
Hebrews." [7]And his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter,
"Shall I go and summon a nursing woman from the
Hebrews that she may suckle the child for you?" [8]And
Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go." And the girl
went and summoned the child's mother. [9]And
Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Carry away this child

and suckle him for me, and I myself will pay your wages.” And the woman took the child and suckled him. [10]And the child grew, and she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter and he became a son to her, and she called his name Moses, “For from the water I drew him out.”

[11]And it happened at that time that Moses grew up and went out to his brothers and saw their burdens. And he saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man of his brothers. [12]And he turned this way and that and saw that there was no man about, and he struck down the Egyptian and buried him in the sand. [13]And he went out the next day, and, look, two Hebrew men were brawling, and he said to the one in the wrong, “Why should you strike your fellow?” [14]And he said, “Who set you as a man prince and judge over us? Is it to kill me that you mean as you killed the Egyptian?” And Moses was afraid and he thought, “Surely, the thing has become known.” [15]And Pharaoh heard of this thing and he sought to kill Moses, and Moses fled from Pharaoh’s presence and dwelled in the land of Midian, and he sat down by the well. [16]And the priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came and drew water and filled the troughs to water their father’s

flock. [17]And the shepherds came and drove them off, and Moses rose and saved them and watered their flock. [18]And they came to Reuel their father, and he said, “Why have you hurried back today?” [19]And they said, “An Egyptian man rescued us from the hands of the shepherds, and, what’s more, he even drew water for us and watered the flock.” [20]And he said to his daughters, “And where is he? Why did you leave the man? Call him that he may eat bread.” [21]And Moses agreed to dwell with the man, and he gave Zipporah his daughter to Moses. [22]And she bore a son, and he called his name Gershom, for he said, “A sojourner have I been in a foreign land.”

[23]And it happened when a long time had passed that the king of Egypt died, and the Israelites groaned from the bondage and cried out, and their plea from the bondage went up to God. [24]And God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. [25]And God saw the Israelites, and God knew.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *took*. This verb is commonly used in biblical Hebrew for taking a wife, even when "wife" is elided, as here. It is worth translating literally because the verb is echoed in the woman's taking the wicker ark (verse 3) and in the Egyptian slavegirl's taking the ark (verse 5).

3. *she took a wicker ark . . . and caulked it with resin and pitch*. The basket in which the infant is placed is called a *tevah*, "ark," the same word used for Noah's ark. (It may be an Egyptian loanword. Such borrowed terms abound in the story, giving it local color. The most prominent is the word for "Nile," *ye'or*.) As numerous commentators have observed, the story of Moses begins with a pointed allusion to the Flood story. In Genesis, a universal deluge nearly destroys the whole human race. Here, Pharaoh's decree to drown every Hebrew male infant threatens to destroy the people of Israel. As the ark in Genesis bears on the water the saving remnant of humankind, the child borne on the waters here will save his imperiled people. This narrative recapitulates the Flood story, itself a quasi-epic narrative of global scope, in the transposed key of a folktale: the story of a future ruler who is hidden in a basket floating on a river has parallels in Hittite, Assyrian, and Egyptian literature, and approximate analogues in many other cultures. Otto Rank sees the basket as a womb image and the river water as an externalization of the amniotic fluid. Psychoanalytic speculation apart, it is clear from the story that water plays a decisive thematic role in Moses's career. He is borne safely on the water, which Pharaoh had imagined would be the very means to destroy all the Hebrew male children. His floating among the reeds (*suf*) foreshadows the miraculous triumph over the Egyptians that he will lead in the parting of the Sea of Reeds (*yam suf*). His obtaining water for the thirsting people will figure prominently in the Wilderness stories.

6. *and saw the child.* The Masoretic Text has "she saw him, the child," but other ancient versions show "saw" without the accusative masculine suffix.

and, look, it was a lad weeping. "Lad," *na'ar*, is more typically used for an older child or a young man, but it may be employed here to emphasize the discovery—"and look," *wehineh*—that this is a male child. (It might also be relevant that *na'ar* occurs elsewhere as a term of parental tenderness referring to a vulnerable child.) The fact that this is a male child left hidden in a basket would be the clue to the princess and her entourage that he belongs to the Hebrews against whom the decree of infanticide has been issued. Nahum

Sarna notes that this is the sole instance in the Bible in which the verb "to weep" is used for an infant, not an adult.

10. *And the child grew.* The verb clearly indicates his reaching the age of weaning, which would have been around three. This might have been long enough for the child to have acquired Hebrew as his first language. The same verb "grew" in verse 11 refers to attaining adulthood.

became a son to her. The phrase indicates adoption, not just an emotional attachment.

Moses. This is an authentic Egyptian name meaning "the one who is born," and hence "son." The folk etymology relates it to the Hebrew verb *mashah*, "to draw out from water." Perhaps the active form of the verb used for the name *mosheh*, "he who draws out," is meant to align the naming with Moses's future destiny of rescuing his people from the water of the Sea of Reeds.

12. *and saw that there was no man about.* Although the obvious meaning is that he wanted to be sure the violent intervention he intended would go unobserved, some interpreters have proposed, a little apologetically, that he first looked around to see if there was anyone else to step forward and help the beaten Hebrew slave. "About" is merely implied in the Hebrew. In any case, there is a pointed echoing of "man" (*ʾish*)—an Egyptian man, a Hebrew man, and no man—that invites one to ponder the role and obligations of a man as one man victimizes another. When the fugitive Moses shows up in Midian, he will be identified, presumably because of his attire and speech, as "an Egyptian man."

13. *Why should you strike your fellow?* The first dialogue assigned to a character in biblical narrative typically defines the character. Moses's first speech is a reproof to a fellow Hebrew and an attempt to impose a standard of justice (*rashaʿ*, "the one in the wrong," is a legal term).

14. *Who set you as a man prince and judge over us?* These words of the brawler in the wrong not only preface the revelation that Moses's killing of the Egyptian is no secret but also adumbrate a long series of later incidents in which the Israelites will express resentment or rebelliousness toward Moses. Again, "man" is stressed. Later, "the man Moses" will become a kind of epithet for Israel's first leader.

thing. The Hebrew *davar* variously means “word,” “thing,” “matter,” “affair,” and much else.

15. *Midian.* The geographical location of this land in different biblical references does not seem entirely fixed, perhaps because the Midianites were seminomads. Moses’s country of refuge would appear to be a semidesert region bordering Egypt on the east, to the west by northwest of present-day Eilat.

sat down by the well. The verb *yashav*, “sat down,” is identical with the previous verb in this sentence, where it reflects its other meaning, “to dwell” or “to settle.” It makes sense for the wayfarer to pause to rest and refresh himself at an oasis as Moses does here. “The well” has the idiomatic force of “a certain well.”

16. *seven daughters . . . came and drew water*. By this point, the ancient audience would have sufficient signals to recognize the narrative convention of the betrothal type-scene (compare Abraham’s servant and Rebekah, Genesis 24, and Jacob and Rachel, Genesis 29): the future bridegroom, or his surrogate, encounters a nubile young woman, or women, at a well in a foreign land; water is drawn; the woman hurries to bring home news of the stranger’s arrival; he is invited to a meal; the betrothal is agreed on. In keeping with the folktale stylization of the Moses story, the usual young woman is multiplied by the formulaic number seven.

17. *the shepherds came and drove them off.* Only in this version of the betrothal scene is there an actual struggle between hostile sides at the well. Moses’s intervention to “save” (*hoshiʿa*) the girls accords perfectly with his future role as commander of the Israelite forces in the wilderness and the liberator, *moshiʿa*, of his people.

18. *Why have you hurried back today?* With great narrative economy, the expected betrothal-scene verb, “to hurry,” *miher*, occurs not in the narrator’s report but in Reuel’s expression of surprise to his daughters.

19. *he even drew water for us and watered the flock.* Their report highlights the act of drawing water, the Hebrew stressing the verb by stating it in the infinitive before the conjugated form—*daloh dalah* (in this translation, “even drew”). The verb is different from *mashah*, the term associated with Moses’s

name, because it is the proper verb for drawing water, whereas *mashah* is used for drawing something out of water. In any case, this version of the scene at the well underscores the story of a hero whose infancy and future career are intimately associated with water.

20. *Call him that he may eat bread.* "Call" here has its social sense of "invite," and "bread" is the common biblical synecdoche for food. Reuel's eagerness to show hospitality indicates that he is a civilized person, and in the logic of the type-scene, the feast offered the stranger will lead to the betrothal.

21. *Zipporah.* The name means "bird."

22. *Gershom . . . A sojourner have I been*. In keeping with biblical practice, the naming-speech reflects folk etymology, breaking the name into *ger*, "sojourner," and *sham*, "there," though the verbal root of the name *g-r-sh* would appear to refer to banishment.

23. *bondage.* The Hebrew *ʿavodah* is the same term rendered as "work" in chapter 1.

24. *moaning.* The Hebrew *naʾaqah* is a phonetic cousin (through metathesis) to the word for groaning, *ʾanaḥah*, reflected in the previous verse, an effect this translation tries to simulate through rhyme.

24–25. Until this point, God has not been evident in the story. Now He is the subject of a string of significant verbs—hear, remember (which in the Hebrew has the strong force of "take to heart"), see, and know. The last of these terms marks the end of the narrative segment with a certain mystifying note—sufficiently mystifying that the ancient Greek translators sought to "correct" it—because it has no object. "God knew," but what did He know? Presumably, the suffering of the Israelites, the cruel oppression of history in which they are now implicated, the obligations of the covenant with the patriarchs, and the plan He must undertake to liberate the enslaved people. And so the objectless verb prepares us for the divine address from the burning bush and the beginning of Moses's mission.

CHAPTER 3

[1]And Moses was herding the flock of Jethro his
father-in-law, priest of Midian, and he drove the flock
into the wilderness and came to the mountain of God,
to Horeb. [2]And the LORD's messenger appeared to
him in a flame of fire from the midst of the bush, and
he saw, and look, the bush was burning with fire and
the bush was not consumed. [3]And Moses thought, "Let
me, pray, turn aside that I may see this great sight, why
the bush does not burn up." [4]And the LORD saw that
he had turned aside to see, and God called to him
from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!"
And he said, "Here I am." [5]And He said, "Come no
closer here. Take off your sandals from your feet, for
the place you are standing on is holy ground." [6]And He
said, "I am the God of your father, the God of
Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."
And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon
God. [7]And the LORD said, "I indeed have seen the
abuse of My people that is in Egypt and its outcry
because of its taskmasters. I have heard, for I know its

pain. [8]And I have come down to rescue it from the
hand of Egypt and to bring it up from that land to a
goodly and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk
and honey, to the place of the Canaanite and the
Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the
Hivvite and the Jebusite. [9]And now, look, the outcry of
the Israelites has come to Me and I have also seen the
oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them.
[10]And now, go that I may send you to Pharaoh, and
bring My people the Israelites out of Egypt." [11]And
Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to
Pharaoh and that I should bring out the Israelites from
Egypt?" [12]And He said, "For I will be with you. And
this is the sign for you that I Myself have sent you.
When you bring the people out from Egypt, you shall
worship God on this mountain." [13]And Moses said to
God, "Look, when I come to the Israelites and say to
them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,'
and they say to me, 'What is His name?,' what shall I
say to them?" [14]And God said to Moses, "*ʾEhyeh-*
ʾAsher-ʾEhyeh, I-Will-Be-Who-I-Will-Be." And He
said, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites, '*ʾEhyeh* has
sent me to you.'" [15]And God said further to Moses,
"Thus shall you say to the Israelites: 'The LORD God
of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of
Isaac, and the God of Jacob, sent me to you.

That is My name forever
and thus am I invoked in all ages.’

16 Go and gather the elders of Israel and say to them,
‘The LORD God of your fathers has appeared to me,
the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, “I have
surely marked what is done to you in Egypt, 17 and I
have said, I will bring you up from the abuse of Egypt
to the land of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the
Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivvite and the
Jebusite, to a land flowing with milk and honey.”’
18 And they will heed your voice, and you shall come,
you and the elders of Israel, to the king of Egypt, and
together you shall say to him: ‘The LORD, God of the
Hebrews, happened upon us, and so, let us go, pray,
three days’ journey into the wilderness, that we may
sacrifice to the LORD our God.’ 19 And I on My part
know that the king of Egypt will not let you go except
through a strong hand. 20 And I will send out My hand
and strike Egypt with all My wonders that I shall do in
his midst, and afterward will he send you out. 21 And I
will grant this people favor in the eyes of Egypt, and
so when you go, you will not go empty-handed. 22 But
each woman will ask of her neighbor and of the
sojourner in her house ornaments of silver and

ornaments of gold and robes, and you shall put them on your sons and on your daughters and you shall despoil Egypt."

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Jethro*. In the previous episode he was Reuel. Modern critics generally attribute the difference in names to different literary sources.

into the wilderness. The Hebrew preposition *ʾaḥar* is odd. Because it usually means "behind," the King James Version bizarrely translated this phrase as "the back side of the desert." The claim that here it means "to the west" is rather strained. Perhaps it may suggest something like "deep into."

Horeb. This appears to be a synonym for Sinai—it is the name used in the E document, whereas Sinai is J's term. The name is transparently derived from a root signifying dryness and so means something like "Parched Mountain." Abraham ibn Ezra acutely notes that this parched desert location is a full three days' journey (verse 18) from the Nile, the great source of water. That contrast points to a spatial-thematic antithesis: Moses, the man associated with water from infancy on, now encounters the God of all creation in the dry desert, and in flame.

2. *the LORD's messenger*. In what follows, it is God Himself reported as speaking to Moses from the burning bush. Either God first assigns a divine emissary to initiate the pyrotechnic display that will get Moses's attention, or the piety of early scribal tradition introduced an intermediary into the original text in order to avoid the uncomfortable image of the LORD's revealing Himself in a lowly bush.

the bush. The Hebrew *seneh*, a relatively rare word, intimates Horeb's other name, Sinai, by way of a pun. Some have conjectured that the name Sinai is actually derived from *Seneh*. In the ancient Near East, deities were often associated with sacred trees, but not with bushes. Rashi construes this

epiphany in the humble bush as an expression of God's identification with the abasement of Israel enslaved.

and the bush was not consumed. The epiphanies to the patriarchs did not involve supernatural events, but Moses is destined to lead Israel out of slavery through great signs and wonders. If one recalls the later image in Jeremiah of God's word as fire in the bones of the prophet (chapter 20), one might see in the divine fire that does not consume the bush a reassuring portent for Moses of the daunting prophetic role to which he is called, for the bush invested with divinity is not destroyed. Rashi makes a similar inference here. In much of the Exodus story, one senses strong symbolic implications in the concrete images, but the symbolism is never explicit.

3. *Let me . . . turn aside that I may see*. Moses is initially drawn by curiosity about the anomalous sight, scarcely imagining what he is getting into.

6. *Moses hid his face.* The gesture reflects the reiterated belief of biblical figures that man cannot look on God's face and live. What should be noted is how God's manifestation has shifted from Genesis. God spoke to Abraham face-to-face in implicitly human form. Here He speaks from fire, and even that Moses is afraid to look on.

7. *I . . . have seen . . . I have heard, for I know its pain*. The three verbs in this sequence pick up three of the four highlighted verbs used at the end of the previous chapter. As Rashi notes, the objectless "knew" of 2:25 here is given its object—pain.

8. *I have come down to rescue . . . to bring it up*. Ibn Ezra neatly observes that the coming down is directly followed by the antithetical bringing up.

flowing with milk and honey. The honey in question is probably not bee's honey, for apiculture was not practiced in this early period, but rather a sweet syrup extracted from dates. The milk would most likely have been goat's milk and not cow's milk. In any case, these two synecdoches for agriculture and animal husbandry respectively become a fixed epithet for the bounty of the promised land.

the place of the Canaanite and the Hittite . . . and the Jebusite. This imposing and repeated list of the peoples of the land of Canaan serves as a notice that this is far from an uninhabited country, that it contains resident peoples who will need to be confronted militarily.

11. *Who am I.* Moses's profession of unworthiness is the first instance of a recurring scene in which the future prophet responds to the divine call by an initial unwillingness to undertake the mission (compare Isaiah 6 and Jeremiah 1). Moses has particular cause to feel unworthy. Having been reared as an Egyptian prince, he has become an outlaw, an exile, and a simple shepherd. His one intervention, moreover, with his Hebrew brothers elicited only a resentful denunciation of him as a murderer.

12. *For I will be with you. And this is the sign*. Rashi proposes that God "answered the first question first and the second question second." That is, to the question "Who am I?," God responds that He will be with Moses, so Moses will have divine authority invested in him. To the question about bringing out the Israelites from Egypt, God responds that the fire in the bush is the concrete token of the miraculous power Moses will exert as God's agent in rescuing his people. It should be observed, however, that the reference of "this is the sign" is quite ambiguous, and perhaps was intended to be so. It could refer simply to the previous clause: "I will be with you" and *that* will be the sign you require. It could refer to the very burning bush out of which God speaks, as Rashi infers. Or, it could refer to the following clause: the sign that it is God Who has sent Moses will be realized when Moses succeeds in the extraordinary undertaking of bringing the Hebrews out of Egypt and leads them all the way to the mountain on which he now stands.

13. *What is His name?* The name of course implies identity, distinctive essence, and in the case of someone giving orders, official authorization (the emissary can claim to be carrying out his mission in the name of So-and-so).

14. *ʾEhyeh-ʾAsher-ʾEhyeh.* God's response perhaps gives Moses more than he bargained for—not just an identifying divine name (the implication of offering one such name might be that there are other divinities) but an ontological divine mystery of the most daunting character. Rivers of ink have since flowed in theological reflection on and philological analysis of this name. The following brief remarks will be confined to the latter consideration, which in any case must provide the grounding for the former. "I-Will-Be-Who-I-Will-Be" is the most plausible construction of the Hebrew, though the middle word, *ʾasher,* could easily mean "what" rather than "who," and the common rendering of "I-Am-That-I-Am" cannot be excluded.

("Will" is used here rather than "shall" because the Hebrew sounds like an affirmation with emphasis, not just a declaration.) Since the tense system of biblical Hebrew by no means corresponds to that of modern English, it is also perfectly possible to construe this as "I Am He Who Endures." The strong consensus of biblical scholarship is that the original pronunciation of the name YHWH that God goes on to use in verse 15 was "Yahweh." There are several good arguments for that conclusion. There is an independent name for the deity, Yah, which also appears as a suffix to proper names, and that designation could very well be a shortened form of this name. Greek transcriptions reflect a pronunciation close to "Yahweh." In that form, the name would be the causative, or *hiphʿil*, form of the verb "to be" and thus would have the theologically attractive sense of "He Who Brings Things into Being." All this is plausible, but it is worth registering at least a note of doubt about the form of the divine name. Here God instructs Moses to tell Israel *ʾEhyeh,* "I-Will-Be," has sent him. The deity, if the Masoretic vocalization is to be trusted, refers to Himself not with a causative but with the *qal* ("simple") conjugation. This could conceivably imply that others refer to him in the *qal* third person as *Yihyeh*, "He-Will-Be." (The medial *y* sound in this conjugated form would have had considerable phonetic interchange with the *w* consonant in YHWH.) This in turn would make the name fit a common pattern for male names in the third-person masculine singular, *qal* conjugation, imperfective form: *Yitsḥaq* (Isaac), "he will laugh"; *Yaʿaqov* (Jacob), "he will protect," or "he will grab the heel"; *Yiftaḥ* (Jephthah), "he will open"; and many others. If this were the case, then the name "Yah" could have been assimilated to YHWH by folk etymology and then perhaps even affected its pronunciation. Whether the pronunciaton of this name later in the Hellenistic period, by then restricted to the high priest on the Day of Atonement, Yahweh, as indicated in Greek transcriptions, reflects its original sound is at least open to question. The logic of *Yihyeh* as the essential divine name would be that whereas particular actions may be attributed to humans through the verbal names chosen for them, to God alone belongs unlimited, unconditional being. This conjecture, inspired by the use here by God of the *qal* conjugation rather than the causative conjugation in naming Himself, is far from certain, but it might introduce at least some margin of doubt about the consensus opinion regarding the divine name.

15. *and thus am I invoked.* The Hebrew of this brief poetic inset preserves strict grammatical-syntactical parallelism with the preceding verset: "and that is my appellation in all ages," but English synonyms for "name" (Hebrew *zekher*), such as "appellation" and "designation," are too ponderously polysyllabic for the little poem.

18. *they will heed your voice.* God is responding to Moses's understandable concern that the Hebrews will simply dismiss him with his crazy-sounding claims.

and together you shall say. "Together" has been added to make clear what is evident in the Hebrew through the plural form of "say," that the elders will be speaking together with Moses to Pharaoh.

happened. They use a verb that elsewhere suggests chance encounter, rather than the more definite "appeared." This might imply that they want to intimate to Pharaoh that they did not seek this meeting with the divinity.

let us go . . . three days' journey. They do not say that they intend to return, though these words bear the obvious implication that they are requesting only a furlough (week-long furloughs were actually sometimes extended to Egyptian slaves). To ask for absolute manumission would have been outrageous.

20. *send out My hand.* A more idiomatic rendering would be "stretch out," but it is important to preserve the symmetry of God's sending at the beginning of the verse and Pharaoh's sending at the end.

22. *each woman will ask of her neighbor and of the sojourner.* Both "neighbor" and "sojourner" are feminine nouns. The verse reflects a frequent social phenomenon—also registered in the rabbinic literature of Late Antiquity—in which women constitute the porous boundary between adjacent ethnic communities: borrowers of the proverbial cup of sugar, sharers of gossip and women's lore. It must be said that this situation, in which Egyptian women are lodgers in Israelite houses, does not jibe with the Plagues narrative, in which the Israelites live in a segregated region. Some readers have felt discomfort at the act of exploitation recorded here. The most common line of defense is that this is restitution for the unpaid labor exacted from the Hebrew slaves. In any case, it seems wise not to view the story in terms of intergroup ethics. From beginning to end, it is a tale of Israelite

triumphalism. The denizens of the simple farms and the relatively crude towns of Judah would have known about imperial Egypt's fabulous luxuries, its exquisite jewelry, and the affluent among them would have enjoyed imported Egyptian linens and papyrus. It is easy to imagine how this tale of despoiling or stripping bare Egypt would have given pleasure to its early audiences. In each of the three sister-wife stories in Genesis that adumbrate the Exodus narrative, the patriarch and his wife depart loaded with gifts: the presence of that motif suggests that the despoiling of Egypt was an essential part of the story of liberation from bondage in the early national traditions.

CHAPTER 4

[1]And Moses answered and said, “But, look, they will
not believe me nor will they heed my voice, for they
will say, ‘The LORD did not appear to you.’” [2]And the
LORD said to him, “What is that in your hand?” And
he said, “A staff.” [3]And He said, “Fling it to the
ground.” And he flung it to the ground and it became a
snake and Moses fled from it. [4]And the LORD said to
Moses, “Reach out your hand and grasp its tail.” And
he reached out his hand and held it and it became a
staff in his grip. [5]“So that they will believe that the
LORD God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the
God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to
you.” [6]And the LORD said further to him, “Bring,
pray, your hand into your bosom.” And he put his
hand back into his bosom and brought it out and, look,
his hand was blanched like snow. [7]And He said, “Put
your hand back into your bosom.” And he put his hand
back into his bosom and brought it out and, look, it
came back like his own flesh. [8]“And so, should they
not believe you and should they not heed the voice of

the first sign, they will believe the voice of the second sign. [9]And should it be that they do not believe even both these signs and do not heed your voice, you shall take of the water of the Nile and pour it on the dry land, and the water that you take from the Nile will become blood on the dry land." [10]And Moses said, "Please, my LORD, no man of words am I, not at any time in the past nor now since You have spoken to Your servant, for I am heavy-mouthed and heavy-tongued." [11]And the LORD said to him, "Who gave man a mouth, or who makes him mute or deaf or sighted or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? [12]And now, go, and I Myself will be with your mouth and will instruct you what to say." [13]And he said, "Please, my LORD, send, pray, by the hand of him You would send." [14]And the wrath of the LORD flared up against Moses, and He said, "Is there not Aaron the Levite, your brother? I know that he can indeed speak, and, what's more, look, he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you, his heart will rejoice. [15]And you shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth, and I Myself will be with your mouth and with his mouth and I will instruct you both what you should do, [16]and he will speak for you to the people, and so he, he will be a mouth for you, and you, you will be for him like a god.

[17]And this staff you shall take in your hand, with which
you will do the signs."

[18]And Moses went and returned to Jether his father-in-
law, and he said to him, "Let me go, pray, and return
to my brothers who are in Egypt that I may see
whether they still live." And Jethro said, "Go in
peace." [19]And the LORD said to Moses in Midian,
"Go, return to Egypt, for all the men who sought your
life are dead." [20]And Moses took his wife and his sons
and mounted them on the donkey, and he returned to
the land of Egypt, and Moses took God's staff in his
hand. [21]And the LORD said to Moses, "When you set
out to return to Egypt, see all the portents that I have
put in your hand and do them before Pharaoh. But I on
my part shall toughen his heart and he will not send
the people away. [22]And you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus
said the LORD: My son, my firstborn, is Israel. [23]And I
said to you, Send off my son that he may worship Me,
and you refused to send him off, and, look, I am about
to kill your son, your firstborn.'"

[24]And it happened on the way at the night camp that
the LORD encountered him and sought to put him to
death. [25]And Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's

foreskin and touched it to his feet, and she said, “Yes, a bridegroom of blood you are to me.” [26]And He let him go. Then did she say, “A bridegroom of blood by the circumcising.”

[27]And the LORD said to Aaron, “Go to the wilderness to meet Moses.” And he went and encountered him on the mountain of God and he kissed him. [28]And Moses told Aaron all the LORD’s words with which He sent him and all the signs with which He charged him. [29]And Moses, and Aaron with him, went, and they gathered the elders of the Israelites. [30]And Aaron spoke all the words that the LORD had spoken to Moses, and he did the signs before the people’s eyes. [31]And the people believed and heeded, that the LORD had singled out the Israelites and that He had seen their abuse. And they did obeisance and bowed down.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *What is that in your hand*? The shepherd’s staff is his familiar possession and constant practical tool. Its sudden metamorphosis into a reptile is thus a dramatic demonstration to Moses of God’s power to intervene in the order of nature that will be repeatedly manifested in the Plagues narrative. The staff itself will be wielded by Moses as a magician’s wand, and Moses’s mission to Egypt, an international capital of the technology of magic, will be

implemented through the exercise of divinely enabled magic. In verse 20, the staff will be called "God's staff," not because it is a staff belonging to God that was given to Moses, as some scholars have contended, but because from this moment of the Horeb epiphany, the simple shepherd's staff has been transmuted into both the theater and the conduit of divine power.

3. *Fling it to the ground.* There is an odd semantic "rhyming" in the recycling for the staff of the violent verb that Pharaoh used for the Hebrew male infants (1:22).

it became a snake and Moses fled. The trusty support turns into something dangerous and alien, triggering a primal fear in Moses—the very fear that is figured in the primordial reptile of the Garden story (Genesis 3:15). Although this particular transformation has the look of a conjuror's trick (and Pharaoh's soothsayers will replicate it), it is an intimation of the fearsome power to unleash the zoological and meteorological realms that God will manifest in Egypt.

4. *grasp its tail.* As has often been noted, this is the most dangerous place to seize a venomous snake, and thus requires Moses to trust implicitly that God will keep him from harm.

6. *his hand was blanched like snow.* The Hebrew *metsora ʿat*, here represented as "blanched," is rendered as "leprous" in many older translations, but the modern scholarly consensus is that what is involved is some disfiguring skin disease other than leprosy. The comparison with snow would not refer to flaking, as some have claimed, because "like snow" is a known biblical simile for total whiteness—in the case of skin, loss of all pigmentation. A skin disease will figure among the plagues with which God will strike the Egyptians, and so is the second of the two metamorphic "signs" here. God appropriately is both a sudden bringer of disease and a healer.

8. *heed the voice of the first sign.* Signs don't have voices, but the formulation is determined by the momentum of the idiom "heed the voice." It is a case, as Abraham ibn Ezra observes, when "Torah speaks like the language of humankind."

9. *the water that you take from the Nile will become blood.* Thus, the enactment of this third sign coincides with the implementation of the first

plague. If the metamorphoses of Moses's own staff and hand do not convince the Hebrews, the spectacular transformation of the Nile—an Egyptian deity, as Rashi notes, and the very source of life in Egypt—will eliminate any lingering skepticism. The predominance of blood in this entire narrative should be observed. Moses has already spilled Egyptian blood (the phrase is not used, but it is a fixed biblical idiom for both manslaughter and murder). The Ten Plagues will begin with a plague of blood and end with one in which blood is heavily involved. On the way to Egypt (verses 24–26), Moses's life will be saved by a rite carried out through blood. The story of liberation from Egyptian bondage is consistently imagined as a process of violent oppression to be broken only by violent counterstrokes. The portent here seems to be to turn the Nile water into blood when it is scooped up and scattered on dry land. In the event, a more cataclysmic turning of the water of the river in its channel into blood will take place. "Dry land" and "water" prefigure the Sea of Reeds miracle.

10. *heavy-mouthed and heavy-tongued.* It seems futile to speculate, as so many commentators have, whether Moses suffered from an actual speech impediment or merely was unaccustomed to public speaking. The point is that he invokes these Hebrew idioms for impeded speech—whether as hyperbole or as physiological fact scarcely matters—to express his feeling of incapacity for the mission, which is his new reason for refusal now that God has settled the question of the skepticism of the Israelites. In the subsequent narrative, Moses actually appears to be capable of considerable eloquence.

12. *I Myself will be with your mouth.* This rather unusual idiom is a way of focusing in on God's initial promise that He will be with Moses. Since Moses has now made an issue of his mouth and tongue, God assures him that the promised divine sustaining aid will be specifically palpable in the organ of speech.

13. *send, pray, by the hand of him You would send.* The implication, of course, is: but not me. Moses resorts to this vague and slightly cryptic phrase because he doesn't dare to say in so many words that he is still unwilling. But God immediately recognizes this as a refusal—hence the flare-up of anger in His immediate response.

14. *Is there not Aaron the Levite, your brother?* The innocent reader might be impelled to ask, "Is there?", since no previous report of Aaron's existence had been made. The account of Moses's conception and birth in 2:2 is elliptic because it is made to sound as though they directly followed the marriage of his parents, whereas Moses is actually the youngest of three siblings, Miriam being the oldest.

his heart will rejoice. Are we to infer that the brothers had secret contact and hence an established fraternal bond during the years that Moses was growing up as the Egyptian princess's adopted son? The narrative data provided in chapter 2 at least allow the possibility that Moses's family could have found ways to stay in touch with him, and this in turn would explain why he felt a sense of identification with his Hebrew "brothers" when he witnessed the beating of the Hebrew slave by the Egyptian taskmaster. In any case, Aaron's joy at the brothers' reunion after Moses's years as a fugitive suggests that the two will work together in fraternal unison.

16. *you will be for him like a god.* Moses will convey "oracular" messages to Aaron who will transmit them as official spokesman to the people. This rather audacious way of stating the communications relay is enabled by the fact that *ʾelohim*, which has the primary meaning of "god," extends to merely angelic divine beings and even to human eminences.

18. *Jether.* This is a variant form of Jethro, which is more often used in the narrative.

return to my brothers who are in Egypt that I may see whether they still live. Moses does not mention that he had fled Egypt for having committed a capital crime, and perhaps one may infer that he never divulged that part of his Egyptian past to his father-in-law. In the very next verse, God will give Moses assurance that he no longer is in danger of execution for the act of manslaughter. The last clause here is a pointed allusion to Joseph's anxious question to his brothers (Genesis 45:3) about whether his father is still alive: the familial bond that induced Joseph to bring his father and brothers down to Egypt will now be manifested in Moses's actions as he sets out to reverse the process, bringing his "brothers" up out of Egypt and back to Canaan. His wondering whether his brothers still live is more than a way of saying that he wants to find out how they are faring because he is aware that they have been the target of a genocidal plan.

20. *his sons.* Only one son was previously mentioned, and only one son figures in verses 24–26. Some textual critics, noting an ambiguity in early Hebrew orthography, propose "his son" as the original reading.

21. *But I on My part shall toughen his heart.* This phrase, which with two synonymous variants punctuates the Plagues narrative, has been the source of endless theological debate over whether Pharaoh is exercising free will or whether God is playing him as a puppet and then punishing him for his puppet's performance. The latter alternative surely states matters too crudely. The heart in biblical idiom is the seat of understanding, feeling, and intention. The verb rendered here as "toughen" (King James Version, "harden") has the primary meaning of "strengthen," and the most frequent synonym of this idiom as it occurs later in the story means literally "to make heavy." God needs Pharaoh's recalcitrance in order that He may deploy the plagues, one after another, thus humiliating the great imperial power of Egypt—the burden of the triumphalist narrative we have already noted—and demonstrating the impotence of all the gods of Egypt. But Pharaoh is presumably manifesting his own character: callousness, resistance to instruction, and arrogance would all be implied by the toughening of the heart. God is not so much pulling a marionette's strings as allowing, or perhaps encouraging, the oppressor-king to persist in his habitual harsh willfulness and presumption.

22. *My son, my firstborn is Israel.* Framing the relationship in these terms lays the ground in measure-for-measure justice for the lethal tenth plague predicted at the end of the next verse, since Pharaoh has sought to destroy Israel.

23. *to kill your son, your firstborn.* This dire threat, to be fulfilled in the tenth plague, also inducts us to the narrative episode that follows in the next three verses, in which the LORD seeks to kill Moses, and the blood of the firstborn intercedes.

24. *on the way at the night camp that the LORD . . . sought to put him to death.* This elliptic story is the most enigmatic episode in all of Exodus. It seems unlikely that we will ever resolve the enigmas it poses, but it nevertheless plays a pivotal role in the larger narrative, and it is worth pondering why such a haunting and bewildering story should have been introduced at this

juncture. There is something starkly archaic about the whole episode. The LORD here is not a voice from an incandescent bush announcing that this is holy ground but an uncanny silent stranger who "encounters" Moses, like the mysterious stranger who confronts Jacob at the Jabbok ford, in the dark of the night (the Hebrew for "place of encampment" is phonetically linked to *laylah*, "night"). One may infer that both the deity here and the rite of circumcision carried out by Zipporah belong to an archaic—perhaps even premonotheistic—stratum of Hebrew culture, though both are brought into telling alignment with the story that follows. The potently anthropomorphic and mythic character of the episode generates a crabbed style, as though the writer were afraid to spell out its real content, and thus even the referents of pronominal forms are ambiguous. Traditional Jewish commentators seek to naturalize the story to a more normative monotheism by claiming that Moses has neglected the commandment to circumcise his son (sons?), and that is why the LORD threatens his life. What seems more plausible is that Zipporah's act reflects an older rationale for circumcision among the West Semitic peoples than the covenantal one enunciated in Genesis 17. Here circumcision serves as an apotropaic device, to ward off the hostility of a dangerous deity by offering him a bloody scrap of the son's flesh, a kind of symbolic synecdoche of human sacrifice. The circumciser, moreover, is the mother, and not the father, as enjoined in Genesis. The story is an archaic cousin of the repeated biblical stories of life-threatening trial in the wilderness, and, as modern critics have often noted, it corresponds to the folktale pattern of a perilous rite of passage that the hero must undergo before embarking on his mission proper. The more domesticated God of verse 19 has just assured Moses that he can return to Egypt "for all the men who sought your life are dead." The fierce uncanny YHWH of this episode promptly seeks to kill Moses (the same verb "seek"), just as in the previous verse He had promised to kill Pharaoh's firstborn. (Here, the more judicial verb, *himit*, "to put to death," is used instead of the blunt *harag*, "kill.") The ambiguity of reference has led some commentators to see the son as the object of this lethal intention, though that seems unlikely because the (unspecified) object of the first verb "encountered" is almost certainly Moses. Confusions then multiply in the nocturnal murk of the language. Whose feet are touched with the bloody foreskin? Perhaps Moses's, but it could be the boy's, or even the LORD's. The scholarly claim, moreover, that "feet" is a euphemism for the genitals cannot be dismissed. There are again three male candidates in the

scene for the obscure epithet "bridegroom of blood," though Moses strikes me as the most probable. William H. C. Propp correctly recognizes that the plural form for blood used here, *damim*, generally means "bloodshed" or "violence" (though in the archaic language of this text it may merely reflect intensification or poetic heightening). He proposes that the deity assaults Moses because he still bears the bloodguilt for the act of involuntary manslaughter he has committed, and it is for this that the circumcision must serve as expiation. All this may leave us in a dark thicket of bewildering possibilities, yet the story is strikingly apt as a tonal and motivic introduction to the Exodus narrative. The deity that appears here on the threshold of the return to Egypt is dark and dangerous, a potential killer of father or son. Blood in the same double function it will serve in the Plagues narrative is set starkly in the foreground: the blood of violent death, and blood as the apotropaic stuff that wards off death—the bloody foreskin of the son will be matched in the tenth plague by the blood smeared on the lintel to ward off the epidemic of death visiting the firstborn sons. With this troubling mythic encounter, we are ready for the descent into Egypt.

27. *And the LORD said to Aaron.* We return to the welcome sphere of a God Who speaks, and directs men to act through speech. After the reunion of the brothers, they will promptly implement God's instructions as Moses imparts the words to Aaron and Aaron then speaks the words to the people.

31. *And the people believed and heeded.* In the event, the two signs of the staff and the hand are sufficient to win their trust ("believe" does not have any doctrinal sense here), and the third sign, of water turned to blood, can be reserved for the first plague.

CHAPTER 5

[1]And afterward Moses and Aaron came and said to
Pharaoh, “Thus said the LORD, God of Israel: ‘Send
off My people that they may celebrate to Me in the
wilderness.’” [2]And Pharaoh said, “Who is the LORD,
that I should heed His voice to send off Israel? I do not
know the LORD, nor will I send off Israel.” [3]And they
said, “The God of the Hebrews happened upon us. Let
us go, pray, a three days’ journey into the wilderness,
that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God, lest He
hit us with pestilence or sword.” [4]And the king of
Egypt said to them, “Why, Moses and Aaron, do you
disturb the people from its tasks? Go to your
burdens!” [5]And Pharaoh said, “Look, the people of the
land are now many, and you would make them cease
from their burdens!” [6]And Pharaoh on that day
charged the people’s taskmasters and its overseers,
saying, [7]“You shall no longer give the people straw to
make the bricks as in time past. They themselves will
go and scrabble for straw. [8]And the quota of bricks
that they were making in the past you shall impose

upon them, you shall not deduct from it, for they are idlers. Therefore do they cry out, saying, ‘Let us go sacrifice to our god.’ [9]Let the work be heavy on the men and let them do it and not look to lying words!” [10]And the people’s taskmasters and its overseers went out and said to the people, saying, “Thus said Pharaoh: ‘I give you no straw. [11]As for you, fetch yourselves straw wherever you find it, because not a thing is to be deducted from your work.’” [12]And the people spread out through all the land of Egypt to scrabble for stubble for straw. [13]And the taskmasters were urging them, saying, “Finish your tasks at the same daily rate as when there was straw.” [14]And the overseers of the Israelites, whom Pharaoh’s taskmasters had set over them, were beaten, saying, “Why have you not completed your tally for making bricks as in time past, neither yesterday nor today?” [15]And the Israelite overseers came and cried out to Pharaoh, saying, “Why should you do this to your servants? [16]Straw is not given to your servants, and bricks they tell us, make, and, look, your servants are beaten and the fault is your people’s.” [17]And he said, “Idlers, you are idlers! Therefore you say, ‘Let us go sacrifice to the LORD.’ [18]And now, go work, and no straw will be given to you, but the quota of bricks you will give.” [19]And the Israelite overseers saw themselves coming to harm,

saying, “You shall not deduct from your bricks, from the same daily rate.” 20And they encountered Moses and Aaron poised to meet them as they came out from Pharaoh. 21And they said to them, “Let the LORD look upon you and judge, for you have made us repugnant in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of his servants, putting a sword in their hand to kill us.” 22And Moses went back to the LORD, and said, “My lord, why have you done harm to this people, why have you sent me? 23Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done harm to this people and You surely have not rescued Your people.” 6:1And the LORD said to Moses, “Now will you see what I shall do to Pharaoh, for through a strong hand will he send them off and through a strong hand will he drive them from his land.”

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Thus said the* LORD. This is the so-called messenger formula, the conventional form for introducing the text, oral or written, of a message. The conveyor of the message may be divine, as here and repeatedly in the Prophets, or human, as in verse 10, where the message comes from Pharaoh. The phrase was regularly used at the beginning of letters.

Send off. The Hebrew verb *shileaḥ* has a range of meanings: “to let go or dismiss,” “to divorce,” “to send guests decorously on their way,” “to grant

manumission to a slave." There is probably some ironic tension in this narrative between the positive and the negative senses of the verb, and since it is repeatedly played off against God's "sending" out His hand or sending ministers of destruction, this translation represents the reiterated request to Pharaoh as "send off."

The abruptness of Moses and Aaron's address to the king of Egypt is noteworthy. They use none of the deferential forms of speech, none of the third-person bowing and scraping, which are conventional in biblical Hebrew for addressing a monarch. Instead, they immediately announce, "Thus said the LORD," and proceed to the text of the message, which begins with an imperative verb, without the polite particle of entreaty, *na'*. William H. C. Propp observes that in doing this, Moses is not following God's orders: he was to have spoken together with the elders, who appear to be absent; he was to have performed his two portents; he was to have threatened Pharaoh's firstborn in God's name. As to the absence of the elders, Rashi, following the Midrash, suggests that they slipped away in fear one by one as Moses and Aaron approached the palace.

2. *Who is the LORD, that I should heed His voice.* The very name, YHWH, of this Semitic deity may be news to Pharaoh, and even if he grants that there is such a god, there is no reason that he, as an Egyptian polytheist and as a figure thought to have divine status himself, should recognize the authority of this Hebrew deity. ("I do not know the LORD" has the sense of "I refuse to recognize his divine authority.") Pharaoh speaks here in quasipoetic parallel clauses, and D. N. Friedman has proposed that this may be coded as an aristocratic style of speech, a token of his regal stature.

3. *Let us go, pray, a three days' journey into the wilderness.* Speaking in God's name, they had made the request unconditionally, without stipulation of time limits. Now answering Pharaoh's indignation in their own voice, they use the cohortative verb form ("let us go") with the particle of entreaty ("pray") and mention the three days, which they presumably should have done at the outset.

lest He hit us with pestilence or sword. The proposal of some scholars that "us" be emended to "you" (because of the impending plagues) should be resisted. It was a perfectly understandable religious concept for peoples of the ancient Near East that a national deity might need to be propitiated through

sacrifice. By couching their request for a furlough for the slaves in these terms, Moses and Aaron are saying to Pharaoh that the cultic expedition into the wilderness is no mere whim but a necessary means to avert the punishing wrath of the god of the Hebrews. In this fashion, they are pitching their argument to Pharaoh's self-interest, for dead slaves would be of no use to him.

5. *the people of the land are now many.* This phrase remains a little obscure. Because of the end of the sentence, it has to refer to the Hebrews. The most likely sense is that the Hebrew workforce has become vast (compare all the references to their proliferation in chapter 1), and so the Egyptian economy has come to depend on this multitude of slave laborers and can scarcely afford an interruption of their work.

6. *taskmasters . . . overseers*. As becomes clear in what follows (e.g., verse 14), the taskmasters are Egyptian slave drivers, the overseers are Hebrew foremen. The former term, *noges*, derives from a root that means "to oppress" the latter term, *shoter*, is associated with a root meaning to "record in writing."

7. *as in time past.* The literal meaning of this common Hebrew idiom is "as yesterday [or] the day before." At the end of verse 14, these two components of the idiom are broken out from the fixed formula, each being prefaced by the emphatic *gam* ("even," "also").

scrabble for straw. The verb *qosheshu* is linked with its usual cognate-accusative object *qash*, "stubble" (see verse 12). "Straw" (*teven*) and "stubble" (*qash*) appear to be the same substance, with the latter in the condition of not having been picked from the ground. Crushed straw was used to give cohesiveness to the bricks before baking.

8. *for they are idlers.* The contemptuous term invoked here by Egypt's head slave owner, *nirpim*, is derived from a verbal root that means "to relax," "to loosen one's grip," "to let go." It is the very verb that is used in 4:26, when the threatening deity of the Bridegroom of Blood episode "let him go."

12. *And the people spread out through all the land of Egypt to scrabble for stubble.* Even in this measure of aggravated oppression, the language of the

story picks up the initial imagery of animal-like proliferation, which in turn harks back to the injunction in the Creation story to fill the land/earth.

14. *the overseers of the Israelites . . . were beaten*. The Egyptians have instituted an effective chain of command for forced labor. It would not be feasible to beat all the teeming thousands of Hebrew slaves, so when they fail to produce their daily quota, the Israelite overseers are made personally responsible and are beaten by the Egyptian slave drivers. The overseers then turn in protest to Pharaoh, "crying out" (or "screaming"), which is the predictable reaction to a beating.

16. *Straw is not given . . . bricks they tell us, make, and, look, your servants are beaten*. There is a colloquial immediacy in the language with which the overseers express their outrage to Pharaoh, positioning "straw" and "bricks" at the beginning of the first and second clauses.

the fault is your people's. Presumably, the fault for the failure to fulfill the quota of bricks is the Egyptians' because they are not providing the straw.

17. *Idlers, you are idlers! Therefore you say, "Let us go sacrifice to the* LORD*."* In keeping with a common procedure of Hebrew narrative, phrases of previous dialogue are pointedly recycled. Pharaoh sarcastically quotes the phrase from Moses and Aaron's request about sacrificing to the LORD, and in a kind of incremental repetition, he picks up his own term, "idlers," and expands it to "Idlers, you are idlers!" These repetitions nicely convey a sense of inflexibly opposed sides in the conflict.

18. *no straw will be given . . . but the quota of bricks you will give*. By this point, "give" (*natan*) has emerged as a thematic key word of the episode. Pharaoh had announced in his message brought by the taskmasters, "I give you no straw." The Hebrew overseers then complained, "Straw is not given," and Pharaoh, picking up their very words, lashes back at them, "no straw will be given," again stipulating that the slaves have the same obligation as before to "give" their quota of bricks.

19. *saw themselves coming to harm.* This is the understanding of the somewhat cryptic Hebrew *wayirʾu . . . ʾotam beraʿ* proposed by Abraham ibn Ezra and many other commentators. Still smarting from their recent

whipping, they are acutely aware that they will be the first to suffer for the inability of the Hebrew slaves to maintain their usual quota of bricks.

20. *And they encountered Moses and Aaron poised to meet them.* Moses and Aaron, who previously had acted as bold spokesmen, now wait awkwardly, perhaps nervously, outside the palace while the delegation of overseers brings its petition before Pharaoh. The verb for "encounter," *paga'*, has both a neutral and a violent meaning. It indicates the meeting of persons or substances—including the "meeting" of forged iron with flesh, when it has the sense of "stab" or "hit," as at the end of verse 3, above.

21. *made us repugnant.* The literal meaning of this common Hebrew idiom is "made our odor stink," but the fact that the idiom is twice linked here with "eyes" suggests that the writer is not much thinking of its olfactory force.

putting a sword in their hand to kill us. Moses and Aaron, we should recall, had expressed the fear to Pharaoh that, without due sacrifice, the LORD would hit the people with pestilence or sword.

22. *why have you sent me?* Moses's initial hesitancy to accept the mission imposed on him at Horeb seems to him perfectly confirmed now by the events. God has only made things worse for the Hebrew slaves (Moses, as it were, passes the buck he has received from the accusing overseers), and the whole plan of liberation shows no sign of implementation.

6:1. *And the LORD said.* Although the conventional division puts this verse at the beginning of a new chapter, it actually sums up the preceding speech, whereas 6.2 marks the beginning of a new speech in which God offers a quasihistorical summary of His relationship with Israel and His future intentions toward Israel.

through a strong hand will he send them off and through a strong hand will he drive them from his land. The "strong hand"—that is, violent force—becomes a refrain in the story, here repeated in quasipoetic parallelism. The phrase refers to the violent coercion that God will need to exert on Pharaoh. It is noteworthy that the semantically double-edged "send" (to send away ceremoniously, to release, to banish) is here paired with the unambiguous "drive them from his land." In the event, God's strong hand will compel Pharaoh to expel the Hebrews precipitously, so that "let my people go" is reinterpreted as something like "banish my people." The Exodus, in other

words, extorted from a recalcitrant Egyptian monarch by an overpowering God, will prove to be a continuation of hostility, a fearful and angry expulsion of the slaves rather than a conciliatory act of liberation.

CHAPTER 6

[2]And God spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am the
LORD. [3]And I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to
Jacob as El Shaddai, but in My name the LORD I was
not known to them. [4]And I also established My
covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan,
the land of their sojournings in which they sojourned.
[5]And also I Myself have heard the groaning of the
Israelites whom the Egyptians enslave, and I do
remember My covenant. [6]Therefore say to the
Israelites: ‘I am the LORD. I will take you out from
under the burdens of Egypt and I will rescue you from
their bondage and I will redeem you with an
outstretched arm and with great retributions. [7]And I
will take you to Me as a people and I will be your
God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your
God Who takes you out from under the burdens of
Egypt. [8]And I will bring you to the land that I raised
My hand in pledge to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and
to Jacob, and I will give it to you as an inheritance. I
am the LORD!’” [9]And Moses spoke thus to the

Israelites, but they did not heed Moses out of shortness of breath and hard bondage.

10 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 11 "Come, speak to Pharaoh king of Egypt, that he send off the Israelites from his land." 12 And Moses spoke before the LORD, saying, "Look, the Israelites did not heed me, and how will Pharaoh heed me, and I am uncircumcised of lips?" 13 And the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron and He charged them regarding the Israelites and regarding Pharaoh king of Egypt to bring out the Israelites from the land of Egypt.

14 These are the heads of their fathers' houses: The sons of Reuben, Israel's firstborn—Enoch and Pallu, Hezron and Carmi, these are the clans of Reuben. 15 And the sons of Simeon—Jemuel and Jamin and Ohad and Jachin and Zohar and Saul, son of the Canaanite woman, these are the clans of Simeon. 16 And these are the names of the sons of Levi according to their lineage—Gershon and Kohath and Merari. And the years of the life of Levi were a hundred and thirty-seven years. 17 The sons of Gershon —Libni and Shimei, according to their clans. 18 And the sons of Kohath—Amram and Izhar and Hebron

and Uzziel. And the years of the life of Kohath were one hundred and thirty-three years. [19]And the sons of Merari—Mahli and Mushi. These are the clans of the Levite according to their lineage. [20]And Amram took him as wife Jochebed his aunt, and she bore him Aaron and Moses. And the years of the life of Amram were a hundred and thirty-seven years. [21]And the sons of Izhar—Korah and Nepheg and Zichri. [22]And the sons of Uzziel—Mishael and Elzaphan and Sithri. [23]And Aaron took him Elisheba daughter of Amminadab sister of Nahshon as wife, and she bore him Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. [24]The sons of Korah—Assir and Elkanah and Abiasaph, these are the clans of the Korahite. [25]And Eleazar son of Aaron had taken him a wife from the daughters of Putiel, and she bore him Phinehas. These are the heads of the fathers of the Levites according to their clans. [26]It was the very Aaron and Moses to whom the LORD said, “Bring out the Israelites from the land of Egypt in their battalions.” [27]It was they who were speaking to Pharaoh king of Egypt to bring out the Israelites from Egypt, the very Moses and Aaron.

[28]And it happened on the day the LORD spoke to Moses in the land of Egypt, [29]that the LORD spoke to

Moses, saying, “I am the LORD. Speak to Pharaoh king of Egypt all that I speak to you.” 30And Moses said before the LORD, “Look, I am uncircumcised of lips, and how will Pharaoh heed me?”

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *I am the* LORD. This formula—“I am X”—has been found in a variety of ancient Near Eastern documents, both royal proclamations and pronouncements attributed to sundry deities. The force of the words is something like “By the authority invested in me as X, I make the following solemn declaration.” The content of this particular declaration is a rehearsal of the binding covenant in which God entered with the patriarchs and an expression of His determination now to fulfill the covenantal promise by freeing the Israelites from slavery and bringing them up to the land of Canaan. In terms of the narrative rhythm of the Exodus story, this grand proclamation by the deity is inserted after the frustration of Moses and Aaron’s initial effort, suspending the action while providing depth of historical background before the unleashing of the first of the plagues.

3. *as El Shaddai, but in My name the* LORD *I was not known to them.* The designation El Shaddai, which is in fact used a total of five times in the Patriarchal Tales, is an archaic, evidently Canaanite combination of divine names. El was the high god of the Canaanite pantheon, though the Hebrew term is also a common noun meaning “god.” No satisfactory explanation for the meaning or origin of the name Shaddai has been made, but some scholars link it with a term for “mountain,” and others associate it with fertility. The usage of “in My name” is a little odd because there is no equivalent here for “in” (*bE*) in the Hebrew. Willam H. C. Propp has proposed that the ellipsis implies a distinction of meaning, but the grounds for such an inference seem rather tenuous. Were the patriarchs in fact ignorant of the name YHWH? It is true that Genesis has no special episode involving the revelation of the

syllables and mystery of this divine name, as we have here in 3:13–16; but there is also no indication that the name was withheld from the patriarchs, and the Primeval History reports that the invocation of this name goes back to the time of Enosh son of Seth (Genesis 4:26). Source critics see this passage as striking evidence for the original autonomy of the Priestly source, which does not share J's assumption that the name YHWH was known to the patriarchs. All the sources drawn together in the Exodus narrative assume that it was only on the threshold of God's intervention in history to liberate Israel that He revealed His unique name to the whole people.

4. *sojournings in which they sojourned.* God's language stresses the character of temporary residence of the nomadic forefathers in the land. Now temporary residence, *megurim*, will be transformed into fixed settlement, *yeshivah*.

6. *I am the* LORD. The repetition of this initiating formula is dictated by its marking the beginning of a declaration within a declaration—the divine proclamation that Moses is to carry to the people. In this instance, "I am the LORD" will be repeated at the end of the proclamation (verse 8) in an envelope structure.

7. *you shall know that I am the* LORD *your God Who takes you out from under the burdens of Egypt.* This idea is emphasized again and again, in the Torah as well as in later books of the Bible. It is the cornerstone of Israelite faith—that God has proven His divinity and His special attachment to Israel by the dramatic act of liberating the people from Egyptian slavery. Some modern scholars, arguing from the silence of Egyptian sources on any Hebrew slave population, not to speak of any mention of an exodus, have raised doubts about whether the Hebrews were ever in Egypt. The story is surely a schematization and simplification of complex historical processes. There is no intimation of the quite likely existence of a sizable segment of the Hebrew people in the high country of eastern Canaan that never was in Egypt. Yet it is also hard to imagine that the nation would have invented a story of national origins involving the humiliation of slavery without some kernel of historical memory. Virgil in the *Aeneid* may invent a tale of Rome rising from the ruins of a defeated Troy, but the defenders of Troy are heroic warriors foiled by trickery, which is scarcely the same as abject slavery.

8. *I raised My hand in pledge.* The Hebrew has only "raised My hand," which by idiomatic usage implies a pledge or vow.

9. *out of shortness of breath.* The Hebrew *ruaḥ* can mean "breath," "wind," or "spirit." This translation follows Rashi's understanding of the phrase, a construction that is attractive because of its concreteness: the slaves, groaning under hard bondage—a condition made all the harder by Moses's bungled intervention—can scarcely catch their breath and so are in no mood to listen to Moses. Others render this term as "impatience" or "crushed spirit."

12. *And Moses spoke before the* LORD. The preposition "before," instead of "to," is sometimes used in addressing a superior (it can also mean "in the presence of").

I am uncircumcised of lips. The phrase is an approximate parallel (the documentary critics would say: in P's vocabulary as against J's) of the "heavy-mouthed and heavy-tongued" we encountered in chapter 4. It is a mistake, however, to represent this upward displacement of a genital image simply as "impeded of speech" because the metaphor of lack of circumcision suggests not merely incapacity of speech but a kind of ritual lack of fitness for the sacred task (like Isaiah's "impure lips" in his dedication scene, Isaiah 6). The idiom is clearly intended to resonate with the Bridegroom of Blood story, in which Moses is not permitted to launch on his mission until an act of circumcision is performed. Syntactically, this last clause of the verse dangles ambiguously: Moses's thought was already complete in the *a fortiori* relation between the first and second clauses (if the Israelites wouldn't listen to me, how much more so Pharaoh . . .), and now Moses offers a kind of reinforcing afterthought—and anyway, I am uncircumcised of lips.

13. *and the* LORD *spoke to Moses and to Aaron.* God offers no explicit response to Moses's reiteration of his sense of unfitness as spokesman, but, as Rashi notes, God's joint address at this point to Moses and Aaron may suggest Aaron's previously indicated role as mouthpiece for Moses.

14. *These are the heads of their fathers' houses.* Genealogical lists, as one can see repeatedly in Genesis, serve an important compositional role to mark the borders between different narrative segments. The story of Moses's early history and the prelude to the plagues is now completed, and before the unleashing of the first of the ten fearful divine blows against Egypt, the

genealogical list constitutes a long narrative caesura. Although this list begins with the sons of Reuben and Simeon, because they are the two firstborn in the order of Jacob's sons, it is not a complete roll call of the tribes but is meant only to take us to the tribe of Levi, and then to culminate in the two sons of the tribe of Levi, Moses and Aaron, who are poised to carry out their fateful mission to Pharaoh. Other Levites appear to be singled out because they are to play roles in the subsequent narrative. "Father's house" (*beyt ʾav*) in this list, as elsewhere in biblical Hebrew, refers to the social unit of the extended family presided over by the father.

16. *a hundred and thirty-seven years.* The life spans are schematized (either 133 or 137) and, as in Genesis, rather hyperbolic. Propp notes that the figures mentioned are approximately a third of the total period of four hundred years supposed to be the duration of the sojourn in Egypt.

20. *Amram took him as wife Jochebed his aunt.* Such a marriage was banned as incestuous by the Priestly writers, to whom scholarship attributes this passage. This is not the only instance in which a union prohibited by later legislation is recorded without comment (compare Jacob's marrying two sisters), and might well reflect an authentic memory of a period when the prohibition was not in force. Only now is the anonymous "Levite daughter" of 2:1 given a name.

she bore him Aaron and Moses. Her sons are listed by order of birth. Three ancient versions add "Miriam their sister," but the list, like the one in chapter 1, is interested only in sons.

25. *Putiel . . . Phinehas*. These are the two names in the list of Egyptian origin (though Putiel has the Semitic theophoric suffix *-el*). One might infer that taking a wife "from the daughters of Putiel" suggests that Eleazar's marriage is exogamous—another indication that the Hebrews were not altogether segregated from the Egyptians—and thus the wife might understandably give an Egyptian name to their son. Later, this possible product of intermarriage will show himself to be a fierce zealot on behalf of Israelite purity.

26–27. *It was the very Aaron and Moses . . . It was they . . . the very Moses and Aaron*. As we move from the end of the list back to the narrative, the writer emphasizes the focus on Moses and Aaron with a triple structure of

rhetorical highlighting, putting an indicative pronoun at the head of each clause: *huʾ aharon umosheh*, *hem hamedabrim*, *huʾ mosheh weʾaharon*.

29. *I am the* LORD. See the comment on verse 2.

30. *Look, I am uncircumcised of lips, and how will Pharaoh heed me?* This sentence repeats verbatim Moses's demurral in verse 12, reversing the order of the two clauses and omitting the first clause about Israel's failure to heed Moses. The recurrent language is a clear-cut instance of a compositional technique that biblical scholars call "resumptive repetition": when a narrative is interrupted by a unit of disparate material—like the genealogical list here—the point at which the story resumes is marked by the repetition of phrases or clauses from the point where the story was interrupted. Moses's report of Israelite resistance to his message is not repeated because the focus now is on the impending confrontation between him and Pharaoh. For the same reason, "how will Pharaoh heed me?" is repositioned at the end of Moses's speech because it will be directly followed by God's enjoining Moses and Aaron to execute the first portent intended to compel Pharaoh's attention.

CHAPTER 7

[1]And the LORD said to Moses, “See, I have set you as
a god to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother will be your
prophet. [2]You it is who will speak all that I charge you
and Aaron your brother will speak to Pharaoh, and he
will send off the Israelites from his land. [3]And I on My
part shall harden Pharaoh’s heart, that I may multiply
My signs and My portents in the land of Egypt. [4]And
Pharaoh will not heed you, and I shall set My hand
against Egypt and I shall bring out My battalions, My
people the Israelites, from the land of Egypt with great
retributions, [5]that the Egyptians may know that I am
the LORD, when I stretch out My hand over Egypt
and bring out the Israelites from their midst.” [6]And
Moses, and Aaron with him, did as the LORD had
charged, thus did they do. [7]And Moses was eighty
years old and Aaron was eighty-three years old when
they spoke to Pharaoh.

[8]And the LORD said to Moses and to Aaron, saying,
[9]"Should Pharaoh speak to you, saying, 'Give you a portent,' you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and fling it down before Pharaoh, let it become a serpent.'"
[10]And Moses, and Aaron with him, came to Pharaoh, and they did as the LORD had charged, and Aaron flung down his staff before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a serpent. [11]And Pharaoh, too, called for the sages and sorcerers and they, too, the soothsayers of Egypt, did thus with their spells. [12]And each flung down his staff and they became serpents, and Aaron's staff swallowed their staffs. [13]And Pharaoh's heart toughened, and he did not heed them, just as the LORD had spoken.

[14]And the LORD said to Moses, "Pharaoh's heart is hard. He refuses to send off the people. [15]Go to Pharaoh in the morning. Look, he will be going out to the water, and you shall be poised to meet him on the bank of the Nile, and the staff that turned into a snake you shall take in your hand. [16]And you shall say to him, 'The LORD god of the Hebrews sent me to you, saying, Send off my people, that they may worship Me in the wilderness, and look, you have not heeded as yet. [17]Thus said the LORD, By this shall you know that

I am the LORD: Look, I am about to strike with the staff in my hand on the water that is in the Nile and it will turn into blood. [18]And the fish that are in the Nile will die and the Nile will stink, and the Egyptians will not be able to drink water from the Nile.’” [19]And the LORD said to Moses, “Say to Aaron: ‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers and over their Nile channels and over their ponds and over all the gathering of their waters, that they become blood. And there shall be blood in all the land of Egypt, and in the trees and in the stones.’” [20]And Moses and Aaron did thus as the LORD had charged. And he raised the staff and struck the water that was in the Nile before the eyes of Pharaoh and the eyes of his servants, and all the water that was in the Nile turned to blood. [21]And the fish that were in the Nile died and the Nile stunk, and the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile, and the blood was in all the land of Egypt. [22]And the soothsayers of Egypt did thus with their spells, and Pharaoh’s heart toughened and he did not heed them, just as the LORD had spoken. [23]And Pharaoh turned and came into his house, and this, too, he did not take to heart. [24]And all of Egypt dug round the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the Nile.

[25]And seven full days passed after the LORD struck
the Nile. [26]And the LORD said to Moses, “Come to
Pharaoh, and you shall say to him, ‘Thus said the
LORD: Send off My people that they may worship
Me. [27]And if you refuse to send them off, look, I am
about to scourge all your region with frogs. [28]And the
Nile will swarm with frogs and they will come up and
come into your house and into your bedchamber and
onto your couch and into your servants’ house and
upon your people and into your ovens and into your
kneading pans. [29]And upon you and upon your people
and upon all your slaves the frogs will come up.’”

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *I have set you as a god to Pharaoh*. The reiteration of this bold comparison may have a polemic motivation: Pharaoh imagines himself a god, but I have made you a god to Pharaoh.

3. *I . . . shall harden Pharaoh’s heart, that I may multiply My signs and My portents*. Whatever the theological difficulties, the general aim of God’s allowing, or here causing, Pharaoh to persist in his harshness is made clear: without Pharaoh’s resistance, God would not have the opportunity to deploy His great wonders and so demonstrate His insuperable power in history and the emptiness of the power attributed to the gods of Egypt. It should be noted that three different verbs are used in the story for the action on or in Pharaoh’s heart: *hiqshah*, “to harden” (the verb here), *ḥizeq*, “to toughen,” or in other contexts, “to strengthen” (the verb used in earlier passages), and

kaved, literally, "to be heavy," which in English unfortunately suggests sorrow when linked with the heart, and so has been rendered "harden" in this translation (as in verse 14). The force of all three idioms is to be stubborn, unfeeling, arrogantly inflexible, and there doesn't seem to be much differentiation of meaning among the terms, though elsewhere *ḥizeq* linked with heart has a positive meaning—"to show firm resolve."

4. *I shall bring out My battalions, My people the Israelites.* The opposition expresses a wry and surprising identification. God bears the epithet "LORD of Battalions" ("LORD of Hosts," "LORD of Armies," *YHWH tseva'ot*), but here the "battalions" God calls His own turn out to be the people of Israel—in fact, a mass of wretched slaves who will be fleeing from their taskmasters.

9. *let it become a serpent.* The noun used here, *tanin*, is not the ordinary *naḥash*, "snake," of the Burning Bush story. (When God in verse 15 refers to the staff that turned into a snake [*naḥash*], He may be alluding to the Burning Bush episode.) The *tanin* is usually a larger threatening reptile, as William H. C. Propp correctly observes, and is sometimes used for the Egyptian crocodile, or for a mythological dragon. The Hebrew zoological reference is clearly slippery, allowing a couple of commentators to see a Nilotic cobra in the transformed shepherd's staff.

11. *and they, too, the soothsayers of Egypt, did thus with their spells.* The Hebrew word for "soothsayers," *ḥartumim*, is a direct borrowing from the Egyptian designation for priest-magicians. The term translated as "spells," *lehatim*, either is related to the root *l-ʾ-t* that means "to conceal" or, if one follows a proposal of Abraham ibn Ezra, is derived from the root *l-h-t*, "to flame out," which he links with the fire-and-flash technique of the illusionist. Ibn Ezra, a rationalist, thus implies that the soothsayers' success in transforming their staffs into serpents was an act of legerdemain. The ancient writer, however, seems to have assumed the efficacy of magic as a kind of technology: the point of the story is that the capacity of this technology was limited, and hence the authentically miraculous serpent into which Aaron's staff has turned swallows up the other serpents.

13. *Pharaoh's heart toughened.* In any case, Pharaoh is not impressed. Moses and Aaron, after all, have done no more than trump his sorcerers at their own

game. What is called for in order to shake him is a series of truly cataclysmic miraculous events.

15. *Look, he will be going out to the water.* This narrative presupposes, at least on the information about Egypt available to the Hebrew writers, that Egyptian royalty regularly went down to the Nile to bathe, unless the purpose was, as ibn Ezra proposes, to check the level of the Nile. Pharaoh's encounter with Moses by the riverside looks back to the discovery of Moses by Pharaoh's daughter when she went down to the Nile.

16. *Send off my people, that they may worship Me . . . you have not heeded*. It should be observed that this prose narrative, in a style not evident in most other biblical stories, proceeds through the solemn, emphatic reiteration of refrainlike phrases and entire clauses, both in the language of the narrator and in the dialogue.

17. *water . . . blood*. For Egypt as a nation dependent on irrigation, the Nile with its fresh water is literally a lifeline. Blood in the Bible is imagined in radically ambiguous terms—the source and substance of life, an apotropaic and redemptive agent, the token of violence and death. It is manifestly the third of these meanings that is brought into play here, as the first plague symbolically anticipates the last one and deprives Egypt of life-sustaining water.

19. *Nile channels.* The Hebrew here converts the Egyptian loanword, *ye'or*, "Nile," into a plural. Elsewhere, in occasional poetic usage, this plural form is simply an elegant synonym for "streams" or "rivers." In this Egyptian context, it seems more likely that it designates both the Nile itself and the system of irrigation canals built out from the Nile.

in the trees and in the stones. Many construe this as a reference to wooden and stone vessels or receptacles, but the plural form *'etsim* suggests trees rather than wood. In any case, trees and stones as objects in nature accord better with the catalogue of bodies of water that precedes than would household utensils. It has also been noted that the Hebrew pairing here, *'etsim wa'avanim*, is often used to refer to the material out of which idols are made.

20. *he raised the staff.* This would have to be Aaron.

before the eyes of Pharaoh and the eyes of his servants. The first spectacular cataclysm is devised so that they will be eyewitnesses to the fearful event. In most of these contexts, "servants" (it can also mean "slaves") refers to Pharaoh's courtiers.

21. *and the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile.* One of the most frequently employed conventions of biblical narrative is the verbatim repetition of whole clauses, or even sequences of clauses, of narrative material—often, as here, once in dialogue and once in the narrator's report. But the characteristic handling of this convention is to introduce small but quite revelatory divergences from verbatim replication as the material is repeated (see the comments on the elaborate near verbatim repetitions in Genesis 24 as a textbook illustration of this technique). Here, however, the point of the repetition seems to be that every term of God's dire prediction (verse 18) is implemented as an accomplished event (verse 21), only the temporal aspects of the verbs shifting, with one minor substitution of a synonym—instead of "will not be able" (*nil'u*), "could not" (*lo'-yakhlu*). The summary clause at the end of the verse here, "and the blood was in all the land of Egypt," is not part of the prediction in verse 18 but appears to be a digest of the panorama of sites to be struck in God's instructions for Aaron in verse 19.

22. *the soothsayers of Egypt did thus with their spells.* Ibn Ezra wonders where they got water to turn into blood if Moses and Aaron had already done the trick for the Nile and all the rivers and ponds. His answer is that they performed their magic on water dug up from subterranean sources (verse 24), a conjuror's act of transmutation that is not to be compared with the miraculous conversion of streams of flowing water into blood. Again, the reality of a technology of magic is not called into question but it is noteworthy that the soothsayers can do no more than effect a pale imitation of the destructive act of the God of the Hebrews; what they are powerless to do is to reverse the process of destruction.

25. *And seven full days passed.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "and seven days were filled." Many commentators infer that during this period the waters of the Nile returned to their original state; otherwise, the first plague alone would have been sufficient to make things utterly intolerable for Pharaoh.

26. Although the King James Version begins chapter 8 at this point, the Masoretic Text continues chapter 7 for four more verses, as here.

28. *the Nile will swarm with frogs.* The verb in the Hebrew is transitive ("will swarm frogs"). Several commentators have noticed that this word choice echoes the "swarming" of the proliferating Hebrews in chapter 1. There, the orgy of propagation seems to have struck the Egyptians as repellently reptilian; here, they are assaulted with a nauseating plague of amphibians. In this, as in other details of the Plagues narrative, the allusions to the Creation story, initially sounded in the first chapter of Exodus, turn into a network of reversals of the original creation. It would be excessive to insist that every detail of the narrative, or even every plague, confirms this pattern. Nevertheless, the allusions to early Genesis that are detectable trace a possibility that much exercised the imaginations of the biblical writers: if creation emerged at a particular moment in a process with discriminated stages, one could imagine an undoing of this event and this process, apocalypse being the other side of the coin of creation. The benign swarming of life in Genesis turns into a threatening swarm of odious creatures, just as the penultimate plague of darkness, prelude to mass death, is a reversal of the first "let there be light." Alexander Pope, at the end of his great anticreation poem, *The Dunciad*, writes thoroughly in the spirit of these reversals when he announces of the new reign of anarchy, "Light dies before thy uncreating word."

into your house . . . your bedchamber . . . your couch . . . your servants' house. The all-powerful Pharaoh should be invulnerable to such violation and should be able to protect his people. Instead, what this fearful catalogue of penetrations conveys is the absolute, helpless exposure of all Egypt, from king to slave, from the intimate place of sleep and procreation to the places where food is prepared, in the face of God's onslaught.

29. *upon you.* The Hebrew preposition would normally mean "into you," which led the Talmud (Sanhedrin 80) to amplify the idea of grotesque penetration by saying that the frogs would croak from inside the guts of the Egyptians.

CHAPTER 8

[1]And the LORD said to Moses, “Say to Aaron: Stretch
out your hand with your staff over the rivers, over the
Nile channels and over the ponds, and bring up the
frogs over the land of Egypt.” [2]And Aaron stretched
out his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs
came up and covered the land of Egypt. [3]And the
soothsayers did thus with their spells and brought up
frogs over the land of Egypt. [4]And Pharaoh called to
Moses and to Aaron and said, “Entreat the LORD that
He take away the frogs from me and from my people,
and I shall send off the people, that they may sacrifice
to the LORD.” [5]And Moses said to Pharaoh, “You
may vaunt over me as for when I should entreat for
you and for your servants and for your people to cut
off the frogs from you and from your houses—only in
the Nile will they remain.” [6]And he said, “For
tomorrow.” And he said, “As you have spoken, so that
you may know there is none like the LORD our God.
[7]And the frogs will turn away from you and from your
houses and from your servants and from your people

—only in the Nile will they remain.” [8]And Moses, and Aaron with him, went out from Pharaoh’s presence, and Moses cried out to the LORD concerning the frogs that He had put upon Pharaoh. [9]And the LORD did according to Moses’s word, and the frogs died, out of the houses and out of the courtyards and out of the fields, [10]and they piled them up heap upon heap, and the land stank. [11]And Pharaoh saw that there was relief and he hardened his heart and did not heed them, just as the LORD had spoken.

[12]And the LORD said to Moses, “Say to Aaron: Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the land and there will be lice in all the land of Egypt.” [13]And thus they did, and Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the land, and there were lice in man and in beast, all the dust of the land became lice in all the land of Egypt. [14]And thus the soothsayers of Egypt did with their spells, to take out the lice, but they were unable, and the lice were in man and in beast. [15]And the soothsayers said to Pharaoh, “God’s finger it is!” And Pharaoh’s heart toughened, and he did not heed them, just as the LORD had spoken.

16 And the LORD said to Moses, “Rise early in the
morning and station yourself before Pharaoh—look,
he will be going out to the water—and say to him,
‘Thus said the LORD: send off My people, that they
may worship Me. 17 For if you do not send off My
people, I am about to send against you and against you
servants and against your people and against your
houses the horde, and the houses of Egypt will be
filled with the horde and the soil, too, on which they
stand. 18 But I shall set apart on that day the land of
Goshen upon which My people stands so that no horde
will be there, that you may know that I am the LORD
in the midst of the land. 19 And I shall set a ransom
between My people and your people. Tomorrow this
sign will be.’” 20 And thus the LORD did, and a heavy
horde came into the house of Pharaoh and the house
of his servants, and in all the land of Egypt the land
was ravaged in the face of the horde. 21 And Pharaoh
called to Moses and to Aaron and said, “Go, sacrifice
to your god in the land.” 22 And Moses said, “It is not
right to do thus, for the abomination of Egypt we shall
sacrifice to the LORD our God. If we sacrifice the
abomination of Egypt before their eyes, will they not
stone us? 23 A three days’ journey into the wilderness
we shall go, and we shall sacrifice to the LORD our
God as He has said to us.” 24 And Pharaoh said, “I

myself will send you off, that you may sacrifice to the LORD your god in the wilderness, only you must not go far away. Entreat on my behalf." [25]And Moses said, "Look, I am going out from your presence and I shall entreat the LORD, that the horde may turn away from Pharaoh and from his servants and from his people tomorrow. Only let not Pharaoh continue to mock by not sending the people off to sacrifice to the LORD." [26]And Moses went out from Pharaoh's presence and entreated the LORD. [27]And the LORD did according to Moses's word, and the horde turned away from Pharaoh and from his servants and from his people, not one remained. [28]And Pharaoh hardened his heart this time, too, and he did not send off the people.

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Stretch out your hand with your staff over the rivers*. The explicit repetition of language and gestures from the first plague has the emphatic effect of a formal refrain, with an overlap between the first two plagues in the location of the Nile as source of the catastrophe. The report of the Ten Plagues—other biblical traditions appear to have known a smaller number—exhibits a high degree of literary shaping and symmetry. Umberto Cassuto offers a good early synthesis of the scholarly literature that has been devoted to following these formal patterns, and subsequent discussions by Moshe Greenberg and William H. C. Propp are also noteworthy. The plagues are organized in three triads, followed by the climactic and most devastating tenth plague. Only in

the first triad is Aaron with his outstretched staff the executor of the plagues. In each triad, in the first plague of the series Moses encounters Pharaoh going out early in the morning; in the second plague of the series, Moses comes into Pharaoh's palace; and in the third plague of the series, the disaster is unleashed without warning. Cassuto also observes that the plagues are equally arranged in pairs: two involving the Nile, two plagues of insects, two epidemics affecting beasts and humans respectively, two plagues devastating the crops, and the final darkness paired with the death of the firstborn.

4. *take away the frogs from me.* Unlike the water turned to blood, the frogs actually invade the homes of Pharaoh and his subjects, thus impelling him to his first offer of terms to Moses.

5. *You may vaunt over me as for when.* The Hebrew "vaunt over me" (*hitpaʾer ʿalai*) is a little odd. The construction of the consensus of commentators, medieval and modern, which seems plausible, is that Moses is offering Pharaoh the limited "triumph" of choosing the moment when the plague will cease. This choice, of course, in fact demonstrates God's absolute power and Moses's perfect efficacy as intercessor. "When" refers not to the time of entreaty but to the time of cessation of the plague, a distinction indicated in the Hebrew, as Rashi nicely observes, by affixing the prefix *l*^{e} ("for") to *matay* ("when"). It is a bit surprising that Pharaoh does not choose to have the plague ended at once. Perhaps he is trying Moses's powers: Can Moses really stipulate a given moment of cessation in the near future and make it come about?

cut off the frogs. In Moses's proposal to Pharaoh, he uses a word that suggests abrupt extirpation of the frogs. In the prediction that he goes on to spell out (verse 7), he uses a less violent verb of evacuation or retreat ("turn away"). Finally, the narrator in his report of the event (verse 9) says, with plain descriptive accuracy, "die" because his account includes a discomfiting idea not mentioned by Moses to Pharaoh—the piles of dead frogs throughout the country.

10. *and the land stank.* The stench of the putrefying dead frogs provides another link with the preceding plague, in which the stench was produced by the dead fish from the Nile.

12. *lice.* At least in postbiblical Hebrew, the terms *kinam* (a collective noun) and *kinim* (a plural) mean "lice," though some have suggested that in this text they might mean "gnats" or "mosquitoes." The plagues began with a profoundly ominous, symbolically portentous, and life-threatening transformation of water into blood. The next three plagues are afflictions of maddening or disgusting discomfort rather than actual threats to survival. The tone of the Plagues narrative is that of harsh (indeed, gloating) monotheistic satire against the pagan imperial power, and so pains are taken to show the Egyptians squirming before they are exposed to destruction.

14. *And thus the soothsayers of Egypt did . . . to take out the lice*. The syntax directs us to a kind of comic discovery: at first we imagine that still again the soothsayers are engaged in their own pathetic imitation of Moses and Aaron's destructive act, bringing forth their own lice; then we realize that this time they are attempting to get rid of the plague, but to no avail.

15. *God's finger it is.* Now that they have tried futilely to get rid of a plague instead of replicating it, they have been forced to recognize that they are contending with a greater power. As Rashi neatly paraphrases their perception, "This plague is not through magic but from the Deity." It is noteworthy that the preceding narrative repeatedly spoke of God's hand or arm; the soothsayers appear to concede a lesser trace of divine action in mentioning God's finger.

And Pharaoh's heart toughened. The repeated formula for Pharaoh's obduracy takes on added meaning here because he willfully ignores the testimony of his soothsayers. The narrative provides no indication as to whether the plague of lice comes to an end, like the previous two, or whether the Egyptians simply continue to live with the infestation as God proceeds to launch the next blow.

17. *if you do not send off . . . I am about to send*. Although the two verbs are in different conjugations, the pun, with its measure-for-measure emphasis, is quite explicit in the Hebrew.

the horde. The Hebrew term *ʿarov* occurs only here, and the only plausible derivation is from the verbal root that means "to mix." Some medieval Hebrew commentators imagined this as a mingling of sundry beasts of prey, but this seems unlikely because, as verse 27 makes clear, the *ʿarov* has

infested the Egyptians rather than torn them limb from limb, and "not one remained" probably suggests minuscule constituents of the horde. A plague of maddeningly noxious insects also makes a much better pair with the preceding plague. The King James Version's "swarm of flies" is as good a guess as any, though it seems wise to avoid "swarm" in order not to introduce a misleading echo of the verb "swarm" in Exodus 1:7 and 7:28.

18. *But I shall set apart on that day the land of Goshen.* Goshen is the region of northeastern Egypt that, according to the account in Genesis (46:34), was set aside for Hebrew settlement. This is the first clear indication in Exodus that the Hebrews lived in a segregated area in Egypt. That geographical segregation will play a crucial role in the climactic ninth and tenth plagues.

19. *I shall set a ransom.* Most interpreters understand the Hebrew *pedut* to mean something like "separation" or "distinction." Everywhere else, however, this root means "to ransom," "to redeem," "to rescue from danger," including the three other occurrences in the biblical corpus in this form of a verbal noun. It seems wise to retain the semantic force of "ransom" and assign the indication of separation to the preposition "between" that follows—that is, God will grant ransom or rescue from the horde to the Israelites, and that saving act will set them apart from the afflicted Egyptians.

20. *the land was ravaged.* This indication of general devastation suggests that the second of the two plagues of insects is somehow more intense than the first.

22. *for the abomination of Egypt we shall sacrifice.* The most likely meaning is that the Hebrews will sacrifice cattle or other beasts considered taboo by the Egyptians and so infuriate them. There is some evidence that Egypt in the late Bronze Age was in fact quite tolerant about different kinds of sacrifice. The Hebrew writer could well be reflecting the awareness of a later age, when Egyptian attitudes may have shifted. By the time of Herodotus, the Egyptians had developed a reputation for rigid sacrificial restrictions.

24. *I myself will send you off.* The desperate Pharaoh now uses a new turn of urgent speech, prefacing the first-person imperfective verb with an emphatic *ʾanokhi*, "I myself."

only you must not go far away. Having yielded to Moses's argument on the three days' journey, he still stipulates that the Hebrews should go no farther, for he is unwilling to contemplate the permanent loss of this population of slave workers.

25. *Look, I am going out from your presence.* There is temporal urgency in Moses's response, as he uses a participial verbal form to indicate that he is already on his way to entreat the LORD. The coy game of asking Pharaoh to stipulate a time of deliverance that marked the previous plague is set aside as Pharaoh's own sense of desperation grows.

Only let not Pharaoh continue to mock. Moses's "only" clause is a clearly marked formal rejoinder to Pharaoh's "only" clause in the previous verse. The verb here, *hatel*, is rendered as "deal deceitfully" by the King James Version and some modern versions, but elsewhere it means "to mock," "to toy with," and, from Moses's point of view, that would be a reasonable representation of Pharaoh's repeated reflex of seeming to yield and then reasserting his intransigence.

CHAPTER 9

[1]And the LORD said to Moses, “Come into Pharaoh
and you shall speak to him, ‘Thus said the LORD, God
of the Hebrews: send off My people, that they may
worship Me. [2]But if you refuse to send them off and
you still hold on to them, [3]look, the hand of the LORD
is about to be against your livestock which is in the
field, against the horses, against the donkeys, against
the camels, against the cattle, and against the sheep—a
very heavy pestilence. [4]And the LORD will set apart
the livestock of Israel from the livestock of Egypt, and
nothing of the Israelites’ will die.’” [5]And the LORD set
a fixed time, saying, “Tomorrow the LORD will do
this thing in the land.” [6]And the LORD did this thing
on the next day, and all the livestock of Egypt died,
but of the livestock of Israel not one died. [7]And
Pharaoh sent and, look, not a single one had died of
the livestock of Israel, and Pharaoh’s heart hardened,
and he did not send off the people.

[8]And the LORD said to Moses and to Aaron, “Take
you handfuls of soot from the kiln and let Moses
throw it toward the heavens before Pharaoh’s eyes,
[9]and it shall become a fine dust over all the land of
Egypt and it shall become on man and on beast a
burning rash erupting in boils in all the land of Egypt.”
[10]And they took the soot from the kiln and stood
before Pharaoh, and Moses threw it toward the
heavens and it became a burning rash with boils
erupting on man and on beast. [11]And the soothsayers
could not stand before Moses because of the burning
rash, for the burning rash was on the soothsayers and
in all of Egypt. [12]And the LORD toughened Pharaoh’s
heart, and he did not heed them, just as the LORD
had spoken to Moses.

[13]And the LORD said to Moses, “Rise early in the
morning and station yourself before Pharaoh, and you
shall say to him, ‘Thus said the LORD, God of the
Hebrews: send off my people, that they may worship
me. [14]For this time I am about to send all My scourges
to your heart and against your servants and against
your people, so that you may know that there is none
like Me in all the earth. [15]For by now I could have sent
forth My hand and I could have struck you and your

people with pestilence, and you would have been wiped off the face of the earth. [16]And yet, for this I have let you stand—so as to show you My power, and so that My name will be told through all the earth. [17]You still block the way to My people, not sending them off. [18]Look, I am about to rain down very heavy hail at this time tomorrow, the like of which there has not been in Egypt from the day of its founding until now. [19]And now, send, gather in your livestock and everything you have in the field. Every man and the beasts that will be in the field and that are not taken indoors, the hail shall come down on them and they shall die.'" [20]Whoever feared the LORD's word among Pharaoh's servants sheltered his slaves and his livestock indoors. [21]And whoever paid no mind to the LORD's word left his slaves and his livestock in the field. [22]And the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the heavens, that there be hail in all the land of Egypt, upon man and upon beast and upon all the grass of the field in the land of Egypt." [23]And Moses stretched out his staff over the heavens, and the LORD let loose thunder and hail, and fire went along earthward, and the LORD rained hail on the land of Egypt. [24]And there was very heavy hail, with fire flashing in the midst of the hail, the like of which there had not been in all the land of Egypt from the time it

became a nation. [25]And the hail struck through all the land of Egypt whatever was in the field, from man to beast, and all the grass of the field did the hail strike, and every tree of the field did it smash. [26]Only in the land of Goshen, in which the Israelites were, was there no hail.

[27]And Pharaoh sent and called to Moses and to Aaron and said to them, “I have offended this time. The LORD is in the right and I and my people are in the wrong. [28]Entreat the LORD, and no more of God’s thunder and hail! And let me send you off, and you shall not continue to stay.” [29]And Moses said to him, “As I go out of the city, I shall spread out my hands to the LORD. The thunder will stop, and the hail will be no more, so that you may know that the earth is the LORD’s. [30]And as for you and your servants, I know that you still do not fear the LORD God.” [31]And the flax and the barley were struck, for the barley was in bud and the flax was in ear. [32]But the wheat and the emmer were unripened. [33]And Moses went out from Pharaoh’s presence out of the city and spread out his hands to the LORD, and the thunder stopped and the hail and the rain were not sluiced earthward. [34]And Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder

had stopped, and he continued to offend, and he hardened his heart, both he and his servants. [35]And Pharaoh's heart toughened, and he did not send off the Israelites, just as the LORD had spoken through Moses.

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *and you still hold on to them*. As we move to the end of the first half of the Ten Plagues, a note of impatience is introduced into God's words through Moses to Pharaoh as this clause is added to the formulaically repeated language. Perhaps this new emphasis on Pharaoh's continuing torment of Israel is the reason that Rashi surprisingly glosses the transparent verb "hold on to," *maḥaziq*, by citing a bizarre parallel from Deuteronomy 25: "should . . . she reach out her hand and seize [or hold on to] his pudenda."

3. *the hand of the LORD is about to be against your livestock.* The Hebrew verb here has a spine-tingling effect for which there is no obvious English equivalent. The verb "to be" in Hebrew is not supposed to have a participial, or present, tense. At this ominous and supernatural juncture, however, that verbal stem *h-y-h* yields an anomalous *hoyah*, rendered in this translation as "about to be." This strange usage involves a kind of fearsome pun on the divine name YHWH that was mysteriously highlighted in the Burning Bush episode. God's intrinsic and unique capacity for being, we are made to see, is not just a matter of static condition but an awesome power of action—the hand that is "about to be" against all the livestock of Egypt.

camels. As in Genesis, the reference is anachronistic. Although camels were widely introduced to Mesopotamia and the land of Israel by early in the first millennium B.C.E., they were not used in Egypt until several centuries later; and in any case, the actual setting of the Exodus story would be some time in the thirteenth century B.C.E.

4. *the LORD will set apart.* The theme of the setting apart of the Hebrews from the Egyptians, first introduced in the previous plague, is again stressed.

7. *Pharaoh's heart hardened.* This is one of many instances in which the literal meaning of the verb is "became heavy." That usage in turn echoes ironically against the qualifying adjective of "a very *heavy* pestilence" (verse 3).

8. *Take you handfuls of soot from the kiln and let Moses throw it toward the heavens.* The beginning of the second half of the Ten Plagues is marked by a switch from the set formula for launching the plague with an outstretched staff. This scooping up of soot and casting it skyward intensifies the ominousness of the moment and has the look of an act of sympathetic magic. The black dust from the kiln turns into broadcast contamination, a plague clearly paired with the preceding plague of livestock pestilence but affecting man as well as beast.

9. *burning rash.* The Hebrew *sheḥin* obviously refers to a painful skin disease, but no definitive identification of the malady has been made. The noun is probably related to a root that means "to be hot"—Rashi cites the rabbinic idiom *shanah sheḥunah*, "a torrid year"—and hence this translation represents it as "burning rash." The fact that the plague is inaugurated with soot taken from a kiln may reinforce an association between burning heat and the skin disease in question.

11. *the soothsayers could not stand before Moses because of the burning rash.* Their repeated gesture in the earlier plagues of a weak imitation of Moses vanishes. After "could not," on the basis of 8:14, we might have expected something like "cure the burning rash." In fact, the soothsayers, themselves painfully smitten by the maddening skin disease, are in no condition to make any effort of the sort but instead flee from Moses's presence. There is added irony in the idiom used, for "to stand before" elsewhere has the sense of "stand in attendance upon." In any case, what was noxious in the earlier plagues has now become physically unbearable.

12. *And the LORD toughened Pharaoh's heart.* For the first time, it is not Pharaoh, or his heart, that is the subject of the verb of obduracy but God. However, in the biblical perspective this may amount to the same thing

because God is presumed to be the ultimate cause of human actions, and Pharaoh's stubborn arrogance can still be understood as the efficient cause. It is striking that Pharaoh persists in his resistance even as his afflicted soothsayers, the experts upon whom he has been depending, flee the scene.

14. *I am about to send.* The Hebrew writer cannot resist any opportunity to confront the two senses of "send"—the sending off or dismissal that Pharaoh is unwilling to implement and the dire sending by God of plague after plague.

16. *so as to show you My power, and so that My name will be told through all the earth.* Here we are given an emphatic summary of the theological rationale for the elaborate and excruciating sequence of plagues. The God of Israel is above all a God of history. His unrivaled supremacy as God is manifested for the Hebrew writers by His powerful acts in the arena of history. The Exodus story is conceived as an establishing of the credentials of the God of Israel for all humankind. Hence his awesome power has to be demonstrated in one plague after another, and Pharaoh's repeated resistance is a required condition of the demonstration. The scope of the demonstration is also noteworthy. The elastic Hebrew term *'erets*, which until this point in the Plagues narrative had meant "land" (as in "the land of Egypt"), clearly here means "earth": YHWH's mighty acts in Egypt are to confirm his reputation as omnipotent deity throughout the world.

17. *You still block the way to My people.* The meaning of the Hebrew verb here, *mistolel*, has long been in dispute. This translation presumes a connection with the military term *soleleh*, "siege-ramp," which might imply that Pharaoh is keeping the Hebrews penned in as a besieging army would do to the population trapped within a city.

18. *from the day of its founding until now.* As the plagues are intensified, rhetorical drum-rolls such as this punctuate the report of the catastrophes. Compare verse 24, "the like of which there had not been in all the land of Egypt from the time it became a nation."

19. *Every man and the beasts.* The beasts are a little puzzling because verse 6 clearly reports a total destruction of Egyptian livestock. Perhaps all the reports of general destruction are meant to be taken as hyperboles; in any case, it seems unwise to look for absolute logical consistency in this narrative,

which is chiefly focused on conveying a sense of grand cumulative catastrophe.

indoors. The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "in the house." The house/field antonyms in biblical Hebrew (*bayit/sadeh*) also have the idiomatic sense in some contexts of inside and outside.

20. *Whoever feared the LORD's word.* Elsewhere, this is an idiom that indicates piety (as in "God-fearing"), but here the idiom has been stripped down to its literal meaning: whoever was struck with terror by this grim threat of God's took the necessary steps to protect his slaves and livestock. The existence of a contingent of Egyptians now genuinely terrified by the dire predictions of the Hebrews is an indication of developing cracks in the pharaonic front.

23. *the LORD let loose thunder and hail, and fire went along earthward.* The dramatic nature of this plague is another manifestation of the pattern of intensification. Instead of disaster welling up from the Nile or somehow coming through the air, it appears here as a direct and violent assault from above against the land of Egypt. In biblical poetry, as in its Canaanite antecedents, thunder and lightning are the characteristic weapons of the sky god. The raining down of celestial fire also sets up an allusive correspondence with the story of the destruction of Sodom.

went along earthward. Instead of the standard form for the Hebrew verb "to go" (*telekh*), the writer uses a dialectic variant form (*tihalakh*) rarely employed in the Bible and perhaps felt to be archaic, as a kind of epic gesture. "Went along earthward" seeks to produce an equivalent strangeness of effect while replicating the rhythm of the Hebrew.

26. *Only in the land of Goshen . . . was there no hail*. The setting apart of Israelite Goshen from the rest of Egypt is extended here into an implicit image of a kind of protective canopy—we would say, umbrella—shielding the Hebrews from the destructive wrath pouring down from the sky.

27. *I have offended this time.* The terrifying display of celestial violence for the first time triggers a confession of wrongdoing from Pharaoh (and the terms "in the right," *tsadiq*, and "in the wrong," *resha'im*, reflect legal usage). But "this time" is restrictive, as though Pharaoh were suggesting: I did

nothing to offend before now, but I admit, in the face of the destruction hurled from the heavens, that this time I have done wrong.

28. *no more.* Literally, "enough" or "much."

29. *spread out my hands.* Spreading out the hands (literally, "palms") is a gesture of prayer or supplication.

the earth is the LORD*'s*. Again, the scope of the theological argument reaches beyond the confines of the land of Egypt: the God Who has wreaked such inconceivable destruction on the great empire of Egypt is surely the God of all the earth.

30. *And as for you and your servants, I know that you still do not fear the* LORD *God.* Moses appears to be shrewdly reading the grudging nature of Pharaoh's admission, "I have offended this time." And Pharaoh's reversal of direction after each of the previous plagues scarcely inspires confidence that he has now undergone a change of heart. The phrase "you still do not fear the LORD God" neatly straddles both senses of the idiom (see the comment on verse 20); Pharaoh is far from fearing the LORD, as Moses recognizes, in the sense of pious submission to divine authority. He does fear the LORD's destructive power—that is why he is pleading with Moses—but probably not sufficiently to prevent him from renewing his obduracy.

31. *flax and barley.* Umberto Cassuto reminds us that flax was used to make linen, a principal Egyptian fabric for clothing (and also an important Egyptian export item), and goes on to suggest that the barley would have been used for cheap bread to feed slaves.

34. *and he continued to offend.* This phrase was not used in the earlier reports of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. It is directly motivated by the language of his confession: after saying "I have offended this time" as the thunder and hail rattle down, he finds himself once more under blue skies and directly proceeds to offend again by reneging on his promise to send off the Hebrews.

CHAPTER 10

[1]And the LORD said to Moses, “Come into Pharaoh,
for I Myself have hardened his heart and the heart of
his servants, so that I may set these signs of Mine in
his midst, [2]and so that you may tell in the hearing of
your son and your son’s son how I toyed with Egypt,
and My signs that I set upon them, and you shall know
that I am the LORD.” [3]And Moses, and Aaron with
him, came into Pharaoh, and they said to him, “Thus
said the LORD, God of the Hebrews: ‘How long can
you refuse to humble yourself before Me? Send off
My people, that they may worship Me. [4]For if you
refuse to send off My people, look, I am about to bring
tomorrow locust in all your territory. [5]And it will cover
the eye of the land, and one will not be able to see the
land. And it will consume the rest of the remnant left
you from the hail, and it will consume every tree you
have growing in the field. [6]And they will fill your
houses and the houses of all your servants and the
houses of all of Egypt, the like of which your fathers
did not see nor your fathers’ fathers from the day they

were on the soil until this day.’” And he turned and went out from Pharaoh’s presence. [7]And Pharaoh’s servants said to him, “How long will this fellow be a snare to us? Send off the men, that they may worship the LORD their god. Do you not yet know that Egypt is lost?” [8]And Moses, and Aaron with him, were brought back to Pharaoh, and he said to them, “Go, worship the LORD your god. Just who is going?” [9]And Moses said, “With our lads and with our old men we will go. With our sons and with our daughters, with our sheep and with our cattle we will go, for it is a festival of the LORD for us.” [10]And he said to them, “May the LORD be with you the way I would send you off with your little ones! For evil is before your faces. [11]Not so. Go, pray, the men, and worship the LORD, for that is what you seek.” And he drove them out from Pharaoh’s presence.

[12]And the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the land of Egypt for the locust, that it may come up over the land of Egypt and consume all the grass of the land that the hail left behind.” [13]And Moses stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt, and the LORD drove an east wind into the land all that day and all the night. When it was morning, the east

wind bore the locust. [14]And the locust went up over all the land of Egypt, and settled, very heavy, over all the territory of Egypt. Before it there had never been locust like it and after it there never would be. [15]And it covered the eye of the land, and the land went dark. And it consumed all the grass of the land and every fruit of the tree that the hail had left, and nothing green in tree or in grass of the field was left in all the land of Egypt. [16]And Pharaoh hastened to call to Moses and to Aaron, and he said, “I have offended before the LORD your god and before you. [17]And now, forgive, pray, my offense, just this time, and entreat the LORD your god, that He but take away from me this death.” [18]And he went out from Pharaoh’s presence and entreated the LORD. [19]And the LORD turned round a very strong west wind, and it bore off the locust and thrust it into the Sea of Reeds, not a locust remained in all the territory of Egypt. [20]And the LORD toughened Pharaoh’s heart, and he did not send the Israelites off.

[21]And the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the heavens, that there be darkness upon the land of Egypt, a darkness one can feel.” [22]And Moses stretched out his hand over the heavens and there was

pitch-dark in all the land of Egypt three days. [23]No one saw his fellow and no one rose from where he was three days, but all the Israelites had light in their dwelling places. [24]And Pharaoh called to Moses and said, “Go, worship the LORD. Only your sheep and your cattle will be set aside. Your little ones, too, may go with you.” [25]And Moses said, “You yourself too shall provide us sacrifices and burnt offerings, that we may do them to the LORD our God. [26]And our livestock, too, shall go with us, not a hoof shall remain. For from it we shall take to worship the LORD our God, and we ourselves cannot know with what we shall worship the LORD our God until we come there.” [27]And the LORD toughened Pharaoh’s heart and he did not want to send them off. [28]And Pharaoh said to him, “Go away from me. Watch yourself. Do not again see my face, for on the day you see my face, you shall die.” [29]And Moses said, “Rightly have you spoken—I will not see your face again.”

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *for I Myself have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants*. This is the first time that God informs Moses before his audience with Pharaoh that He has hardened (once again, the literal sense is “made heavy”) the heart of

the Egyptian monarch. This is a signal that the elaborate toying (verse 2) with Egypt is approaching endgame: Pharaoh is showing himself ever more fiercely recalcitrant, and the plagues are becoming more fearful as we draw near the last plague which will break Pharaoh's will.

2. *so that you may tell in the hearing of your son and your son's son.* The rationale of establishing God's enduring fame shifts here from the global scope of Exodus 9:16 ("that My name will be told through all the earth") to a consideration of educating the future nation. Confirming the LORD's supremacy throughout the world might be viewed as a kind of monotheistic ideal, though not a very realistic one. The particular importance of the Exodus story is that it served as the foundational narrative for the nation.

3. *How long can you refuse to humble yourself before Me?* These words are a translation into other terms of the just announced hardening of Pharaoh's heart by God, and thus constitute a strong indication that events caused by God and events flowing from human will, or willfulness, are merely different biblical ways of accounting for the same phenomenon. It should be noted that the language God directs to Pharaoh through Moses and Aaron has become more confrontational: now Pharaoh is inveighed against not only for blocking Israel from fulfilling its obligations to God but for failing to humble himself before God—humble submission being the last thing the supreme monarch of Egypt would imagine he would ever have to do.

4. *locust.* The Hebrew, like this translation, uses a collective noun. In verse 6, when the narrator wants to emphasize the multiplicity of the locusts invading every nook and cranny of Egypt, he switches to a plural verb.

5. *it will cover the eye of the land.* This striking Hebrew metaphor seems worth preserving in English. The Hebrew *ʿayin*, which has the primary meaning of "eye," obviously suggests something like "surface," "aspect," or "look" in this context. It is a linguistic usage common to many languages in which the object of the organ of perception shares a designation with the organ of perception. The cloud of locusts is so thick ("very heavy," as in verse 14, still another instance of heavy disaster answering the heaviness/hardness of Pharaoh's heart) that it covers the whole surface, or eye, of the land, in effect, blinding Egypt. This image, of course, makes the plague of locusts

adumbrate the next plague, darkness, a link that becomes explicit in verse 15, "and the land went dark."

6. *the like of which your fathers did not see nor your fathers' fathers.* Several commentators have noticed that this is a neat antithesis to "your son and your son's son" of verse 2. More important, however, is that this sentence, like the one in verse 14, amplifies the grand drumroll of pronouncements begun in the previous chapter that declare that the catastrophe about to descend is unequaled in all the long annals of Egyptian history.

7. *How long will this fellow be a snare to us?* The impatient "how long" of Pharaoh's courtiers, in the elegant symmetry of the narrative, echoes God's words in verse 3, "How long can you refuse to humble yourself before Me?" Pharaoh persists in his arrogance, but the Egyptian united front against Israel is visibly coming apart at the seams as the courtiers, who have ample reason to believe the direness of Moses's latest threat, try to tell their king that Egypt is on the brink of total disaster. "This fellow" reflects the indicative pronoun *zeh*, "this one," which is often used in biblical Hebrew to express contempt.

8. *And Moses, and Aaron with him, were brought back to Pharaoh.* Moses, after concluding his annunciation of the impending plague of locusts, had turned on his heels and left—the clear implication being that he was rebuffed by Pharaoh, or did not for a moment expect a positive response from Pharaoh. Now, after the courtiers conclude their rebuke to Pharaoh with "Do you not yet know that Egypt is lost?," the Egyptian king appears to concede the justice of their argument and has Moses and Aaron brought back into his presence. It is noteworthy, however, that Pharaoh's agency, coerced and grudging, is left rather vague by the passive construction ("were brought back")—presumably, Pharaoh issued the order, but perhaps he merely acquiesced as his courtiers sent after Moses and Aaron.

Go, worship the LORD *your god*. His acceptance of their petition expresses itself in an impatient imperative, quite in keeping with the "How long will this fellow be a snare" of his courtiers.

Just who is going? The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "Who and who are going?" Pharaoh's agreement to Moses's request is immediately followed by this question that clearly implies he is not prepared to have the entire people leave.

9. *With our lads and with our old men . . . with our cattle we will go.* Moses, at this point fully confident that God has dealt him the stronger hand, responds to Pharaoh's implied reservation uncompromisingly. In a reversal of their initial speech postures, it is now Pharaoh who speaks in brief, unadorned sentences, and it is Moses who deploys quasipoetic parallelism—lads and old men, sons and daughters, sheep and cattle—in a rhetorical flourish that makes it plain he will yield in nothing.

10. *May the LORD be with you the way I would send you off with your little ones.* The effect is sarcasm: that is, as much as I am prepared to send off your little ones may the LORD be with you—which is not at all.

For evil is before your faces. These words are ambiguous. The most likely meaning is "You are headed for mischief"—i.e., embarked on a scheme to escape with all the Hebrew slaves—but it could also mean something like "Harm is going to befall you." Some commentators have detected in the word for mischief/harm/evil, *raʿah*, a pun on the name of the Egyptian deity Re or Ra.

11. *the men.* The word used here, *gevarim*, is a different one from *ʾanashim*, the one used by the courtiers in verse 7. It has a stronger connotation of maleness (*ʾanashim* can also mean "people"), but "males" will not do as an English equivalent because the Hebrew term means adult males, definitely excluding the "little ones."

he drove them out from Pharaoh's presence. Some critics, in an effort to serve logic, emend the Hebrew text to read "they were driven out." But it is not out of keeping with biblical usage to have "Pharaoh's presence" spelled out as the place from which they were driven even though Pharaoh is also the antecedent of the "he" who does the driving. Moses and Aaron were brought back into the court in a passive construction, but now Pharaoh actively and unambiguously drives them out.

13. *an east wind.* The Hebrew idioms were coined in the geography of Canaan, not of Egypt. In Canaan, locusts and parching winds come from the deserts to the east. In Egypt, such winds and blights would typically come from the Sudan, to the south.

15. *it consumed all the grass of the land and every fruit of the tree.* In this instance, the account of total devastation would have sounded neither

hyperbolic nor miraculous to the ancient audience, who would have had some familiarity with the comprehensive destruction of all growing things that a vast infestation of locusts could effect.

16–17. *I have offended . . . forgive, pray, my offense just this time . . . take away from me this death*. The mastery of dialogue so often manifested in biblical narrative is striking here. Pharaoh's confident, imperious, aristocratic speech has now broken down into contrite confession and short urgent pleas. The dense layer of consuming locusts, blinding the eye of the land and penetrating every crevice, is given no name by Pharaoh except its palpable meaning for him and his people: "this death." That choice of name for it, of course, is an unwitting anticipation of the last of the plagues, which will soon come.

19. *west wind.* The literal meaning is "sea wind," but because of the geographical situation of ancient Israel, "sea" (that is, the Mediterranean) is often used to designate the west. Again, the wind reference reflects the geography of Canaan.

21. *the LORD said to Moses.* As in each third plague in the three triads that make up the sequence of nine, this plague is implemented without warning: the ominousness of three days of total darkness, suddenly enveloping Egypt without advance notice, prepares the ground psychologically for the climactic tenth plague.

a darkness one can feel. The force of the hyperbole, which beautifully conveys the claustrophobic palpability of absolute darkness, is diminished by those who try to provide a naturalistic explanation for this plague (or indeed, for any of the others)—i.e., a desert wind bearing particles of sand and dust darkens the land and makes the darkness palpable. Nor would solar eclipse work as an explanation, since the darkness persists for three days. Although elements of nature are used in all of the plagues—except, perhaps, this one and the next—they are all emphatically presented as extraordinary interventions by God in the order of nature, "signs and portents" that demonstrate His power over the created world.

23. *No one saw . . . no one rose*. Abraham Ibn Ezra and Nahmanides both shrewdly infer that this total incapacity through darkness would logically have

had to include the disabling of candlelight as well as sunlight—another manifestation of the miraculous character of the event.

but all the Israelites had light in their dwelling places. This previously reiterated opposition between the Israelites and the Egyptians is here made boldly schematic, as the dramatic manifestation of God's miraculous intervention. The contrast between light in Goshen and terrifying darkness in the rest of Egypt then sets the stage for the distinction between life for the Israelites and death for the Egyptians in the tenth plague.

24. *Only your sheep and your cattle will be set aside.* Pharaoh now concedes that the children and, implicitly the womenfolk (which some claim are included in the Hebrew term *taf*) may go, but he still wants to keep back the livestock as a material guarantee for the return of the slaves.

25. *You yourself too shall provide.* Moses is at least as uncompromising as in his previous encounter with Pharaoh. His immediate rejoinder to Pharaoh's stipulation about the livestock is that the Egyptian monarch himself will provide the sacrifices. This pugnacious response might nevertheless have allowed Pharaoh momentarily to infer that Moses was agreeing to the condition about leaving the livestock behind. But in his next sentence, Moses vigorously disabuses Pharaoh of this illusion ("not a hoof shall remain").

28–29. *Do not again see my face . . . I will not see your face again*. This is the final squaring-off between these adversaries. No further negotiations are possible, and the scene has now been set for the unleashing of the terrible last plague.

CHAPTER 11

[1]And the LORD said to Moses, “Yet one more plague
shall I bring upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt. Afterward
he will send you off from here; when he sends you off
altogether, he will surely drive you out from here.
[2]Speak, pray, in the hearing of the people, that every
man borrow from his fellow man and every woman
from her fellow woman, ornaments of silver and
ornaments of gold. [3]And the LORD will grant the
people favor in the eyes of the Egyptians.” The man
Moses, too, was very great in the land of Egypt in the
eyes of Pharaoh’s servants and in the eyes of the
people.

[4]And Moses said, “Thus said the LORD: ‘Around
midnight I am going out in the midst of Egypt. [5]And
every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the
firstborn of Pharaoh sitting on his throne to the
firstborn of the slavegirl who is behind the millstones,
and every firstborn of the beasts. [6]And there shall be a

great outcry in all the land of Egypt, the like of which there has not been and the like of which there will not be again. [7]But against all the Israelites no dog will snarl, from man to beast, so that you may know how the LORD sets apart Egypt and Israel. [8]And all these servants of yours shall come down to me and bow to me, saying, Go out, you and all the people that is at your feet. And afterward I will go out.'" And he went out from Pharaoh's presence in a flare of anger.

[9]And the LORD said to Moses, "Pharaoh will not heed you, so that My portents may be multiplied in the land of Egypt." [10]And Moses and Aaron had done these portents before Pharaoh, and the LORD toughened Pharaoh's heart and he did not send off the Israelites from his land.

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And the LORD said to Moses*. There is a problem about where to locate this speech temporally and spatially. In the immediately preceding verses, Pharaoh had warned Moses on pain of death never to see him again, and Moses had grimly concurred that he would never again see the Egyptian king. Verse 8, however, makes it clear that Moses is standing in Pharaoh's presence and announcing the tenth plague to Pharaoh. This speech to Pharaoh (verses 4–8), then, would have to be the continuation and conclusion of the angry

confrontation reported at the end of the previous chapter. God's words to Moses (verses 1–3) do not seem smoothly integrated into the narrative progress, at any rate, not according to modern expectations of narrative continuity. Abraham ibn Ezra points out that most of this material is a restatement of God's predictions to Moses in the Burning Bush episode. The passage thus may be understood as a summarizing recapitulation—Umberto Cassuto sees it as a kind of flashback in Moses's mind—of God's initial promise to confound Egypt and to liberate Israel before the annunciation of the last plague.

send you off . . . drive you out. Again, the semantically multiple "send" ("to dismiss," "to free," "to divorce," "to take ceremonious leave of") is interpreted as brutal expulsion.

3. *The man Moses, too, was very great.* The logical connection with the preceding sentence seems to run along the following lines: just as the rank-and-file Israelites have made the sort of appealing or superior impression on the Egyptians that encourages the bestowal of gifts, the leader of the Hebrews exerts a powerful charisma that confirms or enhances the standing of his followers in Egyptian eyes.

5. *from the firstborn of Pharaoh sitting on his throne to the firstborn of the slavegirl . . . behind the millstones*. Of all the catalogues to indicate the comprehensiveness of the plague about to be enacted, this is of course the scariest. Cassuto locates the phrase "the slavegirl behind the millstones" in an Egyptian document and suggests it may have been proverbial in Egypt for the lowest of the low; this would be another instance of an authentic touch of Egyptian local color in this narrative.

6. *outcry.* The Hebrew *tseʿaqah*, which has also been used for the cries of anguish of the Israelites in their oppression, has a semantic range that goes between "cry" and "scream."

7. *But against all the Israelites no dog will snarl.* That is, not even a menacing gesture toward them will be made. The literal meaning of the idiom used here is "no dog will sharpen its tongue." Dogs, which were not kept as pets in ancient Israel, have a consistently negative valence in biblical literature as images of malefic hostility or of abasement.

8. *And all these servants of yours.* Since the beginning of Moses's speech, "And Moses said," lacks the usual "to Pharaoh" (perhaps because this piece of dialogue is a direct continuation of their previous exchange), it is only now that we can be certain that these words are addressed to Pharaoh, "your servants" referring to Pharaoh's courtiers.

Go out . . . I will go out . . . And he went out. The Hebrew for the Exodus from Egypt is *yetsi'at mitsrayim*, "the going-out from Egypt." Here that crucial verbal stem becomes the thematic key word of Moses's "last confrontation" with Pharaoh before the actual exodus. The first two occurrences of the verb in this verse refer to the Hebrews' leaving Egypt; the third occurrence indicates Moses's angry departure from the court, which through the very repetition of the verb also is made a kind of foreshadowing of the Israelite departure from Egypt. All three of these uses of the verb play against God's "going out in the midst of Egypt" (verse 4), where the same verb appears to have a military sense—"to go out on a sortie," or, as elsewhere in this translation, "to sally forth."

in a flare of anger. Both Rashi and ibn Ezra link this causally to Pharaoh's "Do not again see my face." Since Pharaoh has offered no response to Moses's terrifying announcement of the death of the firstborn, he clearly remains implacable, and hence Moses's anger—the first explicit indication of such a reaction by him in all his clashes with Pharaoh.

9–10. *Pharaoh will not heed you . . . Moses and Aaron had done these portents . . . the LORD toughened Pharaoh's heart*. All this material in virtually the same verbal formulation appears earlier in the narrative—indeed, as early as the initiating episode of the Burning Bush, like the material enunciated here in verses 1–3. Its function at this point before the last night in Egypt is, as Cassuto suggests, a summarizing recapitulation. The first three verses of the chapter and these last two thus form a kind of recapitulative framework for Moses's final confrontation with Pharaoh, reminding us that it is the prelude to the climactic fulfillment of the divine promise given to Moses at Horeb. The function of recapitulation is grammatically indicated by the use of a pluperfect verb: "Moses and Aaron had done these portents." The portents, of course, have proved unavailing, and so the stage is set for carrying out God's grim pledge to Moses at Horeb to kill the firstborn of Egypt.

CHAPTER 12

[1]And the LORD said to Moses and to Aaron in the
land of Egypt, saying, [2]“This month is for you head of
months, it is the first for you of the months of the year.
[3]Speak to all the community of Israel, saying: ‘On the
tenth of this month, let every man take a lamb for a
father’s house, a lamb for a household. [4]And should a
household be too small to have a lamb, it must take
together with its neighbor who is close to its house, in
proportion to the persons, each man according to what
he eats shall take his portion of the lamb. [5]An
unblemished lamb, a yearling male you shall have,
from the sheep or from the goats you may take it. [6]And
it shall be a thing to be kept by you until the fourteenth
day of this month, and the whole congregation of the
community of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. [7]And
they shall take from the blood and put it on the two
doorposts and on the lintel, on the houses in which
they will eat it. [8]And they shall eat the meat on this
night fire-roasted, with flatbread on bitter herbs shall
they eat it. [9]Do not eat from it raw, nor in any way

cooked in water, but fire-roasted, its head with its shanks and with its entrails. [10]And you shall leave nothing from it by morning, and what is left of it by morning in fire you shall burn. [11]And thus shall you eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, your staff in your hand, and you shall eat it in haste. It is a passover offering to the LORD. [12]And I will cross through the land of Egypt on this night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt from man to beast, and from all the gods of Egypt I will exact retributions. I am the LORD. [13]And the blood will be a sign for you upon the houses in which you are, and I will see the blood and I will pass over you, and no scourge shall become a Destroyer amongst you when I strike in the land of Egypt. [14]And this day shall be a remembrance for you, and you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD through your generations, an everlasting statute you shall celebrate it. [15]Seven days shall you eat flat-bread. The very first day you shall expunge leaven from your houses, for whosoever eats leavened bread, that person shall be cut off from Israel, from the first day to the seventh day. [16]And on the first day a sacred convocation and on the seventh day a sacred convocation you shall have, no task shall be done on them, only what each person is to eat, that alone will be prepared for you. [17]And you shall observe

the Flatbread, for on this very day I brought out your battalions from the land of Egypt, and you shall observe this day through your generations, an everlasting statute. [18]In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening you shall eat flatbread, until the twenty-first day in the evening. [19]Seven days no leaven shall be found in your houses, for whosoever eats what is leavened, that person shall be cut off from the community of Israel, sojourner and native of the land alike. [20]Nothing that is leavened shall you eat, in all your dwelling places you shall eat flatbread.'"

[21]And Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Draw out and take yourselves sheep according to your clans and slaughter the Passover offering. [22]And you shall take a bundle of hyssop and you shall dip it in the blood that is in the basin and you shall touch the blood that is in the basin to the lintel and to the two doorposts, and as for you, none of you shall go out from the entrance of his house till morning. [23]And the LORD shall cross through to scourge Egypt, and He shall see the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, and the LORD shall pass over the entrance, and He shall not allow the Destroyer to come into your

houses to scourge. [24]And you shall keep this thing as a
statute for you and your sons, everlasting. [25]And so
when you come to the land that the LORD will give
you as He has spoken, you shall keep this service.
[26]And so should your sons ask you, ‘What is this
service to you?,’ [27]you shall say, ‘A Passover sacrifice
to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the
Israelites in Egypt when he scourged Egypt and our
households He rescued.’” And the people bowed and
did obeisance. [28]And the Israelites went and did as the
LORD had charged Moses and Aaron, thus did they
do.

[29]And it happened at midnight that the LORD struck
down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the
firstborn of Pharaoh sitting on his throne to the
firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and
every firstborn of the beasts. [30]And Pharaoh rose at
night, he and all his servants and all Egypt, and there
was a great outcry in Egypt, for there was no
household in which there was no dead. [31]And he called
to Moses and to Aaron at night and said, “Rise, go out
from the midst of my people, both you and the
Israelites, and go worship the LORD as you have
spoken. [32]Both your sheep and your cattle take as you

have spoken, and go, and you shall bless me as well.”
33And Egypt bore down on the people to hurry to send
them off from the land, for they said, “We are all dead
men.” 34And the people carried off their dough before
it rose, their kneading pans wrapped in their cloaks on
their shoulders. 35And the Israelites had done according
to Moses’s word, and they had asked of the Egyptians
ornaments of silver and ornaments of gold and cloaks.
36And the LORD had granted the people favor in the
eyes of the Egyptians, who lent to them, and they
despoiled Egypt. 37And the Israelites journeyed from
Rameses to Succoth, some six hundred thousand men
on foot, besides the little ones. 38And a motley throng
also went up with them, and sheep and cattle, very
heavy livestock. 39And they baked the dough that they
had brought out of Egypt in rounds of flatbread, for it
had not leavened, since they had been driven out of
Egypt and could not tarry, and provisions, too, they
could not make for themselves. 40And the settlement of
the Israelites which they had settled in Egypt was four
hundred and thirty years. 41And it happened at the end
of four hundred and thirty years and it happened on
that very day, all the battalions of the LORD went out
from the land of Egypt. 42It is a night of watch for the
LORD, for His taking them out of the land of Egypt,

this night is the LORD's, a watch for all the Israelites through their generations.

[43]And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "This is the statute of the Passover offering: no foreigner shall eat of it. [44]And every man's slave, purchased with silver, you shall circumcise, then shall he eat of it. [45]A settler or hired worker shall not eat of it. [46]In one house shall it be eaten, you shall not take out any meat from the house, and no bone shall you break in it. [47]All the community of Israel thus shall do. [48]And should a sojouner sojourn with you and make the Passover offering to the LORD, he must circumcise every male of his, then may he draw near to do it and he shall be like a native of the land, but no uncircumcised man shall eat of it. [49]One law shall there be for the native and for the sojourner who sojourns in your midst." [50]And all the Israelites did as the LORD had charged Moses and Aaron, thus did they do. [51]And it happened on that very day that the LORD brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt in their battalions.

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *in the land of Egypt*. This phrase is usually explained (by Nahmanides and others) as an indication of the unusual setting for the annunciation of this set of legal regulations in contradistinction to the body of Hebrew law that is given in the wilderness. But the phrase also serves to position this passage in the narrative sequence: as the Israelites are poised for the great escape, in the penultimate moment of their 430-year sojourn in Egypt (verse 40), God directs Moses and Aaron to deliver to them, while they are still on Egyptian soil, this law that will be binding on all their descendants.

2. *This month is for you head of months.* The reasonable inference of many scholars is that this calendric announcement reflects a moment in early Israelite history when there was at least one other competing system that designated a different month as the beginning of the year. (The Talmud later would speak of four different new years, and subsequent Jewish practice sets the beginning of the year in the early fall month of Tishrei, evidently making the calendar correspond to the agricultural cycle rather than to a historical event.) The point of beginning the annual sequence of months with the one in which the Exodus occurred is to coordinate the annual cycle with the event of liberation that is construed as the foundational act for the nation.

3. *a lamb.* Though the Hebrew *seh* can refer to both lamb and mature sheep, the indication that the animal should be in its first year—this is Rashi's plausible construction of the term *ben shanah*—makes "lamb" the appropriate translation. It is a slightly peculiar lamb, however, because in verse 5 we learn that it also includes "kid."

6. *a thing to be kept.* The Hebrew *mishmeret* is an abstract noun derived from the verbal stem *sh-m-r*, which has meanings that range from "keep" to "watch" to "observe" (in the ritual sense); all these meanings come into play as the root is repeated through the passage.

8. *flatbread.* The etymology of the Hebrew *matsot* remains uncertain. The conventional translation of "unleavened bread" is less than felicitous not only because of its excess of syllables but because it explicitly defines the bread by negation, the lack of leavening, whereas the Hebrew is a positive term. In Genesis 19 Lot serves *matsot* to the two anonymous guests who were to his house at nightfall, and the implication is that this is a kind of bread that can

be baked hastily, with no need to wait for the dough to rise before putting it in the oven.

9. *Do not eat from it raw, nor in any way cooked in water, but fire-roasted.* Eating raw meat, still suffused with blood, would in any case have been prohibited, but elsewhere there is no restriction on boiled meat (here that would be lamb stew), whether for sacrificial or profane purposes. William H. C. Propp offers what may be the best explanation for this insistence on fire-roasting by observing that it is a more archaic method of cooking meat, without the use of a pot, cooking utensils being the instruments of a more complex culinary technology. In this fashion, he goes on to suggest, fire-roasting would be associated with a kind of purity in the preparation of the meal, just as flatbread (probably baked over an open fire, nomad-style) without any admixture of leaven, might be associated with purity. One could add that these archaically prepared foods enhance the sense of ritual reenactment of what amounts to an archaic moment of national history, when the nation itself was awaiting its foundational liberation as a destroying angel stalked through the Egyptian night and passed over the houses of the Israelites.

10. *in fire you shall burn.* This seemingly redundant idiom has the force of "burn till utterly consumed" and so when applied to buildings means something like "burned to the ground."

12. *I will cross through the land.* The Hebrew verb *ʿavarti* means to "pass" (over, through, or by) or to "cross." The usual translation of "pass through" or "pass over" has been avoided in order to obviate the misleading impression that it is the same word as "Passover," which in the Hebrew reflects an entirely unrelated root, *p-s-ḥ*.

from all the gods of Egypt I will exact retributions. The least strained construction of this clause is that the absolute impotence of the supposed, or perhaps merely petty, gods of Egypt to protect their adherents will expose their nullity as gods. The idea of some commentators, that the Egyptian idols were smashed in the course of this fateful night, seems fanciful: and the exposure of the inefficacy of the Egyptian gods is in keeping with the preceding plagues.

13. *And the blood will be a sign.* Much anthropologically informed commentary has been made on the smearing of blood at the entrance of the house to ward off evil spirits, the "Destroyer" (*mashḥit*) of our narrative being a particularly scary instance of such a spirit. It is equally important, however, to keep in mind the deployment of blood as a recurrent motif in the literary structure of the larger narrative. Moses is thrust from Egypt, and set on the road toward his vocation as prophet, after he sheds the blood of the Egyptian taskmaster. On the way back to Egypt, it is the blood of circumcision that saves his life—a strong foreshadowing of the tenth plague that evidently interprets circumcision as a kind of substitute for the sacrifice of the firstborn. Then the plagues begin with the turning of the water of the Nile into blood.

I will pass over you. The primary meaning of the Hebrew verb *pasaḥ* is to "skip," "hop," "step over." (There is one occurrence in the biblical corpus where it might mean "defend," which is scant basis for the claim of some scholars that this is what it means here.) "Pass over" is used in this translation to preserve the pun on the time-honored English name for the festival. It is quite possible that the Hebrew *pesaḥ* was the independent name for this particular lamb sacrifice and for a spring festival, and that the narrative links that name with the Exodus story through folk etymology.

15. *that person shall be cut off from Israel.* This punishment (the Hebrew term is *karet*) will be invoked for a whole series of infractions as the Mosaic law is promulgated. Perhaps the most likely reference is to some form of ostracism, though both medieval and modern commentators have speculated about whether premature death or childlessness might be suggested by the phrase.

17. *the Flatbread.* Here the term *matsot* is the name of the festival, which is also called *pesaḥ*. Some have plausibly conjectured that these were originally two different holidays—*matsot* agricultural and *pesaḥ* pastoral—that were drawn together in the literary formulation of this text and hence in Israelite practice.

19. *sojourner.* As elsewhere, the Hebrew *ger* refers to a resident alien.

native of the land. The Hebrew reflected in "native," *ʾezraḥ*, probably refers to a plant (many think, a grapevine), and so would be a metaphor for the autochthonous character of the native, springing from the soil in purity.

21. *Draw out and take.* The precise nuance of the first of these two verbs is elusive. It has been proposed that "draw" (*mashakh*) preceding another verb may have the idiomatic force of "hasten," "perform urgently."

22. *touch the blood . . . to the lintel.* This is precisely the same verb that is used in 4:25 for Zipporah's placing or smearing the blood of circumcision at someone's feet. The usage is unusual enough to suggest the possibility of an explicit allusion here to the earlier episode.

25. *And so when you come to the land.* This is a pointed rupture of the time frame of the story. In the midst of the breathless moment that is the last evening of the Israelites in Egypt, as Moses enjoins them to smear their entranceways with protective blood, the narrative briefly leaps forward to a time when the Israelites, long ago liberated from Egyptian servitude, dwell in their land, and when a generation arises that scarcely knows the meaning of the commemorative Passover ritual, so that telling has to supplement the ritualistic showing.

29. *dungeon.* The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "house of the pit."

32. *and you shall bless me as well.* As both Rashi and Abraham ibn Ezra note, the desperate Pharaoh appears to feel in need of intercession: when you propitiate your god in the wilderness, he is saying, remember to put in a good word for me.

33. *Egypt bore down on the people.* The literal meaning of the verb is "was strong." This same verb, *ḥazaq*, was repeatedly used for the "toughening" of Pharaoh's heart, and the redeployment here in a different context, with a different grammatical object, is a virtually ironic echo.

We are all dead men. Coupled with the wrenching grief over the death of the firstborn is a note of panic: "the disasters are becoming more and more intolerable, and after the loss of our sons, the next thing that will happen is that we shall all be killed."

35. *and cloaks.* The cloaks were not included in the preceding instructions about this event. The mention here is evidently triggered by the report of the cloaks in which the kneading pans were wrapped, as an explanation of where the Hebrews got them. Perhaps it is assumed that as a matter of course abject

slaves would possess no more than simple work-tunics, and not the cloaks they would need for a journey. (In Egyptian paintings slaves are often depicted wearing only a short skirt and naked from the waist up.)

37. *six hundred thousand men on foot, besides the little ones.* "On foot" (*ragli*), which functions adverbially here, is a military term with the usual meaning as a noun of foot soldier and thus reinforces the idea that the fleeing Hebrews are "the LORD's battalions." "The little ones" in this instance would logically have to imply or include the women who nurtured them. The total figure of Israelites thus would be considerably more than two million. This is scarcely credible as a historical datum, but ancient literature (Greek as well as Hebrew) has little notion of numerical accuracy in the way it conjures with numbers.

38. *motley throng.* Umberto Cassuto plausibly suggests that the Hebrew *ʿerev rav* has no component that means "multitude" (King James Version, "mixed multitude") but rather that the last syllable is not an independent word but a duplication of the ultimate syllable of the main word—thus, *ʿerevrav*—which is a Hebrew formation for pejoratives. (The English *"riffraff"* comes close.)

very heavy livestock. "Heavy" is a word that shuttles back and forth through the themes of the story, from Pharaoh's heavy/hard heart to the sundry heavy plagues to the heaviness of the Israelite possessions.

42. *a night of watch.* The Hebrew *leyl shimurim* may suggest a vigil or simply a night on which this complex of commemorative rituals is scrupulously kept or observed. In any case, the last phrase of the verse, "through their generations" (or "through their eras") serves as a transition from the preceding narration of the event of Exodus to the passage of legislation that frames it (verses 43–51), which will be followed by a second unit of legislative material (13:1–16).

43. *no foreigner shall eat of it.* The Exodus story defines the nation. The Passover ritual, which commemorates that story, is the cultic enactment of membership in the nation.

44. *purchased with silver.* Literally, the Hebrew is "purchase of silver."

45. *A settler.* The Hebrew *toshav* appears to mean the same thing as *ger*, that is, "resident alien." The two words are often coupled in a hendiadys, *ger wetoshav*, which plainly means resident alien.

hired worker. The obvious implication is a non-Israelite hired worker.

46. *no bone shall you break in it.* This is often linked to the haste of the eating: there is no time to break bones and suck out the marrow. It may be more likely, however, that the prohibition is meant to preserve the idea of the wholeness of the sacrificial meal. The lamb is fire-roasted whole, after which only the meat that can be cut away is consumed.

48. *he must circumcise every male.* Circumcision is the mark of belonging to the covenantal community, as God announced to Abraham when He enjoined the practice (Genesis 17); and so circumcision is a prerequisite to participation in the community-defining Passover ritual. But the mention of circumcision also ties in this law with the Bridegroom of Blood episode that was the prelude to Moses's mission in Egypt: there is a symbolic overlap between the apotropaic blood of circumcision, the apotropaic blood of the lamb on the doorposts, and God's saving Israel from the bloodbath of Egypt to make them His people.

then may he draw near. In ritual contexts, this verb is often an ellipsis for "draw near to the altar" (to offer sacrifice). The Hebrew for "sacrifice," *qorban*, is cognate with the verb "draw near," *qarav*.

49. *One law.* The Hebrew term here is *torah*, which has the primary meaning of "teaching" or "instruction."

CHAPTER 13

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Consecrate unto Me each firstborn, breach of each womb among the Israelites in man and in beast—it is Mine.”

[3]And Moses said to the people, “Remember this day on which you went out of Egypt, from the house of slaves, for by strength of hand the LORD brought you out from here, and unleavened stuff shall not be eaten. [4]Today you are going out, in the month of the New Grain. [5]And so when the LORD brings you to the land of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Hivvite and the Jebusite which He swore to your fathers to give to you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall perform this service in this month. [6]Seven days shall you eat flatbread and on the seventh day a festival to the LORD. [7]Flatbread shall be eaten through the seven days and no leavened stuff of yours shall be seen and no leavening of yours shall be seen in all your territory. [8]And you shall tell your son on that

day, saying, ‘For the sake of what the LORD did for
me when I went out of Egypt.’ [9]And it shall be a sign
for you on your hand and a remembrance between
your eyes, so that the LORD’s teaching will be in your
mouth, for with a strong hand the LORD brought you
out of Egypt. [10]And you shall keep this statute at its
fixed time year after year. [11]And so when the LORD
brings you to the land of the Canaanite as He swore to
you and to your fathers and gives it to you, [12]you shall
pass every womb-breach to the LORD and every
breach of spawn of beast that you will have—the
males to the LORD. [13]And every donkey’s breach you
shall redeem with a lamb, and should you not redeem
it, you shall break its neck, and every human firstborn
of your sons you shall redeem. [14]And so should your
son ask you tomorrow, saying, ‘What is this?,’ you
shall say to him, ‘By strength of hand the LORD
brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slaves.
[15]And it happened, when Pharaoh was hard about
sending us off, that the LORD killed every firstborn in
the land of Egypt from the firstborn of man to the
firstborn of beast. Therefore do I sacrifice to the
LORD every womb-breach of the male and every
firstborn of my sons I must redeem. [16]And it shall be a
sign on your hand and circlets between your eyes, that

through strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt.'"

17 And it happened when Pharaoh sent the people off
that God did not lead them by way of the land of the
Philistines though it was close, for God thought, "Lest
the people regret when they see battle and go back to
Egypt." 18 And God turned the people round by way of
the wilderness of the Sea of Reeds, and the Israelites
went up armed from the land of Egypt. 19 And Moses
took the bones of Joseph with him, for he had
solemnly made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "God
will surely single you out, and you shall take up my
bones with you from here." 20 And they journeyed from
Succoth and encamped at Etham at the edge of the
wilderness. 21 And the LORD was going before them
by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them on the way and
by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light to go by
day and by night. 22 The pillar of cloud would not
budge by day nor the pillar of fire by night from before
the people.

CHAPTER 13 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Consecrate unto Me each firstborn*. As Nahum Sarna notes, there are indications elsewhere—e.g., Numbers 3:12—that the firstborn originally served as priests, until they were replaced by the members of the tribe of Levi, and so consecration here has a double meaning: the human firstborn are to be dedicated to God's cult and the animal firstborn are to be sacrificed to God. These first two verses of the chapter appear to be a separate unit, editorially inserted because of the connection with the instructions about the redemption of the firstborn and the sacrifice of firstborn animals in the next unit (verses 12–13, 15).

breach of each womb. The Hebrew *peter* means "opening" and is related, by metathesis, to *perets*, "bursting." It is a vivid idiom for the firstborn.

3. *Remember this day.* The Hebrew verb *zakhar* suggests both the cognitive act of remembering and the ritual act of commemoration. This entire projection into the future in the promised land of the Passover observance clearly duplicates some of the material in 12:14–28, though it stresses even more centrally the function of memory/commemoration.

unleavened stuff. This rendering of *ḥamets* is preferable to "unleavened bread" used by some translations because the term probably includes grain-based foods other than bread, as later Jewish tradition would extravagantly stipulate in its Passover regulations.

5. *this service.* The reference is to the Passover ritual. As has often been noted, the Hebrew *ʿavodah*, the term for service or worship, is also the word repeatedly used for the labor or slavery in Egypt; so the narrative traces a move from coerced manual service to service of the deity.

6. *on the seventh day a festival to the* LORD. Surprisingly, there is no indication here, as in the previous chapter, of a festival on the *first* day. Either this is an ellipsis, which would be untypical for legal injunctions, or it reflects a variant tradition.

9. *a sign for you on your hand and a remembrance between your eyes.* The concrete reference of these famous words remains in doubt. The original intention could conceivably be metaphorical: the story of the Exodus is to be forever present on the hand (or arm), the idiomatic agent of power and action, and between the eyes, the place of perception and observation. Here the key word for our passage, "remembrance" (*zikaron*), is used for what should be

between the eyes. In verse 16 the term used is *totafot*, "circlets" or "frontlets," a word of obscure origin and not entirely certain meaning: many imagine it as a headband, although a headband would be worn above, not between, the eyes, whereas there are Egyptian ornaments, as some scholars have noted, that were worn between the eyes. Subsequent Jewish tradition construed this phrase to enjoin the wearing of small leather boxes containing scriptural passages written on parchment (*tefillin*, conventionally translated as "phylacteries").

the LORD's teaching. Here *torah* has the clear meaning of "teaching" because it is said to be in the mouth (learning in the ancient world would have involved recitation out loud).

12. *pass . . . to the LORD*. The verb, which is the causative form of the verb used for God's crossing or passing through Egypt, means in this context "to transfer possession."

13. *every donkey's breach.* Since the donkey was an impure animal for both dietary and ritual purposes, it could not be sacrificed, and a lamb (or sheep) had to be sacrificed in its stead. As William H. C. Propp observes, a donkey was worth several times the value of a sheep, so the sheep substitution would almost certainly be embraced rather than the alternative of destroying the donkey that is put forth in the next clause.

you shall break its neck. The Hebrew verb *ʿaraf* clearly derives from *ʿoref*, the nape. It could conceivably refer to slaughter with a knife at the back of the neck rather than at the front, as is ritually prescribed. In postbiblical Hebrew, the verb means "to behead." In any case, the idea is that if a person should refuse to perform the substitute sacrifice for the donkey, he should be deprived of its use—which no sane owner of this ubiquitous and valuable beast of burden and means of transportation would do.

14. *What is this?* Again and again, these texts emphasize the educational and commemorative function of the Exodus story and of the Passover ritual embedded in it. The story encodes the very matrix and rationale of Israelite national existence, and it becomes a sustained exercise in collective remembering. The educational formulas here reiterate the verbal motif of "a strong hand" or "strength of hand" that punctuates the Exodus narrative proper.

15. *every firstborn of my sons I must redeem.* The permanent "redemption" of every firstborn son, in remembrance of all the firstborn Hebrew sons rescued from death on that dire night in Egypt, is evidently a payment in silver or goods to the priests. The notion that this is a substitute for human sacrifice of the firstborn, as Sir James Frazer contended, is at best part of the shadowy archaic antecedents of this practice, here firmly anchored in historical commemoration.

17. *And it happened when Pharaoh sent the people off.* We now return to the story, with an indication of the escape route that will be important as we approach the dramatic event at the Sea of Reeds.

by way of the land of the Philistines. This would have been the most direct route to Canaan, along what amounted to a coastal highway up through the area that is the present-day Gaza Strip. This route was in fact heavily fortified by the Egyptians as the principal avenue for their varying imperial enterprises to the north, and so would have immediately confronted the fleeing slaves with the prospect of "battle." The Philistines in this period are an anachronistic reference, for they arrived from the Aegean region (and thus are known as the Sea Peoples) in this coastal strip during the twelfth century B.C.E., perhaps as much as a hundred years after the conjectured date of the Exodus in the later thirteenth century.

18. *the Sea of Reeds.* This is not the Red Sea, as older translations have it, but most likely a marshland in the northeastern part of Egypt. (Marshes might provide some realistic kernel for the tale of a waterway that is at one moment passable and in the next flooded.) But it must be conceded that elsewhere *yam suf* refers to the Red Sea, and some scholars have recently argued that the story means to heighten the miraculous character of the event through the parting of a real sea. Even if the setting is a marsh, the event is reported in strongly supernatural terms.

19. *he had solemnly made the sons of Israel swear.* Here the reference of *beney yisra'el* would have to be Joseph's brothers, the actual sons of Israel/Jacob. But the double sense of the term works nicely by stressing the continuity of obligation between the original sons of Israel who swore to bring Joseph's bones up out of Egypt and these "sons of Israel" who are the Israelites, the Hebrew nation.

21. *And the* LORD *was going before them.* The participial form of the verb in the Hebrew suggests constant action. This effect is complemented by the verb at the very beginning of (in the Hebrew) the next verse, *lo᾽ yamish*, which has an iterative force, "would not budge." The twin images of a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire going before the people extend the representation of the Israelites as "the LORD's battalions" because in biblical idiom the commander of an army is said to "go out and come in" before it, that is, lead it in battle.

a pillar of cloud . . . a pillar of fire. This spectacular panoramic picture of the Israelite throngs following these miraculous guides through the wilderness nicely counterpoints the plagues that preceded. Several of the plagues involved destruction descending from the sky. Here a great mass of cloud descends from the sky to lead Israel. The penultimate plague plunged Egypt into terrifying darkness, and now a column of divine fire serves as a huge beacon to show Israel the way through the dark of the wilderness.

CHAPTER 14

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Speak to
the Israelites, that they turn back and encamp before
Pi-Hahiroth between Migdol and the sea, before Baal-
Zephon, opposite it you shall camp, by the sea. [3]And
Pharaoh had said of the Israelites,

‘They are confounded in the land,
The wilderness has closed round
them.’

[4]And I shall toughen Pharaoh’s heart, and he will
pursue them, that I may gain glory through Pharaoh
and through all his force, and the Egyptians will know
that I am the LORD.” And thus they did do.

[5]And it was told to the king of Egypt that the people
had fled, and Pharaoh and his servants had a change of
heart about the people, and they said, “What is this we
have done, that we sent off Israel from our service?”

[6]And he harnessed his chariot, and his troops he took
with him. [7]And he took six hundred picked chariots,
and all the chariots of Egypt, and captains he
harnessed his chariot, and his troops over it all. [8]And
the LORD toughened the heart of Pharaoh king of
Egypt, and he pursued the Israelites, the Israelites
going out with a high hand. [9]And the Egyptians
pursued them and overtook them encamped by the sea
—all the horses of Pharaoh's chariots and his riders
and his force—at Pi-Hahiroth before Baal-Zephon.
[10]And Pharaoh drew near, and the Israelites raised
their eyes and, look, Egypt was advancing toward
them, and they were very afraid, and the Israelites
cried out to the LORD. [11]And they said to Moses,
"Was it for lack of graves in Egypt that you took us to
die in the wilderness? What is this you have done to us
to bring us out of Egypt? [12]Isn't this the thing we spoke
to you in Egypt, saying, 'Leave us alone, that we may
serve Egypt, for it is better for us to serve Egypt than
for us to die in the wilderness'?" [13]And Moses said to
the people, "Do not be afraid. Take your station and
see the LORD's deliverance that He will do for you
today, for as you see the Egyptians today, you shall not
see them again for all time. [14]The LORD shall do
battle for you, and you, you shall keep still."

[15]And the LORD said to Moses, “Why do you cry out
to me? Speak to the Israelites, that they journey
onward. [16]As for you, raise your staff and stretch out
your hand over the sea and split it apart, that the
Israelites may come into the midst of the sea on dry
land. [17]As for me, look, I am about to toughen the
heart of the Egyptians, that they come after them, and
I shall gain glory through Pharaoh and through all his
force, through his chariots and through his riders.
[18]And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD
when I gain glory through Pharaoh, through his
chariots and through his riders. [19]And the messenger of
God that was going before the camp of Israel moved
and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved
from before them and stood behind them. [20]And it
came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of
Israel, and there was the cloud and the dark, and it lit
up the night, and they did not draw near each other all
night. [21]And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea,
and the LORD led the sea with a mighty east wind all
night, and He made the sea dry ground, and the waters
were split apart. [22]And the Israelites came into the sea
on dry land, the waters a wall to them on their right
and on their left. [23]And the Egyptians pursued and
came after them, all Pharaoh’s horses, his chariots, and
his riders, into the sea. [24]And it happened in the

morning watch that the LORD looked out over the camp of Egypt in a pillar of fire and cloud and He panicked the camp of Egypt. [25]And He took off the wheels of their chariots and drove them heavily, and Egypt said, “Let me flee before Israel, for the LORD does battle for them against Egypt.” [26]And the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the waters go back over the Egyptians, over their chariots and over their riders.” [27]And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea went back toward morning to its full flow, with the Egyptians fleeing toward it, and the LORD shook out the Egyptians into the sea. [28]And the waters came back and covered the chariots and the riders of all Pharaoh’s force who were coming after them in the sea, not a single one of them remained. [29]And the Israelites went on dry land in the midst of the sea, the waters a wall to them on their right and on their left. [30]And the LORD on that day delivered Israel from the hand of Egypt, and Israel saw Egypt dead on the shore of the sea, [31]and Israel saw the great hand that the LORD had performed against Egypt, and the people feared the LORD, and they trusted in the LORD and in Moses His servant.

CHAPTER 14 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *They are confounded in the land, / The wilderness has closed round them*. Since God has just given the most precise instructions as to where the Israelites should establish their camp, this quotation of what Pharaoh says when he hears of the Israelites' movements is a strong indication that God has set up what amounts in military terms to an ambush. Pharaoh, seeing that the Hebrews have not followed the short and obvious coastal route to get out of Egypt northward, concludes that they have lost their way ("they are confounded in the land") and have inadvertently allowed themselves to be pinned down on the shore of the Sea of Reeds ("The wilderness has closed round them"), where the pursuing troops will easily surround them and recapture the whole mass of runaway slaves. Note that Pharaoh, in his regal confidence, speaks in verse—two semantically complementary clauses with three nicely scanning beats in each, *nevukhím hém baʾárets / sagár ʾaleihém hamidbár*. What the Egyptian leader can scarcely foresee is that the Hebrews will be able to flee into the sea, which then will turn into a death trap for the pursuing Egyptian troops. The place-names stipulated in God's instructions to Moses have not been identified, though it might be noted that they are all Hebrew names, with the exception of Pi-Hahiroth, which appears to have an Egyptian prefix.

4. *that I may gain glory.* The Hebrew verb *ʾikavdah*, as anyone reading the story in the original would notice, plays on the same word *kaved*, "heavy," that has been repeatedly used for the severity of the plagues, the hardness of Pharaoh's heart, and the density of the Israelites' livestock.

5. *about the people.* It is noteworthy that through this section the Israelites are several times referred to simply as "the people," the perspective of the narrative, the audience, and of God having become thoroughly an Israelite national perspective.

from our service. Literally, "from serving us." The multivalent "send" is now given its explicit legal sense of manumission.

6. *his troops.* The literal meaning of *ʿamo* is "his people," but *ʿam* in military contexts regularly refers to troops, and Pharaoh clearly has not taken the entire people with him, only his army.

7. *and all the chariots of Egypt.* That is, Pharaoh took not only the elite chariotry, but in fact the entire Egyptian chariot corps.

captains. The Hebrew *shalishim* has never been definitively explained. It appears to be derived from *sheloshah*, "three," and may refer to the division of the army into command units of three and thirty (compare 2 Samuel 23:9–23). Some have conjectured that the *shalish* would be the third man or commander in a war chariot, but Egyptian chariots appear to have had crews of only two men. A few scholars have suggested a Ugaritic cognate meaning "bronze," as in bronze armor, the term by metonymy referring to a warrior or officer.

8. *with a high hand.* Nahum Sarna proposes that the idiom is drawn from depictions of ancient Near Eastern gods brandishing a weapon in the upraised right hand. The English "high-handed" has some kinship with the notion of defiance conveyed by the Hebrew expression. "Hand" has figured centrally in the entire Exodus narrative both in God's powerful hand against Egypt and Moses's outstretched hand (or arm, the Hebrew *yad* often covering both) unleashing the plagues, as here it will split the sea.

11. *Was it for lack of graves in Egypt.* After the initial complaints of the Israelites against Moses, we have been given no information about their collective mental state. Now we see them as fearful and as recalcitrant as they were at the beginning. This moment becomes the first of a whole series of "murmurings" that will punctuate the Wilderness narrative.

What is this you have done to us . . .? These words are a pointed echo of the words of Pharaoh's courtiers, "What is this we have done?" (verse 5).

12. *Isn't this the thing we spoke to you in Egypt.* These words amount to delayed narrative exposition since, before this revelation in the people's dialogue, there was no report of their having said they would perish in the wilderness and so should stay in slavery. Alternately, they may be inventing words that they never said, but now imagine what they may never actually have said.

13. *Do not be afraid.* Moses has already proven himself an irascible figure, and he will be quick to anger in subsequent episodes. Here, however, he recognizes that the complaint of the newly freed slaves stems from fear, and so he reassures them.

for as you see the Egyptians today, you shall not see them again for all time. The defeat will be so crushing that Egypt will never again attain this zenith of imperial power. This ringing statement is not the least of the exercises in gratifying historical fantasy in the story. Egypt in fact continued to be an intermittent military threat to Israel throughout the First Commonwealth period.

15. *Why do you cry out to me?* This is a little puzzling because there has been no report of Moses's crying out to the LORD. The least strained solution is that of Abraham ibn Ezra, who argues that since Moses is the spokesman of the people, if the people cry out, God can readily attribute the crying out to Moses.

19. *the messenger of God that was going before the camp.* In the initial report of the pillars of cloud and of fire, God Himself was going before the Israelite camp. The introduction of an agent of the deity here is either an explanation in the original narrative of what God's presence before the people actually meant or an interpolation of later tradition in order to mitigate the anthropomorphism.

20. *and it lit up the night.* This clause is ambiguous, especially because the antecedent would have to be the pillar of cloud, which does not give off light. Perhaps one might view these words as a telescoping of a temporal shift: the Egyptians approach the Israelites, who are clearly in full view, in daylight, perhaps, one may infer, in the late afternoon. The pillar of cloud swings around from Israelite front to rear in order to form a barrier between the Hebrews and the Egyptians. As night falls, the pillar of cloud ("and there was the cloud") in response to the gathering darkness ("and the dark") turns into fire ("and it lit up the night").

21. *wind . . . sea dry ground*. The key terms here hark back to the first creation (God's breath-spirit-wind, *ruaḥ*; the dividing between sea and dry land). His power over the physical elements of the world He created is again manifested, this time in a defining event in the theater of history.

split apart. Not merely "divided," for the Hebrew verb *baqaʿ* is a violent one, the word that would be used for splitting wood with an axe.

22. *the waters a wall to them on their right and on their left.* Ilana Pardes persuasively identifies birth imagery in this whole story. The passage through waters—led by a man who has been saved from water, after a genocidal decree in which water was to be the means of killing the babies—is the beginning of the birth of the nation, and Pardes aptly sees the large narrative from Exodus to Numbers as the "biography of a nation."

24. *in the morning watch.* By Israelite reckoning, the last third of the night, from 2:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m. The Hebrews, then, would have marched through the Sea of Reeds during the night, literally plunging into the dark, for the pillar of fire would have been behind them rather than leading them on their way.

the LORD looked out. The Hebrew verb *hishqif* is generally reserved for looking down or out from a high vantage point.

in a pillar of fire and cloud. The double identification is presumably because of the moment of transition toward daybreak when the fire becomes cloud. The narrative sequence at this point is not entirely clear, but it might be sorted out as follows: during the night, the Israelites make their way across the sea, with the protective pillar of fire following after them. The Egyptians, seeing their movement, which would be joined with the receding pillar of fire, begin pursuit. As day breaks, God looks down on them from the pillar of fire just as it turns back into a pillar of cloud. As the water begins to seep back, the Egyptians turn round and flee.

25. *He took off the wheels of their chariots.* There is some dispute about the sense of the verb, which usually means to "take away," "take off," "remove." The simplest explanation is that as the water begins to seep back and before it becomes a flood that engulfs the Egyptians, it turns the dry ground into muck. The chariot wheels rapidly become stuck in the mud ("He . . . drove them heavily") and break off from the axles. In all this tale of the utter destruction of the Egyptian chariots, there is a kind of allaying of a recurrent Israelite fear. From a number of references in the Book of Judges, we can infer that the highland-based Hebrews were poorly equipped with chariots and vulnerable, at least when they fought on level terrain, to the chariots of the Canaanites, which would have been a rough ancient equivalent of armored corps in a modern army. The heavy chariots must have often appeared terrifying to the lightly armed Israelites. In the story of the victory at the Sea

of Reeds, the mighty Egyptian chariot corps is rendered helpless, and this particular aspect of the Egyptian defeat is made a focal point of the narrative.

27. *the Egyptians fleeing toward it.* The Hebrew preposition used here clearly means "toward." What is suggested is the following sequence: the Egyptian troops are struck with panic, perhaps at the sight of the pillar of cloud and fire, surely by the fact that their chariots have lost traction on what had briefly been dry land in the sea; they flee, presumably in the direction from which they had come, but the flood of water comes down on them from that very direction. The male warriors of the nation that had sought to drown every Hebrew male child now meet a fate of death by drowning.

29. *the waters a wall to them.* This key phrase serves as a formal refrain, and will be picked up in the Song of the Sea.

31. *the great hand.* "Hand" here obviously means something like "demonstration of power," but it picks up all the previous uses of "hand," both literal and figurative, in this story of liberation from bondage.

they trusted in the LORD *and in Moses His servant*. The whole story had begun with Moses's understandable doubt as to whether the people would trust, or believe, him. Now all doubt is banished (for the moment) in the great triumph at the Sea of Reeds.

CHAPTER 15

[1]Then did Moses sing, and all the Israelites with him,
this song to the LORD, and they said, saying:

“Let me sing unto the LORD for He
surged, O surged—
horse and its rider He hurled into
the sea.
[2]My strength and my power
is Yah, and He became my
deliverance.
This is my God—I extol Him,
God of my fathers—I exalt Him.
[3]The LORD is a man of war,
the LORD is His name.
[4]Pharaoh’s chariots and his force
He pitched into the sea
and the pick of his captains
were drowned in the Reed Sea.
[5]The depths did cover them over,

down they went in the deep like a
stone.
[6]Your right hand, O LORD, is
mighty in power.
Your right hand, O LORD,
smashes the enemy.
[7]In Your great surging You wreck
those against You,
You send forth Your wrath, it
consumes them like straw.
[8]And with the breath of Your nostrils
waters heaped up,
streams stood up like a mound,
the depths congealed in the
heart of the sea.
[9]The enemy said:
‘I’ll pursue, overtake, divide up the
loot,
my gullet will fill with them, I’ll
bare my sword, my hand
despoil them.’
[10]You blew with Your breath—the
sea covered them over.
They sank like lead in the mighty
waters:

[11]Who is like You among the gods, O
LORD,
who is like You, mighty in
holiness?
Fearsome in praise, worker of
wonders.
[12]You stretched out Your hand—
earth swallowed them up.
[13]You led forth in Your kindness
this people that You redeemed.
You guided them in Your
strength to Your holy abode.
[14]Peoples heard, they quaked,
trembling seized Philistia's
dwellers.
[15]Then were the chieftains of Edom
dismayed,
the dukes of Moab, shuddering
seized them,
all the dwellers of Canaan
quailed.
[16]Terror and fear did fall upon them,
as Your arm loomed big they were
like a stone.
Till Your people crossed over, O
LORD,

till the people You made Yours
crossed over.
17 You'll bring them, you'll plant
them, on the mount of Your
estate,
a firm place for Your dwelling
You wrought, O LORD,
the sanctum, O Sovereign, Your
hands firmly founded.
18 The LORD shall be king for all
time!"

19 For Pharaoh had come with his chariots and his riders into the sea, and the LORD turned the waters of the sea back upon them, but the Israelites went on dry land in the midst of the sea. 20 And Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took the timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her with timbrels and dances. 21 And Miriam sang out to them:

"Sing to the LORD for He has
surged, O surged,
Horse and its rider He hurled into
the sea!"

[22]And Moses made the Israelites journey onward from the Sea of Reeds, and they went out to the Wilderness of Shur, and they went three days in the wilderness and did not find water. [23]And they came to Marah and could not drink water from Marah, for it was bitter. Therefore is its name called Marah. [24]And the people murmured against Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?” [25]And he cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a tree, and he flung it into the water, and the water turned sweet. There did He set him a statute and law, and there did He test him. [26]And He said, “If you really heed the voice of the LORD your God, and do what is right in His eyes, and hearken to His commands and keep all His statutes, all the sickness that I put upon Egypt I will not put upon you, for I am the LORD your healer.”

[27]And they came to Elim where there were twelve springs of water and seventy date palms, and they encamped there by the water.

CHAPTER 15 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Then did Moses sing*. The conclusion of many large narrative units in the Bible is marked with a relatively long poem (*shirah*). After the destruction of Pharaoh's army, the Egyptian phase of the Exodus story is completed, and the sequence of Wilderness tales (the very first is the Marah story, verses 22–26) that is the narrative skeleton of the rest of the Torah begins.

Let me sing unto the LORD. This poetic beginning reflects an ancient Near Eastern literary convention of announcing the topic and the act of song at the beginning of the poem, roughly parallel to the Greek and Latin convention for beginning an epic (as in Virgil's "Of arms and the man I sing").

for He surged, O surged. The poem begins with a vivid pun. The Hebrew verb *ga'ah* means something like "to triumph," "to be exalted," "to be proud," but it is also the verb used for the rising tide of the sea, a concrete image that is especially apt for representing God's overwhelming the Egyptians with the waters of the Sea of Reeds.

horse and its rider. Perhaps, as many scholars have argued, rider (*rokhev*) should be translated as "driver" because chariots are stressed, and the evidence appears to indicate that in the late second millennium B.C.E. the Egyptians did not make much use of cavalry. Nevertheless, the plain meaning of the Hebrew word is "rider," and only with some strain can it be made to mean "chariot driver." Anachronism about such details is familiar enough in the Bible—witness the ubiquity of camels in Genesis in a historical period before they were generally domesticated.

2. *power.* Scholarly consensus is that this is the most likely sense here of the Hebrew *zimrah*, but it is probably a pun on the more common meaning of the word "song"—God, Who is the source of the speaker's power, is for that very reason the theme of his song.

3. *The* LORD *is a man of war.* The representation of God as a fierce warrior is recurrent in biblical poetry and draws on a literary background of Ugaritic/Canaanite mythological poetry.

4. *He pitched into the sea.* The vivid hyperbolic image of God's "pitching" or "hurling" the Egyptian troops into the sea provides a hint to the representation in the preceding prose narrative (which is later in composition) of God's "shaking out" the Egyptians into the sea.

5–6. *down they went in the deep like a stone. / Your right hand . . . mighty in power*. The Song of the Sea is a rare instance in the Bible of a poem that has clearly marked strophic divisions, as Umberto Cassuto and others have noted. Near the end of each strophe one encounters the simile "like a stone" or "like lead." The simile is followed by lines that celebrate the LORD's triumphal supremacy. The first strophe (verses 1–6) offers a kind of summary version of the victory at the sea. The second strophe (verses 7–11) goes over the event in more concrete terms, providing some dialogue for the pursuing Egyptians as well as a more particular account of how God's breath or wind (the same word in the Hebrew) first heaped up the waters in a mound or wall and then sent them back to engulf the Egyptians. The right hand smashing the enemy derives from the martial imagery used for representing battling deities in ancient Near Eastern poetry, but it also resonates with all the references to God's powerful hand in the preceding narrative.

7. *In Your great surging.* Or, "in Your great triumph." The use of the noun derived from the verb *ga'ah* aligns the beginning of the second strophe with the beginning of the first.

it consumes them like straw. The straw simile might appear to conflict with the stone simile, but it is generated, almost formulaically, by the language of "wrath" and, in the next line, "breath of Your nostrils," because in Hebrew poetic idiom, wrath is represented as a kind of fiery emanation from the nostrils. The Hebrew *'af* thus means both "nose" and, by metonymy, "flaring anger."

8. *waters . . . streams . . . depths*. The Hebrew word for water is always plural. The various synonyms used by the poet for the depths or the bottom of the sea are all in the plural as well—possibly a poetic plural of intensification but in any case a form that imparts a sense of grandeur or epic sublimity.

11. *Who is like You among the gods.* This line has inspired a good deal of rather nervous commentary. The most unapologetic way of explaining it is that in the early part of the first millennium B.C.E., or possibly even earlier, to which the composition of this poem may plausibly be assigned, Hebrew writers had no difficulty in conceding the existence of other deities, though always stipulating, as here, their absolute inferiority to the God of Israel.

Fearsome in praise. The Hebrew uses a plural, "praises." The word may refer in a kind of ellipsis to the tremendous acts performed by God that make Him the object of praise.

12. *You stretched out Your hand—/earth swallowed them up.* The hand that smashes the foe here works like Moses's hand, signaling to the sea to engulf the Egyptians. Since it is the sea, not the land, that does the swallowing, there is probably a play on the secondary meaning of the Hebrew *'arets*, "underworld." But in a doubling of the pun, *'arets*, which also means "land," points forward to the prospect of the promised land to which the people will be brought that is the topic of this third strophe.

13. *You led forth . . . You guided*. The Hebrew exhibits a sequence of three phonetically overlapping verbs—*natita*, "You stretched out," *naḥita*, "You led forth," *neihalta*, "You guided." This sound pattern helps to effect the temporal and spatial transition as the beginning of the third strophe moves from the Sea of Reeds to Canaan and, in the space of a single line, from this event in the thirteenth century B.C.E. to the establishment of God's temple on Mount Zion in the tenth century.

14. *Peoples heard, they quaked, / trembling seized Philistia's dwellers.* The national triumphalism of the whole Exodus story comes to a climax here as the victory at the Sea of Reeds is imagined to reverberate throughout the region, panicking the peoples of Canaan who will face a Hebrew invasion led by the unconquerable LORD of Israel. (These lines will be echoed in the speech of Rahab, the harlot of Jericho, in Joshua 2 as a kind of on-the-ground "confirmation" of the terrific impact in Canaan of the event at the Sea of Reeds.) The reference to Philistia is an anachronism because the Philistines did not arrive on the coastal strip of Canaan from the Aegean until about a century after the Exodus.

15. *quailed.* The literal meaning of the Hebrew verb is "melted."

16. *they were like a stone.* It is also possible to construe the verb to yield "they were still as a stone." However, the image of the Canaanites petrified with fear seems stronger, and plays against the (literal) "melting" of the previous line.

Till Your people crossed over . . . / till the people You made Yours crossed over. The use of this sort of incremental repetition is particularly characteristic of the older strata of biblical poetry. (The Song of Deborah, which is older still than this poem, abounds in such patterns.) The Hebrew for "You made Yours," *qanita*, means "to acquire," "to purchase," and occasionally "to create." The liberation from Egyptian slavery is taken as the great historical demonstration that God has adopted Israel as His special people.

17. *a firm place for Your dwelling . . . / Your hands firmly founded*. The Hebrew noun *makhon* and the related verb *konen* are regularly associated in biblical idiom with the solid establishment of a throne or dynasty. Since a mountain is also referred to here, and a sanctum, *miqdash*, is mentioned at the end of the verse, it is highly likely that what the poet has in mind is the temple on Mount Zion, which is imagined as God's earthly throne or dwelling place.

18. *The LORD shall be king for all time.* Although some construe this line as a kind of epilogue to the poem (it lacks the parallelistic structure of a complete line of poetry), its celebration of God's supremacy corresponds to the endings of the two previous strophes (verses 6 and 11). God's regal dominion is confirmed both by the victory over the Egyptians and the establishing of a terrestrial throne in Jerusalem.

20. *And Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took the timbrel in her hand.* One surmises that she is called "prophetess" (*nevi'ah*) because the singing and dancing are an ecstatic activity, and one of the established meanings of the Hebrew term for "prophet" is an ecstatic who typically employed dance and musical instruments to induce the prophetic frenzy. Miriam is designated as Aaron's sister in accordance with a practice of identifying a woman in relation to her oldest brother. The custom of women's going out in song and dance to celebrate a military victory was common in ancient Israel and the surrounding peoples and figures significantly in the David story. The women here sing out the opening lines of the song we have just heard as a kind of antiphonal refrain. Everett Fox notes that Miriam is a witness by the water both at the beginning of the Moses story and now.

22. *the Wilderness of Shur.* The name means “wall” in Hebrew and evidently refers to a fortified region on the northern border of Egypt. (The Egyptian Hagar flees toward this region, Genesis 16:7.)

23. *Marah.* The name means “bitter,” as the story goes on to explain.
could not drink water from Marah. The desperate need for water in the desert, which is a recurrent feature of the stories that follow, is of course a realistic aspect of the Wilderness narrative. At the same time, it links the tribulations of the Hebrews in the wilderness with the Plagues narrative. Here there is an explicit echo of the first plague when the Egyptians “could not drink water from the Nile.” Moses, who as an infant was “drawn from the water,” and who has just led the people between walls of water, is now called upon to provide them water to drink in the wilderness.

25. *There did He set him a statute and law, and there did He test him.* Nearly everything about this gnomic sentence is uncertain. Since the only plausible candidate for setting statutes and laws is God, He would logically be the subject of the verb in the parallel clause, though some have claimed it could be Moses. “Him” might be Moses or a collective reference to Israel. The meaning of “statute and law” is obscure because, at least in this episode, no legislation is stipulated. The phrase might merely refer to the idea that it became a set practice in the wilderness that, as in this incident, Israel’s urgent needs would be filled by God, if only Israel trusted in Him. The “testing,” then, would be the testing of Moses’s, or Israel’s, trust in God’s power to provide for the people’s needs, though that is far from clear. In the famous parallel incident in Numbers 20, Moses will fail the test by angrily striking the rock in order to bring forth water.

26. *If you really heed . . . and do what is right in His eyes.* The language sounds like Deuteronomy, but William H. C. Propp is prudent in calling this “quasi-Deuteronomic diction,” and associating it with the Wisdom overtones of the episode. Wisdom literature, as he goes on to observe, is much concerned with medicine. Here, God concludes by promising He will shield Israel from all the sicknesses that visited the Egyptians. The allusion to the first plague at the beginning of the episode associatively points to the others.

27. *twelve springs of water and seventy date palms.* After the scary incident at Marah, in which it seemed there was only brackish water, the next stage of

the journey is more encouraging, for the Israelites arrive at a real oasis, with an abundance of springs and fruit-bearing trees. Twelve and seventy are, of course, formulaic numbers, perhaps here particularly echoing the twelve tribes and the seventy elders of Israel.

CHAPTER 16

[1]And they journeyed onward from Elim, and all the community of Israelites came to the Wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month of their going out from Egypt. [2]And all the community of Israelites murmured against Moses and against Aaron in the wilderness. [3]And the Israelites said to them, “Would that we had died by the LORD’s hand in the land of Egypt when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread, for you have brought us out to this wilderness to bring death by famine on all this assembly.” [4]And the LORD said to Moses, “Look, I am about to rain down bread for you from the heavens, and the people shall go out and gather each day’s share on that day, so that I may test them whether they will go by My teaching or not. [5]And it will happen, on the sixth day, that they will prepare what they bring in, and it will be double what they gather each day.” [6]And Moses, and Aaron with him, said to the Israelites, “At evening, you shall know that it was the LORD Who brought you out of the land

of Egypt. [7]And in the morning you shall see the
LORD's glory as He hears your murmurings against
the LORD, and as for us, what are we that you should
murmur against us?" [8]And Moses said, "When the
LORD gives you meat in the evening to eat and your
fill of bread in the morning, when the LORD hears
your murmurings that you murmur against him—and
what are we?—not against us are your murmurings but
against the LORD." [9]And Moses said to Aaron, "Say
to all the community of Israelites, 'Draw near before
the LORD, for He has heard your murmurings.'"
[10]And it happened as Aaron was speaking to all the
community of Israelites, that they turned toward the
wilderness, and, look, the LORD's glory appeared in
the cloud. [11]And the LORD said to Moses, saying, [12]"I
have heard the murmurings of the Israelites. Speak to
them, saying 'At twilight you shall eat meat and in the
morning you shall have your fill of bread, and you shall
know that I am the LORD your God.'" [13]And it
happened in the evening that the quail came up and
covered the camp, and in the morning there was a
layer of dew around the camp. [14]And the layer of dew
lifted, and, look, on the surface of the wilderness—
stuff fine, flaky, fine as frost on the ground. [15]And the
Israelites saw, and they said to each other, "*Man hu*,
What is it?" For they did not know what it was. And

Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you as food. [16]This is the thing that the LORD charged: ‘Gather from it each man according to what he must eat, an *omer* to a head, the number of persons among you, each man for those in his tent you shall take.’” [17]And the Israelites did thus, and they gathered, some more and some less.

[18]And they measured it by the *omer*, he who took more had no extra and he who took less had no lack, each according to what he must eat did they gather. [19]And Moses said to them, “Let no man leave over from it till morning.” [20]But they did not heed Moses, and some men left over from it till morning, and it bred worms and stank, and Moses was furious with them. [21]And they gathered it morning after morning every man according to what he must eat, and when the sun grew hot, it melted. [22]And it happened on the sixth day, that they gathered a double portion of bread, two *omers* for each, and all the chiefs of the community came and told Moses. [23]And he said to them, “That is what the LORD has spoken. A day of rest, a holy sabbath to the LORD is tomorrow. What you bake, bake, and what you cook, cook, and whatever is left over leave for yourselves to be kept until morning.” [24]And they left it

until morning as Moses had charged, and it did not stink, and there were no worms in it. [25]And Moses said, “Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the LORD, today you will not find it in the field. [26]Six days you shall gather it, and on the seventh day, the sabbath, there will be none then.” [27]And it happened on the seventh day that some of the people went out to gather and they found nothing. [28]And the LORD said to Moses, “How long do you refuse to keep My commands and My teachings? [29]See, for the LORD has given you the sabbath. Therefore does He give you on the sixth day bread for two days. Sit each of you where he is, let no one go out from his place on the seventh day.” [30]And the people ceased from work on the seventh day. [31]And the house of Israel called its name manna, and it was like coriander seed, white, and its taste was like a wafer in honey. [32]And Moses said, “This is the thing that the LORD commanded: a full *omer* of it to be kept for your generations, so that they may see the bread with which I fed you in the wilderness when I brought you out of the land of Egypt.” [33]And Moses said to Aaron, “Take one jar and put in it a full *omer* of manna and set it before the LORD to be kept for your generations.” [34]As the LORD had charged Moses, Aaron set it before the Covenant to be kept. [35]And the Israelites ate manna

forty years until they came to settled land, the manna did they eat until they came to the edge of the land of Canaan. [36]And the *omer* is one-tenth of an *ephah*.

CHAPTER 16 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *murmured*. The Hebrew verb *wayilonu* is distinctive of the Wilderness narrative. The various contexts in which it occurs suggest it means something like "complain" (its meaning in modern Hebrew) or "express resentment." Some modern translations opt for "grumble," which may be too low as diction, and there is no good reason to relinquish the time-honored "murmur."

3. *Would that we had died by the LORD's hand in . . . Egypt*. In the admirable efficiency of the dialogue, their formulation suggests that the LORD is about to kill them in the wilderness, so He might as well have done the job back in Egypt, where at least they would have died on a full stomach.

fleshpots. The Hebrew indicates something like a cauldron in which meat is cooked, but the King James Version's rendering of "fleshpots" ("flesh" of course meaning "meat" in seventeenth-century English) has become proverbial in the language and deserves to be retained.

when we ate our fill of bread. Bread and meat here are the two staples. God will provide both—quail in the evening and manna in the morning. By this point, in the second month of the departure from Egypt, the supply of unleavened bread that the Israelites brought with them in their precipitous flight might well have been exhausted. Commentators have puzzled over the nostalgia for meat because the Israelites have taken large flocks with them. Perhaps, as a people whose principal wealth is their flocks, they are loath to make heavy inroads into their livestock for the purpose of food on the journey. In any case, there seems to be a note of panic in the claim that they are on the point of death from starvation. That note would be plausible for a population of newly freed slaves who had been accustomed to having all

meals provided by their masters and who now find themselves in the arid moonscape of the Sinai desert.

4. *I am about to rain down.* This promise of divine benefaction may have a double edge because previous uses of this verb, *mamtir*, have been associated with God's showering destruction on humanity—in the Flood story, the Sodom story, and the Plagues narrative.

so that I may test them. The most plausible construction of this phrase is the one proposed by Rashi—that Israel will have to observe the restrictions regarding leaving over manna for the next day and not attempting to gather it on the sabbath. The underlying conception of the deity in ancient Israel, beginning with the Garden story, is of a God who offers humankind a great abundance of gifts but always stipulates restrictions to be observed in their enjoyment.

6. *it was the LORD Who brought you out.* The people in their murmuring had directed their complaint against Moses and Aaron, saying it was the two brothers who brought them out from the land of Egypt (verse 2), while in the same breath accusing God of intending to kill them all. Now, the miraculous provision of meat at evening will make it clear to the people that all these events are directed by God.

7. *in the morning you shall see the LORD's glory.* There has been some puzzlement among interpreters about the evening and morning clauses and what actually is referred to in the latter. The evening-morning sequence may be a reminiscence of the first Creation story: in both, an omnipotent God providentially conducts the progress of events, though here, in contrast to the poised harmony of the Creation story, there is palpable tension between the celestial and the terrestrial realms. Seeing the LORD's glory may well be a threat as well as a promise because the manifestation of God's numinous presence in the pillar of cloud (verse 10) might easily be rather terrifying to the people.

8. *and what are we?—not against us are your murmurings.* The Hebrew syntax, which is reproduced in this translation, has a jagged and discontinuous look, and may be intended, as Benno Jacob suggests, to mimic Moses's sense of perturbation in responding to the people's accusation directed at him and Aaron.

9. *Draw near before the* LORD. Since the preposition used here implies "presence," the location indicated is most probably the cloud that will be mentioned in verse 10 which is invested with God's glory.

12. *I have heard the murmurings of the Israelites.* This statement cuts two ways: "to hear" in biblical idiom can mean "to heed" (i.e., "to obey"), but God may at the same time be expressing annoyance with the people, for He has heard their unreasonable complaint and their accusation that all along He meant to destroy them.

13. *quail.* As with the plagues, generations of commentators have exerted considerable effort to explain all these events in naturalistic terms. Large flocks of migratory quail, it is contended, are sometimes found in the Sinai, and the manna is identified as a sugarlike secretion of desert aphids. One may concede that some kernels of actual memories of improvised sustenance during the Wilderness wanderings might be preserved in these stories, but the point that the narrative makes is to convert them into miraculous occurrences. No migration of quail, after all, would repeat itself every evening, and no edible granules secreted by aphids would mysteriously cease every seventh day.

14. *flaky.* The Hebrew *meḥuspas* is in dispute (in later Hebrew it means "rough"). Umberto Cassuto links it to the root *ḥ-s-f* "to lay bare," and to a Ugaritic cognate and proposes that it means "revealed."

15. Man hu, *What is it?* The scholarly consensus is that this is still another instance of folk etymology. The general assumption is that there was a non-Hebrew term, *man*, for this particular food-substance, perhaps related to an Arabic root that means "to feed." *Man*, in this bit of dialogue, is an archaic form of *mah*, the Hebrew for "what."

16. omer. This dry measure would have been a bit more than two quarts.

20. *some men left over from it till morning, and it bred worms and stank.* The refractory nature of the people—or perhaps one should say their anxiety and their greed—is manifested even in their response to this bounty from God that has come to answer their complaints. In this case, it turns out that the prohibition announced by Moses is actuated by a perfectly practical

consideration: the manna will not keep overnight (except, miraculously, on the sabbath).

26. *Six days you shall gather it, and on the seventh day, the sabbath.* The sabbath—the word means "cessation time"—has not yet been enjoined in the Ten Commandments, but it is assumed by the story (with the Creation story behind it) to be part of the very structure of nature. Thus the double portion of manna gathered on the sixth day is preserved through the seventh, and no manna is to be found on the seventh day.

there will be none then. The literal meaning of the Hebrew is: "there will be none in it."

28. *How long do you refuse.* "You" in the Hebrew is plural, so although God is addressing Moses, He is levying His accusation against the people for whom Moses serves as spokesman.

29. *where he is.* Literally, "under him," that is, in his place.

31. *the house of Israel.* This locution (instead of "the people of Israel" or "the children of Israel [Israelites]") is unusual. Cassuto proposes that it is meant to indicate that the Israelite posterity of the original desert-wanderers preserved this name of manna for the wilderness food.

32. *for your generations.* Here the translation of *dorot* as "ages" in several modern versions is a little misleading because the point is that the *ʿomer* of manna is to be kept in order to be seen by posterity. The miraculous, and surely unhistorical, character of the memorial device is patent, for the evanescent manna is the last thing one could imagine to survive through the centuries, however tightly sealed.

34. *before the Covenant.* This phrase is clearly an ellipsis for "before the Ark of the Covenant." The problem is that the Ark of the Covenant, in which the two tables of the Law are kept, does not yet exist. The injunction here, then, must be read as an anticipation of the time when the Ark will be an established fact and a sacrosanct cultic focus.

CHAPTER 17

[1]And all the community of Israelites journeyed
onward from the Wilderness of Sin on their
journeyings by the LORD's direction, and they
encamped at Rephidim, and there was no water for the
people to drink. [2]And the people disputed with Moses
and they said, "Give us water, that we may drink."
And Moses said to them,

"Why do you dispute with me
and why do you test the LORD?"

[3]And the people thirsted for water there, and the
people murmured against Moses and said, "Why is it
you brought us up from Egypt to bring death on me
and my children and my livestock by thirst?" [4]And
Moses called out to the LORD, saying,

"What shall I do with this people?

Yet a little more and they will
stone me.”

5 And the LORD said to Moses, “Pass before the
people and take with you some of Israel’s elders, and
the staff with which you struck the Nile take in your
hand, and go. 6 Look, I am about to stand before you
there on the rock in Horeb, and you shall strike the
rock, and water will come out from it and the people
will drink.” And thus did Moses do before the eyes of
Israel’s elders. 7 And he called the name of the place
Massah and Meribah, Testing and Dispute, for the
disputation of the Israelites, and for their testing the
LORD, saying, “Is the LORD in our midst or not?”

8 And Amalek came and did battle with Israel at
Rephidim. 9 And Moses said to Joshua, “Choose men
for us and go out, battle against Amalek tomorrow. I
shall take my station on the hilltop, with the staff of
God in my hand.” 10 And Joshua did as Moses had said
to him to battle against Amalek, and Moses, Aaron,
and Hur had gone up to the hilltop. 11 And so, when
Moses would raise his hand, Israel prevailed, and when
he would put down his hand, Amalek prevailed. 12 And
Moses’s hands grew heavy, and they took a stone and

put it beneath him and he sat upon it. And Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on each side, and it happened that his hands were steady till the sun came down. [13]And Joshua disabled Amalek and its people by the edge of the sword. [14]And the LORD said to Moses, "Write this down as a remembrance in a record, and put it in Joshua's hearing, that I will surely wipe out the name of Amalek from under the heavens." [15]And Moses built an altar and he called its name *YHWH Nissi*, the LORD is My Banner. [16]And he said, "For hand upon Yah's throne: War for the LORD against Amalek from all time."

CHAPTER 17 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *by the LORD's direction*. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "by the LORD's mouth." God sets the itinerary, not Moses.

there was no water for the people to drink. In an alternating structure (A B A), the sequence of three "murmuring" episodes exhibits respectively complaints about lack of water, lack of food, and again lack of water.

2. *disputed.* The Hebrew verb often appears in judicial contexts, where it means to bring a legal complaint or disputation (the cognate noun *riv*). *Riv* is the term used in verse 7 in the phrase translated as "the disputation of the Israelites"; the name given the place there, Meribah, derives from the same root and means something closer to "contention."

Give us water. The Masoretic Text shows a plural form of the verb, which might suggest that Aaron is implicated with Moses in the complaint the

people make. But several ancient manuscripts have a singular form for "give," which seems more plausible, since the people have "disputed" or quarreled with Moses alone.

Why do you dispute with me / and why do you test the LORD*?* Moses gives weight and solemnity to his words by casting his reply in a neatly scannable line of parallelistic verse, as he does again in speaking to God a moment later. As in the episode at Elim, he identifies the complaint against him (first verset) as a complaint against God (second verset). Thus, the poetic parallelism becomes a vehicle for expressing the inseparability of Moses's leadership from God's.

3. *brought us up . . . to bring death on me and my children*. This sort of switch from first-person plural to first-person singular is good idiomatic usage in biblical Hebrew, especially in dialogue assigned to a collective entity. The switch allows the sharpness of the complaint to become more vivid as the prototypical individual speaker representing the people laments his own imminent death and that of his children.

4. *Yet a little more and they will stone me.* From the very beginning, at the burning bush, Moses had been doubtful that the people could trust him and accept his leadership. Now he feels something like desperate fear—that the people will actually kill him (an idea that Freud would understand as an accomplished fact).

5. *Pass before the people.* As both Rashi and Abraham ibn Ezra note, this might well be a direct response to Moses's expression of fear that the people will kill him: passing before the enraged people would be rather like running the gauntlet, and it is this that God compels him to do as the prelude to the demonstration of divine saving power.

the staff with which you struck the Nile. This staff was recognized by the people as the instrument Moses used to unleash awesome destruction against Egypt. Now, as Rashi observes, they will see that it can also be an instrument of benefaction.

7. *Testing and Dispute . . . disputation . . . testing*. The arrangement of the terms is neatly chiastic, just as the first pair of nouns here stand in a chiastic relation to the verbs "dispute" and "test" in verse 2. Ibn Ezra, who reads with

the eye of an accomplished poet as well as that of a philologist, firmly identifies the pattern.

8. *And Amalek came and did battle with Israel.* Rashi comments astutely on the sequence of episodes, the attack by a fierce enemy following upon the provision of water to the thirsty people: "You say, 'Is the LORD in our midst or not?' By your life, the dog comes and bites you and you come and cry out to Me, and you will know where I am."

9. *tomorrow.* The Masoretic cantillation marking places "tomorrow" at the beginning of the next clause, which makes the adverb a modifier of when Moses will take up his station, but it probably makes better sense as part of the instruction to Joshua about when he will be fighting.

11. *when Moses would raise his hand.* This gesture neatly cuts two ways. It could merely be the gesture of a general holding up a commander's baton or a standard (compare the reference to a "banner" in verse 15) in order to encourage his troops to attack, or the hand holding the staff could be the conduit, as in the earlier portents, for an influx of divine power. Throughout the passage, the Hebrew noun *yad* characteristically slides between "hand" (verse 9) and "arm" (probably here and surely in verse 12). It is worth retaining "hand" in all instances to catch the sense of thematized repetition in the Hebrew: Umberto Cassuto, who has a certain fixation on the discovery of repeated terms exhibiting formulaic numbers, notes that *yad* recurs precisely seven times in this episode.

12. *And Moses's hands grew heavy.* This could also be construed as "were heavy," i.e., they were heavy to begin with because Moses was an old man. The plural suggests that he raised both hands simultaneously, the one with the staff and the empty one, in a kind of spread-eagle gesture.

his hands were steady. The Hebrew appears to use an abstract noun instead of an adjective—conceivably, an emphatic form: "his hands were steadiness."

13. *disabled.* Several commentators have observed that the unusual verb here, *ḥalash* (evidently derived from a root that means "weak") has a punning echo in Deuteronomy 25:18, where the Israelite stragglers attacked by Amalek are referred to as *neḥeshalim* (the same root with a reversal of the last two

consonants). It should be noted that others, from Rashi to several twentieth-century scholars, think that this odd verb means "to decapitate." In any case, this image of a sword-wielding Hebrew commander cutting down the enemy is the first representation of Israelites evincing martial prowess rather than watching as God performs wonders and does battle for them.

14. *Write this down as a remembrance in a record.* In Genesis, with a certain degree of historical verisimilitude, the patriarchs give no evidence of using writing. Here it is assumed that writing is a primary mode of commemoration in the culture. It must be said that literacy is an early phenomenon in ancient Israel, though it is difficult to determine how far it might have extended, or whether it extended, beyond a learned elite. (In Judges 8, Gideon appears to assume that any lad he would encounter on the road would be capable of writing things down.) "Record" here reflects Hebrew *sefer*, which is used for anything cast in writing—a parchment or papyrus scroll that might contain narrative, inventorial, or genealogical material; a letter; and also what we would call a book.

I will surely wipe out the name of Amalek. The noun *zekher*, though cognate with "remembrance," *zikaron*, in the previous clause, here bears its usual meaning of "name," as in 3:15. The written record will continue to memorialize odious Amalek, but the nation will lose its "name," its posterity —an ultimate curse in the ancient Near East. In all this, as in the Plagues narrative, history is transformed into symbolic typology. Ancient Israel was surrounded by enemies—the Canaanite peoples with whom it fought for territory, marauders like the Midianites to the east and the Amalekites to the south, and the great empires of Mesopotamia and Egypt. Historical survival required nearly continual armed conflict. But distinctions are made among enemies, and Amalek here becomes the very type of the ruthless foe that seeks to annihilate Israel. (Hence much later, in the Book of Esther, Haman will be cast as a descendant of the Amalekite king Agag.) This nation, then, becomes the enemy of God Himself, Who pledges its utter destruction.

16. *For hand upon Yah's throne.* The hand is most likely an image of vow taking in this obscure, and probably archaic, sentence. There has even been some speculation that these words could be a quotation from the lost "Book of the Battles of YHWH" mentioned elsewhere (see the note on Numbers 21:14). The meaning of *kes*, the word translated as "throne," has been widely

disputed, and the term has been sometimes emended. The interpretation that goes back to Late Antiquity that it is a variant—archaic form?—of *kis'ei*, "throne," has the attraction of not exhibiting excessive ingenuity, and the idea of God's taking a vow by placing His hand on the divine throne is plausible.

from all time. The Hebrew noticeably says "from," *mi*, and not *l*^{e}, "for." Perhaps the meaning is the same, though this formulation could suggest a kind of mythic recess of ages, God warring against Amalek as far back as anyone can conceive and until this foe is destroyed.

CHAPTER 18

[1]And Jethro priest of Midian, Moses's father-in-law,
heard all that God had done for Moses and for Israel
His people, that the LORD had brought Israel out of
Egypt. [2]And Jethro, Moses's father-in-law, took
Zipporah, Moses's wife, after her being sent away,
[3]and her two sons, one of whom was named Gershom,
for he said, "A sojourner I have been in a foreign
land," [4]and the other was named Eliezer, "For the God
of my fathers was my aid and rescued me from
Pharaoh's sword." [5]And Jethro, Moses's father-in-law,
and his sons and his wife with him, came to Moses, to
the wilderness in which he was encamped, the
mountain of God. [6]And he said to Moses, "I, your
father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you, and your wife
and her two sons with her." [7]And Moses went out to
meet his father-in-law, and he bowed down and kissed
him, and each of them asked of the other's well-being,
and they went into the tent. [8]And Moses recounted to
his father-in-law all that the LORD had done to
Pharaoh and to Egypt for the sake of Israel, all the

hardship that had come upon them on the way, and the LORD had rescued them. [9]And Jethro exulted over all the bounty that the LORD had done for Israel, that He had rescued them from the hand of Egypt. [10]And Jethro said, “Blessed is the LORD, Who has rescued you from the hand of Egypt and from the hand of Pharaoh, Who rescued the people from under the hand of Egypt. [11]Now I know that the LORD is greater than all the gods, for in this thing that they schemed against them—.” [12]And Jethro, Moses’s father-in-law, took a burnt offering and sacrifices for God, and Aaron came, and all the elders of Israel with him, to eat bread with Moses’s father-in-law before God.

[13]And it happened on the next day that Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood over Moses from the morning till the evening. [14]And Moses’s father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, and he said, “What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why are you sitting alone while all the people are poised over you from morning till evening?” [15]And Moses said to his father-in-law, “For the people come to me to inquire of God. [16]When they have some matter, it comes to me and I judge between a man and his fellow and I make known God’s statutes

and His teachings.” [17]And Moses’s father-in-law said to him, “The thing that you are doing is not good. [18]You will surely wear yourself out—both you and this people that is with you—for the thing is too heavy for you, you will not be able to do it alone. [19]Now, heed my voice—I shall give you counsel, and may God be with you. Be you for the people over against God, and it shall be you who will bring the matters to God. [20]And you shall warn them concerning the statutes and the teachings, and you shall make known to them the way in which they must go and the deed which they must do. [21]As for you, you shall search out from all the people able, God-fearing men, truthful men, haters of bribes, and you shall put over them chiefs of thousands, chiefs of hundreds, chiefs of fifties, and chiefs of tens. [22]And they shall judge the people at all times, and so, every great matter they shall bring to you, and every small matter they themselves shall judge, and it will lighten from upon you and they will bear it with you. [23]If you will do this thing, God will charge you and you will be able to stand, and also all this people will come to its place in peace.” [24]And Moses heeded the voice of his father-in-law, and did all that he had said. [25]And Moses chose able men from all Israel and he set them as heads over the people, chiefs of thousands, chiefs of hundreds, chiefs of

fifties, and chiefs of tens. [26]And they judged the people at all times. The hard matters they would bring to Moses, and every small matter they themselves would judge. [27]And Moses sent off his father-in-law, and he went away to his land.

CHAPTER 18 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Jethro*. As Umberto Cassuto and others have noticed, this episode stands in neat thematic antithesis to the preceding one. After a fierce armed struggle with a hostile nation that Israel is enjoined to destroy, we have an encounter with a representative of another people, Midian, that is marked by harmonious understanding, mutual respect, and the giving of sage counsel. Cassuto points out that this antithesis is underscored through thematic key words: the Amalek episode begins and ends with a repetition of "battle" (or "war"). The Jethro episode begins with inquiries of "well-being" or "peace" (*shalom*) and near the end, "this people will come to its place in peace." Moses "chooses" men for war in the first episode and men for justice in the second. He sits on a stone at the battle and then sits in judgment. His hands are "heavy" in the battle scene and the judicial burden is "heavy" in the judgment scene. As for Midian, the later biblical record shows them acting as marauders crossing the Jordan to attack Israelite farms, but Jethro belongs to the Kenite clan of Midianites that had a particular relationship of loyal alliance with Israel.

2. *after her being sent away.* What this phrase refers to is uncertain. As we saw repeatedly in the Exodus narrative, "send" (the verbal stem *sh-l-ḥ*) has multiple meanings. The verbal noun used here, *shiluḥim*, sometimes means "divorce," but that is an unlikely scenario for Moses and Zipporah. The rare use of the term as "marriage gift" makes even less sense in this context. The most reasonable inference is that Moses, though he had started out for Egypt

with his wife and sons, at some point thought better of it and sent her and the boys home to stay in safety with her father. *The Midrash HaGadol* (seventh century) vividly dramatizes such a reading: When Aaron first comes out to the wilderness to meet Moses, he sees his brother's wife and sons and says: "'Where are you taking them?' He said to him, 'To Egypt.' He said to him, 'For the previous ones we are sorrow-stricken and now you are bringing us still others?' Immediately Moses said to her, 'Return to your father's house.'"

3. *Gershom.* In this poetic etymology, *ger*, "sojourner," is broken out from the rest of the name, which in fact appears to derive from the root *g-r-sh*, "to banish."

4. *was my aid and rescued me from Pharaoh's sword.* The name Eliezer means "my God is aid." The rescue from Pharaoh's sword probably refers, as Nahmanides proposes, to Moses's flight from Pharaoh's executioners after his killing of the Egyptian taskmaster. It could not refer to the victory at the Sea of Reeds because Eliezer had been born earlier, and it does not comfortably refer to the rescue of the infant Moses because swords were not involved in the decree of infanticide by drowning.

5. *the mountain of God.* There is a patent disruption of chronology here, as Abraham ibn Ezra and many others have noted, because in the immediately preceding episode the Israelites were at Rephidim, and it is only in the next chapter that they are reported to have arrived at Mount Sinai. This entire passage is thus a perfect illustration of the rabbinic dictum that "there is neither early nor late in the Torah," that is, that chronology may be violated in order to bring out certain thematic emphases (here, the antithesis between war/Amalek and peace/Jethro).

6. *And he said to Moses.* It is in the next verse that the two men meet, embrace, and inquire of each other's well-being. This has led Nahmanides and many others after him to infer that "said" here actually means something like "sent word."

7. *and they went into the tent.* After Moses's respectful and affectionate public greeting of his father-in-law, the two men withdraw to the privacy of Moses's tent, where the leader of the Hebrews will give Jethro a full account of the extraordinary events that occurred in Egypt and afterward.

11. *Now I know that the LORD is greater than all the gods.* Jethro's response to Moses's narrative is a perfect confirmation of the reiterated theme in the Exodus story that the LORD's great acts against Egypt will demonstrate His supremacy over all other imagined gods. Jethro, as a Midianite priest, appears to speak here as a henotheist rather than a monotheist, conceding the reality of other gods but affirming YHWH's unrivaled greatness.

for in this thing that they schemed against them. These words are quite obscure, and may well reflect a textual corruption. The chief problem is that the syntax breaks off, and an expected clause to complete it appears to be missing. The Targum Onkelos, in its explanatory Aramaic paraphrase, ingeniously proposes that "in this thing" refers to water—the Egyptians plotted to destroy the Hebrews by drowning and they themselves were then drowned.

12. *to eat bread.* Here "bread" is clearly a synecdoche for food (as in the English expression, "to eat the king's bread"), since the ceremonial meal after a sacrifice would have included meat saved from the *zevaḥim*, "sacrifices" (the burnt offering, by contrast, would have been entirely consumed by fire on the altar).

15. *to inquire of God.* Frequently, this is the phrase used for inquiry of an oracle, though here it obviously refers to obtaining a different sort of revelation of recalcitrant truth—a judge's determination of what is right according to the law.

18. *You will surely wear yourself out.* The literal meaning of the Hebrew verb is "to wither"—an appropriate idiom in an agricultural society for exhaustion from work as "burnout" is in a modern technological society.

19. *Be you for the people over against God, and it shall be you who will bring the matters to God.* Jethro, a priest by profession, assumes that the ultimate source of judicial insight for the chief justice is from God, and so Moses is to serve as a kind of intercessor between the people and God.

21. *search out.* The Hebrew is literally "envision."

able, God-fearing men, truthful men, haters of bribes. Quite similar language for the recruitment of judges occurs in both Hittite and Egyptian documents dating from the late second millennium B.C.E.

put over them. That is, over the people as a whole.

chiefs of thousands. The Hebrew for "chief," *sar*, is usually a military term ("commander"), and this neat, numerically divided judicial organization has the look of a military command structure. Scholars have noted that it is far better suited to the royal bureaucracy of the First Commonwealth period than to the rough-and-ready conditions of nomadic life in the wilderness.

22. *every great matter.* Throughout, "matter" is the polyvalent Hebrew *davar*, which means "word," "thing," "matter," "affair," "mission," and more. Cassuto observes that *davar* in the singular occurs exactly ten times in this episode and that it might be a kind of coded prelude to the immediately following episode of the Ten Commandments, which in the Hebrew are called the Ten Words, *ʿAseret haDibrot*.

it will lighten . . . they will bear it. Both "it"s are supplied for purposes of clarity in the translation. The language of course reflects the image of judicial responsibility as a heavy burden.

23. *will come to its place in peace.* Evidently: will go home at the end of the day in a state of well-being or mental contentment. But some have proposed that the clause could refer to coming into the promised land.

26. *The hard matters.* The replacement of "great" by "hard" is a kind of explanatory gloss. Lest we think that "great" meant "important"—let us say, involving large issues of wealth—this substitution informs us that it is the legal cases that are difficult to resolve which would be given to Moses.

27. *And Moses sent off his father-in-law.* The "sending off" is obviously a ceremonious and amicable leave-taking, though it is precisely the verb used repeatedly in the Exodus narrative for what Pharaoh is implored to do for Israel. The verb also neatly closes the episode in a ring structure, picking up the "being sent away" of verse 2.

he went away. The Hebrew uses an ethical dative, literally "he went him" (as in "Go forth [go you] from your land," Genesis 12:1). Its effect seems to be something like "away" or "on his way."

CHAPTER 19

[1]On the third new moon of the Israelites' going out
from Egypt, on this day did they come to the
Wilderness of Sinai. [2]And they journeyed onward
from Rephidim and they came to the Wilderness of
Sinai, and Israel camped there over against the
mountain. [3]And Moses had gone up to God, and the
LORD called out to him from the mountain, saying,
"Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob, and shall
you tell to the Israelites: [4]'You yourselves saw what I
did to Egypt, and I bore you on the wings of eagles
and I brought you to Me. [5]And now, if you will truly
heed My voice and keep My covenant, you will
become for Me a treasure among all the peoples, for
Mine is all the earth. [6]And as for you, you will become
for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These
are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites."

[7]And Moses came and he called to the elders of the
people, and he set before them all these words that the

LORD had charged him. [8]And all the people answered
together and said, “Everything that the LORD has
spoken we shall do.” And Moses brought back the
people’s words to the LORD. [9]And the LORD said to
Moses, “Look, I am about to come to you in the
utmost cloud, so that the people may hear as I speak to
you, and you as well they will trust for all time.” And
Moses told the people’s words to the LORD. [10]And the
LORD said to Moses, “Go to the people and
consecrate them today and tomorrow, and they shall
wash their cloaks. [11]And they shall ready themselves
for the third day, for on the third day the LORD will
come down before the eyes of all the people on Mount
Sinai. [12]And you shall set bounds for the people all
around, saying, ‘Watch yourselves not to go up on the
mountain or to touch its edge. Whosoever touches the
mountain is doomed to die. [13]No hand shall touch him,
but he shall surely be stoned or be shot, whether beast
or man, he shall not live. When the ram’s horn blasts
long, they it is who will go up the mountain.’” [14]And
Moses came down from the mountain to the people,
and he consecrated the people, and they washed their
cloaks. [15]And he said to the people, “Ready yourselves
for three days. Do not go near a woman.” [16]And it
happened on the third day as it turned morning, that
there was thunder and lightning and a heavy cloud on

the mountain and the sound of the ram's horn, very strong, and all the people who were in the camp trembled. [17]And Moses brought out the people toward God from the camp and they stationed themselves at the bottom of the mountain. [18]And Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD had come down on it in fire, and its smoke went up like the smoke from a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. [19]And the sound of the ram's horn grew stronger and stronger. Moses would speak, and God would answer him with voice. [20]And the LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the mountaintop, and the LORD called Moses to the mountaintop, and Moses went up. [21]And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, warn the people, lest they break through to the LORD to see and many of them perish. [22]And the priests, too, who come near to the LORD, shall consecrate themselves, lest the LORD burst forth against them." [23]And Moses said to the LORD, "The people will not be able to come up to Mount Sinai, for You Yourself warned us, saying, 'Set bounds to the mountain and consecrate it.'" [24]And the LORD said to him, "Go down, and you shall come up, you and Aaron with you, and the priests and the people shall not break through to go up to the LORD, lest He burst forth against them." [25]And Moses went down to the people and said it to them.

CHAPTER 19 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *On the third new moon . . . did they come*. Umberto Cassuto aptly observes that instead of the usual "and it happened" (*wayehi*) that marks the beginning of narrative units, this portentous moment—the pivotal one in the whole Torah—begins abruptly (using the perfective instead of the expected imperfective verb form), "as though to notify us that here begins a theme that stands alone, that is unique."

new moon. This is the common biblical meaning of *ḥodesh*, though it can also mean "month," its usual meaning in later Hebrew. The fact that the phrase in apposition, "on this day," refers to one particular day makes the sense of "new moon" inevitable, and this is also the consensus of medieval Hebrew commentators.

2. *And they journeyed onward from Rephidim.* After the stark statement of the crucial narrative datum in the preceding verse that the Israelites had arrived in the Wilderness of Sinai, we get a report that picks up the itinerary of wanderings, tracing the trajectory from the previous stage, Rephidim, to Sinai, and now specifying that the place of encampment is not just the Wilderness of Sinai but over against the mountain.

3. *And Moses had gone up to God.* The Hebrew, like this translation, has an indication of pluperfect tense, suggesting that even as the people were pitching their tents opposite the mountain, Moses, who after his epiphany at the burning bush knew this place as "the mountain of God," had made his way to the heights to speak with God.

Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob, and shall you tell to the Israelites. The perfect poetic parallelism, both semantic and rhythmic, of this sentence signals the lofty, strongly cadenced language, akin to epic in its grandeur, of the entire episode.

4. *I bore you on the wings of eagles.* Although no one has succeeded in squaring this grand image with ornithological behavior, the soaring eagle's

supremacy among birds is meant to suggest the majestic divine power that miraculously swept up the Hebrews and bore them off from the house of bondage. The metaphorical implication is that the Hebrews themselves are helpless fledglings, unable to fly on their own. (Compare Deuteronomy 32:11.)

5. *you will become for Me a treasure among all the peoples, for Mine is all the earth.* "Treasure" (*segulah*), as Yitzhak Avishur has pointed out, is paired in a Ugaritic document with "vassal" (Hebrew, *ʿeved*), and seems to be a term borrowed from the realm of precious objects for contexts of covenants: the faithful vassal becomes the cherished treasure of his sovereign. Because the LORD is, as He declares here, sovereign of all the earth, it is His prerogative to privilege one people among the many as His special treasure.

6. *a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.* The implementation of the divine promise that Israel will become God's treasure is conditional on Israel's upholding the terms of the Covenant. In the covenantal passages in Genesis, it was stipulated that Abraham's seed must do justice and righteousness. The aspiration here is wound to a still higher pitch, envisaging an Israel that will earn its special status before the deity by becoming a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Should this be construed as divine hyperbole? In any case, the chasm between that ideal and the actual behavior of the people will continue to preoccupy the biblical writers, through to the Prophets.

7. *he set before them all these words.* Words (*devarim*) are imagined in biblical Hebrew to be virtually palpable entities, which can be put before people, which have powerful consequences from the moment they are spoken. It may well be, as Cassuto proposes, that the highlighting of *devarim* in this episode is a kind of prelude to the giving of the Ten Words that immediately follows.

8. *Moses brought back the people's words to the LORD.* Presumably, God would have had no trouble hearing what the people said without Moses's help. This formulation, however, stresses Moses's crucial role as intermediary in this episode: God is up on the mountain, the people are down below, and Moses shuttles up and down between the two. Herein lies a principal justification for the recurrence of "go up" and "come down" as thematic key words, a feature of the chapter noted by Everett Fox.

9. *in the utmost cloud.* The Hebrew *ʿav he anan* brackets together two words that mean the same thing and that elsewhere are paired in poetic parallelism. The effect would seem to be a kind of epic intensification. (Compare 10:22, "pitch-dark," which similarly puts together two synonyms, *ḥoshekh ʾafelah*.) It should be noted that *ʿav* means "cloud" and is not the same as *ʿaveh*, "thick," as most translations have assumed.

10. *their cloaks.* The Hebrew *semalot* means "cloaks" or some sort of outer wrap, and is not the general word for garments, *begadim*, though it may well be a synecdoche for garments here. The choice of this term is probably dictated by the fact that it is *semalot* that the Hebrews borrow from their Egyptian neighbors as they flee. It thus makes particular sense that they are enjoined now as part of the process of consecration to launder these cloaks they took off the backs of Egyptian idolators.

13. *No hand shall touch him.* Some construe the Hebrew masculine pronoun *bo* as "it," referring to Mount Sinai, because the previous verse has pronounced a ban on touching even the edge of the mountain. The clear syntactical connection of this clause, however, as Abraham ibn Ezra sees, is with the two clauses that follow: the transgressor is to be killed from a distance, by stoning or arrows—perhaps because by violating this taboo he has set himself irrevocably apart from the community.

they it is who will go up the mountain. The pronoun *hemah*, "they," is placed in an emphatic position. The most plausible referent is Moses and Aaron, in contradistinction to the rest of the people.

16. *there was thunder and lightning and a heavy cloud on the mountain and the sound of the ram's horn.* It trivializes the grand solemnity and the epic sweep of this narrative moment to "explain" it through the purported origins of YHWH as a desert-storm god. In the Syro-Palestinian tradition of mythological poetry upon which the Hebrew writer drew for his imagery, thunder and lightning were the martial accoutrements of the sky god, as they are often in biblical poetry. Literature being an essentially conservative and self-recapitulative medium, a continuity of poetic tropes does not necessarily mean a continuity of theology—the pagan epic apparatus of Milton's *Paradise Lost* is a central case in point. The Sinai encounter is imagined as the decisive moment in human history when the celestial and terrestrial realms are brought

into panoramic engagement, and as God comes down on the mountain, every sort of natural fireworks is let loose, so that trembling seizes not only the people but the mountain itself. The word for "thunder," *qolot*, is not the usual *raʿam* but the word that generally means "voices" or "sounds," and so it is orchestrated with "the sound of the ram's horn" (*qol hashofar*) that reverberates so strongly against the ground-base of the thunder. (The word for "ram's horn" here is different from *yovel*, the term used in verse 13, but there does not seem to be any important difference in meaning.) It is something of a mystery as to where this ram's horn comes from and who is blowing it. Since ram's horns were used both in calls to arms and in coronation ceremonies, one may assume this blast is of celestial origin, probably blown by a member of God's angelic entourage, to announce the awe-inspiring descent of the King of all the earth to deliver the Ten Words to His people.

19. *with voice.* The same multivalent Hebrew word *qol* has encouraged some interpreters to render this as "in thunder." That translation may sound more impressive, but it is unlikely for two reasons. *Qol* in the singular, as against *qolot* in the plural, means "voice" or "sound," not "thunder." And the heart of the whole story of the Sinai epiphany is that God addresses Moses with words (*devarim*), not with *son et lumière*, which are merely the atmospheric prelude to divine speech. The sense, then, of "Moses would speak, and God would answer him with voice" is that Moses and God actually exchange speech on the mountain, as a man would speak with his fellow man. This speech evidently is endowed with miraculous audibility, since it takes place against the most intense background noise of thunder and the constantly mounting blast of the ram's horn.

21. *Go down, warn the people, lest they break through.* God is repeating instructions that have already been carried out, a fact registered by Moses in his response (verse 23: "You Yourself warned us . . ."). The point of the repetition is to underscore the absolute inviolability of the boundary between the mountain where the deity is so awesomely manifested and the people, and to dramatize Moses's necessary role as intermediary going down to the people and up to the mountaintop.

perish. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "fall." The deity is imagined as setting up a sort of terrific force field that, when violated, "bursts forth"—the

same verb is used elsewhere as a response to violation of sancta—to destroy the trespasser.

22. *And the priests.* This reference is a little puzzling because as yet there has been no report of the establishment of a priestly caste. Perhaps the priesthood was so fundamental to the constitution of the people for the later writer that he assumed it must always have existed. Perhaps Moses already designated priests from the tribe of Levi, for sacrifices were offered after the victory over Amalek. Ibn Ezra solves the problem by identifying "priests" here with the firstborn—a proposal that may have some historical merit, presupposing an archaic period in which priestly functions were performed by the firstborn.

who come near to the LORD. Even though their priestly role allows them to approach the LORD by offering sacrifices to Him, in this overwhelming manifestation of God's presence, they are to consecrate themselves like the rest of the people and remain within the boundary Moses has marked at the bottom of the mountain.

25. *And Moses went down to the people and said it to them.* The object of "said" ("it") is supplied by the translation, which follows the decisive consensus of traditional Hebrew commentators that assumes the content of the saying is the warning about not crossing the boundary which God has just asked Moses to convey to the people. Normally, the verb "to say" would be followed by quoted speech, whereas the verb "to speak" (*diber*) does not typically require quoted speech after it. Perhaps "to say" is used here for Moses in order to avoid any overlap with God's speech-act in the very next verse: "And God spoke (*wayedaber*) these words (*devarim*)." It should be kept in mind that the chapter breaks are medieval, so the original text moved directly from Moses's saying to God's speaking.

CHAPTER 20

[1]And God spoke all these words, saying: [2]"I am the
LORD your God Who brought you out of the land of
Egypt, out of the house of slaves. [3]You shall have no
other gods beside Me. [4]You shall make you no carved
likeness and no image of what is in the heavens above
or what is on the earth below or what is in the waters
beneath the earth. [5]You shall not bow to them and you
shall not worship them, for I am the LORD your God,
a jealous god, reckoning the crime of fathers with
sons, with the third generation and with the fourth, for
My foes, [6]and doing kindness to the thousandth
generation for My friends and for those who keep My
commands. [7]You shall not take the name of the LORD
your God in vain, for the LORD will not acquit
whosoever takes His name in vain. [8]Remember the
sabbath day to hallow it. [9]Six days you shall work and
you shall do all your tasks, [10]but the seventh day is a
sabbath to the LORD your God. You shall do no task,
you and your son and your daughter, your male slave
and your slavegirl and your beast and your sojourner

who is within your gates. [11]For six days did the LORD
make the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is
in it, and He rested on the seventh day. Therefore did
the LORD bless the sabbath day and hallow it. [12]Honor
your father and your mother, so that your days may be
long on the soil that the LORD your God has given
you. [13]You shall not murder. [14]You shall not commit
adultery. [15]You shall not steal. [16]You shall not bear
false witness against your fellow man. [17]You shall not
covet your fellow man's house. You shall not covet
your fellow man's wife, or his male slave, or his
slavegirl, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that
your fellow man has."

[18]And all the people were seeing the thunder and the
flashes and the sound of the ram's horn and the
mountain in smoke, and the people saw and they drew
back and stood at a distance. [19]And they said to Moses,
"Speak you with us that we may hear, and let not God
speak with us lest we die." [20]And Moses said to the
people, "Do not fear, for in order to test you God has
come and in order that His fear be upon you, so that
you do not offend." [21]And the people stood at a
distance, and Moses drew near the thick cloud where
God was.

[22]And the LORD said to Moses, “Thus shall you say to the Israelites: ‘You yourselves saw that from the heavens I spoke with you. [23]You shall not make with Me gods of silver and gods of gold, you shall not make them for yourselves. [24]An earthen altar shall you make for Me, and you shall sacrifice upon it your burnt offerings and your communion sacrifices, your sheep and your cattle. In every place that I make My name invoked, I shall come to you and bless you. [25]And should you make Me an altar of stones, you shall not build them of hewn stones, for your sword you would brandish over it and profane it. [26]And you shall not go up by steps upon My altar, that you may not expose your nakedness upon it.’”

CHAPTER 20 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *all these words*. The number ten is not stipulated, but the formulaic number ten, despite other ancient numerations of the commandments, exerted a powerful force. Jewish and Christian traditions have different ways of dividing the “words,” here called *devarim* but in later Hebrew usage usually referred to as *dibrot* (singular, *diber*), which means something like “utterance” or perhaps even “inspired speech.” The formulation of the ten injunctions is, in the most literal sense, lapidary—terse enough to be carved in stone. There is a good deal of plausibility, then, in the inference of some scholars that the wordier commandments here embody explanatory glosses on or elaborations

of the original succinct formulations. Moshe Weinfeld proposes that the original version might have looked something like this:

1. I am the LORD your God; you shall have no other gods beside Me.
2. You shall make you no carved likeness.
3. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.
4. Remember the sabbath day to hallow it.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your fellow man.
10. You shall not covet.

The Hebrew, it should be said, is even more compact: commandments 6, 7, and 8, for example, are each only two words, three syllables. Other ancient Near Eastern cultures customarily used tablets—as a rule, clay and not stone—for writing, whereas the Hebrews adopted the speedier and more efficient writing technology of ink on parchment or papyrus scrolls, which made detailed verbal elaboration easier. The Hebrews did, however, use stone tablets for monumental inscriptions, as a few recovered fragments indicate. The use of stone tablets (the medium will be mentioned later) is most probably dictated by the fact that these Ten Words amount to the text of a pact between God and Israel, and such covenantal texts were typically recorded on tablets of metal or stone.

But writing on stone is also an *archaic* medium of communication and as such lines up with the archaic cooking (fire-roasting) and the archaic baking (unleavened bread) earlier in the story.

2. *I am the LORD.* As we had occasion to note in earlier passages, this formal announcement of the identity of the sovereign whose authority underwrites what is to follow is a convention of ancient Near Eastern royal proclamations.

3. *You shall have no other gods.* Throughout the Ten Words the commands are cast in the second-person singular (elsewhere in Hebrew law, plurals or third-person singulars are often used): the commandments are addressed to each person in Israel.

beside Me. The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "upon my face." As Abraham ibn Ezra acutely observes, this same idiom, *ʿal peney*, is used in Genesis 11:28 in "Haran died in the lifetime of [*ʿal peney*] Terah his father." The sense here, then, may be something like this: I am eternally, and so you must have no other god alongside Me, instead of Me, infringing on My eternal presence that brooks no successors.

4. *the heavens above . . . the earth below . . . the waters beneath the earth*. These are the three realms of the biblical world-picture, each duly registered in the first Creation story. If the LORD in His initial proclamation announces himself as the God of history, "Who brought you out of the land of Egypt," here the language implies that He is equally the God of the cosmos, not limited to one of its realms (in contrast, for example, to Aton, elevated by Akhenaten over all other gods of Egypt but still a solar deity). In Canaanite mythology, as in the corresponding mythologies of other ancient peoples, different gods presided over the different realms of creation: Baal over the land, Yamm over the sea, Mot over the underworld. The invocation here of pagan pantheons argues strongly that the ban against fashioning images is a ban against cultic icons (verse 5, "You shall not bow to them . . .") and not, as some currents of later tradition concluded, a comprehensive prohibition of image-making.

5. *a jealous god.* The Hebrew *qanaʾ* can mean either "jealous" (including the sexual sense) or "zealous," "ardent." The appearance of the term in connection with God's banning all cultic rivals suggests that the leading edge of the word here may in fact be jealousy. The revolutionary idea of a single God uniting all the realms of creation may be a noble and philosophically bold idea, but it is imagined in ancient Israel in powerfully anthropomorphic terms: God does not tolerate rivals to the hearts of His people. The word "god" here is not capitalized because the Hebrew employs the generic term *ʾel*: this, the LORD is saying, is the kind of god I am, and you had better take that to heart.

reckoning the crime of fathers with sons . . . for My foes. This troubling statement is explained by many Hebrew exegetes through reference to "my foes" (or, "those who hate Me") at the end of the clause—it is often the way of the world for sons to follow the path of their fathers, and as long as the offspring of the original offenders qualify as God's foes, they will be subject

to retribution. But the ancient view may well have been that God's mercy was manifest in demanding retribution from only three or four generations while granting kindness for a thousand generations. The word "foes" here is antithetically paired with "for My friends," (or "those who love Me") in verse 6.

6. *doing kindness to.* This could also be rendered as "keeping faith with"—*ḥesed* is an act of kindness and also the loyal performance of an obligation in an alliance or treaty.

the thousandth generation. The Hebrew *ʾalafim* would ordinarily mean "thousands," but the parallel passage in Deuteronomy 7:9 plausibly glosses this as a reference to generations, in parallel to the previous verse.

7. *take the name of the LORD your God in vain.* The Hebrew verb literally means "bear" and indicates the taking of a vow or oath. The reference is to the use of the potent divine name in adjuration and perhaps also in magical conjuration, not to the mentioning of the name in casual speech. "In vain" has the sense of "falsely."

8. *Remember the sabbath day.* This sole ritual—or at least calendric—injunction among the Ten Commandments is a hinge that connects the two principal aspects of the deity already invoked: the God of creation and the God of history. The observance of the sabbath is a commemoration or reenactment of God's creation of the world, as verse 11 explains. At the same time, the liberation from labor, especially with the stipulation that one's male and female slaves should equally be freed of labor on the seventh day, surely would have brought to the mind of these newly freed slaves the blessings of freedom, of cessation from labor. Jewish liturgy would pick up this clue by designating the sabbath "a remembrance of the going out from Egypt."

9. *tasks.* In the Hebrew a collective noun in the singular.

12. *Honor your father and your mother.* This fifth commandment (according to the numeration of Jewish tradition) effects a transition, as Nahmanides nicely observes, from obligations vis-à-vis God to obligations vis-à-vis human beings, beginning with the human pair through whom each of us comes into the world. It is also the only commandment in which "no" or "not" (Hebrew *loʾ*) does not appear, though some have argued that prohibitions—e.g., not

showing disrespect—are implicit. (In any event, the assumption of these Ten Words is that the way to monotheistic loyalty and ethical behavior is paved with prohibitions, that human nature is fraught with impulses that must be resisted.) It is hard to square the causal link between honoring parents and longevity with empirical observation, and one probably has to regard this as part of the traditional wisdom of the ancient Near East, the sort of hopeful moral calculus reflected in the Book of Proverbs.

on the soil. The Hebrew *ʾadamah* could also mean "land" or "earth," but an emphasis on soil (the same stuff of which the altar in verse 24 is fashioned) sounds right for a people who will chiefly make their living from farming.

13. *You shall not murder.* Readers thoroughly conditioned by the King James Version's "Thou shalt not kill" need to be reminded that the Hebrew verb *ratsaḥ* clearly means "murder," not "kill," and so that ban is specifically on criminal acts of taking of life.

17. *You shall not covet.* The Hebrew verb *ḥamad* exhibits a range of meaning from "yearn for," "desire," even "lust after" (the usual sense in postbiblical Hebrew), to simply "want." But here, as in 34:24, it clearly suggests wanting to possess something that belongs to someone else, and so the King James Version rendering of "covet" still seems the best English equivalent. The attempted legislation of desire is problematic enough for Abraham ibn Ezra to devote what is almost a miniature essay to the subject in his commentary. His solution is along the following lines: Desire itself cannot be absolutely legislated but we all learn to condition ourselves as to what is realistic desire and what has to be confined to the realm of mere fantasy—for both moral and practical reasons. A peasant, ibn Ezra argues (perhaps a little too confidently), may be struck by the beauty of a princess, but knowing that she is inconceivably beyond his reach, "he will not covet her [or, lust after her] in his heart to go to bed with her."

18. *seeing the thunder and the flashes and the sound of the ram's horn.* Logically, of course, the objects of seeing would be only the lightning and the smoking mountain, but the writer presents the Sinai epiphany as one tremendous synesthetic experience that overwhelms the people while—the temporal force of the participial "seeing"—the Ten Words are enunciated.

Just as *qolot*, "sounds" or "voices," is not the usual word for thunder, *lapidim*, "flashes," is not the usual designation for lightning but rather a term that generally means "torches," here conveying the visual immediacy of the lightning flashes.

drew back. Literally "swayed," suggesting a motion of involuntary recoil.

23. *with Me.* The preposition *ʾiti* appears to have approximately the same meaning as *ʿal panai*, "beside Me," in the first commandment, and this prohibition of idol-making is a reiteration of the first of the Ten Words.

make them. The accusative pronoun is merely implied in the Hebrew.

24. *An earthen altar.* These instructions have the effect of orienting the people toward a temporal horizon when they will be planted on the soil (*ʾadamah*, the material for building this altar). As Umberto Cassuto notes, this injunction dissipates any sense the people might have that Sinai alone is God's dwelling place and that the worship of the deity is a one-time event. The earthen material of the altar is also in stark antithesis to the silver and gold of the idols.

In every place that I make My name invoked. As scholarship has abundantly observed, the presumption here of a multiplicity of valid places for sacrifice contrasts with the later insistence of Deuteronomy on a centralized cult "in the place that I choose."

25. *your sword.* English translations from Tyndale in the early sixteenth century to a spectrum of translations at the end of the twentieth century have rendered this as "tool" because the context obviously requires an implement for hewing stone. But the Hebrew *ḥerev* patently means "sword," here a kind of metaphoric stand-in for "chisel," and pointedly used because of its association with killing. Rashi succinctly catches the implication of the term: "The altar was created to lengthen a man's days and iron was created to shorten a man's days; it is not fit that the means of shortening should be brandished over the means of lengthening."

26. *that you may not expose your nakedness.* The priests in fact wore linen breeches and so would not have had this problem, though this text probably antedates the introduction of trousers that the Priestly writers adopted. The prohibition, then, as Nahum Sarna notes, may envision a local altar where sacrifice is offered by laymen, who would have been wearing loose tunics

without undergarments (like the dancing David in 2 Samuel 6). There is some evidence of ritual nudity in the ancient Near East, to which this injunction might be a response.

CHAPTER 21

[1]“‘And these are the laws that you shall set before
them. [2]Should you buy a Hebrew slave, six years he
shall serve and in the seventh he shall go free, with no
payment. [3]If he came by himself, he shall go out by
himself. If he was husband to a wife, his wife shall go
out with him. [4]If his master should give him a wife and
she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her
children shall be her master’s, and he shall go out by
himself. [5]And if the slave should solemnly say, “I love
my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go
free,” [6]his master shall make him approach the gods
and make him approach the door or the doorpost, and
his master shall pierce his ear with an awl, and he shall
serve him perpetually. [7]And should a man sell his
daughter as a slavegirl, she shall not go free as the
male slaves go free. [8]If she seem bad in the eyes of her
master, for whom she was intended, he shall let her be
redeemed; to an outsider he shall have no power to sell
her since he has broken faith with her. [9]And if for his
son he intended her, according to the practice of

daughters he shall do for her. [10]If another woman he
should take for himself, he must not stint for this one
her meals, her wardrobe, and her conjugal rights.
[11]And if he does not do these three for her, she shall go
free without payment, with no money. [12]He who strikes
a man and he dies is doomed to die. [13]And he who did
not plot it but God made it befall him, I shall set apart
for you a place to which he may flee. [14]And should a
man scheme against his fellow man to kill him by
cunning, from My altar you shall take him to die.
[15]And he who strikes his father or his mother is
doomed to die. [16]And he who kidnaps a man and sells
him or he is found in his hands, is doomed to die.
[17]And he who vilifies his father or his mother is
doomed to die. [18]And should men quarrel and a man
strike his fellow man with stone or with fist and he
does not die but falls ill, [19]if he gets up and goes about
outside on his cane, the striker shall be clear, only he
shall pay for his loss of time, and he shall surely stand
good for his cure. [20]And should a man strike his male
slave or his slavegirl with a rod and they die under his
hand, they shall surely be avenged. [21]But if a day or
two they should survive, they are not to be avenged for
they are his money. [22]And should men brawl and
collide with a pregnant woman and her fetus come out
but there be no other mishap, he shall surely be

punished according to what the woman's husband
imposes upon him, he shall pay by the reckoning.
[23]And if there is a mishap, you shall pay a life for a
life, [24]an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for
a hand, a foot for a foot, [25]a burn for a burn, a wound
for a wound, a bruise for a bruise. [26]And should a man
strike the eye of his male slave or the eye of his
slavegirl and ruin it, he shall send them off free for
their eye. [27]And if he should knock out the tooth of his
male slave or the tooth of his slavegirl, he shall send
them off free for the tooth. [28]And should an ox gore a
man or a woman and they die, the ox shall surely be
stoned and its flesh shall not be eaten, and the ox's
owner is clear. [29]And if the ox is a gorer from time
past and was warned against to his owner, who did not
keep it in, and it caused the death of a man or a
woman, the ox shall be stoned and its owner, too, shall
be put to death. [30]If restitution be set for him, he shall
pay for the redemption of his life whatever will be set
for him. [31]Whether a son it gore or a daughter it gore,
according to this practice it shall be done to him. [32]If
the ox should gore a male slave or a slavegirl, thirty
shekels of silver he shall give to their master and the
ox shall be stoned. [33]And should a man open a pit or
should a man dig a pit and not cover it and an ox or
donkey fall in, [34]the owner of the pit shall pay silver,

shall make good to its owner, and the carcass shall be his. [35]And should a man's ox collide with his fellow man's ox and it die, they shall sell the live ox and divide the money for it equally, and the carcass, too, they shall divide equally. [36]Or if it is known that the ox is a gorer from time past and its owner did not keep it in, he shall surely pay an ox for the ox, and the carcass shall be his. [37]Should a man steal an ox or a sheep and slaughter it or sell it, five cattle he shall pay for the ox and four sheep for the sheep.'"

CHAPTER 21 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And these are the laws*. After the ten divine imperatives, couched in absolute terms and addressed to each Israelite in the second-person singular, we have a series of miscellaneous laws formulated casuistically (i.e., according to hypothetical case: "Should a man do X, . . ."). This collection of laws, which make up chapter 21 through chapter 23, is conventionally called the Book of the Covenant, in accordance with the phrase used in 24:7 ("And he [Moses] took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people"), though some scholars have questioned whether the text referred to that Moses reads to the people is really the same as this legal miscellany. It is probably one of the oldest collections of law in the Bible; it exhibits numerous parallels with (as well as divergences from) the Code of Hammurabi, with sundry other Sumerian and Akkadian codes, and with Hittite law, all of which have been abundantly studied in the scholarly literature.

you shall set before them. The "you" (singular) is Moses.

2. *Should you buy a Hebrew slave.* Pointedly, the first laws in the group deal with the regulation of slavery, addressed in the narrative situation to an audience of newly freed slaves. That situation may dictate the somewhat unexpected designation, "Hebrew slave" (rather than "a slave from your people" or "a slave from your brothers") because that was the identity of the Israelites in the eyes of their Egyptian masters, "Hebrew" generally being a foreigner's label for an Israelite.

and in the seventh he shall go free. What is clearly involved is not chattel slavery but what amounts to a kind of indentured servitude. The Bible does not question this institution but sets certain limits on it, and, as one can see in the subsequent laws, the slave retains basic human rights.

3. *by himself.* The unusual Hebrew term, *begapo*, might mean, according to Umberto Cassuto, "the corner, or wing [of a garment]." If this is the case, it would have the idiomatic force of "with the shirt on his back" (and nothing else).

4. *the wife and her children shall be her master's.* The evident implication is that the master gave this slavegirl to the male slave for breeding purposes, not for sentimental reasons. The next verse, however, reflects a recognition that even in such brutally economic circumstances the man may develop an emotional attachment to the woman and to their children.

5. *if the slave should solemnly say.* The emphatic force here of the infinitive followed by the conjugated verb *ʾamor yoʾmar* is to indicate a performative speech-act, a binding public declaration.

6. *make him approach the gods and make him approach the door or the doorpost.* The word translated here as "gods" (*ʾelohim*) is a famous crux. Though plural in form, when it is treated grammatically as a singular it usually means "God." When it is treated as a plural it usually means "gods," although occasionally it appears to designate some sort of celestial beings who are less than God. In this sequence one cannot tell whether it is singular or plural. Rabbinic tradition sought to avert any possible scandal in the verse by interpreting *ʾelohim* as "judges," but the philological evidence for that understanding is slim. The most plausible proposal that has been made is that the reference is to household gods: there are several ancient Near Eastern documents indicating that these were placed by the doorposts, and that

certain legal declarations regarding a person's relation to the household were made in their presence, at the doorway. This premonotheistic detail may reflect the very old age of the law, and the repetitive phrase "and make him approach the door or doorpost" may well be a somewhat later gloss intended to explain what "made him approach the *ʾelohim*" meant. It certainly makes more sense that the door in question should be the door of the household to which the slave is perpetually committing himself and not, as others have claimed, the door of a sanctuary or of a judicial court.

pierce his ear with an awl. There is no consensus on the symbolism, though it is not implausible that the ear might be thought of as the organ of obedience. Perhaps no symbolism is intended, and piercing the ear is a way of permanently marking the perpetual slave without serious mutilation, or perhaps the pierced ear might have been used to wear a ring bearing the master's mark or initial.

7. *And should a man sell his daughter as a slavegirl.* From what follows, it is clear that the impoverished father is selling her not to perform labor, as is the case of the male slave, but as some sort of concubine. It is for this reason that the conditions of her manumission differ from those of the male slave.

8. *If she seem bad in the eyes of her master.* That is, if he finds anything about her that disinclines him to keep her as a sexual partner.

an outsider. The Hebrew *ʿam nokhri* (elsewhere, it would mean "a foreign people") is probably an archaic social term—another reflection of the ancient character of the document—with *ʿam* meaning "kin."

broken faith with her. Literally, "betrayed her." He has not honored his commitment to keep her as concubine.

10. *meals.* The Hebrew uses a relatively rare term for "meat," clearly a synecdoche for food.

wardrobe. Literally, "covering."

conjugal rights. Although this translation reflects the strong consensus of Hebrew commentators, the term *ʿonah* is much in dispute. Since the master has rejected the woman as a bedmate, it does seem odd to require him to make conjugal visits. Some have interpreted the term as "housing" by relating it to *maʿon*, "habitation." Others, noting a husband's threefold obligation in other ancient Near Eastern documents to provide his wife food, clothing, and

oil or unguents, propose that *ʿonah* refers to such cosmetic necessities, although the philological grounds for that claim are uncertain.

12. *He who strikes a man.* Cassuto notes a general structural parallel to the Decalogue. The list of laws begins with regulations about slavery, just as the first commandment begins by mentioning the liberation from slavery. The next group of laws begins with murder, just as the second half of the Decalogue does.

13. *I shall set apart for you a place to which he may flee.* The presupposition of this institution of places of sanctuary for people who have committed involuntary manslaughter is vendetta justice: the members of the family bent on "redeeming the blood" (*geʾulat hadam*) of their dead kinsman, even if the killing was unintended, would not be permitted to penetrate these towns of refuge. Eventually, the state took over all functions of executing justice and these provisions became anachronistic.

14. *from My altar you shall take him.* As in other cultures, the altar was a place of sanctuary, and someone accused of bloodguilt could flee to the altar and cling to one of the carved horns at its corners in a plea to be held free of harm. This is what Joab does in 1 Kings 2 in an effort to escape Solomon's henchmen. Solomon orders him to be taken from the altar and executed—perhaps in accordance with this law, for Joab has killed two commanders of Israel in cold blood.

17. *vilifies.* The Hebrew *qilel* is the precise antithesis of "honor" (*kabed*) in "honor your father and your mother," the word for "honor" being derived from a root that means "heavy" or "important" and the word for "vilify" or "treat with contempt" (King James Version, "curse") being derived from a root that means "light" or "worthless."

18. *falls ill.* Literally, "falls to bed."

19. *he shall surely stand good for his cure.* Literally, "he shall surely cure him."

20. *they die . . . they shall surely be avenged*. The Hebrew says "he" in each instance because the masculine form has grammatical precedence, referring

to him or her. Since both the female and the male slave are mentioned as possible objects of the violence, the translation, in order to avoid the awkward "he or she," switches to the plural. The same procedure is followed in several subsequent verses.

21. *But if a day or two they should survive.* The sad implication of this stipulation is that vigorous beating of slaves, male and female alike, was assumed to be an acceptable practice. If the slave lasted a couple of days and then died, the inference would be that the master had not intended the death but had merely overdone the beating. If the slave died on the spot, this would be evidence that the master had meant to kill him, or at least was guilty of involuntary manslaughter.

for they are his money. That is, it would be counter to the master's own interest to take the life of a slave after having purchased him to perform service, so the presumption is that unless the slave dies during the beating, there was no clear intention on the part of the master to kill him.

22. *and her fetus come out.* The Masoretic Text reads *weyatsʾu yeladeha*, "and her children came out," which amounts to the same thing but seems a little odd, especially because of the plural "children." The Samaritan text and the Septuagint both have *weyatsaʾ weladah*, "and her fetus came out."

no other mishap. The reference would have to be to the death, or at least grave impairment, of the pregnant woman. "Other" is supplied in the translation for the sake of clarity.

by the reckoning. The meaning of the Hebrew *biflilim* is uncertain. Some interpreters link the terms to judicial authority. The Code of Hammurabi is equally concerned about liability for induced miscarriages but, unlike this law, makes discriminations according to the social standing of the injured party.

23–25. *a life for a life, an eye for an eye . . . a bruise for a bruise.* The pitiless punishment by equivalent injury of this famous *lex talionis*—again, with a parallel in the Code of Hammurabi—has created much discomfort and elicited tracts of commentary. It should be observed that the connection with the pregnant woman injured by brawlers is highly tenuous: burning, or even the loss of tooth or eye, in that situation seems far-fetched; and in any case, someone who has committed involuntary manslaughter would not be subject

to the death penalty. The notion, therefore, that this is a fragment of an archaic law code stitched into this text seems plausible. The preponderant view of Jewish commentators in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages is that in each of the cases stipulated here, the intention is for the liable party to pay monetary compensation for the loss incurred. The possibility should not be excluded that this was the original intention: monetary compensation for such losses was a widespread practice in ancient Near Eastern codes, and as some of the medieval commentators point out, it would have been unfeasible to implement the *lex talionis* literally with equity (e.g., how does one punish someone who has caused a man a partial loss of eyesight in one eye?).

26. *should a man strike the eye of his male slave.* There is an obvious associative link with the "eye for an eye" of the previous unit. Here it is perfectly clear that the loss of a bodily faculty is assigned monetary value.

28. *an ox.* The ox is the exemplary instance of liability for one's animals in ancient Near Eastern law (and afterward in the Talmud).

the ox shall surely be stoned. This punishment in effect falls on the owner, who loses the whole value of his animal. But there is also a sense that the ox itself has been tainted by destroying a human life and so it is killed, not slaughtered, as a murderer would be killed, and it is unfit to be eaten.

the ox's owner is clear. He has no further liability in the death because this is a case in which there was no precedent for the ox's action and hence, given the usually pacific nature of oxen, the owner could not be expected to anticipate the goring.

29. *a gorer from time past.* In the case of an ox known to be habitually violent, the owner's failure to keep it safely penned in is an act of criminal negligence resulting in death.

30. *If restitution be set for him.* There remains a loophole of monetary compensation for the negligent owner of the goring ox because even criminal negligence is not the same as malicious intention to kill.

37. *Should a man steal an ox or a sheep.* We now move on from torts to laws of theft. The reason for a distinction in penalty between ox and sheep has been debated, but the simplest explanation is that the ox, a draft animal as

well as an animal that can be slaughtered for its meat, is more valuable than the sheep.

CHAPTER 22

[1]“‘If while tunneling, a thief should be found and is
struck down and dies, there is no bloodguilt for him.
[2]If the sun rises upon him, there is bloodguilt for him.
He shall surely pay. If he has not the means, he shall
be sold for his theft. [3]If what is stolen should indeed be
found alive in his hands, from ox to donkey to sheep,
he shall pay double.

[4]“‘Should a man let his beast graze in a field or
vineyard, and he send his beast to graze in another’s
field, from the best of his field and the best of his
vineyard he shall pay. [5]Should a fire go forth and catch
in thorns, and stacked or standing grain or the field be
consumed, he who set the fire shall surely pay. [6]Should
a man give his fellow man money or goods for
safekeeping and they are stolen from the man’s house,
if the thief is found, he shall pay double. [7]If the thief is
not found, the owner of the house shall approach the
gods to swear that he has not laid hands on his fellow

man's effects. [8]In every matter of breach of trust, for an ox, for a donkey, for a sheep, for a cloak, for every loss about which one may say, "This is it," the matter of both shall come before the gods. He whom the gods find guilty shall pay double to his fellow man. [9]Should a man give to his fellow man a donkey or an ox or a sheep or any beast for safekeeping and it die or be maimed or carried off, with no witness, [10]there shall be an oath by the LORD between the two of them, that he has not laid hands on his fellow man's effects, and the owner shall accept and he shall not pay. [11]If it indeed be stolen from him, he shall pay its owner. [12]If it be torn up by beasts, he shall bring it in evidence, he shall not pay for what was torn up by beasts. [13]And should a man borrow it from his fellow man and it be hurt or die, its owner not being with it, he shall surely pay. [14]If its owner is with it, he shall not pay. If he is hired, he gets his hire. [15]And should a man seduce a virgin who has not been betrothed and lie with her, he shall surely pay a bride-price for her as his wife. [16]If her father utterly refuses to give her to him, he shall weigh out silver according to the bride-price for virgins.

[17]“‘No witch shall you let live. [18]Whosoever lies with a
beast is doomed to die. [19]Whosoever sacrifices to a
god, except to the LORD alone, shall be put under the
ban. [20]You shall not cheat a sojourner and you shall not
oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of
Egypt. [21]No widow nor orphan shall you abuse. [22]If you
indeed abuse them, when they cry out to Me, I will
surely hear their outcry. [23]And My wrath shall flare up
and I will kill you by the sword, and your wives shall
be widows and your children orphans. [24]If you should
lend money to My people, to the pauper among you,
you shall not be to him like a creditor, you shall not
impose interest on him. [25]If you should indeed take in
pledge your fellow man’s cloak, before the sun comes
down you shall return it to him. [26]For it is his sole
covering, it is his cloak for his skin—in what can he
lie? And so, when he cries out to Me, I will hear him,
for I am compassionate. [27]You shall not vilify God, nor
shall you curse a chief among your people. [28]The first
yield of your vats and the first yield of your grain you
shall not delay to give. The firstborn of your sons you
shall give to Me. [29]Thus you shall do with your ox and
your sheep: seven days it shall be with its mother; on
the eighth day you shall give it to Me. [30]And
consecrated men you shall be to Me: flesh in the field

torn by beasts you shall not eat; to the dog you shall fling it.'"

CHAPTER 22 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *If while tunneling*. This form of housebreaking by tunneling into the house is clearly imagined as a nocturnal operation (the tunneler would surely risk detection outside the house in daylight). If such a thief encountered a resident of the house in the dark, there would be considerable danger that the thief would try to kill him. Hence Rashi cites the rabbinic dictum "He who comes to kill you, kill him first" to explain "there is no bloodguilt for him." But if this encounter takes place in daylight, it would be much more likely that the intruder would flee or surrender, depending on the balance of forces, and so the householder cannot kill him with impunity.

2. *He shall surely pay.* Abraham ibn Ezra makes the plausible suggestion that this and the following clauses refer not to the housebreaker but to the livestock thief of 21:37. If the stolen animal has already been sold, the thief must pay fourfold or fivefold. If he still has the animal to restore to its owner, he is nevertheless subject to a penalty of twofold payment for the theft. A thief without the means to pay the penalty must be sold as a slave in order to make good what he owes (in the Code of Hammurabi, a thief in such a case is to be executed).

4. *Should a man let his beast graze.* The arrangement of laws in this more or less miscellaneous list is largely determined either by thematic association or by recurring key words. In the latter instance, one detects a convention that is often used to link two adjacent units in biblical narrative: the same word is used twice in succession in two different meanings. Thus the verb *hiv'ir*, "to cause to graze," recurs in the next law in its other sense, "to set a fire." As to thematic association, this law is connected, as Abraham ibn Ezra notes, with the cluster of laws at the end of chapter 21 that also deal with damages caused by one's beast.

send his beast. The relatively rare Hebrew term for beast, *beʿir*, is a cognate accusative of the verb for grazing. In the opening clause of this verse, the word "beast" does not appear in the Hebrew but is implied by the verb *hivʿir*.

5. *Should a fire go forth.* There is a thematic link (again noted by ibn Ezra) as well as a verbal one with the preceding law because this is another instance in which a person's negligence in supervising an activity in his own field—evidently, some sort of controlled burning—results in damage to someone else's field.

the field. Rashi plausibly suggests that this third category of damage is scorching a plowed field, which would then have to be plowed out again.

7. *shall approach the gods.* Again, traditional commentators, and some modern ones as well, interpret *ʾelohim* as a reference to judges, though if this is the case, it would be a usage unique to the Book of the Covenant. This translation presumes that this is a vestige of premonotheistic verbal usage preserved in this relatively archaic legal code. Here it would refer not to household gods, as in 21:6, but would seem to be a loose indication of deities at a local sanctuary. It is noteworthy that when *ʾelohim* is the subject of a verb in the next verse, that verb is conjugated in the plural. One should not make too much of this usage theologically. Linguistic practice can often be more conservative than changing perceptions of reality, and it is quite conceivable that an older stratum of biblical language should have preserved the polytheistic idiom for divine presence at oracle or sanctuary without actually affirming a multiplicity of gods.

to swear. The verb is not stated in the Hebrew but implied by the oath-formula that follows.

effects. The Hebrew *melaʾkhah* (a collective noun) usually means "task" or "labor," but in this legal context the clear meaning is the material possessions that are the product of labor.

9. *maimed or carried off.* The word for "maimed," *nishbar*, usually means "broken" and hence is a little odd to apply to an animal. The choice of term is evidently dictated by the strong assonance with the next word, "carried off," *nishbah*.

10. *an oath by the LORD.* Literally, "an oath of the LORD"—not an oath taken in the LORD's presence but rather an oath that invokes the LORD's name. At this point, the legislator reverts to solid monotheistic language, and from his point of view, there would have been no necessary contradiction with the preceding use of *ʾelohim* in the plural.

laid hands. The literal meaning is "sent out his hand."

accept. Literally, "take."

12. *he shall bring it in evidence.* There are other indications in the Bible that this was a common practice. A hired shepherd would bring some part of the torn carcass of the beast to prove to the owner that he had not stolen and sold the missing animal.

14. *If he is hired.* The term "hired" (*sakhir*) here has lent itself to different interpretations. The immediate context suggests that the most likely reference is to the person to whom the animal has been entrusted. If he has been hired to perform this task, and the loss of the beast occurs while its owner happens to be present to keep an eye on it, the person hired to do the safekeeping is still entitled to his fee.

15. *he shall surely pay a bride-price for her as his wife.* The seducer is obliged to make an honest woman of his victim, including the material benefit—the bride-price was a fund reserved for the use of the woman—accompanying marriage to a virgin. The penalty for raping rather than seducing an unbetrothed virgin is payment of a fine to the father and compulsory marriage without possibility of divorce (Deuteronomy 22:28–29).

17. *No witch shall you let live.* This verse marks the beginning of a second group of laws, no longer formulated casuistically but as absolute imperatives. The witch or sorceress is feminine because, as ibn Ezra and many others after him note, female practitioners predominated, though it may be inferred that male sorcerers are also implied. Ibn Ezra also proposes, somewhat fancifully, a thematic link with the previous law: a seducer might well resort to sorcery in order to have his way with a young woman. The practice of witchcraft had an understandable persistence in ancient Israel, as the tale of the necromancer of Endor (1 Samuel 28) illustrates. The monotheistic objection to the institution, whose efficacy was not necessarily denied, was to an occult

technology that could manipulate the spirit realm which was reserved to God alone.

21. *No widow nor orphan.* Throughout biblical literature, and particularly in the Prophets, these are the paradigmatic cases of powerless members of society who are vulnerable to exploitation.

22. *abuse . . . cry out . . . hear their outcry*. The terms used here pointedly echo the language used at the beginning of Exodus to describe the oppression of Israel in Egypt and God's response to that suffering. This law, then, like the previous one that explicitly invokes the Hebrews' condition of sojourners in Egypt, touches on the experience of slavery as an enduring prod to social conscience.

24. *you shall not impose interest.* The obvious presupposition of this law is an agrarian economy with social groupings on the soil in extended families and clans. Ancient Near Eastern societies with large urban populations in fact have left records of sums regularly lent on interest at extortionate rates.

26. *For it is his sole covering, it is his cloak for his skin.* The anchorage of this regulation in social reality is vividly illustrated in a fragmentary Hebrew inscription from the seventh century B.C.E. uncovered at Yavneh-Yam. The person dictating the inscription, a formal complaint against his foreman, would appear to be a corvée laborer doing agricultural work. Here are the most relevant lines (my translation): "And Hoshiahu son of Shobi came and took your servant's garment when I had finished my harvesting. A full day he has taken my garment, and all my brothers will answer for me, who harvest with me in the heat [of the sun], my brothers will answer for me amen. I am guiltless. . . ." One can make out in the highly fragmented two lines that follow a plea for the garment to be returned.

28. *The first yield of your vats and the first yield of your grain.* The meaning of the two Hebrew terms, *melei'ah* and *dema'*, is not entirely certain, although most interpreters agree that they refer to two categories of agricultural produce from which the farmer must offer the first yield as a sacrifice. (A word that would make the idea of first yield explicit, such as *rei'shit* or *bikurey*, does not appear in the text.) It has also been suggested that *melei'ah* and *dema'* are a single agricultural concept, a hendiadys.

to give. The verb is merely implied in the Hebrew.

The firstborn of your sons you shall give to Me. This could not be a command to perform child sacrifice. In the archaic period of Hebrew culture, the firstborn officiated as priests. The standard practice then became to "redeem" the firstborn by paying a fixed amount to the priests (compare Exodus 13:15).

30. *consecrated men.* Literally, "men of holiness" (*qodesh*). The root *q-d-sh* is the same one used for the act of consecration just enjoined on the people before the giving of the Law on Sinai. To eat carrion is seen as an act of self-defilement.

flesh in the field torn by beasts. It is chiefly out in the field, as Rashi notes, not in pen or barn, that a cow, sheep, or goat would be attacked by ravening animals, though anthropologically inclined critics have also stressed the character of the field in the biblical imagination as a place beyond the pale of human habitation, where wild beasts and impure spirits dwell.

to the dog you shall fling it. The biblical contempt for canines is again detectable: the dog is an unseemly scavenger, an appropriately base receptacle for carrion.

CHAPTER 23

[1]“‘You shall not bear a false rumor. You shall not put
your hand with the guilty to be a harmful witness.
[2]You shall not follow the many for evil, and you shall
not bear witness in a dispute to go askew, to skew it in
support of the many. [3]Nor a poor man shall you favor
in his dispute. [4]Should you encounter your enemy’s ox
or his donkey straying, you must surely return it to
him. [5]Should you see your adversary’s donkey
sprawling under its load and would hold back from
assisting him, you shall surely assist him. [6]You shall
not skew the case of your indigent in his dispute.
[7]From a lying word stay far away, and the guiltless and
innocent do not kill, for I will not acquit the guilty.
[8]No bribe shall you take, for a bribe blinds the sighted
and perverts the words of the innocent. [9]No sojourner
shall you oppress, for you know the sojourner’s heart,
since you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. [10]And
six years you shall sow your land and gather its
produce. [11]But in the seventh you shall let it go and let
it lie fallow, and your people’s indigent may eat of it,

and what is left, the beast of the field will eat. Thus shall you do for your vineyard and your olive grove.
12 Six days shall you do your deeds and on the seventh day you shall cease, so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and your bondman and the sojourner catch their breath. 13 And in all that I have said to you, you shall watch yourselves, and the name of other gods you shall not invoke nor shall it be heard on your lips.

14 “‘Three times in the year shall you hold Me a festival.
15 The Festival of Flatbread you shall keep seven days; you shall eat flatbread as I have charged you, at the fixed time of the month of the New Grain, for in it you came out of Egypt, and they shall not appear in My presence empty-handed. 16 And the Festival of the Harvest, first fruits of your labor that you sow in the field, and the Festival of Ingathering, as the year goes out, when you gather in your labor from the field.
17 Three times in the year all your males shall appear in the presence of the Master, the LORD. 18 You shall not offer up the blood of My sacrifice with leavened stuff, nor shall the fat of My festival offering be left till the morning. 19 The best of the first fruit of your soil you shall bring to the house of the LORD your God. You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.

[20]Look, I am about to send a messenger before you to
guard you on the way and to bring you to the place
that I made ready. [21]Watch yourself with him and heed
his voice, do not defy him, for he will not pardon your
trespass, for My name is within him. [22]But if you truly
heed his voice and do all that I speak, I shall be an
enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes. [23]For
My messenger will go before you and will bring you to
the Amorite and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the
Canaanite, the Hivvite and the Jebusite, and I shall
obliterate them. [24]You shall not bow to their gods and
you shall not worship them, and you shall not do as
they do, but you shall utterly tear them down and you
shall utterly smash their pillars. [25]And you shall
worship the LORD your God, and He will bless your
bread and your water, and I shall take away sickness
from your midst. [26]There shall be no woman
miscarrying or barren in your land. The count of your
days I will fill. [27]My terror I shall send before you and I
shall panic the whole people among whom you will
come, and I shall make all your enemies turn tail to
you. [28]And I shall send the hornet before you and it
will drive out the Hivvite and the Canaanite and the
Hittite before you. [29]I shall not drive them out before
you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the
beasts of the field multiply against you. [30]Little by little

shall I drive them out before you until you are fruitful and inherit the land. [31]And I shall fix its borders from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates, for I shall give into your hand the inhabitants of the land and you will drive them out before you. [32]You shall not make a pact with them or with their gods. [33]They shall not dwell in your land, lest they cause you to offend Me, for should you worship their gods, it will be a snare for you.'"

CHAPTER 23 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *You shall not bear a false rumor*. This injunction begins a group of laws intended to enforce the concept of equality before the law and equity in social behavior, regardless of social standing or condition of enmity or amity. The prohibition on bearing false rumor is reminiscent in formulation of the third of the Ten Commandments, but instead of pertaining to solemn oaths, it addresses the capacity of ordinary speech to do harm.

You shall not put your hand with the guilty. The Hebrew idiom, here literally translated, transparently means to be in league with someone. This injunction stands in a relation of intensifying parallelism (a typical pattern in biblical poetry) with the immediately preceding one. Distortion of the truth is involved in both, but there is an intensification from rumormongering to perjury.

2. *You shall not follow the many for evil.* The last word here could also be rendered "harm." The most straightforward way to construe this verse is as an injunction to cling to one's own sense of what is right despite the temptation to follow popular opinion, including when popular opinion is bent on the perversion of justice.

to go askew, to skew it in support of the many. The Hebrew, as the translation may suggest, seems a little awkward because "to go askew" (*lintot*) appears to be unnecessary and perhaps a little confusing when followed by the same verb in the causative form, *lehatot*, "to skew." It is conceivable that the repetition was introduced to underline formally the notion of skewing or tilting justice, which every person is enjoined to avoid.

3. *Nor a poor person shall you favor in his dispute.* Throughout these laws, "dispute" (*riv*) refers to contention in a court of law. The principle of equality before the law requires the avoidance of any juridical "affirmative action"—one must give no preferential treatment in court either to the poor man because of his afflictions or to the rich man because of his power.

5. *your adversary's donkey sprawling under its load.* This is the first, but by no means the only, expression of humanitarian concern for animals in the Torah. The suffering of the beast must take precedence over a person's hostility toward the beast's owner.

you shall surely assist him. The rare Hebrew verb *ʿ-z-b* is the homonym of a common verb that means "to abandon." It occurs twice elsewhere in the Bible in the sense of "to perform," "to arrange," "to assist," and it has cognates with this meaning in both Ugaritic and Arabic. The object of the verb ("him") could be either the master or the donkey, but the former seems more likely: a heavily loaded donkey would not be wandering around by itself; the person would know to whom it belongs by seeing the owner; and the moral imperative would be all the more pressing because he is enjoined to give a hand to a man he hates.

6–9. Whereas verses 1–3 address the obligation of adherence to justice for all citizens, this related subgroup of injunctions is directed to judges.

6. *You shall not skew the case of your indigent in his dispute.* This formulation is the complement of verse 3. No one should grant preferential treatment to the poor man in justice, but here the judge is reminded that the poor should not be prejudicially mistreated in court. "Case," *mishpat*, can also mean "justice."

7. *I will not acquit the guilty.* The judge is implicitly thought of as a surrogate of God, obliged to enact only what is right, as God does.

8. *blinds . . . perverts*. The aphoristic parallelism sounds rather like the Book of Proverbs.

the sighted. The Hebrew adjective designates both those who have the faculty of sight and, by metaphorical extension, those who are keen-sighted. As a kind of gloss on the term, a parallel law in Deuteronomy substitutes for "sighted" the explicit "wise" (the sense of the term in modern Hebrew).

9. *the sojourner's heart.* The Hebrew is *nefesh*, "life," "inner nature," "essential being," "breath."

11. *let it go.* The Hebrew verb *shamat* means "to release," "to allow to slip out of one's grip." The noun derived from this verb, *shemitah*, is the general term for sabbatical year.

and your people's indigent may eat of it. The motive for the sabbatical year is a partial redressing of social inequity, thus linking it with the immediately preceding laws. The ecological advantage of allowing fields to lie fallow is not mentioned.

12. *so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and your bondman and the sojourner catch their breath.* Unlike the Decalogue, but entirely in keeping with the context of the present code of laws, the rationale for the sabbath offered here is neither theological (God's resting after creation) nor historical (the liberation from Egyptian slavery) but humanitarian. "Catch their breath" (*wayinafesh*) is represented in most translations as "be refreshed." It is cognate with *nefesh*, most probably in the sense of "breath," and is related to the verb *nashaf*, "to breathe hard or pant." The idea of catching one's breath is consonant with the representation in Job and elsewhere in the Bible of the laborer panting from his work and longing to draw a long breath of relief after labor.

13. *And in all that I have said to you, you shall watch yourselves.* This summarizing command reintroduces, in the next clause, the obligation of loyalty to the single God and thus serves as a transition from the group of laws bearing on justice and social equity to the laws of the pilgrim festivals, which are national, seasonal expressions of fealty to God.

14. *Three times.* The word for "times" here, *regalim*, is different from *peʿamim*, the word used at the beginning of verse 17. Both terms mean

"foot," the apparent connection with "time" being the counting of times with the tap of a foot.

15. *appear in My presence.* The original form of the Hebrew indicated "see My face [or presence]," but the Masoretes revocalized the verb as a passive, "to be seen" or "to appear," in order to avoid what looked like excessive anthropomorphism.

16. *Harvest . . . Ingathering*. The Festival of Flatbread ("Passover" is not used here) would be in April. The harvest (Shavuoth) of first fruits would occur in late May or early June, and Ingathering (Succoth) the harvest of most later crops, in late September or early October.

19. *You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk.* This famous prohibition would become the basis in rabbinic dietary regulations for the absolute separation of meat and dairy foods. Two different kinds of justification have been proposed for the prohibition. Maimonides and many after him suggest that the law is a response to a pagan cultic practice known to the ancients of eating a kid prepared in its mother's milk. There is no clear-cut archaeological evidence of such a practice—Maimonides merely inferred it interpretively. One fragmentary mythological text in Ugaritic may in fact refer to this culinary item, though that reconstruction of the text has been disputed. The other approach, espoused by Abraham ibn Ezra (a little tentatively) and many others, is to explain the prohibition on humanitarian grounds. The sensitivity toward animals previously evinced in this group of laws gives some plausibility to the humanitarian possibility. Since no actual aggravation of the animals' suffering is involved, the recoil from this commingling would be on the symbolic level: the mixture of the mother animal's nurturing milk with the slaughtered flesh of her offspring, a promiscuous joining of life and death.

20. *I am about to send a messenger before you.* Although modern rationalist commentators have sought to explain this as a metaphor for providential guidance, the frankly mythological terms of the preceding narrative—the pillars of cloud and fire, the Destroyer in Egypt—invite us to imagine the messenger as a fearsome agent of God, perhaps human in form like the divine messengers in Genesis, leading the people through the wilderness.

21. *he will not pardon your trespass, for My name is within him.* The messenger is not only a guide for the Wilderness wanderings but an unblinking executor of divine surveillance. The mention of the divine name is the earliest of a scattering of biblical references to a quasimythological notion of God's name as a potent agency in its own right. This idea would be elaborately developed in later Jewish mysticism.

22. *I shall be an enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes.* The perfect parallelism of this statement recalls the symmetry of a line of biblical poetry, and several verses in this concluding section of the Book of the Covenant approximate the formal balance and high solemnity of poetry.

24. *tear them down.* The verb here, *haras*, indicates that the object is the idols, not the idolators.

pillars. The reference is to cultic pillars, or steles.

27. *turn tail.* The Hebrew refers to the nape of the neck, which the fleeing enemy shows to his pursuer.

28. *I shall send the hornet before you.* There is some question about what is sent: the noun *tsir'ah* appears in the Bible only three times, all in the context of the conquest of Canaan. The strong consensus of later Hebrew tradition—there is some dissent—is that it refers to a noxious stinging insect. In that case, the word functions here as a collective noun (rather common biblical usage for animals) and refers to dense swarms of hornets. An alternative I would like to propose is that the root is related (with consonants reversed) to the verb *ra'ats*, "to smash," and that this is a mythological rather than a zoological entity, the Smasher (or Smashing), which would be strictly parallel or equivalent to "My terror" at the beginning of verse 27.

29. *lest the land become desolate.* The Hebrew writer, faced with the discomfiting report of the tradition available to him that the conquest of the land, underwritten by solemn divine promise, took more than two centuries, is driven to find some explanation for the delay. (The Book of Judges will propose three rather different explanations.) The prospect sketched here of a suddenly depopulated land overrun by wild beasts and too big for the Hebrews seems intrinsically implausible, and it is hard to square the notion of Israel awaiting its own natural increase ("until you are fruitful") with the

figure offered earlier of 600,000 adult males, which implied a total population of well over two million.

31. *I shall fix its borders.* These grandiose borders, which would make biblical Israel seem a bit like Texas, do not correspond to any actual historical reality but are rather a kind of imaginative nationalist fantasy of what a "spacious land" (Exodus 3:8) might look like. Different, equally ideal borders are mentioned elsewhere.

the Red Sea. In this context, this is the more plausible geographical reference of *yam suf*, rather than Sea of Reeds, which would probably be a marshland in northeastern Egypt.

32. *You shall not make a pact with them or with their gods.* Ibn Ezra, with his keen eye for connections, relates the previous verse to this one: even though God will give Israel this vast expanse of territory (presumably, filled with subject peoples), the temptation of embracing the gods of the native population must be resisted.

CHAPTER 24

[1]And to Moses He had said, “Go up to the LORD,
you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and seventy of the
elders of Israel, and you shall bow down from afar.
[2]And Moses alone shall come near to the LORD but
they shall not come near, and the people shall not go
up with him.” [3]And Moses came and recounted to the
people all the LORD’s words and all the laws, and the
people answered with a single voice and said, “All the
words that the LORD has spoken we will do.” [4]And
Moses wrote down all the LORD’s words, and he rose
early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of
the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes
of Israel. [5]And he sent the lads of the Israelites and
they offered up burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices
and communion sacrifices, bulls to the LORD. [6]And
Moses took half the blood and put it in basins, and
half the blood he threw upon the altar. [7]And he took
the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of
the people, and they said, “All that the LORD has
spoken we will do and we will heed.” [8]And Moses

took the blood and threw it upon the people, and he said, “Look, the blood of the covenant that the LORD has sealed with you over all these words.” [9]And Moses went up, and with him Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and seventy of the elders of Israel. [10]And they saw the God of Israel, and beneath His feet was like a fashioning of sapphire pavement and like the very heavens for pureness. [11]But against the elect of the Israelites He did not send forth His hand, and they beheld God and ate and drank. [12]And the LORD said to Moses, “Go up to Me to the mountain and be there, that I may give you the stone tablets and the teaching and the commandments that I have written to instruct them. [13]And Moses arose, and Joshua his attendant with him, and Moses went up the mountain of God. [14]And to the elders he had said, “Sit here for us until we return to you, and, look, Aaron and Hur are with you. Whosoever has matters to air may approach them.” [15]And Moses went up, and the cloud covered the mountain. [16]And the LORD’s glory abode on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day He called out to Moses from the midst of the cloud. [17]And the sight of the LORD’s glory was like consuming fire at the mountaintop before the eyes of the Israelites. [18]And Moses entered within the cloud

and went up the mountain, and Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

CHAPTER 24 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And to Moses He had said*. As is often the case in sequences of episodes in the Bible, there is some ambiguity about the chronological location of this passage. The form of the verb (perfective instead of the usual imperfective prefixed by *waw*) may well indicate a pluperfect, and Rashi, no doubt noting that what Moses does here is to go up the mountain and bring back God's words, claims, "This passage was said before the Ten Commandments."

2. *Moses . . . shall come near . . . they shall not come near . . . the people shall not go up*. There is evidently a tripartite deployment: Moses alone goes up to the mountaintop; the seventy elders, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu remain at a stopping point partway up the mountain; and the people stay at the foot of the mountain, as they were instructed to do in chapter 19.

3. *all the LORD's words and all the laws.* The two terms are strategically precise. "Words" (*devarim*) refers to the Ten Words, or Commandments; "laws" (*mishpatim*) is the term that announces (21:1) the catalogue of legal injunctions that constitutes the Book of the Covenant.

4. *twelve pillars.* These pillars (*matsevot*) are not structural elements in the altar but cultic pillars or steles, just like the ones that, when they are pagan, the Israelites have been enjoined to smash (23:24).

5. *the lads.* This term, *ne'arim*, has a multiplicity of meanings, but a common one, reflected here, is as a designation of anyone performing a subaltern or assisting function—in the cult, an acolyte.

7. *the book of the covenant.* There are differing opinions as to whether this phrase explicitly refers to the legal text of chapters 21–23, despite an

established scholarly tradition for using it as a title for that literary unit. In any case, this entire ritual, including the sacred feast and the epiphany that follow the sacrifice, is a solemn confirmation of the covenant between God and Israel, and it is conceivable that the "book of the covenant" is a spelling out of the terms of that pact in language not necessarily incorporated in the preceding narrative.

8. *And Moses took the blood and threw it upon the people.* Although splashing blood on the altar is a standard sacrificial procedure, throwing blood on the people is unique to this episode. Some squeamish modern commentators have claimed that the blood is thrown on the pillars that represent the twelve tribes, but such a notion surely undercuts the primal archaic power of the rite. (Addressing the problem of how blood could be sprinkled over 600,000 adult males, or more than two million people, Abraham ibn Ezra plausibly suggests that the seventy elders served as ritual stand-ins for the whole people.) The idea of two parties to a solemn, binding agreement confirming the mutual obligation by dipping hands in the same blood, or exchanging blood smears, is attested in many cultures. In this covenant of ontologically disparate partners, the altar that is sprinkled with half the blood may serve as surrogate for the deity to whose service the altar has been erected. The covenantal rite of casting blood on the people is a climax of the sundry occurrences of blood in this narrative from the Bridegroom of Blood episode onward: the blood of circumcision (itself a covenantal act) that deflected the threat of death to Moses or his child and the blood of the lamb that warded off the Destroyer in Egypt reappear here as the blood of the sacrifice that confirms Israel's everlasting bond with God.

9. *and with him Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and seventy of the elders.* As often elsewhere in this translation, "with him" is added to reflect the focusing function of the Hebrew verb: the verb is in the singular, indicating that the primary or focused subject of the going up is Moses, and that the others join in, or are subsidiary to, Moses's act of ascent. The indications of spatial deployment here are minimal, but it appears that after the covenantal sacrifice, Moses led his three followers and the elders to the mountaintop, or perhaps only near the mountaintop, where they were vouchsafed their epiphany. Then they went back down (verse 14), while Moses went back up the mountain, evidently accompanied part of the way by Joshua (verse 13). In

any event, it is Moses alone who enters into the cloud at the mountaintop that conceals God's glory or presence.

10. *And they saw the God of Israel.* The boldness with which this immediate vision is stated is startling, especially against a biblical background in which humans repeatedly fear that they cannot see God and live (compare the next verse, "But against the elect of the Israelites He did not send forth His hand"). Such collective vision is reserved for this unique event. A symptom of how shocking this frank anthropomorphism could be is Onkelos's evasive substitution in his Aramaic translation: "And they saw their sacrifices that had been accepted favorably as though they had eaten and drunk." *Pace* Onkelos, the eating and drinking after the beholding (verse 11 employs a verb of visionary experience) are a communion feast enjoyed by the elders at God's feet.

and beneath His feet was like a fashioning of sapphire pavement. Mere flesh and blood cannot long sustain the vision of God, and so the visual focus immediately slides down to the celestial brilliance beneath God's feet. Even for this zone touched by the divine, direct linguistic reference is not possible, and so the writer uses a doubled simile—"like a fashioning of . . .," "like the very heavens. . . ."

sapphire. Many scholars think that the Hebrew *sapir* refers to lapis lazuli. If the Hebrew term is actually cognate with sapphire, the writer clearly has in mind a blue sapphire.

12. *the stone tablets and the teaching and the commandments that I have written.* Although the often repeated *devarim*, "words," implies speech (*dibur*), this central event of the giving of the Law places a strong stress on the act of writing as the vehicle for endowing words with permanence. Moses writes down the words and the laws, presumably with ink on parchment or papyrus. God now declares He will do His own inscription—presumably of the Ten Words—in the perdurable medium of stone.

14. *Whosoever has matters to air.* The Hebrew, *mi baʿal devarim*, literally means, "whosoever has/is possessor of words," but *devarim* here clearly means "legal matters," "cases to bring before the law," as the term is used in the Jethro episode (chapter 18). Since Moses seems to know he will be required to stay on the mountaintop a long time (the formulaic forty days),

provision has to be made for the judicial needs of the people during his absence. The necessary implication is that the elders now have gone all the way down the mountain to where the people are waiting. Joshua will presumably stop somewhere short of the summit of the mountain.

17. *And the sight of the* LORD*'s glory was like consuming fire . . . before the eyes of the Israelites*. After the direct epiphany to the elders, we get a long-distance view of God's presence from the perspective of the people at the foot of the mountain. There is more mystifying occlusion than revelation here: an enveloping cloud, flashes of fiery effulgence from within it. Even such distant glimpses of the deity must be qualified by simile—"like consuming fire."

18. *and Moses entered within the cloud.* The terrifying gap between Moses and the people is beautifully registered. They quail down below, seeing pulses of consuming fire from within the cloud; on the mountaintop, Moses actually enters into the cloud. His entering the cloud was already implied in verse 16 ("He called out to Moses from the midst of the cloud"—perhaps what he called out was the Ten Words), but now we get a kind of recapitulative summarizing report, strongly colored by the viewpoint of the assembled people at the foot of the mountain who look up awestruck as Moses disappears into the cloud for forty days and forty nights. That seemingly interminable absence of the leader will in due course engender trouble down below.

CHAPTER 25

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: [2]“Speak to the Israelites, that they take Me a donation from every man, as his heart may urge him you shall take My donation. [3]And this is the donation that you shall take from them: gold and silver and bronze, [4]and indigo and purple and crimson, and linen and goat hair, [5]and reddened ram skins and ocher-dyed skins and acacia wood. [6]Oil for the lamp, spices for the anointing oil and for the aromatic incense. [7]Carnelian stones and stones for setting in the ephod and in the breastplate. [8]And they shall make Me a Tabernacle, that I may abide in their midst. [9]As all that I show you, the form of the Tabernacle and the form of all its furnishings, thus shall you make it. [10]And they shall make an ark of acacia wood, two and a half cubits its length and a cubit and a half its width, and a cubit and a half its height. [11]And you shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and outside you shall overlay it, and you shall make upon it a golden molding all around. [12]And you shall cast for it four golden rings and set them on its four

feet, and two rings on its one side and two rings on the
other side. [13]And you shall make poles of acacia wood
and overlay them with gold, [14]and you shall bring the
poles through the rings on the side of the Ark to carry
the Ark with them. [15]In the rings of the Ark the poles
must be, they shall not come out. [16]And you shall set in
the Ark the tablets of the Covenant that I shall give
you. [17]And you shall make a cover of pure gold, two
and a half cubits its length, and a cubit and a half its
width. [18]And you shall make two cherubim of gold,
hammered work you shall make them, at the two edges
of the cover. [19]And make one cherub at one edge and
one cherub at the other edge, from the cover you shall
make the cherubim at both its edges. [20]And the
cherubim shall spread wings above, shielding the cover
with their wings, and their faces toward each other,
toward the cover the faces of the cherubim shall be.
[21]And you shall set the covering upon the Ark from
above, and in the Ark you shall set the tablets of the
Covenant that I shall give you. [22]And I shall meet with
you there and speak with you, from above the covering
between the two cherubim that are on top of the Ark
of the Covenant, all that I shall charge you regarding
the Israelites. [23]And you shall make a table of acacia
wood, two cubits its length and a cubit its width and a
cubit and a half its height. [24]And you shall overlay it

with pure gold, and make for it a golden molding all around. [25]And you shall make a frame for it, a handsbreadth all around, and you shall make a golden molding for its frame all around. [26]And you shall make four gold rings for it and set the rings at the four corners which are at its four legs. [27]Facing the frame the rings shall be, as housings for the poles to carry the table. [28]And you shall make the poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold, and the table shall be carried with them. [29]And you shall make its bowls and its shovels and its jars and its chalices, from which libation is done. Pure gold you shall make them. [30]And you shall set on the table the bread of the Presence, before Me perpetually.

[31]"And you shall make a lamp stand of pure gold, hammered work it shall be made, its base and its shaft; its cups, its calyxes and its blossoms, shall be from that work. [32]And six shafts going out from its sides, three shafts of the lamp stand from its one side and three shafts of the lamp stand from its other side. [33]Three cups shaped like almond blossoms in the one shaft, calyx and blossom, and three cups shaped like almond blossoms in the other shaft, calyx and blossom, thus for the six shafts that go out from the lamp stand.

[34]And on the lamp stand four cups shaped like almond
blossoms, their calyxes and their blossoms. [35]And a
calyx as part of it under every two shafts, a calyx as
part of it under every two shafts, for the six shafts
coming out from the lamp stand. [36]Their calyxes and
their shafts shall be part of it, all of it one hammered
work, pure gold. [37]And you shall make its seven lamps,
and its lamps shall be mounted and give light in front
of it, [38]and its tongs and its fire-pans—pure gold.
[39]With a talent of pure gold shall it be made together
with all these furnishings. [40]And see, and make it by
their pattern which you are shown on the mountain."

CHAPTER 25 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *a donation*. The Hebrew *terumah* is a noun derived from a verb that means "to elevate," and, among several biblical terms for gift, it is the one that designates a donation for use in the cult or by the priests. This verse inaugurates an elaborate catalogue of instructions about the design of the Tabernacle and its furnishings that will take up the rest of the Book of Exodus, with the exception of the episode of the Golden Calf in chapters 32–34. Modern readers may well be perplexed as to why the compelling narrative of the liberation from Egypt and the revelation on Mount Sinai should be set aside for this lengthy account of cultic paraphernalia. The historical circumstances of the assembling of the Torah must surely be kept in mind. That editorial process in all likelihood took place in Priestly circles early in the period of the return from Babylonian exile (later sixth century B.C.E.). The strong scholarly consensus is that these chapters are the work of the Priestly

writers (P), and the fascination with all the minute details of cultic paraphernalia seems a clear reflection of P's special interests. One may nevertheless ask why the editors, however sacerdotal their concerns, chose to introduce this large block of material at the very moment when Moses has disappeared into the cloud on the mountaintop to commune with God. That moment in the story is marked by the people's fearful distance from the fiery divine presence up above and the daring closeness of one man, Moses the intercessor, to the deity. Against this background, the architectural plan for the Tabernacle and its décor offers a reassuring antithesis. God will come down from above to dwell among His people within the securely designated sanctum of the Tabernacle, will sit enthroned on the cherubim carved above the Ark of the Covenant, from whence He will issue divine instruction (verse 22), and where He will be accessible through the cultic mediation of the priests. The divinely endorsed donations and cultic procedures, moreover, set up a contrast with the transgressive donations that enable the forbidden cult of the Golden Calf. For further comments on the role of this long section, see the introduction to Exodus.

4. *indigo and purple and crimson.* These, at any rate, are the ends of the spectrum reflected by these color words, there being some margin of doubt about the precise indication of chromatic terms and considerably more doubt about the identification of precious stones in these lists. The first two colors indicate dyes extracted from a species of murex, and of Phoenician manufacture; the third is a dye derived from the eggs of scale insects found on oak trees. Both processes of dye production were immensely laborious and costly, and hence these colors were used especially for royal garments throughout the eastern part of the Mediterranean (one may recall Agamemnon "treading on purple" in the great welcome-carpet scene Clytemnestra stages for him near the beginning of the *Oresteia*). It is hard to imagine that these precious dyes would have been accessible to the Hebrews in the wilderness—this is one of several indications that the picture of the Tabernacle is in many ways an ideal projection rather than a strictly historical account.

5. *ocher-dyed skins.* Many translations interpret the Hebrew *teḥashim* as "dolphins" or "dugongs," but a more plausible connection has been made with

an Akkadian term that indicates a yellow or orange dye. That would be in keeping with the focus on brilliantly dyed stuff in the previous verse.

8. *Tabernacle.* The Hebrew *mishkan* literally means "abode" ("that I shall abide in their midst"). It is, of course, a portable sanctuary, to be carried from encampment to encampment in the wilderness, and provisions are made for carrying the Ark, beginning in verse 12. The *mishkan* looks like an amalgam of recollections of an ancient portable sanctuary—Umberto Cassuto notes certain parallels in Ugaritic literature—and a retrojection to the Wilderness period of the Jerusalem temple. More recent scholars detect a resemblance to the bicameral design and proportions of Pharaoh Rameses II's tent used in military campaigns.

12. *its four feet.* One may infer that there were actually small carved feet at the four bottom corners so that the Ark would not rest directly on the ground.

16. *set in the Ark the tablets of the Covenant.* "Tablets" is merely implied by ellipsis. The word for "covenant" here is *ʿedut*, a synonym for the more prevalent *berit*. The stone tablets of the Law are the document of the eternal contract between God and Israel, and their placement here reflects a common ancient Near Eastern practice of placing documents of solemn contracts within sacred precincts.

18. *cherubim.* The Hebrew *keruvim* is derived from a root that suggests "hybrid" or "composite" and perhaps also "steed." These are fearsome winged beasts (compare the Egyptian sphinx) that figure in poetry as God's celestial steeds and that here serve as His terrestrial throne, "enthroned upon cherubim" being an epithet for the deity. (See the comment on Genesis 3:24.)

22. *And I shall meet with you there.* The "you" (singular) is Moses. The verb translated as "meet" has the sense of appointing a fixed time and place.

29. *chalices.* Though the Hebrew *menaqiot* might seem to derive from the verb that means "to clean" and so mean something like "scrapers," Cassuto argues persuasively that these would have to be receptacles for pouring libations, and he cites cognates in Akkadian and Ugaritic.

30. *the Presence.* Literally, “face,” a word often used to designate “presence” for royal, or divine figures.

31. *from that work.* Literally, “from it,” the antecedent being “hammered work.”

40. *see, and make it by their pattern which you are shown on the mountain.* Rashi comments here: “to tell us that Moses had difficulty with the fashioning of the lamp stand, until the Holy One showed him a lamp stand of fire.” It is in fact no easy task to reconstruct the actual design of the lamp stand from these verbal instructions. The Priestly writer himself may have been aware of this difficulty and thus emphasizes that Moses was vouchsafed a vision (“you are shown”) of the precise pattern of the lamp stand. In any case, this reference to Moses’s being shown the pattern on the mountain reflects an effort to anchor the instructions for the Tabernacle, which look like an independent literary unit, in the narrative context that in effect they disrupt.

CHAPTER 26

[1]“And the Tabernacle you shall make with ten panels
of twisted linen, and indigo and purple and crimson,
with cherubim, designer’s work you shall make them.
[2]The length of the panel is twenty-eight cubits, and a
width of four cubits to the one panel, a single measure
for all the panels. [3]Five of the panels shall be joined to
each other and the other five joined to each other.
[4]And you shall make indigo loops along the edge of
the outermost panel in the set, and thus shall you do on
the edge of the outermost panel in the other set. [5]Fifty
loops you shall make in the one panel and fifty loops
you shall make in the outermost panel which is in the
other set, the loops opposite one another. [6]And you
shall make fifty golden clasps, and you shall join the
panels to one another with the clasps, that the
Tabernacle be one whole. [7]And you shall make goat-
hair panels for a tent over the Tabernacle, eleven
panels you shall make them. [8]The length of the one
panel, thirty cubits, and a width of four cubits to the
panel, a single measure for the eleven panels. [9]And you

shall join five of the panels by themselves and six of the panels by themselves, and you shall double over the sixth panel at the front of the tent. [10]And you shall make fifty loops along the edge of the outermost panel in the one set, and fifty loops along the edge of the outermost panel in the other set. [11]And you shall make fifty bronze clasps and bring the clasps through the loops, and you shall join the tent, that it become one whole. [12]And the overhang left over in the tent panels, half of the leftover panel you shall let hang over the back of the Tabernacle. [13]And the cubit on one side and the cubit on the other in what is left over in the length of the tent panels shall hang over both sides of the Tabernacle to cover it. [14]And you shall make a covering for the tent of reddened ram skins and a covering of ocher-dyed skins above. [15]And you shall make boards for the Tabernacle of acacia wood, upright. [16]Ten cubits the length of the board, and a cubit and a half the width of the single board. [17]Two tenons for the one board linked to each other, thus you shall do for all the boards of the Tabernacle. [18]And you shall make the boards for the Tabernacle, twenty boards for the southern end. [19]And forty silver sockets you shall make beneath the twenty boards, two sockets beneath the one board for its two tenons and two sockets beneath the other board for its two tenons.

[20]And on the other side of the Tabernacle at the
northern end, twenty boards. [21]And their forty silver
sockets, two sockets beneath the one board and two
sockets beneath the other board. [22]And at the rear of
the Tabernacle to the west you shall make six boards.
[23]And two boards you shall make for the corners of the
Tabernacle at the rear. [24]And they shall match below,
and together they shall end at the top inside the one
ring, thus it shall be for the two of them, at the two
corners they shall be. [25]And there shall be eight boards
with their silver sockets, sixteen sockets, two sockets
beneath the one board and two sockets beneath the
next board. [26]And you shall make crossbars of acacia
wood, five for the boards of the one side of the
Tabernacle. [27]And five crossbars for the boards of the
other side of the Tabernacle, and five crossbars for the
side of the Tabernacle at the rear to the west. [28]And
the central crossbar in the middle board shall shoot
through from end to end. [29]And the boards you shall
overlay with gold, and their rings you shall make of
gold, housings for the crossbars, and you shall overlay
the crossbars with gold. [30]And you shall set up the
Tabernacle according to the fashion of it that you were
shown on the mountain.

[31]“And you shall make a curtain of indigo and purple
and crimson and twisted linen, designer’s work it shall
be made, with cherubim. [32]And you shall set it on the
four acacia posts overlaid with gold, their hooks gold,
upon four silver sockets. [33]And you shall set the curtain
under the clasps and you shall bring there, within the
curtain, the Ark of the Covenant, and the curtain shall
divide for you between the Holy and the Holy of
Holies. [34]And you shall set the cover over the Ark of
the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. [35]And you shall
put the table outside the curtain and the lamp stand
facing the table on the side of the Tabernacle to the
south, and the table you shall set on the northern side.
[36]And you shall make a screen for the entrance of the
tent, indigo and purple and crimson and twisted linen,
embroiderer’s work. [37]And you shall make for the
screen five acacia posts, and you shall overlay them
with gold, their hooks gold, and you shall cast for them
five bronze sockets.”

CHAPTER 26 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *panels of twisted linen*. The cloth panels, *yeriʿot*, invoke a term generally used for tent coverings, and we are repeatedly reminded that this portable sanctuary, however splendid in gold and silver and bronze and acacia wood, is

a tent, *ʾohel*. The twisting of linen evidently refers to a special technique in the weaving process devised to give the individual threads extra strength.

with cherubim, designer's work. These cherubim are woven as a tapestry design into the cloth. The Hebrew for "designer," *ḥoshev*, indicates a person with a special skill or someone who makes a purposeful plan (*maḥashavah*).

6. *that the Tabernacle be one whole.* More literally, "that the Tabernacle be one." This phrase leads Abraham ibn Ezra to muse over how unity in the greater world is constituted by an interlocking of constituent parts that became a transcendent whole, as in the unity of microcosm and macrocosm. One need not read this section homiletically, as he does, in order to see the power of summation of this particular phrase. All the instructions for the design of the Tabernacle—however much the learned interpreters have differed in explaining the concrete architectural details—point to a perfect symmetry of nicely interlocking parts, posts fitting into sockets, clasps into loops, with crossbars shooting from end to end on both sides of the structure, and the dimensions of every component carefully measured.

7. *goat-hair panels.* Within the Tabernacle are splendid dyed hangings of twisted linen. Covering the structure on the outside is a coarser cloth made of woven goat hair, presumably black, a typical fabric for tents, with the capacity to keep out bad weather.

10. *loops.* It is noteworthy that the Tabernacle passages abound in architectural or structural terms such as this one (*lula ʾot*) that do not appear elsewhere. The plausible inference is that these passages reflect a specialized architectural (or sacerdotal-architectural) literature.

17. *tenons.* The Hebrew *yadot* (from *yad*, "hand") is another technical architectural term, indicating a projection at the end of the board made to fit into another board in a kind of tongue-and-groove construction.

33. *the Ark of the Covenant . . . divide . . . between the Holy and the Holy of Holies*. If the tent structure of the Tabernacle looks backward to an early nomadic period, its dimensions—exactly half those of Solomon's temple—and its divisions mirror the structure of the Jerusalem temple. Dividing—the same word that is central to P's account of creation—between gradations of sanctity is fundamental to the conception of sacred space put forth here. The

100-cubit length (about 60 feet) of the Tabernacle is divided symmetrically between a western half, or outer court, where there is an altar for burnt offerings, and an eastern half, which constitutes the Holy Place (*maqom qadosh*), in which the lamp stand, the table, and the altar of incense are located, and a small inner zone, screened by a curtain, the Holy of Holies, in which the Ark of the Covenant is kept. The verbal construct "X of X" has the idiomatic sense in biblical Hebrew of "the supreme X" (compare "the song of songs, which is Solomon's").

CHAPTER 27

[1]“And you shall make the altar of acacia wood, five
cubits in length and five cubits in width, the altar shall
be square, and three cubits its height. [2]And you shall
make its horns on its four corners, from the same piece
its horns shall be, and you shall overlay it with bronze.
[3]And you shall make its pails for its ashes and its
shovels and its basins and its flesh-hooks and its fire-
pans, all its vessels you shall make of bronze. [4]And you
shall make for it a meshwork grating of bronze, and
you shall make on the mesh four bronze rings at its
four corners. [5]And you shall set it beneath the ledge of
the altar from below, and the mesh shall come halfway
up the altar. [6]And you shall make poles for the altar,
poles of acacia wood and overlay them with bronze.
[7]And its poles shall be brought through the rings, and
the poles shall be on the two sides of the altar when it
is carried. [8]Hollow boarded you shall make it, as He
showed you on the mountain, thus they shall do.

9“And you shall make the Tabernacle court on the
southern side. There shall be hangings for the court of
twisted linen, a hundred cubits in length for one side.
10And its posts shall be twenty and their sockets
twenty, of bronze, the hooks for the posts and their
bands shall be of silver. 11And thus for the northern
side, in length the hangings shall be a hundred cubits,
and its posts twenty and their sockets twenty, of
bronze, and the hooks for the posts, of silver. 12And
the width of the court on the western side, fifty cubits
of hangings, their posts shall be ten and their sockets
ten. 13And the width of the court on the side to the
very east, fifty cubits. 14And fifteen cubits of hangings
for the flank, their posts three and their sockets three.
15And for the other flank fifteen cubits of hangings,
their posts three and their sockets three. 16And for the
gate of the court a screen of twenty cubits, indigo and
purple and crimson and twisted linen, embroiderer’s
work, their posts four and their sockets four. 17All the
posts around the court shall be banded in silver, their
hooks silver and their sockets bronze. 18The length of
the court, a hundred cubits, and the width fifty
throughout, and the height five cubits, twisted linen,
and their sockets bronze. 19So for all the vessels of the
Tabernacle in all its service; and all its pegs and all the
pegs of the court, shall be bronze.

[20]"As for you, you shall command the Israelites, that they take you clear oil of beaten olives for the light, to kindle a lamp perpetually. [21]In the Tent of Meeting outside the curtain which is over the Ark of the Covenant, Aaron with his sons shall lay it out, from evening to morning before the LORD, an everlasting statute for your generations incumbent on the Israelites."

CHAPTER 27 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *its horns*. The horn-shaped projections at the four corners of the altar were, as archaeological investigation has established, a common feature of altars in the West Semitic world. One may surmise that the common Semitic association of horn (Hebrew *qeren*, the same word as Latin *cornu* and English "horn") with strength may have led to this particular practice of cultic ornamentation, the horns somehow confirming or focusing the strength flowing down from the deity to the cultic site. Blood from the sacrifices was sprinkled on the horns of the altar, and so perhaps the horns might have been regarded as the most sacred places on the altar. On that basis, some scholars have reasoned that this is why a person seeking sanctuary would cling to the horns of the altar, although a simpler explanation might be that the horns were the only places on the altar where there was something to hold on to.

3. *pails . . . shovels . . . basins . . . flesh-hooks . . . fire-pans*. Biblical narrative is notoriously stingy in providing details of the paraphernalia of everyday life, in marked contrast to Homer. Oddly and instructively, the one genre of biblical literature in which such details, with the particularizing lexicon needed to indicate them, are abundantly displayed is in cultic legislation. (Again, the Priestly writer remains true to his own professional interests.)

Every one of the utensils required for the elaborate procedure of catching the blood of an animal, shoveling up the ashes and residual fat (*deshen*), turning over the meat as it burns, raking off the coals from the fire, is patiently catalogued in this nonnarrative material.

8. *as He showed you on the mountain, thus they shall do.* This is a variation of the formula at the very end of chapter 25: God is now the subject of a transitive verb "to show" instead of the passive form used for Moses in 25:40. Here, moreover, there is a move from the singular "you" in the first clause to "they" in the second, the Israelites. This switch may reflect an ambiguity about the addressee of the laws of the Tabernacle. In narrative context, it would have to be Moses on the mountain. In rhetorical formulation, the laws sound as though they were addressed to an impersonal "you," the representative Israelite who is obliged to perform all these instructions (and if this text was originally an independent unit of Priestly legislation, it could well have been directed to an impersonal Priestly "you"). This verse, then, appears to make an effort to anchor the cultic laws in the narrative setting by reminding us that everything is addressed to Moses, who will then pass on the orders to the Israelite people for implementation. The move from God as speaker to a third-person reference to the deity is in keeping with a general fluid usage in the Bible between first and third person.

14. *flank.* The Hebrew *katef* literally means "shoulder." Several of the recurring architectural terms are transposed from anatomy to human constructions (e.g., *tsela'*, one of two words translated here as "side," originally means "rib").

18. *fifty throughout.* The literal meaning is "fifty in [by?] fifty," evidently to stress that the width shall measure fifty cubits throughout.

19. *So for all the vessels.* The "so" is probably implied by the initial *lE*, which Umberto Cassuto, following Gesenius, characterizes as a "*lamed* of inclusion."

20. *clear oil of beaten olives.* Olive oil would have been the most expensive kind of oil in the ancient Near East (sesame oil was cheaper and more common), and in contrast to ordinary practice, in which cloudy oil would be used for burning and clear oil for culinary purposes, only the best oil is to be

burned in the lamps. The olives are to be beaten (*katit*) with mortar and pestle rather than crushed in a press, the latter being a less labor-intensive process. Egypt, it should be noted, did not typically cultivate olive trees, and it imported olive oil at a premium from Canaan and Phoenicia. It is thus extremely unlikely that the fleeing slaves would have been able to bring with them supplies of fine olive oil, or to obtain it in the wilderness, so this instruction is another clear instance in which a detail of the later Jerusalem cult is retrojected onto the Wilderness period.

to kindle a lamp perpetually. The Hebrew *tamid* means "perpetually," or "regularly repeated." Despite the attachment of later Jewish tradition to an "eternal light" (the conventional English rendering of the two words here, *ner tamid*), the clear indication of the next verse, confirmed by the sanctuary story of young Samuel and Eli in 1 Samuel 2, is that the lamp burned from evening until daybreak and was lit again each evening.

21. *the Tent of Meeting.* This is a synonym for the Tabernacle, stressing the notion that within this tent God "meets," or has fixed occasions of encounter (*moʿed*) with the people through Moses and the high priest.

the Ark of the Covenant. As before, "Ark" is merely implied in the Hebrew.

CHAPTER 28

[1]“And you, bring you forward Aaron your brother and
his sons with him from the midst of the Israelites to be
priests to Me—Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, Eleazar and
Ithamar, the sons of Aaron. [2]And you shall make
sacred garments for Aaron your brother for glory and
for splendor. [3]And you, speak to every wise-hearted
person whom I have filled with a spirit of wisdom, that
they make Aaron’s garments to consecrate him, to be
priest to Me. [4]And these are the garments that they
shall make: breastplate and ephod and robe and
checkwork tunic, turban and sash. And they shall
make sacred garments for Aaron your brother and for
his sons to make him a priest to Me. [5]And they, they
shall take the gold and the indigo and the purple and
the crimson and the linen. [6]And they shall make the
ephod gold, indigo, and purple, crimson and twisted
linen, designer’s work. [7]Two joining shoulder-pieces it
shall have at its two edges, and attached. [8]And the
fastening band that is on it shall be of the same
fashioning, of one piece with it, gold, indigo and

purple and crimson and twisted linen. [9]And you shall
take two carnelian stones and engrave on them the
names of Israel's sons. [10]Six of their names on the one
stone and the six remaining names on the other stone
in the order of their birth. [11]Lapidary work, seal
engravings you shall engrave on the two stones the
names of Israel's sons, encased in filigree of gold you
shall make them. [12]And you shall set the two stones on
the shoulder-pieces of the ephod as remembrance
stones for Israel's sons, and Aaron shall carry their
names before the LORD on his two shoulders as a
remembrance. [13]And you shall make a filigree of gold.
[14]And two chains of pure gold, intertwined you shall
make them in cordwork, and you shall set the corded
chains on the filigree. [15]And you shall make a
breastplate of judgment, designer's work, like the work
of the ephod you shall make it, gold, indigo and purple
and crimson and twisted linen you shall make it. [16]It
shall be square and doubled, a hand span its length and
a hand span its width. [17]And you shall set in it a stone
inset, four rows of stone, a row of ruby, topaz, and
malachite, the first row. [18]And the second row,
turquoise, sapphire, and amethyst. [19]And the third row
jacinth, agate, and crystal. [20]And the fourth row, beryl
and carnelian and jasper, framed in gold in their
settings. [21]And the stones shall be according to the

names of Israel's sons, twelve according to their names, seal engravings, each with its name for the twelve tribes. [22]And you shall make on the breastplate intertwined cordwork, chains of pure gold. [23]And you shall make on the breastplate two golden rings, and you shall set the two rings on the two edges of the breastplate. [24]And you shall set the two golden cords on the two rings at the edges of the breastplate. [25]And the two ends of the two cords you shall set in the two frames and put them on the shoulder-pieces of the ephod at the front. [26]And you shall make two golden rings and put them on the two edges of the breastplate, at its border which faces the ephod on the inside. [27]And you shall make two golden rings and set them on the two shoulder-pieces of the ephod below in the front opposite its seam above the band of the ephod. [28]And they shall fasten the breastplate from its rings to the rings of the ephod with an indigo strand to be upon the band of the ephod, that the breastplate not slip from the ephod. [29]And Aaron shall carry the names of Israel's sons in the breastplate of judgment over his heart when he comes into the sanctum as a remembrance before the LORD perpetually. [30]And you shall place in the breastplate of judgment the Urim and the Thummim, that they be over Aaron's heart when he comes before the LORD, and Aaron

shall carry the judgment for the Israelites over his heart before the LORD perpetually. [31]And you shall make the robe for the ephod pure indigo. [32]And the opening for the head shall be in the middle of it, its opening shall have a wovenwork border all around, like the opening of a coat of mail it shall be, it must not tear. [33]And you shall make on its hem pomegranates of indigo and purple and crimson, on its hem all around, and golden bells within them all around. [34]A golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate, on the hem of the robe all around. [35]And it shall be upon Aaron when he serves, so that its sound be heard when he comes into the sanctum before the LORD and when he goes out, that he shall not die. [36]And you shall make a diadem of pure gold and engrave upon it with seal engravings: Holy to the LORD. [37]And you shall put on it an indigo strand, that it be on the turban, at the front of the turban it shall be. [38]And it shall be on Aaron's forehead, that Aaron may bear off any guilt from the holy things that the Israelites consecrate, from all their holy gifts, and it shall be on his forehead perpetually for their acceptance before the LORD. [39]And you shall weave the tunic checkwork linen, and you shall make a linen turban, and a sash you shall make of embroiderer's work. [40]And for Aaron's sons you shall make tunics,

and you shall make sashes for them, and headgear you shall make them for glory and for splendor. [41]And you shall dress them, Aaron your brother and his sons with him, and you shall anoint them, and you shall install them and consecrate them, that they serve Me as priests. [42]And make them linen breeches to cover their naked flesh, from the hips to the thighs they shall be. [43]And they shall be upon Aaron and upon his sons when they come into the Tent of Meeting or when they approach the altar to serve in the sanctum, that they do not bear guilt and die—a perpetual statute for him and for his seed after him."

CHAPTER 28 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *to be priests to Me*. Everywhere except perhaps in this chapter, the verb *kihen* is intransitive and means "to perform the functions of a priest (*kohen*)." Here, however, the infinitive has an accusative suffix and so might mean "to make him a priest." In any case, the transformation of Moses's brother and nephews into a distinctive sacerdotal caste is the burden of this passage, and it is the brilliant priestly costume—note the refrain in verse 2 and verse 40, "for glory and for splendor"—that most impressively effects this transformation.

3. *wise-hearted . . . wisdom*. The Hebrew for "wise/wisdom" suggests both a craftsman's skill and insight or understanding.

4. *breastplate and ephod and robe and checkwork tunic.* The ancient audience of this text had an immense advantage over modern readers because it would

have had some actual glimpses of all this splendid raiment and priestly ornamentation and thus would have had a concrete notion of what was being referred to. There have been endless latter-day efforts to reconstruct the wardrobe and to parse the technical sartorial terms that are used to represent it, but these can be no more than amalgams of guesses and approximations. Though the present translation assumes that "breastplate" is still plausible for the Hebrew *ḥoshen* (etymology uncertain), others contend it is a smaller "breastpiece" or even a "pouch." The ephod (the Hebrew root suggests "binding" or "wrapping around") evidently was a kind of apron, although opinions differ on this. It has a secondary meaning as an oracular device.

9. *the names of Israel's sons.* Here the recurrent ethnic designation *beney yisra'el* clearly refers to the twelve sons of Jacob who are the eponymous founders of the twelve tribes of Israel. This, too, reflects a momentous transformation, enshrined in the magic of the cult: the twelve sons of Jacob have become a consecrated people whose special status before the deity is evoked, "remembered," ritually enacted and confirmed in the engravings on the two precious stones in the priest's shoulder-pieces that he carries before the LORD.

15. *a breastplate of judgment.* The judgment (*mishpat*) function of the breastplate is executed through the Urim and Thummim (verse 30) that are set in it. Because the purpose of this device is oracular, some prefer to render *mishpat* as "decision," although there is evidence elsewhere that the Urim and Thummim were often used to determine who was guilty of a particular trespass.

17–20. *ruby, topaz, and malachite . . . jasper*. For all the scholarly recourse to conjectured etymologies and comparative philology, it is virtually impossible to determine precisely what precious stones are referred to in this list of twelve terms. We can do little more than revel in the gorgeousness of the words, which is surely part of the intended response for the ancient audience.

21. *according to the names of Israel's sons.* The stones offer a reduplication—reinforcing the ritual efficacy—of the device of incising the names of the twelve tribes: in the first instance, six names were listed on each of two stones; now every tribe has its own precious stone.

29. *over his heart.* "Heart" of course here means "chest," but the resonance of the term as the organ of feeling and understanding should not be lost.

30. *the Urim and the Thummim.* The precise character of this oracular device has eluded identification. One common conjecture is that they were two stones with different letters or words engraved on them, but unless someone actually digs up a pair, there is no way of proving this conjecture. Traditional interpretation associates the two words with roots that mean "light" and "perfection," but if they are opposites, they could be linked etymologically with terms suggesting "curse" and "innocence." It is probably not coincidental that these two words begin respectively with the first and the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In any case, most of the references to the Urim and Thummim in narrative passages invite the inference that the device generated a binary response to whatever question was posed: yes or no, guilty or innocent.

32. *like the opening of a coat of mail.* This is a prevalent traditional interpretation, but the crucial term in the phrase, *taḥra*, does not appear elsewhere and is of uncertain etymology and meaning.

34. *A golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate.* The sheer splendor of the ornamentation is evoked in poetic incantation through the repetition of the phrase. Judah Halevi, the great medieval Hebrew poet, echoes these words in a delicate, richly sensual love poem, registering an imaginative responsiveness to the sumptuous sensuality of the language here.

35. *so that its sound be heard . . . that he shall not die*. In the ancient Near East, the inner sanctum was a dangerous place. Any misstep or involuntary trespass of the sacred paraphernalia could bring death. (Compare verse 38: the device with the divine name on Aaron's golden diadem carries away any guilt that may be incurred in violating "the holy things that the Israelites consecrate.") The sound of the ringing golden bells on Aaron's hem goes before him as he enters the sanctum, serving an apotropaic function to shield him from harm in this zone of danger.

36. *diadem.* This is another term about which there is dispute. The primary meaning of the Hebrew *tsits* is "blossom," and so this might be a blossom-

shaped gold ornament bound upon the forehead, of the sort the Egyptians were known to use. In poetry, *tsits* appears in parallelism with *nezer*, "crown."

38. *any guilt.* If, for example, an Israelite consecrated to the cult an animal marred by a blemish, "guilt" would be incurred.

41. *install them.* The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "fill their hands."

42. *linen breeches to cover their naked flesh.* Breeches were not worn except by the priestly officials. The need to avoid exposing nakedness in the cult was asserted earlier in 20:26. The Hebrew term here is literally "flesh of the nakedness," the word for nakedness, *ʿerwah*, referring specifically to the genitalia and strongly associated with forbidden sexuality.

43. *that they do not bear guilt and die.* The phrase used pointedly puns on "bear off . . . guilt" in verse 38. In the first instance, the idiom means to remove guilt. Here, antithetically, it means to bear the onus of guilt. Even the golden diadem engraved with the divine name would not protect the priest from harm if he were to violate the sanctity of the Tabernacle by exposing his sexual parts as he performed his priestly functions.

CHAPTER 29

[1]“And this is the thing you shall do for them to
consecrate them to be priests to Me: take one bull of
the herd and two unblemished rams, [2]and flatbread and
flatcakes mixed with oil and flatcake wafers brushed
with oil, fine wheat flour you shall make them. [3]And
you shall place them in one basket and bring them
forward in the basket, with the bull and with the two
rams. [4]And Aaron and his sons you shall bring forward
at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, and you shall
bathe them in water. [5]And you shall take the garments
and dress Aaron in the tunic and the robe of the ephod
and the ephod and the breastplate, and you shall gird
him with the band of the ephod. [6]And you shall put the
turban on his head and you shall set the holy diadem
on the turban. [7]And you shall take the anointing oil
and pour it over his head and you shall anoint him.
[8]And his sons you shall bring forward and dress them
in tunics. [9]And you shall belt them with sashes, Aaron
and his sons, and set headgear on them, and the
priesthood shall be for them a perpetual statute, and

you shall install Aaron and his sons. [10]And you shall
bring forward the bull before the Tent of Meeting, and
Aaron, and his sons, shall lay their hands on the bull's
head. [11]And you shall slaughter the bull before the
LORD at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. [12]And
you shall take of the bull's blood and place it on the
horns of the altar with your finger, and all the blood
you shall spill upon the base of the altar. [13]And you
shall take all the fats that cover the entrails and the
lobe on the liver and the two kidneys and the fat that is
on them and turn them to smoke on the altar. [14]And
the bull's flesh and its hide and its dung you shall burn
in fire outside the camp, it is an offense. [15]And the one
ram you shall take, and Aaron and his sons shall lay
their hands on the ram's head. [16]And you shall
slaughter the ram and take its blood and throw it upon
the altar all around. [17]And the ram you shall cut up by
its parts and wash its entrails and its limbs and put
them on its cut parts and its head. [18]And you shall turn
the ram to smoke on the altar, it is a burnt offering to
the LORD, a pleasing fragrance, a fire offering to the
LORD. [19]And you shall take the second ram, and
Aaron, and his sons, shall lay their hands on the ram's
head. [20]And you shall slaughter the ram and take of its
blood and put it on the right earlobe of Aaron and on
the right earlobe of his sons and on their right thumb

and on their right big toe, and you shall throw the blood on the altar all around. [21]And you shall take of the blood that is on the altar and of the anointing oil and sprinkle them on Aaron and on his garments and on his sons' garments and on his face together with them, and he shall be consecrated, he and his garments and his sons and his sons' garments together with him. [22]And you shall take from the ram the fat, and the broad tail and the fat that covers the entrails and the lobe on the liver and the two kidneys and the fat that is on them, and the right thigh, for it is the installation ram, [23]and one loaf of bread and one cake of bread made with oil and one wafer from the basket of flatbread that is before the LORD. [24]And you shall put it all on the palms of Aaron and on the palms of his sons and elevate it as an elevation offering before the LORD. [25]And you shall take them from their hands and turn them to smoke on the altar, together with the burnt offering, as a pleasing fragrance before the LORD, it is a fire offering to the LORD. [26]And you shall take the breast from the installation ram which is Aaron's and elevate it as an elevation offering before the LORD, and it shall be your portion. [27]And you shall consecrate the breast of the elevation offering and the thigh of the donation, which were elevated and which were donated, from the installation ram that is

Aaron's and that is his sons'. [28]And it shall be a
perpetual statute for Aaron and for his sons from the
Israelites, for it is a donation, and a donation shall it be
from the Israelites, from their communion sacrifices,
their donation to the LORD.

[29]"And the sacral garments that are Aaron's shall
belong to his sons after him, to be anointed in them
and to be installed in them. [30]Seven days the priest in
his stead among his sons shall wear them, who comes
into the Tent of Meeting to serve in the sanctum.
[31]And the installation ram you shall take and you shall
cook its flesh in a sacred place. [32]And Aaron, and his
sons with him, shall eat the ram's flesh and the bread
that is in the basket at the entrance of the Tent of
Meeting. [33]And they for whom atonement is made
shall eat them, to install them, to consecrate them, and
no stranger shall eat them, for they are holy. [34]And if
something is left over from the flesh of installation and
from the bread until morning, you shall burn what is
left in fire, it shall not be eaten, for it is holy. [35]And
you shall do thus for Aaron and for his sons, as all that
I have charged you, seven days you shall install them.
[36]And an offense-offering bull you shall prepare for
each day, and you shall purge the altar as you atone

over it, and you shall anoint it to consecrate it. [37]Seven
days you shall atone on the altar and consecrate it, and
the altar shall be a holy of holies, whoever touches it
shall be consecrated. [38]And this shall you do on the
altar: two yearling lambs each day, perpetually. [39]The
one lamb you shall do in the morning and the other
lamb you shall do at twilight. [40]And a tenth of a
measure of fine flour mixed with a quarter-*hin* of
beaten oil, and a quarter-*hin* libation of wine for the
one lamb. [41]And the other lamb you shall do at
twilight, like the morning's grain offering and its
libation you shall do it, as a pleasing fragrance to the
LORD, [42]a perpetual burnt offering for your
generations at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting
before the LORD, where I shall meet with you there to
speak to you. [43]And I shall meet there with the
Israelites and it shall be consecrated through My glory.
[44]And I shall consecrate the Tent of Meeting and the
altar, and Aaron and his sons I shall consecrate to be
priests to Me. [45]And I shall abide in the midst of the
Israelites and I shall be God to them. [46]And they shall
know that I am the LORD their God Who brought
them out from the land of Egypt for Me to abide in
their midst. I am the LORD their God."

CHAPTER 29 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *to consecrate them to be priests to Me*. This whole series of cultic regulations is arranged in concentric circles: first the donation of the sumptuous materials of the Tabernacle and the instructions for assembling the elaborate portable structure; then the directions for constructing the inner sanctum and the altar; then the vestments and sacred ornaments of the priests; now the priests themselves—their installation rite and the precise instructions for the animal sacrifices, the sundry meal offerings, and the libations. For the Priestly writer, the representation of Aaron and his sons actually performing the sacred service on the altar, installed in their sacerdotal function, butchering the animals and splashing gore on the altar and on themselves, would have surely been the climax of this entire sequence.

4. *you shall bring forward.* The Hebrew verb *hiqriv* generally means "to bring near" or "to cause to approach." Presumably what is implied is coming close to the sacred place of God's presence. It is also the common verb that means "to sacrifice."

7. *anointing oil.* Oil poured over the head—presumably pure olive oil—was the confirming act of consecration for both priests and kings. Hence in biblical idiom the monarch is not the crowned king (though they did sometimes wear crowns) but the anointed king (*mashiaḥ*).

9. *a perpetual statute.* The Hebrew *ḥoq*, which has the general meaning of "statute," also sometimes suggests an allowance, a benefice that is regularly paid to someone. Since the tribe of Levi from which the priests came would have no lands, the priesthood was not only their spiritual inheritance but also their allowance or dole.

10. *lay their hands on the bull's head.* The laying on of hands may simply have betokened an affirmation of possession of the animal, but some commentators suggest a kind of magical transfusion of properties from the person touching to the beast touched—perhaps, the sins for which the sacrificed animal is to atone.

12. *And you shall take of the bull's blood.* Blood, which has been so prominent and so multivalent in the Exodus story, here serves a dedicatory and purgative function, making the altar holy. Similarly, in verse 20 Aaron and his sons are enjoined to daub the sacrificial blood symbolically on the organs of hearing and holding and locomotion in order to dedicate themselves wholly to their sacred task. (Presumably, the eye is omitted to avoid the danger of getting blood in the eye, and the mouth is omitted because of the taboo against tasting blood.)

all the blood. This obviously means all the rest of the blood.

14. *burn in fire.* As elsewhere, this seeming redundance indicates total burning, burning to ashes.

18. *a pleasing fragrance.* This recurrent idiom clearly derives from pagan usage, in which the fragrance of the sacrifices was imagined to ascend to the nostrils of the deity and cause the deity bodily pleasure. What residue of the pagan concreteness of the idiom may have been retained in its biblical usage is impossible to know.

21. *blood . . . anointing oil*. The spectacle of the priests splattered all over with blood and oil may be a repugnant one to the modern imagination, but for the ancients both the clear olive oil and the sacrificial blood were thought of as purifying agents.

29. *to his sons after him.* Here the priestly succession, from Aaron in the wilderness all the way to the Priestly writer in the sixth century B.C.E., is envisaged. The preposition "in his stead" (*taḥtaw*) in the next verse is another indication of a chain of succession to the office of high priest.

33. *no stranger.* The reference here is clearly not to an ethnic alien but, as in other ritual contexts, to anyone not belonging to the priestly caste and not consecrated to approach the sanctum.

36. *purge.* The Hebrew verb is cognate with the noun for "offense" (*ḥata't*) and is used in the *pi'el* conjugation, which sometimes can mean to expunge or remove the substance or quality indicated by the verbal root.

37. *whoever touches it shall be consecrated.* This is commonly explained to mean that whoever touches the altar becomes consecrated, in a kind of contagion of holiness. It could equally mean, however, that whoever touches the altar must first be consecrated, the verb being construed as an imperative. Although contagious impurity is a common biblical idea, there is less basis for a notion of contagious sanctity.

42. *for your generations at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.* The straddle of the Tabernacle laws between the Wilderness setting and the later cultic center in Jerusalem is especially evident here. The Tabernacle service, after all, was in effect just forty years, but the model it provides for the temple service would be for the generations.

43. *it shall be consecrated through My glory.* One detects a certain tension between a conception of the sacred inherited from pagan cult and a new, monotheistic conception. According to the former, there exists an intricate technology of the sacred that confers holiness on a place and on the human officiants—the elaborate regimen of construction and dress and sacrifice and sprinkling with blood that has just been detailed. But now God reminds Israel that it is only through His glory, His free decision as deity to make His presence "abide"—a nomad's term of temporary residence—in this place, that the altar becomes consecrated. Without this divine initiative, all the choreography of the cult is unavailing. The manifestation of the "glory" of the deity has polytheistic antecedents, though the strong emphasis on God's choice to abide in the midst of Israel is new.

46. *I am the* LORD *their God.* Just as the royal proclamation of the Decalogue began with this affirmation, the grand set of regulations for the creation of the Tabernacle and the dedication of the priests concludes with the royal declaration of God's special relationship with Israel.

CHAPTER 30

[1]“And you shall make an altar for burning incense,
acacia wood you shall make it. [2]A cubit its length and a
cubit its width, it shall be square, and two cubits its
height; from the same piece its horns. [3]And you shall
overlay it with pure gold—its roof and its walls all
around and its horns, and you shall make for it a
golden molding all around. [4]And two golden rings you
shall make for it beneath its molding on its two flanks,
you shall make on its two opposite sides, and they shall
be housings for the poles with which to carry it. [5]And
you shall make the poles of acacia wood and overlay
them with gold. [6]And you shall set it before the curtain
that is near the Ark of the Covenant in front of the
cover that is over the Ark of the Covenant where I
shall meet you. [7]And Aaron shall burn upon it the
aromatic incense morning after morning, when he
tends the lamps he shall burn it. [8]And when Aaron
lights the lamps at twilight he shall burn it, a perpetual
incense before the LORD for your generations. [9]You
shall not offer up on it unfit incense, nor burnt offering

nor grain offering, and no libation shall you pour upon it. [10]And Aaron shall atone on its horns once a year with the blood of the offense offering of atonement, once a year he shall atone on it for your generations. It is holy of holies to the LORD."

[11]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [12]"When you count heads for the Israelites according to their numbers, every man shall give ransom for his life to the LORD when they are counted, that there be no scourge among them when they are counted. [13]This shall each who undergoes the count give: half a shekel by the shekel of the sanctuary—twenty *gerahs* to the shekel—half a shekel, a donation to the LORD. [14]Whosoever undergoes the count from twenty years old and up shall give the LORD's donation. [15]The rich man shall not give more and the poor man shall not give less than half a shekel to atone for their lives. [16]And you shall take the atonement money from the Israelites and set it for the service of the Tent of Meeting, and it shall be a remembrance for the Israelites before the LORD to atone for their lives." [17]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [18]"And you shall make a laver of bronze and a stand of bronze for washing and place it between the Tent of Meeting and

the altar, and place water there. [19]And Aaron and his
sons shall wash their hands and their feet from it.
[20]When they come into the Tent of Meeting, they shall
wash with water, that they do not die, or when they
approach the altar to serve, to burn a fire offering to
the LORD. [21]And they shall wash their hands and their
feet, that they do not die, and it shall be for them a
perpetual statute, for him and for his seed, for their
generations."

[22]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [23]"And you,
take you choice spices: five hundred weight wild
myrrh, and aromatic cinnamon, half of that, two
hundred fifty weight, and aromatic cane, two hundred
fifty weight. [24]And cassia, five hundred weight by the
shekel of the sanctuary, and olive oil, a *hin*. [25]And you
shall make of it oil for sacred anointing, a perfumer's
compound, perfumer's work, sacred anointing oil it
shall be. [26]And you shall anoint with it the Tent of
Meeting and its furnishings and the Ark of the
Covenant, [27]and the table and all its furnishings and the
lamp stand and its furnishings and the altar for
incense, [28]and the altar for burnt offering and all its
furnishings, and the laver and its stand. [29]And you shall
consecrate them, and they shall be holy of holies,

whoever touches them shall be consecrated. [30]And Aaron and his sons you shall anoint, and you shall consecrate them to be priests to Me. [31]And to the Israelites you shall speak, saying, 'Oil for sacred anointing this shall be to Me for your generations. [32]On a person's flesh it shall not be poured, and in its proportions you shall make nothing like it. It is holy, it shall be holy for you. [33]The man who compounds its like and who puts it on an unfit person shall be cut off from his people.'" [34]And the LORD said to Moses, "Take you the fragrances balsam and onycha and galbanum, fragrances, and clear frankincense, equal part for part it shall be. [35]And you shall make of it incense, a perfume compound, perfumer's work, tinctured with salt, pure, sacred. [36]And you shall pound it to fine powder and place some of it before the Ark of the Covenant in the Tent of Meeting where I shall meet you. Holy of holies it shall be to you. [37]And the incense that you will make, in its proportions you shall not make for yourselves, holy it shall be for you to the LORD. [38]The man who makes its like to smell it shall be cut off from his people."

CHAPTER 30 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *an altar for burning incense*. Like so many other features of the Tabernacle, small altars of this sort—two cubits square would be on the order of a foot and a half square—for the special purpose of burning incense were common in Canaanite sanctuaries, as archaeological investigation has shown. Although the Hebrew word for "altar" is derived from the root that means "to slaughter" or "to sacrifice," its use here for a little golden square on which no sacrifices could be offered indicates that the term was applied to any raised platform dedicated to cultic purposes. The sacrificial altar was located in the outer court of the Tabernacle, the incense altar in the inner precinct directly in front of the Ark of the Covenant (verse 6). The placement of these regulations after the body of Tabernacle laws is commonly explained by the fact that they had nothing to do with the rites of installation. In any case, this chapter seems to be an appendix of miscellaneous items to the Tabernacle section: first instructions about the incense altar, then census regulations, then directions about the laver, and finally the recipe for the incense.

9. *unfit incense.* Literally, "strange [*zarah*] incense." In the cultic passages, as we have already seen, "strange" indicates not "alien" but either a person (layman) or, as here, a substance that is not proper for introduction into the sanctum.

10. *once a year with the blood of the offense offering of atonement.* That one day would be the Day of Atonement. Aaron would have to carry blood from the outer court, where the animal sacrifice was offered, to conduct this ritual of expiation or purgation in which the four horns of the incense altar were daubed with blood.

12. *When you count heads.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "lift up the head."

every man shall give ransom for his life . . . when they are counted. It was a belief common to Israel and to the Mesopotamian cultures that it was dangerous for humans to be counted. Perhaps it was felt that assigning individuals in a mass an exact number set them up as vulnerable targets for malefic forces. The story of David's ill-fated census in 2 Samuel 24, which triggers a plague, turns on this belief. The danger of destruction inherent in census taking could be averted by the payment of a "ransom" for each threatened life as a donation to the sanctuary. The supposed danger of the

census thus becomes the rationale for the institution of a poll tax, which in turn will be an important source of revenue for the maintenance of the sanctuary and its officiants.

13. *half a shekel by the shekel of the sanctuary.* "Shekel" means "weight" in Hebrew, and the stress on weights here is a clear indication that the reference is to a fixed weight of silver rather than to a coin. (Coins came into use fairly late in the biblical period.) It seems likely that the specified "shekel of the sanctuary" was a heavier weight than the "silver shekels at the merchants' tried weight" (Genesis 23:16) that Abraham pays to Ephron the Hittite. The average weight of actual shekels that have been unearthed is something over eleven grams, which would make the *gerah*, its twentieth part, rather small change.

23–24. *myrrh . . . cinnamon . . . cassia*. As with the names for precious stones, the exact identification of the sundry spices is uncertain (the items listed in verse 34 are especially doubtful). The first two terms mentioned, however, happily have cognates in other languages—*mor* and *qinamon*. The presence of the latter term in biblical Hebrew demonstrates the vitality of ancient international trade: cinnamon was originally raised in Ceylon and elsewhere in South Asia, and the word appears to have arrived in ancient Israel with the luxury import from wherever the plant was grown.

32. *On a person's flesh it shall not be poured.* The person (*ʾadam*) clearly means a layperson, in contradistinction to a consecrated priest.

33. *unfit person.* Again, the term is *zar*, literally, "stranger," and serves as a definition of what is meant by "person" in the previous verse. There is a complementarity of notions of unfitness to the cult. An unfit person or substance may not come or be brought before the altar. The sanctified compound of fragrances used for the incense to be burned on the altar may not be used outside the sanctuary for secular purposes, for the mere pleasure of enjoying the aroma.

CHAPTER 31

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“See, I have
called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the
tribe of Judah. [3]And I have filled him with the spirit of
God in wisdom and in understanding and in
knowledge and in every task, [4]to devise plans, to work
in gold and in silver and in bronze, [5]and in stonecutting
for settings and in wood carving, to do every task.
[6]And I, look, I have set by him Oholiab son of
Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, and in the heart of
every wise-hearted man I have set wisdom, that they
make all that I have charged you: [7]the Tent of Meeting
and the Ark of the Covenant and the covering that is
upon it and all the furnishings of the Tent, [8]and the
table and its furnishings and the pure lamp stand and
all its furnishings and the incense altar, [9]and the burnt-
offering altar and all its furnishings and the laver and
its stand, [10]and the service garments and the sacred
garments for Aaron the priest and the garments of his
sons to be priests, [11]and the anointing oil and the

aromatic incense for the sanctum, as all that I have charged you they shall do."

12 And the LORD said to Moses, saying, 13 "And you, speak to the Israelites, saying, 'Yet My sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you for your generations to know that I am the LORD Who hallows you. 14 And you shall keep the sabbath, for it is holy to you. Those who profane it are doomed to die, for whosoever does a task on it, that person shall be cut off from the midst of his people. 15 Six days shall tasks be done, and on the seventh day, an absolute sabbath, holy to the LORD. 16 Whosoever does a task on the sabbath day is doomed to die. And the Israelites shall keep the sabbath to do the sabbath for their generations, a perpetual covenant. 17 Between Me and the Israelites it is a sign for all time that six days did the LORD make heaven and earth and on the seventh day He ceased and caught His breath.'"

18 And He gave Moses when He had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai the two tablets of the Covenant, tablets of stone written by the finger of God.

CHAPTER 31 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *called by name*. The obvious sense of the idiom is to choose, to designate, or, as Rashi puts it, to summon "to perform a task." After the formal blueprints for the Tabernacle, God enlists the actual craftsmen who are to execute the plans.

3. *wisdom . . . understanding . . . knowledge*. As before, "wisdom" and its synonyms suggest both mastery of a craft and something like insight.

task. The two most common biblical terms for "work" are *mela'khah* (the word used here) and *'avodah* (the word used to designate the activity of the slaves in Egypt). *'Avodah* usually implies subservience—in political contexts, it means to be subject or vassal to a superior power; in cultic contexts, divine service—and it also often suggests strenuous physical labor (it is, for example, the verbal root used when Adam is cursed "to work the soil"). *Mela'khah* derives from the verbal root *l-'-k* found in Ugaritic but not used in the Bible as a verb, which means to carry out a designated task. Thus, a *mala'kh* is a messenger or agent (when his sender is God, an angel). In this immediate context, *mela'khah* has a clear connotation of craft, coupled with the requisite manual skill. The term, however, is meant to interact with its pointed recurrence in the immediately following passage about the sabbath, and so the present translation represents it by "task" in both cases.

6. *in the heart of every wise-hearted man I have set wisdom.* The two master craftsmen just mentioned by name would of course have needed large crews of men with the requisite skills to work under them. Putting wisdom in the hearts of wise-hearted men is a kind of positive counterpart to hardening the heart of Pharaoh: the capacity for skillful artisanship is innate, one of the person's attributes, but God is the ultimate source of all such capacities and the enabling force for their realization.

7–11. The list of everything that Bezalel and his workers are to execute follows the instructions for the Tabernacle and the priests (chapters 25–30) in

the order they were given and thus serves as a recapitulative summary of the long section that it now concludes.

10. *the service garments.* There is debate over the precise meaning of the Hebrew *bigdey haserad*. Rashi—and many modern interpreters after him—prefers to relate it to an Aramaic verb *s-r-d*, which means "to weave" or "to braid." Others, beginning with the Aramaic Targums in Late Antiquity, connect it with the Hebrew root *sh-r-t*, "to serve." Because the term is bracketed here with *bigdey qodesh*, "sacred garments," it is more likely that it indicates a particular function rather than the weave or fabric of the clothing. It would seem, then, that *bigdey haserad* are special garments worn while performing a less sacrosanct service than that of the cult performed by the high priest.

13–17. As is often the case in biblical passages of climactic thematic significance, the injunction about the sabbath is crafted with verbal symmetries that are at once elegant and emphatic. The word *shabat* (in one instance, *shabaton*) occurs precisely seven times and the verb "to keep" three times; and, as Yitzhak Avishur has noted, the whole short section is chiastically structured—for it is a sign (a), it is a sign for all time (b), between Me and you (c), Between Me and the Israelites (c'); for your generations (b') / for their generations (a').

13. *Yet My sabbaths you shall keep.* The force of the initial *ʾakh*, "yet" (or "only," "just") is to link this reiteration of the prohibition of work on the sabbath to the preceding section on the construction of the Tabernacle. The Israelites have been enjoined to undertake an elaborate set of labors in order to build God a fit sanctuary. Nevertheless, this idea of a sanctuary, inherited from pagan antecedents, for confirming the bond between man and God does not have precedence over the original Israelite idea of the sabbath as the supreme confirmation of that bond, Israel's *imitatio dei*, "a sign between Me and you for your generations."

14. *whosoever does a task on it.* All work, including even the "task" (*melaʾkhah*) of the Tabernacle, must cease on the sabbath. The talmudic sages thus showed themselves keen readers of these two adjacent passages in deriving the thirty-nine primary categories of labor (*ʾavot melaʾkhah*)

forbidden on the sabbath from the sundry activities necessary for the assemblage of the Tabernacle and its furnishings.

doomed to die . . . cut off from the midst of his people. The vehemence of this formulation is predicated on the notion that the sabbath is the ultimate sign of the covenant between God and Israel, so that one who violates the sabbath violates the Covenant and renounces solidarity with the covenanted people.

15. *tasks.* The Hebrew uses a collective noun, singular in form.

17. *caught His breath.* For a justification of this physical rendering of the verb, see the comment on Exodus 23:12. The flagrant anthropomorphism would not have been a problem for the ancient audience.

18. *when He had finished speaking.* The concise summary statement of this verse brings us back from the long catalogue of divine instructions—all that Moses was "shown on the mountain" during his forty days there—to the narrative situation that we left in chapter 24. Moses is now ready to come down to the foot of the mountain, where trouble is already brewing.

written by the finger of God. The phrase "finger of God," previously used by Pharaoh's soothsayers, may suggest that God inscribed the stone tablets by tracing a finger over them, without chisel or stylus. Scholars have proposed that behind this image lie both mythological and political traditions of the ancient Near East: gods who inscribe human fate in stone and overlords who inscribe on tablets the conditions of vassalage for their vassals.

CHAPTER 32

[1]And the people saw that Moses lagged in coming
down from the mountain, and the people assembled
against Aaron and said to him, “Rise up, make us gods
that will go before us, for this man Moses who brought
us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what
has happened to him.” [2]And Aaron said to them,
“Take off the golden rings that are on the ears of your
wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them
to me.” [3]And all the people took off the golden rings
that were on their ears and brought them to Aaron.
[4]And he took them from their hand and he fashioned it
in a mold and made it into a molten calf. And they
said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you
up from the land of Egypt.” [5]And Aaron saw, and he
built an altar before it, and Aaron called out and said,
“Tomorrow is a festival to the LORD.” [6]And they rose
early on the next day, and they offered up burnt
offerings and brought forward communion sacrifices,
and the people came back from eating and drinking
and they rose up to play. [7]And the LORD said to

Moses, “Quick, go down, for your people that you brought up from Egypt has acted ruinously. [8]They have swerved quickly from the way that I charged them. They have made them a molten calf and bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.’” [9]And the LORD said to Moses, “I see this people and, look, it is a stiff-necked people. [10]And now leave Me be, that My wrath may flare against them, and I will put an end to them and I will make you a great nation.” [11]And Moses implored the presence of the LORD his God and said, “Why, O LORD, should your wrath flare against Your people that You brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a strong hand? [12]Why should the Egyptians say, ‘For evil He brought them out, to kill them in the mountains, to put an end to them on the face of the earth’? Turn back from Your flaring wrath and relent from the evil against Your people. [13]Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel Your servants, to whom You swore by Yourself and spoke to them, ‘I will multiply your seed like the stars of the heavens, and all this land that I said, I will give to your seed, and they will hold it in estate forever.’” [14]And the LORD relented from the evil that He had spoken to do to His people. [15]And Moses turned and came down the

mountain, with the two tablets of the Covenant in his hand written on both their sides, on the one side and on the other they were written. [16]And the tablets, God's doing they were, and the writing, God's writing it was, inscribed on the tablets. [17]And Joshua heard the sound of the people as it shouted, and he said to Moses, "A sound of war in the camp!" [18]And he said,

"Not the sound of crying out in triumph,
and not the sound of crying out in defeat.
A sound of crying out I hear."

[19]And it happened when he drew near the camp that he saw the calf and the dancing, and Moses's wrath flared, and he flung the tablets from his hand and smashed them at the bottom of the mountain. [20]And he took the calf that they had made and burned it in fire and ground it fine and scattered it over the water and made the Israelites drink it. [21]And Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you should have brought upon it great offense?" [22]And Aaron said, "Let not my lord's wrath flare. You yourself know that this people is in an evil way. [23]And

they said to me, ‘Make us gods that will go before us, for this man Moses who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him.’ [24]And I said to them, ‘Whoever has gold, take it off.’ And they gave it to me, and I flung it into the fire, and out came this calf.” [25]And Moses saw the people, that it was let loose, for Aaron had let them loose as a shameful thing to their adversaries. [26]And Moses stood at the gate of the camp and said, “Whoever is for the LORD, to me!” And the Levites gathered round him. [27]And he said to them, “Thus said the LORD God of Israel, ‘Put every man his sword on his thigh, and cross over and back from gate to gate in the camp, and each man kill his brother and each man his fellow and each man his kin.’” [28]And the Levites did according to the word of Moses, and about three thousand men of the people fell on that day. [29]And Moses said, “Dedicate yourselves today to the LORD, for each man is against his son and against his brother, and so blessing may be given to you today.” [30]And it happened on the next day that Moses said to the people, “You, you have committed a great offense. And now I shall go up to the LORD. Perhaps I may atone for your offense.” [31]And Moses went back to the LORD and said, “I beg You! This people has committed a great offense, they have made themselves gods of gold. [32]And now, if You

would bear their offense . . ., and if not, wipe me out, pray, from Your book which You have written." [33]And the LORD said to Moses, "He who has offended against Me, I shall wipe him out from My book. [34]And now, lead this people to where I have spoken to you. Look, My messenger shall go before you. And on the day I make a reckoning, I will make a reckoning with them for their offense." [35]And the LORD scourged the people for having made the calf that Aaron made.

CHAPTER 32 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And the people saw that Moses lagged in coming down from the mountain*. These words bring us back to the concrete narrative situation at the end of chapter 24, before the long interruption of cultic law: Moses had disappeared into the numinous cloud on the mountaintop; the people, awestruck, waited at the foot of the mountain, glimpsing the flashes of fire from the cloud above. It is understandable that after forty days they should wonder whether Moses would ever return, and that they should be terrified at the idea of being stranded in the wilderness without the leader on whom they had been entirely dependent.

make us gods that will go before us. Here, and repeatedly in the Golden Calf episode, *ʾelohim*, which regularly refers to God (in the singular) is used in the plural: despite all the spectacular demonstrations of the LORD's supreme power, the people have not liberated themselves from polytheistic notions. "Go before us" points to the urgently felt need for a guide through the wilderness, which should have been Moses or, more pointedly, the divine messenger God designated to lead Israel. The phrase is also a military idiom suggesting leadership in battle.

this man Moses. It is noteworthy that the most ordinary of terms, "man," becomes a kind of epithet for Moses, perhaps intimating the distance of puzzlement or wonder with which others regard him. Just before the tenth plague, we were told that "[t]he man Moses, too, is very great in the land of Egypt" (11:3). Now "this man Moses" is an object of exasperation and perplexity for the Israelites. The connection with the passage at the beginning of chapter 11 is reinforced by Aaron's request for the golden earrings, since the "borrowing" of gold and silver ornaments is mentioned in the same section of chapter 11.

4. *fashioned it in a mold.* The word represented as "mold," *ḥeret*, usually means "stylus," but incising would not normally have been part of the process of making a molten image. Some scholars relate both the verb and the noun to entirely different roots that yield the sense "wrapped it in a bag," but that reading is quite strained. Perhaps a term associated with a different image-making process was then applied idiomatically to all kinds of metalwork image-making. In any case, Aaron is pointedly represented as fashioning the image, an idea that may have been reinforced by the use of the term *ḥeret*, in blatant contradiction to the comically lame excuse he will make to Moses, "I flung it into the fire, and out came this calf" (verse 24).

These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt. This is a provocative reversal of God's proclamation at the beginning of the Decalogue and elsewhere that He is the LORD Who brought the people out of Egypt. The gods are plural while the calf is singular because ancient Near Eastern people were polytheists, not fetishists: the golden icon was conceived as the terrestrial throne or platform for the deity (singular or plural), having precisely the same function as the cherubim over the Ark. The Golden Calf is thus a kind of anti-Tabernacle or anti-Ark, meant for the same end of making the divine dwell among the people but doing it in a prohibited fashion. It should be noted that golden bulls or calves were often used as cultic seats for deities in the ancient Near East. Scholarship has duly registered an implicit polemic in this story against the northern kingdom of Israel, which set up golden calves at its sanctuaries in Bethel and Dan—evidently, not at all as images of pagan worship but as thrones for the God of Israel, in a competing iconography to the one used in Jerusalem.

5. *a festival to the LORD.* Aaron tries both to placate the people and yet to preserve a sense of loyalty to the LORD, YHWH. They have already twice said that they wanted him to make them "gods," but, rather desperately, he clings to the notion that the Golden Calf should be seen as the LORD's throne and that this celebration should be "a festival to the LORD."

6. *to play.* The Hebrew *letsaḥeq* suggests revelry and in some contexts sexual play or license. The strong implication is a bacchanalian celebration (accompanied by food and drink) that involves shouting and song (verse 18) and dance (verse 19) and probably orgiastic activity as well.

7. *your people that you brought up from Egypt.* Like a disgruntled parent disavowing connection with a wayward child, God says to Moses that Israel is *your* people.

9. *And the LORD said to Moses.* The formula for introducing quoted speech is reiterated with no intervening response from Moses. According to this fixed convention of biblical narrative, this repetition of the formula after the lack of an answer points to Moses's incapacity to respond, dumbfounded as he is by what God tells him.

10. *leave Me be . . . and I will put an end to them*. Either God, imagined in frankly human terms, is so thoroughly fed up with the refractory people that He really contemplates destroying them utterly and then starting from scratch with Moses, or these words are a kind of test of Moses, who firmly declines to be the progenitor of a new nation and shows himself a staunch advocate of Israel.

12. *Why should the Egyptians say.* Moses invokes what has been a leading motif of the Exodus story: God's liberation of Israel from slavery and His triumph over Egypt established His "glory," His unique status as supreme God of all the earth. To destroy Israel now would overturn all that has been achieved through the Exodus for God's standing in the eyes of humankind at large.

13. *Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel Your servants.* After the argument based on the preservation of God's reputation, Moses invokes a contractual obligation: God has promised to the patriarchs a grand future for their

descendants in the terms of the Covenant, and He surely cannot revoke that promise.

15. *written on both their sides.* Despite Christian and Jewish iconography, the stone tablets, as archaeology has discovered in remnants from the surrounding cultures, were thick enough to have inscriptions on both sides.

17. *And Joshua heard the sound of the people as it shouted.* Joshua, we should recall, was stationed partway up the mountain while Moses went on to the summit. Thus he hears the uproar of the Israelite revelry from a distance and is not close enough to see what is going on. Umberto Cassuto proposes that the single word for "as it shouted," *berei'oh*, is a pun on *bera'ah*, "for evil," which was used in verse 12.

A sound of war in the camp. Joshua is a military man and so jumps to the conclusion that the uproar means battle.

18. *triumph . . . defeat . . . crying out*. In the triadic line of poetry that Moses uses to respond to Joshua, "triumph" (literally, "might") and "defeat" (literally, "weakness") are antithetically bracketed, and then the third member of the line, as often happens in poetic triads, introduces a new, unstable element. The common claim that the Hebrew for "crying out," *'anot*, means "singing" is dubious because the sound has just been described as shouting (though it might include singing). The same term, *'anot*, occurs in 2 Samuel 22:36, where it probably means "battle cry." Moses's response to Joshua, then, is that he hears an indiscriminate uproar which has nothing to do with military matters.

19. *he saw the calf and the dancing . . . and he flung the tablets . . . and smashed them*. Moses, of course, has already been informed about all this, but, as the Hebrew proverb has it, "hearing is not the same as seeing." His wrath flares—precisely what he implored God not to allow to occur with divine wrath—and he responds in a paroxysm of anger, flinging and smashing. There is also a good deal of evidence that in the ancient Near East smashing the tablets on which a binding agreement was written was a legal act of abrogating the agreement.

20. *scattered it over the water and made the Israelites drink it.* Numerous commentators have noted the (approximate) analogy to the ordeal by drinking

to which the woman suspected of adultery is submitted (Numbers 5:11–31). Richard Elliott Friedman asks, what water?, and then interestingly proposes that this would have to have been the water that Moses miraculously provided for the people, which would be a compounding of irony.

24. *I flung it into the fire.* Aaron in his feeble attempt at an alibi uses the same verb for violent or spasmodic throwing that was employed for Moses's casting down the tablets.

25. *let loose, for Aaron had let them loose.* The basic meaning of the Hebrew *paruʿa* is "to unbind," as in the unbinding or letting loose of long hair. The sense here is of a loosing of all inhibitions in orgiastic frenzy. Friedman sees in "let them loose," *peraʿoh,* a pun on "Pharaoh," while Cassuto detects in the same word a pun on *beraʿah*, "in evil."

as a shameful thing to their adversaries. The word translated as "shameful thing," *shimtsah*, appears only here and so its meaning is uncertain, though it seems to indicate something strongly negative. "To their adversaries" might conceivably be a euphemism for "to themselves," as the more common word for enemies is sometimes used as a euphemistic substitution in curses.

27. *Put every man his sword on his thigh.* Typically, the short sword would have been strapped in a scabbard to the left thigh for quick unsheathing by the right hand. In rallying round him men of the tribe of Levi, his own tribe, Moses does something analogous to what David will do in creating a power base within the people through a kind of family militia recruited from his clan in Bethlehem. We can no longer recover the historical roots of the biblical traditions about Levi, later the sacerdotal tribe, as an implacably violent group. In the massacre of the males of Shechem (Genesis 35), that violence was negative; here it is represented in a positive light, supposedly exerting a necessary astringent effect on the people that has been "let loose," that has surrendered to the orgiastic release of a pagan cult.

each man kill his brother . . . his fellow . . . his kin. This chilling command enjoins the sword-wielding Levites to show no mercy to friend or kin, since the very nature of a pagan orgy engulfing the masses is that at least some of those most deeply involved will be people close to the executors of retribution. The figure of three thousand dead in the next verse indicates that

this is not an indiscriminate massacre but an assault on the ringleaders—or perhaps, those guilty of the most egregious excesses—among the orgiasts.

29. *Dedicate yourselves.* This is the same idiom for priestly dedication, "fill your hands," that in the context of the Tabernacle cult was rendered as "install."

so blessing may be given to you. The Hebrew syntax is a little obscure, but the evident sense is that the Levites, through their homicidal zealotry, confirm their "dedication" as a priestly caste and thus as worthy recipients of God's blessing.

31. *I beg You.* The Hebrew, a single word, is neither pronoun nor verb but is an ejaculation, *ʾana*, which is used to begin an entreaty. "Please" in English seems matter-of-fact and merely polite, not sufficiently imploring.

32. *if You would bear their offense.* The thought stipulated after this conditional clause is left incomplete, perhaps because Moses is uncertain what to say and is in any case concentrating on the negative conditional clause: "if not, wipe me out, pray, from Your book."

Your book. Although most modern translators prefer to represent *sefer* as "scroll" or "record," the word also sometimes means "book" in biblical Hebrew (its regular sense in postbiblical Hebrew), and various ancient Near Eastern peoples registered belief in a celestial book in which the fates of humankind were inscribed. (The codex format of the book had not yet been invented, but a text written on a scroll could nevertheless be conceptualized as a book.) This entire exchange between Moses and God looks suspiciously like a duplication, in part contradictory, of verses 9–13. There God offered to make Moses the beginning of a new people after the destruction of all the Israelites. Here Moses asks for death if God will not forgive Israel, and God replies that He will exact retribution only from the offenders.

34. *My messenger shall go before you.* It is not the gods that the people wanted Aaron to make for them that will go before them but, as stipulated earlier in the story, God's messenger. That messenger, we should recall, is not only a guide but also an inexorable and rather menacing monitor of the people's behavior.

on the day I make a reckoning. The exact reference is obscure. Three thousand of the offenders have already been killed by the Levites, and,

momentarily, there will be a further “scourge” by God. For this archetypal sin of the Golden Calf, a free-floating prospect of further retribution would seem to hover over the people like a dark shadow.

35. *for having made the calf that Aaron made.* The repetition of the verb conveys the complicity of both the people and Aaron in the making of the calf.

CHAPTER 33

[1]And the LORD said to Moses, “Go, head up from
here, you and the people that you brought up from the
land of Egypt, to the land that I swore to Abraham, to
Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘To your seed I will give
it.’ [2]And I shall send a messenger before you and I
shall drive out the Canaanite, the Amorite, and the
Hittite and the Perizzite, the Hivvite and the Jebusite,
[3]to a land flowing with milk and honey. But I shall not
go up in your midst, for you are a stiff-necked people,
lest I put an end to you on the way.” [4]And the people
heard this evil thing, and they mourned, and none of
them put on their jewelry. [5]And the LORD said to
Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘You are a stiff-necked
people. If but a single moment I were to go up in your
midst, I would put an end to you. And now, put down
your jewelry from upon you, and I shall know what I
should do with you.’” [6]And the Israelites stripped
themselves of their jewelry from Mount Horeb
onward.

[7]And Moses would take the Tent and pitch it for
himself outside the camp, far from the camp, and he
called it the Tent of Meeting. And so, whoever sought
the LORD would go out to the Tent of Meeting which
was outside the camp. [8]And so, when Moses would go
out to the Tent, all the people would rise and each man
would station himself at the entrance of his tent, and
they would look after Moses until he came to the Tent.
[9]And so, when Moses would come to the Tent, the
pillar of cloud would come down and stand at the
entrance of the Tent and speak with Moses. [10]And all
the people would see the pillar of cloud standing at the
entrance to the Tent, and all the people would rise and
bow down each man at the entrance of his tent. [11]And
the LORD would speak to Moses face-to-face, as a
man speaks to his fellow. And he would return to the
camp, and his attendant Joshua son of Nun, a lad,
would not budge from within the Tent.

[12]And Moses said to the LORD, “See, You say to me,
‘Bring up this people,’ yet You, You have not made
known to me whom You will send with me. And You,
You have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also
found favor in My eyes.’ [13]And now, if, pray, I have
found favor in Your eyes, let me know, pray, Your

ways, that I may know You, so that I may find favor in Your eyes. And see, for this nation is Your people.”
14 And He said, “My presence shall go, and I will grant you rest.” 15 And he said to Him, “If Your presence does not go, do not take us up from here. 16 And how, then, will it be known that I have found favor in Your eyes, I and Your people? Will it not be by Your going with us, that I and Your people may be distinguished from every people that is on the face of the earth?”
17 And the LORD said to Moses, “This thing, too, which you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in My eyes and I have known you by name.”
18 And he said, “Show me, pray, Your glory.” 19 And He said, “I shall make all My goodness pass in front of you, and I shall invoke the name of the LORD before you. And I shall grant grace to whom I grant grace and have compassion for whom I have compassion.” 20 And He said, “You shall not be able to see My face, for no human can see Me and live.” 21 And the LORD said, “Look, there is a place with Me, and you shall take your stance on the crag. 22 And so, when My glory passes over, I shall put you in the cleft of the crag and shield you with My palm until I have passed over.
23 And I shall take away My palm and you will see My back, but My face will not be seen.”

CHAPTER 33 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *But I shall not go up*. The initial Hebrew conjunction *ki* most often means "for" but also sometimes has an adversative sense, "though" or "but," which seems probable here: go up, and My messenger will go before you, but don't expect Me to go up with you.

lest I put an end to you on the way. These words seem to be dictated by a strongly anthropomorphic characterization of God: after the flaring of His anger over the Golden Calf, He prefers to keep a certain distance from this provoking people, whose behavior could easily push Him to destroy them entirely. Abraham ibn Ezra understands God's refusal to dwell in the midst of Israel as a cancellation of the construction project for the Tabernacle—a not unreasonable reading, because all along the Tabernacle was conceived as an institutionalized focus for God's presence in the midst of the people.

4. *none of them put on their jewelry.* Given the fact that they have just made a mass donation of gold earrings for the fashioning of the Golden Calf, one gets a sense that they have come out of Egypt bedecked with a rich abundance of precious ornaments.

5. *You are a stiff-necked people. If but a single moment I were to go up in your midst.* This entire verse duplicates verse 3 and has the look of an uneven editorial splicing of sources. One difference, however, is that in the first instance these words were addressed only to Moses, whereas now he is enjoined to report them to the people, and with a certain note of intensification ("If but a single moment . . ."). Another element of puzzling duplication is the injunction to remove the jewelry, an act that the Israelites have already executed. Richard Elliott Friedman explains the contradiction by proposing that the verb here, "put down from upon you," is meant to indicate not just a temporary removal of the ornaments but a permanent renunciation of wearing them during the Wilderness period. This reading is supported by the odd prepositional use in the next verse of "stripped themselves of their jewelry from Mount Horeb," where "from" probably has a temporal sense (which this translation reflects by adding the adverb "onward").

7. *would take.* Biblical Hebrew has no specialized verbal form for the iterative tense (that is, habitually repeated actions), but the use here of the imperfective followed by the perfective form and the contextual clues make it clear that this whole passage is in the iterative.

and he called it the Tent of Meeting. Elsewhere, this designation was synonymous with the Tabernacle, but here there is no question of erecting that elaborate structure but rather of Moses's pitching his own tent outside the camp and making it serve as a Tent of Meeting, a place where God meets or encounters Moses as Israel's spokesman. Ibn Ezra proposes, with an eye to the iterative character of the passage, that Moses has placed the second set of tablets of the Law in this tent. The Tent itself is located outside the camp because Israel, after the Golden Calf, is deemed unworthy to have God's meeting place with them inside the camp.

8. *each man would station himself . . . they would look after Moses*. This setup replicates horizontally the vertical setup in which Moses goes up on the mountain to encounter God and the people wait below, looking upward at the cloud on the summit. The refractory people now appears to have resumed the stance of obedient followers of Moses.

9. *the pillar of cloud would come down . . . and speak with Moses*. It is of course God speaking from within the pillar of cloud. The oddness of the formulation is dictated by the fact that it is a vividly faithful representation of the people's visual perspective: as each man stands at the entrance of his tent looking after Moses, and as he sees the pillar of cloud (verse 10), it seems to him as though the pillar of cloud were speaking with Moses.

11. *And the* LORD *would speak to Moses face-to-face, as a man speaks to his fellow.* These two idioms for direct communication cannot be literally true because the burden of what follows in this chapter is that no man, not even Moses, can see God's face. The hyperbole is in all likelihood a continuation of the visual perspective of the people so clearly marked in verses 8–10: as it appears to the Israelites from their vantage point in front of their tents, Moses conversing with the pillar of cloud is speaking to God as a man speaks to his fellow.

Joshua son of Nun, a lad. The preceding narrative conveys a strong impression that Joshua is a man of mature years. Ibn Ezra, who places him in

his fifties at this juncture, plausibly infers that the Hebrew *naʿar* here reflects its not infrequent sense of someone in a subaltern position (it would thus be a synonym for "attendant").

12. *You have not made known to me whom You will send with me.* The verb "to know," both in the *hiphʿil* (causative) and *qal* (simple) conjugations, is the key word of this section, which turns on Moses's urgent need to know both the nature of the guidance God will provide Israel through the wilderness and God's intrinsic nature. Moses appears to balk at God's previous declaration that He will not go up in the midst of the people to the promised land but instead will delegate a divine messenger for that task.

I know you by name. The Hebrew idiom suggests both special election and intimate relationship.

13. *for this nation is Your people.* Moses seeks to remind God of His covenantal attachment to Israel, bearing in mind that in the flare-up of divine anger when Israel made the Golden Calf, God had referred to the Israelites as "*your* people."

14. *My presence shall go, and I will grant you rest.* The Hebrew is altogether cryptic—and so compact that the whole sentence is only four words—and this translation mirrors that cryptic effect. Presumably, what God is telling Moses is that He will indeed go before the people through the wilderness, and thus lighten Moses's burden, "grant you rest" (alternately, that verb could refer, according to biblical idiom, to giving Moses, or the people, "rest" from their enemies when they enter the land). But God, scarcely willing to concede that He Himself will lead the people, words the response so laconically, suppressing the clarifying "before you" after "My presence shall go," that Moses is by no means sure what God means, and so he goes on to say, "If Your presence does not go, do not take us up from here." He then stipulates (verse 16) that it is only through God's presence among the Israelites as they journey onward that his own favored status before God can be confirmed, and the election of Israel as well. In all this, it should be noted that "presence" and "face" are the same Hebrew word, *panim*.

18. *Show me, pray, Your glory.* We are not likely to recover precisely what the key term *kavod*—glory, honor, divine presence, and very literally, "weightiness"—conveyed to the ancient Hebrew imagination. In any case,

Moses, who first fearfully encountered God in the fire in the bush, is now ready and eager to be granted a full-scale epiphany, a frontal revelation of the look and character of this divinity that has been speaking to him from within the pillar of cloud.

19. *I shall make all My goodness pass in front of you.* In response to the request that God show Moses His glory, He offers instead to show him His "goodness" (*tuv*), a manifestation of His moral attributes as divinity. But God's goodness is not amenable to human prediction, calculation, or manipulation: it is God's untrammeled choice to bestow grace and compassion on whom He sees fit, as He has done with Moses.

21. *And the LORD said.* Extraordinarily, there are three consecutive iterations of the formula for introducing speech (verses 19, 20, 21) with no response from Moses. Moses, having asked to see God face-to-face, is in a daunting situation where it is God Who will do all the talking and explain the limits of the revelation to be vouchsafed Moses.

22. *shield you with My palm.* The Hebrew *kaf* means the inside of the hand, the part that holds objects, and is not the general word for hand (*yad*). The conjunction of the verb "shield" (or "screen") with *kaf* is unusual, and perhaps *kaf* is used here because it is the tender part of the hand. Another scholarly proposal is that *kaf* in this instance is an assimilative spelling of *kanaf*, "wing" (or "border," of a garment), a noun elsewhere idiomatically associated with shielding or protection.

23. *you will see My back, but My face will not be seen.* Volumes of theology have been spun out of these enigmatic words. Imagining the deity in frankly physical terms was entirely natural for the ancient monotheists: this God had, or at least could assume, a concrete manifestation which had front and rear, face and back, and that face man was forbidden to see. But such concreteness does not imply conceptual naïveté. Through it the Hebrew writer suggests an idea that makes good sense from later theological perspectives: that God's intrinsic nature is inaccessible, and perhaps also intolerable, to the finite mind of man, but that something of His attributes—His "goodness," the directional pitch of His ethical intentions, the afterglow of the effulgence of His presence—can be glimpsed by humankind.

CHAPTER 34

[1]And the LORD said to Moses, “Carve you two stone
tablets like the first ones, and I shall write on the
tablets the words which were on the first tablets that
you smashed. [2]And be ready by morning, and you shall
go up in the morning to Mount Sinai and take your
stance for Me there on the mountaintop. [3]And no man
shall go up with you, and also no man shall be seen in
all the mountain. Neither shall the sheep nor the cattle
graze opposite that mountain.” [4]And he carved two
stone tablets like the first ones, and Moses rose early in
the morning and went up to Mount Sinai as the LORD
had charged him, and he took in his hand the two
stone tablets. [5]And the LORD came down in the cloud
and stationed Himself with him there, and He invoked
the name of the LORD. [6]And the LORD passed
before him and He called out: “The LORD, the
LORD! A compassionate and gracious God, slow to
anger, and abounding in kindness and good faith,
[7]keeping kindness for the thousandth generation,
bearing crime, trespass, and offense, yet He does not

wholly acquit, reckoning the crime of fathers with sons
and sons of sons, to the third generation and the
fourth.” [8]And Moses hastened and prostrated himself
on the ground and bowed down. [9]And he said, “If,
pray, I have found favor in Your eyes, my Master, may
my Master, pray, go in our midst, for it is a stiff-
necked people, and you shall forgive our crime and our
offense, and claim us as Yours.” [10]And He said, “Look,
I am about to seal a covenant. Before all your people I
will do wonders that have not been created in all the
earth and in all the nations, and all the people in whose
midst you are shall see the LORD’s doing, for
fearsome is that which I do with you. [11]Watch you that
which I charge you today. Look, I am about to drive
out before you the Amorite and the Canaanite and the
Hittite and the Perizzite and the Hivvite and the
Jebusite. [12]Watch yourself, lest you seal a covenant
with the inhabitant of the land against which you
come, lest he become a snare in your midst. [13]For their
altars you shall shatter and their pillars you shall smash
and their cultic poles you shall cut down. [14]For you
shall not bow to another god, for the LORD, His name
is Jealous, a jealous God He is. [15]Lest you seal a
covenant with the inhabitant of the land, and they
whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods, and
he call you, and you eat of his sacrifice, [16]and you take

from his daughters for your sons, and his daughters whore after their gods, and make your sons whore after their gods. [17]No molten gods shall you make for yourselves. [18]The Festival of Flatbread you shall keep. Seven days you shall eat flatbread as I charged you, at the fixed time of the month of the New Grain, for in the month of the New Grain you came out of Egypt. [19]Every womb-breach is Mine, and all your livestock in which you have a male womb-breach of ox or sheep. [20]And a womb-breach of donkey you shall redeem with a sheep, and if you do not redeem it, you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of your sons you shall redeem, and they shall not appear in My presence empty-handed. [21]Six days you shall work and on the seventh day you shall cease. In plow time and in harvest you shall cease. [22]And a Festival of Weeks you shall make for yourself, first fruits of the harvest of wheat, and a Festival of Ingathering at the turn of the year. [23]Three times in the year all your males shall appear in the presence of the Master, the LORD God of Israel. [24]For I will dispossess nations before you, and I will widen your territory and no man will covet your land when you go up to appear in the presence of the LORD three times in the year. [25]You shall not slaughter with leavened stuff the blood of My sacrifice, nor shall the sacrifice of the Festival of Passover be

left till the morning. [26]The best of the first fruit of your soil you shall bring to the house of the LORD your God. You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk."

[27]And the LORD said to Moses, "Write you these words, for according to these words I have sealed a covenant with you and with Israel." [28]And he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights. Bread he did not eat, nor water did he drink. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Words. [29]And it happened when Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the Covenant in Moses's hand when he came down from the mountain, that Moses did not know that the skin of his face had glowed when he spoke with Him. [30]And Aaron, and all the Israelites, saw Moses, and, look, the skin of his face glowed, and they were afraid to come near him. [31]And Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the chiefs in the community came back to him, and Moses spoke to them. [32]And afterward all the Israelites drew near and he charged them with what the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. [33]And Moses finished speaking with them, and he put a veil on his face. [34]And when Moses came before the LORD to speak with Him, he would remove the veil until he

came out, and he would come out and speak to the Israelites that which he had been charged. [35]And the Israelites would see Moses's face, that the skin of Moses's face glowed, and Moses would put the veil back on his face until he came to speak with Him.

CHAPTER 34 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Carve you two stone tablets*. The first set of tablets had been given by God to Moses (31:18). Now, as Rashi aptly puts it, God says to Moses, "You smashed the first ones, you, carve you others."

2. *take your stance.* The same verb, *nitsavta*, is used here as at the end of the immediately preceding section (33:21); so it is reasonable to assume that the revelation now on the mountaintop of God's moral attributes is precisely the just promised revelation of God's "goodness" to Moses when he is to stand in the cleft of the crag.

3. *no man shall be seen in all the mountain.* These instructions repeat the injunction in chapter 19 to separate the people from Moses before God gives the law to Moses on the summit of Sinai. Now, however, after the incident of the Golden Calf, the separation is total—this time there are no attendants stationed partway up the mountain.

5. *stationed Himself with him there, and He invoked the name of the* LORD. Given the propensity of biblical Hebrew to use verbs without making the grammatical subject explicit, either Moses or God could be doing the stationing and the invoking. God makes better sense as the subject of "stationed" (the same verb as the one used for Moses, "take your stance," but in the reflexive conjugation, perhaps to distinguish God's action) because it immediately follows "came down," of which God is the unambiguous subject. It might seem more plausible that Moses would be the one to invoke (*qara'*

bE) God's name, but this is precisely what God said He would do in the previous dialogue with Moses (33:19). The exclamation "The LORD, the LORD!" would then be that invocation.

6. *The LORD, the LORD!* The translation follows the traditional understanding of the two Hebrew words as an exclamatory repetition. It is also possible, as Maimonides and others have noted, to read the sequence of words as follows: "And the LORD called out, 'The LORD!'"

7. *keeping kindness for the thousandth generation . . . yet He does not wholly acquit*. See the second comment on Exodus 20:5. "Wholly acquit" (which does not appear in the version in the Decalogue) clearly implies that in cases where the offenders persist in their offense they cannot expect to be acquitted, for all of God's stated compassion.

9. *may my Master, pray, go in our midst.* Virtually every word Moses speaks here harks back to his exchange with God after the fiasco of the Golden Calf. God had said that He would not go in the midst of the people because it was stiff-necked and that He would instead send a messenger; Moses invokes the same attribute of being stiff-necked to argue that the people needs God's intimate guiding presence. Moses had referred before to his finding favor in God's eyes; now he requests as confirmation of that favored status that God go in the midst of the people.

10. *Look, I am about to seal a covenant.* Many scholars identify the verses that follow, through to verse 28, as the Small Book of the Covenant. It manifestly replicates material from the Book of the Covenant (chapters 21–23) as well as from the Decalogue. It has also been proposed that these injunctions reflect a variant set of Ten Commandments, but that interpretation seems strained because some of the laws here—e.g., the redemption of firstborn animals and the ban on the use of leavened stuff with sacrifices—are too secondary to be part of a list of ten defining demands that God makes of Israel.

12. *lest you seal a covenant with the inhabitant of the land.* Such a covenant with idolators would be a kind of anti-covenant to the one God is now making with Israel. As many commentators have observed, in the aftermath of the Golden Calf episode, this series of injunctions pointedly begins with a stern

command to keep a distance from the pagans and to destroy their cultic objects.

13. *pillars . . . cultic poles*. The pillars, *matsevot*, are sacred steles, probably made of piled-up stones (hence the verb "smash"). The cultic poles, *ʾasherim*, were in all likelihood initially associated with the worship of the fertility goddess Asherah; their exact design and dimensions are not known, but it is clear that they were made of wood (hence the verb "cut down," which also plays against the verb in Hebrew for sealing a covenant, which is literally to "cut" a covenant).

14. *His name is Jealous.* See the first comment on Exodus 20:5. The fact that the very next verses three times invoke the metaphor of whoring to represent idolatry strongly argues for a quasisexual sense of "jealous" (rather than "impassioned"): the God Who has chosen Israel implicitly represents Himself as Israel's husband and lover (a metaphor that both Hosea and Jeremiah will make explicit), and when the Israelites betray Him by worshipping other gods, they go "whoring," are unfaithful as an errant spouse is sexually unfaithful.

17. *No molten gods.* This reiterated prohibition has special resonance after what has just happened with the Golden Calf.

20. *break its neck.* See the second comment on Exodus 13:13.

21. *In plow time and in harvest you shall cease.* This clause does not occur in the earlier prohibitions of work on the seventh day. For the agriculturist, it is a vivid way of stressing that the obligation of the sabbath day is binding throughout the annual cycle, even when a farmer might feel the urgent temptation to go on with the plowing of his fields in the early spring or the harvesting of his crops in the fall.

23. *the Master.* The Hebrew *ʾadon* is an approximate synonym of *baʿal*, and there may be a polemic point to the use of the term here in a legal document that begins with a warning against the seductions of Canaanite cults: it is before the Master, the *ʾadon*, the God of Israel, and not before any Baal that Israel is to appear. For the double valence of "to appear in the presence of the LORD," see the comment on 23:15.

24. *I will widen your territory and no man will covet your land.* As Abraham ibn Ezra plausibly suggests, the fact that Israel will have ample, and secure, borders means that when people leave their holdings to go up to the sanctuary for the pilgrim festivals, they will not have to fear incursions from marauders or invaders.

26. *You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk.* See the comment on Exodus 23:19.

28. *Bread he did not eat, nor water did he drink.* This parallelism is a kind of epic flourish, stressing the superhuman heroism of "the man Moses" as he undergoes his epiphany in a formulaic period of forty days.

the words of the covenant, the Ten Words. This is the first time that what is inscribed on the tablets is designated the Ten Words, or "Commandments." (The Hebrew *devarim* means "words" or "things," and has several additional senses.)

29. *Moses came down . . . Moses's hand . . . Moses did not know*. The triple repetition of the name is stylistically odd. It may serve here to throw a kind of spotlight on Moses, who, after his forty days with God, is set off visibly from the rest of humankind.

the skin of his face had glowed. The sense of the verb would seem to be "had begun to glow" since the condition continues. There is some question about the precise meaning of the verb *qaran*, which occurs only here. The Greek translation of Aquila and the Latin Vulgate famously understood it to mean "sprouted horns" (from *qeren*, "horn"), a virtually impossible reading because horns would grow from the head, not from "the skin of the face." Others have imagined that the verb could indicate a hornlike toughness of the skin, a kind of radiation burn after exposure to the divine effulgence. (Ibn Ezra indignantly dismisses the rationalists who claim Moses's face had turned hornlike from the forty days' fast.) It makes more sense to see something terrifyingly luminous—a reflection of the divine fire glimpsed by the people from the foot of the mountain—rather than a disfiguration in Moses's face. The notion of divine radiance enveloping the head or face of a god, a king, or a priest appears in numerous Mesopotamian texts, and so would probably have been a familiar idea to the ancient Hebrew audience.

30. *and they were afraid to come near him.* If, as seems likely, Moses's face is giving off some sort of supernatural radiance, the fear of drawing near him precisely parallels the people's fear of drawing near the fiery presence of God on the mountaintop.

33. *a veil.* Richard Elliott Friedman interestingly connects this with the covering and curtain in the Tabernacle: the site of holiness, he proposes, has to be partitioned off, enveloped in layers, and yet it remains accessible to the people.

CHAPTER 35

[1]And Moses assembled all the community of Israelites
and said to them, “These are the things that the LORD
has charged to do: [2]Six days shall tasks be done and on
the seventh day there shall be holiness for you, an
absolute sabbath for the LORD. Whosoever does a
task on it shall be put to death. [3]You shall not kindle a
fire in all your dwelling places on the sabbath day.”

[4]And Moses said to all the community of Israelites,
saying, “This is the thing that the LORD has charged,
saying, [5]‘Take from what you have with you a donation
to the LORD. Whose heart urges him, let him bring it,
a donation of the LORD, gold and silver and bronze,
[6]and indigo and purple and crimson linen and goat
hair, [7]and reddened ram skins and ocher-dyed skins
and acacia wood, [8]and oil for the lamp and spices for
the anointing oil and for the aromatic incense, [9]and
carnelian stones and stones for setting in the ephod and
in the breastplate. [10]And every wise-hearted man

among you shall come and do all that the LORD has charged: [11]the Tabernacle and its tent and its cover and its clasps and its boards, its bolts, its posts, and its sockets; [12]the Ark and its poles and all its furnishings and the curtain for the screen; [13]the table and its poles and all its furnishings, and the bread of the Presence; [14]and the lamp stand for the light and its furnishings, and its lamps and the oil for the light; [15]and the incense altar and its poles and the anointing oil and the aromatic incense and the screen of the entrance to the Tabernacle; [16]the altar of burnt offering and the bronze grating that belongs to it, its poles and all its vessels and the laver and its stand; [17]the court hangings and its poles and its sockets, and the screen of the court-gate; [18]the pegs of the Tabernacle and the pegs of the court and their cords; [19]the service garments to serve in the sanctum, the sacred garments for Aaron the priest and the garments of his sons to be priests."

[20]And all the community of Israelites went out from before Moses. [21]And every man whose heart moved him and everyone whose spirit urged him came, they brought a donation of the LORD for the task of the Tent of Meeting and for all its work and for the sacred garments. [22]And the men came, besides the women, all

whose heart urged them, they brought brooches and earrings and rings and pendants, every ornament of gold, and every man who raised an elevation offering of gold to the LORD. [23]Every man with whom was found indigo and purple and crimson and linen and goat hair and reddened ram skins and ocher-dyed skins brought it. [24]Whoever donated a donation of silver and bronze brought a donation of the LORD, and with whomever was found acacia wood for all the tasks of the work, they brought it. [25]And every woman wise-hearted with her hands spun and brought the threadwork of indigo and purple and crimson and linen. [26]And all the women whose hearts moved them with wisdom spun the goat hair. [27]And the chieftains brought carnelian stones and stones for setting in the ephod and in the breastplate, [28]and the spice and the oil for the lamp and for the anointing oil and for the aromatic incense. [29]Every man and woman whose heart urged them to bring for all the task that the LORD had charged to do by the hand of Moses, the Israelites brought a freewill gift to the LORD.

[30]And Moses said to the Israelites, “See, the LORD has called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur from the tribe of Judah. [31]And He has filled him with a spirit

of God in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, and in every task, [32]to devise plans, to work in gold and in silver and in bronze [33]and in stonecutting for settings and in wood carving to do every task of devising, [34]and He has given in his heart to instruct—he and Oholiab son of Ahisamach from the tribe of Dan. [35]He has filled them with heart's wisdom to do every task of carver and designer and embroiderer in indigo and in purple and in crimson and in linen, and of weaver, doers of every task and devisers of plans. [36:1]And Bezalel, and Oholiab and every wise-hearted man in whom the LORD has given wisdom and understanding to know how to do the task of the holy work, shall do all that the LORD has charged.

CHAPTER 35 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Moses assembled all the community*. This initial clause, which brings us back to the interrupted instructions regarding the Tabernacle, beginning with the law of the sabbath that concluded those instructions (31:12–17), is a neat reversal of the inception of the Golden Calf episode: "the people assembled against Aaron" (32:1). Instead of a rebellious assembling of the people, their leader now assembles them in order to rehearse before them all that God has enjoined them.

2. *Six days.* This very brief version of the law of the sabbath is a kind of digest of the earlier iteration of the sabbath obligation. There is a good deal of summarizing repetition of earlier material in all that follows.

3. *You shall not kindle a fire.* This prohibition is a new specification. The lighting of fires might well be associated with the "tasks" involved in constructing the Tabernacle because fire would have been required for all the metalwork, and in one Ugaritic text, fire is burned six days in order to erect a sanctuary for Baal. But the kindling of fire—as against merely making use of fire that has been set accidentally—is clearly a primary labor of civilization, as the Prometheus myth suggests, a kind of inauguration of technology, and so it is understandable that a special prohibition of it on the sabbath should be spelled out.

5. *Take . . . a donation to the* LORD. *Whose heart urges him, let him bring it.* The language here and in what follows takes us back to the beginning of the Tabernacle section, chapter 25, and then to passages from the subsequent chapters. The structure of command and implementation in mirroring language is common to the Bible and other ancient Near Eastern literatures. The Priestly editor, now reverting to a Priestly text, seeks to make this a thematically purposeful structure (though the return to cultic regulations is not likely to please modern readers). That is, the design for a perfect earthly abode for God in the midst of the Israelites has been traumatically disrupted by the story of the Golden Calf and the shattering of the tablets of the Law. Now that divinely mandated order has been restored with the making of the second set of tablets, the text can return to the actual fashioning of the Tabernacle, once again relishing every resplendent detail of indigo and crimson, gold and silver and bronze.

gold and silver and bronze. It is worth noting that although the Torah is a product of the early Iron Age, the report of the metals used for the Tabernacle remains faithful to the late Bronze Age setting of the Wilderness narrative.

10. *wise-hearted.* As before, the wisdom (*ḥokhmah*) in question slides from the notion of insight or intelligence to skill in a craft—in part because intelligence itself was thought of as a kind of teachable craft for those who had the capacity. The craft valence of the collocation used here is especially

pronounced in verse 25, which speaks of "every woman wise-hearted with her hands" in the skill of spinning.

19. *the service garments to serve in the sanctum.* In this instance, the writer puts together *serad*, "service," and *sharet*, "to serve," either because he considered them to reflect the same root or because he is punning on the phonetic similarity.

21. *every man whose heart moved him and everyone whose spirit urged him.* The impulse of generosity indicated in 25:2 is stated more emphatically here and in the verses that follow. One may detect in this new emphasis a response to the Golden Calf episode, in which the people were quick to offer their golden rings for the fashioning of the molten image. Now they outdo themselves in donations for the LORD's sanctuary.

22. *the men . . . besides the women*. The Hebrew construction, *haʾanashim ʿal hanashim*, is unusual. It would appear to suggest that the women queued up first to offer their donations. Because of the gender-bound nature of impersonal constructions in Hebrew, all the preceding references to "everyone" were masculine. Now we are alerted to the fact that women played an important role in the outpouring of contributions for the Tabernacle—another way of highlighting the comprehensiveness of the new impetus of generosity. The women were also more likely to have possessed an abundance of ornaments than the men.

earrings. The item in question, *nezem*, was also worn on the nose.

25. *spun.* Spinning is of course the one craft particularly associated with women.

34. *to instruct.* God has endowed Bezalel, together with his chief assistant Oholiab, not only with the skill to execute all these sundry crafts but also with the capacity to instruct the crews of ordinary craftsmen how to carry out their work. Canaanite myth, like the Greek, had a craftsman god; here, instead, the LORD inspires a human being with the skill, or "wisdom," of the craft as well as with the ability to administer the project.

36:1. This verse is a summary of the nature of the workforce for constructing the Tabernacle and therefore would seem to belong here rather than at the

beginning of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 36

[2]And Moses called Bezalel and Oholiab and every
wise-hearted man in whose heart the LORD had given
wisdom, everyone whose heart moved him, to
approach the task to do it. [3]And they took from before
Moses all the donation that the Israelites had brought
for the task of the holy work to do it, and they on their
part brought more freewill gifts morning after
morning. [4]And all the wise people who were doing the
holy task came, each man from his task that he was
doing. [5]And they said to Moses, saying, “The people
are bringing too much for the work of the task that the
LORD charged to do.” [6]And Moses charged, and they
sent word through the camp, saying, “Let each man
and woman do no further task for the holy donation,”
and the people were held back from bringing. [7]And the
task was enough to do all the task, and more.

[8]And every wise-hearted man among the doers of the
task made the Tabernacle—ten panels of twisted linen,

and indigo and purple and crimson, two cherubim,
designer's work, they made them. [9]The length of the
one panel twenty-eight cubits and a width four cubits
to the panel, a single measure for all the panels. [10]And
they joined the five panels one to another, five panels
they joined one to another. [11]And they made indigo
loops along the edge of the outermost panel in the set,
and thus they did on the outermost panel in the other
set. [12]Fifty loops they made in the one panel, and fifty
loops they made in the outermost panel which was in
the other set, the loops opposite one another. [13]And
they made fifty golden clasps and joined the panels to
one another with the clasps, and the Tabernacle
became one whole. [14]And they made goat-hair panels
for a tent over the Tabernacle, eleven panels they made
them. [15]The length of the one panel, thirty cubits, and
a width of four cubits to the panel, a single measure
for the eleven panels. [16]And they joined five of the
panels by themselves and six of the panels by
themselves. [17]And they made fifty loops along the edge
of the outermost panel in the set, and fifty loops along
the edge of the outermost panel in the other set. [18]And
they made fifty bronze clasps to join the tent to
become one whole. [19]And they made a covering for the
tent of reddened ram skins and a covering of ocher-
dyed skins above. [20]And they made boards for the

Tabernacle of acacia wood, upright. [21]Ten cubits the
length of the board, and a cubit and a half the width of
the single board. [22]Two tenons for the one board linked
to each other, thus they did for all the boards of the
Tabernacle. [23]And they made the boards for the
Tabernacle, twenty boards for the southern end. [24]And
forty silver sockets they made beneath the twenty
boards, two sockets beneath the one board for its two
tenons and two sockets beneath the one board for its
two tenons. [25]And in the other side of the Tabernacle
at the northern end, twenty boards. [26]And their forty
silver sockets, two sockets beneath the one board and
two sockets beneath the one board. [27]And at the rear of
the Tabernacle to the west they made six boards. [28]And
they made two boards for the corners of the
Tabernacle at the rear. [29]And they matched below, and
together they ended at the top inside the one ring, thus
they did for the two of them, at the two corners. [30]And
there were eight boards with their silver sockets,
sixteen sockets, two sockets beneath the one board.
[31]And they made five crossbars of acacia wood for the
boards of the one side of the Tabernacle. [32]And five
crossbars for the boards of the other side of the
Tabernacle, and five crossbars for the boards of the
Tabernacle at the rear to the west. [33]And they made the
central crossbar to shoot through the boards from end

to end. [34]And the boards they overlaid with gold, and their rings they made of gold, housings for the crossbars, and they overlaid the crossbars with gold. [35]And they made the curtain of indigo and purple and crimson and twisted linen, designer's work they made it, with cherubim. [36]And they made for it four acacia posts and overlaid them with gold, their hooks gold, and they cast for them four silver sockets. [37]And they made a screen for the entrance of the tent, indigo and purple and crimson and twisted linen, embroiderer's work, [38]and its five posts and its hooks, and they overlaid their tops and their bands with gold, and their five sockets with bronze.

CHAPTER 36 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *freewill gifts*. The Hebrew *nedavah* (here a collective noun), which was mentioned in the previous chapter, 35:29, is derived from the same verb *nadav* that occurs repeatedly in the references to each man's heart "urging" him to offer a gift. In this passage, the theme of Israelite generosity for the construction of the Tabernacle as a resounding reversal of the ill-considered donations for the Golden Calf is given a climactic flourish: the donations go over the top (verse 5) and the people have to be "held back" (verse 6) from giving further.

6. *do no further task.* They are actually not "doing"—that is the responsibility of the craftsmen—but giving. "Task" (*mela'khah*) here is extended in meaning to refer to the materials necessary for the carrying out of the task

that the people bring. That is clearly the meaning of the first occurrence of "task" in the next verse.

8–38. The text now launches upon one of its most extravagant deployments of verbatim repetition. This particular segment corresponds precisely to 26:1–32, the only notable difference being that the imperative verbs of the instruction passage are converted into past verbs for the implementation passage, with the obvious implication that God's directions for the construction of the Tabernacle are now carried out with scrupulous fidelity to every single detail by Bezalel and his work crews. In biblical narrative—these lists scarcely qualify as that—virtually every small swerve from verbatim repetition in repeated passages is a node of new meaning, but here the variance between the two versions is quite marginal and is by no means a vehicle of signification: what really matters is the repetition itself, the fact that the Tabernacle is now faithfully assembled in all its prescribed splendid details. It should be noted that all of the verbs for making in this passage, beginning with "they made them" in verse 8, are in the singular in the Hebrew. The singular is presumably used because the writer has in mind "every wise-hearted man" who is engaged in the building. Hebrew usage slips back and forth easily from plural to singular in such cases. The initial "made" in verse 8 is in the plural, but the end of the verse uses a singular. English being more hidebound by logic, this translation continues with the plural.

CHAPTER 37

[1]And Bezalel made the Ark of acacia wood, two and a
half cubits its length and a cubit and a half its width
and a cubit and a half its height. [2]And he overlaid it
with pure gold, inside and outside, and he made for it a
golden molding all around. [3]And he cast for it four
golden rings on its four feet and two rings on its one
side and two rings on its other side. [4]And he made
poles of acacia wood and overlaid them with gold.
[5]And he brought the poles through the rings on the side
of the Ark to carry the Ark. [6]And he made a cover of
pure gold, two and a half cubits its length and a cubit
and a half its width. [7]And he made two cherubim of
gold, hammered work he made them, at the two edges
of the cover. [8]One cherub at one edge and one cherub
at the other edge, from the cover he made the
cherubim at both its edges. [9]And the cherubim spread
their wings above, shielding the cover with their wings,
and their faces toward each other, toward the cover
their faces were.

[10]And he made the table of acacia wood, two cubits its
length and a cubit and a half its width and a cubit and
a half its height. [11]And he overlaid it with pure gold
and made for it a golden molding all around. [12]And he
made a frame for it, a handsbreadth all around, and he
made a golden molding for its frame all around. [13]And
he cast for it four golden rings and set the rings at the
four corners which were at its four legs. [14]Facing the
frame the rings were, as housings for the poles to carry
the table. [15]And he made the poles of acacia wood and
overlaid them with gold, to carry the table. [16]And he
made the vessels that were on the table, its bowls and
its shovels and its chalices and its jars, from which
libation is done, pure gold.

[17]And he made the lamp stand of pure gold, hammered
work he made the lamp stand, its base and its shaft; its
cups, its calyxes, and its blossoms, were from that
work. [18]And six shafts going out from its sides, three
shafts of the lamp stand from its one side and three
shafts of the lamp stand from its other side. [19]Three
cups shaped like almond blossoms in the one shaft,
calyx and blossom, and three cups shaped like almond
blossoms in the other shaft, and thus for the six shafts
that go out from the lamp stand. [20]And on the lamp

stand were four cups shaped like almond blossoms,
their calyxes and their blossoms. [21]And a calyx under
every two shafts as part of it, and a calyx under every
two shafts as part of it, a calyx under every two shafts
as part of it, for the six shafts coming out of the lamp
stand. [22]Their calyxes and their shafts were part of it,
all of it one hammered work, pure gold. [23]And he
made its seven lamps, and its tongs and its fire-pans—
pure gold. [24]With a talent of pure gold he made it and
all its furnishings.

[25]And he made the altar for burning incense of acacia
wood, a cubit its length and a cubit its width, square,
and two cubits its height; from the same piece its
horns. [26]And he overlaid it with pure gold—its roof
and its walls all around and its horns, and he made for
it a golden molding all around. [27]And two golden rings
he made for it beneath its molding on its two flanks, as
housings for the poles with which to carry it. [28]And he
made the poles of acacia wood and overlaid them with
gold. [29]And he made the holy anointing oil and the
pure aromatic incense, perfumer's work.

CHAPTER 37 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1–29. As before, the implementation of the Tabernacle project mirrors verbatim the instructions for the project, with only minuscule and insignificant variations in formulation (e.g., "*cast* four golden rings" instead of the earlier "*make* four golden rings"). The verses here correspond to 25:10–21, 25:23–39 and 30:1–10.

1. *And Bezalel made.* The instructions for the building were given in the second-person singular to Moses or in the third-person plural for the Israelites. Now Bezalel is represented executing all the details of design, though it is to be understood that he would have been supervising crews of craftsmen. Rashi explains the singling out of Bezalel by name by observing, "Since he devoted himself to the task more than the other artisans, it was linked with his name." Bezalel continues to figure in Hebrew tradition as the archetypal dedicated artisan.

CHAPTER 38

[1]And he made the burnt-offering altar of acacia wood,
five cubits its length and five cubits its width, square,
and three cubits its height. [2]And he made its horns on
its four corners, from the same piece were its horns,
and he overlaid it with bronze. [3]And he made all the
vessels of the altar, and the pails and the shovels and
the basins and the flesh-hooks and the fire-pans, all its
vessels he made of bronze. [4]And he made a meshwork
bronze grating for the altar beneath its ledge from
below halfway up. [5]And he cast four rings at the four
corners of the bronze grating as housings for the poles.
[6]And he made the poles of acacia wood and overlaid
them with bronze. [7]And he brought the poles through
the rings on the sides of the altar to carry it, hollow
boarded he made it.

[8]And he made the laver of bronze and its stand of
bronze from the mirrors of the women who flocked to
the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.

[9]And he made the court for the southern side, the
hangings of the court were twisted linen, a hundred
cubits. [10]Their posts twenty and their sockets twenty,
of bronze. The hooks of the posts and their bands
were silver. [11]And for the northern side, a hundred
cubits, their posts twenty and their sockets twenty, of
bronze. The hooks of the posts and their bands were
silver. [12]And for the western side, hangings of fifty
cubits. Their posts ten and their sockets ten, the hooks
of the posts and their bands were silver. [13]And to the
very east, fifty cubits, [14]hangings of fifteen cubits to the
flank, their posts three and their sockets three. [15]And
for the other flank on each side of the gate of the court
hangings of fifteen cubits, their posts three and their
sockets three. [16]All the hangings of the court all
around were twisted linen. [17]And the sockets for the
posts were bronze, the hooks of the posts and their
bands silver and the overlay of their tops silver, and
they were banded with silver, all the posts of the court.
[18]And the screen of the gate of the court was
embroiderer's work, indigo and purple and crimson
and twisted linen. And it was twenty cubits in length
and a height in the width of five cubits over against the
hangings of the court. [19]And their posts four and their
sockets four, of bronze. Their hooks were silver and
the overlay of their tops and their bands silver. [20]And

all the pegs for the Tabernacle and for the court all around were bronze.

[21]These are the reckonings of the Tabernacle, the Tabernacle of the Covenant, that were reckoned by the word of Moses, the service of the Levites in the hand of Ithamar son of Aaron the priest. [22]And Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur from the tribe of Judah made all that the LORD had charged Moses. [23]And with him was Oholiab son of Ahisamach from the tribe of Dan, wood carver and designer and embroiderer in indigo and in purple and in crimson and in linen. [24]All the gold that was fashioned for the task in every task of the sanctuary, the elevation-offering gold was twenty-nine talents or seven hundred thirty shekels by the sancturary shekel. [25]And the silver reckoned from the community was a hundred talents or one thousand seven hundred seventy-five shekels by the sanctuary shekel. [26]A *beqa* to the head, half a shekel by the sanctuary shekel for each who underwent the reckoning from twenty years old and above, for six hundred thousand and three thousand five hundred and fifty. [27]And the hundred talents of silver were for casting the sockets of the sanctuary and the sockets of the curtain, a hundred sockets for a hundred talents, a

talent for a socket. [28]And from the one thousand seven hundred seventy-five shekels he made hooks for the posts and overlaid their tops and banded them. [29]And the elevation-offering bronze was seventy talents or two thousand four hundred shekels. [30]And he made with it the sockets for the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and the bronze altar and the bronze grating that belongs to it and all the furnishings of the altar, [31]and the sockets of the court all around and the sockets for the gate of the court, and all the pegs of the Tabernacle and all the pegs of the court all around.

CHAPTER 38 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1–7. These verses correspond to Exodus 27:1–8 from the instruction passages.

8. *the mirrors of the women who flocked to the entrance.* The verb here, *tsavʾu*, can mean either "to perform service," as in an army, *tsavʾa*, or "to make up a multitude or crowd," as in the epithet for the stars, *tsevʾa hashamayim*, the "host," or array, of the heavens. Although most modern interpreters opt for the sense of service, there are two difficulties with that construction. The cult was administered by males, and there is scant evidence of a quasisacerdotal function performed outside the sanctuary by women. And if there really were such a group of women doing some sort of sacred service, their numbers would have had to be relatively limited, whereas the sanctuary required large quantities of bronze (see verse 28) donated by the masses. It thus seems more plausible to imagine crowds of devoted women flocking to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, where they would not have been permitted to go in.

(Compare 1 Samuel 2:22, in which the same verb is used.) Mirrors in the ancient world were made of polished bronze, not glass, and were an Egyptian luxury item. Several medieval commentators note that the very objects used by the women for the purposes of vanity, or in the cultivation of their sexual attractiveness, are here dedicated to sacred ends. This verse complements the emphasis on the prominent role of the women in the donations that was brought forth in Exodus 35:22.

9–20. These verses correspond to 27:9–19 with some variation in the wording.

18. *and a height in the width of five cubits.* This is an odd way of describing the height. One suspects that "in the width" (one word in the Hebrew) might be a scribal error, although there are no ancient versions without it.

21. *These are the reckonings.* The term *pequdim*, immediately followed by the cognate passive verb *puqad*, "reckoned," is difficult to translate because the verbal stem *p-q-d* covers so many senses in biblical Hebrew. It means "to count," "to inventory," "to take a census," "to single out," "to pay special attention," "to make a reckoning," and more. The most relevant sense in the present context would be "inventory," but Hebrew idiom prefers to use general terms for technical senses, and this translation honors that preference. When an inventory is transferred from objects to people (verse 26), it becomes a census. What is involved here are two categories of donation—freewill gifts and a poll tax of a silver *beqaʿ* to the head. The poll tax serves simultaneously as a means of extracting silver needed for the sanctuary and as an instrument for counting heads, or taking a census.

by the word of Moses. Literally, "by the mouth."

24. *twenty-nine talents or seven hundred thirty shekels.* The conjunction *waw* here and in what follows does not have its usual sense of "and" but rather "or" since the weight in shekels is manifestly provided as an equivalent—presumably, more familiar to the audience—of the weight in talents. As earlier, it is stipulated that this is the heavier sanctuary-weight shekel and not the mercantile shekel.

26. *for six hundred thousand and three thousand five hundred and fifty.* The previously given round number of 600,000 males is now made more precise

in an enhancement of the effect of exact census of the present context. The "for" (*lE*) that prefixes the number may be dictated by the beginning of the sentence: a silver *beqaʿ* is paid for each head of the 603,550 males.

CHAPTER 39

[1]And from the indigo and the purple and the crimson
they made service garments to serve in the sanctuary,
and they made the sacred garments that were Aaron's
as the LORD had charged Moses. [2]And he made the
ephod of gold, indigo and purple and crimson and
twisted linen. [3]And they pounded out the sheets of
gold and cut strands to work into the indigo and into
the purple and into the crimson and into the linen,
designer's work. [4]Joining shoulder-pieces they made
for it, at its two edges they were joined. [5]And the
ornamented band that was on it was of a piece with it,
fashioned like it, gold, indigo and purple and crimson
and twisted linen, as the LORD had charged Moses.
[6]And they made the carnelian stones ringed with
frames of gold, engraved with seal engravings with the
names of Israel's sons. [7]And he set them on the
shoulder-pieces of the ephod, stones of remembrance
for the sons of Israel, as the LORD had charged
Moses. [8]And he made the breastplate, designer's work,
like the work of the ephod, gold, indigo and purple

and crimson and twisted linen. [9]It was square, they made the breastplate doubled, a span its length and a span its width, doubled. [10]And they set in it four rows of stones, a row of ruby, topaz, and malachite, the first row. [11]And the second row, turquoise, sapphire, and amethyst. [12]And the third row, jacinth, agate, and crystal. [13]And the fourth row, beryl, carnelian, and jasper, framed in gold in their settings. [14]And the stones were according to the names of Israel's sons, twelve according to their names, seal engravings, each with its name for the twelve tribes. [15]And they made on the breastplate intertwined cordwork, chains of pure gold. [16]And they made two golden frames and two golden rings, and they set the two rings on the two edges of the breastplate. [17]And they set the two golden cords on the two rings on the edges of the breastplate. [18]And the two ends of the two cords they set in the two frames, and they set them on the shoulder-pieces of the ephod at the front. [19]And they made two golden rings and set them on the two edges of the breastplate, at its border which faces the ephod on the inside. [20]And they made two golden rings and set them on the two shoulder-pieces of the ephod below in the front opposite its seam above the band of the ephod. [21]And they fastened the breastplate from its rings to the rings of the ephod with an indigo strand to be upon the band

of the ephod, that the breastplate not slip from the ephod, as the LORD had charged Moses. [22]And he made a robe for the ephod, weaver's work, through-and-through indigo. [23]And the opening of the robe in the middle of it like the opening of a coat of mail, a border for its opening all around, so it should not tear. [24]And they made on the hem of the robe pomegranates of indigo and purple and crimson, twisted linen. [25]And they made bells of pure gold and set the bells within the pomegranates on the hem of the robe all around, within the pomegranates. [26]A bell and a pomegranate, a bell and a pomegranate on the hem of the robe all around, to serve, as the LORD had charged Moses. [27]And they made tunics of twisted linen, weaver's work, for Aaron and for his sons, [28]and the turban, linen, and the ornaments of the headgear, linen, and the breeches of linen, twisted linen, [29]and the sash, twisted linen and indigo and purple and crimson, embroiderer's work, as the LORD had charged Moses. [30]And they made a diadem, a sacred crown of pure gold, and wrote upon it in seal-engravings inscription: "Holy to the LORD." [31]And they put on it an indigo strand, to put on the turban above, as the LORD had charged Moses.

[32]And all the work of the Tabernacle of the Tent of
Meeting was completed, and the Israelites did as all
that the LORD had charged Moses, thus they did.
[33]And they brought the Tabernacle to Moses, the Tent
and all its furnishings, its clasps, its boards, its
crossbars, and its posts and its sockets, [34]and the
covering of reddened ram skins and the covering of
ocher-dyed skins and the curtain of the screen; [35]the
Ark of the Covenant and its poles and the cover; [36]the
table and all its furnishings and the bread of the
Presence; [37]the pure lamp stand, its lamps, lamps of
the array, and all its furnishings and oil for the light,
[38]and the golden altar and the anointing oil and the
aromatic incense and the screen of the entrance of the
tent; [39]the bronze altar and the bronze grating that
belongs to it, its poles and all its furnishings, the laver
and its stand; [40]the hangings of the court and its posts
and its sockets and the screen for the gate of the court
and its pegs and all the furnishings of the service of
the Tabernacle for the Tent of Meeting; [41]the service
garments to serve in the sanctuary and the sacred
garments for Aaron the priest and the garments of his
sons to be priests. [42]As all that the LORD had charged
Moses, thus the Israelites did all the work. [43]And
Moses saw all the tasks, and, look, they had done it as

the LORD had charged, thus they had done it, and Moses blessed them.

CHAPTER 39 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1–31. These verses, which constitute the concluding section of the account of implementing the building instructions, correspond to 28:5–42; again, the material is repeated verbatim with only minor variations and, here, some limited abridgement.

1. *as the LORD had charged Moses.* This refrain, repeated, as Nahum Sarna notes, seven times, is not part of the instruction passage in chapter 28.

3. *they pounded out the sheets of gold and cut strands.* This technical detail, absent from chapter 28, is a faithful representation of how gold thread was manufactured. The Egyptians were especially adept in this process, and the word for "sheets," *paḥim*, which has a more common biblical homonym that means "traps," may actually be an Egyptian loanword.

21. The Samaritan version and an Exodus text found at Qumran insert here: "and they made the Urim and the Thummim as the LORD had charged Moses."

32. *the work . . . was completed*. As Umberto Cassuto and others have noted, this passage that summarizes the completion of the Tabernacle echoes the report of God's completion of creation, Genesis 2:1–3, with completion of the work at the beginning and blessing at the end (verse 43). One should recall that the Hebrew for "Tabernacle," *mishkan*, means "dwelling"—God's dwelling place or abode in the midst of the people of Israel. Human effort, adhering to divine direction, emulates the Creator by applying human crafts to build God a harmonious, beautiful, and intricately constructed dwelling place on earth.

33–41. The report of the construction of the Tabernacle and the fashioning of all its furnishings as well as of the priestly garments now concludes, after all the abundance of architectural and sartorial detail, in a rapid catalogue that recapitulates in summary form the principal elements of the whole project. Throughout the Tabernacle passages, both in the directions and in the implementation, language has an incantatory or quasimusical function in addition to the instructional aim, evoking in gorgeous syllables the sheer splendor and artisanal perfection of the sanctuary. This concluding catalogue is rather like the recapitulation of themes at the end of the last movement of a classical symphony, pulling all the previously stated elements together as the piece moves toward satisfying closure.

CHAPTER 40

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]"On the day
of the first month, on the first of the month, you shall
set up the Tabernacle of the Tent of Meeting. [3]And
you shall put there the Ark of the Covenant and screen
the Ark with the curtain. [4]And you shall bring the table
and lay out its array, and you shall bring the lamp
stand and light up its lamps. [5]And you shall set the
golden altar for the incense before the Ark of the
Covenant and you shall set up the screen for the
entrance of the Tabernacle. [6]And you shall set the
burnt-offering altar before the entrance of the
Tabernacle of the Tent of Meeting. [7]And you shall set
the laver between the Tent of Meeting and the altar,
and you shall set water there. [8]And you shall put up the
court all around and set up the screen of the court
gate. [9]And you shall take the anointing oil and anoint
the Tabernacle and all that is in it, and you shall
consecrate it and all its furnishings, that it be holy.
[10]And you shall anoint the burnt-offering altar and all
its furnishings, and you shall consecrate the altar, that

the altar be holy of holies. [11]And you shall anoint the laver and its stand and consecrate it. [12]And you shall bring Aaron and his sons forward to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and bathe them in water. [13]And you shall dress Aaron in the sacred garments and anoint him and consecrate him, that he be a priest to Me. [14]And his sons you shall bring forward and dress them in tunics. [15]And you shall anoint them as you anointed their father, that they be priests to Me, and their anointing shall become for them an everlasting priesthood for their generations." [16]And Moses did as all that the LORD had charged him, thus he did.

[17]And it happened in the first month in the second year, on the first of the month, that the Tabernacle was set up. [18]And Moses set up the Tabernacle and placed its sockets and put up its boards and fixed its crossbars and set up its posts. [19]And he spread the tent over the Tabernacle and put the covering of the tent over it from above, as the LORD had charged Moses. [20]And he took and set the Covenant in the Ark, and he put the poles on the Ark, and he set the cover over the Ark from above. [21]And he brought the Ark into the Tabernacle and placed the curtain of the screen and screened the Ark of the Covenant, as the LORD had

charged Moses. [22]And he set the table in the Tent of
Meeting on the northern side of the Tabernacle outside
the curtain. [23]And he laid out on it the array of bread
before the LORD, as the LORD had charged Moses.
[24]And he placed the lamp stand in the Tent of Meeting
opposite the table on the northern side of the
Tabernacle. [25]And he lit up the lamps before the
LORD, as the LORD had charged Moses. [26]And he
placed the golden altar in the Tent of Meeting before
the curtain. [27]And he burned on it aromatic incense, as
the LORD had charged Moses. [28]And he put up the
screen for the entrance of the Tabernacle. [29]And he put
up the burnt-offering altar there at the entrance to the
Tabernacle of the Tent of Meeting, and offered up on
it the burnt offering and the grain offering, as the
LORD had charged Moses. [30]And he placed the laver
between the Tent of Meeting and the altar, and he set
water there for washing. [31]And Moses and Aaron and
his sons washed their hands and their feet with it.
[32]When they came into the Tent of Meeting and when
they approached the altar, they would wash, as the
LORD had charged Moses. [33]And he set up the court
around the Tabernacle and the altar, and he placed the
screen of the court gate. And Moses completed the
task.

[34]And the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting and the glory of the LORD filled the Tabernacle. [35]And Moses could not come into the Tent of Meeting, for the cloud abode upon it and the glory of the LORD filled the Tabernacle. [36]And when the cloud went up from over the Tabernacle, the Israelites would journey onward in all their journeyings. [37]And if the cloud did not go up, they would not journey onward until the day it went up. [38]For the LORD's cloud was over the Tabernacle by day, and fire by night was in it, before the eyes of all the house of Israel in all their journeyings.

CHAPTER 40 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *the first month, on the first of the month*. Since the month of the New Grain (Abib, or in later Hebrew usage, Nissan) has been fixed as the first month (Exodus 12:2), one may infer that the Tabernacle was set up and consecrated one year, less two weeks, after the departure from Egypt. Thus verse 17 refers to "the first month in the second year," that is, the second year of the Exodus.

you shall set up the Tabernacle. After all the instructions concerning the Tabernacle, followed, after the break of the Golden Calf episode, by the report of the fashioning of all the components of the structure, according to the divine instructions, God enjoins Moses to culminate all these labors by actually setting up the Tabernacle. These commands (verses 1–15) are followed by the account of their implementation (verses 16–34), the latter repeatedly punctuated by the refrain "as the LORD had charged Moses." This perfect execution of God's directions to make Him a dwelling place and a cultic center in the midst of the Israelites would have been conceived, at least

by the Priestly writer, as a fitting conclusion to the Book of Exodus. The doubts as to whether God would dwell among the people as it journeyed through the wilderness are now settled, and that resolution is dramatically confirmed by the evocation of the divine cloud and fire (verses 34–38) with which the book concludes.

4. *lay out its array.* The reference is to the twelve loaves of the bread of Presence, which were changed daily. See verse 23.

15. *their anointing shall become for them an everlasting priesthood for their generations.* This rhetorical flourish makes clear that what the Priestly writer has in view is not merely a report of the archaic era of origins in the Wilderness wanderings but a model and permanent authorization of the privileged status of the priestly caste for all time.

20. *set the Covenant in the Ark.* The Covenant, *ʿedut*, is a synonym for *berit*, the other common biblical term for pact, treaty, or covenant, and it clearly refers to the two stone tablets on which the words of the Covenant were written by the finger of God. The Tabernacle, then, has a double function: it is the place where sacrifices are offered, as in all ancient Near Eastern cults, and it is the place where the material document of an eternal contract between God and Israel is preserved. Though the burnt-offering altar is called "holy of holies" (verse 10), the supreme locus of the sacrosanct, the concrete nexus between humanity and the divine, is the Ark within which the tablets of the Covenant are kept.

33. *And Moses completed the task.* Once again, both the verb and the noun that is its object hark back to the completion of creation in Genesis 2:1–3.

35. *the cloud abode . . . the glory of the* LORD *filled*. Throughout these four concluding verses, one hears the resonant cadences of a kind of epic narrative. As is the rule in most literatures, when prose seeks grand effects, it tends to approximate the formal shape of poetry (compare Melville's repeated use of iambic cadences, coupled with Shakespearian diction in *Moby-Dick*): these two clauses almost scan (the Hebrew has a stress pattern of three beats in the first clause, four in the second), and they exhibit the semantic parallelism that is one of the most prominent features of biblical poetry. Analogous patterns are detectable in the next three verses. The cloud and the

glory appear to be virtual synonyms, or at the very least, overlapping terms. The LORD's glory, *kavod*, is clearly a palpably concrete manifestation of the deity, for all the metaphysical attributes that later theology would attach to it. It may have been imagined as a kind of mantle of light enveloping God, with the cloud giving off a luminosity by day parallel to the fire by night. (Thus the English word "glory," which suggests a nimbus or halo, is an appropriate equivalent.) This cloudy effulgence is so daunting to behold that even Moses does not dare enter the Tent until the cloud lifts.

38. *the LORD's cloud . . . by day, and fire by night was in it*. These words hark back to the initial report of the pillar of cloud and fire (13:21–22) that marked the very beginning of the Wilderness narrative, so this whole large segment of text is cinched in an envelope structure. In chapter 13, the cloud and the fire appear directly before the people to show them the way through the trackless desert. Now, the cloud and the fire have been given a constructed, cultic focal point—the Tabernacle that henceforth will be God's dwelling place in the midst of the people.

in all their journeyings. Pointedly, "their journeyings," *masʿeyhem*, is the last word of the Book of Exodus, just as this same verbal stem inaugurated the Wilderness narrative in 13:20, "And they journeyed from Succoth." We have been left with a sense of harmonious consummation in the completion of the Tabernacle, likened by allusion to the completion of the tasks of creation; but the condition in which the Israelites find themselves remains unstable, uncertain, a destiny of wandering through arduous wasteland toward a promised land that is not yet visible on the horizon. The concluding words of Exodus point forward not to the priestly regulations of the Book of Leviticus, which immediately follows, but to the Book of Numbers, with its tales of Wilderness wanderings, near catastrophic defections, and dangerous tensions between the leader and the led.

LEVITICUS

Introduction

The book of Leviticus, the shortest of the five books that make up the Torah, sits squarely in the middle of the structure of the whole in a way that may be discomfiting to many modern readers. Poised between the completion of the Tabernacle after the Sinai epiphany in Exodus and the Wilderness wanderings in Numbers, it seems like a long moment of stasis dwelling chiefly on matters of ritual. After the brilliantly realized narrative impetus manifested throughout Genesis and, in a somewhat transformed manner, in the first half of Exodus, narrative is entirely set aside, apart from the monitory tales of the deaths of Nadab and Abihu in chapter 10 and of the brawling Egyptian husband who vilifies the divine name in chapter 24. Both those brief episodes, in any event, are introduced as exemplary precedent-setting illustrations

of general principles of law, so they scarcely alter the general legal character of the book as a whole.

Most of the laws, moreover, are focused on topics that may seem less than urgent to audiences not part of the ancient world in which they were framed. There are, to be sure, interesting pieces of legislation here that regulate judicial probity, the administration of charity in an agricultural economy, sexual unions, and dietary practices, but the central concern of the book is the conduct of the cult, with elaborate stipulation of how the sacrificial animals are to be butchered, what parts of them are to be burned on the altar, how their blood is to be ritually sprinkled on the altar or in certain instances daubed on various extremities of the celebrant of the rite. Purification is a paramount consideration in all of this, and the legislation lays out elaborate procedures for cleansing both persons and substances of a rich variety of impurities. Stylistically, the authors of this text convey these laws with careful specification and dry precision, showing no hint of the Deuteronomic flair for rhetoric (apart from the admonitions of the penultimate chapter, which in fact are paralleled in more elaborate form in the concluding chapters of Deuteronomy), and having no recourse to the grand stately cadences that the Priestly

writers elsewhere—in the first version of creation and in the story of the Deluge—impressively display.

If the Torah was assembled from its sundry literary sources by Priestly writers, as scholarly consensus holds, sometime during the sixth century B.C.E., in the decades following the fall of Judah in 586, it is understandable that these editors should want to make the concerns of their own sacerdotal guild the keystone of the literary structure they were establishing. The emphasis, moreover, on the regimen of sacrifices must have had a kind of historical poignancy and an ideological urgency for them: the Temple with all its splendid furnishings and accoutrements had been reduced to rubble by the Babylonian invaders, with much of the Judahite population driven into exile, and these intricate legal instructions about ritual conduct within the sacred space of the Tabernacle were a means of reinstating the vanished temple as a fact of the imagination and a blueprint for future restoration. Precisely this message was strongly carried forward into post-biblical Judaism. Two whole tractates of the Talmud, based on Leviticus, would be devoted to the laws of the cult and would remain the object of intensive study; and at least by the later Middle Ages, small Jewish boys were introduced to the Torah not through the great story of creation and the absorbing

tales of the patriarchs in Genesis but through Leviticus —in Rashi's formulation of the pedagogic slogan, "Let the pure ones come and study laws of purity."

Does Leviticus, in all its legalism and all its focus on sacrificial and purgative procedures, have some sort of literary coherence? The liveliest attempt to define such a coherence is Mary Douglas's *Leviticus as Literature* (1999). As an anthropologist, she had long been fascinated by the system of laws in this book, addressing it in two long chapters of her celebrated book *Purity and Danger*. Eventually, she mastered an impressive body of the relevant biblical scholarship and even acquired some competence in biblical Hebrew in order to devote this full-length study to Leviticus. Her basic argument is that the book represents an extremely intricate and subtle deployment of a mode of thought that she calls "analogical," which, she contends, should not be deemed more primitive than the analytic thinking on which modern Western culture is largely based but rather seen as a different way of conceptually ordering the world, one that is exhibited in many cultures and to which we should not condescend. Reality is conceived as an elaborate system of correspondences—correspondences between Sinai and the cosmos, on the one hand, and the Tabernacle, on the other, and

between all three of these and the body segments of the sacrificial animal. In the scheme of analogical thought that she proposes, no detail is adventitious or devoid of meaning, and so the most minute stipulations about the butchering of beasts and the regimen of ritual manifest an overarching symbolic system that differentiates the realms of the Creator, the human creature, and the priestly caste that serves as intermediary between the two. With this general scheme in constant view, Douglas claims that Leviticus as a book displays a consistently purposeful literary structure, one that follows the contours of this tripartite division of the cosmos.

One may grant the validity of the idea of analogical thought as a shaping force in the book and yet be skeptical about the presence of these proposed formal coherences, which in specific instances seem more the product of interpretive ingenuity than of persuasive reading. I would like to suggest, however, that Leviticus, even as a somewhat miscellaneous assemblage of cultic and other laws, and even as a joining of two distinct documents (the Priestly source and the Holiness Code, chapters 17–26), possesses a certain thematic, though not formal, unity.

There is a single verb that focuses the major themes of Leviticus—"divide" (Hebrew, *hivdil*). That

verb, of course, stands at the beginning of the Priestly story of creation: “And God saw the light, that it was good, and God divided the light from the darkness. . . . And God made the vault and it divided the water beneath the vault from the water above the vault, and so it was.” In this vision of cosmogony, the condition before the world was called into being was a chaotic interfusion of disparate elements, “welter and waste.” What enables existence and provides a framework for the development of human nature, conceived in God’s image, and of human civilization is a process of division and insulation—light from darkness, day from night, the upper waters from the lower waters, and dry land from the latter. That same process is repeatedly manifested in the ritual, sexual, and dietary laws of Leviticus. Thus, the summarizing statement at the end of the list of living creatures respectively permitted and prohibited for eating: “This is the teaching about beast and bird and every living creature that stirs in the water and every swarming thing that swarms on the earth [a whole string of phrases harking back to the Priestly story of Creation], to divide between the unclean and the clean and between the animal that is eaten and the animal that shall not be eaten” (11:46–47). Or again, right after the catalogue of forbidden sexual unions: “I am the LORD your God Who set you

apart from all the peoples. And you shall set apart the clean from the unclean beast, and the unclean bird from the clean, and you shall not make yourselves despicable through beast and bird and all that crawls on the ground, which I set apart for you as unclean. And you shall be holy to Me, for I the LORD am holy" (20:24–26). (The same key Hebrew verb, *hivdil*, is used here, but because "divided you from all the peoples" sounds a little awkward, and might actually introduce an unintended idea of divisiveness, I have reluctantly abandoned consistency in this instance and represented it in English as "set apart.")

The verses just cited appear to straddle between the sexual prohibitions that precede them and the dietary prohibitions mentioned immediately afterward. Just as one has to set apart permissible sexual partners from forbidden ones—mothers, aunts, sisters, daughters, daughters-in-law, and every kind of animal—one must set apart what may be eaten in the great pullulation of living creatures from what may not be eaten—reptiles, amphibians, birds of prey, pigs, bats, rats. Israel, in its turn, by accepting these categorical divisions in the realm of appetite, sets itself apart from other peoples and becomes holy, like God. This last element of *imitatio dei* suggests that God's holiness, whatever else it may involve and however ultimately

unfathomable the idea may be, implies an ontological division or chasm between the Creator and the created world, a concept that sets off biblical monotheism from the worldview of antecedent polytheisms, where at least the king could serve as mediator between human and divine.

Dividing, setting apart, the erection of barriers to access, are notions that suffuse all the regulations here about the Tabernacle (*mishkan*, more literally, God's terrestrial "dwelling place"). Again and again, we are reminded that ordinary Israelites are to keep their distance from the sacred space of the sanctuary, that no unauthorized person may "come forward" (Hebrew *qarav*, which in these contexts, as scholarship has noted, has much the sense of "encroach"). Even the priests must follow a careful regimen of dress and ablution and abstention from alcohol before entering the sanctuary, and the inner sanctum, conceived as the material point of linkage between God and the world, can be entered only by the high priest on the Day of Atonement after meticulous ritual preparation. What goes along with this rigorous setting apart of sacred space is an anxious concern about contamination from the sphere of the profane. Various body fluids; discharges and deformations of the skin and body caused by disease; mildew and other blights in fabrics,

utensils, and buildings; violations of moral as well as ritual prohibitions—all these are lumped together in one large general category, according to the hierarchical division of the cosmos imagined here, of profane pollutants. These are thought of as an invisible cloud of contamination, or as some have proposed, a kind of miasma, that has the capacity to infiltrate into sacred space and compromise its holy character, which by definition involves a careful insulation from the realm of the profane.

The two brief narrative incidents incorporated in the book speak in different ways precisely to the fear of encroachment of the holy. Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons, bring forward "alien fire before the LORD, which He had not charged them" (10:1). Fire is a principal agency of the sacrificial cult, but even it may become a contaminant when it is unauthorized, when it is brought into the sacred zone from some secular source, and these two priests are punished for their invasive act by being consumed with an answering fire that comes out "from before the LORD." The case of the blaspheming Egyptian, who is also put to death (judicially, by stoning), involves a different sort of violation of the sacred. God has a dedicated, delimited space in the sanctuary, which must be guarded, but He also has a sacred name,

which like other names, is understood to hold within it an adumbration or emanation of the distinctive essence of its bearer. The name, of course, cannot be sequestered within spatial barriers as the sanctuary is sequestered; it is always potentially available for circulation in linguistic usage. The Egyptian's vilification or profanation of the divine name is thus an act of encroachment, besmirching the holy with a vileness of the profane, and in the draconian terms of this division of realms, it is deemed a capital offense.

The chief instruments for protecting the separation of ontological spheres are fire, blood, oil, and water. These are all, of course, substances associated with the sacrificial cult that long antedate biblical monotheism, but one may follow Mary Douglas's general line of thought in viewing them as reflections of an implicit symbolic order. Fire, as we have seen abundantly in Exodus and will see even more emphatically in Deuteronomy, is associated with the deity: God reveals His commandments in an awesome pyrotechnic display, manifests His presence before the people in a pillar of fire by night and of cloud by day, and is appropriately worshipped through burnt offerings, entirely consumed by fire, and by other sacrifices that are "turned to smoke" (*hiqtir)* by the officiant. The heart of the sacred zone is a dangerous place from

which divine fire may leap forth to protect the holy from contamination. Blood, as Leviticus emphatically reminds us, is the very life (*nefesh*) of the living animal. As such, it categorically must not be consumed as food, but in ritual procedure it has a purgative virtue and is to be sprinkled, cast, or smeared in designated ways during the sanctuary rite in order to effect purgation. Oil (it is specifically olive oil) has, by contrast, an association with the quotidian and with the social and political realms in ancient culture. A traveler, for example, after washing away the dust of the road, would rub himself with oil; and, of course, oil is the substance of dedication, poured on the head, for kings as well as for priests. It is chiefly the dedicatory function of oil that is carried over into its various stipulated uses here in the cult. Finally, the efficacy of water as a purifying agent is self-evident and universal. One should note that these four substances are drawn from four different realms of existence: fire is linked, as we have seen, with the divine; blood courses through the veins of living creatures, animal and human; olive oil is a product of agriculture, of the land, which sets it over against water, a manifestation of nature without human intervention (it is fresh running water that must be used for purification), recalling the primordial realm

that must be set apart from dry land so that the world may come into existence.

None of this, I suspect, really mitigates the sense of strangeness that people of our own era are likely to feel in reading Leviticus. The preoccupation with dermatological conditions, genital discharges, mildew, the recipes for fritters and breads used in the cult, and the dissection of animals and the distinctions among their various inner organs does not correspond to modern assumptions about the content of great sacred literature. Nevertheless, all these regulations are reflections of a pervasive spiritual seriousness grounded in a comprehensive, coherent conception of reality. This ritual implementation of the monotheistic vision was a battle against the inchoate. Holiness could be achieved, and had to be protected, only by a constant confirmation of hierarchical distinction, by laying out reality in distinct realms and categories separated by barricades of prohibitions. Thus, Aaron and his surviving sons, immediately after the death of Nadab and Abihu, are warned never to come into the sanctuary when they have drunk "[w]ine and strong drink," for in the view of the Priestly writers, authorized ritual is in all respects the exact opposite of ecstatic orgy (another departure in principle from the pagan world as it was imagined by Israelite writers).

This particular ban, like most of the injunctions of Leviticus, is framed to implement a general ideology of separation as “a perpetual statute for your generations, to divide between the holy and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean, and to teach the Israelites all the statutes that the LORD spoke to them by the hand of Moses” (10:9–11).

CHAPTER 1

[1]And He called to Moses and the LORD spoke to him
from the Tent of Meeting, saying, [2]“Speak to the
Israelites and say to them, ‘Should any person from
you bring forward to the LORD an offering, of beasts
from herd and from flock you shall bring forward your
offering. [3]If his offering is a burnt offering, an
unblemished male from the herd he shall bring it
forward, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, to be
accepted for him before the LORD. [4]And he shall lay
his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will
be accepted for him to atone for him. [5]And he shall
slaughter the male of the herd before the LORD, and
the sons of Aaron, the priests, shall bring forward the
blood and cast the blood round the altar which is at the
entrance to the Tent of Meeting. [6]And he shall flay the
burnt offering and cut it up into its parts. [7]And the sons
of Aaron the priest shall place fire on the altar and lay
out the wood on the fire. [8]And the sons of Aaron, the
priests, shall lay out the parts, the head and the fat, on
the wood that is on the fire which is on the altar. [9]And

its innards and its legs he shall wash in water, and the priest shall turn it all to smoke on the altar, a fire offering, a fragrant odor to the LORD. [10]And if his offering is from the flock, from the sheep or from the goats, for a burnt offering, an unblemished male he shall bring it forward. [11]And he shall slaughter it on the north side of the altar before the LORD, and the sons of Aaron, the priests, shall cast its blood round the altar. [12]And he shall cut it up into its parts, its head and its fat, and the priest shall lay them out on the wood that is on the fire which is on the altar. [13]And the innards and the legs he shall wash in water, and the priest shall bring it all forward and turn it to smoke on the altar. It is a burnt offering, a fire offering, a fragrant odor to the LORD. [14]And if his burnt offering to the LORD is from the birds, he shall bring forward his offering from the turtledoves or from the young pigeons. [15]And the priest shall bring it forward on the altar and pinch off its head and turn it to smoke on the altar, and its blood shall be drained on the wall of the altar. [16]And he shall remove its crop with its feathers and fling it by the altar to the east, to the place of the ashes. [17]And he shall tear it open by its wings, he shall not divide them, and the priest shall turn it to smoke on the altar, on the wood that is on the fire. It is a

burnt offering, a fire offering, a fragrant odor to the LORD.'"

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And He called to Moses and the* LORD *spoke to him*. The translation reproduces the oddness of the Hebrew. According to normative usage, one would have expected "And the LORD called to Moses and He spoke to him." Is the postponement of the subject a maneuver to isolate and emphasize the act of calling? Several medieval commentators argue that the calling, or summoning, is the necessary preceding stage before divine speech, and perhaps for that reason it needs to be placed in the syntactic foreground. This verb, the first word of the text (*wayiqra'*), is the prevalent Hebrew name for the book, although another ancient designation, *torat kohanim*, "teaching of the priests," parallels the Greek topical title "Leviticus." Rashbam, the twelfth-century French Hebrew exegete, notes that Exodus ends by reporting Moses's being unable to enter the Tent of Meeting because it was filled with the LORD's glory, and now the LORD must address Moses from that very place in order to speak to him.

2. *any person.* The Hebrew *'adam* can refer to either sex. See the comment on Genesis 1:27.

bring forward. The verb *hiqriv* throughout this text has the technical sense of "introduce," or "present," in the sacred space of the cult. The cognate noun, *qorban*, "offering," is distinctive of Leviticus. Exodus concluded with a notice of God's relationship with Israel in the wilderness, indicating how He led the people on its peregrinations with the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. Now, the Tabernacle having been completed (Exodus 35–37), attention is turned to how Israel on its part is to pursue its relationship with God by offering sacrifices in the sanctuary that has been constructed.

5. *he shall slaughter.* The person presenting the offering butchers the animal, and then the priests take charge of laying out the parts on the altar and burning them.

7. *the sons of Aaron the priest.* Three ancient versions read here "The sons of Aaron, the priests," in the plural, "priests" modifying the sons and not Aaron, as elsewhere in this chapter.

14. *from the birds.* The stipulation of this option appears to be, as several commentators have noted, an accommodation for the poor, who would have been hard put to sacrifice something as valuable as a bull or a sheep.

16. *its crop with its feathers.* There is some question about the meaning of each of these terms. Jacob Milgrom makes an elaborate argument that the first term, *mur'ah*, means "crissum," i.e., the area around the cloacal opening beneath the bird's tail. He is the author of a three-volume, 3000-page commentary on Leviticus that in its sheer comprehensiveness will remain a central reference for philological and historical issues involved in this book. Consequently, his work will often be referred to here. He is an invaluable guide but of course not infallible, and in the present instance there remains a margin of conjecture in his identification of *mur'ah*, and since few readers will understand what a crissum is without recourse to a dictionary, this translation retains the more familiar "crop." The second term, *notsah*, has been linked with the word for "excrement" by some medieval and modern commentators, but it invariably means "feather" elsewhere in Hebrew usage. If the skin was stripped from a large animal and not made part of the sacrifice, it is logical that the feathers would be excluded in the sacrifice of a bird.

CHAPTER 2

[1]“‘Should a person bring forward a grain offering to
the LORD, fine semolina his offering shall be, and he
shall pour oil over it and place frankincense upon it.
[2]And he shall bring it to the sons of Aaron, the priests,
and a handful from there shall be scooped up, from its
fine semolina and from its oil, together with all its
frankincense, and the priest shall turn its token portion
to smoke on the altar, a fire offering, a fragrant odor to
the LORD. [3]And what is left of the grain offering is
for Aaron and for his sons, holy of holies from the fire
offerings of the LORD. [4]And when you bring forward
a grain offering, baked in an oven, it is to be fine
semolina, flatbread cakes mixed in oil or wafers of
flatbread coated with oil. [5]And if your offering is a
grain offering on a griddle, mixed in oil, flatbread it
shall be. [6]Break it into bits, and you shall pour oil over
it. It is a grain offering. [7]And if your offering is a grain
offering in a pan, with fine semolina in oil it shall be
made. [8]And you shall bring the grain offering that will
be made from these to the LORD, and the priest shall

bring it forward and put it out on the altar. [9]And the priest shall set aside from the grain offering its token portion and turn it to smoke on the altar, a fire offering, a fragrant odor to the LORD. [10]And what is left of the grain offering is for Aaron and for his sons, holy of holies from the fire offerings of the LORD. [11]Any grain offering that you bring forward to the LORD shall not be made leavened, for you shall not turn to smoke any leaven nor any honey from it as a fire offering to the LORD. [12]You may bring them forward to the LORD as an offering of first yield, but they shall not go up on the altar as a fragrant odor. [13]And every offering of your grain you shall season with salt. You shall not leave out the salt of the covenant of your God from your grain offering. With each of your offerings you shall offer salt. [14]And if you bring forward an offering of first fruits to the LORD, new ears of grain parched in fire, grits of fresh ears you shall bring forward the offering of your first fruits. [15]And you shall put oil upon it and you shall place frankincense on it. It is a grain offering. [16]And the priest shall turn its token portion to smoke, from its grits and from its oil together with all its frankincense, a fire offering to the LORD.'"

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Should a person bring forward a grain offering*. The early rabbis plausibly understood the grain offering as an accessible cultic vehicle for the common people, who might have been hard put to meet the expense of animal sacrifice. The term for grain offering, *minḥah*, is borrowed from the political realm, where its primary meaning is "tributary payment," and thus it expresses Israel's relationship of vassal to God.

2. *a handful . . . shall be scooped*. The Hebrew says literally "he shall scoop," which could refer to a single priest. The third-person singular, however, without specified subject, is often used as an equivalent of the passive form of the verb.

its token portion. The general ancient Near Eastern practice, and perhaps the original Israelite one as well, was to burn the entire grain offering on the altar. Jacob Milgrom interestingly proposes that the limiting of the sacrificial fire to one small portion of the grain may have been a reaction to the widespread practice of burning cakes to Ishtar (denounced by Jeremiah [7:18]). The economic self-interest of the priests in preserving much of the offering for their own consumption may have also played a role in this prescription.

3. *holy of holies.* As elsewhere, this construction indicates a superlative: "most sacred." The meaning in this context is: strictly reserved for the priests.

11. *any leaven nor any honey.* No really convincing explanation for this prohibition has been offered. Although it might seem that there is some sort of connection between the ban on leaven in the sacrifice and the ban on leaven in the Passover laws, honey—here, as elsewhere, the probable reference is to date honey—does not appear to belong to the same category.

12. *but they shall not go up on the altar as a fragrant odor.* Leavened stuff and honey are not intrinsically taboo substances, but they must be excluded from the kind of offering that is burned on the altar.

13. *the salt of the covenant.* The indispensable presence of salt may ultimately derive from the fact that the sacrifice was originally imagined as a divine

meal, and that seasoning with salt was felt to be necessary in order to make food palatable (compare Job 6:6: “Is tasteless food eaten unsalted?”). But throughout the Mediterranean, salt was associated with covenants, and the phrase in Numbers 18:19, “a perpetual covenant of salt,” suggests that the link between salt and permanently binding covenants may have been reinforced by salt’s efficacy as a preservative.

CHAPTER 3

[1]“‘And if his offering is a communion sacrifice, if he
brings it forward from the herd, whether male or
female, unblemished he shall bring it forward before
the LORD. [2]And he shall lay his hand on the head of
his offering and slaughter it at the entrance to the Tent
of Meeting, and the sons of Aaron, the priests, shall
cast the blood round the altar. [3]And he shall bring
forward from the communion sacrifice a fire offering
to the LORD, the fat covering the innards and all the
fat that is on the innards, [4]and the two kidneys and the
fat that is on them, which is on the sinews, and the
lobe on the liver, together with the kidneys, he shall
remove it. [5]And the sons of Aaron shall turn it to
smoke on the altar together with the burnt offering that
is on the wood which is on the fire, a fire offering, a
fragrant odor to the LORD. [6]And if his offering is
from the flock as a communion sacrifice to the LORD,
male or female, unblemished he shall bring it forward.
[7]If a sheep he brings forward as his offering, he shall
bring it forward before the LORD. [8]And he shall lay

his hand on the head of his offering and slaughter it
before the Tent of Meeting, and the sons of Aaron
shall cast its blood round the altar. [9]And he shall bring
forward from the communion sacrifice a fire offering
to the LORD, its fat, the entire broad tail opposite the
backbone, he shall remove it, and the fat covering the
innards and all the fat that is on the innards. [10]And the
two kidneys and the fat that is on them, which is on
the sinews, and the lobe on the liver, together with the
kidneys, he shall remove it. [11]And the priest shall turn
it to smoke on the altar, fire-offering bread for the
LORD. [12]And if his offering is a goat, he shall bring it
forward before the LORD. [13]And he shall lay his hand
on its head and slaughter it before the Tent of Meeting,
and the sons of Aaron shall fling its blood round the
altar. [14]And he shall bring forward his offering from it,
a fire offering to the LORD, the fat covering the
innards and the fat that is on the innards. [15]And the two
kidneys and the fat that is on them, which is on the
sinews, and the lobe on the liver, together with the
kidneys, he shall remove it. [16]And the priest shall turn
them to smoke on the altar, fire-offering bread for the
LORD, as a fragrant odor, all the fat to the LORD.
[17]An everlasting statute for your generations in all your
dwelling places, no fat and no blood shall you eat.'"

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *communion sacrifice*. There is some uncertainty as to precisely what category of sacrifice this is, especially since the second term of the Hebrew designation, *zevaḥ shelamim*, could be related to "whole," *shalem*, "repay," *shilem*, or "well-being," "greeting," or "peace," all meanings of *shalom*. Jacob Milgrom understands this as a "well-being sacrifice," but Baruch Levine argues plausibly, citing Ugaritic parallels, that it means "a sacred gift of greeting." The translation used here, "communion sacrifice," conveys that sense compactly and follows the rendering of the term in 1 Samuel by Kyle McCarter Jr.

3. *the fat covering the innards.* Modern readers may be perplexed as to why a sacred text should devote such attention to details of butchering and, in particular, why the suet covering the inner organs must be stripped from them (verse 4) and burned for the deity alone, taboo for human consumption (no suet pudding allowed in the Israelite diet). This is, of course, a Priestly text, and the officiants in the cult need to know precisely how to go about their business. But the anthropologist Mary Douglas proposes that all the details of sacrificial butchering are fraught with symbolic significance. For her, Leviticus is a prime instance of subtle and elaborate analogical thinking (in contradistinction to the analytic thinking with which we are more familiar). Thus, following Nahmanides, she sees a system of correspondences between the tripartite structure of the Tabernacle—Holy of Holies, sanctuary, and outer court—and Mount Sinai as it is represented in Exodus—the summit, where only Moses may go, the perimeter of dense cloud, restricted to Aaron, his sons, and the seventy elders, and the foot of the mountain, to which the people have access. She goes on to propose that the animal sacrifice is correspondingly divided in three—the entrails, intestines, and genitals at the summit of the butchered pile, the midriff area with the covering of fat, to be burned on the altar, and the head and meat sections, which may be consumed by the priests and the people. "The suet," she contends, "that divides the body at the diaphragm below the lower ribs is not just a covering. It corresponds in the body to the boundary of a forbidden sacred space on the mountain."

11. *fire-offering bread.* The Hebrew *leḥem*, which has the primary meaning of "bread," is often a synecdoche for food, as here, where the sacrifice is meat, not cereal. In the pagan Near East, sacrifice was generally thought of as food provided by man for the gods. It is not clear whether the religious elite of monotheistic Israel preserved this belief—the idiom could be no more than a linguistic fossil—though one may suspect some persistence of the idea in the popular imagination.

17. *no fat and no blood shall you eat.* The prohibition on consuming blood is grounded in the idea of the sacredness of life (see Genesis 9:4). The prohibition on eating fat seems strictly related to the fact that it is reserved for the deity alone in the sacrificial rite—and, if one follows Douglas, because it marks a barrier of exclusion in a system of analogies between body and sacred cosmos. It is instructive that when the seventeenth-century antinomian messianic leader Sabbatai Zebi wanted to demonstrate to his followers that he was empowered to abrogate the Torah, he chose to demonstrate this by the public consumption of suet—the violation of a seemingly arbitrary prohibition, and a violation that could scarcely have given him much pleasure.

CHAPTER 4

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Speak to
the Israelites, saying, ‘Should a person offend errantly
in regard to any of the LORD’s commands that should
not be done and he do one of these, [3]if the anointed
priest should offend, incurring guilt for the people, he
shall bring forward for his offense that he has
committed an unblemished bull from the herd for the
LORD as an offense offering. [4]And he shall bring the
bull to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting before the
LORD and lay his hand on the head of the bull and
slaughter the bull before the LORD. [5]And the anointed
priest shall take from the blood of the bull and bring it
to the Tent of Meeting. [6]And the priest shall dip his
finger in the blood and sprinkle from the blood seven
times before the LORD against the covering of the
shrine. [7]And the priest shall put some of the blood on
the horns of the altar of aromatic incense before the
LORD, which is in the Tent of Meeting, and all the
blood of the bull he shall pour out at the base of the
burnt-offering altar which is at the entrance to the Tent

of Meeting. [8]And all the fat of the bull of offense
offering, he shall set aside from it the fat covering the
innards and all the fat that is on the innards. [9]The two
kidneys and the fat that is on them, which is on the
sinews, and the lobe on the liver, together with the
kidneys, he shall take away, [10]as it is set aside from the
communion-sacrifice bull. And the priest shall turn
them to smoke on the burnt-offering altar, [11]and the
hide of the bull together with its head and together
with its shanks and its innards and its dung. [12]And he
shall take the whole bull out beyond the camp to a
clean place, to the ash heap, and he shall burn it on
wood with fire, on the ash heap it shall be burned.
[13]And if all the community of Israel should err, and the
thing be hidden from the eyes of the assembly, and
they do one of all the LORD's commands that should
not be done, and they bear guilt, [14]and the offense that
they committed become known, the assembly shall
bring forward a bull from the herd as an offense
offering, and they shall bring it before the Tent of
Meeting. [15]And the elders of the community shall lay
their hands on the head of the bull before the LORD,
and the bull shall be slaughtered before the LORD.
[16]And the anointed priest shall bring from the blood of
the bull to the Tent of Meeting. [17]And the priest shall
dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle from the blood

seven times before the LORD against the covering of the shrine. [18]And some of the blood he shall put on the horns of the altar that is before the LORD, which is in the Tent of Meeting, and all the blood he shall pour out at the base of the burnt-offering altar, which is at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. [19]And he shall set aside all the fat from the bull and turn it to smoke on the altar. [20]And he shall do to the bull as he did to the offense-offering bull, so shall it be done to it, and the priest shall atone for them and it shall be forgiven them. [21]And he shall take the bull out beyond the camp and burn it as he burned the first bull. It is an offense offering of the assembly. [22]When a chieftain offends and does one of all the commands of the LORD his God that should not be done, in errance, and he bears guilt, [23]or his offense that he committed is made known to him, he shall bring his offering, an unblemished male goat. [24]And he shall lay his hand on the head of the goat and slaughter it in the place where the burnt offering is slaughtered before the LORD. It is an offense offering. [25]And the priest shall take from the blood of the offense offering on his finger and place it on the horns of the burnt-offering altar, and he shall pour out its blood at the base of the burnt-offering altar. [26]And all its fat he shall turn to smoke on the altar like the fat of the communion sacrifice, and

the priest shall atone for him for his offense, and it shall be forgiven him. [27]And if a single person from the common people should offend errantly in doing one of the LORD's commands that should not be done, and bear guilt, [28]or his offense that he committed is made known to him, he shall bring his offering, an unblemished female goat, for his offense which he committed. [29]And he shall lay his hand on the head of the offense offering and slaughter the offense offering in the place of the burnt offering. [30]And the priest shall take from its blood on his finger and place it on the horns of the burnt-offering altar, and he shall pour out all its blood at the base of the altar. [31]And all its fat he shall take away, as the fat was taken away from the communion sacrifice, and the priest shall turn it to smoke on the altar as a fragrant odor to the LORD, and the priest shall atone for him and it shall be forgiven him. [32]And if he brings a sheep as his offering for an offense, an unblemished female he shall bring it. [33]And he shall lay his hand on the head of the offense offering and slaughter it as an offense offering in the place where the burnt offering is slaughtered. [34]And the priest shall take from the blood of the offense offering on his finger and place it on the horns of the altar, and all its blood he shall pour out at the base of the altar. [35]And all its fat he shall take away as the fat

of the sheep is taken away from the communion sacrifice, and the priest shall turn it to smoke together with the fire offerings of the LORD, and the priest shall atone for him, for his offense that he committed, and it shall be forgiven him.'"

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And the LORD spoke to Moses.* As Milgrom observes, this introductory formula marks the beginning of a new category of offerings, those offered to expunge the effects of an inadvertent offense.

2. *offend errantly.* The Hebrew adverb *bishegagah* has the sense of "unintentionally," "by mistake." The concern throughout this section is to preserve the purity of the place of the cult. The inadvertent "offense" does not at all imply an ethical transgression but rather the unwitting violation of a prohibition ("any of the LORD's commands that should not be done"), which, in ancient Near Eastern terms, has the consequence of generating physical pollution that must be cleansed. The rabbis aptly explained that the errancy could result from either ignorance of the law or ignorance of the circumstances of the act committed.

3. *the anointed priest.* This is an alternate designation for the high priest.
as an offense offering. The traditional translation of this term is "sin offering." Milgrom argues in elaborate detail that this is a misrepresentation of the Hebrew *ḥata't* and proposes "purification offering" as a precise English equivalent. The verb *ḥata'* in the *qal* conjugation, as in verse 2 here, means "to commit an offense," a term probably taken over from the political to the cultic realm (as when a vassal people commits an offense against its overlords by rebelling). The same root in the *pi'el* conjugation means to "remove" or "cancel" (one well-attested semantic function of this conjugation) the offense. The noun *ḥata't* is derived from the *pi'el* conjugation and hence the canceling-

out effect ("purification") is in fact implied. But something is lost by using a designation for this offering that is not cognate with the verb "to offend," and the context makes clear enough that an offense offering is a sacrifice that removes the effects of the offense.

6. *dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle from the blood seven times before the* LORD *against the covering of the shrine.* This sanguinary business may strike the modern reader as an odd way to purify anything, but throughout the Bible blood has powerfully antithetical valences, alternately identified as the stuff of life and the manifestation of guilt. Perhaps because it was thought to be the very bearer of the life force in animate creatures, it was understood to have what Milgrom vividly calls a "detergent" effect. The sprinkling is of course performed seven times because of the sacredness of the number seven.

7. *the horns of the altar.* Ancient Near Eastern altars in fact have been uncovered that have stone horns carved at each of the four corners. Although no definitive explanation of this general practice has been offered, since the animal's horn is a recurrent image in biblical poetry for power, the horned altar may be a way of defining this space as a zone of power. Fugitives seeking asylum in the sanctuary would cling to one of the horns of the altar.

all the blood. This phrase obviously means all of the remaining blood since a small amount of the blood has been sprinkled on the altar.

13. *if all the community of Israel should err.* As several commentators have noted, this could occur if, for example, the high priest inadvertently misguided them—say, about the day for observing a particular festival.

CHAPTER 5

[1]“‘And should a person offend when he has heard a
voice in adjuration, he being witness, or has seen or
known, if he does not tell, he shall bear his
punishment. [2]Or a person who touches any unclean
thing, whether the carcass of an unclean beast or the
carcass of an unclean domestic animal, or the carcass
of an unclean crawling thing, and it be hidden from
him, and he is unclean and guilty, [3]or should he touch
human uncleanness, of any of the uncleannesses with
which one may be defiled, and it be hidden from him,
and he be guilty, [4]or should a person swear to utter
with the lips, whether for evil or for good, of all that a
human utters in a vow, and it be hidden from him, and
he know and be guilty of one of these, [5]it shall be
when he is guilty of any of these, he shall confess that
concerning which he has offended. [6]And he shall bring
his guilt offering to the LORD for his offense that he
has committed, a female from the flock, a ewe or a
she-goat, as an offense offering, and the priest shall
atone for him for his offense. [7]And if his hand cannot

attain as much as a sheep, he shall bring as his guilt offering for what he has committed two turtledoves or two young pigeons to the LORD, one for an offense offering and one for a burnt offering. [8]And he shall bring them to the priest, who shall bring forward first the one for the offense offering and pinch its head at its nape but not sever it. [9]And he shall sprinkle from the blood of the offense offering against the wall of the altar, and what is left of the blood shall be drained at the base of the altar. It is an offense offering. [10]And the second one he shall make a burnt offering according to regulation, and the priest shall atone for him for his offense that he has committed, and it shall be forgiven him. [11]And if his hand cannot attain two turtledoves or two young pigeons, he shall bring as his offering for what he has committed a tenth of an *ephah* of fine semolina as offense offering. He shall not put oil on it nor shall he place frankincense on it, for it is an offense offering. [12]And he shall bring it to the priest, and the priest shall scoop up a fistful from it as its token and turn it to smoke on the altar together with the fire offerings of the LORD. It is an offense offering. [13]And the priest shall atone for him for his offense that he has committed of any of these, and it shall be forgiven him, and it shall be for the priest like the grain offering.'"

14 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 15 "Should a
person betray trust and offend errantly in regard to any
of the LORD's sancta, he shall bring his guilt offering
to the LORD, an unblemished ram from the flock, or
its equivalent in silver shekels, according to the
sanctuary shekel, as a guilt offering. 16 And that
concerning which he has offended from the sanctum
he shall pay and a fifth part he shall add to it and give
to the priest, and the priest shall atone for him with the
ram of the guilt offering, and it shall be forgiven him.
17 And if a person offends and does any one of all the
commands of the LORD that should not be done and
does not know and is guilty, he shall bear his
punishment. 18 And he shall bring an unblemished ram
from the flock, or its equivalent, as a guilt offering, to
the priest, and the priest shall atone for him for his
errancy that he has committed without knowing, and it
shall be forgiven him. 19 It is a guilt offering. He has
surely incurred guilt to the LORD." 20 And the LORD
spoke to Moses, saying, 21 "Should a person offend and
betray the LORD's trust and dissemble with his fellow
about a deposit or pledge, or by theft, or defraud his
fellow, 22 or should he find something lost and
dissemble about it and swear falsely about anything of
what a person may do to offend, 23 and it shall be, when
he offends and is guilty, he shall return the theft that

he stole or the fraud that he committed or the deposit that was placed with him or the lost thing that he found, [24]or anything that he swore about falsely, and he shall pay back the principal and add a fifth, to him to whom it belongs he shall give it, when his guilt is confirmed. [25]And his guilt offering he shall bring to the LORD, an unblemished ram from the flock, or its equivalent, as a guilt offering, to the priest. [26]And the priest shall atone for him before the LORD, and it shall be forgiven him for whatever he may have done to incur guilt thereby."

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Or a person who touches.* The language of this entire chapter is characteristic of the uncompromising legal style of Leviticus, which makes no concession to rhetorical gesture (in contrast to Deuteronomy), lays out regulations with dry technical precision, and tries to cover a whole range of legal instances—in the present case, the incurring of unwitting guilt, whether through ritual impurity or in vow taking (the catalogue of possibilities, and then the cultic redress required, does not come to the end of a sentence until the conclusion of verse 5).

3. *any of the uncleannesses with which one may be defiled.* These would include contact with a corpse, a menstruating woman, and a man who has just had a seminal emission.

and he be guilty. The Hebrew *'ashem* (here, at the end of verse 2, and elsewhere in this chapter) primarily means to be in a state of guilt, to incur guilt. Because what is involved in these laws is unwitting infraction, many

interpreters have understood the verb to indicate something like an acknowledgment of guilt, though it is not entirely clear that it bears that meaning.

7. *if his hand cannot attain.* The primary sense of the verb is "reach." "Hand" in biblical idiom is often used, as here, metonymically to indicate power or capacity. The law that follows here is what the rabbis called "an ascending and descending offering" (*qorban ʿoleh weyored*), that is, a sliding-scale offering which is devised to accommodate people of limited means.

15. *betray trust.* The verb *maʿal* is used in Numbers 5 to indicate the betrayal of marital trust in cases of infidelity. (In modern Hebrew, it has come to mean embezzlement, reflecting a certain continuity with its ancient usage.) In this verse, the sense is committing sacrilege, and the use of the verb may be dictated by an assumption that preserving the sacred integrity of everything belonging to the sanctuary is a special obligation with which all Israelites are entrusted. In verse 21, betrayal of trust in its more obvious sense is at issue, although the deception of one person by another is conceived as a betrayal of God's trust because it is God who insists on a standard of honesty from humanity.

or its equivalent. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "in your estimation." The possessive pronominal component of this expression ("your") reflects the fact that it is, as Baruch Levine rightly observes, a bound expression, a colloquial "you" becoming fixed as a part of an idiom that means monetary equivalences.

16. *that concerning which he has offended from the sanctum he shall pay.* A characteristic case that this law envisages is when someone eats food not realizing it has been consecrated for cultic use. He would thus pay the monetary cost of the food consumed plus a fine of 20 percent.

21. *theft.* Rabbinic interpretation distinguishes between *gazeil* (the term used here), "robbery" (taking another's property by main force), and *geneivah*, "theft" (taking by stealth). However, the present context of fraud and dissembling encourages the idea that theft is meant.

23. *is guilty.* Again, many interpreters understand this to mean: acknowledges his guilt. The sense could also be: he is found guilty, after which he

acknowledges his guilt.

24. *when his guilt is confirmed.* The literal sense of the two Hebrew words *beyom ʾashmato* is: the day of his guilt.

CHAPTER 6

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Charge
Aaron and his sons, saying, ‘This is the teaching of the
burnt offering. It is the very burnt offering over its
flame on the altar all night till morning, and the fire of
the altar shall keep burning on in it. [3]And the priest
shall wear his linen garb and linen breeches he shall
wear on his body, and he shall take away the ashes that
the fire consumes from the burnt offering on the altar
and put them beside the altar. [4]And he shall take off
his clothes and wear other clothes and take out the
ashes beyond the camp to a clean place. [5]And the fire
on the altar shall keep burning on it, it shall not go out,
and the priest shall burn wood on it morning after
morning and lay out on it the burnt offering and turn
the fat part of the communion offerings to smoke. [6]A
perpetual fire shall keep burning on the altar. It shall
not go out.

7 “‘And this is the teaching of the grain offering. The
sons of Aaron are to bring it forward before the
LORD in front of the altar. 8 And a handful of it shall
be removed, from the semolina of the grain offering
and from its oil, with all the frankincense that is on the
grain offering, and it shall be turned to smoke on the
altar, a fragrant odor, its token to the LORD. 9 And
what is left of it Aaron and his sons shall eat, as
flatcakes it shall be eaten, in a holy place, in the court
of the Tent of Meeting they shall eat it. 10 It shall not be
baked leavened. As their share I have given it from my
fire offerings. It is holy of holies, like the offense
offering and like the guilt offering. 11 Every male
among the sons of Aaron shall eat it, a perpetual
portion for your generations from the fire offerings of
the LORD. Whatever touches them shall become
holy.’”

12 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 13 “This is the
offering of Aaron and his sons which they shall bring
forward to the LORD on the day he is anointed: a
tenth of an *ephah* of semolina as a perpetual grain
offering, half of it in the morning and half of it in the
evening. 14 On a griddle in oil it shall be done, soaked
through you shall bring it, as a grain offering of baked

pieces you shall bring it forward, a fragrant odor to the LORD. [15]And the anointed priest, successor among his sons, shall do it, a perpetual portion for the LORD, it shall be entirely turned to smoke. [16]And every priest's grain offering shall be entire, it shall not be eaten."

[17]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [18]"Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying, 'This is the teaching of the offense offering. In the place where the burnt offering is slaughtered, the offense offering shall be slaughtered before the LORD. It is holy of holies. [19]The priest performing it as an offense offering shall eat it. In a holy place it shall be eaten, in the court of the Tent of Meeting. [20]Whatever touches its flesh shall become holy, and when some of its blood is spattered on a garment, that which has been spattered shall be laundered in a holy place. [21]And an earthen vessel in which it is boiled shall be broken, and if it was boiled in a copper vessel, it shall be scoured and rinsed with water. [22]Every male among the priests shall eat it. It is holy of holies. [23]And every offense offering from which blood is brought into the Tent of Meeting to atone in the sanctum shall not be eaten. In fire it shall be burned.'"

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *This is the teaching*. Leviticus repeatedly introduces a particular set of regulations with the phrase "this is the teaching [*torah*]," this being the first occurrence. "Teaching" is, in fact, the primary meaning of *torah*, and this translation preserves that sense throughout, though in these contexts, "procedure," "ritual," "regulation," and similar terms used in sundry modern English versions are all justified. In any case, the reiteration of the term is a strong verbal symptom of how Leviticus differs formally from other biblical books. This is primarily a book of instructions, and one of its Hebrew names, *torat kohanim*, could aptly be translated as "Priestly Instructions."

It is the very burnt offering. The semantic force of the Hebrew phrase *hiʾ haʿolah* is to emphasize the noun (*ʿolah*) that follows the indicative pronoun (*hiʾ*).

flame. The literal sense is "place of burning" (though the translation "hearth" proposed by some modern scholars sounds altogether too domestic for a cultic setting). Stylistically, this entire passage about the burnt offering is dominated by terms related to burning, as if to focus the idea of a sacred fire that burns perpetually, coordinated with the sacrificial fire that entirely consumes the burnt offering. The word for burnt offering or holocaust, *ʿolah*, is not derived from a root that means "to burn" but rather from the verb "to go up," which, however, is metonymically linked to burning by suggesting the idea that the whole sacrifice "goes up" in smoke. Fire and blood are the two substances that are the key to the sacrificial rites, but the present passage gives preeminence to the nexus between cult and fire—the element associated with God's fiery epiphany at Sinai and with his first appearance to Moses in the burning bush. Hence an altar with a fire that "shall not go out."

9. *Aaron and his sons shall eat.* It must be kept in mind that in this agrarian society, the landless members of the tribe of Levi needed the cult for the bread and butter (or, more literally, the bread and meat) of their physical sustenance. Throughout the sacrificial regulations, provisions are made for setting aside portions to be consumed by the priests.

10. *It is holy of holies.* As elsewhere, this structure is a way of indicating a superlative in biblical idiom, the sense being: supremely holy, sacrosanct.

11. *Whatever touches them shall become holy.* It is also possible to construe this sentence, as Baruch Levine does, to mean: whoever touches them shall be holy (i.e., no person is allowed to touch the flatcakes made from the grain offerings who is not "holy," or a member of the priestly caste). Jacob Milgrom, however, makes a persuasive case on philological and other grounds that the reference is to objects rather than to persons. What is involved, then, is an idea some scholars have described as a "contagion" of holiness symmetrical with the more common idea of a contagion of impurity. Objects that come in contact with consecrated substances such as the grain offering themselves become consecrated and can no longer be used for profane purposes.

15. *successor among his sons.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "in his stead among his sons," but "in his stead" is regularly used in references to monarchy to indicate the successor to the throne, and that must be the meaning here.

a perpetual portion for the LORD. Although the use of the noun *ḥoq*, "portion," may be a linguistic fossil harking back to a premonotheistic era when the sacrifice was conceived as a way of offering food to the gods, its introduction here is more probably dictated by the desire to use a complementary term: one part of the grain offering was reserved for the priests to be eaten as their portion, and so the remaining part burned on the altar is described as "a perpetual portion for the LORD."

16. *every priest's grain offering shall be entire.* That is, when a priest presents a grain offering on his own behalf rather than on behalf of a layperson, no part is to be reserved for his consumption, all of it must be burned on the altar.

CHAPTER 7

[1]And this is the teaching of the guilt offering. It is holy
of holies. [2]In the place where they slaughter the burnt
offering they shall slaughter the guilt offering and its
blood shall be cast on the altar all around. [3]And all of
its fat shall be brought forward, the broad tail and the
fat covering the innards, [4]and the two kidneys and the
fat that is on them which is over the loins and the lobe
on the liver, together with the kidneys, it shall be
removed. [5]And the priest shall turn them to smoke on
the altar, a fire offering to the LORD. It is a guilt
offering. [6]Any male among the priests may eat it; in a
holy place it shall be eaten. It is holy of holies. [7]The
offense offering like the sin offering, a single teaching
do they have: the priest who atones through it, his shall
it be. [8]And the priest bringing forward a man's burnt
offering, the hide of the burnt offering that the priest
brought forward is the priest's, his it shall be. [9]And
every grain offering that is baked in an oven and
everything made in a pan and on a griddle is the
priest's who brings it forward, his it shall be. [10]And

every grain offering, mixed with oil or dry, shall be for all the sons of Aaron, each man of them alike.

[11]And this is the teaching of the communion sacrifice that is brought forward to the LORD. [12]If in thanksgiving he brings it forward, he shall bring forward with the thanksgiving sacrifice flatcakes mixed in oil and flatcake wafers coated with oil and cakes of semolina soaked through, mixed in oil. [13]With cakes of leavened bread he shall bring forward his offering with his thanksgiving communion sacrifice. [14]And he shall bring forward from it one kind of each offering, a levy to the LORD; for the priest casting the blood of the communion sacrifice, his it shall be. [15]And the flesh of his thanksgiving communion sacrifice shall be eaten on the day of its offering; he shall not leave anything of it till the morning. [16]And if his offering is a votive or a freewill offering, on the day he brings forward his sacrifice it shall be eaten, and on the morrow what is left of it may be eaten. [17]And what is left of the flesh of the sacrifice on the third day shall be burned in fire. [18]And if some of the flesh of his communion sacrifice should indeed be eaten on the third day, it will not be acceptable, he who brings it forth, it will not be reckoned for him, it is desecrated meat; and the person

eating of it will bear his guilt. [19]And the flesh that
touches anything unclean shall not be eaten, in fire it
shall be burned. And other flesh, whoever is clean may
eat the flesh. [20]And the person who eats flesh from the
communion sacrifice which is the LORD's and his
uncleanness is upon him, that person shall be cut off
from his kin. [21]And should a person touch anything
unclean through human uncleanness or an unclean
beast or any unclean abominable creature and eat of
the flesh of the communion sacrifice which is the
LORD's, that person shall be cut off from his kin.

[22]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [23]"Speak to
the Israelites, saying, 'No fat of ox or sheep or goat
shall you eat, [24]and the fat of a beast that has died and
the fat of a beast torn by predators may be used for
any task but it shall by no means be eaten. [25]For
whoever eats fat from the animal from which fire
offering is brought forward to the LORD, the person
eating shall be cut off from his kin. [26]And no blood
shall you consume in all your dwelling places, whether
from fowl or beast. [27]Any person who consumes any
blood shall be cut off from his kin.'"

[28]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [29]“Speak to the Israelites, saying, ‘He who brings forward his communion sacrifice to the LORD shall bring his offering to the LORD from his communion sacrifice. [30]His own hands shall bring the fire offerings of the LORD, the fat together with the breast he shall bring it, the breast to elevate as an elevation offering before the LORD. [31]And the priest shall turn the breast into smoke on the altar, and the breast shall be Aaron’s and his sons’. [32]And the right thigh you shall give as a levy to the priest from the communion sacrifices. [33]He of the sons of Aaron who brings forward the blood of the communion sacrifices and the fat, his shall be the right thigh as a share. [34]For the breast of the elevation offering and the thigh of the levy I have taken from the Israelites, from their communion sacrifices, and have given them to Aaron the priest and to his sons as a perpetual portion from the Israelites. [35]This is the allotment of Aaron and the allotment of his sons from the fire offerings of the LORD from the day they were brought forward to be priests to the LORD, [36]which the LORD charged to give to them from the day they were anointed, from the Israelites, a perpetual statute for their generations. [37]This is the teaching for the burnt offering, for the grain offering, and for the offense offering and for the guilt offering and for the

installation offering and for the communion sacrifice
[38]which the LORD charged Moses on Mount Sinai on the day He charged the Israelites to bring forward their sacrifices to the LORD in the Wilderness of Sinai.'"

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

18. *desecrated meat*. The Hebrew *pigul* is a rare term of uncertain etymology and without evident cognates in other Semitic languages. Most interpreters, ancient and modern, assume it means something like "abomination" or "abhorrent thing," but Milgrom, carefully scrutinizing the other biblical occurrences with an eye to the present context, persuasively argues that the word has the technical sense of "desecrated meat."

19. *And other flesh.* The Hebrew says, somewhat obscurely, only "the flesh." The context compels one to infer that what is meant is the flesh of the communion sacrifice that has not been defiled by contact with something unclean.

21. *any unclean abominable creature.* The Hebrew noun is *sheqets*, which usually means "abomination." Some manuscript versions read *sherets*, "creeping thing," which would be the more expected term here.

24. *a beast that has died.* This is a single word in the Hebrew, *neveilah*. The basic meaning is "carcass," but with the necessary implication that the animal has died from natural causes rather than violently.

a beast torn by predators. Again, this is one word in the Hebrew, *tereifah*, which means "something torn [by ravening beasts]." The taboo on eating torn carcass was felt so strongly that, much later, in Yiddish usage, the word would be adopted as the general term for forbidden foods.

26. *in all your dwelling places.* This introduction of this term is an indication that the ban on ingesting blood is in no way restricted to animals or even categories of animals sacrificed in the cult but is comprehensively binding on the Israelites wherever they dwell.

30. *to elevate.* This gesture was a public sign of conveying the part of the animal elevated to the LORD's jurisdiction or possession.

34. *the breast . . . and the thigh*. The same two portions of the animal are reserved for the Aaronides in the installation sacrifice about which instructions are given in Exodus 29:26–27. It is a token of how keenly the concrete details of these seemingly dry cultic passages were reflected on by later generations that Moses ibn Ezra (c. 1055–c. 1135) should wittily invoke these body parts in an erotic poem, transposing them from animal to woman, and proclaiming that he will take his due portion as did the priests of old. The ingenious allusion registers a sound exegetical understanding that the breast and the thigh are the choice parts.

35. *from the day they were brought forward.* As elsewhere, the singular masculine verb (literally, "he brought them forward") is the equivalent of a passive form. The verb *hiqriv*, "brought forward," is equally used for the sundry sacrifices and for the priests. In cultic contexts, it has the sense of presenting or bringing forward into the sacred zone of the sanctuary, into the LORD's presence ("before the LORD"). Its cognate accusative is *qorban*, the general term for "offering." Thus the priests are dedicated to God, brought forward into the divine presence, just as the sacrifices are dedicated.

CHAPTER 8

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Take
Aaron and his sons with him, and the garments and the
anointing oil and the offense-offering bull and the two
rams and the basket of flatbread. [3]And assemble all the
community at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.”
[4]And Moses did as the LORD had charged him, and
the community assembled at the entrance of the Tent
of Meeting. [5]And Moses said to the community, “This
is the thing that the LORD charged to do.” [6]And
Moses brought forward Aaron and his sons and bathed
them in water. [7]And he placed the tunics on them and
girded them with the sash and dressed them in the
robe and put the ephod over it and girded it with the
ornamental band of the ephod, and tied it to him with
it. [8]And he put the breastplate on him and placed in
the breastplate the Urim and the Thummim. [9]And he
put the turban on his head, and he put upon the turban
at the front the golden diadem, the holy crown, as the
LORD had charged Moses. [10]And Moses took the
anointing oil and anointed the Tabernacle and

everything in it and consecrated them. [11]And he
sprinkled from it on the altar seven times and anointed
the altar and all its implements and the laver and its
stand to consecrate them. [12]And he poured from the
anointing oil on Aaron's head and anointed him to
consecrate him. [13]And Moses brought forward the sons
of Aaron and dressed them in tunics and girded them
with sashes and bound headdresses on them as the
LORD had charged Moses. [14]And he brought close the
offense-offering bull, and Aaron and his sons laid their
hands on the head of the offense-offering bull, [15]and it
was slaughtered. And Moses took the blood and put it
on the horns of the altar all around with his finger and
rid the altar of offense, and the blood he poured out at
the base of the altar and consecrated it to atone over it.
[16]And he took all the fat that was on the innards and
the lobe on the liver and the two kidneys and their fat,
and Moses turned them to smoke on the altar. [17]And
the bull and its hide and its flesh and its dung he
burned in fire outside the camp, as the LORD had
charged Moses. [18]And he brought forward the burnt-
offering ram, and Aaron and his sons laid their hands
on the head of the ram. [19]And it was slaughtered, and
Moses cast the blood on the altar all around. [20]And the
ram he cut up into its parts, and Moses turned the
head and the cut parts and the fat into smoke. [21]And

the innards and the legs he washed in water. And Moses turned the whole ram to smoke on the altar—a burnt offering it was—as a fragrant odor to the LORD, a fire offering to the LORD it was, as the LORD had charged Moses. [22]And he brought forward the second ram, the installation ram, and Aaron and his sons laid their hands on the head of the ram. [23]And it was slaughtered, and Moses took from its blood and put it on the right earlobe of Aaron and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot. [24]And he brought forward the sons of Aaron, and Moses put from the blood on their right earlobe and on the thumb of their right hand and on the big toe of their right foot, and Moses cast the blood on the altar all around. [25]And he took the fat and the broad tail and all the fat that is on the innards and the lobe on the liver and the two kidneys and their fat and the right thigh. [26]And from the basket of flatbread that is before the LORD he took one loaf of flatbread and one loaf of oil bread and one wafer and placed them on the fat and on the right thigh. [27]And he put everything on the palms of Aaron and on the palms of his sons, and elevated them as an elevation offering before the LORD. [28]And Moses took them from their palms and turned them to smoke on the altar together with the burnt offering—they were an installation offering for a fragrant odor, a

fire offering they were to the LORD. [29]And Moses took the breast and elevated it as an elevation offering before the LORD from the ram of installation. For Moses it was for a portion, as the LORD had charged Moses. [30]And Moses took from the anointing oil and from the blood that was on the altar and sprinkled it on Aaron, on his garments, and on his sons and on the garments of his sons, with him, and he consecrated Aaron with his garments and his sons and the garments of his sons, with him. [31]And Moses said to Aaron and to his sons, “Boil the flesh at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, and there you shall eat it and the bread that is in the installation basket, as I have charged, saying ‘Aaron and his sons shall eat it.’ [32]And what is left of the flesh and of the bread you shall burn in fire. [33]And from the entrance of the Tent of Meeting you shall not go out seven days, until the day of completion of the days of your installation, for seven days shall your installation be. [34]As was done on this day, the LORD charged to do to atone for you. [35]And at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting you shall sit day and night seven days, and you shall keep the LORD’s watch and shall not die, for thus I have been charged.” [36]And Aaron, and his sons with him, did all the things that the LORD had charged by the hand of Moses.

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

4. *And Moses did as the LORD had charged him*. A variant of this clause recurs at the very end of the chapter, framing the whole in an envelope structure. What is noteworthy is that in this chapter the Book of Leviticus for the first time moves from lists of cultic regulations to narrative. It is, of course, a limited sort of narrative, strictly concentrating on the rite of consecration that makes both the altar and Aaron and his sons fit for the cult of YHWH. The details of this installation ceremony pick up Exodus 29.

7. *the tunics . . . the sash . . . the robe . . . the ephod*. The use of the definite article before each of these items of attire is an indication that the item in question has already been publicly stipulated (in Exodus) as part of the attire the priests are to wear when officiating in the cult.

to him. The Hebrew glides from the plural, used for all the sons of Aaron, to the singular, Aaron the high priest, upon whom the focus will be in the next verse.

8. *the Urim and the Thummim.* See the comment on Exodus 28:30.

10. *Moses took the anointing oil and anointed the Tabernacle.* Some scholars conjecture that anointment was the rite of consecration because, as some ancient Near Eastern parallels suggest, coating with oil was thought to have a prophylactic effect, warding off evil forces. There may, however, be a more quotidian explanation. Rubbing the body with oil after bathing was a way of both pleasuring the body and putting oneself in a festive state, as when David renounces his ritual of mourning, bathes, rubs himself with oil, changes his clothes, then comes to worship and finally to eat (2 Samuel 12:20). The same procedure might have seemed appropriate to ready the altar and the officiants for service. Anointing was also the ceremony for conferring kingship (rather than crowning), perhaps as an extension of its cultic use. The anointing oil was a special mix of olive oil and fragrant spices, with the latter predominating in quantity.

15. *Moses took the blood and put it on the horns of the altar.* The two substances upon which the dedication ritual turns are oil and blood. The function of the former is, at least in the view of this commentary, purely consecrational, whereas the blood is understood to have what Jacob Milgrom calls a "detergent" effect, ridding the altar of impurities.

23. *Moses took from its blood and put it on the right earlobe of Aaron and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot.* Both the altar and the priests are smeared with anointing oil and with blood. As Baruch Levine notes of the high priest, "In effect, he was the human counterpart of the altar." In fact, the ceremony as a whole is a strong instance of what Mary Douglas calls analogical thinking, in which sacerdotal body and altar are part of an intricate system of correspondences. The extremities daubed with blood correspond to the horns and the base of the altar on which blood is sprinkled. At the same time, the right hand and the right foot are the emblems of human agency as the right ear is the emblem of obedience or responsiveness.

33. *until the day of completion of the days of your installation.* The Hebrew phrasing incorporates an untranslatable pun. The word for "installation," *milu'im*, literally means "fillings" and is linked to the idiom "fill the hands" (the phrase at the end of the verse, "shall your installation be" is literally "your hands will be filled"—that is, you will be entrusted with the priestly functions, having been installed). "Completion" (*melo't*) is another form of this same verbal root, the idea being that a set period is completed when its days are filled out.

CHAPTER 9

[1]And it happened, on the eighth day, that Moses called
to Aaron and to his sons and to the elders of Israel.
[2]And he said to Aaron, “Take you a calf from the herd
as an offense offering and a ram as a burnt offering,
both unblemished, and bring them forward before the
LORD. [3]And to the Israelites you shall speak, saying,
‘Take a he-goat as an offense offering and a yearling
unblemished calf and lamb as a burnt offering, [4]and a
bull and a ram as communion offerings to sacrifice
before the LORD, and a grain offering mixed with oil,
for today the LORD will appear before you.’” [5]And
they took that which Moses had charged in front of the
Tent of Meeting, and all the community came forward
and stood before the LORD. [6]And Moses said, “This is
the thing that the LORD charged, you shall do, that
the glory of the LORD may appear to you.” [7]And
Moses said to Aaron, “Come forward to the altar and
do your offense offering and your burnt offering and
atone for yourself and for the people, and do the
offering of the people and atone for them, as the

LORD has charged.” [8]And Aaron came forward to the
altar and slaughtered the offense-offering calf which
was his. [9]And the sons of Aaron brought forward the
blood to him, and he dipped his finger in the blood
and put it on the horns of the altar, and the blood he
poured out at the base of the altar. [10]And the fat and
the kidneys and the lobe from the liver from the
offense offering he turned to smoke on the altar as the
LORD had charged Moses. [11]And the flesh and the
hide he burned in fire outside the camp. [12]And he
slaughtered the burnt offering, and the sons of Aaron
provided him with the blood, and he cast it on the altar
all around. [13]And they provided him with the burnt
offering in its cut pieces and the head, and he turned it
to smoke on the altar. [14]And he washed the innards and
the legs and he turned them to smoke together with the
burnt offering on the altar. [15]And he brought forward
the offering of the people and took the offense-offering
he-goat which was the people’s and slaughtered it and
performed the offense offering with it as with the
previous one. [16]And he brought forward the burnt
offering and did it according to the regulation. [17]And
he brought forward the grain offering and filled his
palm with it and turned it to smoke on the altar, in
addition to the morning’s burnt offering. [18]And he
slaughtered the bull and the ram of the communion

sacrifice which was the people's, and the sons of Aaron provided him with the blood, and he cast it on the altar all around, [19]and the fat from the bull and from the ram, the broad tail and the covering fat and the kidneys and the lobe on the liver. [20]And they placed the fat on the breasts, and he turned the fat to smoke on the altar. [21]The breasts and the right thigh Aaron elevated in an elevation offering before the LORD, as He had charged Moses. [22]And Aaron raised his hands toward the people and blessed them and came down from having done the offense offering and the burnt offering and the communion sacrifice. [23]And Moses, and Aaron with him, came into the Tent of Meeting, and they came out and blessed the people, and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. [24]And a fire came out from before the LORD and consumed on the altar the burnt offering and the fat, and all the people saw and shouted with joy and fell on their faces.

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And it happened*. This formula (*wayehi*) is characteristically used to mark the beginning of a unit of narrative. The present chapter completes the cultic narration inaugurated in chapter 7: after the rite of consecration of the altar

and of Aaron and his sons and the prescribed seven days of the installation period, the priests are ritually fit to perform the sacrifices, which are reported here.

2. *both unblemished.* "Both" is added in the translation to indicate what is clear in the Hebrew from the plural form of "unblemished," *temimim*, that the adjective refers equally to the calf and the ram.

4. *for today the LORD will appear before you.* As Jacob Milgrom observes, the revelation of God before all the people "renders the Tabernacle the equivalent of Mount Sinai." Mary Douglas goes further, seeing a precise structural correspondence in the system of analogical thinking between Sinai and the Tabernacle: each is divided into three gradated zones of holiness—the Sinai summit, where only Moses may ascend; partway up the mountain, where the seventy elders come and are vouchsafed an epiphany; and the bottom of the mountain where the people remain; corresponding to these vertically deployed zones are the horizontal zones of the Tabernacle, from the Holy of Holies to inner court to outer court. What is striking is that in Exodus God's manifestation of His fiery presence to the people comes from a divine initiative associated with the revelation of the Decalogue, whereas in this Priestly document it is ritual—the scrupulous performance of the sacrifices by Aaron and his sons—that brings about the grand epiphany.

6. *the LORD charged, you shall do.* Some commentators assume that *ʾasher*, "that," between "charged" and "you shall do" has been inadvertently omitted.

9. *brought forward the blood to him.* This was obviously done by draining the blood of the slaughtered animal into some sort of bowl.

12. *provided him.* The verb in the *hipʿil* conjugation, *himtsiʾ*, is unique to this chapter. The sense is: to make something available (literally, "to cause it to be found").

19. *the covering fat.* The received text has only the participle ("the covering"). This is probably a simple ellipsis, though the word for "fat" may have been accidentally dropped in scribal transmission.

20. *the fat.* Here and at a couple of other points in the chapter, "the fat" is in the plural (*haḥalavim*), indicating the fat stripped from the sundry inner organs. Milgrom consequently represents this in English as "pieces of fat."

22. *Aaron raised his hands toward the people and blessed them.* A common view, from Late Antiquity (*Sifra*) onward, is that he pronounces the tripartite priestly blessing recorded in Numbers 6:24–26.

24. *a fire came out from before the* LORD. The cloud of the divine glory is luminescent, enveloping the fire into which it turns at night. Here, the emergence of the fire is a dramatic sign of God's self-revelation and of divine favor in accepting the sacrifice. In the next episode, when cultic procedure is violated, this same fire from the LORD will be lethal.

CHAPTER 10

[1]And the sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, took each
of them his fire-pan and put fire in it and placed
incense upon it and brought forward alien fire before
the LORD, which He had not charged them. [2]And fire
came out from before the LORD and consumed them,
and they died before the LORD. [3]And Moses said to
Aaron, “This is just what the LORD spoke, saying,

‘Through those close to Me shall I be
hallowed
and in all the people’s presence
shall I be honored.’”

And Aaron was silent. [4]And Moses called to Mishael
and to Elzaphan, sons of Uzziel, Aaron’s uncle, and he
said to them, “Come forward. Bear off your brothers
from the front of the sacred precinct to outside the
camp.” [5]And they came forward and they bore them
off in their tunics outside the camp as Moses had

spoken. [6]And Moses said to Aaron and to Eleazar and to Ithamar his sons, “Your heads you shall not dishevel nor your garments rend, lest you die and the fury come upon the whole community. And your brothers, the whole house of Israel, may keen for the burning that the LORD inflicted. [7]And you shall not go out from the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, lest you die, for the oil of the LORD’s anointing is upon you.” And they did according to the word of Moses. [8]And the LORD spoke to Aaron, saying, [9]“Wine and strong drink you shall not drink, you and your sons with you, when you come into the Tent of Meeting, lest you die —a perpetual statute for your generations, [10]to divide between the holy and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean, [11]and to teach the Israelites all the statutes that the LORD spoke to them by the hand of Moses.” [12]And Moses spoke to Aaron and to Eleazar and to Ithamar, his remaining sons, “Take the grain offering left from the fire offerings of the LORD and eat it as flatcakes by the altar, for it is holy of holies. [13]And you shall eat it in a holy place, for it is your portion and your sons’ portion from the fire offerings of the LORD, for thus I have been charged. [14]And the breast of the elevation offering and the thigh of the levy you shall eat in a clean place, you and your sons and your daughters with you, for it has been given

as your portion and your sons' portion from the communion sacrifices of the Israelites. [15]The thigh of the levy and the breast of the elevation offering together with the fire offerings of fat they shall bring to lift up as an elevation offering before the LORD. And it shall be for you and for your sons with you a perpetual portion, as the LORD has charged. [16]And the offense-offering goat Moses had insistently sought but, look, it had been burned, and he was furious with Eleazar and with Ithamar the remaining sons of Aaron, saying, [17]"Why did you not eat the offense offering in a holy place? For it is holy of holies, and this did He give you to bear off the guilt of the community, to atone for them before the LORD. [18]Look, its blood was not brought within the sacred precinct. You shall surely eat it in the sacred precinct as I have charged." [19]And Aaron spoke to Moses, "Look, today they brought forward their offense offering and their burnt offering before the LORD, and things of this sort befell me. Had I eaten an offense offering today, would it have seemed good in the eyes of the LORD?" [20]And Moses heard, and it seemed good in his eyes.

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And the sons of Aaron*. Now that the elaborate system of sacrificial regulations, capped by the rites of installation, is completed, we are reminded what a dangerous business the cult is by the catastrophe that befalls the two sons of Aaron when they violate cultic procedure. This is one of the two narrative episodes in Leviticus.

put fire in it. Practically, as many modern commentators have observed, they would have filled the fire-pans with glowing coals, not an actual fire. The literal sense of "fire" (*'esh*) is worth preserving because it makes evident the measure-for-measure enactment of divine justice: Nadab and Abihu introduce alien fire to the sacred precinct, and a fire from the LORD comes out to destroy them.

incense upon it. The feminine form of "upon it" in the Hebrew tells us that the incense is put on top of the coals since fire is feminine.

alien fire. The adjective *zarah*, "alien," "strange" (as in "stranger"), or "unfit," indicates in cultic contexts a substance or person not consecrated for entrance or use in the sacred precinct (hence Jacob Milgrom's translation, "unauthorized"). The consensus of modern interpreters, with precedents in the classical Midrash, is that the fire is "alien" because it has been taken from a profane source—e.g., coals taken from an ordinary oven. Incense has been put on top of the coals, which leads Milgrom to conjecture that this story is a polemic against a practice of burning incense to the astral deities (for which actually there is scant archaeological evidence) in the Assyrian period, probably through Assyrian influence.

2. *And fire came out from before the LORD.* This is the same phrase used in 9:24 to report the act of divine acceptance by which a supernatural flame consumes the offerings on the altar. The zone of the holy, where the divine presence takes up its headquarters, is intrinsically dangerous and, from a certain point of view, radically ambiguous. When proper procedures are followed—a virtual obsession of these Priestly writers—miraculous signs of God's favor are manifested. When procedures are violated, God becomes a consuming fire.

3. *Through those close to Me.* The reference is to the cultic inner circle of the designated priests, with an obvious pun on the verb from the same root

involved in "*brought forward* alien fire." The meaning of this cryptic one-line poem is not entirely transparent, but the reference to being honored in all the people's presence lends some support to the view of several medieval Hebrew commentators that the spectacular punishment of Nadab and Abihu (who as sons of Aaron would be "close to" God), evident to all the people, is what is intended. God is "hallowed" by manifesting His power against transgressors.

4. *your brothers.* The term is used in its frequent extended sense of "kinsmen," since Mishael and Elzaphan are actually the cousins of Nadab and Abihu.

5. *in their tunics.* Rashi proposes that the divine fire miraculously killed Nadab and Abihu without damaging their clothes. This interpretation may not be fanciful, for in an ordinary death by fire, the garments would surely have been burned.

6. *Your heads you shall not dishevel nor your garments rend.* That is, you are not to perform any of the conventional gestures of mourning, for your sons have perished in violating the very trust of the sanctuary that has been given to you and your descendants. Instead, you may allow the people as a whole to take up the burden of mourning ("your brothers, the whole house of Israel, may keen").

the burning that the LORD inflicted. The Hebrew uses a cognate accusative: "the burning that the LORD has burned."

9. *strong drink.* It is not clear whether this term refers here to a specific alcoholic beverage. It is transparently derived from the root *sh-k-r*, "to intoxicate."

17. *to bear off the guilt of the community.* The verb here plays against the "bearing off" of the bodies of Nadab and Abihu.

19. *and things of this sort befell me.* The obvious reference of this vague phrase is to the sudden deaths of Nadab and Abihu. Aaron cannot bring himself to report that painful event in explicit terms, and so he uses this circumlocution.

Had I eaten an offense offering today, would it have seemed good in the eyes of the LORD? One common understanding of these words is that he is,

after all, mourning for his sons, so how could the LORD expect him to eat his fixed portion of the offering, or to eat at all (fasting being a practice of mourning)? Milgrom rejects this possibility because he notes that Aaron has been enjoined not to mourn. He proposes instead that the deaths of the two sons have contaminated the altar, transforming the offense offering into its archaic manifestation in which its "detergent" function was too potent to allow for human consumption. That explanation seems unduly complicated, and it is entirely possible that Aaron has been forbidden to engage in any public gesture of mourning (disheveling one's hair, tearing one's garments) but is still permitted this mourner's act of abstention. Such a reading makes the exchange here between Aaron and Moses more personally poignant: the grieving father asks his own brother whether God could really expect him to constrain himself to ingest meat in this moment of his grief, and Moses concedes that Aaron is right.

CHAPTER 11

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying
to them, [2]“Speak to the Israelites, saying, ‘These are
the beasts that you may eat of all the animals that are
on the land: [3]Everything that has hooves and that has
split hooves, bringing up the cud, among beasts, this
you may eat. [4]But this you shall not eat from those that
bring up the cud or have hooves, the camel for it
brings up the cud but it has no hooves. It is unclean for
you. [5]And the hare, for it brings up the cud but it has
no hooves. It is unclean for you. [6]And the rock-badger,
for it brings up the cud but it has no hooves. It is
unclean for you. [7]And the pig, for it has hooves and
has split hooves, but it does not chew the cud. It is
unclean for you. [8]Of their flesh you shall not eat and
their carcass you shall not touch. They are unclean for
you. [9]This you may eat of all that is in the water: All
that is in the water, in the seas and in the brooks that
have fins and scales, them you may eat. [10]And all in the
seas and in the brooks that have no fins or scales, of all
the swarming creatues of the water and of all the living

things that are in the water, they are an abomination for you. [11]And they shall be an abomination for you. Of their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcass you shall abominate. [12]Whatever in the water has no fins and scales is an abomination for you. [13]And these you shall abominate of the birds, they shall not be eaten, they are an abomination: the eagle and the vulture and the black vulture, [14]and the kite and the buzzard according to its kind, [15]and every raven according to its kind, [16]and the ostrich and the night hawk and the seagull and the hawk according to its kind, [17]and the horned owl and the cormorant and the puff owl, [18]and the hoot owl and the pelican and the fish hawk, [19]and the stork and the heron according to its kind and the hoopoe and the bat. [20]Every winged swarming thing that goes on all fours is an abomination for you. [21]But this you may eat of all winged swarming things that go on all fours: that which has jointed legs above its feet on which to hop on the ground. [22]Of them, these you may eat: the locust according to its kind and the bald locust according to its kind and the cricket according to its kind and the grasshopper according to its kind. [23]And every winged swarming thing that has four feet is an abomination for you. [24]And through these you would become unclean. Whoever touches their carcass shall be unclean till evening. [25]And whoever bears off

anything from their carcass shall wash his clothes and be unclean till evening. [26]Of all the beasts that have hooves but the hooves are not split and they do not bring up the cud, they are unclean for you. Whoever touches them becomes unclean. [27]And whatever goes on its paws among all animals that go on all four is unclean for you. Whoever touches their carcass shall be unclean till evening. [28]And he who bears off their carcass shall launder his clothes and be unclean till evening. They are unclean for you. [29]This is unclean for you among the swarming creatures that swarm on the ground: the mole and the rat and the great lizard according to its kind, [30]and the gecko and the spotted lizard and the lizard and the skink and the chameleon. [31]These are the unclean for you among all swarming things. Whoever touches them when they are dead shall be unclean till evening. [32]And whatever upon which something from them falls when they are dead shall be unclean. Of any vessel of wood or cloth or skin or sackcloth, any vessel in which a task may be done, shall be brought into water and be unclean till evening, and then be clean. [33]And any earthen vessel into which something from them falls, whatever is in it shall be unclean, and you shall break it. [34]Of any food that may be eaten, when water comes on it, shall be unclean, and any liquid that may be drunk in any

vessel, shall be unclean. [35]And whatever upon which
something from their carcass falls shall be unclean.
Oven and range shall be smashed. They are unclean,
and they shall be unclean for you. [36]But a spring or a
cistern, a gathering of water, shall be clean. And he
who touches their carcass shall be unclean. [37]And
should something from their carcass fall on any
planted seed that may be planted, it is clean. [38]And
should water be put on seed and something from their
carcass fall on it, it is unclean for you. [39]And should
one of the beasts die which are your food, he who
touches their carcass shall be unclean till evening.
[40]And he who eats of its carcass shall launder his
garments and be unclean till evening. And he who
bears off its carcass shall launder his garments and be
unclean till evening. [41]And every swarming thing that
creeps on the earth is an abomination. It shall not be
eaten. [42]Whatever goes on its belly and whatever goes
on all fours including the many-legged ones of all
swarming things that swarm on the earth, you shall not
eat them, for they are an abomination. [43]Do not make
yourselves abominable through any swarming thing
that swarms and do not become unclean through them
and be unclean. [44]For I am the LORD your God, and
you shall hallow yourselves and become holy, for I am
holy. And you shall not make yourselves unclean

through any swarming thing that swarms on the earth.
45For I am the LORD Who has brought you up from
the land of Egypt to be for you a God, and you shall
be holy, for I am holy. 46This is the teaching about
beast and bird and every living creature that stirs in the
water and every swarming thing that swarms on the
earth, 47to divide between the unclean and the clean
and between the animal that is eaten and the animal
that shall not be eaten.'"

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *of all the animals that are on the land*. Although the last word in this chain, *ʾerets*, often means "earth," the list that immediately follows makes clear that the category in question is land animals.

3. *Everything that has hooves and that has split hooves.* The inventory of permitted and prohibited creatures and much of the language in which it is cast are quite similar to what one finds in the dietary laws in Deuteronomy 14. Jacob Milgrom makes a plausible argument that the author of the laws in Deuteronomy was familiar with our text and offered what amounts to an abridgement of it. Absent from the parallel passage in Deuteronomy is the lengthy section here, beginning with verse 31, that is concerned not with dietary taboos but with impurity ("uncleanness") imparted by contact with the bodies of the forbidden animals. Purity and impurity, of course, are a preoccupation of the Priestly writers.

5–6. *the hare . . . the rock-badger*. Already at this point in the list, there is some uncertainty about the identity of the animals named in the Hebrew, and this uncertainty grows as the text moves on to birds, amphibians, reptiles, and

insects. See the comment on Deuteronomy 14:7–19. The use in translation of relatively rare zoological designations such as “gecko” and “skink” jibes with the puzzlement that many of the Hebrew terms elicit.

7. *the pig.* It is only later, in the Hellenistic period, that the pig becomes the prohibited animal par excellence, although the anonymous prophet of the Babylonian exile whose words are recorded in Isaiah 66:17 brackets eaters of pig and rat as participants in some unspeakable pagan rite. Pork was a common food among the Philistines and was also sometimes eaten by Canaanites, as archaeological inspection of the bones of animals consumed has determined. Interestingly, in the high country in the eastern part of Canaan, where Israelite population was concentrated toward the end of the second millennium B.C.E., the percentage of pig bones discovered is only a fraction of what it is in the Canaanite lowlands. This suggests that the taboo was already generally embraced by the Israelites at an early period (well before the composition of the Torah) and also that some Israelites chose to disregard it.

10. *that have no fins or scales, of all the swarming creatures of the water.* Mary Douglas has proposed that what underlies the dietary prohibitions is a general commitment of the Israelite mind-set to clear and distinct categories: forms of animal life that appear to be ambiguous instances of their particular zoological class may not be eaten. That proposal seems a little strained for the land animals because it is not self-evident that a nonruminant with hooves, such as the pig, is somehow a violation of the category “land animal.” Her argument is more plausible for sea creatures, and, perhaps also, for amphibians and reptiles. Fish, possessing fins and scales, are the exemplary category instance of denizens of the water. Yet the sea “swarms” or pullulates (Hebrew *shorets*) with polymorphous creatures in shells and plasmic blobs and tentacles that seem altogether unlike fish, and from this pullulation the Israelites are enjoined to distance themselves. It is noteworthy that terms from the Creation story abound here: “swarming creatures” (*sherets*), “according to its kind” (which is to say, “of every kind”), “gathering of water,” “stirs” (*romeset*, which in the different context of Genesis 1 was rendered as “crawling”). The dietary laws are framed to make a statement about the Israelites’ place in the created order of things that is a kind of qualifying addendum to the Priestly panorama of creation in Genesis 1. God’s fecund

world calls all sorts of living creatures into existence, and man is one of these. But the Israelites are expected to set themselves apart from the natural world to which they belong just as they are required to set themselves apart from the nations with which, of necessity, they participate in political, economic, and cultural intercourse. Thus they are forbidden the flesh of whole classes of living creatures, especially when animal life seems to manifest its most intense, category-dissolving pullulation. One may wonder whether behind all this, at least for sea creatures, reptiles, insects, and amphibians, there is some sort of horror of the inchoate, the seemingly formless, a horror akin to the revulsion in the face of the primordial serpent.

21. *that which has.* The Masoretic Text reads "that which does not have," *ʾasher loʾ*, almost certainly a scribal error for *ʾasher lo*, "that which has."

24. *Whoever touches their carcass shall be unclean.* It is the dead unclean animal that conveys this impurity by touch, not the living one. (Abraham ibn Ezra expresses indignation against the Sadducees for imagining that living animals are included.) Dead bodies of any sort impart ritual impurity, but in the present case, because a dead animal is potential food, the "uncleanness" inhering in the prohibited creature assumes an especially dangerous potency. It is imagined as a source of contamination transmitted by physical contiguity, rather like a physical contagion.

25. *whoever bears off anything from their carcass.* As several medieval commentators note, the act of carrying off part of the carcass necessarily involves closer and more sustained contact with the source of impurity and so it requires laundering of the garments as well as bathing.

27. *whatever goes on its paws.* This category of prohibition is of course already implied in the earlier stipulation regarding split hooves, but the Priestly writers seek to make the classes of proscribed animals as clear and explicit as possible.

32. *whatever upon which something from them falls.* Here and in the subsequent verses the notion of contamination through contact is extended. Impurity is imparted not only to a person when he or she reaches out to touch or pick up the carcass of a forbidden creature but also when any part of the carcass—say, a piece of decaying bird whose body is lodged in a tree—

comes in contact with any substance. Porous substances that can be suffused with water in immersion—wood, cloth, skin, sackcloth—can be purified of the contamination through immersion. Earthen vessels, which are porous but cannot be saturated, must be destroyed.

36. *And he who touches their carcass shall be unclean.* This clause looks suspiciously out of place—perhaps an inadvertent scribal repetition from above.

38. *should water be put on seed.* This stipulation is an especially vivid illustration of how impurity is imagined as a contagion in quasimedical terms. Dry planted seed in the ground is deemed part of the natural growing world and resistant to contamination. Wet, softened seed becomes permeable to the contaminating substance.

39. *one of the beasts die which are your food.* Even the carcass of a permitted animal (which has died rather than been deliberately slaughtered) conveys impurity. Milgrom, noting the horror of the dead body and invoking the ban on consuming blood and on eating a kid boiled in its mother's milk (neither of these mentioned here), argues that the dietary prohibitions are an affirmation of life over death. That claim seems apologetic, for it is not clear why, say, the prohibition on eating nonruminants is an affirmation of life.

42. *Whatever goes on its belly.* This phrase, of course, is another allusion to the Creation story, or rather, to the end of that story in the Garden of Eden, when an enmity between humankind and a representative of the animal kingdom (the serpent) is first introduced.

45. *you shall be holy, for I am holy.* This is a grand concluding generalization, but its precise application to the dietary prohibitions is not entirely clear. *Imitatio dei* is ringingly proclaimed. Perhaps because God is involved with creation yet loftily removed from it, Israelite man in his image in this cosmic hierarchy (compare Psalm 8) is enjoined to set himself at a certain distance from the natural world of which he is necessarily a part by restricting categories of animal food, by not ingesting all living creatures in the teeming polymorphous fullness of their pullulation. The reiterated verb "to divide" is a key to the Priestly account of creation in Genesis 1: the world comes into coherent being when God divides the chaotically interfused primal elements

—light and darkness, the waters above and the waters below, the sea and dry land—from each other. Here the Israelites are commanded to emulate God by setting up a framework for daily life in which they are to “divide” (verse 47) between the unclean and the clean, between what is forbidden and permitted to be eaten.

CHAPTER 12

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Speak to the Israelites, saying, ‘Should a woman quicken with seed and bear a male, she shall be unclean seven days, as in the days of her menstrual unwellness she shall be unclean. [3]And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. [4]And thirty days and three she shall stay in her blood purity. She shall touch no consecrated thing nor shall she come into the sanctuary till the days of her purity are completed. [5]And if she bears a female, she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation, and sixty days and six she shall stay over her blood purity. [6]And when the days of her purity are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring a yearling lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a turtledove for an offense offering to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, to the priest. [7]And he shall bring it forward before the LORD and atone for her, and she shall be clean from the flow of her blood. This is the teaching about the childbearing woman, whether of a male or

of a female. [8]And if her hand cannot manage enough for a sheep, she shall take two turtledoves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and one for an offense offering, and the priest shall atone for her, and she shall be clean.'"

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *she shall be unclean*. The notion that the blood of childbirth rendered the parturient ritually impure was widespread in the ancient world, reflected in texts by the Hittites to the north of Israel and by the Greeks to the west. Jacob Milgrom notes that the ancients believed there was seed in the blood discharged by the childbearing woman, and so he proposes that this loss of blood was associated with death and hence conveyed impurity.

as in the days of her menstrual unwellness. The "in" is implied, for what is at issue is not the number of days but the nature of the condition of impurity.

4. *thirty days and three she shall stay in her blood purity.* The Hebrew, emphasizing the counting, says literally "in thirty days and three days." When one adds the initial seven days, the total period during which the woman is to avoid contact with consecrated things (and also, evidently, refrain from marital relations) is the formulaic figure of forty days. The blood of the first seven days is considered impure. Afterward, her blood is deemed pure ("her blood purity") but she must remain in this state for thirty-three days before she is free of the impurity contracted at childbirth.

5. *if she bears a female . . . sixty days and six she shall stay*. When one adds this number to the initial fourteen days, the total period of sequestration comes to eighty, or twice forty. No entirely satisfactory explanation has been offered for why a female child requires twice the length of time for the mother to be free of impurity, though one suspects a general predisposition of the culture to see the female as a potential source of impurity. Seminal

emission also imparts ritual impurity, but the period for ridding oneself of the impurity imparted by menstrual discharge is much longer.

6. *an offense offering.* The present case is a strategic instance of why it is misleading to render the Hebrew *ḥata't*, as almost all English versions do, as "sin offering." Surely the childbearing woman has done nothing that can be called a sin. The state of ritual impurity, however, imposed on her by biological circumstances makes her a potential source of violation of the sancta, which would be an offense to the cult and to its divine object, and so she is enjoined to present an offense offering that will mark the completion of her period of purification.

7. *the flow of her blood.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "the source of her blood," the idiom exhibiting a common linguistic pattern in which there is an interchange between cause ("source") and effect ("flow").

8. *if her hand cannot manage.* More literally, "her hand cannot find" (elsewhere, "her hand cannot attain"), with "hand" having its frequent biblical sense of capacity or power.

CHAPTER 13

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying,
[2]“Should a person have on the skin of his body an
inflammation or a rash or a shiny spot and it become
the affliction of skin blanch on the skin of his body, he
shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his
sons the priests. [3]And the priest shall see the affliction
on the skin of the body, and if the hair in the affliction
has turned white and the affliction seems deeper than
the skin of his body, it is skin blanch. When the priest
sees it, he shall declare him unclean. [4]And if it is a
white shiny spot on the skin of his body and it does not
seem deeper than the skin, and its hair has not turned
white, the priest shall confine the person with the
affliction seven days. [5]And the priest shall see him on
the seventh day, and, look, if the affliction has held its
color, if the affliction has not spread in the skin, the
priest shall confine him another seven days. [6]And the
priest shall see him again on the seventh day, and,
look, if the affliction has faded, if the affliction has not
spread on the skin, the priest shall declare him clean. It

is a rash. And he shall launder his clothes and be clean.
7But if the rash in fact has spread in the skin after he
has been seen by the priest and has been declared
clean, he shall be seen again by the priest. 8And if the
priest sees and, look, the rash has spread in the skin,
the priest shall declare him unclean. It is skin blanch.
9Should a person have the affliction of skin blanch, he
shall be brought to the priest. 10And if the priest sees,
and, look, there is a white inflammation in the skin in
which the hair has turned white and there is exposed
flesh in the inflammation, 11it is chronic skin blanch in
the skin of his body, and the priest shall declare him
unclean. He shall not confine him, for he is unclean.
12And if the skin blanch in fact erupts in the skin, and
the skin blanch covers all the skin of the person with
the affliction from head to toe, wherever the priest's
eyes can see, 13the priest shall see and, look, if the skin
blanch has covered his whole body, he shall declare
the affliction clean. It has turned white; it is clean. 14On
the day exposed flesh is seen in it, he shall be unclean.
15When the priest sees the exposed flesh, he shall
declare him unclean. The exposed flesh is unclean; it is
skin blanch. 16Or, should the exposed flesh recede and
turn white, he shall come to the priest, 17and the priest
shall see him, and, look, if the affliction has turned
white, the priest shall declare the person with the

affliction clean. He is clean. [18]And a body in which there be burning rash on the skin that is healed, [19]and there be in the place of the burning rash a white inflammation or a reddish white shiny spot, [20]and it be seen by the priest, and the priest see, and, look, if it appears lower than the skin and its hair has turned white, the priest shall declare him unclean. It is the affliction of skin blanch. It has erupted in the burning rash. [21]And if the priest sees it and, look, there is no white hair in it and it is not lower than the skin and it is faded, the priest shall confine him seven days. [22]And if in fact it has spread in the skin, the priest shall confine him. It is an affliction. [23]And if the shiny spot remains in its place, does not spread, it is the scar of the burning rash, and the priest shall declare him clean. [24]Or, should there be a burn from fire in the skin of a body, and the exposed flesh of the burn be a reddish white or white shiny spot, [25]the priest shall see it and, look, if the hair has turned white in the shiny spot and seems deeper than the skin, it is skin blanch, it has erupted in the burn, and the priest shall declare him unclean. It is the affliction of skin blanch. [26]And if the priest sees him and, look, there is no white hair in the shiny spot and it is not lower than the skin and it is faded, the priest shall confine him seven days. [27]And when the priest sees him on the seventh day, if in fact

it has spread in the skin, the priest shall declare him unclean. It is the affliction of skin blanch. [28]And if the shiny spot remains in its place, does not spread in the skin, and it is faded, it is the inflammation of the burn, and the priest shall declare him clean, for it is the scar of the burn. [29]And should a man or a woman have an affliction in head or beard, [30]and the priest see the affliction and, look, it seems deeper than the skin and there is thin yellow hair in it, the priest shall declare him unclean. It is scurf. It is blanch disease of the head or of the beard. [31]And should the priest see the affliction and, look, it does not seem deeper than the skin but it has no black hair, the priest shall confine the person with the affliction of scurf another seven days. [32]And the priest shall see the affliction on the seventh day and, look, if the scurf has not spread and there is no yellow hair in it and the scurf seems deeper than the skin, [33]the person with the scurf shall shave himself but the scurf he shall not shave, and the priest shall confine the person with the scurf another seven days. [34]And the priest shall see the scurf on the seventh day and, look, if the scurf has not spread in the skin and there is no yellow hair in it and it does not seem deeper than the skin, the priest shall declare him clean, and he shall launder his clothes and be clean. [35]And if the scurf has in fact spread in the skin after his being

declared clean, [36]and the priest sees it and, look, the scurf has spread in the skin, the priest shall not examine for the yellow hair—he is unclean. [37]And if the scurf has held its color and black hair has grown in it, the scurf is healed, he is clean, and the priest shall declare him clean. [38]And should a man or a woman have on the skin of their body multiple white shiny spots, [39]and the priest sees and, look, on the skin of their body there are multiple dull white spots, it is tetter. It has erupted in the skin. He is clean. [40]And should a man's hair fall out, he is bald on the pate. He is clean. [41]And if the front part of his hair falls out, he is bald on the forehead. He is clean. [42]And should there be on the bald pate or on the bald forehead a white affliction, it is erupting skin blanch on his bald pate or on his bald forehead. [43]And the priest shall see him and, look, the inflammation of the affliction is reddish white on his bald pate or on his bald forehead, like skin blanch of the body in appearance, [44]he is afflicted with skin blanch. He is unclean. The priest shall surely declare him unclean. His affliction is on his head. [45]And the person afflicted with skin blanch, in whom the affliction is, his clothes shall be torn and his hair disheveled, and his moustache he shall cover, and he shall call out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' [46]All the days that the affliction is on him he shall remain unclean. He is

unclean. He shall dwell apart. Outside the camp shall his dwelling place be.

47 “And should a garment have in it a scaly affliction,
whether in a wool garment or a linen garment,
48 whether in the warp or in the woof of the linen or the
wool, or in a skin or anything made of skin, 49 and the
affliction be greenish or reddish in the garment or in
the skin or in the warp or in the woof or in any article
of skin, it is the scaly affliction, and it shall be shown
to the priest. 50 And the priest shall see the affliction
and sequester the article with the affliction seven days.
51 And if he sees the affliction on the seventh day, that
the affliction has spread through the garment or
through the warp or through the woof or through the
skin for anything that the skin may serve for a task, the
affliction is malignant scale disease. It is unclean.
52 And the garment or the warp or the woof in wool or
in linen or in any article of skin in which the affliction
is shall be burned, for it is malignant scale disease. It
shall be burned in fire. 53 And if the priest sees and,
look, the affliction has not spread through the garment
or through the warp or through the woof or through
any article of skin, 54 the priest shall charge, and they
shall launder that in which the affliction was and

sequester it another seven days. [55]And the priest shall see after the article with the affliction has been laundered, and, look, if the affliction has not changed color and the affliction has not spread, it is unclean. In fire you shall burn it. It is corrosion, whether on its inner side or its outer side. [56]And if the priest sees, and, look, the affliction has become faded after being laundered, he shall tear it from the garment or from the skin or from the warp or from the woof. [57]And if it shall still appear in the garment or in the warp or in the woof or in any article of skin, it is eruptive. In fire you shall burn it—that in which the affliction is. [58]And the garment or the warp or the woof or any article of skin that you launder and from which the affliction disappears shall be laundered again and be clean. [59]This is the teaching about the scaly affliction of a wool or linen garment or warp or woof or any article of skin, to declare it clean or unclean."

CHAPTER 13 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *on the skin of his body*. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "on the skin of his flesh." Though that sounds close to a redundancy in English, the point, as Rashbam proposed, is probably to distinguish bare skin from the areas where the skin is covered by hair.

inflammation . . . rash . . . shiny spot. Throughout this long section on dermatological disorders, the precise identification of disease and even symptom remains uncertain, and the approximations afforded by translation are chiefly guided by etymology. ("Inflammation," for example, represents the Hebrew *se'et*, which appears to exhibit the verbal root that means "to raise"; "shiny spot" is proposed for *baheret* because the verbal stem on which that noun is formed means "to shine" or "to be bright.") The fact of the matter is that the ancients perceived and described diseases and their symptoms differently than does modern Western medicine, and some conditions that they understood to be a single malady may actually have been a variety of diseases, not all of them intrinsically related. Scholarly attempts to equate the various conditions reported here with specific dermatological disorders have had only limited success. A certain lack of specificity in the translation of the quasimedical language of this section seems prudent and, indeed, appropriate.

3. *the priest shall see the affliction.* In most of its recurrences here, the verb "see" has the obvious force of "examine," but this is still another instance in which an ordinary all-purpose term is enlisted for a technical use—a stylistic practice this translation emulates.

skin blanch. Although older English translations represent the Hebrew *tsara'at* (etymol ogy uncertain) as "leprosy," modern scholars are virtually unanimous in rejecting this identification. The symptoms do not correspond, and there is scant evidence that leprosy was present in the Near East before the Hellenistic period. No positive identification with a disease known to modern medicine has been made. In most biblical occurrences, *tsara'at* is associated with a ghastly white loss of pigmentation, and hence this translation adopts the coined term "skin blanch" (see the comment on Exodus 4:6). Loss of pigmentation in hair and skin is prominent here as a determining symptom.

When the priest sees it, he shall declare him unclean. The examining priest determines the diagnosis, and perhaps one should think of him as performing at least one function of a physician. But these regulations for skin conditions reflect an ambiguous conception of disease that wavers between pathology and ritual impurity (the general sense of *tam'e*, "unclean"). Thus the quarantining of the afflicted person might involve a fear of contagion in the medical sense or might be chiefly an avoidance of ritual contamination, and one suspects that the two were blurred in the Israelite imagination. Jacob

Milgrom proposes that the wasting of the flesh involved in *tsara'at* is associated with death, and that these laws are an expression of the impulse in Leviticus to separate all deathlike phenomena from the living.

11. *chronic skin blanch.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "old skin blanch," with the implication of its persistence—hence "chronic."

12. *the person with the affliction.* The Hebrew, as repeatedly elsewhere in this passage, simply says "the affliction," but this is an obvious ellipsis or, as some prefer to call it, a metonymy.

from head to toe. The literal Hebrew idiom is "from his head to his feet."

13. *It has turned white; it is clean.* The referent of the second clause might be either the affliction (*nega'*) or the person, in which case it should be translated "he is clean." This criterion for being cured is a little confusing because white has been associated with the disease—compare the preceding clause, "the skin blanch has covered his whole body." Here, however, as Baruch Levine explains, the whiteness is an indication of fresh skin that has grown instead of "exposed flesh" (as in the next verse).

17. *the priest shall declare the person with the affliction clean. He is clean*. This seeming redundancy probably reflects the attention to procedure of the law: first we have the instructions about what the attending priest must do, then a replication of the official, diagnostic declaration the priest is to make: "He is clean."

24. *burn from fire.* The introduction of actual burns here reflects how little these regulations correspond to modern conceptions of disease. The previous verse had dealt with "burning rash" (others: "boils"), *sheḥin*, a skin disease which by etymology suggests heat or burning. This leads the Levitical legislator associatively to consider burns, which in his view have the potential to turn into *tsara'at* (perhaps how he perceives an infected burn).

29. *a man or a woman . . . head or beard*. "Head" of course refers to either and "beard" to the man alone.

30. *thin yellow hair.* This seems to indicate a loss of hair pigmentation that gives the hair a flat discolored look without turning it altogether white. Black

hair was normative among ancient Israelites; Esau and David were said to have red hair, but there is no indication of blonds in the population.

33. *shave himself.* As Levine notes, the purpose of shaving all around the affected area would be to allow the priest to examine it more readily.

39. *tetter.* This all-purpose term for skin diseases (herpes, impetigo, eczema), adopted by many English translators, seems appropriate for the indeterminate Hebrew *bohaq*, indicating a dermatological condition that for some reason was not thought to impart uncleanness.

40. *he is bald.* As with the earlier association of burning rash and burns with infectious diseases, the law here goes against the grain of modern understanding by placing a hereditary condition such as baldness in the category of potentially contaminating skin diseases. Carefully taxonomic according to its own lights, the law distinguishes between baldness fore and aft.

45. *his moustache he shall cover.* This rather odd expression seems to indicate that the afflicted person is to pull some sort of scarf or head covering around his mouth—according to Abraham ibn Ezra, so that he will bring no harm to others from his contaminating breath. The law may stipulate moustache rather than mouth to mark the line up to which the covering is to be pulled. The tearing of the garment and the disheveled hair are ordinarily signs of mourning, but here their evident function is to set aside the afflicted person from the healthy, like the bell that was rung by lepers in medieval times, and like the cry of "Unclean! Unclean!" at the end of this verse.

46. *he shall remain unclean.* He is unclean. See the comment on verse 17.

47. *a scaly affliction.* The Hebrew is *nega' tsara'at*. Here the disparity between ancient understanding and modern categories is most striking. This is the same term for the condition that, when it appears on a human body, has been rendered here as "skin blanch." That translation obviously does not work for fabrics and leather, and the law seems to have in mind some sort of mold or mildew, which, however, is thought to exhibit the same pathology as the dermatological condition, perhaps because of a sickly whiteness manifested in both.

48. *whether in the warp or in the woof.* Milgrom, who has actually consulted weavers, notes that two kinds of threads of different textures and thicknesses are often used, a fact that makes it possible for certain forms of decay to spread through one set of threads and not the other.

50. *sequester.* The Hebrew verb is the same one used for "confining" an afflicted person, but strict English usage does not permit "confining" objects.

55. *has not changed color and . . . has not spread*. The crucial criterion is the color. Even if the blight has not spread, it is regarded as unclean because the color has not changed.

corrosion. The Hebrew *peḥetet* has not been identified but etymologically it is associated with either a term that means "diminution" or one that means "pit."

59. *This is the teaching about the scaly affliction of a wool or linen garment.* This verse formally marks the conclusion of the passage dealing with *tsara'at* in fabrics and leather. The chapter that follows will return to people afflicted with the disease.

CHAPTER 14

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“This shall be the teaching concerning the one struck with skin blanch on the day he becomes clean. He shall be brought to the priest, [3]and the priest shall go outside the camp, and the priest shall see, and, look, if the affliction of skin blanch is healed in the afflicted one, [4]the priest shall charge that there be taken for him who is cleansing himself two live pure birds and cedar wood and crimson stuff and hyssop. [5]And the priest shall charge that one bird be slaughtered in an earthen vessel over fresh water. [6]The living bird—he shall take it, and the cedar wood and the crimson stuff and the hyssop, and dip them and the living bird in the blood of the slaughtered bird over fresh water. [7]And he shall sprinkle upon him who is cleansing himself of the skin blanch seven times, and cleanse him, and he shall send out the living bird over the open field. [8]And he who is cleansing himself shall launder his garments and shave his hair and wash in water and be clean. And afterward he shall come into the camp and sit outside his tent

seven days. [9]And it shall be, on the seventh day, he
shall shave all the hair of his head and his beard and
his eyebrows, and all his hair he shall shave, and he
shall launder his garments and wash his flesh in water,
and become clean. [10]And on the eighth day he shall
take two unblemished sheep and one unblemished
yearling ewe and three-tenths of semolina flour, a
grain offering mixed with oil, and one *log* of oil. [11]And
the cleansing priest shall set the man cleansing
himself, together with them, before the LORD at the
entrance to the Tent of Meeting. [12]And the priest shall
take the one sheep and bring it forward as a guilt
offering, and the *log* of oil, and he shall elevate them
as an elevation offering before the LORD. [13]And he
shall slaughter the sheep in the place where the offense
offering is slaughtered, and the burnt offering in the
place of the sacred zone, for offense offering and guilt
offering alike are the priest's. It is holy of holies. [14]And
the priest shall take from the blood of the guilt offering
and the priest shall put it on the right earlobe of him
who is cleansing himself and on the thumb of his right
hand and on the big toe of his right foot. [15]And the
priest shall take from the *log* of oil and pour it into the
left palm of the priest. [16]And the priest shall dip his
right finger into the oil that is in his palm and sprinkle
from the oil with his finger seven times before the

LORD. [17]And from the rest of the oil that is in his
palm the priest shall put on the right earlobe of the one
who is cleansing himself and on the thumb of his right
hand and on the big toe of his right foot, together with
the blood of the guilt offering. [18]And what remains of
the oil that is in the palm of the priest he shall put on
the head of the one who is cleansing himself, and the
priest shall atone for him before the LORD. [19]And the
priest shall do the offense offering and atone for the
one cleansing himself from his uncleanness, and
afterward he shall slaughter the burnt offering. [20]And
the priest shall offer up the burnt offering and the grain
offering on the altar, and the priest shall atone for him,
and he shall be clean. [21]And if he is poor and his hand
cannot attain, he shall take one sheep as guilt offering
for an elevation offering to atone for himself, and one-
tenth of semolina flour mixed with oil as a grain
offering, and a *log* of oil, [22]and two turtledoves or two
young pigeons, as his hand may attain, and one shall
be an offense offering and one a burnt offering. [23]And
he shall bring them on the eighth day of his cleansing
to the priest at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting
before the LORD. [24]And the priest shall take the sheep
of the guilt offering and the *log* of oil, and the priest
shall elevate them as an elevation offering before the
LORD. [25]And he shall slaughter the sheep of the guilt

offering, and the priest shall take from the blood of the guilt offering and put it on the right earlobe of the one who is cleansing himself and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot. [26]And from the oil the priest shall pour into the left palm of the priest. [27]And the priest shall sprinkle with his right finger from the oil that is in his left palm seven times before the LORD. [28]And the priest shall put from the oil that is in his palm on the right earlobe of the one who is cleansing himself and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot, on the place of the blood of the guilt offering. [29]And what remains of the oil that is in the palm of the priest he shall put on the head of the one who is cleansing himself to atone for him before the LORD. [30]And he shall do one of the turtledoves or of the young pigeons, from which his hand attains, that which his hand attains, [31]the one for an offense offering and the other for a burnt offering, together with the grain offering. And the priest shall atone for the one who is cleansing himself before the LORD. [32]This is the teaching concerning him in whom there is an affliction of skin blanch whose hand cannot attain, when he is being cleansed.”

[33]And the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron,
saying, [34]“When you come into the land of Canaan
which I am about to give you as a holding, and I put
the scaly affliction in the house of the land of your
holding, [35]he whose house it is shall come and tell the
priest, saying, ‘Something like an affliction has
appeared to me in the house.’ [36]And the priest shall
charge that they clear the house so that nothing in the
house is unclean before the priest comes to see the
affliction, and afterward the priest shall come to see
the house. [37]And if he sees the affliction and, look, the
affliction is in the walls of the house, greenish or
reddish hollows that seem lower than the wall, [38]the
priest shall go out of the house to the entrance of the
house and sequester the house seven days. [39]And the
priest shall come back on the seventh day and see and,
look, if the affliction has spread in the walls of the
house, [40]the priest shall charge that they pull out the
stones in which the affliction is and fling them outside
the town into an unclean place. [41]And the house shall
be scraped from within all around, and they shall spill
the earth that they scraped off outside the town into an
unclean place. [42]And they shall take different stones
and bring them in place of the stones, and different
earth shall be taken and the house plastered. [43]And if
the affliction comes back and erupts in the house after

the pulling out of the stones and after the scraping of the house and after the plastering, [44]the priest shall come and see and, look, if the affliction has spread, it is malignant scale disease in the house. It is unclean. [45]And he shall raze the house, its stones, and its timbers and all the earth of the house, and he shall have it taken out beyond the town to an unclean place. [46]And whoever comes into the house all the days it is sequestered shall be unclean until evening. [47]And whoever lies in the house shall launder his garments, and whoever eats in the house shall launder his garments. [48]And if the priest in fact comes and sees and, look, the affliction has not spread in the house after the plastering of the house, the priest shall declare the house clean, for the affliction has been healed. [49]And he shall take to purge the house two birds and cedar wood and scarlet stuff and hyssop. [50]And he shall slaughter the one bird into an earthen vessel over fresh water. [51]And he shall take the cedar wood and the hyssop and the scarlet stuff and the living bird and dip them in the blood of the slaughtered bird and in the fresh water and sprinkle on the house seven times. [52]And he shall purge the house with the blood of the bird and with the fresh water and with the living bird and with the cedar wood and with the hyssop and with the scarlet stuff. [53]And he shall

send out the living bird beyond the town to the open field and atone for the house, and it shall be clean.
[54]This is the teaching for every affliction of skin blanch and for scurf, [55]and for scale disease of garment and of house, [56]and for inflammation and for scab and for shiny spot, [57]to teach on the day of the unclean and on the day of the clean—this is the teaching concerning scale disease."

CHAPTER 14 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *on the day*. This expression often has the sense of "when," and it occurs twice at the very end of the chapter, enclosing the entire unit in an envelope structure. The phrase might, however, specifically indicate the actual day of the purification rite, as some of the early rabbis contended. What follows is a set of procedures to be performed on that day.

3. *shall see.* As in the preceding chapter, the sense is "examine" or "inspect."

4. *that there be taken.* Here and repeatedly elsewhere in this chapter, the Hebrew third-person singular active verb without a specified subject is used as an equivalent of the passive.

cedar wood and crimson stuff. Jacob Milgrom proposes that both are used in this rite of purification because of their red color, linked with blood, which also functions here as a purifying agent. Hyssop appears elsewhere in biblical literature as an instrument of purification, although it remains uncertain why it was thought to have that efficacy.

5. *fresh water.* The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "living water," which creates a link with the "live" bird. The sense of the idiom is flowing water,

whether from a spring or a river. Since the entire ritual is designed to carry off the impurities from the place inhabited by the community, one may infer that the fresh water is to carry off the overflow of the blood.

6. *The living bird—he shall take it.* The Hebrew syntax, reproduced in this translation, is a little odd because the accusative "it" is redundant after "The living bird" has already appeared as the object of the verb. The evident intention is to highlight the living bird in contrast to the slaughtered bird.

7. *he shall send out the living bird over the open field.* This rite of releasing the bird in open country suggests an obvious analogy with the ritual of the scapegoat. The living bird, having been dipped in the blood of the slaughtered bird that has also been sprinkled on the person to be cleansed, carries off any residual impurities to a place far from human habitation. There is something clearly archaic about this entire ritual, and scholarship has detected antecedents in Mesopotamian rites of magical purgation.

9. *he shall shave all the hair of his head and his beard and his eyebrows, and all his hair.* The last seemingly redundant phrase probably indicates that he is to shave all his body hair—the chest, the legs, and the pubic area. Such total removal of hair was otherwise abhorrent in ancient Israel, but in this instance it is enjoined as an expression of the encompassing thoroughness of the cleansing process.

10. *three-tenths of semolina flour.* The ellipsis is for three-tenths of an *ephah*, a dry measure roughly equivalent to 19 liters. A *log* is about 1¼ cups.

12. *guilt offering.* It may sound puzzling that a person who has suffered from a skin disease is thought to have incurred guilt. It may be that the ancients imagined this particular disease as a punishment for some transgressive act, as when Miriam is stricken with skin blanch for slandering her brother (Numbers 12:10–15).

14. *earlobe . . . thumb . . . big toe*. The ritual works by synecdoche: from the protrusion of the head of the earlobe to the protrusions of hand and foot (all on the "governing" right side), the person being cleansed is symbolically covered with the blood of the guilt offering from head to toe without actually immersing in it.

17. *from the rest of the oil . . . the priest shall put on the right earlobe*. The two purgative substances dominating the rite are blood and oil (to which one may add the fresh water of the preceding ritual of the two birds). Blood belongs to the animal kingdom, oil (olive oil) to the vegetable kingdom. Blood, as the life substance, has purgative force; oil, elsewhere used for anointing the sacralia, has both consecrating and purgative power. Here, both the blood and the oil are part of the sacrifice.

21. *And if he is poor.* As with other kinds of sacrifice, special provision for a less costly offering is made for the person of limited means whose "hand cannot attain" (or "reach out," "manage") to bring the stipulated sacrifice.

26. *the priest shall pour into the left palm of the priest.* This odd wording led some traditional commentators to conclude that two priests are involved in the ritual, but perhaps the noun is repeated simply to make clear that the oil is not poured into the palm of the person cleansing himself.

27. *his right finger.* The rabbis plausibly inferred this was the index finger.

34. *I put the scaly affliction.* The Hebrew verb used here is identical with the one just employed for God's "giving" the land. A theological notion is adumbrated in the pun: God bestows (verbal stem *n-t-n*) both great bounty and also blight. The Midrash in Leviticus Rabba, seeking to rescue divine benevolence for Israel, fancifully imagines that the Canaanites have hidden gold in the walls of their houses which is discovered when the stones are pulled apart in the ritual of purgation.

35. *Something like an affliction has appeared to me in the house.* The vagueness of the phrasing reflects the uncertainty of the home owner's diagnosis. We have already observed the peculiar extrapolation from scaly skin disease to blight or mildew in fabrics. Now the owner of the house contemplates what is evidently some sort of mold or mildew in the walls of his house and wonders whether it exhibits a certain similarity—which the diagnosing priest could establish as actually the very same pathology—to the skin disease called *tsara'at*.

40. *fling them outside the town into an unclean place.* As the emphatic language suggests, what is involved is not a neutral act of removing

contaminants but a ridding the community of noxious impurities that are to be consigned, with vehement energy, to a place of impurity outside the pale of the community.

51. *And he shall take . . . and dip them in the blood . . . and sprinkle on the house seven times*. These linked rituals of purgation, from person to house, are motivated not medically but by a pervasive sense that the human community is constantly threatened by forces of impurity which must be warded off or, should they invade, which must be utterly purged through all the ritual gestures and detergent substances at the disposal of the priestly class. The shadowy antecedents of this vision of impurity lie in a pagan sense of a realm of contamination dominated by demonic spirits. Although the ritual apparatus, no doubt drawing on archaic precedents, remains in place, there is no indication here that impurity is associated with the demonic, though there appears to be an association with decay, deformity, and death.

54. *This is the teaching for every affliction of skin blanch.* The little catalogue that begins here and continues through the next two verses serves as a summary, enfolding the laws of this chapter with the preceding one (where scurf, scale disease of garment, and inflammation, scab, and shiny spot are all mentioned).

57. *on the day of the unclean and on the day of the clean.* Less literally, and adopting a minor shift in the vowel points proposed by Baruch Levine, this could mean: when they are cleansed and when they are unclean.

CHAPTER 15

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying,
[2]“Speak to the Israelites, and you shall say to them,
‘Should any man have a flux from his member, he is
unclean. [3]And this shall be his uncleanness in his flux:
his member running with its flux or his member
stopped up with its flux—this is his uncleanness. [4]Any
bedding on which the man with flux lies is unclean and
any object on which he sits is unclean. [5]And a man
who touches his bedding shall launder his garments
and bathe in water and shall be unclean until evening.
[6]And he who sits on an object that the man with flux
has sat on shall launder his garments and bathe in
water and shall be unclean until evening. [7]And he who
touches the body of the man with flux shall launder his
garments and bathe in water and shall be unclean until
evening. [8]And should a man with flux spit upon a clean
person, he shall launder his garments and bathe in
water and shall be unclean until evening. [9]And any
saddle upon which the man with flux rides shall be
unclean. [10]And whoever touches anything that has been

under him shall be unclean until evening, and he who carries these things shall launder his garments and bathe in water and shall be unclean until evening.
[11]And anyone whom the man with flux touches, not having rinsed his hands in water, shall launder his garments and bathe in water and shall be unclean until evening. [12]And an earthen vessel that the man with flux touches shall be broken, and any wooden vessel shall be rinsed with water. [13]And when the man with flux becomes clean from his flux, he shall count him seven days for his being clean and launder his garments and bathe his body in fresh water, and he shall be clean.
[14]And on the eighth day he shall take him two turtledoves or two young pigeons and come before the LORD at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and give them to the priest. [15]And the priest shall do them, one an offense offering and one a burnt offering, and the priest shall atone for him before the LORD for his flux. [16]And when a man has an emission of seed, he shall bathe his whole body in water and be unclean until evening. [17]And any fabric or any leather upon which there has been an emission of seed shall be laundered in water and be unclean until evening. [18]And a woman whom a man has bedded with emission of seed—they shall wash in water and be unclean until evening. [19]And a woman who has a flux of blood, her

flux being from her genitals, seven days she shall be in her menstruation, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until evening. [20]And whatever she lies upon in her menstruation shall be unclean, and whatever she sits upon shall be unclean. [21]And whoever touches her bedding shall launder his garments and bathe in water and shall be unclean until evening. [22]And whoever touches any object upon which she has sat shall launder his garments and bathe in water and shall be unclean until evening. [23]And if it is on the bedding or on the object that she is sitting on when he touches it, he shall be unclean until evening. [24]And if a man in fact beds her, her menstruation shall be upon him, he shall be unclean seven days, and any bedding upon which he lies shall be unclean. [25]And should a woman have a flux of blood many days, not in the time of her menstruation, or should she have a flux in addition to her menstruation, all the days of the flux of her uncleanness she shall be as in the days of her menstruation. She is unclean. [26]Any bedding upon which she lies all the days of her flux shall be like the bedding of her menstruation, and any object on which she sits shall be unclean like the uncleanness of her menstruation. [27]And whoever touches them shall be unclean, and shall launder his garments and bathe in water and shall be unclean until evening. [28]And if she

becomes clean from her flux, she shall count her seven days and after shall be clean. [29]And on the eighth day she shall take her two turtledoves or two young pigeons and bring them to the priest at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. [30]And the priest shall do one an offense offering and one a burnt offering, and the priest shall atone for her before the LORD for the flux of her uncleanness. [31]And you shall set apart the Israelites from their uncleanness lest they die through their uncleanness by making unclean My sanctuary which is in their midst. [32]This is the teaching about the man with flux and about him who has an emission of seed by which he becomes unclean, [33]and about her who is unwell in her menstruation, and about the person with flux, whether male or female, and about the man who lies with an unclean woman.'"

CHAPTER 15 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *from his member*. The primary meaning of the noun *basar* is "flesh." In the preceding chapter, it was used as a synecdoche for "body." Here it is an obvious euphemism for the sexual organ.

3. *running with its flux or . . . stopped up with its flux*. Since the very term "flux" (*zov*, the same root manifested in "a land *flowing with* milk and honey") suggests some sort of fluid discharge, there is a need to stipulate that

this category of ailment also includes cases in which the discharge is scanty, slow, and viscous ("stopped up").

4. *Any bedding.* As in the laws pertaining to skin disease and mildew, the concern is not a medical one of contagion but a ritual one of contamination (*tum'ah*, "impurity" or "uncleanness"). The condition of ritual uncleanness could be conveyed through secondary contact and, in some instances, even tertiary contact. Here, a substance merely touched by the man with a genital discharge does not contaminate, nor does he convey uncleanness if he touches someone after rinsing his hands, but contact with a substance that has been pressed against his genital area—bedding or a seat—does transmit the impurity. In all this, the overriding preoccupation of the Priestly writers is to protect the ritual purity of their special domain, the sanctuary, by instituting this system of sequestering and ablution in order to prevent the spread of the contamination. In the pagan world, such contamination was imagined to be imparted by demonic forces. Milgrom is certainly right in noting that the monotheistic perspective of Leviticus precludes the notion of the demonic from the conception of impurity. His contention, however, that the opposing forces of life and death manifested in purity and impurity are the consequence of man's moral actions is apologetic, for it is clear that certain pathological conditions—not presented here as a punishment for sin—and even certain normal physiological processes were thought to be intrinsic sources of impurity.

5. *bathe.* The Hebrew verb *raḥats* can mean simply "to wash," but in these laws it is evident that the whole body is to be immersed.

7. *he who touches the body.* Again, the noun used means "flesh," but the case of touching the person's genitals is an unlikely one, so the term should be construed here as a synecdoche for body. Abraham ibn Ezra succinctly observes, "Whatever member or limb it may be."

9. *saddle.* The Hebrew *merkav* refers to anything a person mounted on an animal would sit on, and so includes saddlecloths, pillows, and the like.

10. *these things.* The Hebrew says, rather tersely, "them," referring to anything that would have been under the mounted person.

12. *earthen . . . wooden vessel*. Milgrom suggests that the earthen vessel is to be broken because such implements were cheap, whereas the more costly carved wooden vessel was to be rescued for continued use through rinsing.

15. *offense offering.* As elsewhere, the context makes clear that the Hebrew *ḥaṭʾat* does not mean "sin offering," for no sin has been committed. But being the bearer of a source of contamination that could defile the sanctuary is at least a potential offense, in a strictly mechanical sense, to the sacred zone of the deity.

16. *an emission of seed.* The Hebrew for "emission," *shikhvah*, is linked to the verb for "lying down" *shakhav*, but may derive from what is "laid down" as the result of a spurt or shower of anything liquid, as in the expression *shikhvat tal*, "layer of dew" (Exodus 16:13).

18. *And a woman whom a man has bedded with emission of seed.* Sexual intercourse with ejaculation renders both parties temporarily impure in regard to participation in the cult—a widespread idea in the ancient world. Hence the Israelites are enjoined to refrain from sexual relations for three days before the Sinai epiphany.

19. *her flux being from her genitals.* Again, the noun used is *basar*. The translation follows ibn Ezra in understanding this as a euphemism for the vagina and uterus, which of course are the locus of the menstrual flow. The notion that the menstruant is a source of contamination to be strenuously avoided is shared by many ancient cultures. Even if the restrictions regarding menstruation are less extreme here than in some other cultures, the association of this natural female function with uncleanness is one that has had problematic social and perhaps psychological consequences continuing through post-biblical Judaism.

her menstruation. Though the noun *nidah* is conventionally derived from the verbal stem *n-d-h*, which means "to banish," Levine proposes that it is cognate with *n-z-h*, "to sprinkle" or "to spatter," thus referring explicitly to the menstrual flow.

24. *her menstruation shall be upon him.* Later, there will be a stipulation of punishment for this act. Here, the man cohabiting with the menstruant

becomes a kind of male menstruant, conveying ritual impurity precisely as the menstruating woman does and subject to the same process of purification.

CHAPTER 16

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses after the death of
Aaron's two sons when they came forward before the
LORD and died. [2]And the LORD said to Moses,
"Speak to Aaron your brother, that he not come at all
times into the sacred zone within the curtain in front
of the cover that is on the Ark, lest he die. For in the
cloud I shall appear over the cover. [3]With this shall
Aaron come into the sacred zone, with a bull from the
herd for an offense offering and a ram for a burnt
offering. [4]A sacral linen tunic he shall wear and linen
breeches shall be on his body and with a linen sash he
shall gird himself and a linen turban he shall don. They
are sacral garments. And he shall bathe his body in
water and put them on. [5]And from the community of
Israelites he shall take two he-goats for an offense
offering and one ram for a burnt offering. [6]And Aaron
shall bring forward the offense-offering bull which is
his and atone for himself and for his household. [7]And
he shall take the two goats and set them before the
LORD at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. [8]And he

shall put lots on the two goats, one for the LORD and
one for Azazel. [9]And Aaron shall bring forward the
goat for which the lot for the LORD comes up, and he
shall make it an offense offering. [10]And the goat for
which the lot for Azazel comes up shall be set live
before the LORD to atone upon it, to send it off to
Azazel in the wilderness. [11]And Aaron shall bring
forward the offense-offering bull which is his, and he
shall atone for himself and for his household, and he
shall slaughter the offense-offering bull which is his.
[12]And he shall take a panful of fiery coals from the
altar, from before the LORD, and a double handful of
fine aromatic incense, and bring it within the curtain.
[13]And he shall put the incense on the fire before the
LORD, and the cloud of incense shall envelope the
covering that is over the Ark of the Covenant, lest he
die. [14]And he shall take from the blood of the bull and
sprinkle with his finger over the surface of the cover
on the east side, and before the curtain he shall
sprinkle seven times from the blood with his finger.
[15]And he shall slaughter the offense-offering goat
which is the people's and bring its blood within the
curtain, and do with its blood as he did with the blood
of the bull, and sprinkle it on the cover and before the
cover. [16]And he shall atone over the sacred zone for the
uncleannesses of the Israelites and for their sins,

according to all their offenses, and thus he shall do for the Tent of Meeting that dwells with them in the midst of their uncleannesses. [17]And no person shall be in the Tent of Meeting when he comes into the sacred zone to atone until he goes out, and he shall atone for himself and for his household and for the whole assembly of Israel. [18]And he shall go out to the altar that is before the LORD and atone for it, and he shall take from the blood of the bull and from the blood of the goat and put it on the horns of the altar all around. [19]And he shall sprinkle over it from the blood with his finger seven times and cleanse it and consecrate it from the uncleannesses of the Israelites. [20]And when he finishes atoning for the sacred zone and for the Tent of Meeting and for the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat. [21]And Aaron shall lay his two hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the transgressions of the Israelites and all their sins, according to all their offenses, and he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it off in the hand of a man for the hour to the wilderness. [22]And the goat shall bear upon it all their transgressions to a remote region, and he shall send off the goat to the wilderness. [23]And Aaron shall come into the Tent of Meeting and take off the linen garments that he wore when he came into the sacred zone and lay them down there. [24]And

he shall bathe his body in water in a holy place and put on his garments and come out and do his burnt offering and the people's burnt offering, and he shall atone for himself and for the people. [25]And the fat of the offense offering he shall turn to smoke on the altar. [26]And he who sent off the goat to Azazel shall launder his garments and bathe his body in water, and after he may come into the camp. [27]And the offense-offering bull and the offense-offering goat whose blood has been brought to atone in the sacred zone shall be taken out beyond the camp, and they shall burn their hides in fire and their flesh and their dung. [28]And he who burns them shall launder his garments and bathe his body in water, and after he may come into the camp. [29]And it shall be a perpetual statute for you: in the seventh month on the tenth of the month you shall afflict yourselves and no task shall you do, the native and the sojourner who sojourns in your midst. [30]For on this day it will be atoned for you, to cleanse you of all your offenses, before the LORD you shall be cleansed. [31]It is a sabbath of sabbaths for you, and you shall afflict yourselves, an everlasting statute. [32]And the priest shall atone, who will be anointed and who will be installed to serve as priest in his father's stead, and he shall put on the linen garments, the sacral garments. [33]And he shall atone for the holy sanctuary and for the Tent of

Meeting, and he shall atone for the altar, and for the priests and for all the assembled people he shall atone.
[34]And this shall be an everlasting statute for you to atone for the Israelites for all their offenses once in the year." And he did as the LORD had charged Moses.

CHAPTER 16 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *after the death of Aaron's two sons*. As Rashi, Abraham ibn Ezra, and many traditional and modern commentators variously observe, the death of Aaron's sons when they presumptuously entered sacred space is mentioned to alert Aaron to the mortal danger he and his successors run in entering the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement.

when they came forward. This is the verb regularly used for coming before the divine presence in the sanctuary. When the act is unauthorized, the implication of the verb is "to encroach."

2. *the sacred zone.* In the present context, the meaning of *haqodesh* ("the holy") is clearly the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant stands. Only on this most sacred day of the calendar is the high priest granted access to this dangerous space, and only when he follows a strict regimen of dress and action.

the cover. The exact nature of this item is not entirely certain, though it appears to have been some sort of carved lid to the Ark. Whatever the actual etymology of the Hebrew term *kaporet*, this chapter surely exploits a punning connection with *kipur*, "atonement" or "purgation."

6. *atone.* The verb *kiper*, as Jacob Milgrom explains, seems to derive from a concrete notion of rubbing clean. In the cultic lexicon, it has the more abstract—indeed, theological—sense of effecting atonement or expiation. When it is applied to persons, it is followed by either the preposition *beʿad* ("for") or *ʿal* (literally "on," "over"). When it is applied to things (see verse

33), it is followed by the noun as direct object, which has led some interpreters to render it as "purge" in such cases.

8. *one for the LORD and one for Azazel.* As countless seals and other ancient inscriptions unearthed by archaeologists attest, the use of a proper name or title, prefixed by the letter *lamed* ("for") as a *lamed* of possession, was a standard form for indicating that the object in question belonged to So-and-so (as in *lamelekh*, "the king's"). These words, then (in the Hebrew, each is a single word, *leYHWH* and *laʿazaz'el*), are the actual texts written on the two lots. Much ink since Late Antiquity has been spilled over the identity of Azazel, but the most plausible understanding—it is a very old one—is that it is the name of a goatish demon or deity associated with the remote wilderness. The name appears to reflect *ʿez*, goat.

9. *for which the lot for the LORD comes up.* This translation renders the Hebrew verb literally. The use of that verb may be dictated by the fact that the lots were in all likelihood pulled up out of a box or urn.

10. *to send it off to Azazel in the wilderness.* Approximate analogues to the so-called scapegoat ritual, using different animals, appear in several different Mesopotamian texts. The origins of the practice are surely in an archaic idea —that the polluting substance generated by the transgressions of the people is physically carried away by the goat. Azazel is not represented as a competing deity (or demon) rivaling YHWH, but the ritual depends upon a polarity between YHWH/the pale of human civilization and Azazel/the remote wilderness, the realm of disorder and raw formlessness. An unapologetic reading might make out the trace of a mythological plot, even if it is no more than vestigial in this monotheistic context. It is as though the goat piled with impurities were being sent back to the primordial realm of "welter and waste" before the delineated world came into being, but that realm here is given an animal-or-demon tag. The early rabbis, extending the momentum of the ritual, imagined the goat as being pushed off a high cliff, but in our text it is merely sent out, or set free, in the wild wilderness that is the realm of Azazel.

12. *double handful.* Since one hand holds the fire-pan, this is an indication of dry measure rather than a direction that each of the priest's two hands should be filled with incense.

16. *he shall atone over the sacred zone.* This clause is the conceptual heart of the entire atonement ritual. During the year, the accumulated sins and transgressions and physical pathologies and inadvertencies of the Israelites have built up a kind of smog of pollution that threatens the sanctity of the Tent of Meeting and the Holy of Holies within it—by implication for later times, the sanctity of the Temple. This elaborate rite of purgation scrubs everything clean of impurity, making the sacred zone cultically viable for another year. Again, evidence abounds of annual rites for cleansing the temple in Mesopotamian culture that may well have served as precedent for what we have here. Later Jewish tradition would transform this ritual for the purgation of a physical miasma of pollution into a process of spiritual repentance and atonement.

21. *a man for the hour.* The Hebrew *ʾish ʿiti* is a celebrated crux. The expression appears only here. The literal sense is "a timely man," and it probably indicates a man chosen to serve for this time and task.

29. *afflict yourselves.* The evident meaning is fasting, though some have contended that the idiom is not restricted to fasting but could also represent other forms of self-denial.

34. *And he did as the* LORD *had charged Moses.* The only logical antecedent for "he" is Aaron, who as high priest is the person who has been enjoined to carry out this ritual. It is unclear why the name is omitted. With it, the chapter would be enclosed in a neatly chiastic envelope structure: "And the LORD said to *Moses*, 'Speak to *Aaron*' . . . And *Aaron* did as the LORD had charged *Moses*."

CHAPTER 17

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Speak to
Aaron and to his sons and to all the Israelites, and you
shall say to them, ‘This is the thing that the LORD has
charged, saying: [3]Every man of the house of Israel who
slaughters a bull or a sheep or a goat in the camp or
who slaughters outside the camp, [4]and does not bring it
to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting to bring it
forward as an offering to the LORD before the
LORD’s Tabernacle, it shall be counted as blood for
that man—he has spilled blood—and that man shall be
cut off from the midst of his people. [5]So that the
Israelites will bring their sacrifices which they sacrifice
across the open field and bring them to the LORD, to
the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, to the priest, and
they shall sacrifice them as communion sacrifices to
the LORD. [6]And the priest shall cast the blood on the
LORD’s altar at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting
and turn the fat to smoke as a fragrant odor to the
LORD. [7]And they shall no longer sacrifice their
sacrifices to the goat-demons after which they go

whoring. An everlasting statute shall this be for them
for their generations. [8]And to them you shall say: every
man of the house of Israel and of the sojourner who
sojourns in their midst who offers up a burnt offering
or a sacrifice, [9]and does not bring it to the entrance of
the Tent of Meeting to do it for the LORD, that man
shall be cut off from his kin. [10]And every man of the
house of Israel and of the sojourner who sojourns in
their midst who consumes any blood, I shall set My
face against the living person who consumes blood and
cut him off from the midst of his people. [11]For the life
of the flesh is in the blood. And as for Me, I have
given it to you on the altar to ransom your lives, for it
is the blood that ransoms in exchange for life.
[12]Therefore have I said to the Israelites: no living
person among you shall consume blood, nor shall the
sojourner who sojourns in your midst consume blood.
[13]And every man of the Israelites and of the sojourner
who sojourns in their midst who hunts down prey,
beast or fowl that may be eaten, he shall spill out its
blood and cover it with earth. [14]For the life of all flesh,
its blood is in its life, and I say to the Israelites: the
blood of all flesh you shall not consume, for the life of
all flesh is its blood, all who consume it shall be cut
off. [15]And any living person who eats an animal that
has died or been torn by predators, whether native or

sojourner, shall launder his garments and bathe in water and be unclean until evening, and then be clean. [16]And if he does not launder nor bathe his body, he shall bear his punishment.'"

CHAPTER 17 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Speak to Aaron and to his sons and to all the Israelites*. In contrast to the preceding chapters, God here enjoins Moses to address not merely Aaron and the priestly caste but the whole Israelite people. This pitching of the divine message to the entire populace is one of many signals that have led scholars since the nineteenth century to conclude that chapters 17–26 constitute a distinctive unit—conventionally designated the Holiness Code because of its concern with the idea that the entire people shall make itself holy—possessing certain distinctive theological features and certain distinctive elements of vocabulary.

3. *Every man of the house of Israel.* This phrase, *ʾish ʾish mibeyt yisraʾel*, is reiterated in this chapter and does not appear at all in chapters 1–16. It is a stylistic device for insisting on the comprehensiveness of the obligation for all Israelites with which the Holiness Code is concerned.

who slaughters. There has been debate since Late Antiquity about whether the verb refers to general slaughter for the purpose of eating or slaughter for the purpose of sacrifice. There are grounds to conclude that in the early biblical period there was no such thing as "secular" slaughter (*sḥehitat ḥulin*), for slaughter was regularly associated with offering some part of the animal as a sacrifice. That appears to be the assumption of this law. Slaughtering "outside the camp" entails the danger of sacrifice to the feral or vegetal deities of the open field, and so the animal must be brought to the sanctuary. This ban on secular slaughter, pointedly permitted by Deuteronomy, logically implies, as Milgrom argues at length, that local sanctuaries are envisaged by the law, where people living in the immediate

region could bring the animals as offerings before consuming a large part of them.

4. *it shall be counted as blood . . . he has spilled blood*. The starkness of this formulation is quite startling, and very much in keeping with the emphasis throughout the chapter on the sacrosanct character of blood as the principal bearer and symbol of life. The person who slaughters an animal without having the priest cast some of its blood on the legitimate altar of YHWH is considered to have committed murder. The blood on the altar, then, offered up to the deity together with the burnt suet, is an expiation for the blood of the animal spilled in the slaughtering process, a ritual recognition that the taking of life, even for consumption as food, is a grave act that must be balanced by an act of expiation.

7. *And they shall no longer sacrifice their sacrifices to the goat-demons.* This clause provides persuasive evidence that the "slaughter" mentioned in verse 3 is not solely for eating but involves a cultic act. The "goat-demons" (*se'irim*) are surely to be associated with Azazel in chapter 16. While our knowledge of their precise nature is limited, they are clearly archaic nature gods of the wild realm "beyond the camp," outside the pale of monotheistic civilization that the sundry Priestly writers are laboring to create. Monogamy, of course, is a reiterated biblical metaphor for monotheism, and so worship of the goat-demons and other deities is an act of promiscuity, "whoring."

10. *the living person.* In similar contexts elsewhere, the polyvalent Hebrew *nefesh* is rendered in this translation simply as "person," but here it is important to add the notion it implies of life because the use of the term puns on *nefesh* in the sense of "life" as it appears in the next verse.

11. *I have given it to you on the altar to ransom your lives.* The conception of sacrifice as expiating substitution is made perfectly explicit here: the bloodshed, equivalent to murder, involved in slaughtering the animal is "made good" through divine provision by the sacrificial blood cast on the altar "to ransom [or, atone for] your lives."

12. *no living person.* As in verse 10, the fraught term *nefesh* is pointedly used rather than *'ish*, "man."

13. *he shall spill out its blood and cover it with earth.* In the case of game, perhaps typically downed with an arrow, the beast or bird is not fit to be brought as an offering to the altar, so a different mechanism is employed to respect the sacrosanct nature of the lifeblood—spilling it out on the ground and covering it with earth.

14. *For the life of all flesh, its blood is in its life.* The syntax here, literally reproduced in the translation, is a little crabbed, leaving the relation of terms slightly uncertain. One suspects that the writer was impelled by the desire to insist repetitively on the equation of *dam*, "blood," and *nefesh*, "life."

15. *any living person who eats . . . shall launder his garments and bathe*. The clear implication of this verse, in contrast to other biblical legislation on this topic, is that it is not forbidden to eat an animal that has died of natural causes or has been killed by a beast of prey. The animal carcass does convey ritual impurity, so laundering of the garments and bathing are required of the person who eats its flesh. The permissiveness concerning this category of meat may be dictated by the consideration that an animal found dead would not be fit for sacrifice and so, unlike animals slaughtered in open country, would not lead a person into the danger of sacrificing to the feral deities.

CHAPTER 18

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Speak to the Israelites, and you shall say to them: ‘I am the LORD your God. [3]Not like the deeds of the land of Egypt in which you dwelled shall you do, and not like the deeds of the land of Canaan into which I am about to bring you shall you do, and according to their statutes you shall not walk. [4]My laws you shall do and My statutes you shall keep to walk by them. I am the LORD your God. [5]And you shall keep My statutes and My laws which a person shall do and live through them. I am the LORD. [6]No man of you shall come near any of his own flesh to lay bare nakedness. I am the LORD. [7]Your father’s nakedness, which is your mother’s nakedness, you shall not lay bare. She is your mother; you shall not lay bare her nakedness. [8]The nakedness of your father’s wife you shall not lay bare. It is your father’s nakedness. [9]The nakedness of your sister, your father’s daughter or your mother’s daughter, born in the household or born outside—you shall not lay bare her nakedness. [10]The nakedness of

your son's daughter or of your daughter's daughter—
you shall not lay bare her nakedness, for it is your
nakedness. [11]The nakedness of the daughter of your
father's wife, born in your father's household—she is
your sister; you shall not lay bare her nakedness. [12]The
nakedness of your father's sister you shall not lay bare.
It is your father's flesh. [13]The nakedness of your
mother's sister you shall not lay bare, for it is your
mother's flesh. [14]The nakedness of your father's brother
you shall not lay bare, and you shall not come near his
wife. She is your aunt. [15]Your daughter-in-law's
nakedness you shall not lay bare. She is your son's
wife; you shall not lay bare her nakedness. [16]The
nakedness of your brother's wife you shall not lay bare.
It is your brother's nakedness. [17]The nakedness of a
woman and her daughter you shall not lay bare. Her
son's daughter or her daughter's daughter you shall not
take to lay bare her nakedness. They are kin-flesh, it is
depravity. [18]And a woman with her sister you shall not
take to become rivals, to lay bare her nakedness while
her sister is still alive. [19]And you shall not come near a
woman in her menstrual uncleanness to lay bare her
nakedness. [20]And you shall not put your member into
your fellow man's wife to spill seed, to be defiled
through her. [21]And you shall not dedicate any of your
seed to pass over to Molech, and you shall not profane

the name of your God. I am the LORD. [22]And with a male you shall not lie as one lies with a woman. It is an abhorrence. [23]And you shall not put your member into any beast to be defiled through it. And a woman shall not present herself to a beast to couple with it. It is a perversion. [24]Do not be defiled through all of these, for through all of these were the nations that I am about to send away before you defiled. [25]And the land was defiled, and I made a reckoning with it for its iniquity, and the land spewed out its inhabitants. [26]And you on your part shall keep My statutes and My laws, and you shall not do any of these abhorrences, neither the native nor the sojourner who sojourns in your midst. [27]For all these abhorrences did the men of the land who were before you do, and the land was defiled. [28]And the land will not spew you out in your defiling it as it spewed out the nation that was before you. [29]For whosoever does any of these abhorrences, the person who does it shall be cut off from the midst of his people. [30]And you shall keep My watch not to do any of the abhorrent practices that were done before you, and you shall not be defiled through them. I am the LORD your God.'"

CHAPTER 18 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *I am the LORD your God*. As elsewhere in the Torah, this declaration at the beginning, or the end, of a set of legal injunctions echoes the set form for royal proclamations in the ancient Near East, and has the sense: "By the authority invested in me as your sovereign I hereby enjoin you."

3. *the deeds of the land of Egypt . . . the deeds of the land of Canaan*. Were such "deeds" (singular in the Hebrew) of incest and related forms of sexual license endemic in Egypt and Canaan, and not prevalent in Mesopotamia and Phoenicia, which go unmentioned here? Despite the presence of sister-brother marriages in the Egyptian royal house, and perhaps even beyond it, the association of both countries with unbridled sexuality surely cannot be grounded in historical observation. Egypt and Canaan are no doubt invoked because these are the two pagan countries in which Israel has collectively resided. Otherwise, the identification of both countries as theaters of sexual license may be attributed to a widespread reflex of projecting uncontrolled sexuality onto the cultural other (as Jews were sometimes thought of in Christian Europe, blacks in America). This reflex would have been reinforced by the tendency to see the polytheistic world as a realm lacking restraint, in contradistinction to the Israelite conception of one God and one clear-cut set of binding restrictions.

their statutes. *Ḥuqot*, as elsewhere, is translated as "statutes," its etymological primary sense ("things inscribed"), in order to maintain the counterpoint with God's statutes in the next verse. The meaning in context, however, by a kind of metonymic slide from law to action, is something like "habitual practice." When the same term occurs in the last verse of this chapter, the context requires rendering it as "practices."

6. *No man.* The male is singled out, one infers, because he is assumed to take the initiative in sexual acts. An exception here (verse 23) is the woman engaging in bestiality.

his own flesh. This phrase follows an idiomatic pattern of placing two synonyms together in construct state—here, *she'er* and *basar*, both of which mean "flesh"—in order to indicate emphasis or a superlative.

nakedness. The Hebrew noun *'erwah* transparently derives from a verbal root that means "to be naked," but all its uses suggest either vulnerability (as

in Joseph's words to his brothers, "To see the land's nakedness you have come," Genesis 42:9) or shamefulness. Some characterize the term as a euphemism for the genitalia, but if that is the case, it constitutes one of those instances in which the euphemism itself becomes a potent and fraught term. When Saul denounces Jonathan for disloyalty "to . . . the shame of your mother's nakedness" (1 Samuel 20:30), the term verges on an obscenity, as references to the mother's pudenda are used in Arabic and other languages.

7. *which is your mother's nakedness.* Although the Hebrew uses *waw* here (usually, "and"), it is in this case the equivalent of an explanatory subordinate clause, as the next sentence makes clear. A kind of contagion of nakedness is envisaged. Because the mother's nakedness has been in contact with the father's nakedness—and because in the patriarchal order her sexuality "belongs" to him—she is taboo.

8. *your father's wife.* Especially given the circumstances of polygamy, one's father's wife would not necessarily be one's mother.

10. *your son's daughter.* Presumably, a prohibition on intercourse with one's own daughter is also assumed, but no satisfactory explanation has been offered for why it is not explicitly stated.

18. *a woman with her sister.* As many interpreters have noted, this and several other prohibitions in the list are explicitly violated by figures in the national narrative of Israel: Jacob marries two sisters; Abraham claims that Sarah is his half sister; David's daughter Tamar appears to think it possible that her father can arrange a marriage between her and her half brother Amnon. Either these laws represent a Priestly "reform" in sexual practice, as Milgrom proposes, or certain once acceptable sexual unions had come through evolving social consensus to be regarded as taboo.

to become rivals. This is the technical term, grounded in realism, for the condition of co-wives in polygamy. In the clause "while her sister is still alive" the words "her sister" are added for clarity.

20. *to spill seed.* "Spill" is merely implied by the compact *lezara* ʿ, "for seed." The two defining elements for adultery, indicated here with legal precision, are penetration and ejaculation. The potential consequence, of course, is that

the woman could produce a child of dubious paternity—a particularly problematic condition in this patrilinear society.

21. *dedicate any of your seed to pass over to Molech.* Molech is a Canaanite deity whose name suggests "king." The authentic form of the name may have been Malik, revocalized by the Masoretes to make the word resemble *boshet*, "shame." The most likely reference of the whole phrase is to child sacrifice, which in fact was widely practiced in the Syro-Palestinian sphere, as vividly attested by the vast number of children's graves uncovered at the site of Carthage, the Phoenician colony in North Africa. The verb "pass over" would then be an ellipsis for "pass over through fire," used in other texts for this pagan practice. Some scholars, however, maintain that what was involved was a dedication ceremony in which the child was passed over the fire but not burned as a sacrifice. The metonymy "seed" for "child" links this law with the preceding ones and those that follow in which seed in the sense of semen is deposited in a forbidden place.

22. *with a male you shall not lie as one lies with a woman.* The explicitness of this law—the Hebrew for "as one lies" is the plural construct noun *mishkevei*, "bedding," used exclusively for sexual intercourse—suggests that it is a ban on anal intercourse and intercrural intercourse (the latter often practiced by the Greeks). Other forms of homosexual activity do not seem of urgent concern. The evident rationale for the prohibition is the wasting of seed in what the law appears to envisage as a kind of grotesque parody of heterosexual intercourse. (Lesbianism, which surely must have been known in the ancient Near East, is nowhere mentioned, perhaps because no wasting of seed is involved, although the reason for the omission remains unclear.) There is scant textual evidence to support the apologetic claim of some recent interpreters that the ban on homosexual congress is limited to the preceding list of incestuous unions. One may apply here the proposal of Mary Douglas that this is a culture that likes to keep lines of categorical distinction clear: no human-beast couplings are allowed (in contrast to the imaginative freedom on this topic of Greek myth), and any simulation of procreative heterosexual intercourse by the insertion of the male member in an orifice or fleshy crevice of another male is abhorrent.

23. *a woman shall not present herself to a beast.* The literal sense of the verb is "stand before" (which in other contexts can mean "to perform service"), but in fact she is crouching, with posterior toward the male beast, as the verb here for coupling, *r-b-ʿ*, indicates, since it is cognate (possibly via the Aramaic) with *r-b-ts*, the verb used for an animal's crouching. It is puzzling that no mention is made in the present context of acts of bestiality by males, though in chapter 21 this is defined as a capital offense.

27. *the men of the land.* Perhaps the Hebrew *ʾanshey* also includes women, as the taboo in verse 23 suggests, but it is surely meant to pick up the initial "No man of you" in verse 6.

29. *the person who does it.* The Hebrew actually switches from the initial singular "whosoever does" to a plural "the persons who do it," but the singular is used in the translation because of the requirement of consistency of English usage.

CHAPTER 19

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Speak to
all the community of Israelites, and you shall say to
them: ‘You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am
holy. [3]Every man shall revere his mother and his
father, and My sabbaths you shall keep. I am the
LORD your God. [4]Do not turn to the idols nor make
molten gods for yourselves. I am the LORD your God.
[5]And when you sacrifice communion sacrifices to the
LORD, you should sacrifice it so that it will be
acceptable for you. [6]On the day you sacrifice, it shall
be eaten and on the morrow, and what is left till the
third day shall be burned in fire. [7]And if in fact it is
eaten on the third day, it is desecrated meat, it shall
not be acceptable. [8]And he who eats it shall bear his
guilt, for he has profaned the LORD’s holiness, and
that person shall be cut off from his kin. [9]And when
you reap your land’s harvest, you shall not finish off
the edge of your field, nor pick up the gleanings of
your harvest. [10]And your vineyard you shall not pluck
bare, nor pick up the fallen fruit of your vineyard. For

the poor and for the sojourner you shall leave them. I
am the LORD your God. [11]You shall not steal. You
shall not dissemble and you shall not lie, no man to his
fellow. [12]You shall not swear falsely in My name,
profaning the name of your God. I am the LORD.
[13]You shall not defraud your fellow man and you shall
not rob. You shall not keep the hired man's wages with
you through the night till morning. [14]You shall not
vilify the deaf, and before the blind you shall not put a
stumbling block, and you shall fear your God. I am the
LORD. You shall do no wrong in justice. [15]You shall
not favor the wretched and you shall not defer to the
rich. In righteousness you shall judge your fellow.
[16]You shall not go about slandering your kin. You shall
not stand over the blood of your fellow man. I am the
LORD. [17]You shall not hate your brother in your heart.
You shall surely reprove your fellow and not bear guilt
because of him. [18]You shall not take vengeance, and
you shall not harbor a grudge against the members of
your people. And you shall love your fellow man as
yourself. I am the LORD. [19]My statutes you shall keep.
Your beasts you shall not mate with a different kind.
Your field you shall not sow with different kinds. And
a garment of different kinds of thread, *shaʿatnez*, shall
not be donned by you. [20]And should a man lie with a
woman with emission of seed when she is a slave

previously assigned to a man but has not been ransomed or given her freedom, there shall be an inquiry. They shall not be put to death for she has not been freed. [21]And he shall bring his guilt offering to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, a guilt-offering ram. [22]And the priest shall atone for him with the guilt-offering ram before the LORD for his offense that he committed, and it will be forgiven him for his offense that he committed. [23]And when you come to the land and plant any fruit-bearing tree, you shall leave its fruit uncircumcised. Three years it shall be uncircumcised to you. It shall not be eaten. [24]And in the fourth year all its fruit shall be sacred, a jubilation before the LORD. [25]And in the fifth year you may eat its fruit, that its yield may be increased for you. I am the LORD your God. [26]You shall not eat over the blood. You shall not divine nor interpret omens. [27]You shall not round off the edge-growth of your head nor ruin the edge of your beard. [28]No gash for the dead shall you make in your flesh, and no tattoo shall you make on yourselves. I am the LORD. [29]Do not profane your daughter to make a whore of her, lest the land play the whore and the land be filled with depravity. [30]My sabbath you shall keep and My sanctuary you shall revere. I am the LORD. [31]Do not turn to the ghosts, and of the familiar spirits do not inquire to be defiled

through them. I am the LORD. [32]Before a gray head
you shall rise, and you shall defer to an elder and fear
your God. I am the LORD. [33]And should a sojourner
sojourn with you, you shall not wrong him. [34]Like the
native among you shall be the sojourner who sojourns
with you, and you shall love him like yourself, for you
were sojourners in the land of Egypt. I am the LORD
your God. [35]You shall do no wrong in justice—in
measure, whether in weight or liquid measure.
[36]Honest scales, honest weights, an honest *ephah* and
an honest *hin* you shall have. I am the LORD your
God who brought you out of the land of Egypt. [37]And
you shall keep all My statutes and all My laws and do
them. I am the LORD.'"

CHAPTER 19 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *You shall be holy, for I . . . am holy*. Although the idea that the people of Israel is to make itself holy by emulating God's intrinsic holiness is not unique to this group of texts in Leviticus, its enunciation as the supreme rationale and didactic rallying point for God's commands is distinctive, and it is what has led scholars to designate the textual unit from chapter 17 through chapter 26 as the Holiness Code. When the sundry injunctions here conclude with the reiterated formula "I am the LORD," the implication is "I am the LORD your God Who is holy."

3. *Every man shall revere his mother and his father, and My sabbaths you shall keep.* It has been recognized since Late Antiquity that this section of laws, beginning with this verse, constitutes a kind of paraphrase and elaboration of the Ten Commandments, following a different order, using somewhat different turns of phrase, and introducing additional legal imperatives. Abraham ibn Ezra, as usual with an eye to compositional links, notes that the previous section was focused on prohibited sexual relations that could lead to the expulsion of people from its land. The variegated laws of the present chapter, he contends, came to remind Israel that there is a whole spectrum of commands which must be observed if it is to remain rooted in its land.

4. *idols.* The Hebrew *ʾelilim* refers not to the carved likenesses of divinities but to the nonentity of the pagan gods. Its most plausible derivation is from *ʾal*, "not," and hence would suggest falsity or lack of being, but the term probably also puns on *ʾel*, "god," using a diminutive and pejorative form that could mean something like "godlet."

5. *when you sacrifice.* It is characteristic of the sacerdotal milieu that produced this paraphrase of the Decalogue that a sacrificial law is intertwined with the fundamental moral and theological imperatives. The LORD's holiness is profaned no less by eating sacrificial meat on the third day than by dishonoring one's parents or turning one's daughter into a whore.

sacrifice it. The Hebrew thus switches to a distributive "it" after the plural "sacrifices."

9. *you shall not finish off the edge of your field, nor pick up the gleanings of your harvest.* In an agricultural economy without coined money (weights of silver and gold could be used for exchange), the stipulation that an edge of the field be left unharvested and that what was dropped by the reapers should not be picked up amounted to a kind of poor tax. The indigent could follow the harvesters into the fields and pick up enough to sustain themselves, as we see dramatically in the Book of Ruth when the widowed Ruth, a newly arrived resident alien, goes out into Boaz's fields.

10. *sojourner.* As elsewhere, the Hebrew term refers to a resident alien, who in this tribal agrarian society would have been without real property.

12. *You shall not swear falsely in My name, profaning the name of your God.* The main clause is a citation of the Decalogue. "Profaning the name of your God" adds a Holiness Code rationale—to swear falsely is to compromise God's own reputation of holiness through the malfeasance of the people purported to be God's special treasure.

13. *You shall not keep the hired man's wages with you through the night.* The presumption is that the hired man is without reserves. Holding back his wages not only subjects him to a night of anxiety as to whether he will be paid but could impose actual hardship, for he may need the wages for his evening meal.

14. *vilify the deaf, and before the blind . . . a stumbling block*. There is both a common denominator and a logical discrepancy (the rhetorical figure of zeugma) between these two prohibitions. In both instances, the sensory impairment of the victim prevents him from perceiving that someone is exploiting his weakness in a nasty way. But abusing or verbally insulting a deaf man gratuitously humiliates him in a fashion that he himself, unhearing, may never become aware of, whereas placing a stumbling block before a blind man causes him hurt of which he will immediately become aware. A long exegetical tradition sees both these cases as figurative instances of a more general category of moral turpitude: placing a bottle of whiskey, for example, in front of a recovering alcoholic would fall under the rubric of putting a stumbling block before the blind.

15. *You shall not favor the wretched and you shall not defer to the rich.* Both Hebrew verbs involve idioms that make "face" the object of the verb—literally "lift up the face," "glorify/honor the face." The term for "rich" more generally means "great," but in economic contexts (here as an antonym to "wretched" or "indigent") it regularly has the meaning of "wealthy."

16. *You shall not go about slandering . . . You shall not stand over the blood*. Jacob Milgrom neatly observes that the verbs are pointedly sequenced from going about to standing (and presumably doing nothing), both with the effect of complicity in doing harm. Although there is some dispute among interpreters about the meaning of "stand over the blood," there is a degree of consensus among traditional commentators, supported by the bracketing of

the two sentences in this verse, that it means to stand by without intervening while your fellow man's blood—literally or figuratively—is spilled.

17. *You shall surely reprove your fellow.* The obligation to reprove someone you see engaged in a wrongful act may be linked psychologically with the immediately preceding injunction not to hate your brother in your heart: witnessing immoral behavior without attempting to intervene, the observer may feel resentment or contempt toward the perpetrator who in fact might conceivably have been dissuaded from the act by reproof.

19. *shaʿatnez.* This is evidently a loanword, and the etymology is uncertain. The way it is used here suggests it might have required some explanation for ordinary Hebrew speakers of the time of writing, and in Deuteronomy 22:11 (its only other biblical occurrence) it is explicitly glossed as a fabric made of interwoven threads of linen and wool (see the comment there). All the prohibitions in this verse appear to reflect that general Israelite aversion to the mingling of distinct categories on which Mary Douglas has written. It should be noted that, as with some other prohibitions, what is forbidden for profane use is permitted for cultic use—the high priest's robe and the covering of the Ark were linsey-woolsey.

not be donned by you. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "not go up on you."

20. *put to death.* A betrothed woman having sex with another man would be subject like her lover to capital punishment. A female slave, not being a free agent, would not receive the death penalty, and evidently this crime, too, is considered less grave. After an inquiry, a monetary penalty will be set to be paid to the man who betrothed her.

23. *you shall leave its fruit uncircumcised.* This analogy of fruit to foreskin, a little startling to the modern ear, includes both the idea of leaving a natural growth uncut and the notion, readily understandable in a society in which all male infants were circumcised, of something prohibited. These three verses reflect prudent arboricultural practice rather than any ethical imperative. Milgrom, who has consulted horticulturalists, reports that during the first three years a tree is generally not thinned or pruned or harvested but that the closed buds (from which the image of the foreskin would derive) are plucked before fruit emerges.

24. *sacred, a jubilation before the* LORD. What is envisaged is a festival of first fruit, to be offered in the sanctuary to God. Behind the term "jubilation," some scholars have conjectured, may lie an old practice of festive celebrations at harvesttime, perhaps involving matchmaking or even orgies, in the vineyards.

26. *You shall not eat over the blood.* The meaning of this sentence, represented quite literally in this translation, has been disputed, but the most plausible explanation is the one proposed by the medieval Hebrew exegete Nahmanides and by Rashbam before him: what is involved is a pagan rite of divination—this would be the link with the second half of the verse—in which a ritual meal was consumed over a pit or large receptacle containing blood, perhaps with the idea that spirits of the dead could be conjured up from the blood.

27. *round off the edge-growth of your head.* The word for "edge-growth," *peʾah*, is the same one used in verse 9 for the edge of the field, which is also not to be cut. This is an instance of what Mary Douglas characterizes as analogical thinking. This sort of bowl-shaped haircut does not appear to be the same thing as shaving the head, but it should be noted that shaving the head, tearing or mutilating the beard, and gashing one's body are all pagan mourning practices.

28. *for the dead.* The polyvalent Hebrew noun *nefesh* often means "person," but in some contexts it refers to a dead person or corpse, and the implication of mourning here points to that meaning.

32. *defer to an elder.* The idiom used is exactly the one that appears in verse 15 in the prohibition against deferring to the rich. Context is everything: in court proceedings, no special consideration can be given to anyone, regardless of status; in everyday interactions, an old person deserves deference. (Israeli buses used to carry a sign with the words "Before a gray head you shall rise" as a reminder that passengers should give up their seats to the elderly.)

35. *in measure, whether in weight or liquid measure.* The literal sequence of the Hebrew is: "in measure, in weight, in liquid measure." Though some contend that the first word, *midah*, refers to measures of length and breadth, it

is a general term introducing the category of measurement, which is then followed by different kinds of measure (hence “whether . . . or”).

CHAPTER 20

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“And to the
Israelites you shall say: ‘Every man of the Israelites
and of the sojourners who sojourn in Israel who gives
of his seed to Molech is doomed to die. The people of
the land shall stone him. [3]And as for Me, I shall set My
face against that man and cut him off from the midst
of his people, for he has given of his seed to Molech
so as to defile My sanctuary and to profane My sacred
name. [4]And if the people of the land actually avert
their eyes from that man when he gives of his seed to
Molech, not putting him to death, [5]I Myself shall turn
My face against that man and his clan, and I shall cut
him off and all who go whoring after him to whore
after Molech, from the midst of their people. [6]And the
person who turns to the ghosts and to the familiar
spirits to go whoring after them, I shall set My face
against that person and cut him off from the midst of
his people. [7]And you shall sanctify yourselves and
become holy, for I am the LORD your God. [8]And you
shall keep My statutes and do them. I am the LORD

Who makes you holy. [9]For every man who vilifies his
father and his mother is doomed to die. He has vilified
his father and his mother—his bloodguilt is upon him.
[10]And a man who commits adultery with a married
woman, who commits adultery with his fellow man's
wife, the adulterer and the adulteress are doomed to
die. [11]And a man who lies with his father's wife, his
father's nakedness he has laid bare. The two of them
are doomed to die. Their bloodguilt is upon them.
[12]And a man who lies with his daughter-in-law, the two
of them are doomed to die. They have done a
perversion. Their bloodguilt is on them. [13]And a man
who lies with a male as one lies with a woman, the two
of them have done an abhorrent thing. They are
doomed to die. Their bloodguilt is upon them. [14]And a
man who takes a woman and her mother, it is
depravity. In fire shall he and they be burned, so that
there be no depravity in your midst. [15]And a man who
puts his member into a beast is doomed to die, and the
beast you shall kill. [16]And a woman who approaches
any beast to couple with it, you shall kill the woman
and the beast. They are doomed to die. Their
bloodguilt is on them. [17]And a man who takes his
sister, his father's daughter or his mother's daughter,
and sees her nakedness and she sees his nakedness, it
is vileness, and they shall be cut off before the eyes of

their kinfolk. His sister's nakedness he has laid bare.
He shall bear his punishment. [18]And a man who lies
with a woman while she is unwell and lays bare her
nakedness, he has exposed her flow and she has laid
bare the flow of her blood, and the two of them shall
be cut off from the midst of their people. [19]And the
nakedness of your mother's sister or your father's sister
you shall not lay bare, for his own flesh he has
exposed. Their punishment they shall bear. [20]And the
man who lies with his aunt, his uncle's nakedness he
has laid bare. Their guilt they shall bear, barren they
shall die. [21]And the man who takes his brother's wife,
it is a repulsive thing. His brother's nakedness he has
laid bare. Barren they shall die. [22]And you shall keep
all My statutes and all My laws and do them, lest the
land to which I bring you to dwell there spew you out.
[23]And you shall not go by the statutes of the nation
which I am about to send away before you, for all
these things they have done, and I loathed them. [24]And
I said to you, it is you who will take hold of their soil,
and as for Me, I shall give it to you to take hold of it, a
land flowing with milk and honey. I am the LORD
your God Who set you apart from all the peoples.
[25]And you shall set apart the clean from the unclean
beast, and the unclean bird from the clean, and you
shall not make yourselves despicable through beast and

bird and all that crawls on the ground, which I set apart for you as unclean. [26]And you shall be holy to Me, for I the LORD am holy. [27]And any man or woman who has a ghost or a familiar spirit is doomed to die. They shall be stoned, their bloodguilt is upon them.'"

CHAPTER 20 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Every man of the Israelites . . . who gives of his seed to Molech*. The list of prohibited acts that begins here mirrors the one that takes up chapter 18. That chapter and the present one are two panels separated by the paraphrase of the Decalogue in chapter 19. What is couched in chapter 18 as a series of imperatives is recast here in the language of case law ("casuistically"), with the punishment for each offense now stipulated. That addition gives a focusing or quasinarrative development to the relationship between the parallel lists of laws.

3. *I shall set My face.* The literal sense of the verb is "give," thus making it a measure-for-measure response to "gives of his seed to Molech."

so as to defile My sanctuary. Once more, we see the preoccupation of all the segments of Leviticus with preserving the sacred integrity of the sanctuary. A heinous act, such as child sacrifice, is not only intrinsically abhorrent, but also conveys pollution to the sanctuary of YHWH.

8. *I am the LORD Who makes you holy.* This refrainlike line, which is the ultimate rationale for all the prohibited acts with their stipulated punishments, is the thematic center of the chapter.

9. *who vilifies his father and his mother.* The verb *qalel*, "to treat with disrespect," "to vilify," or "to insult" (literally "to make light of"), is the

antonym of "*honor* [literally, make heavy] your father and your mother" in the Decalogue.

10. *a married woman.* The Hebrew says literally "a man's woman [or wife]."
the adulteress. Abraham ibn Ezra shrewdly observes of the Hebrew term *hano'efet*, which is an active verbal form, that had she been constrained by the man to submit to the sexual act, she would not have been so designated.

11. *The two of them are doomed to die.* As with the preceding law, the assumption is that the woman is a willing participant.

13. *as one lies with a woman.* This locution, literally "the lying with a woman" (as in 18:22, and see the comment there), plausibly leads the Talmud in Sanhedrin to characterize the act as "putting a brush into a tube"—that is, the particular homosexual act of anal penetration.

14. *takes.* The use of this verb here and several times in subsequent verses is an ellipsis for "takes as a wife," but its choice of the term may be dictated by the way it stresses the male's taking the initiative.

15. *the beast you shall kill.* Commentators have wrestled with the reason for executing the animal. As Rashi says, "If the person committed a wrong, what wrong has the beast done?" The most plausible explanation is that the beast, even without its volition, has been associated with a disgusting act and so must be destroyed as a contaminated thing.

17. *and she sees his nakedness.* Ibn Ezra is surely right that this unusual addition is to emphasize her full complicity in the act of incest.

18. *he has exposed her flow.* The Hebrew noun *maqor* generally means "source," this being an instance of the common linguistic pattern in which there is an exchange between cause (the source) and effect (the flow). It is reductive to claim, as do Jacob Milgrom and others, that "source" is simply a euphemism for the female genitalia. The point is that the menses are conceived not merely as a contaminant but as some ultimate, intimate female mystery which the woman has to keep secret—hence the condemnation, "for she has laid bare her source/flow."

21. *a repulsive thing.* The Hebrew *nidah* is the term elsewhere used for menstruation. One infers that here it is intended metaphorically.

24. *it is you.* The use of the plural pronoun *ʾatem* before the conjugated verb conveys this sense of emphasis.

24–25. *set you apart . . . you shall set apart.* There is a clear system of what one might well describe as cosmic analogies functioning here. Holiness depends upon distinction, upon being set apart and setting things apart. Israel has been set apart by God to be holy, to be different from other nations. Israel in its turn is enjoined to realize its distinctive character by relinquishing the indiscriminate consumption of all living things and setting apart the unclean from the clean.

25. *you shall not make yourselves despicable.* Milgrom chooses to render this as "you shall not defile your throats." This is a distinctly possible interpretation, if not entirely compelling. The Hebrew *nefesh* means "life-breath," and then synecdochically "person," but also metonymically "throat" (the passage through which the breath is conducted). In the present context, however, which stresses the imperative for Israel to preserve its holiness as a people set apart, the defiling of the whole person rather than the throat seems more likely as the intended meaning.

CHAPTER 21

[1]And the LORD said to Moses, “Say to the priests, the
sons of Aaron, and say to them, ‘For no dead person
among his kin shall he be defiled, except for his own
flesh that is close to him, [2]for his mother and for his
father and for his son and for his daughter and for his
brother, [3]and for his virgin sister who is close to him,
as she has not become a man’s, for her he may be
defiled. [4]He shall not be defiled among his kin to
profane himself. [5]They shall not make a baldness on
their head, and the edge of their beard they shall not
shave, and in their flesh they shall cut no gash. [6]They
shall be holy to their God, and they shall not profane
the name of their God, for the fire offerings of the
LORD, their God’s bread, do they bring forward, and
they shall be holy. [7]A woman degraded as a whore they
shall not take as wife, and a woman divorced from her
husband they shall not take as wife, for he is holy to
his God, [8]and you shall deem him holy, for he brings
forward God’s bread. He shall be holy for you, for I
the LORD Who hallows you am holy. [9]And should a

priest's daughter degrade herself in whoring, she has degraded her father, in fire she shall be burned. [10]And the priest exalted over his brothers, on whose head the anointing oil has been poured and who has been installed to wear the garments, shall not dishevel his hair nor rip his garments. [11]And near any dead person he shall not come in, for his father or for his mother he shall not be defiled. [12]And from the sanctuary he shall not go out, and he shall not profane the sanctuary of his God, for the mark of his God's anointing oil is upon him. I am the LORD. [13]And as for him, he must take as wife a woman in her virginity. [14]A widow or a divorced woman or a degraded whore, these he shall not take as wife, but a virgin from his kin he shall take as wife. [15]And he shall not profane his seed among his kin, for I am the LORD Who hallows him.'"

[16]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [17]"Speak to Aaron, saying, 'No man of your seed to their generations in whom there is a defect shall come forward to offer his God's bread. [18]For no man in whom there is a defect shall come forward, no blind man nor lame nor disfigured nor malformed, [19]nor a man who has a broken leg or a broken arm, [20]nor a hunchback nor a midget nor one with a cataract in his

eye nor scab nor skin flake nor crushed testicle. [21]No man from the seed of Aaron the priest in whom there is a defect shall draw near to bring forward the fire offerings of the LORD. There is a defect in him. He shall not draw near to bring forward his God's bread. [22]From the holy of holies and from the holy, he may eat his God's bread. [23]But he shall not come in by the curtain nor shall he draw near to the altar, for there is a defect in him, and he shall not profane My sanctuaries, for I am the LORD Who hallows you.'" [24]And Moses spoke to Aaron and to his sons and to all the Israelites.

CHAPTER 21 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *dead person*. The Hebrew *nefesh*, "person," is an abundantly attested ellipsis for *nefesh met*, "dead person," and the full phrase in fact is used in verse 11.

defiled. It is possible, as many scholars have proposed, that the notion of corpses as a source of defilement is linked with a polemic against the cult of the dead evidently widespread in Canaan among both Canaanites and Israelites. But given the repeated affirmation through ritual in Leviticus of life against death, it is quite possible that dead bodies were thought of as intrinsically contaminating, even without reference to a cult of the dead.

3. *as she has not become a man's.* Once she is in the jurisdiction of her husband, it is his obligation in the case of her decease to see to her burial.

4. *He shall not be defiled among his kin.* The two Hebrew words *baʿal beʿamaw* are a well-known crux. Literally, they mean "a master/husband among his kin." The various attempts to make this intelligible are strained, and it has been pointed out by several scholars that elsewhere *baʿal* is always used either as part of a collocation (Hebrew *smikhut*) or in a declined form. This translation adopts Meir Paran's plausible proposal that the received text reflects a dittography, the initial *bet* and *ayin* of *beʿamaw* inadvertently repeated by a scribe and then a *lamed* added in order to turn the two letters into a known word.

5. *baldness . . . the edge of their beard . . . shave . . . gash*. All these acts are pagan rites of mourning that must be avoided. There are other pagan gestures of mourning (as attested, for example, in Ugaritic texts) that are permitted to the Israelites, such as putting ashes on the head and donning sackcloth. Presumably, the acts stipulated here are prohibited because they entail disfiguring some part of the body.

6. *God's bread.* As elsewhere, *leḥem* is a synecdoche for "food."

7. *A woman degraded as a whore.* This translation follows the proposal of many modern scholars that *zonah waḥalalah* (literally, "whore and degraded one") is a hendiadys used to convey the idea of the intrinsically degraded condition of the whore. Milgrom's proposal that *ḥalalah* means "raped woman" rests on rather flimsy philological evidence. Note that in verse 9 these same two roots are put together, this time as a verb and an infinitive, *taḥel liznot*, "degrade herself in whoring," strongly suggesting that they are a fixed collocation rather than designating two different possibilities.

for he is holy. The Hebrew, like this translation, slips from the plural for all priests to the singular for the individual priest.

8. *holy . . . hallows . . . holy*. The verbal motif central to the Holiness Code is here redoubled as the text concentrates on the priests, the very heart of the holiness that is to extend to the entire people.

10. *exalted over his brothers.* More literally, "greater than his brothers."

the garments. Though the Hebrew uses a general term for garments, the obvious reference is the priestly vestments worn in the cult.

dishevel his hair nor rip his garments. Gestures of mourning permitted to those who are not the high priest. The verb chosen for "rip," *param*, neatly alliterates with *para ʿ*, "dishevel."

11. *he shall not come in.* The contamination of the corpse would be conveyed to him if he were to enter any enclosed space in which the corpse was laid out.

for his father or for his mother he shall not be defiled. The syntactic positioning of the two nouns at the beginning of the clause suggests: not even for his father or for his mother.

12. *mark.* The Hebrew *nezer* can also mean "diadem," but its etymology indicates "to be distinct, set apart," and the anointing oil is the priestly mark of distinction.

14. *virgin.* On the basis of both the immediate context and usages elsewhere, one must categorically reject Milgrom's claim that *betulah* simply means "young woman" and does not imply virginity. The priest has to marry a virgin to ensure the purity of the priestly line.

18. *no man in whom there is a defect.* The underlying notion, however objectionable to modern sensibilities, is one shared by many ancient religions: just as the animal offered in sacrifice must be unblemished, the officiant offering the sacrifice must be without physical blemish.

disfigured nor malformed. The two Hebrew terms, *ḥarum* and *saruʿa,* have long been the objects of philological speculation. Their exact meaning remains in doubt, though it is clear that they refer to some sort of physical deformity.

19. *a broken leg or a broken arm.* As Baruch Levine notes, given the limitations of ancient medicine, broken bones would usually have resulted in a permanent deformity.

22. *he may eat his God's bread.* The physical deformity does not disqualify the man from his priestly perquisite of a share in the sacrifices. Otherwise, he would have no source of sustenance. But he is not permitted (verse 23) to approach the altar ("come in") to offer the sacrifice.

24. *And Moses spoke.* For editorial reasons that remain obscure to us, this chapter concludes atypically, with a report of Moses speaking that is not followed by a speech and thus appears to refer retrospectively to the speech just delivered.

CHAPTER 22

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Speak to Aaron and to his sons, that they keep apart from the sacred donations of the Israelites—lest they profane My holy name—which they consecrate to Me. I am the LORD. [3]Say to them: ‘To your generations, any man of all your seed who draws near the sacred donations that the Israelites consecrate to the LORD with his uncleanness upon him, that person shall be cut off from before Me. I am the LORD. [4]Any man whosoever from the seed of Aaron when he is smitten with skin blanch or discharge from his member shall not eat of the sacred donations until he becomes clean, nor he who touches anything unclean through a dead person nor a man who has had an emission of seed, [5]nor a man who has touched any swarming thing by which one becomes unclean or a human being by which one becomes unclean with any uncleanness. [6]A person who touches these shall be unclean till evening and shall not eat of the sacred donations until he bathes his body in water, [7]and the sun sets and he

becomes clean, and after he may eat of the sacred donations, for it is his bread. [8]A beast that has died or one torn by predators he shall not eat to be defiled by it. I am the LORD. [9]And they shall keep My watch and not bear offense for it and die through it when they profane it. I am the LORD Who hallows them. [10]And no outsider shall eat a sacred donation. A priest's resident hireling shall not eat the sacred donation. [11]And should a priest buy a person as the purchase of his silver, that person may eat of it, and he who is born in his household—they may eat of his bread. [12]And should a priest's daughter be married to an outsider, she shall not eat of the levy of the sacred donations. [13]And should a priest's daughter become a widow or divorced, having no seed and she come back to her father's house as in her youth, of her father's bread she may eat, but no outsider shall eat of it. [14]And should a man eat the sacred donation in errance, he shall add a fifth of its value to it and give the sacred donation to the priest. [15]And they shall not profane the sacred donations of the Israelites that they set aside for the LORD, [16]causing them to bear the punishment of the guilt for having eaten of their sacred donations, for I am the LORD Who hallows them.'"

[17]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [18]“Speak to
Aaron and to his sons and to the Israelites, and you
shall say to them: ‘Every man of the house of Israel
and of the sojourner in Israel who brings forward his
offering, for any of their votive offerings or their
freewill offerings that they bring forward to the LORD
as burnt offerings, [19]to be acceptable for you, it shall be
an unblemished male from the cattle, the sheep, or the
goats. [20]Whatever has a defect you shall not bring
forward, for it will not be acceptable for you. [21]And
should a man bring forward a communion sacrifice to
the LORD to set aside as a votive offering or freewill
offering from the cattle or from the flock, it shall be
unblemished to be acceptable, no defect shall there be
in it. [22]Anything blind or broken or lacerated or with a
wen or scab or skin flake, these you shall not bring
forward to the LORD, and no fire offering from them
shall you put on the altar to the LORD. [23]And a bull or
sheep with a stretched or crimped limb you may make
a freewill offering but it shall not be acceptable as a
votive offering. [24]And anything with crushed or
smashed or torn-off or cut-off testes you shall not
bring forward to the LORD, and in your land you shall
not do it. [25]And from the hand of a foreigner you shall
not bring forward your God’s bread from any of these.

Their deformity is in them, a defect is in them. They shall not be acceptable for you.'"

[26]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [27]"When a bull or a goat is born, it shall be seven days under its mother, and from the eighth day onward it is acceptable as a fire offering to the LORD. [28]And a bull or sheep, you shall not sacrifice it with its young on the same day. [29]And when you sacrifice a thanksgiving sacrifice to the LORD, you shall sacrifice it so as to be acceptable for you. [30]On that day it shall be eaten, you shall leave nothing of it till morning. I am the LORD. [31]And you shall keep My commands and do them. I am the LORD. [32]And you shall not profane My holy name, and I shall be hallowed in the midst of the Israelites. I am the LORD Who hallows you, [33]bringing you out of the land of Egypt to be God for you. I am the LORD."

CHAPTER 22 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *that they keep apart*. The syntactical interpolation of the clause after this one makes the sentence slightly unclear, but the evident motive is to effect a strong thematic juxtaposition of the antonyms, *qodashim*, "sacred donations," and *yeḥalelu*, "profane," with the verb's direct object, *shem qodshi*, "My holy name," reinforcing the link between divine sacredness and the sacred donations. It may at first seem puzzling that the priests should be enjoined to

keep apart from the sacred donations of sacrificial animals that were, after all, their sustenance, but the next verse makes clear that this warning to the priests obtains in cases when they are in a state of ritual impurity (and so Rashi observes).

3. *who draws near.* As Jacob Milgrom repeatedly notes, this all-purpose verb in contexts of ritual prohibition means "to encroach," though when the ritual act is permitted, it means, more neutrally, "to enter into the sacred zone."

shall be cut off from before Me. The more common locution in Leviticus is "cut off from his kin." This variation may suggest divestment from priestly privileges, being cut off from the sacerdotal line.

5. *a human being.* This noun is the object of the double-duty verb "touched."

7. *for it is his bread.* As often elsewhere, "bread" is a synecdoche for food. In fact, the typical sacred donation would have been meat.

9. *bear offense for it and die through it.* Both of the pronouns here are masculine, though the only adjacent noun that might be a candidate for an antecedent, "watch," is feminine. Various efforts to rescue grammatical consistency—e.g., that the antecedent is an elided *shem qodshi*, "My holy name"—seem strained. It is more likely that the requirements of gender consistency of modern Western languages did not altogether obtain for biblical grammar and that it seemed natural to use a masculine form for impersonal constructions such as "bear offense for it" regardless of the antecedents.

10. *A priest's resident hireling.* Avraham Melamed, followed by Jacob Milgrom, argues persuasively that the phrase *toshav kohen wesakhir*—literally, "priest's resident and hireling"—is a hendiadys, like the use of *toshav* in other combinations, and does not refer to two entities.

15. *And they shall not profane.* As the end of this sentence, in the next verse, makes clear, "they" refers to the priests, who would profane the sacred donations by allowing unfit laypersons to incur guilt by eating them (thus Rashi). This whole clause mirrors the language of the opening verse, thus forming an envelope structure to bring this entire unit of the chapter to a close.

19. *to be acceptable for you.* Literally, “for your favor”—i.e., for your finding favor, being acceptable, in the eyes of God.

20. *Whatever has a defect you shall not bring forward.* As many commentators have noted, the list of deformities for the animals unfit for the cult parallels the list of deformities for priests unfit for the cult in the previous chapter. The terms used, however, are different.

22. *Anything blind.* The Hebrew uses the term for the disease, “blindness,” but then switches to the male singular beast bearing the defect, “broken” (presumably, brokenlimbed), and “lacerated,” and then to symptoms of disease (“wen,” “scab,” “skin flake”). Category consistency does not appear to have been a requirement of ancient Hebrew idiomatic usage.

24. *crushed or smashed or torn-off or cut-off.* The list appears to be arranged in ascending order of the severity of mutilation.

and in your land you shall not do it. This sounds like a general ban on gelding, which, however, would have had a necessary role in animal husbandry. One may tentatively adopt Milgrom’s proposal that the reference is to regional sanctuaries beyond the principal one, since Leviticus does not assume that there is one exclusive sanctuary. “Do it,” then, would mean “perform the sacrifice.”

25. *from the hand of a foreigner you shall not bring forward . . . from any of these*. This warning is intended to preclude the notion that a maimed animal is permitted for sacrifice in cases where the maiming has not been done by an Israelite but by a foreigner from whom the animal is purchased.

27. *it shall be seven days under its mother.* A humanitarian rationale for this law is unconvincing because, after all, on the eighth day the suckling animal can be slaughtered and offered up on the altar. It is more likely that the newborn beast was not regarded as a viable living creature, and hence fit for sacrifice, until it had attained its eighth day of life (the day designated for the circumcision of Israelite males). This correspondence of eight days between man and beast may be another instance of analogical thinking.

CHAPTER 23

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Speak to
the Israelites, and you shall say to them: ‘These are the
fixed times of the LORD which you shall call sacred
convocations. These are My fixed times. [3]Six days shall
tasks be done, and on the seventh day, an absolute
sabbath, a sacred convocation. No task shall you do. It
is a sabbath for the LORD in all your dwelling places.
[4]These are the fixed times of the LORD, sacred
convocations which you shall call in their fixed time.
[5]In the first month on the fourteenth of the month at
twilight a Passover offering to the LORD. [6]And on the
fifteenth day of this month, a Festival of Flatbread to
the LORD. Seven days you shall eat flatbread. [7]On the
first day a sacred convocation you shall have. No task
of work shall you do. [8]And you shall bring forward a
fire offering to the LORD seven days. On the seventh
day a sacred convocation, no task of work shall you
do.’”

[9]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [10]“Speak to
the Israelites, and you shall say to them: ‘When you
come into the land that I am about to give you and you
reap its harvest, you shall bring a sheaf, first of your
harvest, to the priest. [11]And he shall elevate the sheaf
before the LORD to be acceptable for you, from the
morrow of the sabbath the priest shall elevate it. [12]And
on the day you elevate the sheaf you shall do an
unblemished yearling lamb as a burnt offering to the
LORD, [13]and its grain offering, two-tenths of an *ephah*
of semolina mixed with oil, a fire offering to the
LORD, a fragrant odor, and its wine libation, a quarter
of a *hin*. [14]And bread and roast grain and fresh ears
you shall not eat until this very day, until you bring
your God’s offering, an everlasting statute for your
generations in all your dwelling places. [15]And you shall
count you from the morrow of the sabbath, from the
day you bring the elevation sheaf, seven whole weeks
shall they be. [16]Until the morrow of the seventh
sabbath you shall count fifty days, and you shall bring
forward a new grain offering to the LORD. [17]From
your dwelling places you shall bring two loaves of
elevation bread, two-tenths of an *ephah* of semolina
they shall be, leavened they shall be baked, first fruits
to the LORD. [18]And you shall bring forward with the
bread seven unblemished yearling lambs and one bull

from the herd and two rams. They shall be a burnt offering to the LORD and their grain offering and their libations, a fire offering, a fragrant odor to the LORD.
19And you shall do one he-goat as an offense offering and two yearling lambs as a communion sacrifice.
20And the priest shall elevate them with the bread of first fruits as an elevation before the LORD with the two lambs. They shall be holy for the LORD, for the priest. 21And on this very day you shall call a sacred convocation—it will be for you—no task of work shall you do, an everlasting statute in all your dwelling places for your generations. 22And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not finish off the edge of your field in your reaping, nor gather the gleanings of your harvest. For the poor and for the sojourner you shall leave them. I am the LORD your God.'"

23And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 24"Speak to the Israelites, saying: 'In the seventh month on the first of the month you shall have a sabbath, a commemoration with horn blast, a sacred convocation.
25No task of work shall you do, and you shall bring forward a fire offering to the LORD.'" 26And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 27"Yet on the tenth of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement, a sacred

convocation it shall be for you, and you shall afflict yourselves and bring forward a fire offering to the LORD. [28]And no task shall you do on this very day, for it is a day of atonement to atone for you before the LORD your God. [29]For every person who is not afflicted on this very day shall be cut off from his kin. [30]And any person who does any task on this very day —I shall make that person perish from the midst of his people. [31]No task shall you do, an everlasting statute for your generations in all your dwelling places. [32]An absolute sabbath it is for you, and you shall afflict yourselves on the ninth of the month in the evening, from evening to evening you shall keep your sabbath.'"

[33]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [34]"Speak to the Israelites saying: 'On the fifteenth day of this seventh month, a festival of huts, seven days, to the LORD. [35]On the first day, a sacred convocation, no task of work shall you do. [36]Seven days you shall bring forward a fire offering to the LORD. On the eighth day you shall have a sacred convocation and bring forward a fire offering to the LORD; it is a solemn gathering. No task of work shall you do. [37]These are the fixed times of the LORD which you shall call sacred convocations to bring forward a fire offering to the

LORD, burnt offering and grain offering, sacrifice and libation, each thing on its day, [38]besides the LORD's sabbaths and besides your gifts and besides all your votive offerings and besides all your freewill offerings that you give to the LORD. [39]Yet on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you gather in the yield of the land, you shall celebrate the LORD's festival seven days—on the first day a sabbath and on the eighth day a sabbath. [40]And you shall take you on the first day the fruit of a stately tree, fronds of palm trees, and a branch of a leafy tree and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days. [41]And you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD seven days in the year, an everlasting statute for your generations. In the seventh month you shall celebrate it. [42]In huts you shall dwell seven days. All natives in Israel shall dwell in huts, [43]so that your generations will know that I made the Israelites dwell in huts when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.'" [44]And Moses spoke the fixed times of the LORD to the Israelites.

CHAPTER 23 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *Six days shall tasks be done.* It is somewhat surprising, as commentaries from the Middle Ages onward have reflected, that after announcing a calendar of the sundry annual festivals (*moʿadim*, "fixed times"), the text proceeds to spell out the weekly obligation of the sabbath day. Rashi tries to reconcile the contradiction by proposing that the mention of the sabbath is to indicate that violation of the sabbath and violation of the festivals are equivalent in seriousness; but the consensus of modern scholarship is that these verses on the sabbath were added, perhaps out of later historical considerations, such as the impossibility of observing the pilgrim festivals in the Babylonian exile. This addition would have been facilitated by a certain ambiguity in the word *shabbat* (literally, "cessation"), which can apply, as it does elsewhere in this chapter, not only to the weekly day of rest but to a festival, when most everyday tasks are also prohibited.

an absolute sabbath. The Hebrew uses a doubled construct form that generally indicates a superlative, *shabbat shabbaton*.

4. *sacred convocations which you shall call.* In this recurring phrase, the verb, *tiqreʾu*, and its object, *miqraʾey qodesh*, are cognates, something that the translation intimates at least etymologically because "convocation" is derived from a Latin term for calling. "Call" in this context obviously means to "proclaim," "convene," "invite."

5. *the first month.* As elsewhere, the calendar begins with the spring month that Exodus calls Abib and that will later be called Nissan. The present list does not use names for the month, simply referring to them by ordinal numbers.

5–6. *Passover offering . . . a Festival of Flatbread*. The paschal offering (traditionally in English, "Passover offering") is stipulated for the first evening and the flatbread for the seven days of the festival. On the historical relation between the two aspects of observance, see the comment on Exodus 12:17.

6. *a Festival.* The Hebrew *ḥag* is a term reserved in biblical usage for pilgrim festivals (evidently derived from a verb that means to "circle round" or "wend one's way"), when the population of the countryside was enjoined to come to the sanctuary.

10. *sheaf.* The early rabbis understood the term *ʿomer* not as a reference to a bundle of grain (in this case of a late spring harvest, probably barley) but as a unit of dry measure.

11. *from the morrow of the sabbath.* This innocent-looking phrase is fraught with ambiguity that generated historical schism. The early rabbis understood "sabbath" to refer to the first day of the Passover celebration (see the comment on verse 3), and this has been the normative system in Judaism ever since for counting forward to the Festival of Weeks, Shavuoth. The Karaites, among others, understood *shabbat* here as a reference to the sabbath day, although the question was raised whether this applied to the sabbath occurring in the week of the Passover festival or to the first sabbath after that week. (As a rule, issues of calendar were often defining for schismatic divisions in Judaism.) Whatever the reasons of the rabbis, their construction of *shabbat* as referring to "festival" seems implausible. Baruch Levine and Jacob Milgrom have variously understood *shabbat* to mean "week" in the present context. In verse 16, the phrase "seventh sabbath" in fact seems to mean "seventh week."

20. *They shall be holy for the LORD, for the priest.* The second phrase, which syntactically is in apposition with the first, is a kind of gloss on it: in the case of this offering of first fruits, the consecrated status of the foodstuffs ("holy for the LORD") means not that they are to be consumed in fire on the altar but that they are reserved exclusively for the use of the priests.

21. *a sacred convocation—it will be for you.* The oddness of the syntax might conceivably reflect a scribal insertion here of a formula reiterated elsewhere. In independent clauses, we find the complete syntactic unit, "A sacred convocation it will be for you." Here, however, "a sacred convocation" is already the object of the verb "you will call," and so "it will be for you" seems not to belong.

24. *a commemoration with horn blast.* Although the instrument used is not specified here, the reasonable assumption is that it is the ram's horn, or *shofar*. The "commemoration" in question is the act of making God remember, or take note of, Israel through the ritual of horn blasts. Some biblical scholars have detected a hint of an annual ceremony for the

coronation of God, but the historical evidence for that vivid conjecture is scant.

27. *Yet.* The Hebrew *ʾakh* ("yet," "however") expresses opposition but also a focusing emphasis ("only").

you shall afflict yourselves. In legal-cultic contexts, this idiom refers primarily to fasting, a meaning perhaps reinforced by the fact that the noun in question, the ubiquitous *nefesh*, can also mean both "throat" and "appetite," though its most plausible sense in context is simply as an intensive form of the pronoun.

32. *from evening to evening.* Only here is this phrase attached to the observance of a sacred day. Levine's reasonable inference is that the system of counting the day from sunset to sunset, standard in later Judaism, may not yet have been normative in the biblical period, and hence its binding application to the Day of Atonement had to be stipulated.

you shall keep your sabbath. More literally, "you shall cease your cessation."

36. *solemn gathering.* This is a single word in the Hebrew, *ʿatseret* (elsewhere, also *ʿatsarah*), which appears to refer specifically to the cultic assembly at the end of the festival, perhaps because the verb from which it derives means "to retain" or "to hold back."

40. *a stately tree.* In modern Hebrew, *ʿets hadar* has come to mean "citrus tree," but that is only because in the late Second Temple period this whole phrase was understood to refer to the citron, the somewhat larger and brighter-yellow cousin of the lemon. *Hadar*, however, is a general term referring to majesty, stateliness, or splendor, and it is probable that the original instruction was to take the fruit of any grand-looking tree, not necessarily the fruit of a specific genus of trees.

you shall rejoice before the LORD *your God*. The injunction to rejoice occurs only in the case of Succoth, the fall Festival of Huts. One reason for this may be that this was the final harvest festival of the agricultural cycle, and hence the pilgrims, free from the need to hurry back to their farms to look after the next crop, could spend the full week in celebration at the sanctuary where sacrifices were offered and attendant feasts enjoyed. In the climate of the Land of Israel, this was the time (late September to early October) when

the long hot dry season came to an end and the welcome autumnal rains were imminent. In precisely this connection, we know from the Mishnah that the Succoth celebration in the Second Temple included an elaborate ritual for invoking water for the land (*simḥat beyt hasho'evah*), a ritual explicitly represented as a peak of collective joy.

43. *I made the Israelites dwell in huts.* Huts were used for temporary shelter by farmers watching over their crops about to be harvested and so may have been associated with this festival of the fall harvest. Milgrom suggests that the flood of pilgrims to the central sanctuary in this most popular of the pilgrim festivals compelled many of them to spend the week in huts or other temporary shelters because the town itself could not have possibly provided the bulk of them with lodging. Whether the original explanation was in agricultural practice or in the material necessities of pilgrimage, a historical-theological rationale is now provided.

44. *Moses spoke the fixed times.* Here "spoke" has the obvious sense of "enjoined," "proclaimed," "enunciated."

CHAPTER 24

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Charge the
Israelites, that they take clear beaten olive oil for the
light to kindle a lamp perpetually. [3]Outside the curtain
of the Covenant in the Tent of Meeting Aaron shall set
it out from evening till morning before the LORD
perpetually, an everlasting statute for your generations.
[4]On the pure gold lamp stand he shall set out the
lamps, before the LORD perpetually. [5]And you shall
take semolina flour and bake it into twelve loaves.
Each loaf shall be two-tenths of an *ephah*. [6]And you
shall place them in two rows, six to a row, on the pure
gold table before the LORD. [7]And you shall place
clear frankincense together with the row and it shall
become a token offering for the bread, a fire offering
to the LORD. [8]Sabbath day after sabbath day they
shall be laid out before the LORD perpetually on
behalf of the Israelites, an everlasting covenant. [9]And
it shall be Aaron’s and his sons’, and they shall eat it in
a holy place, for it is holy of holies for him from the
LORD’s fire offerings, an everlasting statute.”

[10]And the son of an Israelite woman, he being the son of an Egyptian man, went out among the Israelites, and the son of the Israelite woman and an Israelite man brawled in the camp. [11]And the son of the Israelite woman invoked the Name, vilifying it. And they brought him to Moses. And his mother's name was Shelomith daughter of Dibri of the tribe of Dan. [12]And they left him under guard until it should be made clear to them by the word of the LORD. [13]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [14]"Take out him who vilified beyond the camp, and all who heard shall lay their hands on his head, and all the community shall stone him. [15]And to the Israelites you shall speak, saying, 'Should any man vilify his God, he shall bear his offense. [16]And he who invokes the LORD's name shall be doomed to die; and the community shall surely stone him, sojourner and native alike; for his invoking the Name he shall be put to death. [17]And should a man mortally strike down any human being, he is doomed to die. [18]And he who mortally strikes down a beast shall pay for it, life for life. [19]And should a man maim his fellow, as he has done so shall it be done to him. [20]A fracture for a fracture, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth—as he has maimed a human being, so shall he be maimed. [21]And he who strikes down a beast shall pay for it, but

he who strikes down a human being shall be put to death. [22]One law shall there be for you, for sojourner and native alike shall it be, for I am the LORD your God.'" [23]And Moses spoke to the Israelites, and they took out him who had vilified beyond the camp and pelted him with stones. And the Israelites did as all that the LORD had charged Moses.

CHAPTER 24 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *beaten olive oil*. "Beaten" (*katit*), from a verb that means "to smash" or "to pulverize," suggests that the olives are to be pounded with a pestle rather than crushed in a press.

perpetually. The Hebrew *tamid* implies that the light is to be constantly renewed, not that it is to burn incessantly as an "eternal light."

3. *the curtain of the Covenant.* The last word here is a prevalent ellipsis for "Ark of the Covenant."

4. *the pure gold lamp stand.* As both Rashi and Abraham ibn Ezra note, the Hebrew phrase—literally, "the pure lamp stand"—is an ellipsis for "pure gold lamp stand." The same is true of the phrase "pure [gold] table" in verse 6.

5. *twelve loaves.* This sanctified number of course reflects the number of the tribes of Israel, as does the number of stones in the breastplate of the high priest. The bread in question is the "bread of display" or "bread of the Presence" (King James Version, "shewbread"). Laying out bread on the altar daily, or even several times a day, with the idea of symbolically feeding the deity, was a widespread practice in ancient Near Eastern religions. Jacob Milgrom suggests that it was in order to distance this cherished cultic procedure from any notion of providing sustenance to God that this version of

the law stipulates putting out fresh loaves only once a week. The inevitably stale bread could then be consumed by the priests (perhaps one of the less attractive of their sacerdotal perquisites).

7. *clear frankincense.* The adjective used, *zakh*, is the same one applied to olive oil in verse 1, and translations that render it as "pure" run the risk of introducing a confusion with the pure (*tahor*) gold lamp stand and table. Since frankincense is a resin, this might be an indication that it should be translucent, a visual attribute squarely within the semantic range of *zakh*.

a token offering for the bread, a fire offering. Since the bread itself is not consumed on the altar but is left untouched until the following sabbath, when it may be given to the priests, the frankincense, set alongside the bread, is burned as a "token offering" in lieu of the bread.

8. *Sabbath day after sabbath day.* The literal contour of the Hebrew idiom is "On the sabbath day, on the sabbath day."

10. *brawled.* This verb of violent altercation is the same one used for the two Hebrew men whom the young Moses rebukes (Exodus 2:13). It is perhaps this verbal trigger that led Rashi to claim, rather fancifully, that the blasphemer in this episode was the son of the Egyptian taskmaster whom Moses killed on the day before his encounter with the two brawling Israelites.

11. *invoked the Name, vilifying it.* "The Name," in an interesting biblical anticipation of later pious usage in Hebrew, is an ellipsis for "the Name of YHWH." One suspects that the writer avoided using the complete phrase because the idea of actually invoking and vilifying God's holy name was so abhorrent to him. The object of "vilifying" it (the Name), is merely implied. Though it might at first seem that the brawler is verbally abusing his adversary, supercharging the abusive language by introducing God's sacrosanct name, verse 15 clearly makes "his God" the grammatical object of "vilify," and this direct verbal assault on the name YHWH is of course a graver transgression.

Shelomith daughter of Dibri of the tribe of Dan. Mary Douglas ingeniously detects in these names a kind of allegorical play: Compensation (or Retribution) daughter of Law-suit from the tribe of Judgment.

12. *until it should be made clear to them by the word of the* LORD. What is to be made clear is what should be done with the malefactor. "By the word [literally, by the mouth] of the LORD" in the present context obviously refers to an oracle, and God's speech to Moses in the following verses is the message of the oracle.

14. *him who vilified.* God, too, suppresses the divine object of the verb of scurrilous speech.

all who heard. That is, all who heard the blasphemous utterance.

shall lay their hands on his head. In biblical idiom, bloodguilt rests "on the head" of the perpetrator. The laying on of hands by the witnesses is the confirming of the guilt (and so Rashi observes).

16. *for his invoking the Name he shall be put to death.* The element of the idiom that sticks in the craw of the pious writer, "and vilifying it," is merely implied. This act of lèse-majesté aimed at God, Who is the very rationale for the existence of the community, is understood to be a threat to the community itself, and so all are to be involved in the execution. In any case, this formulation, which appears to hold the mere invoking of the Name as a sin, led later on to a general ban against pronouncing the name YHWH except by the high priest on the Day of Atonement in the Holy of Holies.

17. *And should a man mortally strike down any human being.* The use of the generic term *ʾadam*, "human being," sets up the contradistinction of killing a domestic animal rather than a human being. But there may also be an implied contrast with God in the preceding unit. God in principle cannot be hurt by any human act, but His name, available for manipulation and debasement in human linguistic practice, can suffer injury, and for this injury the death penalty is exacted, as here in the case of murder.

18. *shall pay for it, life for life.* Since what is explicitly stated is providing restitution to the owner of the animal that has been killed, "life for life" here clearly means the monetary value of the dead creature that will enable its owner to acquire another one. Although the rabbis strenuously sought to extend this notion of monetary compensation to all the cases of *lex talionis* that follow here, the plain language of the text appears to call for an actual infliction of injury for injury, as Milgrom plausibly concludes after an exhaustive survey of the age-old interpretive debate. The formulation of the

lex talionis in Exodus 21:23–25 may leave a bit more latitude for the possibility of monetary compensation because there is no verb for the act of maiming like what is used here, “as he has maimed a human being so shall he be maimed.” See the comment on Exodus 21:23–25.

CHAPTER 25

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai,
saying, [2]“Speak to the Israelites, and you shall say to
them: ‘When you come into the land that I am about to
give you, the land shall keep a sabbath to the LORD.
[3]Six years you shall sow your fields and six years you
shall prune your vineyard and gather in its yield. [4]And
in the seventh year there shall be an absolute sabbath
for the land, a sabbath to the LORD. Your field you
shall not sow and your vineyard you shall not prune.
[5]The aftergrowth of your harvest you shall not reap
and the grapes of your untrimmed vines you shall not
pick. There shall be an absolute sabbath for the land.
[6]And the land’s sabbath shall be food for you, for you
and for your male slave and for your slavegirl and for
your resident hirelings who sojourn with you, [7]and for
your cattle and for the beasts that are in your land, all
its yield shall be for food. [8]And you shall count you
seven sabbaths of years, seven years seven times, and
the days of the seven sabbaths of years shall come to
forty-nine years. [9]And you shall send round a blasting

ram's horn, in the seventh month on the tenth of the month, on the Day of Atonement, you shall send round a ram's horn through all your land. [10]And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and call a release in the land to all its inhabitants. A jubilee it shall be for you, and you shall go back each man to his holding and each man to his clan, you shall go back. [11]It is a jubilee, the fiftieth year it shall be for you. You shall not sow and you shall not reap its aftergrowths and you shall not pick its untrimmed vines. [12]For it is a jubilee. It shall be holy for you. From the field you may eat its yield. [13]In this jubilee year you shall go back, each man to his holding. [14]And when you sell property to your fellow or buy from the hand of your fellow, you shall not defraud one another. [15]By the number of years after the jubilee you shall buy from your fellow, and by the number of years of yield he shall sell to you. [16]The larger the number of years, the more you shall pay for its purchase and the smaller the number of years the less you shall pay for its purchase, since he is selling you the number of yields. [17]And you shall not defraud each other, and you shall fear your God, for I am the LORD your God. [18]And you shall do My statutes, and My laws you shall keep and do them, and you shall dwell on the land securely. [19]And the land will give forth its fruits and you will eat to fullness, and you will

dwell securely on it. [20]And should you say: What shall
we eat in the seventh year, if we do not sow and do not
gather in our yield? [21]I have charged My blessing for
you in the sixth year, and it will produce yield for
three years. [22]And you shall sow in the eighth year and
eat of the old crop until the ninth year, until its yield
comes, you shall eat the old. [23]And the land shall not
be sold irreversibly, for Mine is the land, for you are
sojourning settlers with Me. [24]And in all the land of
your holdings, you shall allow a redemption for the
land. [25]Should your brother come to ruin and sell his
holding, his redeemer who is related to him shall come
and redeem what his brother sold. [26]And should a man
have no redeemer and his hand attain and find enough
for its redemption, [27]he shall reckon the years it was
sold and give back the difference to the man to whom
he sold, and he shall go back to his holding. [28]And if
his hand cannot find enough to pay him back, what he
sold shall be in the hands of the buyer till the jubilee
year, and it shall be released in the jubilee, and he
shall come back to his holding. [29]And should a man
sell a dwelling house in a walled town, its redemption
shall be till the end of the year of its sale. A year its
redemption shall be. [30]And if it is not redeemed by the
time a full year has elapsed for him, the house in the
town that has a wall shall pass over irreversibly to its

buyer for his generations. It shall not be released in the jubilee. [31]And houses in the hamlets that have no walls all around shall be reckoned as part of the land's open fields. They shall have redemption and be released in the jubilee. [32]And as to the towns of the Levites, the houses of the towns of their holding, the Levites shall have a redemption forever. [33]And what is redeemed of the Levites, the sale of house and the town of his holding, shall be released in the jubilee, for the houses of the Levites' towns are their holding in the midst of the Israelites. [34]And the unenclosed fields of their towns shall not be sold, for it is an everlasting holding for them.

[35]"'And should your brother come to ruin and his hand buckle under you, you shall hold him as sojourning settler, and he shall live under you. [36]You shall not take from him advance interest or accrued interest, and you shall fear your God, that your brother may live with you. [37]You shall not give him your silver for advance interest, and for accrued interest you shall not give him your food. [38]I am the LORD your God Who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan to be God for you. [39]And should your brother come to ruin under you and be sold to you, you shall

not work him the work of a slave. [40]Like a resident hireling he shall be under you, till the jubilee year he shall work under you, [41]and he shall be released from you, he and his children with him, and go back to his clan, and to his fathers' holdings he shall go back. [42]For they are My slaves, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt. They shall not be sold in a slave's sale. [43]You shall not hold crushing sway over him, and you shall fear your God. [44]And your male slave and your slavegirl whom you may have from the nations that are around you—from them you may buy a male slave or a slavegirl. [45]And also from the children of the settlers sojourning among them—from them and from their clan that is with them you may buy whom they have begotten in your land, and they shall become a holding for you. [46]And you shall hold them in estate for your children after you to inherit a holding forever. Them you may work, but your brothers the Israelites—no man shall hold crushing sway over his brother. [47]And should the hand of a sojourning settler with you attain means when your brother comes to ruin under you and is sold to a sojourning settler under you, or to an offshoot of a sojourner's clan, [48]after being sold, he shall have a redemption; one of his brothers may redeem him. [49]Or his uncle or his cousin may redeem him or any of his own close kin from his clan may

redeem him, or his hand may attain the means and he shall be redeemed. [50]And he shall reckon with his buyer from the year of his sale to him till the jubilee year, and the silver of his sale shall be according to the number of the years, like the time of a hireling he shall be under the other. [51]If there are still many years, according to them he shall pay back his redemption from the silver of his purchase. [52]And if few years are left till the jubilee year, he shall reckon for him, according to its years he shall pay back its redemption. [53]Like a hireling from year to year he shall be under you. No one shall hold crushing sway over him before your eyes. [54]And if he is not redeemed through any of these ways, he shall be released in the jubilee year, he and his children with him. [55]For Mine are the Israelites as slaves, they are My slaves whom I brought out of the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.'"

CHAPTER 25 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *on Mount Sinai*. The mention here of Mount Sinai has become proverbial in Hebrew for a puzzling juxtaposition of two disparate terms—in Rashi's classic formulation: "What is the connection between Mount Sinai and the Year of Release?" The most plausible explanation, put forth by several recent scholars, is that there is an invocation of a Mesopotamian practice, in which a king assuming his throne would issue a general proclamation for the release

of slaves. Thus God announcing His kingship at Sinai definitively releases the Israelites from the status of slaves to which they had been reduced in Egypt. They become instead God's slaves (a parodoxical definition of their new freedom), as the end of this chapter pointedly reminds us.

2. *the land shall keep a sabbath to the* LORD. More literally, "the land shall cease a cessation to the LORD."

4. *your vineyard you shall not prune.* The vines of course do not have to be planted annually like the grains, but without annual pruning, they will not yield an adequate crop of grapes.

5. *untrimmed vines.* A very literal representation of this phrase would be "nazirite vines." The Hebrew *nazir* reflects a root that means "to set apart," but because the nazirite refrains among other things from cutting his hair, the idiom here may be a simple analogical extension from uncut hair (because it is forbidden) to untrimmed vines (because it is equally forbidden).

6. *the land's sabbath shall be food for you.* This phrasing is an obvious ellipsis for "the land's sabbath yield shall be food for you."

your resident hirelings. Throughout this section, the two nouns *sekhirkha wetoshavkha*, connected by "and," should be understood not as separate items ("your hireling and your resident") but as a hendiadys, two terms indicating a single concept.

7. *all its yield.* "Its" (feminine in the Hebrew) refers either to "land" or to "sabbath."

9. *send round.* This verb is chosen because what is suggested is that the ram's horn is to be carried around the country from place to place by delegated heralds and to be appropriately sounded, so that everyone will know that the jubilee year has arrived.

10. *call a release in the land to all its inhabitants.* One must regretfully forgo the grandeur of the King James Version, inscribed on the Liberty Bell: "proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof." In fact, the passage is concerned with the legal arrangements regarding property in the jubilee year, and modern scholarship has persuasively demonstrated

that *deror* does not mean "liberty" but is cognate with a technical Akkadian term, *anduraru*, which means a release from, or moratorium on, debts and indenture.

jubilee. Though scholarly debate persists about the etymology of this word (which has entered English from the Hebrew), the noun *yovel* in Exodus 19:13 clearly indicates a ram's horn (the alternate term is *shofar*), and thus it is plausible that the fiftieth year was called jubilee, *yovel*, because this was when loud blasts of the ram's horn were sounded throughout the land.

12. *its yield.* The only proximate candidate for an antecedent of "its" (feminine) is "jubilee year."

13. *you shall go back, each man to his holding.* Without the notion of inalienable property holdings, the whole system of permanent division of the land according to tribes, and then clans, would have broken down. On the other hand, the arrangements for the jubilee release entailed the most cumbersome complications, as verses 16–17 concede, and once the tribal territories had disappeared as a historical fact in the Second Temple period, the rabbis devised a legal mechanism that in effect abrogated the jubilee.

16. *since he is selling you the number of yields.* If, say, there remained only three years until the jubilee, the buyer would enjoy only three harvests before the land would revert to its original owner, and so the seller could demand only a limited purchase price (in all likelihood, $\frac{3}{4}_9$ of its intrinsic value).

19. *its fruits.* Here the term functions in its general sense of "produce."

21. *I have charged My blessing for you in the sixth year, and it will produce yield for three years.* This miraculous intervention in order to generate a harvest in the sixth year sufficient for three years suggests that the legislation for the sabbatical year was in a way utopian, and could have been observed only imperfectly for compelling practical reasons.

23. *sojourning settlers.* As everywhere in biblical usage, the two Hebrew nouns (literally, "sojourner and settler") are a hendiadys with the modern legal sense of "resident alien."

24. *you shall allow a redemption for the land.* Land can be redeemed at any time either by its original owner or by a relative acting on behalf of the original owner, and the buyer is obliged to sell back the land, to "allow redemption." The jubilee, then, is a kind of backup system: if neither the original owner nor his kin can come up with the price of redemption, the land will in any case revert to its original owner in the jubilee.

28. *released.* The literal meaning of the verb *yatsa'* is "go out," but in contexts of property law it has this technical meaning, and the literal sense would not be intelligible in English.

30. *the house in the town that has a wall shall pass over irreversibly to its buyer.* In an agrarian economy, real property in open fields was a permanent and indispensable source of livelihood, whereas urban real estate was primarily a residence rather than a source of income. As a result, it was not regarded as inalienable property and might be permanently relinquished if the seller could not scrape together funds to buy it back within a year.

35. *his hand buckle under you.* The verb here is more typically associated with the foot, where it has the sense of "stumble." Because "hand" is a metonym for "power," the idea is that the person has suffered something we would call economic collapse.

he shall live under you. That is, he shall live under your authority or power, with the understanding that you shall take reasonable steps to allow him to subsist.

36. *advance interest or accrued interest.* There is some uncertainty as to the precise differentiation between these two kinds of interest. The former term, *neshekh,* etymologically means a "bite"; the latter, *marbit*, comes from the verb that means "to multiply."

42. *For they are My slaves.* The parodoxical consequence of the fact that the Israelites, as God's covenanted people, have assumed the condition of God's slaves is that they are prohibited from treating each other as slaves. The status outlined here, with mandatory release in the jubilee year, is a kind of indentured servitude. In contrast, however, to the sabbatical laws in Exodus and Deuteronomy, manumission occurs only in the jubilee, so the maximum period of servitude is forty-nine years, not six.

43. *You shall not hold crushing sway.* This idiom combines two locutions for exercising absolute authority, the verb *radah* (see Genesis 1:26, with the second comment there) and the adverb *befarekh*, which is used for the harsh enslavement of the Hebrews by the Egyptians (see the comment on Exodus 1:13).

47. *hand . . . attain means*. The object "means" has been added in the translation for the sake of intelligibility, the idea being that the resident alien has amassed the wherewithal to purchase an impoverished Israelite.

48. *after being sold, he shall have a redemption.* This system, which envisages Israelite domination of the land, is sharply asymmetrical. An Israelite sold into slavery to an alien has the permanent right, without temporal restriction, to have his freedom bought for him, whereas the alien sold to an Israelite may become a permanent slave.

50. *reckon . . . from the year of his sale . . . till the jubilee year*. The procedure is precisely parallel to that for the redemption of property. Since in the fiftieth year the owner would in any event be obliged to release the Israelite slave, the closer the time of buying back his freedom is to the jubilee, the less his market value.

like the time of a hireling he shall be under the other. The value of the slave shall be computed as though he were a hireling. If a hireling is paid x amount of silver per year, and there are twelve years remaining until the jubilee, his value is $12x$ of silver. In the translation, "the other" is added for clarification: the Hebrew, a bit cryptically, simply says "under him."

CHAPTER 26

1 “‘You shall make you no idols nor set up a sculpted
image or a sacred pillar for yourselves, and you shall
not put a figured stone in your land to bow over it, for I
am the LORD your God. 2 My sabbaths you shall keep,
and My sanctuary you shall revere. I am the LORD. 3 If
you go by My statutes and keep My commands and do
them, 4 I shall give you rains in their season, and the
land will give its yield and the tree of the field will give
its fruit. 5 And your threshing will overtake the vintage,
and the vintage will overtake the sowing, and you will
eat your bread to the full, and you will dwell securely
in your land. 6 And I shall set peace in the land, and
you will lie down with none to make him tremble, and
I shall make evil beasts cease from the land, and no
sword will pass through your land. 7 And you will
pursue your enemies and they will fall before you by
the sword. 8 And five of you will pursue a hundred, and
a hundred of you will pursue ten thousand, and your
enemies will fall before you by the sword. 9 And I shall
turn toward you and make you fruitful and multiply

you and fulfill My covenant with you. [10]And you will eat old grain long stored, and you will clear out the old for the new. [11]And I shall place My tabernacle in your midst, and I shall not loathe you. [12]And I shall go about in your midst, and I shall be God to you, and as for you, you will be My people. [13]I am the LORD your God Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from your being slaves to them, and I broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk upright.

[14]“‘But if you do not heed Me and do not do all these commands, [15]and if you reject My statutes and if you loathe My laws, not doing all My commands, voiding My covenant, [16]I on My part will do this to you: I will direct panic against you, consumption and fever wasting the eyes and making the throat ache, and you shall sow your seed in vain, and your enemies shall eat it. [17]And I will set My face against you and you shall be routed before your enemies, and your foes shall hold sway over you, and you shall flee with none pursuing you. [18]And if even with these you do not heed Me, I will go on to chastise you sevenfold more for your offenses. [19]And I will break the pride of your strength and make your heavens like iron and your earth like bronze. [20]And your power shall be spent in vain, and

your land shall not give its yield, and the tree of the land shall not give its fruit. [21]And if you come in encounter against Me and do not want to heed Me, I will go on with blows against you sevenfold for your offenses. [22]And I will unleash the beasts of the field among you and they shall bereave you of your children and cut off your cattle and diminish you, and your roads will be desolate. [23]And if through these you do not take chastisement by Me, and you come in encounter against Me, [24]I on My part will come in encounter against you and I Myself will strike you sevenfold for your offenses. [25]And I will bring against you the avenging sword of the covenant's vengeance, and you shall gather into your towns, and I will send pestilence in your midst, and you shall be given into an enemy's hands. [26]When I break your staff of bread, ten women shall bake your bread in one oven and dole out your bread by weight, and you shall eat and not be sated. [27]And if despite this you do not heed Me and you come in encounter against Me, [28]I will come against you in wrathful encounter and I on My part will chastise you sevenfold for your offenses. [29]And you shall eat the flesh of your sons, and the flesh of your daughters you shall eat. [30]And I will destroy your cult-places and cut off your incense stands, and I will put your corpses on top of the corpses of your fetishes,

and I will loathe you. [31]And I will turn your towns into
ruins and lay waste your sanctuaries, and I will not
smell your fragrant odors. [32]And I Myself will lay
waste to the land, and all your enemies who settle in it
shall be appalled by it. [33]And you I will scatter among
the nations, and I will unsheath the sword after you,
and your land shall be a desolation, and your towns a
ruin. [34]Then shall the land expiate its sabbath years all
the days it is desolate while you are in the land of your
enemies, then shall the land keep a sabbath and expiate
its sabbath years. [35]All the days of the desolation it
shall keep a sabbath for not having kept your sabbath
years when you dwelled there. [36]And those left among
you, I will bring faintness into their hearts in the lands
of their enemies, and the sound of a driven leaf shall
pursue them, and they shall flee as in flight from the
sword and fall, with none pursuing. [37]And each man
shall stumble against his brother as before the sword,
with none pursuing, and there shall be no standing up
for you in the face of your enemies. [38]And you shall
perish among the nations, and the land of your
enemies shall consume you. [39]And those left among
you shall rot in their guilt in the lands of your enemies,
and also in the guilt of their fathers with them they
shall rot. [40]And they shall confess their guilt and the
guilt of their fathers, in their betraying My trust, [41]and

also in their coming in encounter against Me. I on My part will come in encounter against them and bring them into the land of their enemies, and then shall their uncircumcised heart be humbled, and then shall they expiate their guilt. [42]And I will remember My covenant with Jacob and also My covenant with Isaac and also My covenant with Abraham I will remember, and the land I will remember. [43]And the land shall be forsaken of them, and it shall expiate its sabbath years when it is desolate of them, and they shall expiate their guilt, by very reason that they have rejected My laws, and My statutes they have loathed. [44]Yet even this, too —when they are in the land of their enemies I will not reject them and I will not loathe them to put an end to them, to void My covenant with them, for I am the LORD their God. [45]And I will remember for them the covenant of the first ones whom I brought out from the land of Egypt before the eyes of the nations to be God for them, I am the LORD.'"

[46]These are the statutes and the laws and the teachings that the LORD set out between Himself and the Israelites on Mount Sinai through the hand of Moses.

CHAPTER 26 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *You shall make you no idols.* These words signal a shift in the discourse to summarizing generalization, for the language of this verse and the next, as Jacob Milgrom observes, invokes three of the first five injunctions of the Decalogue, reverting, one may say, to first principles. These verses, then, may be construed as an overture to the grand epilogue to the laws of Leviticus that swings into full momentum with verse 3, the point at which Jewish tradition marks the beginning of the textual unit for communal reading. What follows is a rhetorically powerful evocation (the style switching from legalistic to rhetorical) of the blessings that will ensue if Israel keeps the covenant and the ghastly curses if it violates the covenant. Both in its placement in the book after the code of laws and in its own formal organization and language, the enire passage closely parallels Deuteronomy 28.

figured stone. The etymology of the word rendered as "figured," *maskit*, has long been debated, though it might derive from a verb that means "to look." Milgrom plausibly suggests that the stone in question is a paving stone (hence "bow *over it*"), perhaps with a mosaic design, set in the floor of a sanctuary.

5. *your threshing will overtake the vintage.* This image of a kind of fast-forward of the agricultural cycle as a hyperbolic representation of fertility is used in Amos 9:13.

your bread. Once again, this is a synecdoche for food in general.

6. *I shall make evil beasts cease from the land.* As both biblical narrative and poetry repeatedly attest, in the early period of Israelite settlement predatory beasts—in particular, lions and bears—were a threat to the population (the young David became a skilled fighter by learning how to contend with them). In the hyperbolic language of the passage, predators, like invading enemies, will entirely vanish. As in the Prophets, hyperbole points the way to later messianic constructions of an end-time in history.

9. *I shall turn toward you.* The rabbis supply "in favor," an idea clearly implied by the idiom as it stands.

make you fruitful and multiply you. The phrasing explicitly invokes God's injunction to humankind in the Priestly version of the creation (Genesis 1:28).

10. *you will eat old grain long stored.* This appears to be an allusion to the preceding chapter (25:20–22) in which God promises to provide Israel sufficient grain in the sixth year of the sabbatical cycle to tide people over the seventh and eighth year until they can harvest new crops, planted in the eighth year, during the ninth. This detail, perhaps oddly specific in context, is evidently put forth as a particular instance of God's special providential care for Israel. The punctilious observance of the sabbatical year, as the section of curses makes clear, is a paramount concern of this writer.

11. *tabernacle.* Milgrom argues that *mishkan* (from the root *sh-k-n*, "to dwell") means "presence" here, though elsewhere it is always a cultic structure, and the fact that Israel in the wilderness already has a tabernacle by no means prevents God from promising that He will establish a sanctuary within the land which the people is about to enter.

loathe. The present translation concurs with Milgrom that the multivalent *nefesh* here means "throat" and hence the phrase *lo tigʿal nafshi ʾetkhem* means literally "my throat will not expel you," i.e., I will not retch in disgust over you, loathe you. Although it might at first seem surprising that so strongly negative a locution would be used in a blessing, albeit prefaced by a "not," it is chosen in order to stand in counterpoint to Israel's loathing God in verses 15 and 43 and God's loathing Israel in return for its miscreance.

13. *I broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk upright.* In Hebrew, as in other languages, "yoke" is a general symbol for subjugation (an English word which itself means "being under the yoke"). But here the dead metaphor is resuscitated: the two bars of the yoke connecting to the crosspiece are broken, and enslaved Israel, forced to go about (in the metaphor) pulling heavy burdens on all four like a beast, can now stand up straight.

15. *voiding My covenant.* The antithesis to God's fulfilling the covenant (verse 9).

16. *making the throat ache.* Since a particular body part seems required to match the wasted eyes, it is highly likely that the sense here of *nefesh* is once again "throat."

17. *I will set My face against you.* This is the antithesis of "I shall turn toward you" in verse 9. Throughout this section of curses, the translation uses "will"

in the first person and "shall" in the second because the modal force of the language seems more emphatic in the curses than in the blessings.

19. *your heavens like iron and your earth like bronze.* This grim simile is a common feature in Assyrian treaty curses and is equally exploited in Deuteronomy 28:23, although in that instance bronze goes with the heavens and iron with the earth.

21. *come in encounter against Me.* The exact origin of this phrase, unique to this passage, *telkhu ʿimi beqeri*, is in dispute, though it obviously means something like "confront," "dispute," "rebel against." The most plausible etymology of the noun *qeri* is from the verbal stem *q-r-h*, suggesting "encounter," "happening upon," or even "mishap," and so this translation uses the phrase "in encounter" (which of course can also mean "duel"), preserving what may be a slight idiomatic oddness in the Hebrew.

22. *your roads will be desolate.* If one pauses to reflect, this is a haunting image (and one to which several of the Prophets revert): the once teeming highways of the land will be bleak and empty after the devastation of the populace.

23. *And if through these you do not take chastisement.* The section of curses is structured as a sequence of downward spiraling disasters. After each set of punishing blows, God, as it were, pauses to see if Israel will correct its ways. When this does not happen, He intensifies the catastrophes, which will culminate in exile.

25. *the avenging sword of the covenant's vengeance.* A covenant is both a promise and a threat. From those who violate their covenantal obligations, vengeance is exacted.

28. *against you in wrathful encounter.* Ominously, God now adds the component of wrath, *ḥamah*, to the reiterated noun *qeri*, suggesting that divine hostility is now ready to trump Israelite hostility in a climactic set of disasters.

29. *you shall eat the flesh of your sons.* On this grisly detail, see the comment on Deuteronomy 28:53. The verse is arranged as a neat chiasm—eat (a), flesh

of your sons (b), flesh of your daughters (b'), eat (a')—as a rhetorical means of hammering home the horrific images.

30. *your corpses . . . the corpses of your fetishes.* Although logically fetishes cannot have corpses, not ever having been alive, the same word is pointedly repeated, suggesting a bitter equation between the inert, heaped-up bodies of the fetish worshippers and the inert, lifeless fetishes, which have been "corpses" all along, and now deprived of worshippers, are all the more conspicuously sheer dead matter.

31. *sanctuaries.* The plural surely suggests that in this text a single central sanctuary is not presupposed.

I will not smell your fragrant odors. The reference is to the fragrance of the sacrifice burned on the altar and thought, at least in the pre-Israelite period, to be a pleasing aroma in the nostrils of the gods. By the time of the writing of this text, it may have become a dead metaphor simply meaning, I will not look with favor on your sacrifices.

34. *Then shall the land expiate its sabbath years.* These words, and those of the next two verses, reflect both a logic of restitution and mordant satiric irony. The people has violated its obligation to keep the sabbatical year. Now, as the depopulated land lies fallow year after year, all those violated sabbaths will be made up for, numerically. But this is also a bitterly mocking image of the land, violently divested of its Israelite inhabitants, compelled by grim history to keep on its own a whole series of sabbatical years, in which nothing is sown or reaped.

37. *there shall be no standing up for you in the face of your enemies.* This is a vivid antithesis to "made you walk upright" in verse 13. The two Hebrew words in question derive from the same root—"upright," *qomemiyut*, and "standing up," *tequmah*.

39. *guilt.* The Hebrew *ʿawon* means "iniquity" (or "crime") and by causal extension, both "guilt" and "punishment."

41. *their uncircumcised heart.* This is a recurrent metaphor for obtuseness or callousness. See the comment on Deuteronomy 10:16.

44. *My covenant.* The envelope structure formed by the reiteration of this key term at the beginning and the end of the entire section is meant as a reassurance. God will respond in terrible wrath to Israel's dereliction, but the commitment to the covenant He expressed at the beginning will in the end lead Him to rescue Israel from exile as He once rescued them from Egyptian slavery.

45. *the covenant of the first ones.* This somewhat opaque phrase refers to the founding generation that stood at Sinai, but its very vagueness allows a certain elision between these "first ones" and the patriarchs, with whom God initially sealed the covenant that has just been mentioned.

46. *between Himself and the Israelites.* This locution of betweenness, in the summation at the end of all the preceding laws and statutes, followed by this chapter's catalogue of blessings and curses, is an indication of the two-sided contractual nature of God's covenant with Israel that is repeatedly invoked in the blessings and the curses.

CHAPTER 27

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Speak to
the Israelites, and you shall say to them, ‘Should a man
set aside a votive offering in the value fixed for persons
to the LORD, [3]the value for the male from twenty
years old up to sixty years old shall be fifty shekels by
the sanctuary shekel. [4]And if it is for a female, the
value shall be thirty shekels. [5]And if it is for someone
from five years old up to twenty years old, the value
shall be twenty shekels for the male and for the female
ten shekels. [6]And if it is for someone from a month old
up to a year, the value of the male shall be five silver
shekels and for the female the value three silver
shekels. [7]And if it is for someone from sixty years old
and above, if a male, the value shall be fifteen shekels
and for the female ten shekels. [8]And if one should
become too impoverished to meet the value, he shall
be set before the priest, and the priest shall evaluate
him, according to what the hand of the votary can
attain shall the priest evaluate him. [9]And if it is an
animal that is brought forward as an offering to the

LORD, any of which may be given to the LORD shall be holy. [10]He shall not exchange it and shall not replace it, whether good for bad or bad for good, and if in fact he replaces one animal for another, both it and its replacement shall be holy. [11]And if it is any unclean animal that is not to be brought forward as an offering to the LORD, the animal shall be set before the priest. [12]And the priest shall evaluate it, whether good or bad, according to the priest's valuation, thus shall it be. [13]And if he in fact redeems it, he shall add a fifth to its value. [14]And should a man consecrate his house as holy to the LORD, the priest shall evaluate it, whether good or bad. As the priest evaluates it, thus shall it stand. [15]And if he who consecrates his house redeems it, he shall add a fifth to the silver of its value, and it shall be his. [16]And if a man should consecrate anything from a field of his holding to the LORD, its value shall be according to its seed—a *homer* of barley seed at fifty silver shekels. [17]If he consecrates his field from the jubilee year, it shall stand according to its value. [18]And if he consecrates his field after the jubilee, the priest shall reckon the silver for him according to the remaining years until the jubilee, and these shall be deducted from its value. [19]And if he who consecrates the field shall in fact redeem it, he shall add a fifth to its value, and it shall become his. [20]And if he does not

redeem the field and had sold the field to another man, it may no longer be redeemed. [21]And the field when it is released in the jubilee shall be holy to the LORD, as a proscribed field. His holding shall become the priest's. [22]And if he consecrates a field he has purchased, which is not from the field of his holding, to the LORD, [23]the priest shall reckon for him the amount of the value until the jubilee year, and he shall give the value on that day, a sacred donation to the LORD. [24]In the jubilee year the field shall revert to him from whom it was bought to him who has the holding of the land. [25]And every valuation shall be by the sanctuary shekel, twenty *gerahs* the shekel shall be. [26]But the firstborn of the animals, which is marked firstborn to the LORD, no man shall consecrate. Whether ox or sheep, it is the LORD's. [27]And if it is of an unclean animal, he shall ransom it by its value and add a fifth, and if it is not redeemed, it shall be sold at its value. [28]But anything proscribed, that a man may proscribe for the LORD, of anything he has, whether of humans or animals or of the field of his holding, shall not be sold and shall not be redeemed. Anything proscribed is holy of holies to the LORD. [29]No human who has been proscribed may be ransomed. He is doomed to die. [30]And all tithes of the land, of the seed of the land, of the fruit of the land, are the Lord's,

holy to the LORD. [31]And if a man in fact redeems something of his tithe, he shall add a fifth to it. [32]And all tithes of cattle and sheep, anything that passes under the staff, the tenth shall be holy to the LORD. [33]He shall not look out for good or bad, and he shall not replace it. And if in fact he replaces it, it or its replacement shall be holy, it shall not be redeemed.'"

[34]These are the commands that the LORD charged Moses for the Israelites on Mount Sinai.

CHAPTER 27 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Should a man set aside a votive offering.* This miscellany of laws seems, by modern lights, an odd way to conclude a book. Interpretive attempts have been made to rescue it as a thematically appropriate conclusion, but none is altogether persuasive. This final chapter is best regarded as an appendix to Leviticus focusing on a variety of laws pertaining to voluntary offerings and taxed obligations to the sanctuary. Perhaps these monetary issues, necessary for the maintenance of the sanctuary but not altogether agreeable for the audience of the book to contemplate, were deliberately tacked on at the very end.

in the value fixed. The Hebrew term, at least as it has been vocalized by the Masoretes, is *beʿerkekha*, which means literally "in your value/valuation." It seems likely (though there are other philological solutions) that this is a colloquial term—"as you would evaluate"—that became frozen and lexicalized as an abstraction with the general sense of "assessed value." The verb used in verse 8 and elsewhere for the priest's assessment of monetary

value is cognate with this noun and hence is translated here as “evaluate” in order to make that connection clear.

the value fixed for. What follows is a table of fixed values in weights of silver (the meaning of “shekel”), the valuation being strictly according to age and gender with no regard to the social or economic standing of the person. The system of valuation, as Baruch Levine plausibly contends, reflects the potential economic productivity of a person of the stipulated age bracket and gender. A male has greater potential productivity than a female, a mature person greater productivity than a child or than an aged person. The idea of setting the amount of a votive offering of silver as the equivalent of the value of a person has symbolic and psychological force, for it expresses the idea that the votary is offering to the sanctuary an equivalent of himself or herself.

8. *if one should become too impoverished.* The verb, which in different contexts has been translated “fall to ruin,” indicates a process of steep economic decline. What it logically means here is that the person in question made the vow to give the offering of his fixed value in silver but then fell on hard times, so that he now does not have the wherewithal to pay his pledge. The priest is therefore enjoined to assess the person’s economic state and impose whatever limited amount it seems reasonable for him to pay.

9. *any of which may be given to the* LORD. That is, any of the specified kinds of animals acceptable as sacrifices. Such an animal, once pledged by the votary, becomes “holy,” to be offered as a sacrifice with the greater part of its flesh reserved for the exclusive consumption of the priests.

10. *whether good for bad or bad for good.* The particular animal that the votary has pledged must be offered, and the substitution of, say a fatter animal for a scrawny one or the other way around, is not allowed.

11. *any unclean animal.* The animal in this case, which could not be used as a sacrifice, serves as a unit of value. Though Jacob Milgrom argues that unclean animals—for example, donkeys—could be used as beasts of burden in the sanctuary, the stipulation here of the priest’s function as an assessor of value suggests that what the law has in view is the equivalent in silver of the animal.

12. *whether good or bad.* This means, of course, whether high or low, but the valuation itself is set according to the health, age, size, and so forth (“good or

bad") of the animal.

13. *if he in fact redeems it.* The votary may change his mind and decide he wants to hang on to this particular animal. In that case, he is obliged to pay a 20 percent surcharge on top of its assessed value in silver.

16. *according to its seed.* That is, according to its capacity to be planted with a particular quantity of seed.

a homer. The *ḥomer*, derived from *ḥamor*, "donkey" (a load that a donkey can carry), is a large unit of dry measure, well above a hundred liters.

17. *from the jubilee year, it shall stand according to its value.* This accords with the preceding laws about the redemption of slaves and real property in relation to the jubilee cycle. Consecration at the time of the jubilee would produce the maximal value. Because the land is part of the person's ancestral, tribal holding, it must revert to him at the next jubilee.

20. *and had sold the field to another man.* The Hebrew is a little cryptic. Milgrom, following Menahem Haran, plausibly argues that the person has first sold the field, which would ordinarily revert to him in the jubilee, and then consecrated it to the priests. The consecration following the sale (which was in effect no more than a lease) suggests that he is renouncing his right to have the property revert to him in the jubilee, as the next verse makes explicit.

22. *a field he has purchased.* This is a piece of property that is not part of his ancestral holding and hence need not revert to him in the jubilee.

25. *the sanctuary shekel.* As elsewhere, this phrase indicates a shekel that has a greater weight than the mercantile shekel.

26. *But the firstborn of the animals . . . no man shall consecrate*. Since the firstborn in any case belongs to the deity, its owner is in no position to consecrate it as though it were his voluntary offering.

28. *anything proscribed.* The Hebrew term is *ḥerem*, which in martial contexts means the "ban" of total destruction to which a conquered population and its possessions are subjected. In the present context, a more pacific kind of

ḥerem is intended: whatever a person irrevocably divests himself of and sets aside to be dedicated to God. Thus "humans" (*ʾadam*) here must mean the one category of human beings that can become permanent property, non-Israelite slaves, and their fate in this instance is not destruction but transfer to the jurisdiction of the sanctuary. Thus three categories of property are listed: slaves, livestock, and land.

29. *No human who has been proscribed.* In this case, the reference is by no means limited to slaves, and the *ḥerem* referred to is the lethal kind. One clear-cut example would be a prisoner taken from a conquered town that was to be subjected to the ban of total destruction (like Agag the Amalekite king in 1 Samuel 15). The ban cannot be revoked, and hence the proscribed person is "doomed to die." The appropriateness in this instance of the verb "ransomed," instead of the reiterated "redeemed" is clear.

32. *anything that passes under the staff.* The staff in question is obviously the shepherd's staff, and the phrase as a whole, which appears with variations elsewhere in the Bible, is a kenning for herded animals. Both medieval and modern commentators, putting this phrase together with the next verse, have understood the law to be that the shepherd actually counts the animals passing under his staff, marking every tenth one to be tithed to the sanctuary. As the next verse makes clear, the tenth animal, whether it is robust or meager, cannot be replaced by another creature, for better or for worse.

34. *These are the commands that the LORD charged Moses.* Most commentators see this statement of closure as an explicit tie-in with the formal conclusion (26:46) of the previous textual unit, "These are the statutes and the laws and the teachings that the LORD set out between Himself and the Israelites on Mount Sinai through the hand of Moses." Since this chapter does not deal with covenantal material, the language of betweenness is omitted, and "commands" may have been introduced as a term that comprises the others. But as an editorial decision, this final verse equally points back to the whole Book of Leviticus and forward to the Book of Numbers. Leviticus begins not exactly on Mount Sinai but at the Tent of Meeting, after the Sinai epiphany and presumably still in spatial proximity to the mountain. The opening words of Numbers remind us of the link between God's revelation on

Sinai and His further commands to Moses from the Tent of Meeting, locating God's speech to Moses "in the Wilderness of Sinai in the Tent of Meeting."

NUMBERS

Introduction

The Book of Numbers is in some respects the most miscellaneous of the five books of the Torah, but it also includes a series of uniquely fascinating episodes that exhibit distinctive literary features. The first ten chapters are, by scholarly consensus, the work of Priestly writers and in a certain sense constitute a continuation of Leviticus. The four initial chapters are taken up with a detailed tabulation of the census of the tribes conducted in the wilderness and are the warrant for the prevalent English title of the book, which goes back to the Vulgate and the Septuagint and is also reflected in a designation appearing in rabbinic sources, *ḥomesh hapequdim*, "the Fifth [that is, one book of the Five] of Reckonings." (The generally used Hebrew title, *Bemidbar*, which is simply the first common noun in the text, means "in the wilderness.") The Priestly writers' enthusiasm for pageantry is

manifested in this great initial roll call of the tribes, which is picked up in the review of the order of their march through the wilderness in chapter 10 and in the elaborately repetitive rehearsal of the gifts of the twelve chieftains in chapter 7. In between these, we are given laws intended to protect cultic purity in chapters 5 and 6, with considerable attention devoted to the trial by ordeal of the wife suspected of adultery and to the nazirite's vows of abstinence, and then the dedication of the Levites and the ritual of the Passover offering in chapters 8 and 9.

The book returns to the narrative impulse that marks the first half of Exodus—indeed, with certain pronounced parallels to episodes in Exodus—in chapter 11. Although some legal material, in large part concerned with the cult, will be introduced along the way, together with an additional chapter (26) devoted to census, narrative predominates to the end of the book. The Israelites, Sinai behind them, are on the move, edging toward the prospect of the conquest of the land that is first engaged here in the reconnaissance mission of the twelve spies (chapters 13 and 14) and that will become imminent, forty years later in narrated time, with actual combat against kingdoms to the east of the Jordan, from chapter 21 onward. We are repeatedly reminded of the passing of generations

as the story carries us to the border of the promised land. After the incident of the spies, the entire adult generation that came out of Egypt is fated to die before the promise of the land can be realized. Moses, seconded by Aaron, fails the test of trusting in God's provident intervention when he strikes the rock on his own initiative in order to bring forth water (chapter 20), and as a result, he, too, will not be privileged to enter the land. Miriam and Aaron die; Moses's impending death on Mount Nebo is announced by God; and Joshua is lined up to succeed him as leader (the logical narrative continuation of this book being the Book of Joshua).

But if Israel is on the move from chapter 11 to the end, it must be said that this text associates movement with trouble. After the initial choreographed procession of the teeming tribes, each arrayed in orderly fashion around its own banner, we get repeated representations of a motley crew of malcontents—the Hebrew pejorative *ʾasafsuf*, "riffraff" (11:4), is aptly invoked to characterize them—a mob churning with complaints and frustrated desires, restive under Moses's leadership, fed up with the hardships of life in the wilderness, and nostalgic for the material comforts of life in Egypt.

The incidents of Taberah (Conflagration) and Kibroth-Hattaavah (the Graves of Desire) reported in chapter 11 establish a model for much of what follows. The narrative motifs deployed, which first appeared in Exodus and now recur in a whole series of episodes here in Numbers, constitute such a fixed sequence that one is tempted to say they qualify as a type-scene, like the type-scenes of betrothal and annunciation in Genesis and Exodus. The one notable difference, however, from type-scene is that instead of the same scene, with significant variations, featuring different characters, we have a repetition of the same scene involving the same actors—Israel, Moses, and God—manifesting a certain intensification more than significant variation from one recurrence to the next. The scheme of the recurrent scene of "murmuring" or complaint is as follows: the people bitterly protests its misery in the wilderness or Moses's leadership or both; God's wrath flares against the people, expressing itself in some sort of "scourge" that decimates the Israelite ranks; Moses intercedes—in two instances, after God actually threatens to wipe out the entire people and to begin anew with Moses—and He relents. The two most salient episodes of Israelite recalcitrance are the story of the spies, who report the fabulous bounty of the land but despair of conquering it, then seek to

storm it without divine authorization, and the story of the mutiny led by Korah (respectively, chapters 13–14 and 16–17). Restiveness under Moses's rule is so epidemic that even Miriam and Aaron are infected by it, at one point resentfully rebelling against their brother (chapter 12). One suspects that all these repetitions of the scene of murmuring are introduced because the writers conceived it as a paradigm for the subsequent history of Israel: recurrent resentment of God's rule and of the authority of His legitimate leaders, chronic attraction to objects of base material desire, fearfulness, divisiveness, and the consequences of national disaster brought about, in the view of the biblical writers, by this whole pattern of constant backsliding.

For all the prominence of these scenes of rebellion, Numbers offers a kind of dialectical counterimage to the representation of Israel as an obstinate and refractory mob. This generation that cannot free itself from the slave mentality it brought with it from Egypt also constitutes the beginnings of a people meant to realize a grand historical destiny. Imagery and acts of martial prowess, reinforced by sheer numbers that daunt the other nations of the region, and more pacific images of well-watered vegetation luxuriantly burgeoning, are associated with

the assembled tribes of Israel. Many of these terms are introduced in poetry, and it is the striking poetic insets in Numbers that account for much of its distinctive quality among books of the Bible. The more typical convention of biblical literature is to insert a relatively long poem at the end of a book, as happens with the Blessing of Jacob at the end of Genesis and with the Song of Moses at the end of Deuteronomy, or after a climactic narrative event, as in the instance of the Song of the Sea in Exodus. Here, however, we are given snippets of what look like very ancient Hebrew poems at unpredictable points in the narrative, together with one relatively extended sequence of poems (it is not really a single continuous poem), Balaam's oracles, a series of prophecies about Israel's future that is pronounced, unlike any other biblical poetry, by a non-Israelite soothsayer.

It is worth reflecting on the ancient character of the poems and what role that plays in the narrative panorama of Numbers. The first of these (if one excepts God's oracular pronouncement in 12:6–8 to Miriam and Aaron on Moses's unique status as prophet) is a highly fragmentary quotation from a vanished work, the Book of the Battles of YHWH: "Against Waheb in a whirlwind and the Wadis of Arnon, / and the cascade of the wadis that turns down

toward Ar's dwelling, / and clings to Moab's border" (21:14–15). These opaque lines are followed, two verses on, by the Song of the Well: "Rise up, O Well! / Sing out to it. / Well, that captains dug, / the people's nobles delved it, / with a scepter, with their walking stick." No one has offered a convincing explanation of what this is all about, and it is an interesting question why such scraps of old verse should have been incorporated in the Book of Numbers. The French literary critic Roland Barthes, in a much discussed essay, once provocatively claimed that many details of material reality in realist fiction are introduced not to signify anything or to serve any function of plot or theme but solely to invoke the category of the real, to produce a "reality effect." In a roughly analogous way, I would like to propose that these fragments of old poems are introduced into the narrative of Numbers at least in part in order to produce an "antiquity effect." There is no way of knowing whether Hebrew audiences in, say, the ninth century B.C.E. were still familiar with the Book of the Battles of YHWH, or whether it was already a lost work, surviving only in remembered fragments or perhaps tag ends of manuscript. The point, in any case, of the fragmentary quotation, triggered in context by the geographical references, would have been to evoke a distant

moment in early Israelite history, suffused with the aura of the historical era of the story's setting in the thirteenth century B.C.E. One may surmise that the Book of the Battles of YHWH was deemed too anthropomorphic or too mythological in character to be included in the canon that was evolving, perhaps (to judge by the title) featuring a warrior-god wielding lightning as his weapon, as in some of the Psalms and in Ugaritic poetry, leading the assault against Israel's enemies. The enigmatic lines cited from this ancient text conjure up an era of fierce martial energies when Israel first established itself among the peoples of Canaan as a conquering nation. (The early-twentieth-century Hebrew poet Saul Tchernikhovsky would capture something of the spirit of this era by referring to the primordial deity of the Hebrews in a programmatically Nietzschean poem as "El, god of the conquerors of Canaan in a whirlwind.") The Song of the Well might possibly recall a particular incident of discovering water in the wilderness, but, more prominently, it evokes a whole nomadic way of life in the desert, and in its extreme brevity, it looks more like the refrain of an old song than the complete text.

Later in chapter 21 (verses 27–30), a third ancient poem is introduced, beginning with the words "Come to Heshbon, let it stand built, / may the city of Sihon

be unshaken." What is striking about this particular text is that it is explicitly presented as coming from a non-Israelite source: it is said to be what the "rhapsodes" (*moshlim*) say; these would be West Semitic, possibly trans-Jordanian, bards of unspecified national identity, and the burden of their song is a celebration of the predominance of the Amorite city Heshbon over Moab that has no direct connection with Israelite history. These lines (which become somewhat obscure toward the end) are either a Hebrew translation of a foreign poem or a citation of a poem from a language so closely cognate with Hebrew that it required only minor adaptation. Given the foreign provenance of the poem, it is an especially striking instance of an antiquity effect, taking the story of the approach of the Israelite masses to the eastern border of Canaan back to a half-remembered time when many kingdoms rose and fell in this region.

The brilliant centerpiece among these citations of archaic poetry is the oracles of Balaam (chapters 23 and 24), which follow the story of Balaam and his she-ass, tracing a cunning network of analogies to it. That story has often been characterized as a folktale, and there are no other instances of talking animals in the historical narratives of the Bible (the only other candidate, the serpent in the Garden story, belongs to

the primeval and hence more mythological phase of biblical literature). Especially because, according to prevalent preconceptions, there is no humor in the Bible, it should be noted that this story is quite funny. The humor serves the purposes of a monotheistic satire of pagan notions of the professional seer with independent powers to curse or bless: Balaam the celebrated visionary cannot see the sword-wielding divine messenger who is plainly visible to his ass, and he is reduced to spluttering frustration, finally engaging in an angry argument with his beast of burden. Balaam then plays the role of the ass whose eyes, and mouth, are opened by God vis-à-vis the thrice frustrated, and understandably fuming, Moabite king Balak, to whom Balaam's previous role as imperceptive satiric butt is assigned in this second story.

The very figure of Balaam is part of the antiquity effect cultivated in this narrative. This selfsame soothsayer is the principal character in an inscription discovered in Jordan in 1967, written in a language that is a close relative of Hebrew, with Aramaic elements, and dating from the eighth century B.C.E.; and so we may infer that he was known as a seer of fabled powers in the traditions of this region, perhaps going back to tales told centuries earlier. His

appearance in Numbers, pronouncing blessings on Israel in lofty poetic language, sets this story of Israel on the threshold of its entrance into the land in the large context of the archaic traditions of the region. It is an Aramean prophet, summoned from "the eastern mountains," who beholds from a promontory the vast array of the tribes of Israel (a vivid narrative realization of the dry census figures at the beginning of the book) and projects spatial into temporal vision, prophesying the future greatness of Israel:

> [F]rom the top of the crags do I see them
> and from the hills do I gaze on them.
> Look, a people that dwells apart,
> amongst nations it is not reckoned.
> Who has numbered the dust of Jacob,
> who counted the issue of Israel?
> (23:9–10)

The archaic coloration of Balaam's oracles is nicely conveyed through the names he uses for the

deity. Balaam in the poems refers to God once, near the beginning of the first oracle, as YHWH, but then God is variously invoked as El, Shaddai, and Elyon, all names of deities from the Canaanite pantheon that have been, one might say, co-opted by the Hebrew monotheists. Balaam expresses his own identity as a seer schooled in the lore of West Semitic polytheists by using animal imagery for God (as the Psalms do), representing Him charging against Israel's enemies with "wild ox's antlers." And yet, this pagan prophet, both through the ingenious turns of the story and through the poetry that is put in his mouth, has been enlisted in the monotheistic cause. All prophetic utterance, all curses and blessings, come from YHWH alone: "What can I hex that El has not hexed, / and what can I doom that the LORD has not doomed?" (23:8). His prophecies about Israel move from sheer multitudinousness to martial fierceness—the people ravening like a lion, smashing the bones and crushing the loins of its foes—to a pacific vision of palm groves and gardens by a river followed by concluding reprise of martial imagery. Instructively, the sequence of oracles ends not with Israel but with a rapid panorama, couched in rather obscure vatic language, of sundry nations of the region plummeting to destruction. Once again, this chronicle of IsraeI poised for the conquest

of the land God has promised it is set into an ancient world, whether remembered or reinvented through scraps of inherited literary tradition, where kingdoms rise and fall in the long reaches of history.

In the end, there are complementary parallels, counterpoints, and also strong tensions between the Priestly sections of the Book of Numbers and its narrative and poetic passages. The Priestly writers above all seek to establish a vision of order and stability—through the intricate system of laws regulating personal behavior and cultic practice, through the long lists of numbers and names, through the representation of the grand order of march of the tribes. They aspire to an ideal of Israel as a holy people, bound by Priestly ordinances, that is altogether unique among the nations of the earth. The poetry Balaam utters also registers the idea of "a people that dwells apart," yet his oracles, like the surrounding narrative, clearly see Israel as part of the unfolding history of the whole region. This is a theater in which great kingdoms have come and gone, long before the arrival of Israel: the biblical self-perception of the Israelite nation as a latecomer to the historical scene is palpably present here. Now, at this reported moment in the thirteenth century B.C.E., it is Israel's turn to establish itself through conquest. As the concluding

chapters of Numbers take up issues of inheritance and the division of the land, and as the departure of Moses is announced, the narrative has prepared us for the defining moment of the crossing of the Jordan, with Joshua in command.

CHAPTER 1

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of
Sinai in the Tent of Meeting on the first of the second
month in the second year of their going out from
Egypt, saying, [2]“Count the heads of all the community
of the Israelites by their clans, by their fathers’ houses,
according to the number of names, every male by their
heads. [3]From twenty years old and up, everyone who
goes out in the army in Israel, you shall reckon them
by their battalions, you and Aaron. [4]And with you let
there be a man from each tribe, each man the head of
his father’s house. [5]And these are the names of the
men who will stand with you: for Reuben, Elizur son
of Shedeur; [6]for Simeon, Shelumiel son of
Zurishaddai; [7]for Judah, Nahshon son of Amminadab;
[8]for Issachar, Nethanel son of Zuar; [9]for Zebulun,
Eliab son of Helon; [10]for the sons of Joseph—for
Ephraim, Elishama son of Ammihud, for Manasseh,
Gamaliel son of Pedahzur; [11]for Benjamim, Abidan
son of Gideoni; [12]for Dan, Ahiezer son of
Ammishaddai; [13]for Asher, Pagiel son of Ochran; [14]for

Gad, Eliasaph son of Deuel; [15]for Naphtali, Ahira son
of Enan. [16]These are the ones called from the
community, chieftains of their fathers' tribes, they are
the heads of the kin-groups of Israel." [17]And Moses,
and Aaron with him, took these men who had been
marked out by name. [18]And all the community they
assembled on the first of the second month, and they
were affiliated by their clans, by their fathers' houses
according to the number of names, from twenty years
old and up, by their heads, [19]as the LORD had charged
Moses, and he made a reckoning of them in the
Wilderness of Sinai.

[20]And the sons of Reuben, Israel's firstborn, those born
to them by their clans, by their fathers' houses,
according to the number of names, by their heads,
every male from twenty years old and up, everyone
who went out in the army, [21]their reckoning for the
tribe of Reuben, forty-six thousand five hundred. [22]For
the sons of Simeon, those born to them by their clans,
by their fathers' houses according to the number of
names, by their heads, every male from twenty years
old and up, everyone who went out in the army, [23]their
reckoning for the tribe of Simeon, fifty-nine thousand
three hundred. [24]For the sons of Gad, those born to

them by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and up, everyone who went out in the army, [25]their reckoning for the tribe of Gad, forty-five thousand six hundred and fifty. [26]For the sons of Judah, those born to them by their clans, by their fathers' houses according to the number of names, from twenty years old and up, everyone who went out in the army, [27]those reckoned for the tribe of Judah, seventy-four thousand six hundred. [28]For the sons of Issachar, those born to them by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years and up, everyone who went out in the army, [29]their reckoning for the tribe of Issachar, fifty-four thousand four hundred. [30]For the sons of Zebulun those born to them, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and up, everyone who went out in the army, [31]their reckoning for the tribe of Zebulun, fifty-seven thousand four hundred. [32]For the sons of Joseph—for the sons of Ephraim, those born to them by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and up, everyone who went out in the army, [33]their reckoning for the tribe of Ephraim, forty thousand five hundred. [34]For the sons of Manasseh, those born to them by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according

to the number of names, from twenty years old and up, everyone who went out in the army, [35]their reckoning, for the tribe of Manasseh, thirty-two thousand two hundred. [36]For the sons of Benjamin, those born to them, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and up, everyone who went out in the army, [37]their reckoning, for the tribe of Benjamin thirty-five thousand four hundred. [38]For the sons of Dan, those born to them by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and up, everyone who went out in the army, [39]their reckoning for the tribe of Dan sixty-two thousand seven hundred. [40]For the sons of Asher, those born to them, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and up, everyone who went out in the army, [41]their reckoning for the tribe of Asher forty-one thousand five hundred. [42]The sons of Naphtali, those born to them by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old up, everyone who went out in the army, [43]their reckoning for the tribe of Naphtali, fifty-three thousand four hundred. [44]These are the reckonings that Moses, and Aaron and the chieftains of Israel, made, twelve men, one man for each father's house they were. [45]And all the Israelites who were

reckoned by their fathers' houses, from twenty years old and up, everyone who went out in the army in Israel, [46]all the reckonings came to six hundred three thousand five hundred and fifty. [47]And the Levites by the tribe of their fathers were not reckoned in their midst. [48]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [49]"But the tribe of Levi you shall not reckon, and their heads you shall not count in the midst of the Israelites. [50]And you, make the Levites reckon with the Tabernacle of the Covenant and with all its furnishings and with all that belongs to it. They it is who shall bear the Tabernacle and all its furnishings, and they shall serve it, and around the Tabernacle they shall camp. [51]And when the Tabernacle journeys onward, the Levites shall take it down, and when the Tabernacle camps, the Levites shall set it up, and the stranger who draws near shall be put to death. [52]And the Israelites shall camp each man with his camp and each man with his banner by their battalions. [53]And the Levites shall camp around the Tabernacle of the Covenant, that there be no fury against the community of Israelites, and the Levites shall keep watch over the Tabernacle of the Covenant. [54]And the Israelites did as all that the LORD had charged Moses, thus did they do.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *in the Wilderness*. The Hebrew word represented by these three English words—*bemidbar*—is the prevalent Hebrew title for the book. Numbers, the topical title, derives from the Greek rubric as well as a Hebrew equivalent that appears in the Talmud. In this case, the convention of selecting the first significant word in the text as title fortuitously produces an apt characterization of the book, which is all about Wilderness wanderings and trials and upheavals in that liminal space for the nation in the making.

on the first of the second month in the second year. The Tabernacle was completed one month earlier (Exodus 40:17). Now, after the Priestly legislation that constitutes the Book of Leviticus, and which is not tied to a specific date, the narrative turns its attention outward from the sanctuary to the people and to the organization of a census.

2. *Count the heads.* Literally, "lift the heads." The word for "head" at the end of this verse is not, as here, *roʾsh* but *gulgolet*, which means "poll" and also "skull."

their fathers' houses. The Hebrew *beyt ʾav*, which some render as "patriarchal house," designates a social unit considerably larger than a nuclear family. The "clan" (*mishpaḥah*) would involve a large extended family, or several households of kinfolk. The most reasonable inference—there are differing opinions—is that the *beyt ʾav* encompassed a number of clans, as verse 4 here may suggest, since the head of a *beyt ʾav* is chosen as representative of the whole tribe.

3. *everyone who goes out in the army.* That is, every male eligible for military service. The purpose of the census here is to organize a general military conscription. The journeying from Sinai through the wilderness toward the promised land, about to be initiated after the completion of the Tabernacle in the second year of the Exodus, will necessarily be an extended military campaign. Thus, the Israelite males are to be counted "by their battalions."

you shall reckon them. The root *p-q-d*, which is used again and again in connection with the census, is an all-purpose verb that variously means "to muster," "to tally," "to single out," "to pay special attention to," "to requite," "to appoint," and more. The first two of these meanings are the ones strictly relevant to our passage. This translation uses "reckon" precisely because it is

an English term not restricted to one semantic field and thus able to suggest something of the overlapping senses of the Hebrew verb.

5. *And these are the names.* Jacob Milgrom notes that scarcely any of the names of the tribal representatives appear elsewhere in biblical literature and that none shows the theophoric suffix *yah*. He infers from this that the list reflects an authentically ancient tradition.

10. *for the sons of Joseph.* In keeping with Jacob's deathbed promise to Joseph that Joseph's two sons would be as his own sons, the descendants of the two sons of Joseph are given tribal status (and are elsewhere designated as "half-tribes"). Since the tribe of Levi will not be included in the census or the conscription, this device preserves the number of twelve for the tribes.

16. *kin-groups.* Although there is scholarly consensus that the Hebrew term *ʾelef* (in numerical contexts, "a thousand") indicates a group of kinfolk, the size and configuration of the group and its relation to father's house and clan remain uncertain.

18. *affiliated.* The unusual Hebrew verb, a reflexive form of the root that means "to give birth," is interpreted by Rashi, and confirmed by modern scholarship, to have the sense of sorting out birth lines or pedigrees.

21. *their reckoning.* Although the Hebrew *pequdim* may look like a past participle ("those reckoned"), this form is also used to express an abstraction. Compare *zequnim*, "old age," from the root *z-q-n*, "to be old."

44. *These are the reckonings.* The verb of which this noun is object ("made") is a cognate to the accusative in the Hebrew, *paqad*, "reckoned."

49. *But.* The Hebrew *ʾakh* has a focusing and emphatic effect as well as an adversative sense—"yet," "only."

50. *make the Levites reckon with the Tabernacle.* The obvious sense of the verb is "to appoint" or "to install," but the Hebrew puns on the term *paqad* used for the census, recasting it here in the *hiphʿil* or causative conjugation: you are not to reckon the Levites, but instead you must make them reckon with the Tabernacle, confer upon them the responsibility of its maintenance.

The emphasis on the central role of the Levites will continue through much of the Book of Numbers.

51. *the stranger who draws near.* As is always the case in specifically cultic contexts, "stranger," *zar*, has the technical meaning of anyone unfit to enter the sanctum, that is, a layman.

52. *banner.* This is the consensus of postbiblical Hebrew tradition for understanding the term *degel*. But Baruch Levine summons considerable comparative Semitic evidence, seconded by the Aramaic Targums, to argue that *degel* actually designates a "sociomilitary unit" (perhaps something like "regiment"?). It is also possible that a banner used to identify the military unit then became interchangeable through metonymy with the unit—roughly, the way "regimentals" in English came to be the term for the uniform of the regiment.

53. *that there be no fury.* The Hebrew term for "fury," *qetsef*, means, at least etymologically, "foam," as in a mouth foaming with rage. The fury in question is God's punitive fury that would be triggered by any violation of the sacred space of the sanctuary.

the Levites shall keep watch. The Hebrew again has a cognate accusative, *shamru mishmeret*. Some understand the meaning to be that the Levites will attend to all the necessary maintenance of the Tabernacle, and *mishmeret* does sometimes have that meaning. But given the fact that the assignment of the Levites to the Tabernacle is in lieu of military service, and given the just stated need for them to ward off the unfit and thus prevent the unleashing of God's fury, the sense of a military watch or vigil seems more likely: the Levites are cast as a kind of elite corps guarding the sanctuary.

CHAPTER 2

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying,
[2]“Every man by his banner with standards for his
father’s house, shall the Israelites camp opposite,
round the Tent of Meeting they shall camp.” [3]And
those that camp to the very east, the banner of the
camp of Judah by its divisions, and the chieftain of the
Judahites, Nahshon son of Amminadab. [4]And his
division and those reckoned with them, seventy-four
thousand six hundred. [5]And those camped by him, the
tribe of Issachar, and the chieftain of the Issacharites,
Nethanel son of Zuar. [6]And his division and those
reckoned with it, fifty-four thousand four hundred.
[7]The tribe of Zebulun, and the chieftain of the
Zebulunites Eliab son of Helon. [8]And his division and
those reckoned with it, seventy-five thousand four
hundred. [9]All the reckoning for the camp of Judah one
hundred eighty-six thousand four hundred by their
divisions. They shall journey first. [10]The banner of the
camp of Reuben to the south by their divisions, and
the chieftain of the Reubenites Elizur son of Shedeur.

[11]And his division and those reckoned with it, forty-six thousand five hundred. [12]And those who camped by him, the tribe of Simeon, and the chieftain of the Simeonites Shelumiel son of Zurishaddai. [13]And his division and their reckoning, fifty-nine thousand three hundred. [14]And the tribe of Gad, and the chieftain of the Gadites Eliasaph son of Reuel. [15]And his division and their reckoning with them, forty-five thousand six hundred and fifty. [16]All the reckoning for the camp of Reuben, one hundred fifty thousand four hundred and fifty by their divisions. And they shall journey second. [17]And the Tent of Meeting, the camp of the Levites, shall journey in the midst of the camps. As they camp, so shall they journey, each in his own place, by their banners. [18]The banner of the camp of Ephraim by their divisions to the west, and the chieftain of the Ephraimites Elishama son of Ammihud. [19]And his division and their reckoning, forty thousand five hundred. [20]And by him the camp of Manasseh, and the chieftain of the Manassehites Gamaliel son of Pedahzur. [21]And his division and those reckoned with it thirty-two thousand two hundred. [22]And the tribe of Benjamin, and the chieftain of the Benjaminites Abidan son of Gideoni. [23]And his division and their reckoning thirty-five thousand four hundred. [24]And the reckoning for the camp of Ephraim one hundred eight

thousand one hundred by their divisions. And they shall journey third. [25]The banner of the camp of Dan to the north by their divisions, and the chieftain of the Danites Ahiezer son of Ammishaddai. [26]And his division and their reckoning, sixty-two thousand seven hundred. [27]And those who camped by him, the tribe of Asher, and the chieftain of the Asherites Pagiel son of Ochran. [28]And his division and their reckoning forty-one thousand five hundred. [29]And the tribe of Naphtali, and the chieftain of the Naphtalites Ahira son of Enan. [30]And his division and their reckoning, fifty-three thousand four hundred. [31]All the reckoning for the camp of Dan one hundred fifty-seven thousand six hundred. They shall journey last by their banners. [32]These are the reckonings of the Israelites by their fathers' houses, all the reckonings of the camps by their divisions, six hundred three thousand five hundred and fifty. [33]But the Levites were not reckoned in the midst of the Israelites, as the LORD had charged Moses. [34]And the Israelites did as all that the LORD had charged Moses, thus they camped by their banners and thus they journeyed, each man by his clans, together with his father's house.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Every man by his banner with standards for his father's house*. After the preceding census lists, which provide the names of the tribal chieftains and then the head count of each of the tribes, with a stress on the census as a means of implementing military conscription, we are given a plan for the marching order of the Israelite forces, each tribe a military unit carrying its distinctive insignia.

round the Tent of Meeting they shall camp. The marching formation is a protective square, meant to ward off potential assaults from all directions, with the Tent of Meeting, the sacred locus of encounter between God and Moses and the site of the cult, inside the square.

3. *to the very east.* The Hebrew uses two successive synonyms for "east" (a procedure not followed for the other three directions), evidently with an effect of emphasis.

by its divisions. The Hebrew *tseva'ot* (singular *tsava'*) has elsewhere been rendered as "battalions" in order to convey the martial force of the term. In the present context, however, "battalion" would be too small a unit because the numbers involved run into tens of thousands, and hence "division" seems a better English approximation.

4. *those reckoned with them.* Although the language for each of the tribes is unvarying boilerplate, as befits a list of this sort, in some instances the text says "reckoned with them" and in some "reckoned with him." Abraham ibn Ezra rightly notes that there is no difference of meaning whatever—biblical Hebrew indifferently construes collectives as singular or plural. Similarly, the term rendered throughout in this passage as "fathers' houses" is literally "fathers' house," though if linguistic usage followed logic, which it very often does not, the phrase would be either "fathers' houses" or "father's house."

9. *They shall journey first.* Baruch Levine is surely right in arguing that here the verb "journey" (*yisa'u*) has the military sense of "march." But, by and large, biblical Hebrew adopts general terms for technical usages rather than coining specialized technical terms—compare "reckoned" for "mustered"—and this translation seeks to preserve that effect.

14. *Reuel.* In 1:14, 7:42, and 10:20, this name appears as “Deuel.” The letters indicating *d* and *r* are similar in form and hence there are sometimes scribal errors in transcribing them. The more likely form is Reuel.

17. *the Tent of Meeting, the camp of the Levites.* In the received Hebrew text, these two phrases appear to be in apposition, yielding a rather curious characterization of the Tent of Meeting. The second phrase is best understood as standing in a relation of metonymy to the first: the camp of the Levites surrounds the Tent of Meeting, serving as a protective extension to it and thus borrowing its name. This formulation sustains the notion put forth in 1:50–53 that the Levites fulfill a kind of military function in guarding the Tent of Meeting against all incursions. Thus in the marching plan for the army, the Levites inside the square act as an elite corps or palace guard.

33. *But the Levites were not reckoned in the midst of the Israelites.* This notation is in keeping with the differential instruction concerning the Levites in 1:49. The military role of the Levites is to serve as guards of the sanctuary, and as such they are not counted in the muster of the army that is assembled to confront external threats.

CHAPTER 3

[1]And these are the generations of Aaron and Moses on
the day the LORD spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai.
[2]And these are the names of the sons of Aaron: the
firstborn Nadab, and Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar.
[3]These are the names of the sons of Aaron, the
anointed priests whom he installed to serve as priests.
[4]And Nadab and Abihu died before the LORD when
they brought forward unfit fire before the LORD in the
Wilderness of Sinai, and sons they did not have, and
Eleazar and Ithamar served as priests in the lifetime of
Aaron their father.

[5]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [6]"Bring
forward the tribe of Levi, and set them before Aaron
the priest, that they may serve him. [7]And they shall
keep his watch and the watch of all the community
before the Tent of Meeting to do the work of the
Tabernacle. [8]And they shall keep watch over all the
furnishings of the Tent of Meeting and the watch of

the Israelites to do the work of the Tabernacle. [9]And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and to his sons, wholly given shall they be from the Israelites. [10]And Aaron and his sons you shall single out, that they keep their priesthood, and the stranger who draws near shall be put to death." [11]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [12]"And as for Me, look, I have taken the Levites from the midst of the Israelites in place of every firstborn womb-breach of the Israelites, that the Levites be Mine. [13]For Mine is every firstborn. On the day I struck down every firstborn in the land of Egypt I consecrated to Me every firstborn in Israel from man to beast—Mine they shall be. I am the LORD."

[14]And the LORD spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai, saying, [15]"Reckon the Levites by their fathers' houses, by their clans, every male from a month old and up you shall reckon them." [16]And Moses reckoned them according to the word of the LORD as he had been charged. [17]And these were the Levites by their names: Gershon and Kohath and Merari. [18]And these are the names of the sons of Gershon by their clans: Libni and Shimei. [19]And the sons of Kohath by their clans: Amram and Izhar, Hebron and Uzziel. [20]And the sons of Merari by their clans: Mahli and Mushi. These

are the clans of Levi by their fathers' houses. [21]To Gershon, the Libnite clan and the Shimeite clan, these are the Gershonite clans. [22]Their reckoning, in the number of every male from a month old and up, their reckoning is seven thousand five hundred. [23]The Gershonite clans shall camp behind the Tabernacle to the west. [24]And the chieftain of the father's house for the Gershonite, Eliasaph son of Lael. [25]And the watch of the Gershonites in the Tent of Meeting, the Tabernacle and the Tent, its cover and the screen of the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, [26]and the hangings of the court and the screen of the entrance to the court which is around the Tabernacle and the altar and its cords for all its service. [27]And to Kohath, the Amramite clan and the Izharite clan and the Hebronite clan and the Uzzielite clan, these are the Kohathite clans. [28]In the number of every male from one month old and up, eight thousand six hundred, keepers of the watch of the sanctuary. [29]The clans of the Kohathites shall camp on the side of the Tabernacle to the south. [30]And the chieftain of the father's house for the clans of the Kohathite, Elizaphan son of Uzziel. [31]And their watch is the ark and the table and the lamp stand and the altars and the sacred vessels with which they shall serve and the screen and all its work. [32]And the chieftain of the chieftains of the Levites is Eleazar son

of Aaron the priest, the charge of those who keep the watch of the sanctuary. [33]To the Merarite, the Mahlite clan and the Mushite clan, these are the Merarite clans. [34]And their reckoning, in the number of every male from one month old and up, six thousand two hundred. [35]And the chieftain of the father's house for the clans of the Merarite, Zuriel son of Abihail. On the side of the Tabernacle they shall camp to the north. [36]And the charge of the Merarites, the boards of the Tabernacle and its bars and its posts and its sockets and all its furnishings and all its work, [37]and the posts of the court all around and their sockets and their pegs and their cords. [38]And those who camped before the Tabernacle to the east before the Tent of Meeting to the east, Moses and Aaron and his sons, keeping the watch of the Tabernacle, for the watch of the Israelites, and the stranger who draws near shall be put to death. [39]All the reckonings of the Levites that Moses and Aaron reckoned according to the word of the LORD by their clans, every male from a month old and up—twenty-two thousand.

[40]And the LORD said to Moses, "Reckon every firstborn male of the Israelites from a month old and up and count the number of their names. [41]And you

shall take the Levites for Me—I am the LORD—
instead of every firstborn among the Israelites, and the
cattle of the Levites instead of every firstborn among
the cattle of the Israelites." [42]And Moses reckoned as
the LORD had charged him every firstborn among the
Israelites. [43]And all the firstborn males in the number
of names from a month old and up in their reckoning
came to twenty-two thousand two hundred and
seventy-three. [44]And the LORD said to Moses, saying,
[45]"Take the Levites instead of every firstborn among
the Israelites and the cattle of the Levites instead of
their cattle, and the Levites shall be Mine. I am the
LORD. [46]And for the redemption of the two hundred
seventy-three of the firstborn of the Israelites who
exceed the number of the Levites, [47]you shall take five
shekels for each head, by the sanctuary shekel, you
shall take, twenty *gerahs* to the shekel, [48]and you shall
give the silver to Aaron and his sons as redemption for
those among them who exceed the number." [49]And
Moses took the redemption silver from those who
exceeded the number of those redeemed by the
Levites. [50]From the firstborn of the Israelites he took
the silver, one thousand three hundred and sixty-five
shekels, by the sanctuary shekel. [51]And Moses gave the
redemption silver to Aaron and to his sons according

to the word of the LORD, as the LORD had charged Moses.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And these are the generations of Aaron and Moses*. Having completed the marching formation of the eleven tribes, the writer now turns to the tribe of Levi, listing its genealogy and its special duties. In keeping with his Priestly perspective, considerably more space is devoted to the Levites than to any of the other tribes.

4. *brought forward.* The Hebrew verb *hiqriv* has the overlapping meanings of "bring forward," "bring near," "present," and "sacrifice." In cultic contexts it suggests bringing before the divine presence or to the altar, and so it is appropriately followed here by "before the LORD." Compare verse 6, "bring forward the tribe of Levi."

unfit fire. Literally, "strange fire." In relation to the cult, "strange" means "unconsecrated," "unfit." Compare "the stranger [the same word in the Hebrew] who draws near" in verse 10.

8. *keep . . . the watch of the Israelites*. The medieval commentators, like their modern heirs, are divided on the interpretation of "keep watch" (*shamru mishmeret*) and how it relates to the Israelites. Rashi prefers the unmartial sense of *mishmeret* as "maintenance" and explains that the sundry functions of the Tabernacle were necessarily the actions of the Levites on behalf of the entire community of Israelites. Abraham ibn Ezra, like the present translation, prefers the military sense: "they will keep watch that no Israelite touch the Tabernacle." The likelihood that the meaning here is "to guard against" is supported by the recurrence in the next verse of the formula, "the stranger who draws near shall be put to death."

9. *wholly given shall they be.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "given, given shall they be." "Given" in this context obviously means "dedicated,"

"appointed," but again the translation seeks to reflect the stylistic tendency of biblical Hebrew to use general terms for technical senses.

12. *that the Levites be Mine.* There may be an implicit etymological pun here. "Levite" (*lewi*) is the name of Jacob's second son and hence of the tribe, but the name could suggest the verbal stem *l-w-h*, "to accompany," "to attach to," which is the role of the Levites vis-à-vis the deity.

15. *every male from a month old and up.* Unlike the other tribes, whose census is the vehicle of an explicit military conscription and hence based on the age of twenty and over, the Levites are dedicated to God for their whole lives. The count begins not from birth but from one month because given the prevalence of infant mortality, only after a month is the child regarded as a viable person (an explanation duly noted by several of the medieval commentators).

16. *according to the word of the* LORD. The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "by the mouth of the LORD." Jacob Milgrom's proposal that the phrase refers not to divine command but to oracle has not found general acceptance. In verse 51, this phrase appears to be in apposition with "as the LORD had charged."

41. *instead of every firstborn among the Israelites.* This injunction picks up the idea enunciated in Exodus 13 and elsewhere that, after the rescue of the Israelite firstborn in Egypt, some form of "redemption" or substitution for the firstborn was owed to God. Here the Levites, dedicated from infancy to the divine cult, serve as substitutes. Behind this law stands an archaic background in which cultic functions were performed by the firstborn instead of by a priestly caste.

46. *exceed the number.* The concept of "number" is in this context implied by the Hebrew verb *'adaf*, which means to "go beyond the limit," "spill over the edge," "exceed."

47. *you shall take five shekels for each head.* How would the Israelites know who were the 273 who exceeded the number of the Levites and hence had to pay this price of redemption? Several early rabbinic sources plausibly suggest that a lottery was conducted to select the 273.

by the sanctuary shekel. “Shekel” means “weight” and is not a coin, coinage coming into Israelite life only in the Late Biblical period. The sanctuary shekel, about 11.4 grams, was heavier than the commercial shekel.

48. *the silver.* Although this word has the approximate sense of “money” (the meaning it frequently has in later Hebrew), what is given to Aaron and his sons are weights of silver, so it is preferable to render the term as “silver.”

CHAPTER 4

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying,
[2]"Count the heads of the Kohathites from the midst of
the Levites by their clans, by their fathers' houses.
[3]From thirty years old up till fifty years old, all who
come to the army to do the task in the Tent of
Meeting. [4]This is the work of the Kohathites in the
Tent of Meeting, the holy of holies. [5]And Aaron shall
come, and his sons, when the camp journeys onward,
and take down the covering of the screen and cover
with it the Ark of the Covenant. [6]And they shall place
over it a cover of ocher-dyed skin and spread a
garment of pure indigo above it and put in its poles.
[7]And on the table of the Presence they shall spread an
indigo garment and place on it the bowls and the ladles
and the jars and the libation flasks, and the perpetual
bread shall be upon it. [8]And they shall spread over
them a crimson garment and cover it in a covering of
ocher-dyed skin and put in its poles. [9]And they shall
take an indigo garment and cover the lamp stand of the
light and its lamps and its tongs and its fire-pans and

all its oil vessels with which they serve. [10]And they shall place it and all its vessels in a covering of ocher-dyed skin and place it on a beam. [11]And over the golden altar they shall spread an indigo garment and cover it with a covering of ocher-dyed skin and put in its poles. [12]And they shall take all the vessels of service with which they serve in the sanctuary and place them in an indigo garment and cover them with a covering of ocher-dyed skin and place on a beam. [13]And they shall clear the ashes from the altar and spread over it a purple garment. [14]And they shall place on it all its vessels with which they serve upon it, the fire-pans and the flesh-hooks and the scrapers and the basins, all the vessels of the altar, and they shall spread over it a covering of ocher-dyed skin and put in its poles. [15]And Aaron, and his sons, shall finish covering the sanctuary and all the vessels of the sanctuary when the camp journeys onward, and afterward the Kohathites shall come to carry, so that they do not touch the holy and die. These make up the carriage of the Kohathites in the Tent of Meeting. [16]And what is appointed for Eleazar son of Aaron the priest—the oil for the lamp and the aromatic incense and the perpetual grain offering and the anointing oil, what is appointed for all the Tabernacle and all that is in it, in the sanctuary and in its vessels."

17 And the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron,
saying, 18 “Do not let the tribe of the clans of the
Kohathites be cut off from the midst of the Levites.
19 And this shall you do for them, that they live and not
die when they draw near the holy of holies: Aaron and
his sons shall come and set every man of them at his
work and at his carriage. 20 And they shall not come in
to see the sanctuary for even a moment and die.”

21 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 22 “Count the
heads of the Gershonites, too, by their fathers’ houses,
by their clans. 23 From thirty years old up till fifty years
old you shall reckon them, all who do army service to
do the work in the Tent of Meeting. 24 This is the work
of the Gershonite clans, for work and for carriage:
25 They shall carry the curtains of the Tabernacle and
the Tent of Meeting, its covering and the covering of
ocher-dyed skin that is over it above and the screen of
the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. 26 And the panels
of the court and the screen for the entrance to the gate
of the court which is all around the Tabernacle and the
altar, and their cords, and all the vessels for their
service and all that is done for them, and they shall do
the work. 27 By the word of Aaron and his sons shall be
all the work of the Gershonites, for all their carriage

and for all their work, and you shall oversee them watchfully in all their carriage. [28]This is the work of the Gershonite clans in the Tent of Meeting, and their watch is in the hand of Ithamar son of Aaron the priest. [29]The Merarites by their clans, by their fathers' houses, you shall reckon them. [30]From thirty years old up till fifty years old you shall reckon them, all who come to the army to do the work of the Tent of Meeting. [31]And this is the watch of their carriage for all their work in the Tent of Meeting: the boards of the Tabernacle and its bars and its posts and its sockets, [32]and the posts of the court all around and their sockets and their pegs and their cords, for all their vessels and for all their work. And by name you shall reckon the vessels of their carriage watch. [33]This is the work of the Merarites for all their work in the Tent of Meeting, in the hand of Ithamar son of Aaron the priest."

[34]And Moses, and Aaron and the chieftains of the community with him, reckoned the Kohathites by their clans by their fathers' houses, [35]from thirty years old up till fifty years old, all who came to the army, to the work in the Tent of Meeting. [36]And their reckoning by their clans was two thousand seven hundred and fifty. [37]This is the reckoning of the Kohathite clans, all who

worked in the Tent of Meeting, which Moses, and
Aaron with him, reckoned, by the LORD's word,
through the hand of Moses. [38]And the reckoning of the
Gershonites by their clans and by their fathers' houses,
[39]from thirty years old up till fifty years, all who came
to the army, to the work in the Tent of Meeting. [40]And
their reckoning by their clans, by their fathers' houses,
came to two thousand six hundred and thirty. [41]This is
the reckoning of the Gershonites, all who worked in
the Tent of Meeting, which Moses, and Aaron with
him, reckoned by the LORD's word. [42]And the
reckoning of the Merarite clans, by their clans, by their
fathers' houses, [43]from thirty years old up till fifty years
old, all who came to the army, to the work in the Tent
of Meeting. [44]And their reckoning by their clans came
to three thousand two hundred. [45]This is the reckoning
of the Merarite clans that Moses, and Aaron with him,
reckoned by the LORD's word, through the hand of
Moses. [46]All the reckoning by which Moses, and
Aaron and the chieftains of Israel with him, reckoned
the Levites by their clans and by their fathers' houses,
[47]from thirty years old up till fifty years old, all who
came to do the work and the work of carriage in the
Tent of Meeting. [48]And their reckoning came to eight
thousand five hundred and eighty. [49]By the LORD's
word did he reckon them through the hand of Moses,

every man according to his work and according to his carriage, and his reckoning was as the LORD had charged Moses.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *From thirty years old up till fifty years old*. The Book of Numbers incorporates three different traditions regarding the beginning age of levitical service. The notion of the present unit that it begins at thirty seems to reflect a sense that, in contradistinction to general military service, which begins at twenty, the maintenance of the sanctuary as it is transported requires elaborate training or perhaps something like spiritual maturity.

all who come to the army. Throughout this chapter, the Hebrew word for "army," *tzava'*, is a kind of pun. The term has a secondary meaning of "service," which is the primary sense in this context, but its repeated use reminds us that the Levites' cultic service is an equivalent to fulfilling military obligations.

5. *take down the covering of the screen.* In both anthropological and literary terms, the key to this entire passage is the idea of protective envelope, barrier, covering. Not only are these terms used repeatedly but a rich vocabulary of synonyms is deployed: *mikhseh* and *kisui* (both meaning "covering"), *masakh* ("screen"), and, for the sheets of brilliant cloth used to wrap the sacred objects, *beged*, "garment." This last term may reflect an anthropomorphizing sense of solicitous concern for the sacralia, but, more pervasively, the extravagant emphasis on coverings (which may be more the literary articulation of a theological idea than a record of the historical experience of early Israel) is driven by a widespread ancient Near Eastern notion of the terrific danger of the holy for all but the consecrated priests. Thus the transportation of the sanctuary from place to place, its disassembling and reassembling, was a moment of acute peril, for which our passage makes elaborate provision. Note how God exhorts Moses and Aaron (verse 18) to

protect the Kohathites from being "cut off"—here, evidently, struck dead—by making sure not only that they avoid direct contact with the sacred objects but also that they not look at the sacred. This, too, is a taboo registered in other ancient Near Eastern texts. Only the consecrated Aaronite priests, not the Levites, may touch or behold the sacred objects.

7. *the table of the Presence.* This is a common ellipsis for the "table of the Bread of the Presence," that is the table on which the twelve loaves of "perpetual bread" (changed weekly by the officiants of the sanctuary) were placed.

19. *at his work and at his carriage.* These paired terms are repeated through the passage. Though some scholars have proposed that they are a hendiadys—two terms bound together to indicate one concept—it is more plausible to see them as the two complementary labors of the Levites: *ʿavodah*, "work," would be taking apart the sanctuary and perhaps also reassembling it; *masaʾ*, "carriage," is the task of carrying it from place to place. It is misleading to render *ʿavodah* as "service" because hard physical labor is entailed, and only in later Hebrew does that noun come to mean the temple service.

20. *even a moment.* The Hebrew *kevalaʿ* (the verbal root means "to swallow" or "to destroy") is obscure. The translation follows a proposal of Baruch Levine, who compares the word with its occurrence in Job 7:19, but it should be said that in Job the verb, as an indication of a very brief moment, has a specific object: "You don't let me go [even] while I swallow my spit." One would have to assume, then, that *kevalaʿ* here is an ellipsis for an established idiom invoked more fully in Job, though there are scant grounds for confidence in that assumption. Others construe it as "dismantling," but that seems a long stretch from the basic meaning of "swallow" or "destroy."

CHAPTER 5

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Charge the Israelites, that they send out from the camp everyone infected with skin blanch and everyone suffering from genital flux and everyone defiled by a corpse. [3]Whether male or female, you shall send them off, outside the camp you shall send them, that they do not defile their camps in whose midst I abide.” [4]And thus did the Israelites do, and they sent them outside the camp. As the LORD had spoken to Moses, thus the Israelites did.

[5]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [6]“Speak to the Israelites: Should man or woman commit any of the human offenses, to betray the trust of the LORD, that person shall bear guilt. [7]And they shall confess their offenses which they committed, and he shall render back for his guilt the sum of its principal, and a fifth part of it he shall add to it, and give it to him whom he wronged. [8]And if the man should have no

redeemer to render back to him for his guilt, what is rendered back shall be the LORD's, the priest's, besides the ram of atonement with which he will atone for himself. [9]And every donation for all the sacred offerings of the Israelites that they bring forward to the priest, his shall it be. [10]And a man's sacred offerings shall be his. That which he gives to the priest shall be his."

[11]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [12]"Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'Any man whose wife may stray and betray his trust, [13]and a man lie with her in seed-coupling and it be concealed from her husband's eyes and she hide and be defiled, with no witness against her, and she herself be not apprehended—[14]then a spirit of jealousy may come over him and he will be jealous about his wife, with her being defiled, or a spirit of jealousy may come over him and he will be jealous about his wife, she not being defiled. [15]The man shall bring his wife to the priest and bring her sacrifice for her, a tenth of an *ephah* of barley flour; he shall pour no oil over it nor put frankincense upon it, for it is a grain offering of jealousy, a grain offering of remembrance, a remembering of guilt, [16]and the priest shall bring her

forward and stand her before the LORD. [17]And the
priest shall take holy water in an earthen vessel, and
from the earth that is on the floor of the sanctuary the
priest shall take and put into the water. [18]And the priest
shall stand the woman before the LORD and undo her
hair and place on her palms the grain offering of
remembrance, a grain offering of jealousy it is, and in
the hand of the priest shall be the bitter besetting
water. [19]And the priest shall make her swear and shall
say to the woman: If no man has lain with you and if
you have not strayed in defilement from your husband,
be cleared by this bitter besetting water. [20]And you, if
you have strayed from your husband and if you have
been defiled and a man other than your husband has
put his semen in you. . . . [21]And the priest shall make
the woman swear this oath of imprecation, and the
priest shall say to the woman: May the LORD make
you an imprecation and oath in the midst of your
people through the LORD's making your thigh sag and
your belly swell. [22]And this besetting water shall enter
your innards to swell the belly and to sag the thigh.
And the woman shall say: Amen, amen. [23]And the
priest shall write these imprecations in a record and
wipe them out in the bitter water. [24]And he shall make
the woman drink the bitter besetting water and the
bitter besetting water shall enter her. [25]And the priest

shall take from the woman's hand the grain offering of jealousy and elevate the grain offering before the LORD and bring it forward to the altar. [26]And the priest shall take a handful from the grain offering, its token, and turn it to smoke on the altar and, after, shall make the woman drink the water. [27]Once he has made her drink the water, it shall come about that if she was defiled and betrayed her husband's trust, the besetting water will enter her as bitter and her belly will swell and her thigh sag, and the woman shall become an imprecation in the midst of her people. [28]And if the woman has not been defiled and she is pure, she will be cleared and sown with seed. [29]This is the teaching of jealousy, should a woman stray from her husband and be defiled. [30]Or a man over whom a spirit of jealousy may come and he be jealous about his wife. The priest shall stand her before the LORD and do to her all this teaching, [31]and the man shall be clear of guilt, and that woman shall bear her guilt.'"

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *skin blanch*. This English nonce term reflects the medical uncertainty of the Hebrew disease *tsara'at* (here in an adjectival form for the person suffering from it, *tsaru'a*). The symptoms listed in Leviticus 13–14 make it clear that it

is not leprosy (Hansen's disease), as the older translations have it. Perhaps the term designated a group of diseases because the sundry skin lesions listed in Leviticus do not seem entirely compatible, with indications elsewhere (e.g., Exodus 4:6) that it involved a complete loss of pigmentation. In any case, the disease was regarded as contagious and, as other biblical texts record, required quarantine.

suffering from genital flux. This necessary clarification in translation does not do justice to the extraordinary compactness of the Hebrew, a single syllable, *zav*, "flowing."

by a corpse. Literally, "for a [dead] person," *lanafesh*. All three of these categories of impurity are clearly cultic, not moral. Pathology and death are viewed as contaminants, and the camp of Israel in the wilderness, in which God's presence dwells with a specific locus in the Tabernacle, must be kept free of them.

6. *any of the human offenses, to betray the trust of the* LORD. The Hebrew *ḥato't ha'adam*, "human offenses," is unique to this text, and seems to indicate offenses of one person against another. The primary meaning of *lim'ol ma'al*, "to betray the trust," is to appropriate objects or goods that have been consecrated to the sanctuary. Here, the meaning has been extended to the illicit appropriation of another person's property, which is equally seen as betraying the LORD's trust.

7. *the sum of its principal.* "The sum of" represents the Hebrew particle b^e ("with"), which here has the sense of a price or sum paid for something. "Principal" is the technical monetary sense of the Hebrew *ro'sh* (literally, "head"). The fact that the wrongdoer is to pay back the value of the appropriated goods plus a fine of 20 percent, rather than a fourfold or fivefold restitution, suggests that what may be involved is some sort of embezzlement rather than outright theft.

8. *if the man should have no redeemer.* The most plausible construction is that the man referred to is the wronged person, not the wrongdoer. "Redeemer" has the technical legal sense, as in the search for a redeemer for Naomi's deceased husband in Ruth 4, of a kinsman who can act as a surrogate for a deceased person. The case indicated, then, is one in which the wronged person is no longer alive to receive restitution and there is no relative who can

be given the restitution in his stead. In such a case, the priest, God's agent, becomes the proxy to whom restitution is made.

12. *whose wife may stray and betray his trust.* The law of the wife suspected of adultery is formally linked with the preceding section by the prominent use at the beginning and then repeatedly of the idiom "to betray his trust." Similarly, the repeated characterization of the unfaithful woman as "defiled" verbally links this passage with the opening unit of this chapter concerning defilement of the camp by contact with corpses or diseased persons.

13. *and a man lie with her in seed-coupling.* If the Masoretic vocalization of the text can be trusted, the Hebrew makes "her" the direct object of "lie" ("lay her," "bed her"), a usage that may highlight the brutality of the act. "Seed-coupling," *shikhvat-zeraʿ*, is literally "seed-lying" or perhaps even "layer of seed." In any case, the phrase clearly indicates vaginal penetration with emission of semen.

concealed . . . hide . . . no witness . . . not apprehended. The deployment of overlapping language stresses the clandestine nature of the act of adultery. With no concrete evidence of the sexual betrayal, with no more than his suspicions to go on, the husband is overcome by a fit of jealousy (verse 14) and has recourse to a trial by ordeal.

15. *The man shall bring his wife to the priest.* This troubling and also fascinating ritual is the only clear-cut instance of trial by ordeal in the Bible. It became the basis for a whole tractate of the Talmud, Sotah ("the straying woman"), and with the concern for the status of women in recent scholarship, it has been the subject of voluminous discussion and debate. Apologetic approaches seem questionable. The ritual reflects the strong asymmetry of sexual roles in the biblical worldview: a woman must submit to this ordeal on the mere suspicion of her husband, and the question of the man suspected of adultery is not even raised in the legal system. The ordeal, moreover, is based on a kind of archaic magic, however one seeks to square it with loftier versions of monotheism. Parallels have been noted with the Code of Hammurabi, which provides for an oath by the woman (compare verse 19 here) if her husband accuses her of unfaithfulness, and an ordeal of jumping into a river, sink or swim, if the accusation comes from someone else (compare the prominence of water here). Our passage powerfully records an

ideology of marital relations, but in point of historical fact, there is no way of knowing to what extent it was actually practiced in ancient Israel. It is doubtful whether this was a living legal institution in the Second Temple period, and if the sanctuary setting of the ritual is the Tabernacle, it may even have not been observed in the First Temple period. In any case, it is a vivid male fantasy of testing and exposing sexual "defilement" in a woman.

her sacrifice . . . a tenth of an ephah *of barley flour*. A person seeking some sort of judicial or oracular determination from the sanctuary (understood to be from God through the priest) would have to come with an offering. But in consonance with the somber occasion for this visit to the sanctuary, this is a no-frills grain offering, not the usual semolina flour but barley, and devoid of oil and frankincense. As Rashi, citing Tractate Sotah, sharply puts it, "She did a beast's act, and her sacrifice is a beast's feed."

offering of remembrance, a remembering of guilt. The verbal stem *z-k-r* manifested in these paired nouns refers both to the cognitive act of remembering and to making a record or explicit indication of something. The word for "guilt," *ʿawon*, which can also mean "crime" and even "punishment," is different from the term for "guilt," *ʾasham*, used in verses 6–8.

17. *holy water.* This phrase does not occur elsewhere. It may plausibly be understood, as Abraham ibn Ezra and others have proposed, as a reference to the water in the basins of the sanctuary, set out for the use of the priests in ritual ablution. Two elements, then, of the sanctuary that are binary opposites are joined in the liquid vehicle of the trial by ordeal: water and earth. The latter, *ʿafar* (also "dust" or "dirt"), is not something one would ordinarily drink, and it is associated in biblical usage with mourning (*ʿafar* is placed on the head), and with death ("for dust you are / and to dust shall you return," Genesis 3:19).

18. *undo her hair.* The Hebrew says literally, "undo her head," a transparent metonymy. The loosening of the hair is an act of public shaming, so the woman in effect is exposed and vulnerable before she takes her oath and swallows the potion.

the bitter besetting water. Punning sound-play is crucial in the Hebrew phrase *mey hamarim hameʾararim*. The literal sense of the second of the two Hebrew qualifiers of "water" is "cursing" or "curse-conveying." Verse 27 seems to indicate that the water turns bitter only if the woman fails the trial

by ordeal ("if she . . . betrayed her husband's trust, the besetting water will enter her as bitter"). The ever-acute ibn Ezra proposes that "bitter" is used proleptically, in analogy to "you . . . strip[ped] the naked of their clothes" in Job 22:6. It should be noted that in biblical idiom, bitter water is brackish or salt water that is unfit for drinking.

19. *strayed . . . from your husband*. The Hebrew says literally "strayed under your husband." Some have interpreted this as "under the authority of," a sense of the preposition for which there is scant biblical evidence. One recent interpreter reads it as "in place of," one clear meaning of the Hebrew preposition, but which strains the syntax here. One might infer a symbolic or even sexual image of the husband on top, with the wife "straying" from under him.

20. *And you.* The woman is rhetorically buttonholed by this emphatic initial "you" at the beginning of this statement of the negative alternative of the oath.

put his semen in you. The term for "semen," *shekhovet*, is derived from the verbal stem *sh-k-v*, "to lie," used at the beginning of the passage, and appears to have this technical sexual sense. Its use, together with "seed-coupling" above, may offer support to those commentators who propose that the suspected woman is actually pregnant. Either the husband thinks he has grounds for suspicion that he is not the father (e.g., this wife has been frequently gone from the house at odd hours), or, in a case where he has not been having sex with his wife (whether through mutual estrangement or because he has been away), he thinks he can be certain. Bathsheba and Uriah would be an instance of the second alternative.

21. *And the priest shall make the woman swear.* This clause interrupts the move from the conditional clause of the oath (verse 20) to the consequence clause ("May the LORD make you an imprecation . . .").

your thigh sag and your belly swell. Much futile energy has been devoted to working out what sort of medical symptoms might be indicated. "Belly" is often womb in the Bible, and "thigh" might be a metonymic euphemism for vagina, but not necessarily. In any case, something physically dire immediately happens to the guilty woman after she swallows the potion, and it happens in or around the organs of generation. If in fact she is pregnant,

that could be a miscarriage, the ordeal thus becoming an induced abortion, though this remains uncertain.

22. *this besetting water shall enter your innards.* The verb for entering or coming into is also a biblical idiom for consummated sexual intercourse, so the penetration of the ritual potion into the woman's innards answers to the act of which she has been accused.

23. *these imprecations.* Either the plural is a rhetorical intensification or it reflects the two symptoms, sagging thigh and swollen belly.

26. *its token.* Literally, "its remembrancing," *ʾazkaratah*.

27. *the woman shall become an imprecation.* The ritual, for all its cruelty, does not prescribe a death penalty for the adulterers. (In Genesis 38, Judah's judgment of Tamar presupposes the death penalty for such an act.) The punishment is public shaming and, one may infer, divorce without restitution of her bride-price.

28. *sown with seed.* This is the literal meaning of the Hebrew. If one sustains the assumption that the accused wife is pregnant, the phrase would mean that she retains her pregnancy, now proven to be legitimate, and will be rewarded with progeny. Otherwise, the phrase might suggest that her reward comes in her conceiving afterward by her husband: in this reading, the trial by ordeal would be a means of reconciliation between spouses separated by the husband's suspicion.

29. *This is the teaching.* The Hebrew *torah* means "teaching," "regulation," "prescribed procedure."

31. *and the man shall be clear of guilt, and that woman shall bear her guilt.* The asymmetry between the sexes is vividly summarized in this concluding verse. If the woman should fail the trial by ordeal, she will of course bear her own guilt, as the language of the oath that the priest has imposed on her makes clear. But even if she is proven innocent, the husband incurs no guilt in subjecting her to the ordeal: if he thinks he has grounds for suspicion—indeed, if he is simply caught up Othello-like in a "spirit of jealousy," a

jealous passion—it is his prerogative as husband to make her submit to the ordeal.

CHAPTER 6

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Speak to
the Israelites and say to them: ‘Man or woman, should
anyone act exceptionally to make a nazirite vow to
keep himself apart for the LORD, [3]from both wine
and strong drink he shall keep himself apart, neither
wine vinegar nor liquor vinegar shall he drink, no
grape steepings shall he drink, and grapes, whether
wet or dry, he shall not eat. [4]All the days of his
naziritehood, of anything made from the grapevine,
from seeds to skin, he shall not eat. [5]All the days of his
nazirite vow no razor shall pass over his head, until the
days come to term. That which he sets apart for the
LORD shall be holy, to grow loose the hair on his
head. [6]All the days of his setting apart for the LORD,
he shall not come to a dead person. [7]For his father and
for his mother and for his brother and for his sister he
shall not be defiled for them when they die, for the
crown of his God is on his head. [8]All the days of his
naziritehood, he is holy to the LORD. [9]And should a
dead person die near by him all of a sudden and he

defile his nazirite head, he shall shave his head on the day of his purification, on the seventh day he shall shave it. [10]And on the eighth day he shall bring two turtledoves or two pigeons to the priest at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. [11]And the priest shall prepare one for an offense offering and one for a burnt offering and shall atone for him, as he has offended through the corpse, and he shall consecrate his head on that day. [12]And he shall keep apart for the LORD the days of his naziritehood, and he shall bring a yearling lamb as a guilt offering, and the first days shall fall away because he defiled his naziritehood. [13]And this is the teaching for the nazirite: When the days of his naziritehood come to term, he shall be brought to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, [14]and he shall bring forward his sacrifice to the LORD, one unblemished yearling lamb for a burnt offering, and one unblemished yearling ewe as an offense offering, and one unblemished ram as a communion sacrifice, [15]and a basket of flatbread of fine flour, cakes mixed with oil, and flatbread wafers coated with oil, and their grain offerings and their libations. [16]And the priest shall bring them forward before the LORD and do the offense offering and its burnt offering. [17]The ram he shall do as a communion sacrifice to the LORD with the basket of flat-bread, and the priest shall do his meal offering and his

libation. [18]And the nazirite shall shave his nazirite head
at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and he shall
take the hair of his nazirite head and put it on the fire
that is under the communion sacrifice. [19]And the priest
shall take the cooked shoulder from the ram and one
flatbread cake from the basket and one flatbread wafer
and put them on the palms of the nazirite after he has
shaved his crown. [20]And the priest shall elevate them as
an elevation offering before the LORD. It is holy for
the priest together with the breast of the elevation
offering and the thigh of the donation. And afterward
the nazirite shall drink wine. [21]This is the teaching for
the nazirite who vows his sacrifice to the LORD for
his naziritehood besides what his hand may attain.
According to his vow that he vows, so shall he do,
together with the teaching for his naziritehood.' "

[22]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [23]"Speak to
Aaron and to his sons, saying, 'Thus shall you bless the
Israelites. Say to them:

[24]May the LORD bless you and guard you.
[25]May the LORD light up His face to you and grant
grace to you;

[26]May the LORD lift up His face to you and give you peace.’

[27]And they shall set My name over the Israelites, and I Myself shall bless them.”

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *should anyone act exceptionally*. Much of the biblical view of the institution of the nazir depends on the interpretation of the verb *yafli’* that is used here. Some modern commentators make it relatively neutral by claiming that, in conjunction with “vow,” it merely means to state the vow expressly. The philological evidence, however, for this technical sense of the verb is slender, as Baruch Levine argues. Some medieval commentators, whom Levine follows, understand it as a synonymous reinforcer of the reiterated verb *hazir*, “to set apart,” assuming that the root *p-l-’* is an orthographic variant of *p-l-h*, which does mean “to set apart” or “to distinguish.” But the common biblical use of the verbal stem *p-l-’* is in the sense of performing a wonder or acting in a way that is profuse or extraordinary (thus Abraham ibn Ezra). If that is the most likely meaning, then the biblical legislator sees the person who assumes these obligations of self-restriction as doing something extraordinary. Whether this extraordinary act is viewed with admiration or suspicion is not entirely clear.

a nazirite vow. A nazir or nazirite is “someone set apart” (compare Joseph’s blessing, Genesis 49:26, “the one set apart from his brothers,” *nezir ’eḥaw*). The word is a phonetic and etymological relative of the word that immediately follows it, *neder*, “vow.”

3. *from both wine and strong drink.* The second of these two terms, *shekhar*, clearly derives from the verb meaning “to intoxicate,” but it is not clear what sort of intoxicant it may have been. Some understand it as a form of ale, but

Levine rightly questions whether any kind of fermented grain would have been allowed on the altar. The Targum of Onkelos renders *yayin weshekhar* as "new wine and old wine," and since the restrictions on the nazirite are almost obsessively focused on anything connected with grapes, this understanding has a certain plausibility. Or, it might well be grappa.

5–6. *no razor shall pass over his head . . . he shall not come to a dead person*. There are, then, three different restrictions involved in the vow of the nazirite: abstention from all products of the grape, abstention from haircutting, and avoidance of any sort of contact with a corpse. The last of these three restrictions reflects a general regulation regarding impurity, and is unambiguously shared with the priesthood. The renunciation of wine is specific to the nazirite: though the biblical writers variously register the dangers of drunken excess, there is no general code of abstinence from drink, no biblical ethos of asceticism. Allowing the hair to grow uncut has been the subject of much anthropological speculation. The simplest inference is that it served as a very visible outward sign of the nazirite's being "set apart," and that it then could become a product of his body he could actually offer up—in flame—on the altar. (There are no indications in these laws that the nazirite was to refrain from sexual activity or joyous celebrations.) A late-ninth-century B.C.E. Phoenician inscription seems to reflect an offering of hair to Astarte. One suspects that a practice roughly resembling that of the biblical nazirite, and involving the renunciation of haircutting and then an offering of hair, was an established devotional regimen among the West Semitic peoples. The Bible, then, is by no means inventing or imposing this practice but recognizing it as something that certain individuals, in emulation of established pagan tradition, might want to do. The aim of the legislation is to regulate the practice and integrate it in the procedures of the official cult.

5. *the days come to term.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "the days are filled."

7. *the crown of his God is on his head.* The Hebrew turns on a pun: *nezer* is a common word for "crown," but in context it also means "naziritehood." The abundance of uncut hair, crowning the head of the vow taker, is, as the visible manifestation of his vow (*neder*), also a synecdoche for his naziritehood.

Thus, in verse 9, “his nazirite head” could also be rendered as “the crown of his head.”

12. *and the first days shall fall away.* That is, the days until the moment he defiled himself by contact with the corpse are to be canceled, and he must begin anew the count of days of the period he has vowed to be a nazirite.

14. *an offense offering.* What offense (*ḥata᾽t*) has he committed? The consensus of medieval and modern commentators is that by now removing his person from the realm of the consecrated to the ordinary realm of the profane, he is taking something away from God and so must make an offense offering. An antithetical construction is also possible: this “acting exceptionally” to set oneself apart for holiness, renouncing the pleasures of wine and letting one’s hair grow long, expresses a kind of presumption, an aspiration to spiritual superiority, and thus is an offense.

20. *elevate them as an elevation offering.* This was a performative act of gesturing that formally conveyed what was elevated to God’s jurisdiction. Practically, this meant that it was conveyed to God’s agent, the priest.

21. *besides what his hand may attain.* The sacrifice just stipulated is the constitutive obligation of the nazirite vow. If the person who makes the vow has the means and desire to pledge more than this as an offering, he is free to do so.

23. *Thus shall you bless the Israelites.* This cadenced threefold blessing came to play a central liturgical role for both Jews and Christians, and probably began to serve that function even in the biblical period. Remarkable for its rhetorical stateliness and its emphatic use of repetition and overlapping terms, it is not, in strictly formal terms, a poem, but it does exhibit a remarkable degree of formal organization. Jacob Milgrom aptly characterizes its three clauses as embodying “a rising crescendo of 3, 5, and 7 words, respectively”; and this pattern, he goes on to observe, is coordinated with the number of stressed syllables (3, 5, and 7), and the total number of syllables (12, 14, and 16). A nearly identical version of this blessing was found on two silver filigree amulets in a burial cave at a site called Kateph Hinnom, in Jerusalem, in 1980. The amulets have been dated to the seventh century or early sixth century B.C.E. The version of the blessing on the amulets is somewhat

abbreviated, which has led some scholars to conclude that they register the "original" text. It seems more plausible, however, that the text was abbreviated in order to fit it on the small amulets: the shortened form does not preserve the just mentioned formal elegance of the version in our text. Levine speculates that the prayer to be favored and guarded by God may have been applied, given the fact that Kateph Hinnom was a burial place, to safeguarding in the underworld, though that is hardly the original intention of the blessing.

25. *light up His face to you.* In biblical idiom, the shining of the face (or eyes) toward someone is a showing of favor or affection. Lifting up the face has the same meaning.

27. *and I Myself shall bless them.* The device of emphasis—the insertion of the first-person pronoun *ʾani* before the conjugated verb, which because of its conjugation would normally make the pronoun superfluous—is not reflected in most translations. It is particularly important here because it underscores the idea of God's special relationship with Israel: after the pronouncing of the threefold blessing, God's name, a kind of divine proprietorship, will be set over Israel, and God Himself will carry out the blessing.

CHAPTER 7

[1]And it happened on the day Moses finished setting up
the Tabernacle, that he anointed it and consecrated it
and all its furnishings and the altar and all its
furnishings, and he anointed them and consecrated
them. [2]And the chieftains of Israel—the heads of their
fathers' houses, they are the chieftains of the tribes,
they are the ones who stand over the reckoning—
[3]brought forward and set their offering before the
LORD: six covered wagons and twelve oxen, a wagon
for every two chieftains and an ox for each one, and
they brought them before the Tabernacle. [4]And the
LORD said to Moses, saying, [5]"Take from them, and
they shall be for doing the work of the Tent of
Meeting, and you shall give them to the Levites, each
man according to his work." [6]And Moses took the
wagons and the oxen and gave them to the Levites,
[7]the two wagons and the four oxen he gave to the
Gershonites according to their work. [8]And the four
wagons and the eight oxen he gave to the Merarites
according to their work in the hand of Ithamar son of

Aaron the priest. [9]And to the Kohathites he did not
give, for the work of the sanctuary was upon them, on
the shoulder did they carry. [10]And the chieftains
brought forward the dedication offering of the altar on
the day it was anointed, and the chieftains brought
forward their offering for the dedication of the altar.
[11]And the LORD said to Moses, “One chieftain each
day, one chieftain each day, shall offer his offerings for
the dedication of the altar.” [12]And the one who brought
forward his offering on the first day was Nahshon son
of Amminadab of the tribe of Judah. [13]And his
offering was one silver bowl, a hundred thirty shekels
its weight, one silver basin, seventy shekels by the
sanctuary shekel, both of them filled with fine flour
mixed with oil for a grain offering. [14]One golden ladle
of ten shekels filled with incense. [15]One bull from the
herd, one ram, one yearling lamb for the burnt
offering. [16]One goat for an offense offering. [17]And for
the communion sacrifice two oxen, five rams, five he-
goats, five yearling lambs. This is the offering of
Nahshon son of Amminadab. [18]On the second day
Nethanel son of Zuar, chieftain of Issachar, brought
forward his offering, [19]and his offering was one silver
bowl, a hundred thirty shekels its weight, one silver
basin, seventy shekels by the sanctuary shekel, both of
them filled with fine flour mixed with oil for a grain

offering. [20]One golden ladle of ten shekels filled with incense. [21]One bull from the herd, one ram, one yearling lamb for the burnt offering. [22]One goat for an offense offering. [23]And for the communion sacrifice two oxen, five rams, five he-goats, five yearling lambs. This is the offering of Nethanel son of Zuar. [24]On the third day, the chieftain of the Zebulunites, Eliab son of Helon. [25]His offering was one silver bowl, a hundred thirty shekels its weight, one silver basin, seventy shekels by the sanctuary shekel, both of them filled with fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering. [26]One golden ladle of ten shekels filled with incense. [27]One bull from the herd, one ram, one yearling lamb for the burnt offering. [28]One goat for an offense offering. [29]And for the communion sacrifice two oxen, five rams, five he-goats, five yearling lambs. This is the offering of Eliab son of Helon. [30]On the fourth day, the chieftain of the Reubenites, Elizur son of Shedeur. [31]His offering was one silver bowl, a hundred thirty shekels its weight, one silver basin, seventy shekels by the sanctuary shekel, both of them filled with fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering. [32]One golden ladle of ten shekels filled with incense. [33]One bull from the herd, one ram, one yearling sheep for the burnt offering. [34]One goat for an offense offering. [35]And for the communion sacrifice two oxen, five rams, five he-

goats, five yearling lambs. This is the offering of Elizur
son of Shedeur. [36]On the fifth day, the chieftain of the
Simeonites, Shelumiel son of Zurishaddai. [37]His
offering was one silver bowl, a hundred thirty shekels
its weight, one silver basin, seventy shekels by the
sanctuary shekel, both of them filled with fine flour
mixed with oil for a grain offering. [38]One golden ladle
of ten shekels filled with incense. [39]One bull from the
herd, one ram, one yearling lamb for the burnt
offering. [40]One goat for an offense [41]And for the
communion sacrifice two oxen, five rams, five he-
goats, five yearling lambs. This is the offering of
Shelumiel son of Zurishaddai. [42]On the sixth day, the
chieftain of the Gadites, Eliasaph son of Deuel. [43]His
offering was one silver bowl, a hundred thirty shekels
its weight, one silver basin, seventy shekels by the
sanctuary shekel, both of them filled with fine flour
mixed with oil for a grain offering. [44]One golden ladle
of ten shekels filled with incense. [45]One bull from the
herd, one ram, one yearling lamb for the burnt
offering. [46]One goat for an offense offering. [47]And for
the communion sacrifice two oxen, five rams, five he-
goats, five yearling lambs. This is the offering of
Eliasaph son of Deuel. [48]On the seventh day, the
chieftain of the Ephraimites, Elishama son of
Ammihud. [49]His offering was one silver bowl, a

hundred thirty shekels its weight, one silver basin,
seventy shekels by the sanctuary shekel, both of them
filled with fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering.
[50]One golden ladle of ten shekels filled with incense.
[51]One bull from the herd, one ram, one yearling lamb
for the burnt offering. [52]One goat for an offense
offering. [53]And for the communion sacrifice two oxen,
five rams, five he-goats, five yearling lambs. This is the
offering of Elishama son of Ammihud. [54]On the eighth
day, the chieftain of the Manassites, Gamaliel son of
Pedahzur. [55]His offering was one silver bowl, a
hundred thirty shekels its weight, one silver basin,
seventy shekels by the sanctuary shekel, both of them
filled with fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering.
[56]One golden ladle of ten shekels filled with incense.
[57]One bull from the herd, one ram, one yearling lamb
for the burnt offering. [58]One goat for an offense
offering. [59]And for the communion sacrifice two oxen,
five rams, five he-goats, five yearling lambs. This is the
offering of Gamaliel son of Pedahzur. [60]On the ninth
day, the chieftain of the Benjaminites, Abidan son of
Gideoni. [61]His offering was one silver bowl, a hundred
thirty shekels its weight, one silver basin, seventy
shekels by the sanctuary shekel, both of them filled
with fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering.
[62]One golden ladle of ten shekels filled with incense.

[63]One bull from the herd, one ram, one yearling lamb
for the burnt offering. [64]One goat for an offense
offering. [65]And for the communion sacrifice two oxen,
five rams, five he-goats, five yearling lambs. This is the
offering of Abidan son of Gideoni. [66]On the tenth day,
the chieftain of the Danites, Ahiezer son of
Ammishaddai. [67]His offering was one silver bowl, a
hundred thirty shekels its weight, one silver basin,
seventy shekels by the sanctuary shekel, both of them
filled with fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering.
[68]One golden ladle of ten shekels filled with incense.
[69]One bull from the herd, one ram, one yearling lamb
for the burnt offering. [70]One goat for an offense
offering. [71]And for the communion sacrifice two oxen,
five rams, five he-goats, five yearling lambs. This is the
offering of Ahiezer son of Ammishaddai. [72]On the
eleventh day, the chieftain of the Asherites, Pagiel son
of Ochran. [73]His offering was one silver bowl, a
hundred thirty shekels its weight, one silver basin,
seventy shekels by the sanctuary shekel, both of them
filled with fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering.
[74]One golden ladle of ten shekels filled with incense.
[75]One bull from the herd, one ram, one yearling lamb
for the burnt offering. [76]One goat for an offense
offering. [77]And for the communion sacrifice two oxen,
five rams, five he-goats, five yearling lambs. This is the

offering of Pagiel son of Ochran. [78]On the twelfth day, the chieftain of the Naphtalites, Ahira son of Enan. [79]His offering was one silver bowl, a hundred thirty shekels its weight, one silver basin, seventy shekels by the sanctuary shekel, both of them filled with fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering. [80]One golden ladle of ten shekels filled with incense. [81]One bull from the herd, one ram, one yearling lamb for the burnt offering. [82]One goat for an offense offering. [83]And for the communion sacrifice two oxen, five rams, five he-goats, five yearling lambs. This is the offering of Ahira son of Enan. [84]This is the dedication offering of the altar on the day of its anointing from the chieftains of Israel: twelve silver bowls, twelve silver basins, twelve golden ladles, [85]one hundred thirty shekels each silver bowl and seventy each basin; all the silver of the vessels, two thousand four hundred by the sanctuary shekel. [86]Twelve golden ladles filled with incense, ten shekels the ladle by the sanctuary shekel; all the gold of the ladles, one hundred twenty shekels. [87]All the cattle for the burnt offering, twelve bulls, twelve rams, twelve yearling lambs and their grain offering, and twelve goats for an offense offering. [88]And all the cattle for the communion sacrifice, twenty-four bulls, sixty rams, sixty he-goats, sixty yearling lambs. This is the dedication of the altar after it was anointed.

[89]And when Moses came into the Tent of Meeting to speak with Him, he would hear the voice being spoken to him from above the covering that is over the Ark of the Covenant, from between the two cherubim, and He would speak to him.

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *on the day Moses finished setting up the Tabernacle*. "On the day" (*beyom*) has the semantic force of "when" but conveys a sense of epic solemnity lacking in the more ordinary Hebrew term, *ka'asher*. (Compare Genesis 2:5, "On the day the LORD God made earth and heavens.") The meaning here is obviously not restricted to a single day because it will take the tribal chieftains twelve days to present their offerings. Abraham ibn Ezra, characteristically looking for literary linkages, connects this entire passage with the immediately preceding priestly blessing: once the threefold blessing was pronounced, the elaborate proceedings of the dedication offerings could begin.

2. *stand over.* That is, supervise.

3. *six covered wagons.* The translation follows the Septuagint and the Aramaic Targums in their understanding of *'eglot tsav*. They in turn seem to have based their construction on the amphibian *tsav* in Leviticus 11:29, which many think is a turtle. Some recent scholars instead connect *tsav* with a possible Akkadian cognate that, like *'agalah*, means "wagon." It would then be an intensifier here.

5. *each man according to his work.* As the subsequent verses show, the wagons are not distributed equally but according to the weight of the portage that the various levitical groups are to bear. The Kohathites, who carry the relatively light sanctuary furnishings on their shoulders, get no wagons.

12–88. This is the one signal instance in the entire Bible of extensive verbatim repetition without the slightest variation. (The single exception is that in verses 72 and 78, the word "day," *yom*, is—untranslatably—repeated after the formula "On the *x*th day," a usage perhaps dictated by the fact that the numeration has gone beyond ten to numbers that are compound in form in the Hebrew. The language in verse 12 reporting the first set of offerings also differs slightly from the formulas at the beginning of the subsequent eleven sets of offerings, but that is simply because it introduces the whole series.) Biblical narrative, as we have had many occasions to see, characteristically deploys significant swerves from verbatim repetition as it approximately repeats strings of phrases and whole clauses and sentences. This passage, however, is manifestly not narrative but a kind of epic inventory. Each of the tribes, here accorded absolutely equal status before the sanctuary without political hierarchy, brings exactly the same offering. One can readily imagine that the members of each tribe in the ancient audience of this text would be expected to relish the sumptuousness of its own tribal offering exactly equal to all the others, as it hears the passage read. It is also well to remember that lists and the repetitions they entail constitute an established literary form with its own aesthetic pleasures—as, for example, in the catalogue of the ships in the *Iliad* or in the cumulative repetitive structures of songs like *ḥad Gadya* ("An Only Kid") and, more apposite to this catalogue of gifts, "The Twelve Days of Christmas." The offerings of the tribes encompass animal, vegetable, and mineral gifts (the sacrificial beasts, the grain offerings, the precious vessels) and are punctuated by the solemn stipulation of weight and number. All this is then totaled up in verses 84–88, after the twelve verbatim repetitions. Baruch Levine notes, moreover, certain similarities in form with various West Semitic temple inventories that have been uncovered by archaeologists. (In the Hebrew, for example, the ordinal numbers uncharacteristically follow the nouns rather than precede them, evidently the set form for temple inventories.) This entire passage, like almost all of the first ten chapters of Numbers, is the product of Priestly writers, and it strongly reflects both their professional concerns and the literary antecedents on which they drew.

89. *And when Moses came into the Tent of Meeting to speak with Him.* This sentence about Moses's mode of communication with God in the Tent of Meeting does not appear to be connected either with what precedes or what

follows it. The sentence also exhibits three rather puzzling turns of speech. The masculine pronoun that is the object of "to speak with" has to refer to God, but God is not mentioned by name anywhere in this verse. One might have expected "to speak with the LORD" in the initial clause of this little unit. Perhaps it is absent because the unit has been excerpted from a larger literary document.

the voice being spoken. The second linguistic anomaly of this verse is the use of the reflexive form of the verb, *midaber* (instead of the usual *medaber*, "speaking"). Levine understands this form as an indication of "continually speaking," though reflexive verbs in Hebrew are often used to indicate a passive sense. It is also possible that the meaning is genuinely reflexive: "the voice speaking itself." There seems to be a theological impulse here to interpose some kind of mediation between the divine source of the speech and the audible voice that is spoken to Moses.

and He would speak to him. The third linguistic knot in the strand of this sentence is that the last two words, *wayedabar ʾelaw*, a verb and a preposition with no indication of proper nouns, could also be read the other way around: "and he [Moses] would speak to Him." One wonders whether the cryptic style of this verse might reflect a certain nervousness about the fraught topic of direct communication between God and His prophet, as the highly cryptic language of the Bridegroom of Blood fragment (Exodus 4:24–26) reflects a nervousness about its potent mythic character.

CHAPTER 8

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Speak to
Aaron and say to him: ‘When you light up the lamps,
opposite the front of the lamp stand shall the seven
lamps give light.’” [3]And thus Aaron did: opposite the
front of the lamp stand he lit up its lamps as the
LORD had charged Moses. [4]And this is the fashioning
of the lamp stand: hammered work of gold, from its
base to its petal it was hammered work, according to
the semblance that the LORD had shown Moses, thus
did he make the lamp stand.

[5]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [6]“Take the
Levites from the midst of the Israelites and purify
them. [7]And thus you shall do to them to purify them:
sprinkle on them expiation water and pass a razor over
all their flesh and wash their clothes and be purified.
[8]And they shall take a bull from the herd and its grain
offering, fine flour mixed with oil, and a second bull
from the herd you shall take as an offense offering.

[9]And you shall bring the Levites forward before the
Tent of Meeting and you shall assemble all the
community of Israelites. [10]And you shall bring the
Levites forward before the LORD, and the Israelites
shall lay their hands on the Levites. [11]And Aaron shall
make of the Levites an elevation offering before the
LORD from the Israelites, and they shall serve to do
the work of the LORD. [12]And the Levites, they shall
lay their hands on the head of the bulls and make the
one an offense offering and the one a burnt offering to
the LORD to atone for the Levites. [13]And you shall
stand the Levites before Aaron and before his sons and
make of them an elevation offering to the LORD.
[14]And you shall divide the Levites from the Israelites
and they shall be Levites to Me. [15]And afterward the
Levites shall come to work in the Tent of Meeting and
you shall purify them and make of them an elevation
offering. [16]For wholly given they are to Me from the
midst of the Israelites instead of the breach of every
womb, firstborn of all of the Israelites, I have taken
them to Me. [17]For Mine is every firstborn among the
Israelites, in man and in beast, on the day I struck
down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, I
consecrated them to Me. [18]And I took the Levites
instead of every firstborn among the Israelites. [19]And I
made the Levites wholly given to Aaron and to his

sons from the midst of the Israelites to do the work of the Israelites in the Tent of Meeting, to atone for the Israelites, that there be no scourge against the Israelites when the Israelites approach the sanctuary.” [20]And Moses, and Aaron and all the community of Israelites, did to the Levites as all that the LORD had charged Moses concerning the Levites, thus did the Israelites do to them. [21]And the Levites did expiation and washed their clothes, and Aaron made of them an elevation offering before the LORD, and Aaron atoned for them to purify them. [22]And afterward the Levites did come to do their work in the Tent of Meeting before Aaron and before his sons; as the LORD had charged Moses about the Levites, thus did they do to them.

[23]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [24]“This is what regards the Levites: from twenty-five years old and up, each shall come to do army service in the work of the Tent of Meeting. [25]And from fifty years old he shall come back from the army work and shall work no more. [26]And he shall serve his brothers in the Tent of Meeting to keep watch, but work he shall not do. So shall you do to the Levites in their watch.”

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *When you light up the lamps*. Rashi provides a vividly imaginative explanation for why this unit of four verses about the lamp stand should immediately follow the dedicatory offering of the twelve tribes: "When Aaron saw the dedicatory offering of the chieftains, he was dismayed that he was not together with them in the dedicatory offering, neither he nor his tribe. The Holy One said to him, 'By your life, yours is greater than theirs, for you light and tend to the lamps.'"

4. *petal.* This is a collective noun indicating the floral ornamentation of the seven lamp holders.

6. *Take the Levites . . . and purify them*. If there is no biblical theology of original sin, there is, at least among the Priestly writers, a technology to deal with original impurity. The dangerous inner zone of the sanctuary can be entered only when a person has undergone an elaborate sequence of acts to rid himself of the impurity that is intrinsic to profane life: thus the Levites must be sprinkled with expiation water, have their body hair shaven, their garments washed, and a special sacrifice intended to remove even inadvertent offense (*ḥata't*) offered up for them.

7. *expiation water.* Many medieval and modern interpreters understand this as a reference to the water mingled with the ashes of the red cow referred to in Numbers 19:1–9, though Baruch Levine offers grounds for skepticism about this identification. The term *ḥata't* means both offense (political, diplomatic, social, moral, or cultic) and, especially in cultic contexts, any ritual means employed to remove or cancel the effect of the offense committed.

10. *the Israelites shall lay their hands.* For practical reasons, as many commentators have noted, the laying on of hands would have to be performed by designated representatives of the people.

19. *I made the Levites wholly given to Aaron and to his sons.* Although "given" (*netunim*) is not repeated (*netunim netunim*) as above, an analogous emphasis is conveyed by the cognate verb (in the translation "made" but literally in the Hebrew "gave"). This is the first clear indication of a hierarchical division of cultic labor between the Aaronide priests (*kohanim*) and the Levites, who serve them and do the heavy lifting in the sanctuary (the "work"), in contrast to officiating in the ritual. Levine conjectures that historically this division between Levites and priests began only at the time of Josiah's reforms around 621 B.C.E.

that there be no scourge against the Israelites. This characteristically Priestly notion is that profane persons, presuming to enter sacred space, would automatically trigger the devastating manifestation of divine fury (*qetsef*) in the form of a scourge or epidemic. The presence of the Levites in the sanctuary is thus properly represented as a "watch" or the equivalent of army service, for as properly consecrated and purified cultic servitors, they act as a kind of protective phalanx that wards off danger from the Israelites who might otherwise approach too close to the sacred zone.

24. *from twenty-five years old and up.* Earlier, the beginning age for levitical service was stated as thirty. Various efforts have been made to harmonize the contradiction, but one suspects that the different passages reflect different traditions.

25. *he shall come back from the army work and shall work no more.* The provision made here is for a kind of phased retirement. The defining term of difference is "work." From the age of fifty, the Levite is relieved of heavy labor within the sanctuary, the responsibilities that were undertaken as a kind of equivalent for military service, but he continues to assist his brother Levites, evidently outside the sanctuary, in their guard duty.

CHAPTER 9

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of
Sinai in the second year of their going out from the
land of Egypt in the first month, saying, [2]“Let the
Israelites do the Passover offering at its fixed time. [3]On
the fourteenth day in this month at twilight you shall
do it at its fixed time, according to all its statutes and
according to all its laws you shall do it.” [4]And Moses
spoke to the Israelites to do the Passover offering.
[5]And they did the Passover offering in the first month
on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight in the
Wilderness of Sinai, as all that the LORD had charged
Moses, thus did the Israelites do.

[6]And it happened that there were men who were
defiled by human corpse and could not do the Passover
offering on that day, and they drew near before Moses
and before Aaron on that day. [7]And these men said to
him, “We are defiled by human corpse. Why should
we be withheld from offering the LORD’s sacrifice at

its fixed time in the midst of the Israelites?” [8]And Moses said to them, “Stand by, that I may hear what the LORD will charge you.” [9]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [10]“Speak to the Israelites, saying, ‘Any man who may be defiled by corpse or on a distant journey, of you or of your generations to come, and would do the Passover offering to the LORD, [11]in the second month on the fourteenth day at twilight they shall do it, with flatcakes and bitter herbs they shall eat it. [12]They shall leave nothing of it till morning, and no bone shall they break in it, according to all the statutes of the Passover offering they shall do it. [13]And the man who is pure and was not on a journey and fails to do the Passover offering, that person shall be cut off from his kin, for he did not offer the LORD’s sacrifice at its fixed time. [14]That man will bear his punishment. And should a stranger sojourn with you and do the Passover offering to the LORD, according to the statute of the Passover offering and according to its law, thus shall he do. One statute shall you have, both for the stranger and for the native of the land.’”

[15]And on the day the Tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the Tabernacle of the Tent of the Covenant, and in the evening it would be over the Tabernacle like

a semblance of fire until morning. [16]Thus it would be perpetually: the cloud would cover it, and a semblance of fire at night. [17]And as the cloud lifted from the tent, then the Israelites would journey onward, and in the place where the cloud would abide, there would the Israelites camp. [18]By the LORD's word the Israelites would journey onward and by the LORD's word they would camp, all the days that the cloud would abide over the Tabernacle they would camp. [19]And when the cloud lingered over the Tabernacle many days, the Israelites would keep the LORD's watch and would not journey onward. [20]And sometimes the cloud would be but a few days over the Tabernacle. By the LORD's word they would camp and by the LORD's word they would journey onward. [21]And sometimes the cloud would be from evening till morning and the cloud would lift in the morning and they would journey onward, or a day and a night and the cloud would lift and they would journey onward. [22]Or two days or a month or a year, when the cloud lingered over the Tabernacle to abide over it, the Israelites would camp and would not journey onward, and when it lifted, they would journey onward. [23]By the LORD's word they would camp and by the LORD's word they would journey onward. The LORD's watch did they keep by the LORD's word in the hand of Moses.

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Let the Israelites do the Passover offering*. The reiteration here of the instructions for the Passover offering picks up the first injunction about the Passover offering on the eve of the departure from Egypt (Exodus 12:43–51). There is narrative symmetry in the reiteration: the first Passover was celebrated just before the Israelites set out on their journey from Egypt. Now they are about to move onward from the Sinai encampment in their Wilderness itinerary—a topic to which verses 15–23 alert us—and again the departure is marked by the Passover offering.

6. *And it happened that there were men who were defiled by human corpse.* The injunction to offer the Passover sacrifice at its fixed time is followed by a piece of case law. What is to be done for Israelites who find themselves in a state of ritual impurity and hence excluded from the sacrificial ceremony?

7. *Why should we be withheld from offering the* LORD*'s sacrifice at its fixed time in the midst of the Israelites?* The partaking in the Passover sacrifice is the primary act of affirming membership in the community of Israel, and so the people in question are distressed that a mere accident, contact with a corpse (or perhaps another source of ritual pollution), should exclude them from the community. Conversely, a person who deliberately neglects to perform the Passover offering is "cut off from his kin."

10. *or on a distant journey.* This is another circumstance, not that of the men who come to petition Moses, that would prevent someone from participating in the Passover offering. Baruch Levine plausibly infers that the stipulation of a distant journey presupposes the Deuteronomic requirement of a centralized cult. (The initial Passover sacrifice was performed in each household, and a person on a journey could presumably have participated with a household where he was a guest.)

14. *should a stranger sojourn with you.* This provision for the resident alien (*ger*) reflects a prevalent ancient Near Eastern practice of allowing such

residents to adopt the local cult. No formal ceremony of "conversion," as in later times, was required, though the law in Exodus stipulates that the stranger must be circumcised before he can partake in the Passover offering. That requirement is presumably implied here in "according to the statute of the Passover offering and according to its law" but it is not expressly stated.

15–23. This literary unit nicely sets the stage for the peregrinations and perturbations that will make up much of the Book of Numbers from chapter 10 onward. Until this point, the forward drive of narrative has been abandoned for tabulation—census and military roster—and legislation in a long stasis in the Wilderness of Sinai. Now the Israelites prepare to move on, and their order of march, dictated by the descent upon the Tabernacle and the ascent from the Tabernacle of the divine cloud, is reported in a series of verbs in the iterative tense. The indication of the varying time periods during which the cloud "abides" (or "tents," "dwells," a verb cognate with the noun *mishkan*, "Tabernacle") over the Tabernacle may seem repetitious but in fact constitutes a grand rhetorical flourish: all of Israel's movements through the wilderness are prompted by the divine sign, with the duration of encampment varying from a night or two to a month to a year. Yitzhak Avishur neatly confirms the purposeful rhetorical organization of the passage by pointing to its studied use of numerically formulaic repetitions: the phrase "by the LORD's word" (literally, "by the LORD's mouth") occurs seven times—three times in conjunction with "they would journey onward," three times in conjunction with "they would camp," and at the very end of the passage, in conjunction with neither. "Tabernacle" occurs seven times; the root *sh-k-n* from which it derives, ten times; and, if one follows the Septuagint rather than the Masoretic Text, "cloud" also appears ten times. The carefully measured repetitions thus yield a tight thematic interweave of cloud, Tabernacle, camping, journeying, and God's word or direction.

CHAPTER 10

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Make you
two silver trumpets, hammered work you shall make
them, and they shall serve you for calling the
community and for the journeying of the camps. [3]And
when they blow them, all the community shall meet
with you at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. [4]And
if but one they blow, the chieftains, the heads of
Israel’s thousands, shall meet with you. [5]And if you
blow a long blast, the camps that are encamped to the
east shall journey on. [6]And if you blow a long blast a
second time, the camps that are encamped to the south
shall journey on, a long blast they shall blow for their
journeyings. [7]And when the assembly is gathered, you
shall blow but let out no long blast. [8]And the sons of
Aaron, the priests, shall blow the trumpets, and they
shall become for you an everlasting statute for your
generations. [9]And when you come in battle in your
land against the foe who assails you, you shall let out a
long blast with the trumpets and be remembered
before the LORD your God and be rescued from your

enemies. [10]And on the day of your gladness and at your fixed seasons and on your new moons, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings and over your communion sacrifices, and they shall become for you a remembrance before your God. I am the LORD your God."

[11]And it happened in the second year in the second month on the twentieth of the month that the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle of the Covenant. [12]And the Israelites began on their journeyings from the Wilderness of Sinai, and the cloud abided in the Wilderness of Paran. [13]And they journeyed on from the first by the word of the LORD through the hand of Moses. [14]And the banner of the camp of the Judahites journeyed first by their divisions, and over its division, Nahshon son of Amminadab. [15]And over the division of the tribe of Issacharites, Nethanel son of Zuar. [16]And over the division of the tribe of Zebulunites, Eliab son of Helon. [17]And the Tabernacle was taken down, and the Gershonites and the Merarites, the bearers of the Tabernacle, journeyed on. [18]And the banner of the camp of Reuben by their divisions journeyed on, and over its division, Elizur son of Shedeur. [19]And over the division of the tribe of

Simeonites, Shelumiel son of Zurishaddai. [20]And over
the division of the tribe of Gadites, Eliasaph son of
Deuel. [21]And the Kohathites, the bearers of the
sanctuary, journeyed on, and they would set up the
Tabernacle by the time they came. [22]And the banner of
the camp of the Ephraimites by their divisions
journeyed on, and over its division, Elishama son of
Ammihud. [23]And over the division of the tribe of
Manassehites, Gamaliel son of Pedahzur. [24]And over
the division of the tribe of Benjaminites, Abidan son
of Gideoni. [25]And the banner of the tribe of Danites
journeyed on, the rear guard for all the camps by their
divisions, and over its division, Ahiezer son of
Ammishaddai. [26]And over the division of the tribe of
Asherites, Pagiel son of Ochran. [27]And over the
division of the tribe of Naphtalites, Ahira son of Enan.
[28]These are the journeyings of the Israelites by their
divisions as they journeyed on.

[29]And Moses said to Hobab son of Reuel the
Midianite, Moses's father-in-law, "We are journeying
to the place of which the LORD said to us, 'It will I
give to you.' Come with us and we shall be good to
you, for the LORD has spoken a good thing for
Israel." [30]And he said to him, "I shall not go, but to my

land and to my birthplace I shall go.” [31]And he said to him, “Pray, do not leave us, for do you not know our encampment in the wilderness? And you will serve us as eyes. [32]And so, if you go with us, by that good which the LORD will do for us, we shall be good to you.”

[33]And they journeyed on from the mountain of the LORD a three days’ march, with the Ark of the LORD’s Covenant journeying before them a three days’ march to scout for a resting place for them. [34]And the LORD’s cloud was over them by day as they journeyed on from the camp. [35]And it happened, as the Ark journeyed on, that Moses would say,

“Rise O LORD, let Your enemies
scatter,
and Your foes flee before You!”

[36]and when it came to rest, he would say,

“Come back O LORD to Israel’s
teeming myriads.”

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *two silver trumpets*. After all the lists of the early chapters of Numbers, the visual pageantry of the Tabernacle furnishings, and the deployment of the tribal troops with their banners, sound enters the text—in essence, musical flourishes, a pageantry of sound. These particular sounds are in the first instance the signal for the forward movement of the camp, and so propel the whole story from the long stasis of the stay at Sinai into the narrative of wanderings that constitutes much of what follows. The hammered silver trumpets are more artfully wrought wind instruments than the *shofar*, the ram's horn, with which they share some functions. The *shofar* is used for the call to battle, and for coronations; these trumpets serve the distinctive purposes of signaling the march in the wilderness and accompanying cultic celebrations.

5. *a long blast.* There is no scholarly agreement as to whether the Hebrew *teruʿah* means "a long blast" and the other term, *teqiʿah,* "a short blast," or the other way around. The verb *taqaʿ* has the primary meaning of "stab," and by extension, a stabbing or penetration of breath through the aperture of a wind instrument. This sense might perhaps lend itself better to the idea of a short blast. *Teruʿah* also means "shout," without the aid of an instrument, and might be more prolonged.

9. *let out a long blast . . . and be remembered before the* LORD. Here the function of the trumpets is identical with that of the *shofar*. The trumpet blast rallies the troops, perhaps frightens the enemy, and is imagined as a means for alerting God's attention to Israel, calling them to mind, being a "remembrance" before Him.

12. *And the Israelites began on their journeyings.* The marching order of the tribes laid out in the next fifteen verses is a precise implementation of the tribal deployment detailed in chapter 2.

21. *bearers of the sanctuary.* In contradistinction to the Gershonites and the Merarites, "bearers of the Tabernacle," the burden of the Kohathites is not the structure itself but the cultic paraphernalia of the sanctuary.

and they would set up the Tabernacle by the time they came. As elsewhere, biblical idiom is parsimonious in stipulating the antecedents of pronouns. The first "they" would have to refer to the Gershonites and Merarites, who carry the Tabernacle; the second "they" would be the Kohathites.

29. *And Moses said to Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite.* We now leave the Priestly tabulations and pomp and ceremony and enter the first actual narrative episode of the Book of Numbers. The name of Moses's Midianite father-in-law is a bafflement that has been resolved only by rather contorted harmonizing explanations. In Exodus, he is called Jethro, who also seems to be identical with Reuel, while here he is Hobab son of Reuel. It seems likely that these narratives draw on authentic ancient traditions about an alliance and kinship between Moses and the Kenite clan of the Midianites, and those traditions provided an etiological explanation for the peaceful cohabitation of the Kenites with the Israelites (compare Judges 4:17–22). In the traditional variants of these stories about the Kenites, Moses's father-in-law may have been assigned different names.

We are journeying to the place. No foreshadowing is allowed to intrude. At this point, Moses, unwitting of the disasters that lie ahead, imagines that both he and the people he is leading are about to cross the wilderness and enter into the promised land.

the LORD has spoken a good thing. Literally, "spoken good," with the obvious sense of "promised to confer all manner of good things." By repeating the root in both verb and noun, Moses twice emphasizes (the second time in verse 32) that he means to have Hobab share in the good that God has promised Israel.

30. *to my land and to my birthplace I shall go.* These words are probably an explicit allusion to God's first command to Abraham, "Go forth from your land and your birthplace" (Genesis 12:1). Hobab asserts the desire to reverse that direction, to go back to his own homeland instead of forging on to the land God has promised Israel.

31. *do you not know our encampment in the wilderness?* Previously in Numbers, and before that in Exodus, there was a heavy stress on the idea that the cloud over the Tabernacle would guide the people. Here, by contrast, human agency is stressed: Hobab, himself indigenous to the great wilderness

to the south of Canaan, is to act as a native guide through this forbidding territory. It is conceivable that this story registers an actual historical memory of receiving help of this sort from the Midianites. Hobab's response to Moses is not stated, but the later presence of his descendants among the Israelites suggests that he agreed to accompany them. Perhaps the end of this story was excised editorially in order not to diminish the idea conveyed in the next two verses that it was the Ark with the accompanying cloud that led Israel through the wilderness.

33. *the Ark . . . journeying before them a three days' march*. Although the Ark was to lead the way, this three days' distance is baffling, for in that case the Ark would not have been visible to the people who were supposed to follow it. A common scholarly solution to the problem is to see the second occurrence of "a three days' march" as an inadvertent scribal repetition (dittography) of the first.

35. *Rise O LORD.* These words attributed to Moses are often referred to as the Song of the Ark. Although one recent scholar, Richard Elliott Friedman, has expressed skepticism about whether this is actually a poem, there is sufficient evidence of poetic structure and diction even in the brief fragment. Rhythmically, these two versets contain, respectively, four and three stresses, a pattern sometimes found in lines of biblical poetry. The word pairings, enemies/foes, scatter/flee, are a hallmark of parallelistic poetry. The concluding line (verse 36) uses a bit of emphatic synonymity, "teeming myriads" (literally "myriads of thousands") that is marked as poetic diction and also appears, with the order of "myriads" and "thousands" reversed, in the poetic blessing for Rebekah, Genesis 24:60. "Rise," as several commentators have noted, also has a military sense of "attack," but the visual image of elevation is important—God, imagined as enthroned on the cherubim carved over the Ark, surges up like a warrior-king as the Ark is lifted to be carried forward. In the Hebrew text, the unit that verses 35–36 constitute is bracketed off from what precedes and follows by inverted letter *nun*s. This is a scribal device known from Late Antiquity for marking a piece of text that is out of place, or quoted from another source. Some have conjectured that the Song of the Ark is actually a quotation from the mysterious Book of the Battles of YHWH mentioned elsewhere. Whatever the source, the quotation may give only the opening lines of two poems rather

than the integral text of the poems. In any case, this is the first of several fragments of archaic Hebrew poetry quoted in Numbers.

36. *Come back O LORD to Israel's teeming myriads.* There is no explicit "to" in the Hebrew connecting "come back" with Israel's myriads. The absence of the preposition has inspired a variety of ingenious interpretations, but one should keep in mind that biblical poetic diction—especially in the case of the more archaic layer of Hebrew poetry—exhibits a great deal of ellipsis, which is, after all, a means of eliminating extra syllables and heightening the compactness of the utterance. It thus seems reasonable to infer that "to" is implied here.

CHAPTER 11

[1]And the people became complainers of evil in the ears of the LORD, and the LORD heard and His wrath flared and the LORD's fire burned against them and consumed along the edge of the camp. [2]And the people cried out to Moses, and Moses interceded with the LORD, and the fire sunk down. [3]And he called the name of that place Taberah, for the LORD's fire had burned against them.

[4]And the riffraff that was in their midst felt a sharp craving, and the Israelites, too, again wept and said, "Who will feed us meat? [5]We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for free, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic. [6]And now our throats are dry. There is nothing save the manna before our eyes." [7]And the manna was like coriander seed and its color like the color of bdellium. [8]The people would go about and gather it and grind it between millstones or pound it in a pestle and cook it

in a cauldron and make it into cakes. And its taste was like the creaminess of oil. [9]And when the dew would come down on the camp at night, the manna would come down upon it. [10]And Moses heard the people weeping by its clans, every man at the entrance of his tent, and the LORD's wrath flared fiercely, and in Moses's eyes it was evil. [11]And Moses said to the LORD, "Why have You done evil to Your servant, and why have I not found favor in Your eyes, to put the burden of all this people upon me? [12]Did I conceive all this people, did I give birth to them, that You should say to me, 'Bear them in your lap, as the guardian bears the infant,' to the land that You swore to their fathers? [13]From where shall I get meat to give to all this people when they weep to me, saying, 'Give us meat that we may eat'? [14]I alone cannot bear this people, for they are too heavy for me. [15]And if thus You would do with me, kill me, pray, altogether, if I have found favor in Your eyes, and let me not see my evil fate." [16]And the LORD said to Moses, "Gather for Me seventy men of the elders of Israel of whom you know that they are the elders of the people and its overseers, and you shall take them to the Tent of Meeting, and they shall station themselves there with you. [17]And I shall come down and speak with you there and I shall hold back some of the spirit that is upon

you and place it upon them, and they will bear with you the burden of the people and you yourself will not bear it alone. [18]And to the people you shall say: ‘Consecrate yourselves for the morrow and you will eat meat, for you wept in the hearing of the LORD, saying, Who will feed us meat? For it was good for us in Egypt. And the LORD will give you meat and you will eat. [19]Not one day will you eat and not two days and not five days and not ten days and not twenty days, [20]but a full month of days, till it comes out of your noses and becomes a loathsome thing to you, inasmuch as you have cast aside the LORD Who is in your midst and you have wept before him, saying, “Why is it we have come out of Egypt?”” [21]And Moses said, “Six hundred thousand foot soldiers are the people in whose midst I am, and You, You said, ‘I shall give them meat and they will eat a month of days’? [22]Will sheep and cattle be slaughtered for them and provide for them? Will all the fish of the sea be gathered for them and provide for them?” [23]And the LORD said to Moses, “Will the LORD’s hand be too short? Now you will see whether My word will come about or not.” [24]And Moses went out and spoke the LORD’s words to the people, and he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and stood them round about the Tent. [25]And the LORD came down in the

cloud and spoke to him and held back some of the spirit that was upon him and put it upon the seventy men of the elders, and it happened, as the spirit rested upon them, that they prophesied, but did it no more.
[26]And two men remained in the camp. The name of the one was Eldad and the name of the other was Medad. And the spirit rested upon them, and they were among those inscribed, but they did not go out from the tent, and they prophesied in the camp. [27]And the lad ran to tell Moses and said, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.” [28]And Joshua son of Nun, attendant to Moses from his youth, spoke out and said, “My lord Moses, restrain them!” [29]And Moses said to him, “Are you jealous on my part? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would place His spirit upon them.” [30]And Moses was gathered back into the camp, he and the elders of Israel. [31]And a wind moved onward from the LORD and swept up quail from the sea and left them over the camp, about a day’s journey in every direction all round the camp and about two cubits deep on the ground. [32]And the people arose all that day and all that night and all the next day and gathered the quail. The most sparing gathered ten *homers*, and they laid them out for themselves round about the camp. [33]The meat was still between their teeth, it had not yet been

chewed, when the LORD's wrath flared against the people, and the LORD struck a very great blow against the people. [34]And the name of the place was called Kibroth-Hattaavah, for there the people buried the ones who had been craving. [35]From Kibroth-Hattaavah the people journeyed on to Hazeroth, and they were in Hazeroth.

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And the people became complainers of evil*. The grammatical construction of the Hebrew is unusual—literally, "And the people became [or were] as complainers of evil." Some understand this as an indication of persistence in the activity of complaint, though it is at least as plausible to construe it as conveying the initiation of the activity. The likelihood of the latter construction is reinforced by the fact that this episode is the first of the numerous episodes of "murmuring" that punctuate Numbers. In this initial instance, no specific content of the complaint is stipulated. This lack of specification may be intended so that the episode can serve as a general paradigm for all the incidents that follow: unreasonable complaint triggering God's consuming wrath, a plea for Moses's intercession, an end to the devastation.

3. *Taberah.* The place-name is derived from the verb *baʿar*, "to burn," and so means something like Conflagration.

4. *the riffraff.* The Hebrew *ʾasafsuf* is a noun in the reduplicative form (like the English "riffraff") derived from the verb *ʾasaf*, "to gather." The reduplicative form in Hebrew often has a pejorative sense: it is also used for the parallel term in Exodus 12:38, *ʿerev rav* (perhaps originally *ʿararav*, "motley throng"). Richard Elliott Friedman has noted that the verb *ʾasaf* is

especially prominent in this chapter and the next. In the long second episode of the present chapter, Moses will strategically "gather" elders around him, and in an unusual usage that appears to be dictated by the desire to repeat this verb, he does not return to or enter the camp but is "gathered back into the camp" (verse 30). The play between *ʾasafsuf* and *ʾasaf*, I would suggest, focuses the issues of leadership and national cohesiveness that are central both to this chapter and to much of what follows in Numbers. There is a negative kind of "gathering" or assembly, the ragtag collection of *ʾasafsuf* that congregates in order to voice divisive gripes; and there is a positive gathering of leaders in which Moses delegates authority and imposes coherent governance on the people.

and the Israelites, too. The subversive complaints of the riffraff, who are of foreign origin, prove infectious and spread to the body of the Israelites proper.

Who will feed us meat? This question may seem puzzling because the people immediately go on to mention not meat but fish—a prominent source of protein in the Egyptian diet—and its elaborate vegetable garnishings. In the event, they get not fish, scarcely imaginable in this desert setting, but fowl. Some interpreters contend, with a bit of a stretch, that "meat" means "fish." It may make more sense to infer that the complainers, filled with craving or lust (*taʾawah*) for the good old days of slavery, remember the sumptuous feasts of Egypt and, in their appetitive recollection, are a little confused about the culinary terms: first they say "meat," the most substantial object of gluttonous craving, but when they review the actual menu of their Egyptian meals, the main course, plausibly enough along the banks of the Nile, turns out to be fish.

5. *for free.* This term is a striking instance of selective memory. The slaves did not have to pay for their food, which was provided by their owners, but of course a brutally high price was exacted through the punishing labor imposed upon them by their taskmasters.

6. *before our eyes.* The Hebrew lacks "before" (a mere particle, l^e), whether because this is an ellipsis or a scribal omission. In the Hebrew, there is an anomalous "to" (*ʾel*) before "manna," and perhaps this preposition actually belongs before "eyes."

7. *bdellium.* This English term may derive from the Hebrew *bedolaḥ* or its Semitic cognates; it is a semitransparent yellowish gum. Later Hebrew, working from what is probably a misinterpretation of the biblical term, uses *bedolaḥ* in the sense of "crystal."

8. *grind it . . . pound it . . . cook it . . . make it into cakes.* This itemization of processes of food preparation (the "it" is merely implied in the Hebrew) makes one suspect that the reports of the manna reflect a real memory of some improvised food in the Wilderness wanderings. A common conjecture is that it might be the edible secretions of a particular insect found on trees in the Sinai. However ingeniously processed, it would have offered poor competition to the refinement and variety of Egyptian cuisine that riffraff and Israelites alike recall.

the creaminess of oil. In all likelihood, this refers to the thick upper layer of the first press of olive oil.

10. *weeping by its clans.* Throughout this episode, "weep" has the obvious sense of "complain," but it is used instead of several possible biblical alternatives because it stresses the whining nature of the complaints.

11. *Why have You done evil to Your servant.* "Evil" here means "harm" but pointedly carries forward the perception by Moses in the previous verse that this whole affair is evil, bad business.

burden. The notion of the responsibility of leadership as a heavy load repeats the emphasis of the parallel episode in Exodus 18.

12. *Did I conceive all this people, did I give birth to them.* In an extravagant metaphor that expresses Moses's sense of outrageous anomaly in the task he is required to do, he asks whether he is the mother of all these teeming multitudes. He then goes on, in the words he attributes to God, to wonder whether he is supposed to be an *ʾomen*, a guardian or private tutor of the sort that wealthy families would hire to care for and instruct their children.

15. *kill me, pray, altogether, if I have found favor in Your eyes.* In Exodus 33, the sign Moses sought that he had found favor in God's eyes was that God would elect to go in the midst of the people and would show Moses something of the divine nature. Now, Moses in his desperation imagines an end to his suffering through death as the sign of God's favor.

17. *hold back some of the spirit.* The verb *ʾatsal*, which Esau uses when he asks Isaac whether he has held in reserve some blessing for his real firstborn, suggests that a certain limited portion of the spirit vouchsafed Moses is taken from him to be distributed among the elders. This is precisely what is involved in the delegation of authority.

21. *Six hundred thousand foot soldiers.* That is, 600,000 males the age of military conscription. This figure would then be multiplied through all the additional female and minor mouths to feed. The incredulity expressed in the question indicates that even Moses cannot believe there is a way to provide meat—both he and God take the people at their own initial word, forgetting about the fish—for this vast populace.

22. *provide for them.* The Hebrew verb here usually means "find," but this understanding of its meaning in context goes back to the Targum Onkelos and is endorsed by most modern scholars.

23. *Will the LORD's hand be too short?* "Hand" here has the idiomatic sense of "power" but also manifests a metaphorical image—the hand of God reaching all the way to the sea to sweep up the quail and rain them down on the Israelite camp.

25. *as the spirit rested upon them, that they prophesied.* To "prophesy" (*hitnabeiʾ*) is to exhibit ecstatic behavior—dancing, writhing, emitting vatic speech. In this instance, the elders, who have been designated to share the burden of leadership with Moses, don't do anything other than to make manifest through prophesying, after they have gathered round Moses, that they, too, are invested with the divine spirit and so share his responsibility. The end of the verse makes clear that this is a one-time event: the elders demonstrate here that they partake of the spirit, but they have no continuing role as prophets, in contrast to Moses.

26. *they were among those inscribed.* The most likely meaning is that they were "inscribed" among the seventy elders but differed from them in not coming out of the Tent. The particle *waw*, which usually means "and," can have an adversative sense, as it probably does here, when it prefixes a verb in the perfective tense instead of the usual imperfective tense for historical narration (*welo ʾ yatsʾu*, "but they did not go out"). Abraham ibn Ezra

helpfully glosses: “they did not go out from the camp of Israel to the Tent of Meeting” (where the other elders had gathered).

28. *from his youth.* The Hebrew *mibeḥuraw* could also mean “from his chosen ones.”

My lord Moses, restrain them. The prophesying of the other sixty-eight elders in the designated place of sanctity, before the Tent of Meeting, is one thing, but the manifestation of prophecy in the midst of the Israelite camp is quite another, for it could turn into a dangerously contagious threat to Moses’s leadership.

29. *Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets.* Moses, just having surrendered a portion of the spirit invested in him to the seventy elders, now hyperbolically expresses the sense that holding on to a monopoly of power (equated with access to the divine spirit) is not at all what impels him as leader. Although he knows that there is scarcely any prospect that the entire people will become prophets, he nevertheless points to an ideal of what we might call radical spiritual egalitarianism. Access to the realm of the spirit is granted by God, in principle to anyone God chooses. The “gathering” of the elders to share the spirit is the antithesis of the mob of riffraff that assembles to express in complaint the dictates of the belly, not the spirit.

31. *swept up quail from the sea.* There may be a realistic kernel to this miraculous event: flocks of migratory quail from the sea do cross over the Sinai, where, exhausted from their flight, they are easy to trap.

32. *ten* homers. This would be a huge amount, since the *ḥomer* is ten *ephahs*, or more than five bushels.

they laid them out. The evident purpose is to cure the meat in the hot desert sun. But two ancient versions read instead of *wayishteḥu*, “and they laid out,” *wayishḥetu*, “and they slaughtered” (a reversal of the second and the third consonants of the verb).

33. *it had not yet been chewed.* The verb for “chew” or “consume,” *yikaret*, is unusual, for its ordinary meaning is “to be cut off.” It probably occurs here as an ominous bit of micro-foreshadowing, since the “blow” (or “plague”) God strikes against the people will, in biblical idiom, cut off many of them.

34. *Kibroth-Hattaavah.* The Hebrew means Graves of Desire (or Lust). In both this episode and the preceding one of Taberah, as in many incidents to follow, the Israelites move across the trackless wastes of the Sinai peninsula ironically leaving a trail of new place-names that is the history of their own repeated derilections.

CHAPTER 12

[1]And Miriam, and Aaron with her, spoke against
Moses concerning the Cushite wife he had taken, for
he had taken a Cushite wife. [2]And they said, “Is it but
through Moses alone that the LORD has spoken? Has
He not spoken through us as well?” And the LORD
heard. [3]And the man Moses was very humble, more
than any person on the face of the earth. [4]And the
LORD said suddenly to Moses and to Aaron and to
Miriam, “Go out, the three of you, to the Tent of
Meeting.” And the three of them went out. [5]And the
LORD came down in the pillar of cloud and stood at
the entrance of the tent and called, “Aaron and
Miriam!” And the two of them went out. [6]And He
said,

“Listen, pray, to My words.
If your prophet be the LORD’s
in a vision to him would I be
known,

in a dream would I speak
through him.
[7]Not so My servant Moses,
in all My house is he trusted.
[8]Mouth to mouth do I speak with
him,
and vision, and not in riddles,
and the likeness of the LORD
he beholds.
And why did you not fear
to speak against My servant
Moses?”

[9]And the LORD’s wrath flared against them, and He went off. [10]And the cloud moved off from over the tent, and, look, Miriam was blanched as snow, and Aaron turned to Miriam, and, look, she was struck with skin blanch. [11]And Aaron said to Moses, “I beseech you, my lord, pray, do not put upon us the offense which we did foolishly and by which we offended. [12]Let her not be, pray, like one dead who when he comes out of his mother’s womb, half his flesh is eaten away.” [13]And Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, “God, pray, heal her, pray.” [14]And the LORD said to Moses, “Had her father spat in her face,

would she not be shamed seven days, be shut up seven days outside the camp, and afterward she would be gathered back in?" [15]And Miriam was shut up outside the camp seven days, and the people did not journey onward until Miriam was gathered back in. [16]And afterward the people journeyed on from Hazeroth, and they camped in the Wilderness of Paran.

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Miriam, and Aaron with her, spoke against Moses*. This is one of the most striking instances of an expressive grammatical device in ancient Hebrew prose: when there are two or more subjects of a verb but a singular verb is used (here, feminine singular), there is a thematic focus on the first of the subjects as the principal agent in the action stipulated through the verb. (This translation adds "with her" to suggest an equivalent effect.) Thus Abraham ibn Ezra: "she spoke and Aaron assented or was silent, so he [too] was punished." It is Miriam, of course, who will be stricken with the skin disease. The expression *diber b^{e}* often means "to speak against," but in a punning usage, it can also refer, as it does repeatedly in this episode beginning with Aaron's and Miriam's dialogue in the next verse, to God's speaking *through* a prophet. Verse 8 here also uses *diber b^{e}*, but because of the mouth-to-mouth idiom, in that one instance it is translated as "speak with."

the Cushite wife. Is this Zipporah? Only if one locates Cush in Midian, which some interpreters find grounds for doing. Otherwise, Cush might be a designation for Nubia or Ethiopia, which would make this wife black. If she is a second wife, the objection might be simply to the fact that Moses had compromised Zipporah's privileged status by this second marriage (Baruch Levine's view), or it could reflect racial disapproval. If Miriam and Aaron are

referring to Zipporah, the objection would simply be to her coming from a different ethnic-national group. In either case, they mean to suggest that Moses's marital behavior is unworthy of a prophetic leader and hence evidence that he does not deserve to be the exclusive vessel of prophecy.

2. *Has He not spoken through us as well?* This familial "murmuring" should be read against the background of the immediately preceding episode. There two people, Eldad and Medad, were singled out as instruments of prophecy. Now these two siblings come forth to propose themselves as candidates for the same role, though there is scant indication in the earlier narratives that God has been speaking directly through them (despite Miriam's designation as "prophetess" in Exodus 15:20). Moses responded to the prophesying of Eldad and Medad by wishing that the whole people might be endowed with the spirit of prophecy. In flagrant contrast, Miriam and Aaron pretend that their brother has been treating prophecy as a private monopoly, and their view of the prophetic spirit is of something one can seize as a means of privilege and power. The great biblical theme of sibling rivalry, until now absent from the story of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, here makes an appearance.

3. *And the man Moses was very humble.* As we have noted before (see the comment on Exodus 32:1), "the man," quite exceptionally, is a kind of epithet for Moses. His humble or unassuming character is reflected here in the fact that he has not troubled to listen, or has paid no attention, to the malicious rumors about him that Miriam and Aaron have initiated. God, however, has heard.

4. *the LORD said suddenly.* The use of "suddenly" to introduce divine speech is quite unusual. Nahmanides proposes an interesting explanation: Miriam and Aaron, having made their dubious declaration that through them, too, God had spoken, "were not at the moment thinking of an expected prophecy, and for Moses's sake it came upon them without invitation." Prophecy, that is, proves to be an abrupt and frightening business, not the commodity of power they had imagined. Thus, in the next verse, God, having called to all three siblings, singles out Miriam and Aaron in peremptory direct address.

6. *Listen, pray, to My words.* God's speech to Miriam and Aaron takes the exalted form of poetry. One of the conventions for beginning a biblical poem is an exhortation for those addressed to hearken to the utterances of the poet.

(Compare the first of many instances, Genesis 4:23: "Adah and Zillah, O hearken my voice . . .")

If your prophet be the LORD's. The Hebrew text is cryptic, perhaps through scribal error, perhaps merely because of the compacted language of archaic poetry. The literal Hebrew word sequence is: If-there-be your-prophet the-LORD. The second and third of these word-units might be an ellipsis for "prophet of the LORD," and both the Septuagint and the Vulgate show "of" or "for" (the Hebrew particle *l*^{e}). A couple of other ancient versions also reflect a reading of "a prophet among you." Various modern textual critics move "the LORD" (YHWH) either back to the verb "said" at the beginning of the verse or forward to the next clause, leaving "If there be a prophet [among you]."

vision . . . dream. For an ordinary prophet, God reveals Himself through an oblique imaging process, in vision or dream.

7. *My servant Moses, / in all My house is he trusted.* "Trusted," *ne'eman*, is an expected qualifier for "servant," *'eved*. Moses figures here as a kind of faithful majordomo given the keys to God's household.

8. *and vision, and not in riddles.* Although vision has been noted as one of the two vehicles of communication with the ordinary prophet, in Moses's case it is no enigmatic vision but a perfectly clear image, as he, and he alone, is privileged to look upon "the likeness of the LORD."

10. *blanched as snow.* If the Cushite woman is actually black, this sudden draining of pigmentation, as Jacob Milgrom notes, would be mordant poetic justice for Miriam's slander.

11–13. The rhetorical contrast between Aaron's petition to Moses and Moses's petition to God is pointed. Aaron's speech is relatively lengthy and centers on an elaborate, and horrifying, simile of stillbirth for Miriam's skin disease. (Perhaps that simile is dictated by Aaron's consciousness of the sibling bond between Miriam and her two brothers, as though he were saying to Moses: look, the three of us were born into life from the same womb, and now our sister is suffering a fate no better than that of a stillborn fetus.) Moses's prayer is a mere five words and five syllables (both in the Hebrew and in this translation), devoid of any metaphorical elaboration or explanation of motive and circumstance, a kind of pure verbal distillate of imperatively urgent plea. The starkness of the language makes it all the more affecting.

Compare Rashi's comment on the urgency of the language: "Why did not Moses pray at length? So that the Israelites would not say, 'His sister is in distress and he is standing and going on and on in prayer!'"

14. *shut up seven days outside the camp.* This does not appear to be the usual medical quarantine for this disease, which would be fourteen days, but, to judge by the immediate context, is rather a period of isolation until the public shaming Miriam has undergone will no longer be fresh.

15. *gathered back in.* This is the same locution used for Moses's return to the camp in Numbers 11:30. The repeated usage underscores a thematic antithesis: Moses was gathered back into the camp, from which he had gone out to stand before the Tent of Meeting, after sharing his spirit of prophecy with the seventy elders. Miriam is gathered back into the camp after having been excluded from it in punishment because she had complained that Moses was monopolizing the spirit that by right belonged equally to her and to Aaron. In the first instance, we have a gesture of consolidating political unity; in the second instance, a divisive complaint.

CHAPTER 13

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Send you
men, that they scout the land of Canaan which I am
about to give to the Israelites, one man each for his
father’s tribe, every one of them a chieftain.” [3]And
Moses sent them from the Wilderness of Paran by the
LORD’s word, all of them men, heads of the Israelites
they were. [4]And these are their names: For the tribe of
Reuben, Shammua the son of Zaccur. [5]For the tribe of
Simeon, Shaphat the son of Hori. [6]For the tribe of
Judah, Caleb son of Jephunneh. [7]For the tribe of
Issachar, Igal the son of Joseph. [8]For the tribe of
Ephraim, Hosea son of Nun. [9]For the tribe of
Benjamin, Palti son of Raphu. [10]For the tribe of
Zebulun, Gaddiel son of Sodi. [11]For the tribe of
Joseph, the tribe of Manassah, Gaddi son of Susi.
[12]For the tribe of Dan, Ammiel son of Gemalli. [13]For
the tribe of Asher, Sethur son of Michael. [14]For the
tribe of Naphtali, Nahbi son of Vophsi. [15]For the tribe
of Gad, Geuel son of Machi. [16]These are the names of
the men whom Moses sent to scout the land. And

Moses called Hosea the son of Nun Joshua. [17]And
Moses sent them to scout the land of Canaan, and he
said to them, “Go up this way through the Negeb, and
you shall go up into the high country. [18]And you shall
see the land, what is it like, and the people that dwells
in it, are they strong or slack, are they few or many.
[19]And what is the land in which they dwell, is it good
or bad, and what are the towns in which they dwell, are
they in open settlements or in fortresses. [20]And what is
the land, is it fat or lean, are there trees in it or not.
And you shall muster strength and take of the fruit of
the land.” And the season was the season of the first
ripe grapes.

[21]And they went up and scouted the land from the
Wilderness of Zin to Rehob at Lebo-Hamath. [22]And
they went up through the Negeb and came to Hebron,
and there were Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmai,
offspring of the giant. And Hebron had been built
seven years before Zoan in Egypt. [23]And they came to
Wadi Eshcol, and they cut off from there a branch and
one cluster of grapes—and bore it on a pole with two
men—and of the pomegranates and of the dates.
[24]That place was called Wadi Eshcol because of the
cluster that the Israelites cut off there. [25]And they came

back from scouting the land at the end of forty days.
[26]And they went and came to Moses and to Aaron and
to all the community of Israelites, at the Wilderness of
Paran at Kadesh, and they brought back word to them
and to all the community, and showed them the fruit
of the land. [27]And they recounted to him and said, “We
came into the land to which you sent us, and it’s
actually flowing with milk and honey, and this is its
fruit. [28]But mighty is the people that dwells in the land,
and the towns are fortified and very big, and also the
offspring of the giant we saw there. [29]Amalek dwells in
the Negeb land, and the Hittite and the Jebusite and
the Amorite dwell in the high country, and the
Canaanite dwells by the sea and by the Jordan.” [30]And
Caleb silenced the people around Moses and said, “We
will surely go up and take hold of it, for we will surely
prevail over it.” [31]But the men who had gone up with
him said, “We cannot go up against the people for they
are stronger than we.” [32]And they put forth an ill report
to the Israelites of the land that they had scouted,
saying, “The land through which we passed to scout is
a land that consumes those who dwell in it, and all the
people whom we saw in it are men of huge measure.
[33]And there did we see the Nephilim, sons of the giant
from the Nephilim, and we were in our own eyes like
grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes.”

CHAPTER 13 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *all of them men*. Rashi, followed by several modern commentators, proposes that "men" has the connotation of men of stature. In the present context, that might mean military prowess—a trait that would make the fearful majority report of the scouts all the more shameful.

4. *And these are their names.* These names are entirely different from the names of the tribal chieftains previously reported. Most of the names, moreover, do not appear elsewhere in the Bible. This could be an authentic ancient list of tribal military leaders, distinct from the tribal political heads.

16. *And Moses called Hosea the son of Nun Joshua.* The names are phonetically closer in the Hebrew—*Hoshe'a* and *Yehoshu'a*. The latter is the variant of the former that bears the theophoric prefix, with the meaning "God-saves."

17. *and you shall go up into the high country.* After crossing the Negeb desert, the tribes would move into the mountainous region of Judah in eastern Canaan.

18. *are they strong or slack.* The formulation of the mission of the scouts in terms of these binary opposites leads into the divided opinion of the report. The majority of ten will focus on "strong" and "fortifications."

19. *in open settlements.* The Hebrew is literally "encampments." This nomad's term was evidently extended to any settlement lacking fortified walls. Given the fact that Canaan comprised a variety of city-states and regional mini-kingdoms which were often in conflict with one another, the landscape abounded in fortified cities.

20. *muster strength and take of the fruit of the land.* The notion that strength is required to take a sample of the fruit of the land is the first hint that the fruit is preternaturally heavy, just as the inhabitants are preternaturally large.

The hyperbolic—or legendary—indication in verse 23 is that a single cluster of grapes is so heavy that it requires two men to carry it.

22. *offspring of the giant.* The second Hebrew term here, *ʿanaq*, is understood by some modern translators to be an ethnic designation ("Anakites"). The words of the scouts, however, in verse 33, clearly place "offspring of the *ʿanaq*" in apposition with Nephilim, the legendary man-god hybrids mentioned in Genesis 6:1–4, and there is no indication elsewhere of an ethnic group called Anakites. (On the basis of this chapter, *ʿanaq* in all subsequent strata of Hebrew is the standard term for "giant.") The legendary scale of the bounty of the land, its "fatness," is matched by the legendary proportions of its inhabitants. It should be noted that this representation of Hebron inhabited by giants swerves from the depiction of Hebron in Genesis 25, where the local denizens are ordinary, and commercially shrewd, Hittites.

Zoan in Egypt. This city is usually identified as Tanis.

24. *Wadi Eshcol.* "Eshcol" is the Hebrew term for "grape cluster."

25. *at the end of forty days.* The number is of course formulaic, but it is also a reasonably plausible time in which a contingent of men on foot might traverse the Negeb, from its southernmost region (the Wilderness of Paran), make their way to northern Canaan, and return.

27. *they recounted to him.* Although Aaron and the representatives of the community are present, and have been shown the spectacular samples of the fruit of the land, it is to Moses as leader that they address the words of their report.

it's actually flowing with milk and honey. Moses, conveying the divine promise, has repeatedly used this phrase for the fruitfulness of the land. Now the eyewitnesses confirm that it is actually (*gam*) true.

29. *the Canaanite dwells by the sea.* This indication is historically accurate for the thirteenth century B.C.E. because the Philistines, who would very soon control most of the coastal area, had not yet arrived.

30. *We will surely go up . . . we will surely prevail*. Caleb's vehement contradiction of the majority of the scouts does not deny the substance of their report but rather insists that even against such huge adversaries and such

an array of fortified cities the Israelites will prevail. This martial resolution will be fulfilled in the biblical account a full generation later, under Joshua's leadership.

32. *a land that consumes those who dwell in it.* As several medieval commentators observe, the scouts now raise the ante in their negative report. At first, they duly noted the extravagant fruitfulness of the land together with the fearful aspect of its inhabitants. Now, in their rejoinder to Caleb, they put forth an ill report (*dibah*) of the land itself, saying that it consumes its inhabitants. Jacob Milgrom plausibly proposes that this phrase refers to a state of repeated war in which the inhabitants of this land find themselves, at the geographical crossroads between the Near Eastern empires to the south, to the east, and to the north. The multiple ethnic groups, moreover, of the land itself, indicated in the scouts' report, reflect armed conflict among the various natives. The land flowing with milk and honey, then, is seen in these words as a kind of death trap: even if the Israelites were to succeed in obtaining a foothold and themselves became dwellers of the land, it would "consume" them through internecine and international warfare.

men of huge measure. "Huge" is merely implied in the Hebrew.

33. *and so we were in their eyes.* This judgment has to be sheer fearful projection, for they would scarcely have spoken with the Canaanites.

CHAPTER 14

[1]And all the community lifted their voice and put it
forth, and the people wept on that night. [2]And all the
Israelites complained against Moses and against
Aaron, and all the community said to them, “Would
that we had died in the land of Egypt, or in this
wilderness would that we had died. [3]And why is the
LORD bringing us to this land to fall by the sword?
Our women and our little ones will become booty.
Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?”
[4]And they said one man to another, “Let us put up a
head and return to Egypt.” [5]And Moses and Aaron fell
on their faces before all the assembly of the
community of Israelites. [6]And Joshua son of Nun and
Caleb son of Jephunneh from those who had scouted
the land tore their garments. [7]And they said to all the
community of Israelites, saying, “The land through
which we passed to scout, the land is very, very good.
[8]If the LORD favors us, He will bring us to this land
and give it to us, a land that is flowing with milk and
honey. [9]Only do not rebel against the LORD, and you,

do not fear the people of the land, for they are our bread, their shade has turned from them and the LORD is with us. Do not fear them." [10]And all the community meant to pelt them with stones, but the glory of the LORD appeared in the Tent of Meeting to all the Israelites. [11]And the LORD said to Moses, "How long will this people despise Me, and how long will they not trust Me, with all the signs that I have done in their midst? [12]Let Me strike them with the plague and dispossess them, and I shall make you a nation greater and mightier than they." [13]And Moses said to the LORD, "And the Egyptians will hear that through Your power You brought up this people from their midst, [14]and will say to the inhabitants of this land, they have heard that You the LORD are in the midst of this people, for eye to eye You are seen, LORD, and Your cloud stands over them, and in a pillar of cloud You go before them by day and in a pillar of fire by night. [15]And you would put to death this people as a single man? And the nations who have heard rumor of You will say, saying, [16]'From the LORD's inability to bring this people to the land that He swore to them, He slaughtered them in the wilderness.' [17]And so, let the LORD's power, pray, be great, as you have spoken, saying, [18]"The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in kindness, bearing

crime and trespass, yet He does not wholly acquit,
reckoning the crime of fathers with sons, with the
third generation and the fourth.' [19]Forgive, pray, the
crime of this people through Your great kindness and
as You have borne with this people from Egypt till
now." [20]And the LORD said, "I have forgiven,
according to your word. [21]And yet, as I live, let the
LORD's glory fill all the earth. [22]For all the men who
have seen My glory and My signs that I did in Egypt
and in the wilderness yet have tried Me ten times over
and have not heeded My voice, [23]they shall never see
the land that I swore to their fathers, and all who
despise Me shall not see it. [24]But My servant Caleb,
inasmuch as there was another spirit with him, and he
followed after Me, I shall bring him to the land to
which he comes and his seed will take hold of it. [25]And
the Amalekite and the Canaanite dwell in the valley.
Tomorrow turn and journey onward in the wilderness
by the way of the Red Sea." [26]And the LORD said to
Moses and to Aaron, saying, [27]"How long for this evil
community that raises against Me the complaints of
the Israelites? That which they complain against Me I
have heard. [28]Say to them, 'As I live, the LORD
declares, just as you have spoken in My hearing, so
will I do to you. [29]In this wilderness your corpses will
fall and all your reckoned ones from twenty years old

and up, for you have complained against Me. [30]You shall never come into the land about which I lifted up My hand vowing to make you dwell within it, except for Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. [31]And your little ones, of whom you said they would become booty, I shall bring them and they will know the land that you cast aside. [32]And your own corpses will fall in this wilderness. [33]And your sons will be herdsmen in the wilderness forty years, and they will bear your whoring until your corpses come to an end in the wilderness. [34]By the number of days that you scouted the land, forty days, a day for a year, a day for a year, you will bear your crimes forty years, and you will know what it is to thwart Me. [35]I the LORD have spoken: Will I not do this to all this evil community that joins forces against Me? In this wilderness shall they come to an end, and there shall they die." [36]And the men whom Moses had sent to scout the land, who came back and set all the community complaining against him, putting forth an ill report about the land, [37]the men who put forth an ill and evil report of the land died in the scourge before the LORD. [38]And Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh were left alive from those men who had gone to scout the land. [39]And Moses spoke these words to all the Israelites, and the people mourned deeply. [40]And they

rose early in the morning and went up to the mountaintop, saying, “Here we are, and we shall go up to the place that the LORD said, for we have offended.” [41]And Moses said, “Why is it you are overstepping the LORD’s word, when it will not succeed? [42]Do not go up, for the LORD is not in your midst, lest you be routed before your enemies. [43]For the Amalekite and the Canaanite are there in front of you, and you will fall by the sword, for have you not turned back from the LORD and the LORD will not be with you?” [44]And they strove to go up to the mountaintop, and the Ark of the LORD’s Covenant and Moses did not budge from the midst of the camp. [45]And the Amalekite and the Canaanite, who dwelled on that mountain, came down and struck them and shattered them all the way to Hormah.

CHAPTER 14 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *lifted their voice and put it forth*. The conjunction of these two verbs with “voice” as their grammatical object is unusual, although elsewhere one or the other commonly appears with that noun as object. The apparent aim of the synonymity is emphasis: thus the sense of the whole verse is something like “they wept loud and bitterly.”

2. *Would that we had died.* The people’s complaint is cast in quasipoetic form, an indication of heightened, perhaps self-dramatizing, speech, in two

semantically parallel clauses that are a neat chiasm: died (a), Egypt (b), wilderness (b'), died (a').

3. *Our women and our little ones will become booty.* The complainers, in their terror of the imposing inhabitants of Canaan, neatly forget that in Egypt, where they long to return, a royal decree had been devised to destroy all their male children, leaving the girls and women to be exploited by their enslavers.

4. *Let us put up a head.* So Rashi, Targum Onkelos, and many other interpreters. The Hebrew *nitnah ro'sh* is a little cryptic. Others understand it as "let's pay attention" or even "let's set up a marching column." The New Jewish Publication Society, hanging on to the head in another sense, renders this as "let us head back." One should note that the same verb (*n-t-n*) used for "voice" in verse 1 recurs here with "head" for its object.

5. *And Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly.* For the most part, this gesture is used to express submission to a greater power. Here evidently, as Nahmanides proposes, it is a desperate attempt by Moses and Aaron to plead with the people not to undertake the disastrous course that they have just threatened.

9. *for they are our bread, their shade has turned from them.* Caleb and Joshua's words of exhortation conclude with what sounds like colloquial sting: as for these supposedly fearsome Canaanites, we will just gobble them up, and they are stripped of all protection, while the LORD is with us. "Shade," in the languages of this hot desert region, is a fixed metaphor for protection. Abraham ibn Ezra, with an eye to the battlefield, suggests that the reference is to the shadow of the warrior's shield.

10. *but the glory of the LORD appeared.* At the moment that Caleb and Joshua are threatened with death by stoning, God interposes His earthly manifestation, the luminous cloud, and drives back the assailants, rather like the way the two divine messengers to Sodom (Genesis 19) drive off the would-be rapists by striking them with blinding light.

11. *How long will this people despise Me.* It is not clear whether these are the words of an anthropomorphic God, sounding rather like an impatient parent, a God now thoroughly fed up with the repeatedly rebellious Israelites, or

whether this divine proposal is intended as a test of Moses's selfless devotion as leader. If the latter, he comes through with flying colors.

13. *the Egyptians will hear.* Moses does not even bother to protest that he has no ambitions to become the sole progenitor of a great people. Instead, he immediately focuses on the issue of God's own global reputation. In the Exodus narrative, we were reminded again and again that the purpose of all the prodigious signs and wonders that God worked against Egypt was to make His uncontested supremacy known among all the nations. Were He now to destroy the Israelites, the effect would be to unravel the great skein of the Exodus by encouraging the nations to question whether the LORD has any real power.

16. *He slaughtered them.* Moses himself has just spoken of putting the people to death, but he puts in the mouth of the contemptuous foreign nations a stronger word, one usually reserved for the killing of animals.

17. *let the LORD's power, pray, be great.* Some interpreters, leaning on one marginal biblical parallel, claim that "power" here actually means "forbearance." Rashi more plausibly glosses "power" as God's power to do what He has said. That proposal makes particular sense in light of the jeering reference to God's inability, or lack of power, in the words attributed to the surrounding nations. That is, God, by standing by His word to Israel, will make the greatness of his power manifest.

18. *The LORD is slow to anger.* Moses here recapitulates the declaration of divine attributes made on Mount Sinai in Exodus 34:6–7, with some phrases deleted (see the comments there). That declaration of attributes indicates that God both exacts justice ("He does not wholly acquit") and is compassionate. In the present urgent predicament, Moses cannot expect that God will simply shrug off the people's rebelliousness, but the attributes, after all, begin with "the LORD is slow to anger and abounding in kindness," an emphasis very much to Moses's purpose as intercessor for a wayward Israel.

21. *as I live, let the LORD's glory fill all the earth.* Many interpreters, from Rashi to the moderns, understood the second clause to mean "and as the LORD's glory fills all the earth." The Hebrew, however, has no grammatical indication of such an "as" structure, and there are no precedents for God's

swearing not merely by His life but by the fact that His glory fills all the earth. It is preferable to understand this clause as ibn Ezra does, to point forward in time to God's unfolding historical plan: yes, the generation of adults in the wilderness will perish there, but loyal Caleb, together with the next generation, will enter the land, thus confirming God's glory, demonstrating that it was not out of divine incapacity that the older Israelites failed to enter the land.

23. *they shall never see.* "Never" in the translation reflects the sense of solemn emphasis conveyed by the negative oath form—prefixed by *'im*—that is used in the Hebrew.

24. *followed after Me.* Literally "filled after"—an indication of absolute loyalty.

25. *by the way of the Red Sea.* In this case, the Israelites are directed toward Eilat/Akaba. Unable to confront the Canaanite adversaries, they must make a large sweep to the southeast and then ascend by stages through trans-Jordan, from where they will eventually invade Canaan from the east. The "valley" in which the Amalekites and Canaanites dwell is a puzzle because the Amalekites and the Canaanites at the end of this episode (verse 45) are said to come from the high country.

27. *this evil community that raises against Me the complaints of the Israelites.* Since a distinction is made between the "evil community" and the whole Israelite people, the former phrase would have to refer to the spies, though it is a little odd to call ten men a community (*'edah*).

29. *all your reckoned ones from twenty years old and up.* The laborious business of the military census, laid out in such detail in the opening chapters of Numbers, is now to be undone by death.

30. *vowing.* This word does not appear in the Hebrew but is implied by the lifting of the hand.

32. *And your own corpses will fall in this wilderness.* It would have been sufficient, idiomatically and semantically, to say "And you will fall in this wilderness." God's language, by making the corpses the grammatical subject,

invites the Wilderness generation to contemplate the concrete reality of their own death, "you" turned into "corpses."

33. *they will bear your whoring.* Whoring is of course a standard biblical metaphor for sinfulness—especially for betrayal (modeled on sexual betrayal). Your offspring, then, will bear the consequences of your rebelliousness for forty years until they are finally allowed to enter the land.

37. *the men.* This same word was emphasized at the beginning of the scouts' expedition to express their standing as leaders and warriors. Now it is "the men" who perish.

an ill and evil report. Previously, the noun *dibah*, which itself means "ill report," had been used without an adjective. Here, for the sake of emphasis, *raʿah*, "evil," is added to *dibah*.

40. *went up to the mountaintop.* The geographical indication here is rather vague. There is a range of low mountains along the eastern axis of Canaan, but the Israelites at this point are encamped to the south of Canaan. The unspecified mountain is probably intended to be doubly paradigmatic: an enemy whose land is to be conquered would typically be situated in fortifications on heights, and the unauthorized scramble up the mountainside toward the summit is an act of presumption, distantly related to the heaven-seeking Tower of Babel.

we shall go up to the place that the LORD said, for we have offended. They recognize their own cowardice in having been persuaded by the scout's negative report, but their resolution to storm the heights of Canaan is a misguided self-correction, entirely ignoring God's declaration that none of this generation will enter the land.

44. *strove.* The Hebrew verb *yaʿpilu* is unique to this verse, and its meaning is in dispute. One common etymology links it with *ʿofel*, "height," assuming that it means something like "strive upward."

the Ark of the LORD's Covenant and Moses did not budge from the midst of the camp. The would-be conquerors thus attack the heights without either their leader or the object that is the token of God's potent presence in the midst of the people. (Compare the Ark Narrative in the early chapters of 1 Samuel, where the people believe they will be victorious if they carry the Ark with them into battle.)

45. *all the way to Hormah.* Hormah may be a place-name, though its location is unknown, or it could be a common noun, “destruction,” in which case the sense of the phrase would be “until they were utterly destroyed.”

CHAPTER 15

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Speak to
the Israelites, and you shall say to them: ‘When you
come to the land of your settlement that I am about to
give to you, [3]you shall make a fire offering to the
LORD, a burnt offering or a sacrifice to set aside a
votive or a voluntary offering, or in your fixed seasons
to make a fragrant odor to the LORD from the cattle
or from the flock. [4]And he who brings forward his
offering to the LORD shall bring forward a grain
offering of fine semolina, one-tenth measure mixed
with one-fourth of a *hin* of oil. [5]And wine for the
libation, one-fourth of a *hin* you shall make with the
burnt offering or for the sacrifice for each sheep. [6]Or
for the ram you shall make a grain offering of fine
semolina, two tenth measures mixed with a third of a
hin of oil. [7]And wine for the libation, a third of a *hin*,
you shall bring forward, a fragrant odor to the LORD.
[8]And should you make a head of cattle as a burnt
offering or a sacrifice to set aside a votive or
communion sacrifice to the LORD, [9]the person shall

bring forward with the head of cattle a grain offering
of fine semolina, three-tenths of a measure mixed with
half a *hin* of oil. [10]And wine you shall bring forward
for the libation, half a *hin*, a fire offering, a fragrant
odor to the LORD. [11]Thus shall be done for the one
bull or the one ram or the lamb of the sheep or the
goats. [12]For the number that you do, thus you shall do
for each one, according to their number. [13]Every native
shall do these thus, to bring forward a fire offering, a
fragrant odor to the LORD. [14]And should a sojourner
reside with you, or anyone in your midst for your
generations, he shall make a fire offering, a fragrant
odor to the LORD, as you do, so shall he do. [15]The
assembly—one statute for you and for the sojourner
who resides, a perpetual statute for your generations,
you and the sojourner alike, shall there be before the
LORD. [16]One teaching and one practice shall there be
for you and for the sojourner who resides with you.'"

[17]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [18]"Speak to
the Israelites, and you shall say to them: 'When you
come to the land to which I am about to bring you,
[19]when it happens that you eat of the bread of the land,
you shall present a donation to the LORD. [20]The first
yield of your kneading troughs, a round loaf, you shall

present in donation, like the donation from the threshing floor, thus you shall present it. [21]From the first yield of your kneading troughs you shall give to the LORD, a donation for your generations. [22]And should you err and not do all these commandments that the LORD spoke to Moses, [23]all that the LORD has charged you by the hand of Moses, from the day that the LORD charged and henceforth for your generations, [24]and should it happen that it was done as in errancy away from the eyes of the community, the whole community shall make one bull from the cattle as a burnt offering, a fragrant odor to the LORD, and its grain offering and its libation according to fixed practice, and one he-goat for an offense offering. [25]And the priest shall atone for all the community of the Israelites and it will be forgiven to them, for it is an errancy, and they will have brought their offering, a fire offering to the LORD, and their offense offering before the LORD, for their errancy. [26]And it will be forgiven to all the community of Israelites and to the sojourner who resides in their midst, for the whole people is errant. [27]And if a single person errantly offends, he shall bring forward a yearling she-goat as an offense offering. [28]And the priest shall atone for the person erring in his offense in errancy before the LORD, to atone for him, and it will be forgiven him.

[29]And for the native among the Israelites and for the sojourner who resides in their midst, one teaching there shall be for them for him who does in errancy. [30]And the person who does it with a high hand, whether from the native or from the sojourner—he reviles the LORD, and that person shall be cut off from the midst of his people. [31]For he has spurned the word of the LORD and His commandment he has violated. That person shall surely be cut off, his crime is upon him.'"

[32]And the Israelites were in the wilderness, and they found a man gathering wood on the sabbath day. [33]And those who found him gathering wood brought him forward to Moses and to Aaron and to all the community. [34]And they placed him under watch, for it had not been determined what should be done to him. [35]And the LORD said to Moses, "The man is doomed to die. Let all the community pelt him with stones outside the camp." [36]And all the community took him outside the camp and pelted him with stones and he died, as the LORD had charged Moses.

[37]And the LORD said to Moses, saying, [38]"Speak to the Israelites, and you shall say to them that they

should make them a fringe on the skirts of their garments for their generations and place on the fringe of the skirt an indigo twist. [39]And it shall be a fringe for you, and you shall see it and be mindful of all the LORD's commandments and you shall do them. And you shall not stray after your heart and after your eyes, after which you go whoring. [40]So that you will be mindful and do My commandments, and you shall be holy to your God. [41]I am the LORD your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt to become your God. I am the LORD your God."

CHAPTER 15 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *When you come to the land*. After the incident of the spies, the narrative movement is broken off by the insertion of a miscellany of laws pertaining to the cult, the sabbath, and the mnemonic ritual fringes. The narrative of Wilderness rebellions will resume in the next chapter with the story of Korah's mutiny. It is not clear why the redactors deemed it appropriate to introduce this legal miscellany here, though the best effort of explanation has been made by Abraham ibn Ezra, with his characteristic alertness to possibilities of continuity in disjunct texts: "This section was juxtaposed to the previous because they [the ten scouts and their followers] had been cut down and people were mourning, to comfort the sons by letting them know that they would come to the land." Ibn Ezra goes on to say that the emphasis here on forgiveness (verse 25) is also a response to the sin of the ten scouts and their followers, and the reference to a "high hand" (verse 30) looks back to their arrogance in trying to storm the Canaanite heights without divine authorization.

4. *one-tenth measure.* This is evidently the dry measure *ʾephah*, roughly a bushel.

15. *one statute for you and for the sojourner.* Apologetic commentary has made much of the egalitarianism of this reiterated formula. In fact, it was common in the ancient Near East for resident aliens to participate in the cult of the community in which they were, in effect, naturalized citizens. In this early period, no special ceremony of conversion was involved, and as a matter of historical actuality, it is likely that the descendants of resident aliens in the course of time would have become indistinguishable from native Israelites.

22. *And should you err*. The Hebrew root *sh-g-h* (here) or *sh-g-g* (in all the subsequent occurrences in this chapter) denotes an inadvertent offense, because the person either is not aware of the law or is not cognizant of what he is doing.

24. *the whole community.* A prohibited act performed inadvertently by members of the community incurs guilt on the whole group that must be expiated. (Compare the plagues that descend on Thebes in *Oedipus the King* and *Antigon*e.)

30. *with a high hand.* This phrase, which suggests bold defiance, is the obvious legal antithesis to inadvertent transgressing, or erring.

32. *And the Israelites were in the wilderness.* This clause takes us back from the listing of timeless laws to the narrative setting of the Wilderness tales. The anecdote, however, proves to be a piece of case law indicating what is the sentence of a person willfully violating the sabbath.

35. *Let all the community pelt him with stones outside the camp.* The death sentence for violating the sabbath offers a grim prospect, which might well make one think of the brutal enforcement of strict theological conformity in certain modern theocracies. Ibn Ezra seeks to provide a palliative by linking this episode with the “high hand” of the immediately preceding passage, suggesting that the wood gatherer had been duly warned but high-handedly went on with his action. The larger narrative context comprises a series of acts of mutiny, threatening both the authority of Moses and the cohesiveness of the community, and this episode is conceived as a grave instance of such

mutiny. Israel as a community is in part defined by its adherence to the sabbath. In the harsh reality of the Wilderness setting, he who has broken ranks is taken outside the camp and executed by the whole community.

38. *make them a fringe on the skirts of their garments.* The "skirts" of the garment are literally "wings" (*kenafayim*). The garment would typically be a kind of tunic (and so would not have "corners"), and the reference is thus to the hem or bottom edge. The fringe—elsewhere the Hebrew *tsitsit* refers to a lock of hair—is made up of uncut threads extending down from the hem.

an indigo twist. Though indigo may be a reasonable approximation of the color in question, it should be noted that the dye is not derived from a plant, as is indigo, but from a substance secreted by the murex, harvested off the coast of Phoenicia (see the comment on Exodus 25:4). The extraction and preparation of this dye were labor-intensive and thus made it quite costly. It was used for royal garments in many places in the Mediterranean region, and in Israel it was also used for priestly garments and for the cloth furnishings of the Tabernacle. One may infer that the indigo twist was a token of the idea that Israel should become a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" and perhaps also that, as the covenanted people, metaphorically God's firstborn, the nation as a whole had royal status. Remnants of clothing found in the caves inhabited by Bar Kokhba's men demonstrate that such indigo twists were still worn at the hems of ordinary outer garments in the second century C.E. Eventually, the indigo color was dropped as dye for the authentic hue became inaccessible. The fringes were transferred to the *talit*, or prayer shawl, though some devout Orthodox men and boys still wear as an inner garment a sleeveless piece of cloth with a large neckhole and fringes at its four corners.

39. *be mindful of all the LORD's commandments.* The key Hebrew verb *z-k-r* means both "to remember" and "to be cognizant of." There is a continuing concern with mnemonic devices and stories in Numbers. This fringe with the indigo twist is presumably meant to remind the Israelites of their obligation as a holy people and of their quasiroyal status before God: when tempted to look at the objects of desire, they are to look instead upon the mnemonic fringe.

you shall not stray. The Hebrew verb here also has the more neutral meaning of "to go about," "to explore," "to scout"; and, as many commentators have noted, it is the very verb used for the expedition of the

twelve spies. Perhaps the "straying" is also intended, at least by the redactor, as a glance back at the sabbath wood gatherer.

41. *I am the LORD your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt.* Throughout the Hebrew Bible, theology is an inseparable part of story. Israel's fealty to God is not a consequence of abstract theological principle but of its experience of God's workings in history. The indigo twist—Rashi even seeks to link it with the color of the sky on the night of the Exodus—is thus a reminder not only of the commandments but of the liberation from slavery, prelude to the Sinai epiphany through which Israel took on the obligation to become a kingdom of priests. The once enslaved people is henceforth to wear a constant token of royalty and sanctity.

CHAPTER 16

[1]And Korah son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi,
and Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab and On son of
Peleth sons of Reuben, took up, [2]and they rose before
Moses, and two hundred fifty men of the Israelites,
community chieftains, persons called up to meeting,
men of renown. [3]And they assembled against Moses
and against Aaron and said to them, “You have too
much! For all the community, they are all holy, and in
their midst is the LORD, and why should you raise
yourselves up over the LORD’s assembly?” [4]And
Moses heard and fell on his face. [5]And he spoke to
Korah and to all his community, saying, “In the
morning, the LORD will make known who is His, and
him who is holy He will bring close to Him and him
whom He chooses He will bring close to Him. [6]Do
this: Take your fire-pans, Korah and all your
community. [7]And place fire in them and put incense
on them before the LORD tomorrow. And the man
whom the LORD chooses, he is the holy one. You
have too much, sons of Levi.” [8]And Moses said to

Korah, “Listen, pray, sons of Levi. [9]Is it too little for
you that the God of Israel divided you from the
community of Israel to bring you close to Him to do
the work of the LORD’s Tabernacle, to stand before
the community to serve them? [10]And He brought you
close, and all your brothers the sons of Levi with you.
And will you seek priesthood as well? [11]Therefore you
and all your community who band together against the
LORD—and Aaron, what is he that you should
murmur against him?”

[12]And Moses sent to call to Dathan and Abiram, the
sons of Eliab, and they said, “We will not go up. [13]Is it
too little that you brought us up from a land flowing
with milk and honey to put us to death in the
wilderness, that you should also actually lord it over
us? [14]What’s more, to a land flowing with milk and
honey you have not brought us nor given us an estate
of fields and vineyards. Would you gouge out the eyes
of these men? We will not go up!” [15]And Moses was
very incensed and he said to the LORD, “Do not turn
to their offering. Not a donkey of theirs have I carried
off, and I have done no harm to any one of them.”

16 And Moses said to Korah, “You and all your
community, be before the LORD, you and they and
Aaron, tomorrow. 17 And each man take his fire-pan
and you shall place on it incense and bring it forward
before the LORD, each man his fire-pan, two hundred
fifty fire-pans, and you and Aaron, each man his fire-
pan.” 18 And each man took his fire-pan, and they
placed fire in them and put incense on them, and they
stood at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, with
Moses and Aaron. 19 And Korah assembled all the
community by the entrance of the Tent of Meeting,
and the LORD’s glory appeared to all the community.
20 And the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron,
saying, 21 “Divide yourselves from this community, and
I will put an end to them in an instant.” 22 And they fell
on their faces and said, “El, God of the spirits for all
flesh, should one man offend and against all the
community You rage?” 23 And the LORD spoke to
Moses, saying, 24 “Speak to the community, saying,
‘Move up from around the dwelling of Korah, Dathan,
and Abiram.’” 25 And Moses arose and went to Dathan
and Abiram, and the elders of Israel went after him.
26 And he spoke to the community, saying, “Turn away,
pray, from the tents of these evil men and touch
nothing of theirs, lest you be swept away in all their
offense.” 27 And they moved up from the dwelling of

Korah, Dathan, and Abiram from all around, and Dathan and Abiram went out, poised at the entrance of their tents, and their wives and their sons and their little ones. [28]And Moses said, “By this shall you know that the LORD has sent me to do all these deeds, that it was not from my own heart: [29]If like the death of all human beings these die, and if the fate of all human beings proves their fate, it is not the LORD who has sent me. [30]But if a new thing the LORD should create, and the ground gapes open its mouth and swallows them and all of theirs and they go down alive to Sheol, you will know that these men have despised the LORD.” [31]And it happened, just as he finished speaking all these words, the ground that was under them split apart, [32]and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households and every human being that was Korah’s, and all the possessions. [33]And they went down, they and all that was theirs, alive to Sheol, and the earth covered over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. [34]And all Israel that was round about them fled at the sound of them, for they thought, “Lest the earth swallow us.” [35]And a fire had gone out from the LORD, and consumed the two hundred fifty men bringing forward the incense.

CHAPTER 16 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Korah . . . took up*. The verb (it is the first word here in the Hebrew text) is in the singular, thus thematically focusing on the principal agent, Korah, who becomes the archetype of the presumptuous rebel against just authority. The function of the verb is nevertheless not entirely clear: the verb "to take" is transitive and should have a direct object but none appears in this sentence. Abraham ibn Ezra solves this difficulty by claiming that an elliptical object, "men," is implied. Others construe "take" to have the idiomatic sense of "take himself aside" or "rebel." This translation replicates the ambiguity of the Hebrew.

Dathan and Abirman . . . sons of Reuben. The conjoining of Levites and Reubenites is the first signal of an underlying problem in the entire episode, abundantly registered by biblical scholars. This is a rare instance in which the editorial orchestration of literary sources, instead of producing polyphonic complexity, generates repeated dissonance. Two rebellions have been combined, a rebellion of Levites for priestly privilege and a rebellion of Reubenites for political power. It is fitting that the latter should come out of the tribe of Reuben, for Reuben is the firstborn who has been passed over in the struggle for political preeminence. As the two stories twine around each other, it emerges that there are two different places of confrontation—for Korah and his people, the sanctuary ("before the LORD"), where the trial of the fire-pans occurs; and for Dathan and Abiram and their followers, the entrance to their tents. And there are also two different modes of destruction —a consuming fire engulfs the Levites while the Reubenites are swallowed up by the earth. Perhaps this odd weaving together of the two rebellions was intended to suggest that political and sacerdotal power are inseparable (an idea that might have appealed to Priestly editors), but from a modern perspective it makes peculiar reading.

3. *they are all holy.* Korah and his followers throw back in Moses's face the idea he has transmitted to them that all Israel should be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6).

raise yourselves up. The verb also could mean "play the chieftain."

4. *Moses heard and fell on his face.* This gesture of prostration ordinarily is an expression of reverence and self-abnegation, as indeed it is in verse 22; but here it would have to be a reflex of extreme dismay. Moses will promptly pick himself up and deliver an ominous prediction to the rebels.

5. *Korah and to all his community.* The Hebrew *ʿadato* has often been rendered as his "band" or his "faction." But it is the term regularly used (as in "community chieftains" in verse 2) to indicate the legitimate organized collective of Israelites, and the point is that Korah has deflected a legitimate collectivity, the *ʿedah*, into a mutinous break-off group, so the term needs to be preserved for both the legitimate organization and the rebellion.

bring close. In ritual contexts, the verbal stem *q-r-b* almost always suggests the privilege of access to sanctified space and to the divine presence.

7. *You have too much, sons of Levi.* Moses is obviously flinging their own initial words of complaint against him (verse 3) back against them. This phrase will then be antithetically reversed at the very beginning of Moses's next speech (verse 8), "Is it too little . . . ?"

9. *divided you . . . to bring you close . . . to do the work . . . to stand before the community to serve them?* The expansively synonymous character of Moses's language underscores the immense bounty that the Levites received in being charged with all the (nonpriestly) work of the Tabernacle. ("Stand before" has the idiomatic sense of "serve.")

11. *Therefore you and all your community . . . and Aaron, what is he*. The syntax here seems a bit disjunct, perhaps because the story of Korah is at this point interrupted by the story of Dathan and Abiram. Aaron is singled out here because from among the Levite clans it is upon Aaron and his sons that priesthood has been conferred.

12. *Moses sent to call.* The purpose of the summons is not stated, but it is clearly an expression of Moses's political authority over these Reubenites, which they categorically reject by declaring, "We will not go up." In this second story, where power rather than priestly privilege is at issue, the rebellion is directed against Moses, and Aaron now is not mentioned.

13. *Is it too little.* These words of course echo the phrase just used by Moses (verse 9) in addressing Korah and his followers and reflect an effort to pull the two strands together.

from a land flowing with milk and honey. Previous recollections in the "murmurings" stories of the fleshpots of Egypt are now ratcheted up as the house of bondage is represented in the very terms of bounty that have been repeatedly used for the promised land. The claim that the wilderness is no more than a death trap for the liberated slaves has been made from the start.

14. *to a land flowing with milk and honey you have not brought us.* This complaint is abundantly justified. They are still stuck in the pitiless rocky landscape of the Sinai desert, and the effort of the ten scouts to lead an expedition against the high country of Canaan has just been turned back in disastrous defeat.

Would you gouge out the eyes of these men? "These men" is a euphemism for "us," employed to avoid saying something dire about oneself. Gouging out the eyes was sometimes a punishment of rebels in the ancient Near East, although the Reubenites may simply be saying, as ibn Ezra proposes, that they are not blind to Moses's outrageous behavior.

15. *Do not turn to their offering.* Dathan and Abiram have mentioned no offering, so this could be an attempt to harmonize this story with Korah's.

16. *And Moses said to Korah.* The narrative thread broken off at the end of verse 11 is now resumed.

21. *Divide yourselves from this community.* There is some ambiguity here about the scope of the noun *ʿedah*. If it means Korah's faction, then in the next verse Moses and Aaron plead that only the ringleaders be punished, not all 250 rebels. But the subsequent occurrences of "community" in the story seem to point to the whole Israelite people, so perhaps Moses and Aaron fear that God is exhibiting another impulse to destroy the entire populace and to start again with the two brothers.

24. *the dwelling.* The Hebrew *mishkan* is also the term for "Tabernacle." Its use may be still another effort to tie the two stories together, as its application to profane dwellings is generally in the plural (*mishkenot*).

Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. The first of these names appears to be an interpolation, for Korah has been instructed to stand by the Tent of Meeting, not in front of his own tent.

27. *they moved up.* This is the same verb as the rebels'"we will not *go up*," used here in a different conjugation to convey the sense of "removed themselves from." It occurs equally in verse 24.

Dathan and Abiram. Korah has now, properly, disappeared from the scene in front of the tents.

32. *the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households.* This justice by cataclysmic portent is pitiless, and scarcely accords with the discrimination of guilty agents elsewhere in the Mosaic Code—everyone associated with Dathan and Abiram is engulfed, down to the little children.

and every human being that was Korah's. Once more the name is inserted in order to try to splice the two strands, for one may infer that Korah should be awaiting destruction by fire at the Tent of Meeting.

34. *And all Israel . . . fled at the sound of them*. The real thrust of the story is not considered justice but monitory spectacle: terror surges through the whole people as they witness the earth gaping, then closing (no mere earthquake!), with the rebel Reubenites tumbling into the underworld.

35. *And a fire had gone out from the* LORD. Here we have the report of the denouement of the trial of the fire-pans, suspended after verse 22. The use of the pluperfect reflects an attempt to hold the two narrative lines together: while Dathan, Abiram, and company were being swallowed by the earth, a divine fire coming out from the sanctuary has consumed Korah and his people. But, pointedly, explicit reference to Korah is omitted from this verse because verse 32 has just placed him alongside Dathan and Abiram. The consequent confusion is carried into postbiblical Hebrew tradition, where Korah is sometimes represented as having been buried alive and sometimes as having been incinerated.

CHAPTER 17

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Say to
Eleazar son of Aaron the priest that he should lift up
the fire-pans from the midst of the burnt-out zone and
scatter the fire abroad, for they have become holy—
[3]the fire-pans of these offenders at the cost of their
lives. And they shall make of them hammered sheets
as plating for the altar, for they brought them forward
before the LORD and they have become holy, and
they will become a sign for the Israelites.” [4]And
Eleazar the priest took the bronze fire-pans that those
burned to death had brought forward, and they
hammered them into a plating for the altar, [5]a
remembrance for the Israelites, so that no stranger,
who was not of the seed of Aaron, should come
forward to burn incense before the LORD, and none
should be like Korah and his community, as the
LORD had spoken to him in the hand of Moses. [6]And
all the community of Israelites murmured on the next
day against Moses and against Aaron, saying, “You,
you have put to death the LORD’s people.” [7]And it

happened when the community assembled against Moses and against Aaron, that they turned to the Tent of Meeting, and, look, the cloud had covered it and the LORD's glory appeared. 8And Moses, and Aaron with him, came before the Tent of Meeting. 9And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 10"Lift yourselves up from the midst of this community and I will put an end to them in an instant." And they fell on their faces. 11And Moses said to Aaron, "Take the fire-pan and place fire upon it from the altar and put in incense and carry it quickly to the community and atone for them, for the fury has gone out from before the LORD, the scourge has begun." 12And Aaron took as Moses had spoken, and he ran into the midst of the assembly, and, look, the scourge had begun against the people, and he put in incense and atoned for the people. 13And he stood between the dead and the living, and the scourge was held back. 14And those who died by the scourge came to fourteen thousand and seven hundred, besides those who died because of Korah. 15And Aaron returned to Moses at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and the scourge was held back.

16And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 17"Speak to the Israelites, and take from them a staff for every

father's house from all their chieftains, according to
their fathers' houses, twelve staffs—each man's name
you shall write on his staff. [18]And Aaron's name you
shall write on the staff of Levi, for one staff there is
for the head of their father's house. [19]And you shall lay
them down in the Tent of Meeting before the Ark of
the Covenant where I meet with you. [20]And it will
happen that the man whom I choose, his staff will
flower. And I shall cause to subside from Me the
murmurings of the Israelites which they murmur
against you." [21]And Moses spoke to the Israelites, and
all their chieftains gave him a staff for every single
chieftain, according to their fathers' houses, twelve
staffs, and Aaron's staff was among their staffs. [22]And
Moses laid down the staffs before the LORD in the
Tent of the Covenant. [23]And it happened on the next
day that Moses came into the Tent of the Covenant,
and, look, Aaron's staff of the house of Levi had
flowered, and it had brought forth flower and had
burgeoned in blossom and had born almonds. [24]And
Moses brought out all the staffs from before the
LORD to the Israelites, and they saw, and each man
took his staff. [25]And the LORD said to Moses: "Bring
back Aaron's staff before the Ark of the Covenant as a
safekeeping, as a sign for rebels, and let there be an
end to their murmurings against Me, and they shall not

die.” [26]And Moses did as the LORD had charged him, thus did he do. [27]And the Israelites said to Moses, saying, “Look, we perish, we are lost, all of us are lost. [28]Whoever so much as comes near the LORD’s Tabernacle will die. Are we done with perishing?”

CHAPTER 17 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *lift up*. The idiomatic sense of this verb in context is “remove.” *burnt-out zone*. Literally, “the burning,” but the fire of course has now died down. *scatter the fire*. “Fire,” *’esh*, sometimes can mean, as here, hot ashes.

3. *for they brought them forward before the* LORD *and they have become holy.* The first clause explains the second: the fire-pans, by virtue of having been carried into sacred space, even though by unauthorized persons who paid for the encroachment with their lives, have become holy.

they will become a sign for the Israelites. Again and again in the Book of Numbers, the narrative is concerned with collective mnemonic devices: ritual apparatus is meant to recall monitory events in the Wilderness wanderings—here, the bronze plating of the altar and, below, Aaron’s staff, set before the altar in “safekeeping.”

5. *stranger.* The general sense of *zar* is “alien” or “outsider.” As always in ritual contexts, the term refers not to an ethnic foreigner but to anyone not a member of the consecrated priesthood.

to him. The ambiguous antecedent is plausibly identified by Abraham ibn Ezra as Aaron.

6. *all the community of Israelites.* Given the people’s refractory nature, the violent suppression of a small band of rebels only triggers a general expression of resentment against Moses’s leadership. The repeated pattern of

these stories is a study in collective malcontent, in the psychology of resistance to authority.

You, you have put to death the LORD's people. The insertion of the emphatic second-person plural pronoun *ʾatem* vividly expresses the accusatory tone of the Israelites' angry words to Moses and Aaron. As Richard Elliott Friedman aptly notes, the accusation turns everything around in the story: the Israelites are "the LORD's people" and Moses and Aaron are thus lined up against them and God, saddled with the responsibility for the death of the rebels whom in fact God killed.

10. *Lift yourselves up.* This idiom for "remove yourselves" pointedly picks up the verb used for the removal of the fire-pans in verse 2. We have here a reiterated theme of the episodes of "murmuring": God's "fury"—literally, "foaming wrath," *qetsef*—is on the point of consuming the whole rebellious people so that He can start all over with Moses and Aaron, but they intercede on behalf of the people.

12. *he put in incense and atoned for the people.* The burning of incense to drive off a plague should not be thought of as a sanitary technique. Since incense in ancient Near Eastern religions was imagined, like the burnt offerings it accompanied, as a fragrant odor in the nostrils of the gods, there would have been an expectation that the burning of incense had the power to assuage an angry deity. It is notable that this act of intervention to save the people is not dictated by God but is a device Moses on his own initiative orders Aaron to implement.

17. *a staff for every father's house.* The social unit "father's house" is used rather loosely here to designate "tribe," perhaps because the two Hebrew words for "tribe," *mateh* and *shevet*, both mean "staff," and hence the use of either in this context would have introduced confusion. In any case, we are made conscious that the staff, the tribal emblem, is a metonymy for tribe.

20. *I shall cause to subside from Me.* The unusual Hebrew verb (the same root is used for the receding waters of the Deluge) suggests that the murmurings of complaint are imagined as a kind of flood that rises up around the deity. In this sentence, God clearly aligns Himself with Moses and Aaron as object of the complaints—in precise antithesis to the people's attempt to put God on their side by identifying the two brothers as enemies of "the LORD's people."

21. *Aaron's staff was among their staffs.* The tribe of Levi would not have been reckoned among the twelve tribes. Thus, there are twelve staffs representing the ten tribes and the two half-tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, and Aaron's staff is placed together with them in this trial.

23. *it had brought forth flower and had burgeoned in blossom and had born almonds.* The chronology of these stages of vegetal growth is a little obscure because either "flower," *peraḥ*, and "blossom," *tsits*, are synonyms, or *tsits* may be an incipient *peraḥ*. Perhaps the parallel clauses are encouraged by the practice of synonymity in poetry, where the more unusual term (here, *tsits*) is always the second one. In any case, the bearing of fruit, the almonds, obviously follows in time the flowering, and this fast-forwarding of a slow process of growth spectacularly confirms the miraculous character of the event. Flowering staffs also make an appearance in Herodotus. The divine favor accorded the Levites is figured in this image of agricultural fertility linked with the tribe whose sacerdotal duties in fact removed them from the soil.

27. *Look, we perish, we are lost, all of us are lost.* Instead of embracing the monitory mnemonic of Aaron's staff that has just been offered them and accepting God's assurance that if they renounce their murmurings, "they shall not die," the people conclude that they are about to be utterly destroyed. The panic they feel is etched in the stark simplicity and the repetitions of their expression of fear: in these two concluding verses, they say "perish" twice, "lost" twice, and (in the Hebrew) "approach" twice (*kol haqarev haqarev*). This whole story, like so many others in Numbers, marks out a borderline between the sacred and the profane, stressing that only the consecrated can cross into the zone of the sacred. The people, however, who live alongside the sacred precincts, are gripped with fear that at any time they might step over the line and be struck down.

CHAPTER 18

[1]And the LORD said to Aaron, “You and your sons
and your father’s house with you, you shall bear the
guilt of the sanctuary, and you and your sons with you,
you shall bear the guilt of your priesthood. [2]And your
brothers, too, the tribe of Levi, your father’s tribe,
bring forward with you, and they will be levied with
you and serve you, and you and your sons with you are
to be before the Ark of the Covenant. [3]And they will
keep your watch, the watch of all the Tent. Only they
must not come near the sacred vessels and the altar, so
that they do not die, both they and you. [4]And they will
be levied with you and keep the watch of the Tent of
Meeting for all the work of the Tent, and no stranger
shall come near them. [5]And you shall keep the watch
of the sacred zone and the watch of the altar, that
there be no more fury against the Israelites. [6]And as
for Me, look, I have taken your brothers the Levites
from the midst of the Israelites, as a gift for you they
are given to the LORD, to do the work of the Tent of
Meeting. [7]And you and your sons with you, you shall

keep your priesthood for every matter of the altar and
for inside the curtain, and you shall do the work. As
gift work I shall give your priesthood, and the stranger
who comes near will be put to death."

[8]And the LORD spoke to Aaron, "And as for Me,
look, I have given you the watch of My donations for
all the holy things of the Israelites, to you I have given
them as a share and to your sons as a perpetual statute.
[9]This will be yours from the most holy things from the
fire, all their offerings, including all their grain
offerings and all their offense offerings and all their
guilt offerings that they give back to Me, most holy
things they are for you and for your sons. [10]In the most
holy precincts you shall eat it, every male shall eat it. It
will be holy for you. [11]And this is yours: their gift of
donations including all the donation offerings of the
Israelites, to you I have given them, and to your sons
and to your daughters with you as a perpetual statute,
every clean person in your household will eat it. [12]All
the richest of the oil and all the richest of the wine and
the grain, their prime yield that they give to the
LORD, to you I have given them. [13]The first fruits of
all that is in their land, which they bring to the LORD,
for you it will be, every clean person in your household

will eat it. [14]Everything that has been proscribed in
Israel, yours it will be. [15]Every womb-breach for all
flesh that they offer to the LORD whether human or
beast, yours it will be. But you shall surely redeem
every human firstborn, and the firstborn of unclean
beasts you shall redeem. [16]And its redemption price
from a month old you shall redeem at the value in
silver of five shekels by the sanctuary shekel, which is
twenty *gerahs*. [17]But the firstborn of an ox or the
firstborn of a sheep or the firstborn of a goat you shall
not redeem; they are holy. Their blood you shall throw
upon the altar and their fat you shall turn to smoke, a
fire offering with pleasing fragrance to the LORD.
[18]And their flesh will be yours, like the best of the
elevation offering and like the right thigh, yours it will
be. [19]All the donations of the holy things that the
Israelites donate to the LORD I have given to you and
to your sons and to your daughters with you as a
perpetual statute, a perpetual covenant of salt it is
before the LORD, for you and for your seed with
you."

[20]And the LORD said to Aaron, "In their land you
shall have no estate, and no portion shall you have in
their midst. I am your estate and your portion in the

midst of the Israelites. [21]And to the Levites, look, I have given every tithe in Israel as an estate in exchange for their work that they perform, the work of the Tent of Meeting. [22]And the Israelites will no longer draw near to the Tent of Meeting to bear offense to die. [23]And the Levite, he shall perform the work of the Tent of Meeting, and they will bear their guilt. It is a perpetual statute for your generations, and in the midst of the Israelites they will have no estate. [24]For the tithe of the Israelites which they donate to the LORD, I have given as a donation to the Levites for an estate. Therefore did I say to them, 'In the midst of the Israelites they will have no estate.'"

[25]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [26]"And to the Levites you shall speak, and you shall say to them, 'When you take from the Israelites the tithe that I have given you from them as your estate, you shall donate from it the LORD's donation, a tithe of the tithe. [27]And it will be accounted for you as your donation, like the yield from the threshing floor and like the matured wine from the vat. [28]So shall you, too, donate the LORD's donation from all your tithes that you take from the Israelites, and you shall give from them the LORD's donation to Aaron the priest. [29]From all your

gifts you shall donate the LORD's donation, from all the richest of it, the consecrated part of it. [30]And you shall say to them, When you donate the richest of it, it will be accounted for the Levites like the yield from the threshing floor and like the yield from the vat. [31]And you shall eat it in every place, you and your households, for it is wages for you in exchange for your work in the Tent of Meeting. [32]And you shall not bear offense for it when you donate the richest of it, and you shall not profane the holy things of the Israelites and you shall not die.'"

CHAPTER 18 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And the LORD said to Aaron*. After the account of the rebellion against Aaronite priestly privileges, concluding with the trial in which only Aaron's staff blossoms, God directs this address not to Moses or to Moses and Aaron, as is everywhere else the case, but to Aaron alone. The subject, appropriately, is the grave responsibility of entering into the sanctuary and performing the sacred work there.

bear the guilt of the sanctuary. This compressed Hebrew idiom refers to bearing guilt, which is to say, the consequences of guilt, for any violation of the sacred zone of the sanctuary. This whole series of instructions highlights the intrinsic danger of the sacred zone, where any misstep can trigger divine "fury" (verse 5), and hence the need to protect the sanctuary from the intrusion of any unfit person (*zar*). The logic of placing these laws immediately after the story of Korah's rebellion is manifest.

2. *the tribe of Levi, your father's tribe.* The Hebrew uses two synonyms for tribe, first *mateh* (the characteristic Priestly term) and then *shevet.* Both words have the primary meaning of "staff" and then become metonyms for tribe because each tribe carries its distinctive staff.

3. *keep your watch.* As elsewhere, the Hebrew *mishmeret* has a military sense, to keep watch or guard, but may also refer to something like "maintenance."

4. *they will be levied with you.* The Hebrew verb *nilwu* means "to be joined" or "associated," but it is an obvious pun on Levi (*lewi*), and "levied," in the sense of "mustered," seems a close enough approximation that preserves the pun.

8. *as a share.* The Hebrew *lemoshḥah* is a homonym for a more common term that has the sense of "for anointing." Baruch Levine has argued with especial cogency that context requires the sense of "share" or "measure," which this root has in several other Semitic languages.

11. *perpetual statute.* The Hebrew noun *ḥoq* can mean either "statute" or "allotment," and it appears to straddle both meanings here. In verse 23, where no gifts to the priesthood are being doled out, the same phrase can mean only "perpetual statute."

every clean person. That is, everyone untainted by ritual impurity (such as having had contact with a corpse).

14. *Everything . . . proscribed*. Everything that has been declared *ḥerem*, "under ban," "set aside," and hence dedicated solely to the cult and not allowed for profane enjoyment.

15. *redeem every human firstborn, and the firstborn of unclean beasts.* Neither of these categories is acceptable for sacrifice, but for opposite reasons—human beings because their life is sacred, unclean beasts (pigs, scavengers) because it would be degrading to use them in the cult.

18. *their flesh will be yours.* For the landless Levites, the parts of the sacrificial animal not burned on the altar (only one class of sacrifices, the *ʿolah*, was wholly burned) become a special perquisite, and an important source of sustenance.

19. *a perpetual covenant of salt.* Although some commentators have argued for a reference to the actual consumption of salt as part of a covenantal feast, it is more likely that salt as a preservative is a figurative idiom that reinforces the idea of permanence equally invoked in "perpetual."

20. *no estate, and no portion.* The two Hebrew terms *naḥalah* and *ḥeleq* often occur (in reverse order) as a hendiadys meaning "permanent estate." Breaking out a hendiadys into two separate words for purposes of emphasis is a common stylistic maneuver both in Hebrew poetry and prose.

29. *from all the richest of it.* The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "from all the fat of it," fat, *ḥelev*, being a common biblical idiom for the best part of anything (as in "the fat of the land").

32. *you shall not bear offense for it . . . and you shall not profane the holy things . . . and you shall not die*. This whole unit of instructions to the Aaronides closes in an envelope structure: the danger of suffering the consequences of violating the sanctuary, invoked at the beginning, recurs now on a note of reassurance: because these tithes of agricultural offerings are the priests' just wages for their service in the cult, they run no risk of perishing for having eaten consecrated foodstuffs.

CHAPTER 19

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying,
[2]“This is the statute of the teaching that the LORD has
charged, saying, ‘Speak to the Israelites, that they take
you a perfect red cow that has no blemish and on
which no yoke has been put. [3]And you shall give her to
Eleazar the priest, and he shall take her outside the
camp and she shall be slaughtered before him. [4]And
Eleazar the priest shall take of her blood with his
finger and sprinkle toward the front of the Tent of
Meeting from her blood seven times. [5]And the cow
shall be burned in his sight, her hide and her flesh and
her blood together with her dung he shall burn. [6]And
the priest shall take cedarwood and hyssop and
crimson stuff and fling them into the burning of the
cow. [7]And the priest shall wash his garments and bathe
his flesh in water, and then he may come into the
camp, and the priest will be unclean till evening. [8]And
he who burns her shall wash his garments in water and
bathe his flesh in water and will be unclean until
evening. [9]And a clean man shall gather the cow’s ashes

and set them outside the camp in a clean place, and it shall become for the community of Israelites a thing to be kept as riddance water; it is an offense offering.
10 And he who gathers the cow's ashes shall wash his garments and will be unclean until evening, and it shall be for the Israelites and for the sojourner who dwells in their midst a perpetual statute. 11 He who touches a dead body of any human person shall be unclean seven days. 12 He shall cleanse himself with the ashes on the third day and on the seventh day he will be clean, and if he does not cleanse himself on the third day, on the seventh day he will not be clean. 13 Whosoever touches a dead body, a human being who has died, and does not cleanse himself, he defiles the LORD's Tabernacle, and that person shall be cut off from Israel, for riddance water was not thrown upon him. He is unclean; his uncleanness is still in him.

14 "This is the teaching about a person who dies in a tent. Whosoever comes into the tent and all that is in the tent will be unclean seven days. 15 And every open vessel that has no tight lid on it will be unclean. 16 And whosoever in the open field touches a corpse slain by sword or a dead body or a human bone or a grave will be unclean seven days. 17 And they shall take for the

unclean person from the dust of the burning of the offense offering, and fresh water shall be put into it in a vessel. [18]And a clean person shall take a hyssop and dip it in water and sprinkle it on the tent and on all the vessels and on the people who were there and on him who touched the bone or the corpse or the dead person or the grave. [19]And the clean person shall sprinkle it over the unclean person on the third day and on the seventh day, and he shall cleanse him on the seventh day, and he shall wash his garments and bathe in water, and he will be clean at evening. [20]And a man who becomes unclean and does not cleanse himself, that person will be cut off from the midst of the assembly for he has defiled the LORD's sanctuary, riddance water has not been thrown on him, he is unclean. [21]And it shall become a perpetual statute for them, and he who sprinkles the riddance water shall wash his garments, and he who touches the riddance water will be unclean until evening. [22]And whatever the unclean person touches will be unclean, and the person who touches it will be unclean until evening.'"

CHAPTER 19 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *a perfect red cow that has no blemish*. The traditional rendering of *parah* as "heifer" is not warranted by the Hebrew, which in no way suggests that the beast is not mature. The red color appears to be associated with the importance of blood in the purification ritual that follows, an association reinforced by the phonetic overlap in Hebrew between *dam*, "blood," and *ʾadom*, "red."

on which no yoke has been put. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "on which no yoke has gone up." The manifest idea is that the cow should not have been used for profane purposes.

3. *she shall be slaughtered.* The Hebrew uses an impersonal third-person masculine verb, "one shall slaughter her," a fairly common equivalent of the passive. (The same form occurs at the beginning of verse 5.) As verse 8 makes clear, some person other than Eleazar the priest does the burning: the priest himself is kept at a certain distance from this procedure, supervising it (the force of "before him" in this verse).

4. *her blood.* As elsewhere, blood has a purifying function, serving as what Jacob Milgrom calls a "spiritual detergent." The blood is sprinkled "toward" the Tent of Meeting because the whole ritual takes place at a considerable distance from it, outside the camp.

9. *it is an offense offering.* This comment is a kind of gloss. A normal offense offering would be sacrificed on the altar to expiate an offense. These ashes mixed with water serve a similar function of ridding the person of contamination. Both the corpse and the act of transgression are imagined as imparting a polluting physical residue, a kind of miasma, that has to be cleansed.

11. *He who touches a dead body.* Baruch Levine has made a persuasive case that the "hidden agenda" of this whole section is an attempt to discourage the cult of the dead. Sundry Ugaritic and Mesopotamian documents suggest a widespread cult of the dead (especially, royal dead) in the ancient Near East, and there are some hints of its presence in the Bible proper. These laws, then, argue that the dead, far from being objects of worship and propitiation, are a source of contamination, and that even accidental contact with corpse or grave or bone requires a rite of purification. Without such purification, the defiled person is proscribed from the community (verse 13).

12. *the ashes.* The Hebrew says only "it," but the antecedent of the pronoun has been substituted for clarity in the translation. (The Hebrew for "ashes" is singular.)

14. *all that is in the tent will be unclean.* The ritual impurity exuded by the corpse contaminates everything within the enclosed space of the tent, except for tightly sealed vessels. Although there is a similarity here to the modern understanding of the mechanism of contagion in highly communicable diseases, the similarity is a coincidence flowing from the ancient conception of impurity as a seeping miasma.

16. *a corpse slain by sword or a dead body or a human bone.* Any dead body, whether a victim of the sword or of natural causes, or any remnant of a dead body, is equally contaminant. The stress on "human," as some of the medieval commentators note, indicates that no distinction is intended between Israelite and non-Israelite corpses.

17. *the dust.* Dust and ashes, because they are a set collocation in biblical usage (see Genesis 18:27), exhibit a certain degree of interchangeability, though *ʿafar* does usually indicate dust of the earth and *ʾefer* the residue of burning.

CHAPTER 20

[1]And the Israelites, the whole community, came to the Wilderness of Zin, in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. And Miriam died there and she was buried there.

[2]And the community had no water, and they assembled against Moses and against Aaron. [3]And the people disputed with Moses, and they said, saying, “Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD. [4]And why did you bring the LORD’s assembly to this wilderness to die here, we and our beasts? [5]And why did you take us out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place, not a place of seed or fig tree or vine or pomegranate, and no water to drink?” [6]And Moses, and Aaron with him, came away from the assembly to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and fell on their faces, and the LORD’s glory appeared to them. [7]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [8]“Take the staff and assemble the community, you and Aaron

your brother, and you shall speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will yield its water, and you shall bring forth water for them from the rock and give drink to the community and to its beasts.” [9]And Moses took the staff from before the LORD as He had charged. [10]And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly in front of the rock, and he said to them “Listen, pray, rebels! Shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?” [11]And Moses raised his hand and he struck the rock with his staff twice and abundant water came out, and the community, with its beasts, drank. [12]And the LORD said to Moses and to Aaron, “Inasmuch as you did not trust Me to sanctify Me before the eyes of the Israelites, even so you shall not bring this assembly to the land that I have given to them.” [13]These are the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites disputed with the LORD and He was sanctified through them.

[14]And Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom: “Thus said your brother Israel, ‘You know all the hardship that has found us. [15]Our fathers went down to Egypt and we dwelled in Egypt many years and the Egyptians did evil to us and to our fathers. [16]And we cried out to the LORD and He heard our

voice and sent a messenger and brought us out of Egypt. And look, we are in Kadesh, a town on the edge of your territory. [17]Let us, pray, pass through your land. We will not pass through field or vineyard and we will not drink well water. On the king's road we will go. We will not swerve to the right or the left until we pass through your territory.'" [18]And Edom said to him, "You shall not pass through me, lest with the sword I come out to meet you." [19]And the Israelites said to him, "On the highway we will go up. And should we drink your water, I and my livestock, I will pay its price. Only it is nothing. On foot let me pass through." [20]And he said, "You shall not pass!" And Edom came out to meet him with heavy troops and a strong hand. [21]And Edom refused to let Israel pass through his territory, and Israel swung away from him.

[22]And they journeyed on from Kadesh, and the Israelites, all the community, came to Hor the Mountain. [23]And the LORD said to Moses and to Aaron at Hor the Mountain on the border of the land of Edom, saying, [24]"Let Aaron be gathered to his kin, for he shall not come into the land that I have given to the Israelites because you both have rebelled against My word at the waters of Meribah. [25]Take Aaron and

Eleazar his son and bring them up Hor the Mountain.
[26]And strip Aaron of his garments and clothe with
them Eleazar his son, and Aaron will be gathered up
and will die there." [27]And Moses did as the LORD had
charged, and they went up Hor the Mountain before
the eyes of all the community. [28]And Moses stripped
Aaron of his garments and clothed with them Eleazar
his son, and Aaron died there on the mountaintop, and
Moses came down, and Eleazar with him, from the
mountain. [29]And all the community saw that Aaron
had expired, and all the house of Israel keened for
Aaron thirty days.

CHAPTER 20 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the whole community*. Both Rashi and Abraham ibn Ezra understand this phrase as intended to underline the fact that the Wilderness generation has died out and that a whole new community of Israelites is now poised to enter the land. The widely shared inference is that the story has now reached the fortieth year of Wilderness wanderings.

And Miriam died. This isolated obituary notice is inserted here to provide a symmetrical frame for the two stories of Moses's striking the rock and the rebuff of Israel by Edom. Miriam's death stands at the beginning and that of her brother Aaron at the end.

3. *And the people disputed with Moses.* This story is a close counterpart to the episode of complaint at the beginning of the Wilderness wanderings, Exodus 17:1–7. Even the place-names overlap: this place is called Meribah

(Disputation); the site of the murmuring in Exodus is called Massah and Meribah (Testing and Dispute). In the present episode, the people provide a fuller description of the awfulness of the great desert (verse 5), and no mention is made here, as it is in Exodus 17, that Moses fears he will be stoned by the people, though perhaps fear is implied in the report that Moses and Aaron "came away from [*mipney*] the assembly to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting" (verse 6), as into a place of refuge.

Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD. To mention the most recent episode, Dathan and Abiram and their followers were swallowed up by the earth, Korah and his people incinerated—instantaneous deaths that now seem preferable to slow death by thirst.

8. *Take the staff.* The fact that it is not referred to as "your staff" implies that it is a staff—whether Moses's or Aaron's—that has been set aside for keeping in the Tent of Meeting "before the LORD" (verse 9).

assemble the community. The crucial verbal stem *q-h-l* has been used in a negative sense: the mutinous assembling against Moses and Aaron. Now they are enjoined to assemble the community to be united in witnessing God's saving power.

10. *Shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?* The verb for taking out or bringing out is the same one the people used (verse 5) to refer to their trajectory from Egypt into the wilderness. Both they and Moses attach the verb to the wrong subject because in both cases it is God who does the bringing out, not Moses and Aaron. Milgrom, building on an insight of the medieval French Hebrew commentator Bekhor Hashor, persuasively argues that Moses's sin, for which he is condemned to die outside the borders of the promised land, is his presumptuous claim, at the very moment he is supposed to "sanctify" God in the eyes of the people, that it is he and Aaron who will bring forth the water from the rock. A venerable tradition sees Moses's sin in his angry striking of the rock instead of speaking to it as he was instructed, but in the twin episode in Exodus 17, he is actually told to strike the rock, and such efficacious gestures with the staff have been an authorized part of Moses's role as a worker of wonders from the beginning of his mission.

13. *and He was sanctified through them.* The antecedent of "them" is ambiguous, but the proximate noun that creates the fewest difficulties is

"waters." Moses and Aaron had the opportunity to proclaim God's power in bringing forth the water from the rock. Although they failed in this, the gush of water from the rock that revived the thirsting people nevertheless proved to be a confirmation of God's power, "sanctifying" Him, rather than being a demonstration of Moses's ability as an arch-magician.

14. *Thus said your brother Israel.* The first two words of this clause are the so-called messenger formula that is conventionally used to introduce the text, whether written or oral, of a message (roughly like the salutation in a modern letter). Collective Israel identifies himself to Edom as "your brother" because they are in fact ethnic kin; according to Genesis, the eponymous founders of the two peoples, Jacob–Israel and Esau–Edom, were twins. The sending of messengers to Edom, as many commentators have noted, recalls Jacob's sending messengers to his brother Esau after two decades of separation. This heir of Esau, however, behaves quite differently from his ancestor, flatly rejecting Israel's claim to brotherhood and its accompanying request of transit through his territory.

15. *Our fathers went down to Egypt.* This recapitulation of history is in part intended to enlist a sense of Semitic ethnic solidarity against the non-Semitic Egyptian persecutors.

16. *sent a messenger.* In some of the varying accounts in Exodus, not God Himself but a divine messenger leads Israel out of slavery into the wilderness.

territory. The Hebrew *gevul* means either "territory" or "border." In verse 23 the term obviously has the latter meaning.

17. *Let us, pray, pass through your land.* The Israelites are careful to use the most polite and deferential forms in this diplomatic petition.

the king's road. This is a major north-south route from Syria through trans-Jordan to Egypt.

18. *And Edom said.* The obvious sense is "the king of Edom," just as "France" in Shakespeare's plays can mean "the king of France."

You shall not pass. Following the principle of contrastive dialogue often evident in biblical narrative, Edom's response, after Israel's elaborate petition, is abrupt and blunt. His second response (verse 20) is even more abrupt, only two words in the Hebrew, *loʾ taʿavor*, "you shall not pass."

19. *highway.* The Hebrew *mesilah* is a beaten track, and appears to be a synonym for the king's road.

I will pay its price. As Rashi suggests, Israel now proffers a possibility of economic gain if Edom will grant transit rights.

21. *and Israel swung away from him.* In order to avoid a clash with the massed Edomite forces, the Israelites, instead of proceeding north by northeast, swing around (literally, "incline") to the east, coming to a place of encampment perhaps fifty miles eastward at Hor the Mountain.

22. *Hor the Mountain.* This odd form reproduces the unusual word order of the Hebrew, used only for this mountain.

24. *gathered to his kin.* This decorous euphemism is used instead of the plain verb "die." *you both*. "Both" is added in the translation to reflect the plural Hebrew verb that addresses both brothers.

rebelled against My word. The Hebrew says literally "against My mouth." God had said, "I shall bring forth water"; Moses on behalf of himself and Aaron said, "Shall we bring forth water . . . ?"

26. *strip . . . clothe*. The divestiture of Aaron leaves him naked in his human vulnerability, without accoutrement of office, before the universal fact of death. But clothing his son in the priestly garb is also a concrete manifestation of the continuity of his line and its sacerdotal authority. This is one reason that traditional Hebrew commentaries see Aaron's demise as a blissful death.

die there. Only now is the blunt verb of death introduced, after Moses has been twice prepared for the loss of his brother through the euphemism and the instructions of divestiture.

29. *all the community saw . . . all the house of Israel keened*. The textual unit that began with "all the community" arriving at Kadesh, where they disputed with Moses and Aaron, ends with all the community joined in mourning for Aaron. The biblical narrator's characteristic impassivity does not allow us to know confidently whether these thirty days of mourning are merely a formal ritual or an expression of real sorrow. Aaron was often enough a target of popular resentment, as in the very recent episode of the waters of Meribah. But he was also often a welcome intercessor for the people. Rashi neatly catches the second possibility, the people's reaction to the loss of a cherished

leader: “When they saw Moses and Eleazar coming down and Aaron did not come down, they said, ‘Where is Aaron?’ He said to them, ‘He’s dead.’ They said, ‘Is it possible that the angel of death should conquer him who stood against the destroying angel and held back the scourge?’”

CHAPTER 21

[1]And the Canaanite, king of Arad, the Negeb dweller,
heard that Israel had come by way of Atharim, and he
did battle with Israel and took captives from him. [2]And
Israel made a vow to the LORD and said, “If You
indeed give this people into my hand, I will put its
towns under the ban.” [3]And the LORD hearkened to
Israel’s voice and He gave the Canaanite into his hand,
and he put them and their towns under the ban, and
called the name of the place Hormah.

[4]And they journeyed on from Hor the Mountain by
way of the Red Sea to skirt round the land of Edom,
and the people grew impatient on the way. [5]And the
people spoke against God and against Moses: “Why
did you bring us up from Egypt to die in the
wilderness? For there is no bread and there is no
water, and we loathe the wretched bread.” [6]And the
LORD sent against the people the viper-serpents, and
they bit the people, and many people of Israel died.

[7]And the people came to Moses and said, “We have offended, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD that He take the serpents away from us.” And Moses interceded for the people. [8]And the LORD said to Moses: “Make you a viper and put it on a standard, and so then, whoever is bitten will see it and live.” [9]And Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it on a standard, and so then, if the serpent bit a man, he looked on the serpent of bronze and lived.

[10]And the Israelites journeyed on and camped at Oboth. [11]And they journeyed on from Oboth and camped at Iye-Abarim in the wilderness that faced Moab, toward the rising sun. [12]From there they journeyed onward and camped at the Wadi of Zered. [13]From there they journeyed onward and camped across the Arnon, which is in the wilderness coming out from the territory of the Amorite, for the Arnon is the border of Moab between Moab and the Amorite. [14]Therefore is it said in the Book of the Battles of YHWH:

> “Against Waheb in a whirlwind and the Wadis of
> Arnon,

[15]and the cascade of the wadis that turns down
toward Ar's dwelling,
and clings to Moab's border."

[16]And from there to Beʾer, which is the well of which the LORD said to Moses, "Gather the people, that I may give them water." [17]Then did Israel sing this song:

"Rise up, O well!
Sing out to it.
[18]Well, that captains dug,
the people's nobles delved it,
with a scepter, with their
walking stick."

And from Midbar to Mattanah. [19]And from Mattanah to Nahaliel, and from Nahaliel to Bamoth. [20]And from Bamoth to the valley that is in the steppes of Moab, by the top of Pisgah looking out over the wasteland.

[21]And Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, saying, [22]"Let me pass through your land. We will not turn off in field or vineyard. We will not drink well water. On the king's road we will go until we pass through your territory." [23]And Sihon did not

let Israel pass through his territory, and Sihon gathered all his troops and went out to meet Israel in the wilderness, and he came to Jahaz and did battle with Israel. [24]And Israel struck him down by the edge of the sword and seized his land from the Arnon to the Jabbok to the Ammonites, for the border of the Ammonites was strong. [25]And Israel took all these cities and Israel settled in all the cities of the Amorite, in Heshbon and in all its surrounding villages. [26]For Heshbon is the city of Sihon king of the Amorites, and he had done battle with the first king of Moab and he took all his land from his hand as far as the Arnon.
[27]Therefore do the rhapsodes say:

“Come to Heshbon, let it stand built,
may the city of Sihon be
unshaken.
[28]For fire has come out from
Heshbon,
flame from the town of Sihon.
It consumed Ar of Moab,
the notables of Arnon’s high
places.
[29]Woe to you, Moab,

You are lost, O people of
Chemosh.
His sons he has turned into fugitives,
and his daughters to captive state
to the Amorite king Sihon.
30 And their mastery is lost,
from Heshbon to Dibon.
We wrought havoc up to Nophah,
which is all the way to Medeba."

31 And Israel settled in the land of the Amorite. 32 And Moses sent to spy out Jazer, and they captured its surrounding villages and dispossessed the Amorite who was there. 33 And they turned and went up on the road to Bashan, and Og king of Bashan came out to meet them in battle, he and all his troops, at Edrei. 34 And the LORD said to Moses, "Do not fear him, for into your hand I have given him and all his troops and his land, and you shall do to him as you did to Sihon king of the Amorites who dwells in Heshbon." 35 And they struck him down, and his sons and all his troops, till no remnant was left him, and they took hold of his land.

CHAPTER 21 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *king of Arad*. Arad was a town in the central southern Negeb. Archaeological investigation raises doubts as to whether it existed in this early period. The whole account here of battles and conquests around the southern and eastern perimeters of Canaan appears to be a complicated interweaving of retrojections from a later period with fragmentary historical memories. The comments here will concentrate on the literary articulation of the account without attempting to sort out the layered phenomena of historical report.

he did battle with Israel. Although the way of Atharim has not been identified, the preceding narrative encourages the inference that the Israelites are advancing eastward along the southern border of Canaan, avoiding any penetration into Canaan proper. The king of Arad, then, hearing of their movements, takes the initiative in leading an expeditionary force southward across the border against them. This act of aggression, rewarded by the initial taking of captives, is what prompts the Israelites to their vow of utter destruction.

2. *put its towns under the ban.* The Hebrew verb *heḥerim* (cognate noun, *ḥerem*) means to devote to utter destruction, with any booty taken to be dedicated to the cult rather than retained for private enjoyment. The place-name Hormah memorializes this grim practice.

3. *into his hand.* This clarifying phrase (a single Hebrew word) is lacking in the Masoretic Text but is reflected in a couple of ancient versions.

4. *the Red Sea.* In the present context, *yam suf* could not refer to the Sea of Reeds, the marshy lake region in northern Egypt, as it appears to do in Exodus, but would plausibly be the Red Sea, the body of water for which the term is used in the Book of Kings.

5. *we loathe the wretched bread.* The probable literal sense of the Hebrew is "our very self [*nafsheinu* as an intensive form of the first-person plural pronoun] loathes the wretched bread." The intensive sense is transferred in this translation to the extremeness of the verb "loathe." But there are two more physiological meanings of *nefesh* that are also possible here: "appetite" or "gullet." Perhaps the people are saying that they retch when they try to eat

the bread. The complaint here repeats the pattern of a whole series of murmuring episodes that began in Exodus 17. The one notable difference in this instance is that the people revile the very stuff that God has given them as a bounty to sustain them in the wilderness—the manna. This denigration of a divine gift may explain why, in contrast to the earlier episodes, God immediately responds with lethal punishment.

6. *viper-serpents.* The Hebrew uses two words that, to judge by their bracketing elsewhere as parallel terms in poetry, are synonyms: *neḥashim* and *serafim*. The second word, transparently derived from the root that means "to burn," is also used, in Isaiah 6, for "fiery angels" (from which the English "seraph" is taken); that application of the term to snakes appears to come from the burning effect of the venom. Although it is unlikely that the *serafim* were fire-breathing dragons, as some fanciful commentators have claimed, this is still another instance in which kernels of historical recollection have been expanded into myth. Israelites who wandered through the wilderness would no doubt have been regularly exposed to the threat of venomous snakes native to the desert. Here, however, the poisonous creatures are suddenly and miraculously dispatched by God against Israel as a relentless attacking force.

7. *the serpents.* The Hebrew employs a singular, collective noun, a common idiomatic pattern for animals in biblical usage.

9. *a serpent of bronze.* The Hebrew is *neḥash neḥoshet*. Rashi vividly catches the point of the wordplay: "It was not said to him 'of bronze,' but Moses said, 'The Holy One calls it *naḥash* and I'll make it out of *neḥoshet*'—a pun." The word magic of replicating serpent/*naḥash* in bronze/*neḥoshet* reinforces the device of sympathetic magic whereby the sight of the bronze image of the serpent becomes an antidote for the serpents' poisonous bite. Interestingly, a small bronze serpent, evidently used in the local cult, has been found at Timnah (where Solomon mined copper) near Eilat, the region in which this incident is reported to have taken place.

14. *the Book of the Battles of YHWH.* This is one of several lost books mentioned in the Bible. The tetragrammaton is represented in this instance as YHWH rather than as "the LORD" in order to intimate the archaic character of the book's title. One may conjecture that this ancient—probably poetic—book was not preserved for the canon because it was felt by later authorities

to be too mythological in nature, representing YHWH as a warrior-god in direct combat with Israel's enemies—as He figures in the Song of the Sea—rather than working through the agency of Israel, as is the typical case in the Bible's historical narratives.

Against Waheb in a whirlwind. The quotation from the Book of the Battles of YHWH is fragmentary, and it is not easy to determine what it might be about. The first two place-names are preceded by the accusative prefix *ʾet* but no verb is included in the quotation. It seems reasonable to infer that a verb of violent action, suggesting something like "to storm," with YHWH as subject, was present in the text immediately before the words actually quoted. In this translation, the implication of the accusative prefix is represented by "against." *Sufah*, the word for "whirlwind," is construed by many to be a place-name (otherwise unattested), but given the subject of divine battling, "whirlwind" makes better sense.

16. *Beʾer, which is the well of which the* LORD *said. Beʾer* means "well" in Hebrew. The narrative here invokes an apparently familiar episode of God's providing water in the desert but does not directly report it. Instead, we have the quotation of a second archaic poem that celebrates the discovery of the well. Such well-songs are actually current among later Bedouins: when life in the parched desert is so dependent on water, the discovery of an underground spring is an occasion for musical thanksgiving.

18. *Well, that captains dug, / the people's nobles delved it.* Although Abraham ibn Ezra wants to identify these leaders as Moses and Aaron, it is far more likely that this ancient bit of song registers a less historically anchored celebration by desert tribesmen and their chieftains, who, hyperbolically, are said to have dug into a water source using their staffs of authority as digging implements.

20. *the steppes of Moab.* These notations of itinerary indicate that the Israelites have at this point completed their march to the east and are poised for a northward drive. The Moabites and the Amorites inhabit the region that is part of present-day Jordan; most of the towns mentioned are about a day's march to the east of the Dead Sea. The northernmost area mentioned is Bashan, which is above the Dead Sea.

22. *Let me pass through your land.* Although the language repeats the salient elements of the diplomatic message to the king of Edom, there is no recapitulation of the enslavement in Egypt, perhaps because the Amorites are not a "brother" people like the Edomites.

23. *Sihon did not let Israel pass through his territory.* His response is the same as that of the king of Edom with one difference: he does not even honor the Israelites' request for free passage with an answer but instead musters his forces for an attack against them, like the king of Arad.

24. *the edge of the sword.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "mouth of the sword," an image correlated with the idiomatic usage in which the sword is said to "consume."

from the Arnon to the Jabbok. Both these rivers run north to south, the Jabbok on the border of Canaan. The impregnable border of the Ammonites is to the east.

25. *all its surrounding villages.* The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "all its daughters." In biblical idiom, the city figures as a mother and the little settlements in its vicinity are daughters.

26. *the first king of Moab.* The expression could conceivably mean "the former king of Moab," as Baruch Levine contends.

27. *Therefore do the rhapsodes say.* In the anthologizing spirit of this entire section, we are given still another quotation from an old poem, one that evidently was a popular subject for recitation by the rhapsodes (*moshlim*) of this region. The poem could not be Israelite in origin, for it celebrates the greatness of the Amorite city Heshbon and its conquest of Moab. This text seems to be a Hebrew translation or adaptation of Amorite epic material celebrating a military victory famous throughout the region.

28. *For fire has come out from Heshbon, / flame from the town of Sihon.* The style of the poem is manifestly traditional, relying heavily on formulaic phrases and formulaic word-pairings. This line, which has numerous analogues in the poetry of the Prophets, is a textbook illustration of the formulaic construction of a line of parallelistic verse: fire/flame; Heshbon/the town of Sihon, the verb "come out" doing double duty for both versets, with

the added element "town of" (*qiryat*) providing an accented syllable that a second verb would yield and thus preserving a three-beat rhythm in each verset.

29. *You are lost.* The Hebrew verb means "to be lost," "to perish," "to vanish."
Chemosh. He is the patron deity of Moab.
His sons he has turned into fugitives. Although the verb could be a passive masquerading as a third-person singular transitive, it makes better poetic sense to construe Chemosh as the subject: the god of Moab has been compelled to make his own sons fugitives.

30. *And their mastery is lost.* The Hebrew *waniram* is obscure. The initial Masoretic vowel would make it a verb. This translation, following a construction endorsed by Rashi and many modern scholars, reads it as a noun, *weniram*. That noun, *nir*, has the primary meaning of "yoke," and then by metaphorical extension, "mastery" or "rule," and, alternately, by metonymic extension, "plowed field." An attractive alternative reading offered by the Septuagint is *weninam*, "and their descendants."

33. *Og king of Bashan.* According to the tradition registered in Deuteronomy 3:1–11, Og was a giant, but there is no indication of that in the present report.
troops. The collective noun *ʿam* usually designates "troops" in any sort of military context, though the conjunction of *ʿam* with "land" in the next verse raises the possibility that it might reflect here its more general meaning of "people."

CHAPTER 22

[1]And the Israelites journeyed onward, and they
camped in the steppes of Moab across the Jordan from
Jericho. [2]And Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel
had done to the Amorite. [3]And Moab was very
terrified of the people, for they were many, and Moab
loathed the Israelites. [4]And Moab said to the elders of
Midian, “Now, this assembly will nibble away
everything around us as the ox nibbles the grass of the
field.” And Balak son of Zippor was king over Moab
at that time. [5]And he sent messengers to Balaam son
of Beor at Pethor, which is on the Euphrates in his
people’s land, to call him, saying, “Look, a people has
come out of Egypt. Look, it has covered the eye of the
land and it is sitting over against me. [6]And so, pray, go
curse this people for me, for it is mightier than I.
Perhaps I shall be able to strike against it and drive it
out of the land. For I know that whom you bless is
blessed and whom you curse is cursed.” [7]And the
elders of Moab and the elders of Midian went, with
spells in their hand, and they came to Balaam and

spoke Balak's words to him. [8]And he said to them, "Lodge here tonight, and I shall give you back an answer as the LORD will speak to me." And the chieftains of Moab stayed with Balaam. [9]And God came to Balaam and said, "Who are these men with you?" [10]And Balaam said to God: "Balak son of Zippor has sent to me: [11]'Look, the people that has come out of Egypt has covered the eye of the land. So, go hex it for me. Perhaps I shall be able to do battle against it and drive it out.'" [12]And God said to Balaam, "You shall not go with them. You shall not curse the people, for it is blessed." [13]And Balaam rose in the morning and said to Balak's chieftains, "Go to your land, for the LORD has refused to let me go with you." [14]And the chieftains of Moab rose and came to Balak, and they said, "Balaam refused to go with us." [15]And Balak once more sent chieftains, more numerous and more honored than the others. [16]And they came to Balaam and said to him, "Thus said Balak son of Zippor: 'Do not, pray, hold back from going to me. [17]For I will surely honor you greatly, and whatever you say to me, I will do. And, pray, go hex this people for me.'" [18]And Balaam answered and said to Balak's servants, "Should Balak give me his houseful of silver and gold, I could not cross the word of the LORD my God to do either a small thing or a great one. [19]And now, stay here, you,

too, tonight, that I may know what the LORD may
speak further with me." [20]And God came to Balaam in
the night and said to him, "If these men have come to
call you, rise, go with them. [21]But only the word that I
speak to you shall you do." And Balaam rose in the
morning and saddled his ass, and he went with the
chieftains of Moab. [22]And God's wrath flared because
he was going with them, and the LORD's messenger
stationed himself in the road as an adversary to him,
and he was riding his ass, and his two lads were with
him. [23]And the ass saw the LORD's messenger
stationed in the road, his sword unsheathed in his
hand, and the ass swerved from the road and went into
the field, and Balaam struck the ass to steer her back
to the road. [24]And the LORD's messenger stood in the
footpath through the vineyards, a fence on one side
and a fence on the other. [25]And the ass saw the
LORD's messenger and was pressed against the wall
and pressed Balaam's leg against the wall, and once
more he struck her. [26]And the LORD's messenger
crossed over and stood in a narrow place in which
there was no way to swerve right or left. [27]And the ass
saw the LORD's messenger and crouched down under
Balaam and Balaam's wrath flared and he struck the
ass with the stick. [28]And the LORD opened the ass's
mouth, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to

you, that you should have struck me these three
times?” [29]And Balaam said to the ass, “Because you
have toyed with me. Had I a sword in my hand, by now
I would have killed you.” [30]And the ass said to Balaam,
“Am I not your ass upon whom you have ridden your
whole life till this day? Have I ever been wont to do
thus to you?” And he said, “No.” [31]And the LORD
unveiled Balaam’s eyes, and he saw the LORD’s
messenger stationed in the road, his sword unsheathed
in his hand, and he prostrated himself and bowed
down on his face. [32]And the LORD’s messenger said to
him, “For what did you strike your ass three times
now? Look, I myself have come out as adversary, for
the road plunged before me. [33]And the ass saw me and
swerved away from me these three times. Had she not
swerved away from me, by now it is you I would have
killed, while her I would have let live.” [34]And Balaam
said to the LORD’s messenger, “I have offended, for I
did not know that you were stationed to meet me in
the road. And now, if it is wrong in your eyes, let me
turn back.” [35]And the LORD’s messenger said to
Balaam, “Go with the men. But the word that I speak
to you, it alone shall you do.” And Balaam went with
Balak’s chieftains. [36]And Balak heard that he had
come, and he went out to meet him to the town of
Moab, which is at the edge of the territory. [37]And

Balak said to Balaam, “Did I not assuredly send to call you? Why did you not go to me? Is it true that I cannot honor you?” [38]And Balaam said to Balak, “Look, I have come to you now. Can I possibly speak anything? The word that God puts in my mouth, only that will I speak.” [39]And Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kiriath-Huzoth. [40]And Balak slaughtered cattle and sheep and sent to Balaam and to the chieftains who were with him. [41]And it happened in the morning that Balak took Balaam and brought him up to Bamoth-Baal, and he saw from there the edge of the people.

CHAPTER 22 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Balak . . . saw*. The thematic key word of this entire episode is “to see,” *raʾoh* (and in the poems that follow, its poetic synonym, “to gaze,” *shur*). The Moabite king sees the vast expanse of the Israelite multitudes, which at the climax of the story Balaam, the hexer he has hired, will see as well; the ass sees the LORD’s messenger in the road while her master, the professional seer, remains blind to the divine emissary until his eyes are “unveiled.”

3. *Moab was very terrified of the people, for they were many, and Moab loathed the Israelites.* This report alludes pointedly to the response of the Egyptians to the Israelites in Exodus. There, too, the sheer magnitude of the Hebrews is stressed, with two terms, *rabim* and *ʿatsumim*, “many” and “mighty,” that recur here, and the Egyptians, too, are said to “loathe” (verbal stem *quts*) the Israelites.

4. *nibble away everything.* The verb here for "chewing up" or "nibbling away" is generally reserved for animals, as the ox simile makes clear. The covering of the eye of the land in the next verse is an image borrowed from the plague of locusts in Exodus, which neatly catches the Moabites' fearful revulsion at the sight of the Hebrew multitudes. (In the Egyptian loathing in Exodus, the Hebrews are assimilated to the realm of crawling and creeping things by the verb "swarm.") In practical terms, though the Israelites have not actually invaded Moab, Balak fears that this vast horde will eat up everything in sight along the borders of his territory ("everything around us").

5. *the Euphrates.* The Hebrew says "the River," which usually is the designation for the Euphrates. In what follows, there is some ambiguity as to whether Balaam's homeland is Aram in Mesopotamia or Ammon, to the southwest of Aram, in trans-Jordan. In the latter case, "the River" might be the Jabbok. The very next phrase here, "in his people's land" *ʾerets beney ʿamo*, sounds a little odd in Hebrew, and a reading reflected in the Vulgate and the Peshitta, *ʾerets beney ʿamon*, "land of the Ammonites," is a more idiomatic usage and would place Balaam in trans-Jordan. That reading, however, may be merely an ancient solution to the very textual difficulty delineated here.

6. *whom you bless is blessed and whom you curse is cursed.* Balak's concluding words are the crux of this monotheistic fable. He assumes that he can employ Balaam as a technician of the realm of spirits to put a hex on his enemies. The emphatic point of the story is that God alone controls human destiny, and man has no independent power to impose curses or blessings.

7. *the elders of Midian.* The addition of Midianites, not afterward mentioned, to the delegation is perhaps puzzling. A couple of the medieval commentators propose that the frightened king of Moab is rounding up allies from his neighbors.

with spells in their hand. The meaning of this phrase has long been disputed. Since the Middle Ages, many interpreters claim that this is an idiom that actually means "payment for spells to be cast," although one may wonder whether the emissaries would really have brought Balaam his reward—to entice him?—before he performed any service. The alternative view is that they brought along spells to demonstrate their own expertise in magic as

credentials for their engaging him in informed fashion as a past master of the craft.

9. *And God came to Balaam.* This idiom, as Moshe Weinfeld notes, is reserved for God's appearance to non-Israelites. It is equally noteworthy that God typically comes to non-Israelites in night-visions. (Compare the Gerarite king Abimelech in Genesis 20:3.) Otherwise, the entire story, with the fable of the talking ass that this commentary regards as integral to it, is altogether distinct from the surrounding narrative. Even the use of YHWH and *ʾelohim* as designations of the deity does not follow the pattern of discrete literary strands detectable elsewhere in the Torah. Baruch Levine conjectures that both story and poem are the special product of Israelite literary activity in Gilead, the central northern trans-Jordanian region. It is striking that an inscription on plaster, probably composed in the eighth century B.C.E., discovered in 1967 at Deir ʿAlla, in this same region, about fifteen kilometers east of the Jordan River, speaks of a powerful soothsayer and seer named Balaam son of [the Aramaic *bar* is used rather than the Hebrew *ben*] Beor. The language of the inscription, which some scholars have called "Gileadite," is very close to Hebrew, perhaps merely a dialect of it with certain Aramaizing elements. Some terms in the inscription are quite similar to terms used in Balaam's poems in our text. The Deir ʿAlla inscription, though fragmentary, clearly reflects a polytheistic outlook, which would by no means exclude an Israelite author. The well-known figure, then, of the pagan seer Balaam, whether legendary or historical, has been co-opted by the author of the Balaam story in Numbers to make a monotheistic point with considerable satirical brilliance. Balaam's first words reveal him as someone who assumes all answers and instructions come from "the LORD," YHWH (verse 8).

Who are these men with you? As elsewhere in dialogue between God and man (e.g., "Where is Abel your brother?"), God asks a question not in order to get information He needs but to elicit a response from his human interlocutor that will register some appropriate recognition of the situation at issue.

10. *has sent to me.* The verb here indicates: has sent me the following message. Balaam then goes on to quote the text of the message.

11. *Look, the people that has come out.* Although Balaam's report repeats Balak's words, he abbreviates the message, and, as Yitzhak Avishur neatly observes, he edits out elements that would unduly stress Balak's personal perspective. Thus, "and it is sitting over against me" and "it is mightier than I" are both deleted.

17. *I will surely honor you.* "Honor" throughout suggests the generous bestowal of material rewards. The "more honored" emissaries of the second delegation may well be imagined as more splendid in raiment and personal ornament, explicitly chosen on these grounds in order to provide Balaam an intimation of the munificence from which he will benefit after rendering his services. One should note that Balak's second dispatch to Balaam is much briefer than the first, not repeating anything about the vastness of the Israelite hordes but instead stressing the promise of payment, not mentioned in the first dispatch.

20. *If these men have come to call you.* God of course realizes that the men have come to "call," or invite, Balaam. He has now determined to turn this invitation of a professional hexer into a trap to humiliate the polytheists, as the second sentence here ("But only the word that I speak . . .") makes clear.

22. *God's wrath flared because he was going with them.* This is a famous source of puzzlement because God has just told Balaam to go with them. Some biblical critics solve the problem by cutting the textual knot and assigning the tale of Balaam's ass that begins here to an entirely independent source. But could the God of this story be capable of capricious second thoughts? Or, to suggest more moral grounds for the seeming contradiction of God's act, when later He repeats what He had said in the night-vision, "Go with the men. But the word that I speak to you, it alone shall you do" (verse 35), the implication of the second sentence may be that Balaam was inwardly harboring other intentions. That is, he may have accepted the instructions of the dream-revelation in good faith, but now on the way to Moab, contemplating the profusion of wealth Balak has dangled before him, he could have begun to wonder whether he might not go ahead with a good professional execration. This shift of intention would then trigger God's wrath and the sword-wielding divine messenger.

24. *the footpath.* The Hebrew *mish ʿol*, which occurs only here, is transparently derived from *sha ʿal*, "span," and so implies a narrow pedestrian way. The story assumes the folktale structure of a crescendo of three repetitions (like "Goldilocks and the Three Bears") with a climactic reversal or revelation in the third occurrence. What is noteworthy here is the progressive constriction: from road to footpath to a way so narrow that there is no room to move to either side. The spatial arrangement of the story becomes a dramatization of how man and beast are inexorably caught in God's design for them, from which there is no escape.

a fence. The fences are, as one would expect in this region, low stone walls, and should not be imagined as picket fences or hedges. Their construction becomes clear in the next verse.

25. *and pressed Balaam's leg against the wall.* In the progression of three occurrences, first Balaam is caused to make an involuntary detour, now he is caused physical discomfort, and finally he will be totally stymied in his forward movement as the ass crouches down under him.

27. *with the stick.* No stick was previously mentioned. Abraham ibn Ezra, ever alert to minute textual details, infers that in the two previous instances Balaam struck the ass with a switch or branch and only now administers a more serious beating with a stick.

28. *And the* LORD *opened the ass's mouth.* This is the only talking animal, if one excludes the mythological serpent in the Garden story, in the entire Bible. The early rabbis, sensitive to the anomaly, put the mouth of Balaam's ass on their list of ten prodigies especially preordained from the time of creation. But the talking ass is perfectly in accord with the theological assumptions of the story: if God absolutely controls blessings and curses and vision, He can do the same for speech. And the ensuing dialogue between master and ass opens up splendid comic possibilities.

29. *Because you have toyed with me.* The wonderful absurdity of this response is that Balaam doesn't miss a beat. Confronted with the articulated speech of his ass's eminently justified complaint, he answers irascibly as though he were thoroughly accustomed to conducting debates with his beast.

Had I a sword in my hand. Even as he harangues his ass, Balaam remains perfectly blind to something the ass has had no difficulty seeing all along: he

wishes he had a sword at the very moment the LORD's messenger stands in front of him wielding an unsheathed sword.

30. *your whole life.* The Hebrew, a single word, means literally "as long as you have been."

Have I ever been wont to do thus to you? The ass sounds altogether like an aggrieved worker. Her service to her master has always been dependable, as Balaam concedes in his one-word response, so these three deviations must have special cause.

31. *the LORD unveiled Balaam's eyes.* The unveiling or uncovering (verbal stem *g-l-h*) of the eyes is of course crucial to the central theme of vision, and both unveiling and eyes will recur in the prologue of Balaam's oracles.

he prostrated himself and bowed down on his face. This gesture of reverence continues the comedy of man and beast, for Balaam unwittingly imitates what his ass has already done in crouching down.

32. *the road plunged before me.* The reader should be warned that no one really knows what this phrase means. The verb *yarat* occurs only one other time in the Bible, in Job 16:11, and it is not even certain that the same root is manifested there. The context in Job suggests violent descent or some other catastrophic action. Many interpreters, medieval and modern, seek to smooth out the meaning by understanding *derekh*, "road" or "way," as "mission" or "behavior," referring to Balaam. In that case, however, one would expect "your way" instead of "the way." It seems best for the translation to reproduce the enigma of the Hebrew.

33. *by now it is you I would have killed.* The divine messenger, sword in hand, addressing the swordless Balaam, bounces back to him the very words he used against the ass (verse 29).

while her I would have let live. The messenger's words are a virtual citation of the words Abram says about himself and Sarai, "they will kill me while you they will let live" (Genesis 12:12). This transposition of the predicament of patriarch and matriarch to pagan prophet and his ass is still another bold gesture of comic incongruity in the shaping of the story.

36. *And Balak heard that he had come.* Against the initial "seeing" (verse 2), he has now only this mediated report of Balaam's arrival at his border, and he

has not the slightest idea of all that Balaam with his unveiled eyes has seen, so he blithely imagines that his design against Israel is moving forward.

37. *Why did you not go to me?* Although the ordinary logic of English usage would call for "come," this translation maintains "go" (verbal stem *h-l-k*) throughout because it is manifestly a thematic key word in Balaam's story, the story of a man who goes on a questionable way.

38. *The word that God puts in my mouth.* Balaam, after his confrontation by the sword-wielding messenger of the LORD, is speaking in perfect good faith. Balak on his part no doubt assumes that this is the sort of pious twaddle that a top-notch execrator would invoke for the benefit of a client before proceeding to put a hex on someone.

40. *and sent to Balaam and to the chieftains who were with him.* Balak sends the dressed meat to Balaam and the chieftains as an act of hospitality and a prelude to the great ceremony of execration. It is unclear whether any of this slaughtering is sacrificial or whether it is purely a culinary measure, the same Hebrew verb serving both purposes.

41. *brought him up to Bamoth-Baal.* The place-name means "high places [that is, sacrificial sites] of Baal," and so becomes the stage for the elaborate procedure of sacrifices that immediately follows. The bringing up is equally important because each of Balaam's oracles is delivered from a promontory where he can look out over the multitudes of the Israelite camp.

and he saw from there the edge of the people. The narrative unit from the initial exposition of the story to the moment before the first oracle begins with Balak's seeing Israel and concludes with Balaam's seeing Israel. But the professional visionary can see only the "edge" of the people, both because he is at a considerable distance from them, on the heights, and because they constitute such a vast expanse that his eye can take in no more than the edge of their encampment. The legendary notion that the total population of the Wilderness generation comes to well over two million is here both dramatized and thematized.

CHAPTER 23

[1]And Balaam said to Balak, “Build me here seven
altars, and ready me here seven bulls and seven rams.”
[2]And Balak did as Balaam had spoken, and Balak and
Balaam offered up bull and ram on each altar. [3]And
Balaam said to Balak, “Station yourself by your burnt
offering, and let me go—perhaps the LORD will
chance upon me and will show me something that I
may tell you.” And he went off in silence. [4]And God
chanced upon Balaam, and he said to Him, “The seven
altars I have arrayed, and I have offered up bull and
ram on each altar.” [5]And the LORD put a word in
Balaam’s mouth, and He said, “Go back to Balak and
thus shall you speak.” [6]And he went back to him, and,
look, he was stationed by his burnt offering, he and all
the chieftains of Moab. [7]And he took up his theme and
he said:

“From Aram did Balak lead me,

the king of Moab, from the
eastern mountains:
‘Go, curse me Jacob,
[8]and go, doom Israel.’
What can I hex that El has not
hexed,
and what can I doom that the
LORD has not doomed?
[9]For from the top of the crags do I
see them
and from the hills do I gaze on
them.
Look, a people that dwells apart,
amongst nations it is not
reckoned.
[10]Who has numbered the dust of
Jacob,
who counted the issue of Israel?
Let me but die the death of the
upright,
and may my aftertime be like
his.”

[11]And Balak said, “What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, and, look, you have done

nothing but bless.” [12]And he answered and said, “Why, that which the LORD puts in my mouth, only that do I keep to speak.” [13]And Balak said to him, “Go with me, pray, to another place, from which you will see him—only his edge will you see, but the whole of him you will not see, and hex him for me from there.” [14]And he took him to the Lookouts’ Field, on the top of Pisgah, and he built seven altars and he offered up bull and ram on each altar. [15]And he said to Balak, “Station yourself here by your burnt offering, and I myself shall seek some chance.” [16]And the LORD chanced upon Balaam and put a word in his mouth and said, “Go back to Balak, and thus shall you speak.” [17]And he came back to him, and there he was stationed by his burnt offering, and the chieftains of Moab with him. And Balak said to him, “What has the LORD spoken?” [18]And he took up his theme and he said:

“Rise, Balak, and listen,
give ear to me, O Zippor’s son!
[19]El is no man who would fail,
no human who would show
change of heart.
Would he say and not perform
would he speak and not fulfill it?

[20]Look, to bless I was taken,
and He blessed, so I will not
reverse it.
[21]He has beheld no harm in Jacob,
and has seen no trouble in Israel.
The LORD his god is with him,
the king's trumpet blast in his
midst,
[22]El who brings them out from
Egypt,
like the wild ox's antlers for him.
[23]For there is no divining in Jacob
and no magic in Israel.
Now be it said to Jacob
and to Israel what El has wrought.
[24]Look, a people like a lion arises,
like the king of beasts, rears up.
He will not lie down till he devours
the prey,
and blood of the slain he drinks."

[25]And Balak said to Balaam, "Neither to curse shall you curse him nor to bless shall you bless him." [26]And Balaam answered and said to Balak, "Did I not speak to you, saying, 'All that the LORD speaks, only that

may I do'?" [27]And Balak said to Balaam, "Go, pray, let me take you to another place. Perhaps it will be right in the eyes of the god and you will curse him for me from there." [28]And Balak took Balaam to the top of Peor, which looks out over the wasteland. [29]And Balaam said to Balak, "Build me here seven altars and ready me here seven bulls and seven rams." [30]And Balak did as Balaam had said, and he offered up bull and ram on each altar.

CHAPTER 23 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Build me here seven altars*. This elaborate cultic procedure turning on the sacred number seven, and, as it emerges, repeated three times, may be Balaam's set professional regimen of preparation for delivering an efficacious curse or blessing, but there is a suspicion that it could also be a delaying tactic through which he postpones the moment when the LORD, as he has good reason to expect, will put a blessing and not a curse in his mouth. The number seven is also the number of times that Balaam's vatic utterances are formally introduced by "and he took up his theme and he said." The narrative also establishes a satiric parallel between the three times that Balak and Balaam set up altars and offer sacrifices and the three times that Balaam and his ass are stymied by the LORD's messenger. Balak now plays the role of the thrice frustrated Balaam in the preceding episode, and Balaam, whose eyes have been "unveiled," plays the role of the ass. In each of the three instances, the LORD "chances upon" or sets His spirit on Balaam, just as the LORD's messenger stationed himself before the ass. (The verb "to station oneself" is here transferred to Balak, waiting by the sacrifice.) In the progression from instance to instance, Balak's frustration mounts, just as Balaam's did with the ass, for not only is the plan of execration repeatedly frustrated, but the

blessings pronounced upon Israel become more extravagant from one oracle to the next. The monotheist's satiric exposure of the polytheist's delusions could scarcely be more brilliant.

3. *in silence.* The Hebrew adverbial form *beshefi* occurs only here, and its meaning is not certain.

7. *he took up his theme.* The Hebrew term *mashal* represented by "theme" is variously used in the Bible for different kinds of poetic composition—aphoristic, proverbial, rhapsodic. (Thus the poets called *moshlim* in 21:27 are rendered as "rhapsodes.") Here the poetic utterance is oracular in nature. *Mashal* is not a term generally used for the pronouncements of the Hebrew prophets, and so it may have been deemed especially appropriate for this gentile seer.

8. *What can I hex that El has not hexed.* El, though it is also a Hebrew common noun that means "god," is the proper name of the head of the Canaanite pantheon. One may resist Baruch Levine's conclusion that the poem reflects a still polytheistic stage of thinking about gods in ancient Israel, but there is surely a certain teasing quality of hovering between two different theologies in the designations for God in the poem. A non-Israelite visionary such as Balaam might well speak of El in the old Canaanite sense, yet El appears to be a synonym, in the parallelism of the two versets of this line, with YHWH, the LORD, and in the second oracle (verse 22), El plays precisely the traditional role of YHWH in bringing Israel out of Egypt. This translation seeks to preserve the poem's gesture toward the archaic by using the proper noun El instead of "God."

9. *see . . . gaze*. The synonymous language of the line highlights the theme of seeing that was prominent in the tale of the ass.

them. The Hebrew says "it/him," the antecedent being the collective noun "Israel."

10. *who counted.* Reading, with the Septuagint *umi sapar* instead of the Masoretic *umispar*, "and the number of."

the issue. The meaning of the unusual Hebrew term *rova'* is in dispute. The verbal stem *r-b-'* (akin to *r-b-ts*) does sometimes apply to copulation and so, perhaps, to the consequence of copulation. Others relate it to the number

four, *ʾarbaʿ* (thus Levine, "quarterland"); and still others, with an eye to a possible Akkadian cognate, understand it as another word for "dust," or perhaps "dust cloud."

the upright. An emendation of *yesharim* proposed by Levine produces *yeshurun*, "Jeshurun," a synonym for Israel.

my aftertime. The Hebrew *aḥarit* is an abstract noun derived from *aḥar*, "after." It is misleading to translate it as "afterlife" because Israel in this period had no real notion of an afterlife. What Balaam appears to be saying is that when he dies (an eventuality mentioned in the first verset here), he would like the name that lives after him to be as unassailable as that of the people of Israel. This view of life and death is closer to Homer than to later Judaism or Christianity.

18. *Zippor's son.* The poem uses an archaic-poetic construct form, *beno tsipor*, instead of the usual *ben tsipor*, "son of Zippor."

19. *El is no man.* The monotheistic point briefly stated in the first oracle (verse 8) is here expanded to a full-fledged theological proposition on God's fixed intentions that resist any human manipulation.

20. *I was taken.* Reading *luqaḥti* instead of the Masoretic *laqaḥti*, "I took."

and He blessed. A change of one vowel in the consonantal text yields the infinitive "bless," which might make a better syntactic parallelism with the first verset.

22. *like the wild ox's antlers for him. To ʿafot*, the word translated as "antlers," usually means "mountain peaks" and perhaps is used metaphorically here for what juts out from the top of the wild ox's head. To whom does this simile refer? The more cautious reading is that it is a representation of the fiercely triumphant Israel, now a militant people after its liberation from Egyptian slavery. It may, however, be more in keeping with the archaic character of the poem to see the animal imagery as a representation, in accordance with the conventions of Canaanite epic, of the fierce God who has freed Israel from Egypt.

23. *Now be it said to Jacob / . . . what El has wrought*. This line of verse follows directly from the assertion that there is no divining in Israel. Other nations may foolishly have recourse to soothsayers and word-magic

professionals like Balaam, but Israel is immediately informed, whether through prophets or direct divine revelation, what God's designs are.

24. *like a lion arises.* This image of the rising, bloodthirsty lion is a stock metaphor for martial prowess in biblical and other ancient Near Eastern poetry. The kenning "king of beasts" in the second verset of this line reflects a single Hebrew word: biblical Hebrew has five synonyms for lion (whatever distinctions there may have been among them have been lost with the passage of time), whereas English, alas, has none.

blood of the slain he drinks. The language here is similar to the startling picture in Job 39:30 of the eagle's fledglings lapping up the blood of the slain. Altogether, Balaam's second oracle has raised the stakes of frustration for Balak. Israel is envisaged now not merely as vast but as a fiercely indomitable warrior people—Balak now has not just been led off the road into the field but feels his leg crushed against the wall.

25. *Neither to curse.* Momentarily, Balak is so exasperated that he announces that he is dispensing altogether with Balaam's professional services. But when Balaam replies that he is, after all, bound to carry out whatever the LORD tells him, Balak imagines that he may have better luck with this god on a third try.

27. *Perhaps it will be right in the eyes of the god.* Balak accepts the fact that Balaam's words are dependent on this particular deity, but he clings to the hope that the deity at last will prove more favorably inclined to the plan of execration. The Hebrew *'elohim* could mean "God," but the fact that it is prefixed by a definite article and that it is pronounced by a pagan makes the polytheistic sense of the term more likely.

CHAPTER 24

[1]And Balaam saw that it was good in the eyes of the
LORD to bless Israel, and he did not go as on the
times before to encounter omens but turned his face to
the wilderness. [2]And Balaam raised his eyes and saw
Israel dwelling by its tribes, and the spirit of God was
upon him. [3]And he took up his theme and he said:

“Utterance of Balaam, Beor’s son,
utterance of the man open-eyed,
[4]utterance of him who hears El’s
sayings,
who the vision of Shaddai
beholds,
prostrate with eyes unveiled.
[5]How goodly your tents, O Jacob,
your dwellings, O Israel!
[6]Like palm groves they stretch out,
like gardens by a river,
Like aloes the LORD has planted,

like cedars by the water.
7 Water drips from his branch,
and his root in abundant waters.
His king looms over Agag
and his kingship is lifted high.
8 El who brings him out from Egypt,
like the wild ox's antlers for him.
He consumes nations, his foes,
and their bones he does crush
and smashes his loins.
9 He crouches, lies down like a lion,
like the king of beasts, who can
rouse him?
Those who bless you are blessed,
and your cursers are cursed."

10 And Balak's wrath flared against Balaam and he clapped his palms, and Balak said to Balaam, "To hex my enemies did I call you, and, look, you have done nothing but bless now three times. 11 And so, go flee to your place. I said I would surely honor you, and, look, the LORD has held you back from honor." 12 And Balaam said to Balak, "Did I not speak to your messengers, too, whom you sent to me, saying,
13 'Should Balak give me his houseful of silver and gold,

I could not cross the word of the LORD to do either a
good thing or a bad one from my own heart. That
which the LORD speaks to me, it alone can I speak.’
14And so, I am about to go to my people. Let me
counsel you what this people will do to your people in
days to come.” 15And he took up his theme and he
said,

“Utterance of Balaam, Beor’s son,
utterance of the man open-eyed.
16Utterance of him who hears El’s
sayings
and knows what Elyon knows.
Shaddai’s vision he beholds,
prostrate with eyes unveiled.
17I see him, but not yet now.
I gaze on him, but not in time
close.
A star steps forth from Jacob,
a meteor arises from Israel,
and smashes the brow of Moab,
and the pate of all the Sethites.
18And Edom will be dispossessed,
Seir dispossessed by its enemies.
But Israel performs prowess,

[19]and Jacob holds sway over them,
and destroys the city's survivor."

[20]And he saw Amalek, and he took up his theme and said,

"First of nations was Amalek,
and at his last unto destruction."

[21]And he saw the Kenite, and he took up his theme and said,

"Staunch is your settlement,
and set in the rock your nest.
[22]But Cain will be for burning,
how long will Asshur hold you
captive?"

[23]And he took up his theme and he said,

"Woe, who can live more than El has
set him,
[24]and ships from the hands of the
Kittites,

and they lay low Asshur and lay low
Eber,
and he, as well, unto destruction.”

[25]And Balaam rose and went and returned to his place,
and Balak, too, went on his way.

CHAPTER 24 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *he did not go as on the times before to encounter omens*. This constitutes new information about Balaam’s two previous oracles. In each instance, as we now understand, he made his way along the promontory, in accordance with his usual professional procedures as seer and hexer or blesser, looking for signs (bird flight, cloud formations, or whatever) that would give him a clue about what to say. In each case, God intervened and “put a word in his mouth.” Balaam’s persistence in his seer’s craft throws retrospective light on his intentions toward Israel during his journey from the east when he was stymied three times by his ass as she was confronted by the divine messenger. Now, in keeping with the folktale pattern of three repetitions with a climactic switch in the third occurrence, Balaam abandons his quest for omens, instead looking out straightaway to the wilderness where Israel is encamped.

2. *and the spirit of God was upon him.* In this altered third instance, God does not put a word in Balaam’s mouth but sets His spirit upon him—the formula to designate inspiration used for the prophets (and the judges). With this spirit, he will now pronounce his most comprehensive blessing of Israel.

3. *Utterance of Balaam.* Although this line and the next (verse 4) sound very much like the set self-introduction of a professional seer who feels he can lay claim to special visionary powers, there was no equivalent at the beginning of

the previous oracles, and so the declaration may be motivated in narrative context by God's spirit having come upon Balaam.

4. *El's . . . / Shaddai*. Elsewhere, El Shaddai is a compound name used for the God of Israel. As elsewhere in Balaam's oracles, these designations, as well as Elyon in verse 16, appear to be names once used for Canaanite deities (and hence neatly appropriate in the speech of this non-Israelite prophet) that have been co-opted for monotheistic usage.

prostrate with eyes unveiled. The unveiled eyes hark back to the unveiling of Balaam's eyes by the LORD's messenger. A certain irony is generated by the link between the two texts: Balaam's declaration here of his visionary power comes to remind us of his blindness when he was incapable of seeing what his ass plainly saw, until the LORD's messenger intervened. "Prostrate" (literally, "falling," *nofel*) most likely refers to the state of ecstasy in which the seer is flung to the ground. There are abundant indications elsewhere in the Bible that this sort of "falling" was expected as a consequence of the descent of the spirit on the seer or prophet.

6. *Like palm groves.* The Hebrew *neḥalim*, most scholars agree, is a homonym for the much more common term that means "wadis" or "brooks." But the poet's decision to use this unusual word here, as the Israeli scholar Shlomo Morag has plausibly suggested, is motivated by a desire to reinforce through the pun on palm groves/brooks the imagery of abundant water in the next several versets. There is also a near pun in these lines between the verb *nitayu*, "stretch out," and *nataʿ*, "planted."

7. *his root.* The noun *zeraʿ*, which ordinarily means "seed," frequently designates "root" in poetry (repeatedly, in Job).

Agag. King of Amalek at the time of Saul.

8. *their bones . . . / his loins*. The switch from a plural to a singular object of the verb is characteristic of the fluid Hebrew usage in this regard.

and smashes his loins. The Masoretic Text reads "and smashes his arrows," *weḥitsaw yimḥats*. A compelling emendation adopted by many scholars corrects this to *weḥalatsaw yimḥats* (the addition of a single consonant to the noun in question). This not only yields a much more intelligible parallelism but also reflects other lines of biblical poetry in which "loins," *ḥalatsayim*, is the direct object of "smash," *maḥats*.

10. *clapped his palms.* In the biblical world, this is a conventional gesture of despair.

11. *honor.* As before, "honor" refers to material reward. Balaam, having been promised vast quantities of silver and gold, will now go home empty-handed.

12. *Did I not speak to your messengers.* Following the established convention of biblical narrative, Balaam does not simply summarize what he said to the messengers but actually quotes his earlier speech verbatim. The only substitution, "a good thing or a bad one" instead of "a small thing or a great one," is merely a synonymous variation, since both expressions have the sense of "anything at all." This time, Balaam also adds "from my heart" by way of explanation.

13. *That which the LORD speaks to me, it alone can I speak.* This already repeated sentence, recurring now just before Balaam pronounces his final oracles, has the force of a thematic refrain: the whole point of the story is that there is no autonomous realm of word magic and vision that a technician of the holy can manipulate; all blessings and curses are dictated by the LORD.

14. *people.* Balaam pointedly repeats this word three times, laying before Balak a triangle of peoples: Moab, Israel, and his own people to the east, to whom he will return once he has told Balak what Israel will do to Moab.

16. *and knows what Elyon knows.* The extravagance of this whole self-advertisement, and especially of this clause, has a certain irony, given the previously unseeing Balaam's absolute dependence on God for everything he manages to see and for everything he says.

17. *I see him . . . / I gaze on him*. Once more, as Balaam launches on his final series of pronouncements, the thematic words of sight are highlighted.

A star steps forth. The meaning of this phrase has defied interpreters. The Septuagint's reading of *zaraḥ*, "shines," instead of the Masoretic *darakh*, "steps forth" or "trods," is a transparent instance of evading a textual difficulty by substituting a simpler term. Some modern interpreters, arguing from a Semitic cognate, claim that *darakh* here means "rules," but that seems far-fetched because every other biblical instance has to do with treading or walking (or tightening a bow with pressure from a foot). It seems most

sensible to imagine the star marching forth in military fashion or emerging from Jacob. The star is in all likelihood a metaphor for a king, something that Bar Kochba's followers assumed in using this verse as a rationale for his messianic name, which means "son of a star."

and the pate. The Masoretic Text here reads *weqarqar*, an infinitive form that might, only conjecturally, mean "and to raze." This translation embraces the widely accepted emendation of *weqodqod*, "and the pate," a neat parallel to "brow" and an apt object of the double-duty verb in the first verset, "smashes." (The ancient Hebrew graphemes for *d* and *r* are very similar.) The identity of the Sethites is uncertain and obscurities will grow as Balaam moves on to his oracles about the nations.

19. *and Jacob holds sway over them.* Instead of the Masoretic "and he holds sway from Jacob," *weyerd miya ʿaqov*, this translation reads *weyirdem ya ʿaqov*, moving the *mem* from the beginning of the noun to the end of the verb that precedes it.

22. *Cain will be for burning, / how long will Asshur hold you captive?* The language of the second verset is especially crabbed and the meaning in doubt. There is also another way to construe the first verset. The verb *ba ʿer* can indicate either burning or grazing by cattle. Baruch Levine, adopting the second meaning, renders this as "Cain will be a trampled land."

23–24. *who can live more than El has set him, / and ships from the hands of the Kittites.* An honest translator must admit that the Hebrew text here is not intelligible, and that the nexus between the seemingly philosophical pronouncement of the first verset and the invocation of a Mediterranean fleet in the second verset is obscure. Some scholars have sought to recover the original meaning by performing radical surgery on the text.

24. *they lay low Asshur.* What one can glean from these last vatic words of Balaam is a vista of destruction in which once great kingdoms sink into oblivion while the people of Israel powerfully persists.

25. *And Balaam rose and went and returned to his place.* This is a recurrent formula for marking the end of a narrative unit in the Bible. It should be noted that through much of the story, it was Balaam who was the subject of the verb "to go." Now he is seen, according to the set formula, returning to

his place, resuming a condition of stasis outside the boundaries of what can be narrated, while Balak goes on his way, not toward any indicated destination or mission, as was the case with Balaam, but in the frustration of all his intentions.

CHAPTER 25

[1]And Israel stayed at Shittim, and the people began to
go whoring with the daughters of Moab. [2]And they
called the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the
people ate and bowed down to their gods. [3]And Israel
clung to Baal Peor, and the LORD's wrath flared
against Israel. [4]And the LORD said to Moses, "Take
all the chiefs of the people and impale them to the
LORD before the sun, that the LORD's flaring wrath
turn away from Israel." [5]And Moses said to the judges
of Israel, "Each of you kill his men who cling to Baal
Peor." [6]And look, a man of the Israelites came and
brought forth to his kinsmen the Midianite woman
before the eyes of Moses and before the eyes of the
whole community of Israelites as they were weeping at
the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. [7]And Phinehas
son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest saw, and he
rose from the midst of the community and took a
spear in his hand. [8]And he came after the man of
Israel into the alcove and stabbed the two of them, the
man of Israel and the woman, in her alcove, and the

scourge was held back from the Israelites. [9]And those who died in the scourge came to twenty-four thousand. [10]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [11]“Phinehas son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest turned away My wrath from the Israelites when he zealously acted for My zeal in their midst, and I did not put an end to the Israelites through my zeal. [12]Therefore say: ‘I hereby grant him My covenant of peace. [13]And it shall be for him and for his seed after him a covenant of perpetual priesthood in recompense for his acting zealously for his God and atoning for the Israelites.’” [14]And the name of the man of Israel who was struck down, who was struck down with the Midianite woman, was Zimri son of Salu chieftain of the Simeonite father’s house. [15]And the name of the Midianite woman who was struck down was Cozbi daughter of Zur, who was chieftain of the leagues of fathers’ houses in Midian. [16]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [17]“Be foes to the Midianites and strike them. [18]For they have been foes to you through their wiles that they practiced upon you in the matter of Peor and in the matter of Cozbi daughter of the chieftain of Midian, their kinswoman, who was struck down on the day of the scourge over the matter of Peor.”

CHAPTER 25 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Shittim*. The name means "acacias." The full place-name, given in 33:49, is Abel-Shittim, which means "brook of the acacias."

began to go whoring with the daughters of Moab. The sexual metaphor of "whoring" (verbal stem *z-n-h*) is regularly used in the Bible to represent Israel's betrayal of cultic fidelity to its own God. This figurative usage leads Baruch Levine to argue that no actual sexual activity is involved in the present episode. That inference, however, is implausible because it offers no explanation of how or why it is the "daughters" (*banot*, "young women") of Moab who lure the Israelite men to worship their god. Our story is rather an instance in which the literal sense of the verb "to whore" leads to the figurative sense. Rashi catches this double usage in the following vivid vignette: "When he was seized by his sexual impulse and said, 'Submit to me,' she would pull out an image of Peor from her lap and say to him, 'Bow down to this.'"

2. *they called.* The verb here has the technical sense of "invited."

3. *And Israel clung to Baal Peor.* There is no obvious link, beyond the trans-Jordanian setting, between this episode of cultic infidelity and the preceding tale of Balaam, and, indeed, the Baal Peor story seems clearly the product of another hand, or in fact, of other hands. The editorial decision, however, to insert this material here reflects the general predisposition of biblical literature to represent Israel dialectically. If in Balaam's oracles Israel is a unique and indomitable nation, here it is pathetically vulnerable to the seductions of the surrounding pagan world. Perhaps most ironically apposite from Balaam's oracles is the grand declaration that Israel is "a people that dwells apart." Now, immediately after that oracle, the Israelites show how intertwined they can be with their pagan neighbors, both sexually and cultically. Baal is the Canaanite god of the fields: Baal Peor means the Baal who is venerated at Peor. (One wonders whether the story puns sexually on that place-name, which can be related to the Hebrew verb that means "to gape open.") Jacob Milgrom notes that this is the first mention in the Bible of Baal, a deity whose worship became widespread only in the latter half of the second millennium B.C.E., and he also observes that the story reflects the fact

that Israel has now come to the borders of Canaan, where it will be in contact with the Canaanite peoples.

4. *impale them to the LORD before the sun.* The clear implication of this grim command is that the public impaling of the Israelite leaders is conceived in quasiritual terms, "to the LORD," as a kind of expiatory sacrifice or execution. In what follows, there is no report that this order of execution is carried out.

5. *the judges of Israel.* The Hebrew *shoftim* could mean "magistrates" or simply "leaders," but in any case this has to be a group distinct from the "chiefs" (or "heads," *ra'shim*) just mentioned.

Each of you kill his men who cling to Baal Peor. Moses seems to alter God's instructions that the chiefs of the people be killed. Milgrom sees this as another instance of Moses's acting as intercessor, in this case making only the malefactors the objects of the order of execution.

6. *the Midianite woman.* The story began with Moabite women, not Midianites, but this may reflect an assimilation of the two contiguous peoples rather than a confusion. In the story of Balaam, the Moabite delegation that comes to Balaam includes Midianite elders.

8. *into the alcove . . . in her alcove*. The Hebrew *qubah* is unique to this text, but it has been linked with the Arabic *qubbe*, which is a small tent of red leather used for cultic purposes, or, alternately, for conjugal purposes. (The English "alcove" actually derives from the Arabic *al-qubbe*.) The contention that the term refers here to the Tabernacle, and hence that a violation of the Israelite sanctum is at issue, is strained because the Tabernacle (*mishkan*) is nowhere else referred to as *qubah*. The second occurrence of *qubah* in this verse, if one follows the Masoretic vocalization, appears to be the same word, though it obviously puns on *qebah*, "belly." One is warranted to understand the second "alcove" as a rather transparent euphemisim for the woman's sexual part: she is stabbed in her "alcove." Several of the medieval commentators follow this line of interpretation, invoking the principle of measure for measure.

and the scourge was held back. There was no previous mention of a scourge, and God's orders to kill the Israelite chiefs might seem to exclude the use of a scourge as the agency of punishment. "The LORD's flaring wrath,"

(verse 4) however, may imply scourge, as it does in the parallel episode of the Golden Calf.

12. *I hereby grant him My covenant of peace.* Many understand the Hebrew *briti shalom* as "My covenant of friendship" (or "of fellowship"). In any event, there is some ironic dissonance between Phinehas's bloody act of retribution and this covenant of *shalom* between his descendants and God. This is not the only instance in which members of the priestly caste figure as militant—indeed, military—champions of the LORD's exclusive cult. Such militancy scarcely reflects the role of the priests in later Israelite history, though it may express an image of their stern authority that they sought to impress on the people.

14–15. *Zimri son of Salu chieftain of the Simeonite father's house . . . Cozbi daughter of Zur, who was chieftain of the leagues of fathers' houses in Midian*. The information about the name and lineage of the two culprits, given only at the end of the story, casts retrospective light on the implications of their act. This is not any "man of the Israelites," as we might have thought, but a Simeonite prince, cohabiting with a Midianite princess. The targeting of the Israelite chiefs for execution is perhaps to be understood in this connection: the sexual conjunction of an Israelite prince and a Midianite princess is not merely an encounter of desire between two individuals but a treacherous model for the populace on both sides, an emblem of the religious and sexual amalgamation of the two peoples. Her name, whatever actual Midianite provenance it might have, clearly points to the Hebrew root *k-z-b*, "to deceive" or "to lie." In all this, it is notable that Moses, who leaves the bloody work of execution to Phinehas, is himself married to the daughter of a Midianite priest, a figure who, far from promoting Baal, speaks of YHWH in virtually monotheistic terms. The Israelite attitude toward its neighbors appears to have oscillated over time and within different ideological groups between xenophobia, a fear of being drawn off its own spiritual path by its neighbors, and an openness to alliance and interchange with the surrounding peoples.

CHAPTER 26

25:18b 1And it happened after the scourge that the LORD
said to Moses and to Eleazar son of Aaron the priest,
saying, 2"Count the heads of all the community of
Israelites from twenty years and up by their fathers'
houses, everyone who goes out in the army in Israel."
3And Moses, and Eleazar the priest, spoke with them
in the steppes of Moab by the Jordan opposite Jericho,
saying, 4"From twenty years and up, as the LORD
charged Moses and the Israelites who came out of the
land of Egypt. 5Reuben firstborn of Israel. The sons of
Reuben: Enoch, clan of the Enochite, for Pallu, clan of
the Palluite. 6For Hezron, clan of the Hezronite. For
Carmi, clan of the Carmite. 7These are the clans of the
Reubenite, and their reckonings came to forty-three
thousand seven hundred and thirty. 8And the sons of
Pallu, Eliab. 9And the sons of Eliab, Nemuel and
Dathan and Abiram, these are Dathan and Abiram,
called forth from the community, who incited against
Moses and against Aaron in the community of Korah,
when they incited against the LORD. 10And the earth

opened its mouth and swallowed them and Korah
when the community died, when the fire consumed
two hundred and fifty men and they became a sign.
[11]But the sons of Korah did not die. [12]The sons of
Simeon by their clans: For Nemuel, the clan of the
Nemuelite. For Jamin, the clan of the Jaminite. For
Jachin, the clan of the Jachinite. [13]For Zerah, the clan
of the Zerahite. For Saul, the clan of the Saulite.
[14]These are the clans of the Simeonite, twenty-two
thousand and two hundred. [15]The sons of Gad by their
clans. For Zephon, the clan of the Zephonite. For
Haggi, the clan of the Haggite. For Shuni, the clan of
the Shunite. [16]For Ozni, the clan of the Oznite. For
Eri, the clan of the Erite. [17]For Arod, the clan of the
Arodite. For Areli, the clan of the Arelite. [18]These are
the clans of the sons of Gad by their reckonings, forty
thousand and five hundred. [19]The sons of Judah, Er
and Onan, and Er and Onan died in the land of
Canaan. [20]And these are the sons of Judah by their
clans. For Shelah, the clan of the Shelanite. For Perez,
the clan of the Perezite. For Zerah, the clan of the
Zerahite. [21]And these are the sons of Perez. For
Hezron, the clan of the Hezronite. For Hamul, the clan
of the Hamulite. [22]These are the clans of Judah by
their reckonings, seventy-six thousand and five
hundred. [23]The sons of Issachar by their clans. Tola,

the Tolaite clan. For Puvah, the clan of the Punite.
[24]For Jashub, the clan of the Jashubite. For Shimron,
the clan of the Shimronite. [25]These are the clans of
Issachar by their reckonings, sixty-four thousand and
three hundred. [26]The sons of Zebulun by their clans.
For Sered, the clan of the Seredite. For Elon, the clan
of the Elonite. For Jahleel, the clan of the Jahleelite.
[27]These are the clans of the Zebulunite by their
reckonings, sixty thousand and five hundred. [28]The
sons of Joseph by their clans, Manasseh and Ephraim.
[29]The sons of Manasseh. For Machir, the clan of the
Machirite, and Machir begot Gilead. For Gilead, the
clan of the Gileadite. [30]These are the sons of Gilead:
Iezer, clan of the Iezerite. For Helek, clan of the
Helekite. [31]And Asriel, clan of the Asrielite. And
Shechem, clan of the Shechemite. [32]And Shemida,
clan of the Shemidaite. And Hepher, clan of the
Hepherite. [33]But Zelophehad son of Hepher had no
sons but daughters, and the names of the daughters of
Zelophehad were Mahlah and Noa, Hoglah, Milcah,
and Tirzah. [34]These are the clans of Manasseh by their
reckonings, fifty-two thousand and seven hundred.
[35]These are the sons of Ephraim by their clans. For
Shuthelah, the clan of the Shuthelahite. For Becher,
the clan of the Becherite. For Tahan, the clan of the
Tahanite. [36]And these are the sons of Shuthelah. For

Eran, the clan of the Eranite. [37]These are the clans of the sons of Ephraim by their reckonings, thirty-two thousand and five hundred. These are the sons of Joseph by their clans. [38]The sons of Benjamin by their clans. For Bela, the clan of the Belaite. For Ashbel, the clan of the Ashbelite. For Ahiram, the clan of the Ahiramite. [39]For Shuphupham, the clan of the Shuphumamite. For Hupham, the clan of the Huphamite. [40]And Bela's sons were Ard and Naaman. The clan of the Ardite. For Naaman, the clan of the Naamanite. [41]These are the sons of Benjamin by their clans, and their reckonings were forty-five thousand and six hundred. [42]These are the sons of Dan by their clans. For Shuham, the clan of the Shuhamite. [43]These are the clans of Dan by their clans. All the clans of the Shuhamite by their reckonings, sixty-four thousand and four hundred. [44]The sons of Asher by their clans. For Imnah, the clan of the Imnite. For Ishvi, the clan of the Ishvite. [45]For Beriah, the clan of the Beriitite. For the sons of Beriah. For Heber, the clan of the Heberite. For Malchiel, the clan of the Malchielite. [46]And the name of the daughter of Asher was Serah. [47]These are the clans of the sons of Asher by their reckonings, fifty-three thousand and four hundred. [48]The sons of Naphtali by their clans. For Jahzeel, the clan of the Jahzeelite. For Guni, the clan of the

Gunite. [49]For Jezer, the clan of the Jezerite. For Shillem, the clan of the Shillemite. [50]These are the clans of Naphtali by their clans, and their reckonings were forty-five thousand and four hundred. [51]These are the reckonings of the Israelites: six hundred one thousand seven hundred and thirty."

[52]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [53]"To these shall the land be apportioned as an estate by the number of names. [54]For the many you shall make their estate large and for the few you shall make their estate small, each according to his reckonings shall his estate be given. [55]But by lot shall the land be apportioned, by the names of their fathers' tribes shall they inherit. [56]According to lot shall their estate be apportioned, whether many or few."

[57]And these are the reckonings of the Levites by their clans. For Gershon, the clan of the Gershonite. For Kohath, the clan of the Kohathite. For Merari, the clan of the Merarite. [58]These are the clans of Levi. The clan of the Libnite, the clan of the Hebronite, the clan of the Mahlite, the clan of the Mushite, the clan of the Korahite. And Kohath begot Amram. [59]And the name of Amram's wife was Jochebed daughter of Levi

whom she bore to Levi in Egypt, and she bore to Amram Aaron and Moses and Miriam their sister.
60And to Aaron were born Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. 61And Nadab and Abihu died when they brought forward unfit fire before the LORD. 62And their reckonings were twenty-three thousand, every male from a month old and up, for they were not reckoned in the midst of the Israelites, for they were not given an estate in the midst of the Israelites.
63These are the reckonings of Moses and Eleazar the priest, who reckoned the Israelites in the steppes of Moab by the Jordan opposite Jericho. 64And among these there was not a man from the reckonings of Moses and Aaron the priest, who reckoned the Israelites in the Wilderness of Sinai. 65For the LORD had said of them, “They are doomed to die in the wilderness.” And no man was left of them save Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun.

CHAPTER 26 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

25:18b. *And it happened after the scourge.* Although these words occur at the end of chapter 25 in the conventional chapter break, they clearly belong here.

2. *Count the heads . . . from twenty years and up*. The principal narrative sequence of the Book of Numbers, consisting largely of a series of incidents

of rebellion, is framed by a census at the beginning (chapter 1) and a census at the end. The aim of the first census was a military conscription for the march through the wilderness, and that function was reflected in the numbering of all males twenty years old and above. Here, on the other hand, the census is intended to lay the grounds for the division of the land as the Israelites encamp opposite Jericho, the first point of attack in the conquest; and the stipulation of males twenty years old is to indicate that the Wilderness generation fated not to enter the land has died out, with a new generation having grown up to take its place.

4. *as the LORD charged Moses and the Israelites who came out of the land of Egypt.* The most plausible construction of this clause is that the present census follows the pattern of the census that the Israelites were commanded to conduct at the beginning of the Wilderness wanderings for the generation that experienced the Exodus.

9. *these are Dathan and Abiram.* Coming after a series of narrative incidents, this census, unlike the earlier one, takes space for parenthetical glosses of figures in the lineage cut off by premature death.

10. *the earth opened its mouth . . . when the fire consumed*. The reference to the two different agencies of destruction is a transparent effort to harmonize the imperfectly blended accounts of the two different rebellions in chapter 16. In fact, the Reubenites Dathan and Abiram and their followers were swallowed up by the earth while the priestly rebels led by Korah were consumed by fire.

a sign. The Hebrew *nes* generally means "banner" or "standard." Here the sense is a sign of warning.

11. *But the sons of Korah did not die.* In fact, the Korahites ended up playing a prominent role in the later temple cult.

19. *Er and Onan died in the land of Canaan.* In this instance, the gloss on the particular descendants of one of Jacob's sons who died without leaving offspring refers to an episode not in Numbers but in Genesis (chapter 38).

30. *Iezer.* This name is a contraction of Abiezer. In the parallel list in Joshua 17:2 the full form of the name is given.

33. *the names of the daughters of Zelophehad.* This exceptional stipulation of daughters by name anticipates the issue of inheritance through daughters raised in the next chapter with the case of Zelophehad's daughters as legal precedent. Two of these names have been found on ostraca in Samaria dating from around 800 B.C.E. and are the names of cities in the region. Other names in this census list may also be place-names figuring as the designation of clans.

51. *six hundred one thousand seven hundred and thirty.* As in the earlier census, the total number of adult males makes up a figure that is just a little over the legendary and formulaic tally of 600,000.

53. *by the number of names.* That is, each clan here registered by name in the census shall have territory inalienably assigned to it.

55. *But by lot shall the land be apportioned.* At first glance, this would seem to contradict the condition just stated that the territory is to be divided according to the varying size of the clans and the tribes. The use of lots, however, is in all likelihood restricted to the selection of particular regions and does not apply to the size of the territories granted.

57. *the reckonings of the Levites.* As in the earlier census, the tally of the Levites is given after the general census because the Levites had no land as estate (and in the previous census, they were not subject to military conscription).

65. *save Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun.* These two are, of course, the sole exceptions to the death sentence on the adults of the Wilderness generation because they were the only scouts who brought back a positive report about the prospects for conquering the land. Mentioning them by name here at the end of the census aligns this textual unit with the inception of the conquest at the beginning of the Book of Joshua. Caleb will be the first mentioned to take an inheritance in the land, and Joshua will lead the conquest.

CHAPTER 27

[1]And the daughters of Zelophehad son of Hepher, son of Gilead, son of Machir, son of Manasseh of the clans of Manasseh, son of Joseph came forward, and these are the names of his daughters: Mahlah, Noa, and Hoglah and Milcah and Tirzah. [2]And they stood before Moses and before Eleazar the priest and before the chieftains and all the community at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, saying, [3]"Our father died in the wilderness, and he was not part of the community that banded together against the LORD with the community of Korah, for through his own offense he died, and he had no sons. [4]Why should our father's name be withdrawn from the midst of his clan because he had no son? Give us a holding in the midst of our father's brothers." [5]And Moses brought forward their case before the LORD. [6]And the LORD said to Moses, saying, [7]"Rightly do the daughters of Zelophehad speak. You shall surely give them a secure holding in the midst of their father's brothers and you shall pass on their father's estate to them. [8]And to the

Israelites you shall speak, saying, ‘Should a man die without having a son, you shall pass on his estate to his daughter. [9]And if he has no daughter, you shall give his estate to his brothers. [10]And if he has no brothers, you shall give his estate to his father’s brothers. [11]And if his father has no brothers, you shall give his estate to his closest kin from his clan and he shall take possession of it. And this shall be a statute of law for the Israelites as the LORD has charged Moses.’”

[12]And the LORD said to Moses, “Go up to this Mount Abarim and see the land that I have given to the Israelites. [13]And you shall see it, and you shall be gathered to your kin—you, too, as Aaron your brother was gathered, [14]since you rebelled against My word in the Wilderness of Zin in the community’s dispute, to sanctify Me through the water before their eyes.” These are the waters of Meribah at Kadesh in the Wilderness of Zin. [15]And Moses said to the LORD, saying, [16]“Let the LORD, God of the spirits for all flesh, appoint a man over the community, [17]who will go out before them and come in before them and who will lead them in and out on the march so that the LORD’s community will not be like a flock that has no shepherd.” [18]And the LORD said to Moses, “Take you

Joshua son of Nun, a man who has spirit within him, and lay your hand upon him. [19]And you shall stand him before Eleazar the priest and before all the community, and you shall charge him before their eyes. [20]And you shall set something of your grandeur upon him in order that all the Israelite community will heed. [21]And before Eleazar the priest he shall stand and inquire of him for the ruling of the Urim before the LORD. By it shall they go out and by it shall they come in—he and all the Israelites with him and all the community." [22]And Moses did as the LORD had charged him, and he took Joshua and stood him before Eleazar the priest and before all the community. [23]And he laid his hands upon him and charged him as the LORD had spoken through Moses.

CHAPTER 27 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the daughters of Zelophehad*. Rashi, noting that this episode immediately follows a mention of the ten fearful spies, construes it as a special argument in behalf of the role of women as opposed to men in the Wilderness narrative: "The men say (Numbers 14), 'Let us make us put up a head and return to Egypt,' and the women say, 'Give us a holding.'"

3. *Our father died.* The choice of the favored instrument of biblical narrative —dialogue—for making this case has expressive consequences. The issue of daughters' inheritance in the absence of male offspring is not presented as an

abstract legal precedent but as an impassioned plea for justice—"Why should our father's name be withdrawn . . .? Give us a holding"—by these five young women who fear that the patriarchal system of inheritance will deprive them of their rights. Though the notion of daughters' inheriting was exceptional in the ancient Near East, this story is something other than a feminist argument. The chief concern is not to lose the inheritance pertaining to the clan, not to allow the "name" of the clan to disappear. But since the holdings of the clans were defined within tribal territories, the whole system would have been upset if the daughters were to marry outside the tribe. The follow-up to this episode in chapter 36 therefore stipulates that they are obliged to marry within the tribe.

for through his own offense he died. This would most plausibly be the "offense" of all the adults of the Wilderness generation after the episode of the spies. The daughters assume, as Abraham ibn Ezra notes, that the active conspirators against the LORD in the Korah rebellion are to be punished more severely, by death and by denial of inheritance to their descendants.

5. *Moses brought forward their case before the LORD.* The idiom refers to inquiry of an oracle, but, unlike the Urim and Thummim (evidently divinatory stones or tokens) that Joshua is directed to employ at the end of this chapter, Moses is represented as engaged in dialogue with God.

7. *a secure holding.* The Hebrew is literally "a holding of an estate." The two terms, *ʾaḥuzah* and *naḥalah*, are virtual synonyms, and the use of two synonyms linked in the construct state often expresses an intensification of the noun (compare *ḥoshekh ʾafelah*, "pitch-dark," in Exodus 10:22).

8. *Should a man die.* From the dramatized instance of the daughters of Zelophehad, the divine response to Moses's inquiry now proceeds to a casuistically formulated law of inheritance that includes the contingency of a daughter as heir but also stipulates the lines of inheritance when the deceased has neither sons nor daughters.

14. *since you rebelled against My word . . . to sanctify Me through the water*. The sense of the somewhat loose syntax of this sentence is: My instruction, against which you rebelled, was to sanctify Me through the water (that is, by making manifest that it was I bringing forth water from the rock rather than claiming the deed for yourself and Aaron as you struck the rock).

16. *Let the LORD, God of the spirits for all flesh, appoint a man.* In this final dialogue between Moses and God, it is noteworthy that Moses, far from demurring about the fate of imminent death that has just been pronounced upon him, expresses his concern about the continuity of leadership and the future of the people he has led. The relatively unusual epithet, "God of the spirits for all flesh," points forward to the need for a man "who has spirit within him" (either the "spirit of wisdom," *ruaḥ ḥokhmah*, or the "spirit of God," *ruaḥ ʾelohim*). All living flesh has an animating spirit or life-breath in it, but only the few are endowed with a spirit of understanding or visionary presence.

17. *go out before them and come in before them.* This idiom has the sense of "to lead in battle," an appropriate role for Joshua, who will command the Israelite forces in the conquest of the land. The same two verbs are used in the next clause transitively, in the causative conjugation, and there the translation adds "on the march" to underscore the military implication of the idiom.

that the LORD's community will not be like a flock that has no shepherd. Though the image of ruler as shepherd of the people is conventional in the ancient Near East, it also harks back, as Richard Elliott Friedman aptly observes, to Moses's own beginnings as a shepherd and his first dialogue with God at the burning bush to which he had come while tending his sheep.

18. *lay your hand upon him.* In the event, Moses will lay both hands on Joshua. Jacob Milgrom, arguing that two hands were regularly used for the gesture of passing on leadership, reads "hands" here, against the Masoretic Text. Rashi ingeniously makes an interpretive point out of the discrepancy between "hand" and the plural "hands" in verse 23: "[Moses acted] more generously, more than he had been commanded. For the Holy One said to him, 'and lay your hand' but he did it with both his hands and turned [Joshua] into a chock-full vessel and filled him with his wisdom generously."

20. *something of your grandeur.* The Hebrew *hod* ("grandeur," "majesty," "aura") is typically associated with kings, or with God. The partitive *mem* that prefixes the noun is a clear indication of the difference in stature between Moses and Joshua—only a part of Moses's grandeur is to be conferred upon Joshua. In any case, this notion of leadership presumes that the leader in his

personal presence must manifest some sort of charisma in order to enlist the loyalty of those he would lead, “in order that the whole Israelite community will heed.”

21. *inquire of him for the ruling of the Urim.* Joshua’s lesser stature in comparison with Moses is reflected in the fact that he will be dependent upon an institutionalized intermediary—the high priest manipulating the oracular device of the Urim and Thummim—instead of speaking with God “as a man speaks with his fellow man.” The Urim and Thummim were evidently two stones or dicelike carved objects that yielded yes-or-no responses to inquiries. The two terms begin respectively with the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet. More conjecturally, Urim might be related to the root *ʾ-r-r*, “to curse,” and Thummim to the root *t-m-m*, “innocent.”

CHAPTER 28

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Charge the Israelites, and you shall say to them, ‘My offering, My bread, for My fire offerings, My fragrant odor, you shall keep, to offer up to Me at its fixed time.’ [3]And you shall say to them, ‘This is the fire offering that you will offer to the LORD: two unblemished yearling lambs a day, a perpetual burnt offering. [4]One lamb you shall do in the morning and the second lamb you shall do at twilight. [5]And a tenth of an *ephah* of fine semolina flour for the grain offering mixed with a fourth of a *hin* of beaten oil. [6]A perpetual burnt offering like the one done on Mount Sinai as a fragrant odor, a fire offering to the LORD. [7]And its libation, a quarter of a *hin* for each lamb in the sanctuary to pour out in libation of strong drink to the LORD. [8]And the second lamb you shall do at twilight like the grain offering of the morning and its libation, you shall do a fire offering, a fragrant odor to the LORD. [9]And on the sabbath day, two unblemished yearling lambs and two-tenths of fine semolina flour, a grain offering mixed

with oil, and its libation. [10]The burnt offering for one sabbath to the next, besides the perpetual burnt offering and its libation. [11]And on your new moons you shall offer up a burnt offering to the LORD, two bulls from the herd and one ram, seven unblemished yearling lambs. [12]And three-tenths of fine semolina flour, a grain offering mixed with oil for each bull, and two-tenths of fine semolina flour, a grain offering mixed with oil for each ram. [13]And one-tenth of fine semolina flour, a grain offering mixed with oil for every lamb, a burnt offering, a fragrant odor, a fire offering to the LORD. [14]And their libations, these will be half a *hin* for the bull and a third of a *hin* for the ram and a quarter of a *hin* for the lamb—wine. This is the burnt offering for the new moon on each new moon of the year. [15]And one goat as an offense offering to the LORD, besides the perpetual burnt offering, will be done, and its libation.

[16]"'And in the first month on the fourteenth day of this month, a Passover offering to the LORD. [17]And on the fifteenth day of this month, a festival, seven days flatbread shall be eaten. [18]On the first day a sacred assembly: no task of work shall you do. [19]And you shall offer up a fire offering, a burnt offering to the

LORD, two bulls from the herd and one ram and seven yearling lambs, unblemished they shall be for you. [20]And their grain offering, fine semolina flour mixed with oil, three-tenths for the bull and two-tenths for the lamb shall you do. [21]One-tenth you shall do for every lamb and two-tenths for the seven lambs you shall do. [22]And one offense-offering goat to atone for you. [23]Besides the morning's burnt offering which pertains to the perpetual burnt offering you shall do these. [24]Like these you shall do each day seven days, bread of the fire offering, a fragrant odor to the LORD, besides the perpetual burnt offering shall it be done, and its libation. [25]And on the seventh day a sacred assembly shall you have, no task of work shall you do.

[26]"'And on the day of First Fruits when you offer up an offering of new grain to the LORD in your Festival of Weeks, a sacred assembly shall you have, no task of work shall you do. [27]And you shall offer up a burnt offering as a fragrant odor to the LORD, two bulls of the herd, one ram, seven yearling lambs. [28]And their grain offering mixed with oil, three-tenths for the single bull, two-tenths for the single ram. [29]A tenth for every single lamb of the seven lambs. [30]One goat to

atone for you. [31]Besides the perpetual burnt offering and its grain offering you shall do. Unblemished shall they be for you, and their libation.'"

CHAPTER 28 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *My offering, My bread*. Although Moses is to be the speaker, he is enjoined to quote God's direct discourse to the Israelites.

My offering. The end of the previous chapter was clearly what should have been the penultimate moment of the Moses story: Moses summoned to the mountaintop where he will be gathered to his kin and where he is enjoined to pass the leadership on to Joshua. Now, however, the Priestly redactors, pursuing their own professional concern with the cult, introduce a large block of material stipulating regulations for sacrifices (chapters 28–29). This will be followed by a sequence of passages pertaining to the conquest and the division of the land, but since in these sections Moses still holds the reins of leadership, they would have to be anterior to the end of chapter 27. One could scarcely find a more emphatic illustration of the rabbinic principle that "there is neither early nor late in the Torah," i.e., that the text of the Torah passed down to us does not exhibit consistent chronological sequence.

My bread. As elsewhere, this is a synecdoche for food, since the burnt flesh of animals as well as grain offerings is involved. The sacrificial laws reflect the strongest nexus of biblical religion with antecedent paganism, and this link is reflected in the archaic survivals of the language, in which the sacrifices are represented as the food of the gods and the smoke from the altar as a "fragrant odor" in the nostrils of the gods, predisposing them in favor of those who offer the sacrifices. Although biblical monotheism by stages transcended this mechanical conception of sacrifice, as polemic passages against it in the Prophets demonstrate, one may assume that it had a powerful appeal, quite literally understood, for many ordinary Israelite worshippers.

3. *perpetual.* That is, a fixed and repeated requirement, performed daily.

5. *beaten oil.* The top-grade oil was produced with mortar and pestle rather than extracted with a press.

6. *like the one done on Mount Sinai.* The literal sense of the somewhat enigmatic Hebrew is "that is done on Mount Sinai." Abraham ibn Ezra shrewdly infers that the sacrifices, first established and performed at Sinai, were not done during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

7. *strong drink.* The Hebrew *shekhar* is derived from the verbal root that means "to intoxicate." Some think it means "beer" (widely used in the ancient Near East), but since it is unlikely that beer, a fermented substance otherwise prohibited in the cult, was used for libations, it probably refers to some sort of wine distinct from the ordinary kind or, even more likely, to grappa.

17. *a festival.* The Hebrew *ḥag* implies a pilgrim festival. The noun derives from the verb *ḥug*, "to move about in a circle," and in all likelihood refers to the trajectory of the pilgrim procession making its way to the sanctuary. As several recent commentators have noted, *ḥag* is not mentioned in connection with the Feast of First Fruits, and this may not have been a pilgrim festival in the earlier biblical period.

26. *Festival of Weeks.* The Hebrew simply says "Weeks," *shavuʿot*. The name refers to the seven weeks counted from the inception of Passover to this festival (hence the Christian Pentecost, festival of the fiftieth day, the day following seven weeks).

CHAPTER 29

[1]“‘And in the seventh month on the first of the month
you shall have a sacred assembly, no task of work shall
you do. A day of trumpeting it shall be for you. [2]And
you shall do a burnt offering, a fragrant odor to the
LORD, one bull from the herd, one ram, seven
unblemished yearling lambs. [3]And their grain offering
mixed with oil, three-tenths for the bull, two-tenths for
the ram. [4]And one-tenth for each lamb of the seven
lambs. [5]And a goat for an offense offering to atone for
you. [6]Besides the burnt offering of the new moon and
its grain offering and the perpetual burnt offering and
its grain offering and their libations according to their
rule, as a fragrant odor, a fire offering to the LORD.
[7]And on the tenth of this seventh month you shall have
a sacred assembly, and you shall afflict yourselves, no
task shall you do. [8]And you shall offer up a burnt
offering to the LORD, a fragrant odor: one bull from
the herd, one ram, seven unblemished yearling lambs
you shall have. [9]And their grain offering fine semolina
flour mixed with oil, three-tenths for the bull, two-

tenths for the one ram. [10]One-tenth for every lamb of the seven lambs. [11]One goat as an offense offering, besides the offense offering of atonement and the perpetual burnt offering and its grain offering and their libations.

[12]“‘And on the fifteenth day of the seventh month you shall have a sacred assembly, no task of work shall you do, and you shall celebrate a festival to the LORD seven days. [13]And you shall offer up a burnt offering, a fire offering, a fragrant odor to the LORD, thirteen bulls from the herd, two rams, fourteen yearling lambs, unblemished they shall be. [14]And their grain offering, fine semolina flour mixed with oil, three-tenths for each bull of the thirteen bulls, two-tenths for each ram of the two rams. [15]And one-tenth for every lamb of the fourteen lambs. [16]And one goat as an offense offering besides the perpetual burnt offering, its grain offering and its libation. [17]And on the second day twelve bulls from the herd, two rams, fourteen unblemished yearling lambs. [18]And their meal offering and their libations—for the bulls and for the rams and for the lambs by their number and according to their rule. [19]And one goat as an offense offering besides the perpetual burnt offering and its grain offering and their

libations. [20]And on the third day eleven bulls, two rams, fourteen unblemished yearling lambs. [21]And their grain offering and their libations—for the bulls and for the rams and for the lambs by their number according to their rule. [22]And one offense-offering goat, besides the perpetual burnt offering and its grain offering and its libation. [23]And on the fourth day ten bulls, two rams, fourteen unblemished yearling lambs. [24]Their grain offering and their libations—for the bulls, for the rams, and for the lambs by their number according to their rule. [25]And one goat as an offense offering, besides the perpetual burnt offering, its grain offering and its libation. [26]And on the fifth day nine bulls, two rams, fourteen unblemished yearling lambs. [27]And their grain offering and their libations—for the bulls, for the rams, and for the lambs by their number according to their rule. [28]And one offense-offering goat, besides the perpetual burnt offering and its grain offering and its libation. [29]And on the sixth day eight bulls, two rams, fourteen unblemished yearling lambs. [30]And their grain offering and their libations—for the bulls, for the rams, and for the lambs by their number according to their rule. [31]And one offense-offering goat, besides the perpetual burnt offering, its grain offering and its libations. [32]And on the seventh day seven bulls, two rams, fourteen unblemished yearling

lambs. [33]And their grain offering and their libations—
for the bulls, for the rams, and for the lambs, by their
number according to their rule. [34]And one offense-
offering goat, besides the perpetual burnt offering, its
grain offering and its libation. [35]On the eighth day you
shall have a convocation, no task of work shall you do.
[36]And you shall offer up a burnt offering, a fire
offering, a fragrant odor to the LORD, one bull, one
ram, seven unblemished yearling lambs. [37]Their grain
offering and their libations—for the bull, for the ram,
and for the lambs, by their number according to their
rule. [38]And one offense-offering goat, besides the
perpetual burnt offering and its grain offering and its
libation. [39]These shall you do for the LORD in your
fixed seasons, besides your votive offerings and your
donations, as your burnt offerings and your grain
offerings and your libations and your communion
sacrifices.'" [30:1]And Moses said to the Israelites as all
that the LORD had charged Moses.

CHAPTER 29 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *in the seventh month on the first of the month*. In the postbiblical period, this sacred assembly would be designated Rosh Hashanah, New Year. The month in which it occurs, approximately equivalent to September, figures as

the seventh month in biblical calculation because the agriculturally based calendar begins in the early spring.

A day of trumpeting. The Hebrew *teruʿah* in all likelihood refers to the sounding of the ram's horn, the *shofar*. Blasts on the ram's horn were used in coronation ceremonies, and as Moshe Weinfeld plausibly argues, this festival was probably linked with other ancient Near Eastern festivals that enacted an annual coronation of the principal deity. It is quite possible that as the biblical faith, evolving toward the form it took in rabbinic Judaism, became more monotheistically theological and less centered on agriculture, this theme of God's kingship led to the adoption of the first day of the seventh month as the beginning of the year—the time when God's majestic rule is ceremonially acknowledged and humanity vows fealty and submits itself (there are ancient Near Eastern precedents) to divine judgment.

7. *and on the tenth of this seventh month . . . you shall afflict yourselves*. The holiday referred to is the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, though that name is not mentioned here. The idiom "you shall afflict yourselves," *weʿinitem ʾet-nafshoteikhem*, indicates fasting.

12. *on the fifteenth day of the seventh month.* The holiday in question is the seven-day fall harvest festival of Succoth. Not only is that name not used here but there is also no mention of the harvest aspect of the holiday in this Priestly document, which focuses relentlessly on sacrificial procedures.

13. *And you shall offer up a burnt offering.* Throughout this cultic legislation, the et cetera principle is strenuously avoided. Although all of the sacrifices, except for the bulls, are identical on each day, for every day, as if to confirm the high ceremonial scrupulousness of what is to be performed, each of the items is restated verbatim. Only trivial variations in wording are allowed —"and" sometimes appears and sometimes is deleted in the lists; the goat is sometimes "one goat as an offense offering" (*seʿir ʿizim ʾeḥad ḥataʾt*) and some times, more concisely, "one offense-offering goat" (*seʿir ʾataʾt ʾeḥad*). This is a literature of meticulous protocol.

thirteen bulls. The bulls, which decrease by one each day, begin with the odd number thirteen in order that on the seventh day there will be a perfect match of seven bulls for the seven days—a harmonious pairing of the sacred number in the counting of the days and in the sacrificial animals.

35. *On the eighth day you shall have a convocation.* This eighth day's convocation, *ʿatseret*, is clearly marked in the cult as a separate holiday because it has no part in the countdown of bulls, only one bull now being sacrificed. In postbiblical tradition, the holiday would come to be known as Shemini ʿAtseret, the Eighth-Day Convocation.

30:1. Hebrew Bibles set this as the beginning of chapter 30, but it is obviously a conclusion of the present unit, summarizing what has preceded.

CHAPTER 30

[2]And Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes of the Israelites, saying, “This is the thing that the LORD has charged: [3]Should a man take a vow or make an oath to the LORD, to take upon himself a binding pledge, he shall not profane his word. According to all that issues from his mouth he shall do. [4]And should a woman take a vow to the LORD and make a binding pledge in her father’s house in her youth, [5]and her father hear her vow and her binding pledge that she took upon herself, and her father remain silent to her, all her vows shall stand and every binding pledge that she took upon herself shall stand. [6]But should her father restrain her when he hears all her vows and her binding pledges that she took upon herself, it shall not stand, and the LORD will forgive her, for her father restrained her. [7]But should she indeed become a man’s with her vows upon her or her lips’ utterance that she made binding upon herself, [8]and her husband hear of it at the time he hears and remain silent to her, her vows shall stand, and her binding pledges that she took upon herself

shall stand. [9]And if at the time her husband hears, he
restrains her and annuls her vow that is upon her and
her lips' utterance that she took upon herself as a
binding pledge, the LORD will forgive her. [10]And the
vow of a widow or a divorced woman, all that she took
upon herself as a binding pledge, shall stand. [11]And if
she vowed in her husband's house or took upon herself
a binding pledge by oath, [12]and her husband heard and
remained silent to her, he did not restrain her, all her
vows and every binding pledge that she took upon
herself shall stand. [13]But if her husband indeed
annulled them at the time he heard, whatever issues
from her lips in regard to her vows and to her binding
pledge shall not stand. Her husband has annulled them
and the LORD will forgive her. [14]Every vow and every
binding oath to afflict oneself, her husband shall let it
stand and her husband shall annul it. [15]And if her
husband indeed remains silent to her day after day and
lets all her vows stand or all her binding pledges that
are upon her, he has let them stand, for he remained
silent to her when he heard. [16]But if he indeed annuls
them after he has heard, he shall bear her guilt."
[17]These are the statutes that the LORD charged Moses
between a man and his wife, between a father and his
daughter in her youth in her father's house.

CHAPTER 30 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *Should a man take a vow*. Jacob Milgrom proposes that the editorial decision to introduce this section on the laws of vows was dictated by the references to vows or votive offerings (*nedarim*) at the end of the preceding section (29:39) of laws about sacrifices.

vow . . . oath . . . binding pledge. The first term, *neder*, as Baruch Levine has shown, refers to a conditional promise made to God: if God will do such-and-such, the vow taker commits himself then to repay God by offering such-and-such. (Jephthah's vow to sacrifice to God whoever or whatever comes out of his house when he returns victorious from battle is a striking, if outrageous, instance of a *neder*.) The second term, *shevuʿah*, is an oath binding from the moment it is pronounced. The distinction between these two and the third term, *ʾisar*, "binding pledge," is not entirely clear, though Levine suggests that *ʾisar* is an oral pledge which is then set down in legally obligating written form.

4. *should a woman.* Though this section begins with a man who makes a vow or pledge, its real subject is the woman who takes upon herself this sort of obligation. The woman, clearly, has limited legal automony in this society. Before marriage, her vows may be annulled by her father; after marriage, by her husband.

in her youth. The abstract noun *neʿureiha* refers to the period when she is a *naʿarah*, a nubile young woman, from puberty until marriage.

6. *restrain.* That is, abrogate the vow she has made.

10. *the vow of a widow or a divorced woman.* This is the one category of woman not subject to the authority of a man that biblical law imagines, since it does not allow for the case of the spinster (presumably a great rarity in biblical society with its ubiquitous imperative to marry and procreate).

11. *And if she vowed in her husband's house.* The legal autonomy, however, of the widow or the divorced woman is restricted to her present single state.

Commitments she made while married are still validated or voided by the say-so of her deceased or former husband.

13. *whatever issues from her lips.* Throughout these laws, there is a sense that the pronounced word, what comes out of the mouth, is a palpable entity with legally binding force. Jephthah's daughter's words in Judges 11:36 perfectly illustrate this notion.

14. *to afflict oneself.* As in 29:7, this idiom refers in the first instance to fasting.

16. *if he indeed annuls them after he has heard, he shall bear her guilt.* Although the formulation is rather compressed, the clear sense is as follows: if the husband remains silent when he hears the woman's vows, and only afterward annuls them, the vows are still binding, and should she now ignore the vow, it is he who must bear the consequences of the violated commitment, having led her to think that the vow was no longer binding.

CHAPTER 31

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Wreak the vengeance of the Israelites against the Midianites. Afterward you shall be gathered to your kin.” [3]And Moses spoke to the people, saying, “Send forth a vanguard of men from you for the army, for them to be against Midian to exact the LORD’s vengeance from Midian. [4]A thousand for every single tribe, for all the tribes of Israel you shall send to the army.” [5]And a thousand for the tribe, twelve thousand of the thousands of Israel, were delivered as vanguards of the army. [6]And Moses sent them out, a thousand for the tribe to the army—them and Phinehas son of Eleazar the priest, to the army, and the sacred vessels and the trumpets for blasting were in his hand. [7]And they arrayed against Midian, as the LORD had charged Moses, and they killed every male. [8]And they killed the kings of Midian, besides their slain men—Evi and Rekem and Tsur and Hur and Reba, the five kings of Midian, and Balaam son of Beor they killed by the sword. [9]And the Israelites took the Midianite women

captive, and their little ones, and all their cattle and all their livestock and all their wealth they plundered.
10And all their towns in their places of settlement and all their encampments they burned to the ground.
11And they took all the booty and all the spoil both human and beast. 12And they brought to Moses and to Eleazar the priest and to the community of Israelites the captives and the spoil and the booty, to the camp in the steppes of Moab which are at the Jordan opposite Jericho. 13And Moses and Eleazar the priest and all the chieftains of the community came out to meet them outside the camp. 14And Moses was furious with the commanders of the force, the captains of the thousands and the captains of the hundreds who came from the battling army. 15And Moses said to them, "You have let every female live! 16Look, these are the ones who led the Israelites by Balaam's word to betray the LORD's trust in the affair of Peor, and there was a scourge against the LORD's community. 17And now, kill every male among the little ones, and every woman who has known a man in lying with a male, kill. 18And all the little ones of the women who have not known lying with a male, let live. 19And you, camp outside the camp seven days. Everyone who has killed a person and everyone who has touched the slain, you shall cleanse yourself on the third day and on the

seventh day, you and your captives. [20]And every garment and every article of leather and everything made of goatskin and every wooden vessel you shall cleanse.” [21]And Eleazar the priest said to the men of the army who came to the battle, “This is the statute of teaching that the LORD charged Moses: [22]Only the gold and the silver and the bronze, the iron, the tin, and the lead, [23]everything that can come into fire you shall pass through fire and it will be clean. Only in riddance water shall it be cleansed. And everything that cannot come into fire you shall pass through water. [24]And you shall wash your garments on the seventh day and you shall be clean. Afterward shall you come into the camp.” [25]And the LORD said to Moses, saying, [26]“Count the heads of the spoil of captives, both human and beast, you and Eleazar the priest and the heads of the fathers of the community. [27]And you shall divide the spoil in half between those who bore arms in battle, who went out to the army, and the whole community. [28]And you shall raise a levy for the LORD from the men of war who go out to the army, one living creature out of five hundred from the humans and from the cattle and from the donkeys and from the sheep. [29]From their half-share you shall take it and give to Eleazar the priest as the LORD’s donation. [30]And from the half-share of the Israelites

you shall take one part of fifty from the humans, from the cattle, from the donkeys and from the sheep, from all the beasts, and you shall give them to the Levites, keepers of the watch of the LORD's Tabernacle."
31 And Moses, and Eleazar the priest, did as all that the LORD had charged Moses. 32 And the spoil, over and above the plunder that the troops of the army had plundered, came to six hundred seventy-five thousand sheep, 33 and seventy-two thousand head of cattle, 34 and sixty-one thousand donkeys, 35 and human persons, of the women who had not known lying with a male, all the persons came to thirty-two thousand. 36 And the half, the share of those who went out to the army, the number of sheep was three hundred thirty-seven thousand and five hundred. 37 And the levy for the LORD from the sheep came to six hundred seventy-five. 38 And the cattle, thirty-six thousand head, and their levy to the LORD, seventy-two. 39 And donkeys, thirty thousand five hundred, and their levy to the LORD, sixty-one. 40 And human persons, sixteen thousand, and their levy to the LORD, thirty-two persons. 41 And Moses gave the levy of the LORD's donation to Eleazar the priest as the LORD had charged Moses. 42 And of the half-share of the Israelites that Moses had split off from the men serving in the army— 43 the half-share of the

community came to three hundred thirty-seven thousand and five hundred sheep. [44]And cattle, thirty-six thousand head. [45]And donkeys, thirty thousand five hundred. [46]And human persons, sixteen thousand. [47]And Moses took from the half-share of the Israelites one part of fifty from the humans and from the beasts, and he gave them to the Levites, keepers of the watch of the LORD's Tabernacle, as the LORD had charged Moses. [48]And the commanders of the army's thousands, the captains of the thousands and the captains of the hundreds, approached Moses. [49]And they said to Moses, "Your servants have counted the heads of the men of war who are in our hands, and not a man of them is missing. [50]And we would offer up the LORD's offering, each man what he found of gold ornaments, armband and bracelet, ring, earring, and pendant, to atone for our lives before the LORD." [51]And Moses, and Eleazar the priest, took from them every wrought ornament. [52]And all the gold of the donation that they donated to the LORD came to sixteen thousand seven hundred and fifty shekels, from the captains of the thousands and from the captains of the hundreds. [53]But the men of the ranks had each of them taken booty for himself. [54]And Moses, and Eleazar the priest, took the gold from the captains of the thousands and the hundreds, and they brought it to

the Tent of Meeting as a remembrance for the Israelites before the LORD.

CHAPTER 31 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Afterward you shall be gathered to your kin*. In the rather intermittent narrative progress of the later chapters of Numbers, this military campaign against the Midianites, with the invocation of Moses's imminent death, should properly come after (or just before) God tells Moses of his impending demise in chapter 27 and after the Israelite involvement with the seductive Midianite women reported in chapter 25.

3. *Send forth a vanguard.* The verbal root *ḥ-l-ts* can mean "to pull out" or "to gird." Either sense might lead to the specialized noun used in military contexts, *ḥaluts*, "vanguard." Here the root occurs strictly as a verb, but the likely meaning is that the men should constitute a vanguard.

to exact the LORD's vengeance from Midian. Rashi wonders why the Moabites, who after all were the ones who engaged Balaam to curse Israel, are not mentioned. His answer is that the Moabites acted out of fear of Israel, whereas the Midianites took up a quarrel that was not theirs. It may be more likely that the writer has in mind Midian's enticing the Israelites to join in pagan orgies in the Baal Peor incident, as Moses's angry words in verse 16 suggest.

4. *to the army.* Throughout this episode, this term could also be interpreted to mean "for military service."

6. *them and Phinehas son of Eleazar the priest.* One of several apparent discrepancies between this story and the antecedent narrative is that a priest is sent out as a frontline chaplain but there is no mention of a field commander, and certainly not of Joshua.

the sacred vessels and the trumpets for blasting. It is not clear which sacred vessels are to be brought, though it was common to bring instruments of

divination, such as the Urim and Thummim, to the battlefield to guide tactical decisions. Some medieval commentators, with the Ark Narrative in 1 Samuel in mind, propose that the Ark was taken on the campaign. The trumpets for blasting would be used to muster the troops.

8. *besides their slain men.* The "slain" (*ḥalalim*) is the term for those fallen in battle. These kings were then killed after being taken captive.

Balaam son of Beor they killed. Here Balaam, in contrast to his performance in the Oracles narrative, appears as a negative figure, evidently assumed to have instigated the actions of the Midianite women (verse 16).

17. *kill every male among the little ones, and every woman who has known a man.* Moses's command—one should note that it is Moses's, not God's—to perpetrate this general massacre, excluding only virgin females, is bloodcurdling, and the attempts of the interpreters, traditional and modern, to "explain" it invariably lead to strained apologetics. The practice of massacring most or all of a conquered population was widespread in the ancient Near East (the Moabite Mesha stele records a similar "ban" or *ḥerem* against a defeated enemy, using certain Semitic terms cognate to ones that are employed here), but that is not exactly a palliative. It is painfully evident that this is an instance in which the biblical outlook sadly failed to transcend its historical contexts. Many commentators have also puzzled over the fact that Moses, whose own wife is Midianite, should now show such intransigence toward the Midianite population. Either two conflicting traditions are present in these texts, or, if we try to conceive this as a continuous story, Moses, after the Baal Peor episode, reacts with particular fury against the Midianite women (not to speak of all the males) because he himself is married to one of them and feels impelled to demonstrate his unswerving dedication to protecting Israel from alien seduction. But it must be conceded that the earlier picture of the Midianite priest Jethro, Moses's father-in-law, as a virtual monotheist and a benign councillor of Israel does not accord with the image in these chapters of the Midianite women enticing the Israelites to pagan excesses.

18. *all the little ones of the women.* This phrase is a literal representation of the Hebrew, which sounds equally odd. The obvious sense is: all the young females not yet nubile. This leads Rashi and others to infer that sexually

mature virgins were included in the massacre, though that inference seems to be contradicted by the emphasis on "the women who have not known lying with a male."

19. *you shall cleanse yourself.* The instructions here are in strict keeping with the regulations in chapter 19 regarding purification from ritual contamination imparted by contact with a corpse.

23. *everything that can come into fire.* That is, everything that can be passed through fire without being destroyed. This seems to have been viewed as the preferred process of purification.

Only in riddance water shall it be cleansed. The repetition of "only" (*ʾakh*) from the previous sentence is a bit confusing. If the text is dependable, the sense is that after having been passed through fire, the fireproof substances are to be washed in the specially prepared "riddance water" (chapter 19) to complete the process of purification. Other substances must simply be cleansed with water.

28. *one living creature.* The Hebrew *ʾeḥad nefesh* is peculiar on two counts: the number precedes the noun instead of following it as it ordinarily does, and the number is masculine whereas *nefesh* is feminine. There are, however, instances in which numbers precede nouns, and the use of the masculine number here may be influenced by the phrase for "*one part* of fifty" (verse 30), which equally reverses the usual order of number and noun: *ʾeḥad ʾaḥuz*.

32. *six hundred seventy-five thousand.* The approximate correspondence to the number of adult male Israelites in the wilderness is obvious. The numbers are schematic and patently exaggerated, as are other details of the defeat of the Midianites (most extravagantly, the report in verse 49 that the Israelites did not suffer a single casualty).

50. *armband and bracelet, ring, earring, and pendant.* Despoiling the defeated enemy of jewelry was a standard practice and is alluded to elsewhere as an expected procedure (compare David's elegy over Saul and Jonathan: "O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, / who clothed you in scarlet and bangles, / who studded your garments with jewelry of gold" [2 Samuel 1:24]). Of the items mentioned here, armbands and rings (that is, signet rings) could be worn by either sex, but the bracelets, earrings, and pendants are women's

ornaments. The exact meaning of *kumaz*, the term translated as “pendant,” is not entirely certain. Rashi imagines it is “an image of the vagina,” which is perhaps fanciful but not completely off the mark, since ancient pendants have been found in this general region showing erotic female figures.

52. *all the gold of the donation.* As in the case of the Israelite donations for the making of the Tabernacle, the sundry gold ornaments are to be melted down and then refashioned as sacred vessels.

53. *But the men of the ranks.* More literally, “the men of the army.” The form of the verb here clearly suggests contrast: the ordinary soldiers, in contrast to the officers, kept what they had taken as booty, the entire donation being made up by the officers.

CHAPTER 32

[1]And the Reubenites and the Gadites had much
livestock, very numerous, and they saw the land of
Jazer and the land of Gilead, and, look, the place was
a place for livestock. [2]And the Gadites and the
Reubenites came to Moses and to Eleazar the priest
and to the chieftains of the community, saying,
[3]"Ataroth and Dibon and Jazer and Nimrah and
Heshbon and Elealeh and Sebam and Nebo and Beon,
[4]the land that the LORD struck down before the
community of Israel, is livestock land, and your
servants have livestock." [5]And they said, "If we have
found favor in your eyes, let this land be given to your
servants as a holding. Do not make us cross the
Jordan." [6]And Moses said to the Gadites and to the
Reubenites, "Shall your brothers come to battle and
you sit here? [7]And why would you hinder the heart of
the Israelites from crossing into the land that the
LORD has given to them? [8]Thus your fathers did when
I sent them from Kadesh-Barnea to see the land. [9]And
they went up as far as Wadi Eshcol and saw the land,

and they hindered the heart of the Israelites from coming into the land that the LORD had given them. [10]And the LORD's wrath flared on that day and He swore, saying, [11]'These men who have come up from Egypt, from twenty years old and up, shall not see the soil that I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, for they have not fulfilled My behest, [12]save Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite and Joshua son of Nun, for they fulfilled My behest.' [13]And the LORD's wrath flared against Israel, and He made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until all the generation that had done evil in the eyes of the LORD came to an end. [14]And, look, you have arisen in your fathers' stead, a breed of offending men, to add still more of the LORD's flaring wrath against Israel. [15]For you would turn back from Him, so that He would continue to leave them in the wilderness, and you would destroy all this people." [16]And they approached him and said, "Sheep enclosures we shall build here for our livestock, and towns for our little ones. [17]And as for us, we shall head out swiftly in the vanguard before the Israelites until we bring them to their place, and our little ones will dwell in the fortified towns because of the inhabitants of the land. [18]We will not return to our homes until the Israelites take possession every man of his estate. [19]For we will not take possession with them

on the other side of the Jordan and beyond, for our estate has come to us on the side of the Jordan to the east." [20]And Moses said to them, "If you will do this thing, if you go out in the vanguard to battle before the LORD, [21]and every member of the vanguard among you crosses the Jordan before the LORD until He dispossesses His enemies before Him, [22]and the land is conquered before the LORD, then you may return and you will be clear of the LORD and of Israel, and this land will be a holding for you before the LORD. [23]And should you not do thus, look, you will have offended to the LORD, and know your offense, which will find you. [24]Build your towns for your little ones and enclosures for your sheep, and the utterance of your mouth you shall do." [25]And the Gadites and the Reubenites said to Moses, saying, "Your servants will do as my lord charges. [26]Our little ones, our wives, our livestock, and all our beasts will be there in the towns of Gilead. [27]And your servants will cross over, all the vanguard of the army, before the LORD to the battle, as my lord speaks." [28]And Moses charged them, with Eleazar the priest and Joshua son of Nun and the heads of the fathers of the Israelite tribes. [29]And Moses said to them, "If the Gadites and the Reubenites cross the Jordan with you, all the vanguard to the battle before the LORD, and the land is

conquered before you, you shall give them the land of Gilead as a holding. [30]But if they do not cross over with you as a vanguard, they shall find holdings in your midst in the land of Canaan." [31]And the Gadites and the Reubenites answered, saying, "That which the LORD has spoken to your servants, so will we do. [32]We will cross over in the vanguard before the LORD to the land of Canaan, while ours will be our secure holding on the other side of the Jordan." [33]And Moses gave to the Gadites and to the Reubenites and to the half-tribe of Manasseh son of Joseph the kingdom of Sihon, king of the Amorite, and the kingdom of Og, king of the Bashan, the land with its towns within the borders of the towns of the land all around. [34]And the Gadites built Dibon and Ataroth and Aroer, [35]and Atroth-Shophan and Jazer and Jogbehah, [36]and Beth-Nimrah and Beth-Haran—fortified towns and sheep enclosures. [37]And the Reubenites built Heshbon and Elealeh and Kiriathaim, [38]and Nebo and Baal-Meon, changed in name, and Sibmah. And they called by names, the names of the towns they had built. [39]And the sons of Machir son of Manasseh went to the Gilead and captured it and dispossessed the Amorite who was in it. [40]And Moses gave the Gilead to Machir son of Manasseh, and he settled in it. [41]And Jair son of Manasseh went and captured their hamlets and called

them Jair's Hamlets. [42]And Nobah went and captured Kenath and its surrounding villages and he called it Nobah, in his name.

CHAPTER 32 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead*. The flexible Hebrew term *'erets*, "land," often means "region," as it does here, rather than "country." The area of settlement where these animal-breeding Israelites seek to stay is east of the northern half of the Dead Sea and east of the Jordan River that flows down into it, extending all the way up to the Sea of Galilee.

3. *Ataroth and Dibon and Jazer.* Perhaps out of a certain nervousness at presenting Moses with a request that might elicit his displeasure (this proves to be the case), the Reubenites and Gadites begin their speech with a long catalogue of names of recently conquered places, not at first explaining what they have on their mind.

5. *And they said.* As is generally the case, the repetition of the formula for introducing speech with no intervening response from the other party is an indication of temporary lack of response because of the nature of what has been said. The Reubenites and Gadites present a catalogue of towns, then say that this is good land for livestock and that they have livestock. This is a leading statement, and Moses no doubt sees where their remarks are leading. He listens in stony silence: they hesitate, then resume their speech, now making the explicit request to settle east of the Jordan.

6. *Shall your brothers come to battle and you sit here?* At least according to this canonical account, the fighting in the region east of the Jordan (against the Amorites, the Moabites, and the Midianites) has already been successfully concluded, whereas the conquest of Canaan proper remains to be undertaken.

11. *the soil.* Here Moses chooses to have God say *ʾadamah*, which can mean "land" or "country" but which has a strong connotation of "arable land" or "soil," underlining the prospective fertility of the territory promised to Israel. The more usual term in these texts of promise is *ʾerets*, "land."

they have not fulfilled My behest. The literal meaning of this phrase is "they have not filled after me," that is, implicitly followed Me.

15. *to leave them in the wilderness.* The Hebrew says, a little confusingly, "to leave him," the evident antecedent being the collective noun "people."

17. *because of.* Or "in the face of," "against."

18. *We will not return to our homes until the Israelites take possession.* The existence of a substantial Israelite settlement east of the Jordan, whether one attributes it to this early period or to later expansionist drives, clearly posed a problem of national unity. The exemplary readiness of the Reubenites and Gadites to head out in the vanguard to fight for their cis-Jordanian brothers is intended as a rousing image of national solidarity.

19. *for our estate has come to us.* As Rashi notes, the idiom means "to come into legal possession."

22. *you will be clear of the* LORD *and of Israel.* The idiom refers to being clear of the obligations of a vow or pledge—in this case, because they will have been fulfilled.

23. *know your offense, which will find you.* Although this agreement with the trans-Jordanian tribes is strictly between them and Moses (in this case Moses does not turn to God for guidance), the implicit guarantor of the pledge is God. Violating the pledge would be an offense "to the LORD," and the consequences of the offense would be felt by the violators of the pledge.

24. *the utterance of your mouth.* More literally, "what goes out from your mouth"—an idiom used for oaths, which cannot be retracted once they are pronounced.

28. *the heads of the fathers of the Israelite tribes.* "Fathers" apparently enters this string of phrases as a reference to the social-organizational unit "father's

house," or patriarchal house.

32. *our secure holding.* See the comment on 27:7 for an explanation of this phrase.

33. *the half-tribe of Manasseh.* Until this point, there was no mention of Manasseh as part of the trans-Jordanian group.

34. *built.* The implication is not that they built these towns from the ground up but that they rebuilt them after conquest and, one assumes, partial destruction. This is a common biblical use of this verb.

38. *changed in name.* Some of these towns, as Rashi observed, bore names associated with pagan gods (notably, the just mentioned Baal-Meon), so the Israelites were impelled to rename them.

39. *the sons of Machir.* Although the obvious meaning is Machirites, in this instance the translation literally reproduces the Hebrew "sons of" because of the identification of Machir, twice, in what immediately follows as literally "son of Manasseh."

CHAPTER 33

[1]These are the journeyings of the Israelites who came
out of the land of Egypt by their battalions, in the
hand of Moses and Aaron. [2]And Moses wrote down
their departure points for their journeyings by the
word of the LORD, and these are their journeyings by
their departure points.

[3]And they journeyed from Rameses, in the first month
on the fifteenth day of the first month on the morrow
of the Passover offering the Israelites went out with a
high hand before the eyes of all Egypt. [4]And the
Egyptians were burying all the firstborn that the
LORD had struck down among them, and the LORD
had dealt punishment to their gods. [5]And the Israelites
journeyed from Rameses and camped at Succoth.
[6]And they journeyed from Succoth and camped at
Etham, which is on the edge of the wilderness. [7]And
they journeyed from Etham and went back toward Pi-
Hahiroth, which is opposite Baal-Zephon, and they

camped before Migdol. [8]And they journeyed from Pi-Hahiroth and crossed over through the sea to the wilderness, and they went three days in the Wilderness of Etham and camped at Marah. [9]And they journeyed from Marah and came to Elim, and at Elim there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, and they camped there. [10]And they journeyed from Elim and camped by the Sea of Reeds. [11]And they journeyed from the Sea of Reeds and camped in the Wilderness of Sin. [12]And they journeyed from the Wilderness of Sin and camped at Dophkah. [13]And they journeyed from Dophkah and camped at Alush. [14]And they journeyed from Alush and camped at Rephidim, and there was no water there to drink. [15]And they journeyed from Rephidim and camped in the Wilderness of Sinai. [16]And they journeyed from the Wilderness of Sinai and camped at Kibroth-Hattaavah. [17]And they journeyed from Kibroth-Hattaavah and camped at Hazeroth. [18]And they journeyed from Hazeroth and camped at Rithmah. [19]And they journeyed from Rithmah and camped at Rimmon-Perez. [20]And they journeyed from Rimmon-Perez and camped at Libnah. [21]And they journeyed from Libnah and camped at Rissah. [22]And they journeyed from Rissah and camped at Kehelath. [23]And they journeyed from Kehelath and camped at Mount Shepher. [24]And

they journeyed from Mount Shepher and camped at Haradah. [25]And they journeyed from Haradah and camped at Makheloth. [26]And they journeyed from Makheloth and camped at Tahath. [27]And they journeyed from Tahath and camped at Terah. [28]And they journeyed from Terah and camped at Mithkah. [29]And they journeyed from Mithkah and camped at Hashmonah. [30]And they journeyed from Hashmonah and camped at Moseroth. [31]And they journeyed from Moseroth and camped at Bene-Jaakan. [32]And they journeyed from Bene-Jaakan and camped at Hor-Haggidgad. [33]And they journeyed from Hor-Haggidgad and camped at Jothbathah. [34]And they journeyed from Jothbathah and camped at Abronah. [35]And they journeyed from Abronah and camped at Ezion-Geber. [36]And they journeyed from Ezion-Geber and camped in the Wilderness of Zin, which is Kadesh. [37]And they journeyed from Kadesh and camped at Hor the Mountain at the edge of the land of Edom. [38]And Aaron the priest went up Hor the Mountain by the LORD's word and died there in the fortieth year of the Israelites' going out from Egypt, in the fifth month on the first of the month. [39]And Aaron was one hundred twenty-three years old when he died on Hor the Mountain. [40]And the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who dwelled in the Negeb in the land of Canaan, heard

when the Israelites came. [41]And they journeyed from Hor the Mountain and camped at Zalmonah. [42]And they journeyed from Zalmonah and camped at Punon. [43]And they journeyed from Punon and camped at Oboth. [44]And they journeyed from Oboth and camped at Iye-Abarim on the border of Moab. [45]And they journeyed from Iye-Abarim and camped at Dibon-Gad. [46]And they journeyed from Dibon-Gad and camped at Almon-Diblathaim. [47]And they journeyed from Almon-Diblathaim and camped in the high country of Abarim, before Nebo. [48]And they journeyed from the high country of Abarim and camped in the steppes of Moab across the Jordan from Jericho. [49]And they camped by the Jordan from Beth-Jeshimoth to Abel-Shittim, in the steppes of Moab.

[50]And the LORD spoke to Moses in the steppes of Moab across the Jordan from Jericho, saying, [51]“Speak to the Israelites and you shall say to them, ‘You are about to cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan. [52]And you shall dispossess all the inhabitants of the land before you, and you shall destroy all their carved figures and all their molten images you shall destroy, and all their cult-places you shall demolish. [53]And you shall take possession of the land and dwell in it, for to

you I have given the land to take hold of it. [54]And you shall settle the land by lot according to your clans. For the many you shall make their estate large and for the few you shall make their estate small. Wherever the lot falls, there it will be his. By the tribes of your fathers you shall settle. [55]And if you do not dispossess the inhabitants of the land from before you, it will come about that those of them you leave will become stings in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they will be foes to you on the land in which you dwell. [56]And it will come about that as I had thought to do to them, I shall do to you.'"

CHAPTER 33 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *These are the journeyings*. Now at the end of the long chain of Wilderness stories that began in Exodus, as the Israelites are poised to cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, we get a grand recapitulation of the whole narrative in the form of an itinerary of all the way stations in the Wilderness march. Such itineraries were a set literary form in the ancient Near East, with Mesopotamian examples, akin in form to the document in this chapter, going back to early in the second millennium B.C.E.

2. *Moses wrote down their departure points.* As elsewhere, the narrative reflects a consciousness of the antiquity and primacy of writing in Hebrew culture.

by the word. Literally, "by the mouth."

4. *the LORD had dealt punishment to their gods.* The conjecture of some scholars that this clause reflects a lost tradition in which the God of Israel battled directly against the gods of Egypt seems unnecessary. From the story in Exodus, it is clear enough that the Ten Plagues and the freeing of the Hebrew slaves are understood as a resounding demonstration of the impotence of the gods of Egypt in the face of the all-powerful YHWH.

5–49. Most of the place-names occur in the narrative in Exodus and Numbers, and the rehearsal of these names here constitutes a summary and recollection of incidents that occurred at the sundry places. (Thus Kibroth-Hattaavah, verse 16, which means Graves of Desire, hardly an ordinary place-name, recalls the incident recorded in chapter 11.) But there are some important episodes with their place-names that do not appear in this itinerary: even, surprisingly, the central stop at Mount Sinai is not actually mentioned, only a stay in the Wilderness of Sinai. At the same time, a number of places are recorded in the itinerary that do not appear in the preceding narrative. At least a few of these are designations that don't sound like conventional place-names but appear to refer to some event that occurred at the location in question (e.g., Haradah in verse 24 is the Hebrew word for "terror"). All this makes it likely that, in keeping with a common compositional procedure of biblical literature, an archival document has been spliced into the text, reflecting some traditions about the Wilderness wanderings that were not incorporated in the canonical narrative of Exodus and Numbers.

52. *cult-places.* The *bamah* was an open-air altar on which sacrifices, to agricultural and other gods, were offered. Israelites in fact widely used *bamot* until they were suppressed in the reforms of Josiah around 621 B.C.E.

55. *stings in your eyes and thorns in your sides.* Given the next clause, "they will be foes to you on the land" (Onkelos interprets the verb here as "oppress"), the reference of these metaphors appears to be strategic: unless you entirely destroy or expel the Canaanites, they will continually attack you as you try to dwell in the land. The parallels to this verse in Exodus 34:11–13, Deuteronomy 7:1, and Joshua 23:4–9 see the danger of the Canaanite presence as cultic temptation rather than military harassment. In any case, the idea of wiping out or totally banishing the Canaanites was never actually

implemented, and it has the look of a theological program retrojected onto a purportedly historical narrative as a desideratum presented by God to Israel.

CHAPTER 34

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2]“Charge the Israelites, and you shall say to them, ‘When you come into the land of Canaan, this is the land that will fall to you in estate, the land of Canaan by its borders. [3]And your southern limit shall be from the Wilderness of Zin by Edom, and your southern border from the edge of the Dead Sea to the east. [4]And your border shall swing round south of the Ascent of Akrabbim and pass through Zin, and its farthest reaches shall be south of Kadesh-Barnea, and it shall extend out to Hazar-Addar and pass through to Azmon. [5]And the border shall swing round from Azmon toward the Wadi of Egypt, and its farthest reaches to the Sea. [6]And the western border—the Great Sea shall be your border, this shall be your western border. [7]And this shall be your northern border, from the Great Sea you shall trace a line to Hor the Mountain. [8]From Hor the Mountain you shall trace a line to Lebo-Hamath, and the farthest reaches of the border to Zedad. [9]And the border shall extend to Ziphron, and its farthest

reaches, Hazar-Enan. This shall be your northern
border. [10]And you shall trace for yourselves a line for
the eastern border from Hazar-Enan to Shepham.
[11]And the border shall go down from Shepham to the
Riblah, east of Ain, and the border shall go down and
touch the slope of Lake Chinnereth to the east. [12]And
the border shall go down to the Jordan, and its farthest
reaches at the Dead Sea. This shall be your land by its
borders all around.'"

[13]And Moses charged the Israelites, saying, "This is the
land of which you will take possession by lot, as the
LORD has charged to give to the nine and a half
tribes. [14]For the tribe of the Reubenites by their
fathers' houses and the tribe of the Gadites by their
fathers' houses and the half-tribe of Manasseh have
taken their estate. [15]The two and a half tribes have
taken their estate beyond the Jordan across from
Jericho to the east." [16]And the LORD spoke to Moses,
saying, [17]"These are the names of the men who will
share out estates of the land for you: Eleazar the priest
and Joshua son of Nun. [18]And one chieftain, one
chieftain from each tribe you shall take to share out
the estates of the land. [19]And these are the names of
the men: For the tribe of Judah, Caleb son of

Jephunneh. [20]For the tribe of the Simeonites, Samuel
son of Ammihud. [21]For the tribe of Benjamin, Elidad
son of Chislon. [22]And for the tribe of the Danites,
chieftain Bukki, son of Jogli. [23]For the Josephites of
the tribe of the Manassites, chieftain Hanniel son of
Ephod. [24]And for the tribe of the Ephraimites,
chieftain Kemuel son of Shiphtan. [25]And for the tribe
of the Zebulunites, chieftain Elizaphan son of Parnach.
[26]And for the tribe of the Issacharites, chieftain Paltiel
son of Azzan. [27]And for the tribe of the Asherites,
chieftain Ahihud son of Shelomi. [28]And for the tribe
of the Naphtalites, chieftain Pedahel son of Ammihud.
[29]These are the ones whom the LORD charged to
share out estates to the Israelites in the land of
Canaan."

CHAPTER 34 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *fall to you*. As Rashi aptly notes, this verb is used because the apportionment of the land is to be carried out by lot.

3–12. As the Book of Numbers draws to a close, with the Israelites ready to begin the conquest of the land (a sequence of events that will not be reported until the Book of Joshua), the reality of the land in which Israel will dwell is concretized through this mapping out of its borders. Those borders are only partly consistent with the delineation of the borders in Joshua and Ezekiel, and it is questionable whether they completely correspond to any historical

contours of Israelite dominion. The northern borders extend far into Syria, well north of Sidon. Though the Mediterranean as western border seems neat, it does not reflect the fact that for several centuries much of the coastal plain was Philistine territory. Some scholars have argued that these borders are substantially those of the Egyptian province of Canaan agreed on with the Hittites after the battle of Kedesh in 1270 B.C.E., but that proposal has not been universally accepted and it remains to be explained why a later writer would adopt those borders.

4. *the Ascent of Akrabbim.* The Hebrew means "Scorpion Ascent."

6. *the western border.* The Hebrew term for "west," *yam*, actually means "sea." That word, whether by itself or with the qualifier "great," always refers to the Mediterranean, unless it is otherwise specified in the name (e.g., *yam suf*, Sea of Reeds).

15. *have taken their estate beyond the Jordan.* The decision of the two and a half tribes to settle east of the Jordan in the Gilead region was reported in detail in chapter 32. Although this was a recognized area of Israelite settlement, there is a sense here that it lies outside the land of Canaan proper, whose eastern border is marked by Lake Kinneret (the Sea of Galilee) and the Jordan and the Dead Sea below it.

CHAPTER 35

[1]And the LORD spoke to Moses in the steppes of
Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho, saying,
[2]“Charge the Israelites, that they give to the Levites
from their secure holdings towns in which to settle and
pastureland for the towns around them you shall give
to the Levites. [3]And the towns will be theirs to settle,
and their pasturelands will be for their cattle and for
their goods and for all their beasts. [4]And the
pasturelands of the towns that you give to the Levites
are to be a thousand cubits all around from the wall of
the town. [5]And you shall measure outside the town the
eastern limit two thousand in cubits and the southern
limit two thousand in cubits and the western limit two
thousand in cubits and the northern limit two thousand
in cubits, with the town in the middle. This will be
their towns’ pasturelands. [6]And the towns that you shall
give to the Levites, the six towns of asylum you shall
give for a murderer to flee there, and in addition to
them you shall give forty-two towns. [7]All the towns
that you shall give to the Levites will come to forty-

eight towns, they and their pasturelands. [8]And the towns that you give from the holdings of the Israelites, from the many you shall give much and from the few you shall give less, each according to his estate of which he takes possession shall he give of his towns to the Levites." [9]And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [10]"Speak to the Israelites, and you shall say to them, 'When you cross over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, [11]you shall set out for yourselves towns, towns of asylum you shall have, and a murderer may flee there, one who strikes down a person in errance. [12]And the towns will be an asylum for you from the avenger, and the murderer will not die until he stands before the community for judgment. [13]And the towns that you give, six towns of asylum you shall have. [14]Three towns you shall give beyond the Jordan the avenger, and three towns in the land of Canaan, towns of asylum they shall be. [15]For the Israelites and for the sojourner and for the settler in their midst these six towns shall be an asylum for everyone who strikes down a person in errance, to flee there. [16]But if he struck him with an iron tool and he died, he is a murderer, the murderer is doomed to die. [17]And if he struck him with a hand stone by which one may die and he died, he is a murderer, the murderer is doomed to die. [18]Or with a wooden hand tool by which one may die he struck him

and he died, he is a murderer, the murderer is doomed to die. [19]The blood avenger shall put the murderer to death, when he comes upon him he shall put him to death. [20]And if in hatred he should knock him down or fling something on him by design and he die, [21]or in enmity he strike him with his hand and he die, he who struck is doomed to die, he is a murderer. The blood avenger shall put the murderer to death when he comes upon him. [22]But if on an impulse, without enmity, he knocked him down or flung upon him any tool, without design, [23]or with any stone by which one may die, without seeing he dropped it on him and he died, he not being his enemy nor seeking his harm, [24]the community shall judge between him who struck and the blood avenger on these matters of judgment. [25]And the community shall rescue the murderer from the hands of the blood avenger and the community shall take him back to the town of asylum where he fled, and he shall stay there until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the holy oil. [26]But if the murderer should indeed go out beyond the border of his town of asylum where he has fled, [27]and the blood avenger finds him outside the border of his town of asylum and the blood avenger murders the murderer, he has no bloodguilt. [28]But he shall stay in his town of asylum until the death of the high priest, and after the

death of the high priest the murderer shall go back to the land of his holding. [29]And these shall be for you a statute of judgment for your generations in all your dwelling places. [30]Whoever strikes down a person, by witnesses shall the murderer be murdered, and a single witness shall not testify against a person to die. [31]And you shall not take ransom for the life of a murderer who is guilty to die, for he is doomed to die. [32]And you shall not take ransom in lieu of flight to his town of asylum to let him go back to dwell in the land, until the death of the high priest. [33]And you shall not pollute the land in which you are, for blood will pollute the land, and for the land there will be no ransoming for the blood that has been shed in it except through the blood of him who shed it. [34]And you shall not defile the land in which you dwell, in the midst of which I abide, for I am the LORD, abiding in the midst of the Israelites.'"

CHAPTER 35 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *give to the Levites . . . towns in which to settle*. The Levites, it should be recalled, had no tribal territory, and so the other tribes are enjoined to apportion towns for them.

5. *the eastern limit.* Both the invocation of the four points of the compass and the use of the term "limit" (*peʾah*) recall the apportionment of the land in the preceding chapter. The juxtaposition—presumably, an editorial maneuver—is significant. The division of the land into tribal territories and clan holdings does not guarantee the creation of a stable, harmonious society. Provision must be made, as it is in these regulations for towns of asylum, for acts of violence of Israelite against Israelite, with protection for the manslayer when the act is not premeditated.

two thousand in cubits. The seeming contradiction with the just stipulated one thousand cubits is most simply resolved by assuming that the two thousand cubits are from perimeter to perimeter, with the breadth of the town itself ("the town in the middle") excluded from the calculation. Rashi's solution is that in fact an area extending two thousand cubits beyond the town walls is designated—an inner zone of one thousand cubits for pastureland and an outer zone of another thousand cubits for planted fields and vineyards.

7. *forty-eight towns.* The total number amounts to four towns per tribe, though the contribution of towns is to be implemented proportionately to the size of the tribe (verse 8).

11. *set out.* The use of the verbal stem *q-r-h* here is a little unusual because it generally indicates a chance event. Rashi proposes that the essential meaning of the verb is "to determine," "to cause to happen" (*leshon hazmanah*).

murderer. The Hebrew *rotseaḥ* is used for both an intentional murderer and, as here, for someone who has committed manslaughter.

12. *the avenger.* The term *goʾel* is an abbreviated form of *goʾel hadam*, "blood avenger," used elsewhere in this chapter. Blood vengeance was a form of vendetta justice executed by the family of the victim. The ritual motive beyond the simple thirst for vengeance was an archaic sense that blood wrongfully shed polluted the land, generated a kind of poisonous miasma, and had to be "redeemed" by shedding the blood of the murderer. (Compare Genesis 9:6: "He who sheds human blood / by humans his blood shall be shed.") The laws here try to blend this older system of justice implemented by the family with a system in which justice is administered by courts. Thus, the "community" is given the responsibility for adjudicating between the accused person and the blood avenger by determining whether the accused

has committed premeditated murder. If he has, capital punishment is then executed by the blood avenger, not the community.

14. *Three towns . . . beyond the Jordan*. It is odd that the division should be three on each side of the Jordan because nine and a half of the tribes reside to the west of the Jordan. Rashi's suggestion that there was an unusually high homicide rate among the trans-Jordanian Gileadites seems fanciful. Perhaps three towns of asylum east of the Jordan made sense because this was the region of Israelite settlement farthest removed from the main centers of Israelite population, and thus a fugitive from vendetta justice was likely to feel more safely distanced there from the reach of the avengers.

15. *for the sojourner and for the settler.* Although "for" is repeated before each noun in the Hebrew, this is merely a variant form of the common hendiadys *ger wetoshav*, which means "resident alien."

16. *with an iron tool.* As Jacob Milgrom reminds us, the historical setting for these laws was the early Iron Age, when iron may have been chiefly used for weapons. The prohibition in Exodus 20:25 against using iron tools in the construction of an altar reflects the same situation. If the fatal blow was delivered with a lethal implement, the presumption is that the killing was intentional.

17. *a hand stone.* The translation literally reproduces the gnomic expression of the Hebrew. The obvious meaning is a sizable stone that can be grasped in the hand and used as a weapon.

18. *Or with a wooden hand tool.* There appears to be a progressive extension of the principle of lethal implement through these three instances. The iron tool is designed as a weapon. The stone is an improvised weapon. The wooden hand tool—say, a wooden mallet—is an implement meant for another purpose that has been appropriated as a weapon.

19. *when he comes upon him.* The verb *p-g-ʿ* indicates an encounter between two parties (or two material substances), but there may be a pun here because the verb also means "to stab" (the sharp encounter of iron with flesh).

22. *But if on an impulse.* Or "suddenly," which is to say, the perpetrator of the act himself did not foresee or plan it.

23. *with any stone by which one may die.* This stipulation recognizes that the previously mentioned nature of the instrument of killing is not sufficient proof of premeditation: a person could, for example, carelessly throw a "hand stone" out a window, not realizing that someone was standing below.

26. *if the murderer should indeed go out beyond the border of his town of asylum.* There is a link between the notion of levitical towns of asylum and the extension of protective sanctuary at the altar to manslayers and other accused criminals. Baruch Levine suggests that once the cult was centralized in Jerusalem, the levitical towns assumed the function of asylum previously associated with local sanctuaries. In Mesopotamia there were analogous towns of asylum, and Moshe Weinfeld notes that the Egyptians had zones of asylum, supervised by priests, which may shed light on the linking of the duration of asylum here with the life span of the high priest.

30. *by witnesses.* For capital crimes, at least two witnesses were necessary to convict the accused.

shall the murderer be murdered. The verb *ratsaḥ* reaches its longest semantic stretch here when it is used in the sense of "execute"—probably in order to underline the notion of measure-for-measure justice. In verse 25 it is used to designate an involuntary manslayer.

32. *ransom in lieu of flight.* The Hebrew says literally, "ransom to flee." Ransom thus is equally prohibited as a substitute for the capital punishment of a murderer and as a substitute for a manslayer's settling in a town of asylum, which would be a form of exile within the borders of the country (as in the sentence of internal exile to a remote region in the Czarist system of justice).

CHAPTER 36

[1]And the heads of the fathers' houses for the clan of
the son of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh from
the clans of the sons of Joseph came forward and
spoke before Moses and before the chieftains, heads of
the fathers' houses of the Israelites. [2]And they said,
"The LORD charged my lord to give the land to the
Israelites in estate by lot, and my lord was charged by
the LORD to give the estate of our brother
Zelophehad to his daughters. [3]But should they become
wives to any of the sons of the Israelite tribes, their
estate would be withdrawn from our fathers' estate and
added to the estate of the tribe to which they would
belong, and from the lot of our estate it would be
withdrawn. [4]And though the jubilee comes for the
Israelites, their estate would be added to the estate of
the tribe to which they would belong, and from the
estate of our fathers' tribe it would be withdrawn."
[5]And Moses charged the Israelites by the word of the
LORD, saying, "Rightly do the tribe of the sons of
Joseph speak. [6]This is the thing that the LORD

charged concerning the daughters of Zelophehad, saying, ‘To whomever is good in their eyes they may become wives, only within the clan of their father’s tribe must they become wives. [7]And an estate of the Israelites shall not turn round from tribe to tribe, but the Israelites shall cling each man to the estate of the tribe of his fathers. [8]And every daughter inheriting an estate from the tribes of the Israelites shall become wife to someone from the clan of her father’s tribe, so that the Israelites may inherit each man the estate of his fathers. [9]And an estate shall not turn round from a tribe to another tribe, but each man shall cling to his estate in the tribes of the Israelites.’” [10]As the LORD charged Moses, so did the daughters of Zelophehad do. [11]And Mahlah, Tirzah, and Hoglah and Milcah and Noa the daughters of Zelophehad became wives to their uncles’ sons. [12]Within the clans of the sons of Manasseh son of Joseph they became wives, and their estate was attached to the tribe of the clan of their father.

[13]These are the commands and the regulations that the LORD charged the Israelites by the hand of Moses in the steppes of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho.

CHAPTER 36 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the heads of the fathers' houses*. In both occurrences of the phrase in this verse, the Hebrew uses an ellipsis, "heads of the fathers."

2. *the estate.* The issue of inheritance, so urgent in the later chapters of Numbers, is thematically focused in this concluding episode by the constant repetition of "estate," *naḥalah*.

3. *any of the sons of the Israelite tribes.* The obvious reference is to husbands outside their own tribe and clan.

their estate would be withdrawn . . . and added to the estate . . . from . . . our estate it would be withdrawn. The speech of the Gileadite leaders reflects an extraordinary degree of redundancy (and these recurring phrases are recycled still again in the next verse). Perhaps the repetition indicates nervousness on their part about the substance of their petition: they seem peculiarly anxious that some parcel of their tribal estate might slip away from them and be annexed by another tribe unless Moses takes immediate steps to rectify the situation. Moses's answer shows something of the same inclination to repetition (compare verses 7 and 9), as though in response to their anxiety he wanted to make absolutely clear what the governing principle must be.

the lot of our estate. The slightly odd collocation of these two nouns in the construct state (*smikhut*) is dictated by the fact that the estate is divided by lot.

4. *though the jubilee comes for the Israelites.* In the jubilee year, the end of a forty-nine year cycle, land that has been sold is supposed to revert to its original owners. This is not the case, however, for inherited land, and so the land inherited by Zelophehad's daughters, were they to marry outside the tribe, would remain attached to their husbands' tribes, even after the occurrence of the jubilee.

5. *by the word of the* LORD. Despite this phrase, there is no indication here that Moses has consulted an oracle, which was the case in the initial legal issue of the daughters of Zelophehad (chapter 27). Confronted with an

unanticipated consequence of the earlier ruling, a ruling said to be dictated by God, Moses the judicial leader is compelled to engage in legal interpretation of how the ruling is to be applied. The act of interpretation itself is represented as a kind of extension of the oracular revelation that was manifested in the earlier incident. The phrase, "by the word [literally, mouth] of the LORD" here is a microcosmic adumbration of the whole theology of legal interpretation that later will undergird the Talmud: every rabbinic ruling is *halakhah lemosheh misinai*, "a law according to Moses from Sinai."

Rightly do the tribe of the sons of Joseph speak. As Richard Elliott Friedman notes, these words are a pointed self-quotation by Moses of his response to the petition of the young women in 27:7: "Rightly do the daughters of Zelophehad speak."

12. *and their estate was attached to the tribe of the clan of their father.* Although the legal anecdote of the marriage of Zelophehad's daughters is often characterized by scholars as an appendix to the Book of Numbers, it does serve as a vivid focus for the prospect of inheriting the land that confronts the Israelites as they await orders to begin their invasion. Not only does "estate" recur as a key word but also "clan," "tribe," and, it should be duly noted, "fathers" and "sons." The case of inheriting daughters puts a certain strain on the patriarchal system, but its patriarchal character remains firmly in place, as the reiteration of "fathers" and "sons" makes clear, and thus a limitation on the choice of husband (to which noninheriting daughters would not be subject) is imposed on these young women in order to preserve the integrity of the tribal configuration with its patriarchal definition. With the viability of the tribal division of the land thus reaffirmed, the Israelites are prepared to begin the conquest. First, however, in the redacted final form of the Five Books of Moses, they will have to listen to Moses's long, recapitulative valedictory speech that makes up the Book of Deuteronomy.

13. *These are the commands and the regulations.* This concluding summary is more appropriate as a coda to the sections of law and cult procedure in the latter part of Numbers than to the book as a whole, with its many incidents of rebellion and its account of military campaigns in the trans-Jordan region.

in the steppes of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho. This phrase of geographical location has been repeated several times, reminding us that the Wilderness wanderings of the Israelites conclude with a long pause at this

final way station. It is fitting that “Jericho” should be the last word in the Book of Numbers. Jericho will be the first military objective when the Israelites cross the Jordan, and so the concluding word here points forward to the beginning of Joshua.

DEUTERONOMY

Introduction

The Book of Deuteronomy is the most sustained deployment of rhetoric in the Bible. It is presented, after all, as Moses's valedictory address, which he delivers across the Jordan from the promised land just before his death, as the people assembled before him are poised to cross the river into the land. It comprises a series of speeches, discourses, or, as some scholars actually call them, sermons. The two long poems that cap these speeches not only follow a biblical convention for concluding a book but are also a culmination of the rhetorical energies of this book, grandly echoing some of its major themes and even some of its recurring phrases. Only the code of laws in the middle of the book, from chapter 12 to chapter 26, does not participate in this manifestly rhetorical enterprise, though one function of the surrounding rhetoric is to underwrite the authority of the laws here

promulgated, reminding the people again and again that their very lives and their collective survival on the land depend upon the punctilious observance of "this teaching" (*hatorah hazo't*).

If one tries to imagine, however, the actual audience for which Deuteronomy was first framed, it will begin to be evident that its impressive deployment of rhetoric serves another purpose. Rhetoric is an art of persuasion, and the rhetoric of Deuteronomy is meant to persuade audiences in the late First Commonwealth and exilic period of the palpable and authoritative reality of an event that never occurred, or at any rate surely did not occur as it is represented in this text—the national assembly in trans-Jordan that was a second covenant after the covenant at Sinai, in which Moses reviewed the whole code of law, rapidly rehearsed the story of the Wilderness wanderings, and exhorted the people to be loyal to God, with repeated predictions of the dire consequences if they should fail in their loyalty. There are, in fact, two equivalences that the language of Moses's address is devised to establish: an equivalence between this solemn convocation and the defining experience at Sinai, which is repeatedly referred to as *yom haqahal*, "the day of assembly," in order to line it up with this new assembly in the trans-Jordan; and an equivalence

between the experience of this audience physically present to receive Moses's last words and that of the seventh-century B.C.E. audience and its prospective heirs listening to the Book of Deuteronomy and assenting to its authority. The resources of rhetoric are marshaled to create through a written text the memory of a foundational national event, so that the latter-day Israelites listening to "this book of teaching," *sefer hatorah hazeh*, will feel that they themselves are reenacting that event.

The role of stylistic indicators of temporal and spatial location and orientation—those "pointing words" that linguists refer to as *deictics*—is essential to the creation of this general effect. (Although critical scholarship views the opening section of the book through 4:44 as a somewhat later composition that was added as an introduction, there are significant stylistic continuities with the rest of the book, and it is those that will concern us here.) Moses's first discourse, beginning in chapter 1, is a rapid and highly selective recapitulation of elements of the Wilderness narrative reported in Exodus and in Numbers. The first discriminated episode in this recapitulation is the appointment of a judicial bureaucracy to help him carry the burden of administering justice to this multitudinous people. The prominent element of the

parallel story in Exodus 18 pointedly omitted is the intervention of Moses's father-in-law Jethro as the person who proposes the delegation of judicial authority. Though a suspicious reader might wonder whether this change reflects an element of xenophobia in Deuteronomy (Jethro, of course, is a Midianite), the more urgent reason is that nothing must be allowed to diminish from the depiction here of Moses's strong leadership, grounded in his wisdom (a key value for Deuteronomy) and in his uniquely direct access to God. Moses concludes his account of creating this judicial system by declaring, "And I charged you at that time all the things that you must do" (1:18), right after having used the same phrase in relation to the magistrates, "And I charged your judges at that time saying, 'Hear between your brothers . . .'" (1:16). This seemingly minor deictic gesture, "at that time," *ba'et hahi'*, reflects an important, and recurring, rhetorical strategy in the book. There is no biblical text more generous than Deuteronomy in its use of demonstrative pronouns. "At that time" temporally positions both Moses and his audience in relation to the legal injunction he is delivering: you heard it then, the phrase tells us, or at any rate your parents, now died out, heard it, and its imperative force is exactly the same now as I repeat this injunction—and, again, it

will be the same when these words of Moses are read out to their audience in the seventh century or later.

In the very next verse, 1:19, the deictic phrase functions in a more strictly narrative, rather than legal, context: "And we journeyed from Horeb and we went through all that great and fearful wilderness which you have seen, by way of the high country of the Amorite. . . ." Now, narrative report in the Bible is famously laconic, and one could plausibly argue that it would be more in keeping with characteristic biblical style for this verse to read, "And we journeyed from Horeb and we went through the wilderness, by way of the high country of the Amorite." What is the difference between this pared-down version and the one that is actually used in Deuteronomy? My more terse formulation follows a fairly typical biblical procedure of registering space traversed in a narrative report as essentially blank space: the idea is to get from point A to point B—say, to get Abraham and Isaac in a three days' journey from Hebron to Mount Moriah—without drawing attention to the spatial reality that lies in between because it is not deemed essential to the story. The Deuteronomic summary at this point of the Wilderness wanderings has a very different purpose. The demonstrative pronoun "that" which is attached to "wilderness" is both a temporal and an emotional

deictic. Temporally, it points to something that has been undergone but that is now over and done with. The Israelites have completed their long and arduous trajectory through the wilderness and now stand before Moses in the Arabah, just east of the land of Canaan. Emotionally, the wilderness is a place to be remembered with fear and trembling, a place that tried the soul of the nation—"all that great and fearful wilderness," *kolhamidbar hagadol wehanoraʾ hahuʾ*, and the deictic "that" serves to keep it at arm's length as a haunting memory of a very palpable experience recently undergone. (The terror of the wilderness will be carried forward in Deuteronomy all the way to the Song of Moses, which speaks of "the wilderness land, . . . the waste of the howling desert [*tohu yeleil yeshimon*]" [32:10].) The little subordinate clause, again ostensibly gratuitous, that is added to the impressive phrase about the wilderness, is equally characteristic of the rhetorical strategy of national recollection in Deuteronomy. It is the wilderness, Moses says, *ʾasher reʾitem*, "which you have seen." Again and again, the audience of this national assembly is reminded that they have seen—or in a frequent variation, that their very eyes have seen, *ʿeyneikhem haroʾot*—the portentous events that Moses is rehearsing. At one remove, the members of the

historical audience of the Book of Deuteronomy are implicitly invited to imagine what their forebears actually saw, to see it vicariously. The midrashic notion that all future generations of Israel were already present as witnesses at Sinai is adumbrated, perhaps actually generated, by this rhetorical strategy of the evocation of witnessing in Deuteronomy.

In precisely this connection, it should be noted that there is a purposeful ambiguity of reference in the use of the second person, whether plural as here, or singular as often elsewhere, in Moses's address. Since we are reminded of the episode of the spies early in the first discourse (1:22–45), with the consequent death sentence on the Wilderness generation, we know that all the people standing before Moses now would have been under the age of twenty, perhaps most of them, indeed, as yet unborn, at the time of the events recalled in his speech. Yet Moses repeatedly speaks as though they were all direct participants in or observers of the episodes he mentions. There is, I would say, a slide of identification between one generation and another. Most of those listening to Moses's words could not literally have seen the things of which he speaks, but the people is imagined as a continuous entity, bearing responsibility through historical time as a collective moral agent. It is this assumption that

underwrites the hortatory flourish, repeated in several variations, “Not with our fathers did the LORD seal this covenant but with us—we who are here today, all of us alive” (5:3). Thus Moses can say of the witnessing, “you have seen” (my choice of a present perfect verb in the translation attempts to suggest the temporal doubleness of the seeing), and, in reporting actions, he can flatly state, referring to the route of Israel by the Amorites at Hormah, “you came back and wept before the LORD, and the LORD did not listen to your voice” (1:45), though it was the fathers, now deceased, not the living members of the audience, who did the weeping and were rebuffed by God. The implicit next link in this chain of identification is the generation in the twilight of the First Commonwealth, or perhaps immediately after it, which is invited to see itself experiencing what the Wilderness generations underwent, or at any rate, to see the experience of their forebears as a compelling model for its own historical predicament.

It is the unique event at Sinai that is the very matrix of collective memory in Deuteronomy. The Ten Words enunciated in Exodus are of course proclaimed again here, and though there are certain famous divergences in wording between the two texts, the restatement of these ten foundational imperatives

reflects nothing of the strongly revisionary impulse that is so evident in the reformulation of antecedent laws elsewhere in the book. (One infers that the Decalogue was too fundamental to revise substantively.) Moses's valedictory transmission of God's commands to Israel is a second Sinai, and the written text that records his final discourses is in turn understood to be the permanent vehicle through which an approximation of the Sinai experience can be reenacted (thus laying the ground, one might observe, for the pervasive textualization of Jewish culture that would evolve in later centuries). As Israel's past is laid out in Moses's oratory, there is a sudden leap from summary to imaginative evocation when the story arrives at Sinai. The origins of the people in the Patriarchal period are almost entirely reduced to the reiterated reference to God's having sworn the land to "your fathers." The great signs and portents of the Exodus itself are mentioned in just those terms, but there are no vivid representations of the Ten Plagues or of the splitting of the Sea of Reeds. The Sinai epiphany, on the other hand, in all its terror and wonder, is a moment to which Moses's speech repeatedly reverts. Thus, the proclamation of the Decalogue in chapter 5 is prefaced by these words: "Face-to-face did the LORD speak with you on the mountain from the midst of the fire. I

was standing between the LORD and you at that time to tell you the word of the LORD—for you were afraid in the face of the fire and did not go up the mountain" (5:4–5). Although the parallel account in Exodus has thunder and lightning and the whole mountain smoking, Deuteronomy chooses to emphasize the purer and even more unapproachable substance of divine fire from which God's words are emitted. Concomitantly, the issue of the separation of the people from the divine presence and the necessary role of Moses as mediator is reframed. In Exodus, God issues an explicit command before the epiphany that the people must keep their distance, that they are not so much as to touch the edge of the mountain. It is only after the tremendous fact of revelation that, awestruck, they implore Moses to act as their spokesman, thus confirming the rightness of the spatial restriction that God has already imposed on them. In Deuteronomy's version, there is no mention of a prior order from God that the people stay at a distance. On the contrary, their initial experience of the epiphany is almost too close for comfort: "Face-to-face did the LORD speak with you on the mountain from the midst of the fire." Moses here is obliged to interpose himself because the people are terrified by the fire and afraid to go up the mountain. The motive for keeping their

distance is visceral response rather than divine taboo: their own eyes have seen, as future generations will be reminded, the full fearsome force of God's descent upon the mountain, and this sight is too much to bear. Indeed, after the enunciation of the Decalogue, they are afraid to hear as well as to see: "And now, why should we die, for this great fire will consume us. If we hear again the voice of the LORD our God, we shall die" (5:22). In this fashion, the Deuteronomic story conveys both the indelible fact of witnessing and the indispensability of the lawgiver as mediator, including in that mediation "this book of teaching" that he will leave as legacy and implying the further need for authoritative mediation through those who will promulgate and expound the text he leaves.

The conjuring up of the Sinai experience through the powerful language of this oratory is brilliantly linked with the Deuteronomic polemic against the worship of images. Moses takes pains to remind his audience that the revelation they were vouchsafed was auditory, and in no way visual (another contrast to Exodus, where after the Decalogue is given, the elders of Israel come partway up the mountain and "beheld God" [Exodus 24:11]). This is how Moses here evokes the moment before the epiphany: "And you came forward and stood at the bottom of the mountain, and

the mountain was burning with fire to the heart of the heavens—darkness, cloud, and dense fog. And the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the fire. The sound of words you did hear but no image did you see except the sound" (4:11–12). This is a moment of mystery, compounded of impenetrable obscurity —"darkness, cloud, and dense fog"—and blinding effulgence. The eye, which has seen so much from Egypt until this moment, can see nothing; the ear alone can receive the commanding divine words. The abiding residue of this voice is, as one might expect in Deuteronomy, a text:

> And He told you His covenant that He charged you to do, the Ten Words, and He wrote them on two tablets of stone. And me did the LORD charge at that time to teach you statutes and laws for you to do in the land into which you are crossing over to take hold of it. And you shall be very watchful of yourselves, for you saw no image on the day the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the fire, lest you act ruinously and make you a sculpted image of any likeness, the form of male or of female, the form of any beast that is on the earth, the form of any winged bird that flies in the heavens, the form

> of anything that crawls on the ground, the form of any fish that is in the waters under the earth, lest you raise your eyes to the heavens and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the array of the heavens, and you be led astray and bow down to them and worship them, for the LORD your God allotted them to all the peoples under the heavens. But you did the LORD take and He brought you out from the iron's forge, from Egypt, to become for Him a people in estate as this day (4:13–20).

I have in this instance quoted at length because one needs the length in order to get a sense of Deuteronomy's sweeping oratorical power. Indeed, the heart of this passage is one grand sentence that rolls on, according to the conventional verse division, from the beginning of verse 15 to the end of verse 19. There are few biblical instances of this sort of sentence length outside of Deuteronomy, where the grand sentence is devised to catch up the listener in its sheer momentum of insistence. Let us try to follow the stages of the effort of persuasion inscribed in the language. God writes the text of the Ten Words in stone, then designates Moses, the continuing intermediary, as the leader and expounder of the laws

—presumably, the reference is not to the Decalogue itself but to the code of laws, what in Exodus is the so-called Book of the Covenant, and to its counterpart in the code of laws in Deuteronomy. The narrative report of the Sinai experience in Exodus also emphasizes sound and speech, excluding any direct visual image of God, with the limited exception of the post-epiphanic vision on the mountain by the elders of Israel. Here, however, the imageless character of the revelation at Sinai is moved to the thematic center. The defining memory of the people of Israel is at once an overwhelming revelation of God and a memory of the absence of any image. That memory of an absence then becomes the warrant for an enduring imperative to avoid all worship of images, never to confuse the representation of any living thing in the created world with the exclusive divinity of the Creator. The language of the long central sentence here is profuse both in emphatic synonymity in regard to representations of deities—"a sculpted image of any likeness," *pesel temunat kol-samel*, and "form," *tavnit* —and in the hammering insistence of anaphora, *tavnit* standing at the head of five consecutive noun phrases. The catalogue of images of things not to be worshipped also pointedly harks back to the Creation story, leading one to infer that the writer was familiar

with the Priestly version of creation or some textual ancestor of it. Male and female, every beast that is on the earth, every winged bird that flies in the heavens, things crawling on the ground, and fish in the waters under the earth are all part of the hierarchy of creation called into being by the Creator at the beginning of Genesis and not to be revered as though they had autonomous power as gods. The injunction not to raise one's eyes to the heavens and worship the celestial bodies probably had special urgency in the late First Commonwealth period when, particularly through Assyrian influence, the cult of astral deities had become widespread in the Israelite populace, at least according to one prevalent historical inference. Here, too, the language of the Priestly account of creation has special resonance: the eyes that have beheld God's portentous presence in history—but not His image—should avoid the temptation to see "the sun and the moon and the stars, all the array of the heavens . . . and bow down to them," for in the authoritative story all these celestial entities were ordained by God to exist in cosmic orderliness, with the process culminating when "the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their array" (Genesis 2:1). Israel, because of its unique historical experience from Egypt to Sinai, has been provided with an unprecedented

vantage point to see that its imageless God is the God of all things. Fire plays a role both in Egypt and at Sinai—in Egypt, figuratively, where the torment of slavery is represented as "the iron's forge," *kur habarzel,* and at Sinai, literally, where the mountain burns with fire to the heart of the heavens and God speaks from the midst of the fire. It is not the image of God but His incandescent presence that the people of Israel experience through their history, and the powerful rhetoric of the book is the means that evokes this presence.

CHAPTER 1

[1]These are the words that Moses spoke to all the
Israelites across the Jordan in the wilderness in the
Arabah opposite Suph between Paran and Tophel and
Laban and Hazeroth and Di-Zahab, [2]eleven days from
Horeb by way of Mount Seir to Kadesh-Barnea. [3]And
it was in the fortieth year in the eleventh month on the
first of the month that Moses spoke to the Israelites
according to all that the LORD had charged him
concerning them, [4]after he had struck down Sihon king
of the Amorite who dwelled in Heshbon and Og king
of the Bashan who dwelled in Ashtaroth in Edrei.
[5]Across the Jordan in the land of Moab did Moses
undertake to expound this teaching, saying:

[6]"The LORD our God spoke to us in Horeb, saying,
'Long enough you have stayed at this mountain. [7]Turn
and journey onward and come to the high country of
the Amorite and to all his neighbors in the Arabah, in
the high country, and in the lowland and in the Negeb

and on the shore of the sea, the land of the Canaanite,
and the Lebanon, as far as the Great River, the River
Euphrates. [8]See, I have given the land before you.
Come and take hold of the land that the LORD swore
to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to
give to them and to their seed after them.' [9]And I said
to you at that time, saying, 'I cannot carry you by
myself. [10]The LORD your God has multiplied you, and
here you are today like the stars of the heavens in
multitude. [11]May the LORD God of your fathers add
to you a thousand times more than you are and bless
you as He has spoken concerning you. [12]O, how can I
carry by myself your trouble and your burden and your
disputing? [13]Get you wise and understanding and
knowing men according to your tribes, and I shall set
them at your head.' [14]And you answered me and said,
'The thing that you have spoken is good to do.' [15]And I
took the heads of your tribes, wise and knowing men,
and I made them heads over you, captains of
thousands and captains of hundreds and captains of
fifties and captains of tens and overseers for your
tribes. [16]And I charged your judges at that time,
saying, 'Hear between your brothers, and you shall
judge rightly between a man and his brother or his
sojourner. [17]You shall recognize no face in judgment.
You shall hear out the small person like the great one.

You shall have no terror of any man, for judgment is
God's. And the matter that will be too hard for you,
you shall bring forward to me and I shall hear it.' [18]And
I charged you at that time all the things that you must
do. [19]And we journeyed from Horeb and we went
through all that great and fearful wilderness which you
have seen, by way of the high country of the Amorite,
as the LORD our God had charged us, and we came as
far as Kadesh-Barnea. [20]And I said to you, 'You have
come to the high country of the Amorite which the
LORD our God is about to give us. [21]See, the LORD
your God has given the land before you. Go up, take
hold, as the LORD God of your fathers has spoken to
you. Be not afraid nor be dismayed.' [22]And you came
forward to me, all of you, and you said, 'Let us send
men before us that they probe the land for us and bring
back word to us of the way on which we should go up
and the towns into which we should come.' [23]And the
thing was good in my eyes, and I took from you twelve
men, one man for each tribe. [24]And they turned and
went up to the high country and came to Wadi Eshcol
and spied it out. [25]And they took in their hand from the
fruit of the land and brought it down to us and brought
back word to us, and they said, 'The land that the
LORD our God is about to give us is good.' [26]And you
did not want to go up and you rebelled against the

word of the LORD your God. [27]And you grumbled in
your tents and said, ‘In the LORD’s hatred of us He
took us out of the land of Egypt to give us into the
hand of the Amorite to destroy us. [28]Where are we
going up? Our brothers have made our heart faint,
saying, “A people greater and loftier than we, towns
great and fortified to the heavens; and also giants did
we see there.”” [29]And I said to you, ‘You shall not
dread and you shall not fear them. [30]The LORD your
God Who goes before you, He it is Who will battle for
you as all that He did with you in Egypt before your
very eyes, [31]and in the wilderness that you have seen,
where the LORD carried you as a man carries his son
all the way that you went as far as this place. [32]And
despite this thing you do not trust the LORD your
God, [33]Who goes before you on the way to search out
for you a place for you to camp in the fire by night to
show you the way that you should go and in the cloud
by day.’ [34]And the LORD heard the sound of your
words, and He was furious and swore, saying, [35]‘Not a
man of these men, this evil generation, shall see the
land that I swore to give to their fathers, [36]save Caleb
son of Jephunneh. He shall see it, and to him I will
give the land on which he has trod, and to his sons,
inasmuch as he fulfilled the behest of the LORD.’
[37]Against me, too, the LORD was incensed because of

you, saying, ‘You, too, shall not come there. [38]Joshua
son of Nun, who stands before you, he it is who will
come there. Him you must strengthen, for he will give
it in estate to Israel. [39]And your little ones of whom
you said they will become prey, and your sons who
know not this day good or evil, they it is who will
come there, and to them I will give it, and they will
take hold of it. [40]As for you, turn you and journey on
to the wilderness by way of the Red Sea.’ [41]And you
answered and said to me, ‘We have offended the
LORD. We ourselves will go up and do battle as all
that the LORD our God has charged us.’ And you
girded, each man, his weapons and you presumed to
go up to the high country. [42]And the LORD said to
me, ‘Say to them: “You shall not go up and you shall
not do battle, for I am not in your midst, lest you be
routed by your enemies.”’ [43]And I spoke to you, and
you did not heed, and you rebelled against the LORD’s
word and you were defiant and went up to the high
country. [44]And the Amorite who dwells in the high
country came out to meet you, and then pursued you
as the bees do, and they pounded you in Seir as far as
Hormah. [45]And you came back and wept before the
LORD, and the LORD did not listen to your voice and
did not give ear to you [46]And you stayed in Kadesh
many days, as the days that you stayed. [2:1]And we

turned and journeyed on to the wilderness on the way to the Red Sea, as the LORD had spoken to me, and we swung round the high country of Seir many days."

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the words*. The prevalent Hebrew title for Deuteronomy, following the convention of using the first significant word in the text as title, is Devarim, "Words." The title Deuteronomy, which is the Greek equivalent of an alternate ancient Hebrew name for the book, means "second law" or "repetition of the law" and is based on the Hebrew phrase in 17:18, *mishneh hatorah hazo't*, "a copy [or repetition] of this teaching [or, law, *torah*]." Since Deuteronomy is in fact a recapitulation of the law and narrative of the three preceding books (as well as in certain important respects a revision of them), the Greek title is perfectly apt. But Devarim as a title has the advantage of highlighting the preeminently rhetorical character of this book, which is structured as a series of long speeches delivered by Moses to Israel, and which also incorporates, as the opening chapter illustrates, prominent elements of dialogue—words of speech framed by words of oratory. More than any other biblical text, it is a book of words, as the Hebrew title suggests.

2. *eleven days from Horeb.* Horeb is the alternate name for Sinai. These introductory verses of Deuteronomy swiftly situate Moses's discourse in time, place, and sequence of events: at the end of the forty years' wandering, on the east bank of the Jordan, where the Israelites were seen encamped at the conclusion of the Book of Numbers, and after the military victories over the trans-Jordanian kings reported toward the end of Numbers.

5. *to expound this teaching.* The verb *be'er*, "to expound" or "to explain," provides a central rationale for the whole book. The teaching, *torah*, that has already been enunciated is represented as requiring further exposition or explaining, and hence the need for "the repetition of this teaching." *Torah*

here is still a verbal noun that means "teaching," but the repeated stress of Deuteronomy on its own textual character begins to push Torah in the direction of the meaning it would subsequently have, the name not only of this book but of all the Five Books of Moses. The act of expounding and explaining, moreover, announces the intellectualist theme—in all likelihood, drawing on Hebrew Wisdom traditions—that sets off this book from the preceding four.

7. *the Amorite.* Deuteronomy uses this term to designate all the inhabitants of Canaan, perhaps because the Amorites, on the eastern perimeter of the country, were the first people encountered by the invading Israelites.

the Lebanon. This refers to the mountain range, not to a country.

as far as the Great River, the River Euphrates. Needless to say, this grandiose northeastern border does not correspond to the actual historical contours of any Israelite state.

8. *See, I have given . . . you*. Significantly, the very first speech of God in Moses's initial discourse is a ringing confirmation of the promise of the land to the people. "I have given . . . you" has the legal force of a performative speech-act, as if to say, By these words I hereby confer to you.

9. *And I said to you at that time.* Although the adverbial phrase here does convey Moses's retrospective viewpoint, looking back to an event that occurred four decades earlier, there is no connection, either narrative or thematic, between the preceding unit concerning the promise of the land and the unit now introduced, which reports the creation of a judiciary bureaucracy. It looks as though "at that time" is a rhetorical ploy used to camouflage a lack of transition.

10. *and here you are today like the stars of the heavens in multitude.* God's reiterated promise to Abraham to make his seed a multitudinous people is now fully realized, and it confronts Moses with a grave practical problem of judicial oversight of these vast numbers.

11. *May the* LORD *. . . add to you a thousand times*. But Moses, not wanting to construe the blessing of national fecundity negatively, hastens to wish for Israel that it continue to proliferate in the spectacular fashion it already has done.

12. *O, how can I carry.* The Hebrew does not use the ordinary form for "how," *ʾeikh*, but the elongated form *ʾeikhah*, which often marks the beginning of laments. The translation seeks to suggest this effect of threnody by adding "O."

13. *Get you wise and understanding and knowing men.* This account of the establishment of a judicial bureaucracy differs from the one in Exodus 18 in several respects, all of which reflect the distinctive aims of Deuteronomy. Jethro, Moses's father-in-law, who conceives the scheme in Exodus, is not mentioned here. Instead, the plan is entirely Moses's idea, as this is the book of Moses. Having hit on the idea, he entrusts the choice of magistrates to the people, whereas in Exodus, he implements Jethro's directive by choosing the judges himself. In Exodus the qualities to be sought in the judges are moral probity and piety, whereas here intellectual discernment is stressed. "Knowing" in the Hebrew is a passive form ("known"), which led both Rashi and Abraham ibn Ezra to understand the term as "well-known," but the word, given the immediate context, could well have an active sense here (or could be revocalized as an active verb), and it has been construed that way by many interpreters, from the Aramaic Targums to contemporary scholars.

16. *Hear.* The Hebrew uses an infinitive form of the verb to serve as an imperative—a well-attested idiomatic option in biblical Hebrew but also a form that nicely matches the impersonal rhetoric of authority in Deuteronomy, grammatically highlighting the action to be performed rather than those addressed.

17. *You shall recognize no face in judgment.* This vivid idiom, the meaning of which is illustrated in the next sentence of this verse, has the obvious sense of not showing partiality.

19. *all that great and fearful wilderness which you have seen.* This invocation of the terrors of the great wilderness, experienced firsthand by the wandering Israelites, emphatically recurs in Moses's speech as the people camp at the edge of the wilderness at the end of the forty years looking into the land they are about to enter.

22. *Let us send men before us.* This version strikingly revises the story of the twelve scouts reported in Numbers 13–14. There, the sending out of the

scouts was an order from God. Here, it is strictly the people's idea, their hesitant response to Moses's flat imperative, "Go up, take hold."

that they probe the land. More literally, "that they dig out the land." This verb, which does not occur in Numbers 13–14, is in keeping with the strictly strategic purpose of the expedition here ("the way on which we should go up and the towns into which we should come"). In Numbers, the scouts are especially enjoined to ascertain the prosperity of the land and its natural resources. This difference, however, is not strictly a "revision" on the part of Deuteronomy because the present version is also a drastic *abridgement* of the story in Numbers, and it concentrates on what is deemed the essential matter of the episode.

27. *In the LORD's hatred of us.* The extreme vehemence of this phrase, which does not appear in Numbers, again reflects the writer's tendency to incriminate the people in this book of admonishments that is Deuteronomy.

30. *The LORD your God Who goes before you, He it is Who will battle for you.* In the version of the story in Numbers, it is Joshua and Caleb who defiantly declare that they can successfully undertake an assault against the Canaanites, "for they are our bread" (Numbers 14:9). In the more theologically pitched account here, the language of God's battling on behalf of Israel is borrowed from the victory at the Sea of Reeds (Exodus 14:14). This notion of God's overwhelming power is extended by Moses's reminder (verse 33) of the pillars of fire and cloud, an fearsome phenomenon that in Numbers 14:14 is attributed to the rumor that has reached the terrified Canaanites.

36. *Caleb.* Curiously, for reasons that have been explained by many scholars as a drawing together of different sources, Joshua is not mentioned at all here but only in verse 38, in his function as Moses's personal attendant.

the land on which he has trod. This phrase focuses the physical act of Caleb's walking through the land—evidently, only as far as Wadi Eshcol in the future tribal territory of Judah and not, as in Numbers, to the far north—on the espionage mission. Walking through territory was also an act of taking legal possession of it in a sale.

37. *Against me, too, the LORD was incensed because of you.* No mention is made here of the incident in which Moses struck the rock, and this appears to be an entirely new explanation of why Moses never entered the land. Once

more, the change reflects the tendency of Deuteronomy to inculpate Israel. Moses is doomed to die east of the Jordan not because of his own unfortunate momentary impulse on which he acted but because he acceded to the people's plan to send out spies and was thus implicated in their subsequent guilt. Elsewhere in Deuteronomy, a different explanation will be offered for Moses's dying outside the land.

43. *you were defiant and went up.* The choice of the verb here, *hazid*, "to be defiant," "to act wickedly or maliciously," may reflect the fact that the present text is a response to the one in Numbers. The previous verse is essentially a quotation of Numbers 14:42. At this point in the version in Numbers (14:44), an otherwise unattested verb, *haʿapil* ("to strive upward"?) is used, and this writer appears to gloss that enigmatic term by substituting a more familiar word.

46. *many days, as the days that you stayed.* The apparent sense of this Hebrew idiom is: as many days as you ended up staying.

2:1. *the Red Sea.* The Hebrew *yam suf* in all likelihood refers to two different bodies of water. In the Exodus story, it seems to be a lake or marshland in the north of Egypt, the Sea of Reeds. Elsewhere, it does designate the Red Sea, and here the Israelites are clearly being sent south toward Aqabah and the Red Sea, not back to Egypt. This summarizing notation of the movements of the Israelites makes it the conclusion of this whole literary unit, though the conventional chapter division sets it at the beginning of chapter 2.

CHAPTER 2

2 “And the LORD said to me, saying, 3 ‘Long enough
you have swung round this high country. Turn you to
the north. 4 And charge the people, saying, “You are
about to pass through the territory of your brothers the
sons of Esau, who dwell in Seir. Though they fear you,
you must take great care. 5 Do not provoke them, for I
will not give you of their land so much as a foot tread,
for I have given the high country of Seir as an
inheritance to Esau. 6 Food you shall buy from them
with silver, that you may eat, and water, too, you shall
get from them with silver, that you may drink. 7 For the
LORD your God has blessed you in all the work of
your hands. He has known your goings in this great
wilderness these forty years. The LORD your God is
with you. You have lacked nothing.’” 8 And we passed
onward away from our brothers the sons of Esau, who
dwell in Seir, from the way of the Arabah, from Elath
and Ezion-Geber. And we turned and we passed
through the Wilderness of Moab. 9 And the LORD said
to me, ‘Do not besiege Moab and do not provoke them

to battle, for I will not give you his land as an inheritance, for to the sons of Lot I have given Ar as an inheritance. [10]The Emim used to dwell there, a great and multitudinous people, and lofty as the giants. [11]The Rephaim, they, too, are accounted as giants, and the Moabites call them Emim. [12]And in Seir the Horites used to dwell, and the sons of Esau dispossessed them and destroyed them in their onslaught and dwelled in their stead, as Israel did to the land of its inheritance which the LORD gave them. [13]Now, rise up and cross over the Wadi Zered.' And we crossed the Wadi Zered. [14]And the time that we went from Kadesh-Barnea until we crossed the Wadi Zered was thirty-eight years until the whole generation, the men of war, came to an end from the midst of the camp as the LORD had sworn concerning them. [15]And the hand of the LORD, too, was against them to panic them from the midst of the camp until they came to an end. [16]And it happened, when all the men of war had come to an end of dying from the midst of the people, [17]that the LORD spoke to me, saying, [18]'You are passing beyond the territory of Moab today, beyond Ar, [19]and you will approach opposite the Ammonites. You shall not besiege them and you shall not provoke them, for I will not give you an inheritance of the land of the Ammonites, for to the sons of Lot I have given it as an

inheritance. [20]It is also accounted as the land of the Rephaim. The Rephaim used to dwell there, and the Ammonites call them Zamzummim, [21]a great and multitudinous people, and lofty as the giants. And the LORD destroyed them through the Ammonites' onslaught, and they dwelled in their stead, [22]as He did to the sons of Esau, who dwell in Seir, who destroyed the Horites in their onslaught and dispossessed them, and have dwelled in their stead to this day—[23]and the Avvim, who dwell in villages as far as Gaza, the Caphtorim, who came out of Crete, destroyed them and dwelled in their stead. [24]Rise up, journey onward, and cross the Wadi Arnon. See, I have given in your hand Sihon the Amorite king of Heshbon, and begin, take hold of his land and provoke him to battle. [25]On this day will I begin to put the fear of you and the dread of you over the peoples under all the heavens, so that when they hear rumor of you, they will quake and shudder before you.'

[26]"And I sent messengers from the Wilderness of Kedemoth to Sihon king of Heshbon—words of peace, saying, [27]'Let me pass through your land. On the road, on the road will I go. I will not swerve right or left. [28]Food for silver you shall sell me that I may eat,

and water for silver you shall give me, that I may drink. Only let me pass through on my own feet, [29]as the sons of Esau, who dwell in Seir, and the Moabites, who dwell in Ar, did for me, until I cross the Jordan into the land that the LORD our God is about to give us.' [30]But Sihon king of Heshbon did not want to let me pass through it, for the LORD your God hardened his spirit and toughened his heart, in order to give him into your hand as on this day. [31]And the LORD said to me, 'See, I have begun to give Sihon and his land before you. Begin—take hold—to take hold of his land.' [32]And Sihon sallied forth to meet us, he and all his troops, to battle at Jahaz. [33]And the LORD gave him before us, and we struck him down, and his sons, and all his troops. [34]And we captured all his towns at that time and we put every town under the ban, menfolk and the women and the little ones, we left no remnant. [35]Only the beasts did we plunder, and the booty of the towns that we captured. [36]From Aroer which is on the bank of the Wadi Arnon and the town in the wadi as far as the Gilead, there was no city that loomed too high for us, everything did the LORD our God give before us. [37]Only the land of the Ammonites you did not approach, all along the Wadi Jabbok and the towns of the high country, as all that the LORD our God had charged."

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *Long enough*. This initial phrase pointedly echoes the one in 1:6, thus establishing a rhetorical link between God's command to Israel to move on from Sinai and His command thirty-eight years later for Israel to move on to the conquest after its peregrinations to the southeast of Canaan.

4. *Though they fear you.* Richard Elliott Friedman aptly notes that in Genesis 32, as Jacob/Israel drew near his brother after long years of separation, it was Israel who feared Esau and not the other way around.

7. *For the LORD your God has blessed you.* The initial "for" (*ki*) marks a clear logic of causation: because God has blessed all your enterprises, you have abundant wherewithal to pay for food and drink.

He has known. The Hebrew verb "to know" often suggests intimate knowledge—hence its use for sexual intercourse—and caring attention.

these forty years. Again and again in Moses's valedictory speech that constitutes this book, he invokes the palpable experience that the people has undergone in all its years of wandering "in this fearful wilderness."

8. *Elath and Ezion-Geber.* These are port cities at the northern end of the Gulf of Aqabah.

10. *The Emim.* This designation, evidently of legendary creatures, is probably related to the noun *ʾeymah*, "fear" or "terror." Rephaim in the next verse is a well-attested Hebrew and Ugaritic term for ghosts or dwellers of the underworld. In verse 20, we are informed that the Ammonite name for these huge creatures was Zamzummim. Jeffrey H. Tigay plausibly represents this as an onomatopoeic term, "the Buzz-buzzers"—that is, people who speak an unintelligible, and perhaps frightening, language. This could also be, as Abraham ibn Ezra proposes, the Hebraization of a foreign gentilic term. Moshe Weinfeld speculates that it was the presence of megaliths in the trans-Jordan region that inspired these traditions of an aboriginal race of giants there.

12. *the sons of Esau dispossessed them . . . as Israel did to the land of its inheritance*. The writer confronts a theological problem posed by political history. All around him, he sees a constant flux of warring peoples, one group laying waste to another and seizing its territory. Upon this Hobbesian moral chaos of history, he strives to impose at least a degree of monotheistic order: it is God Who determines the inheritance of peoples, not only in the case of Israel, which has been promised it will succeed in overcoming the indigenous Canaanites and possessing the land, but also in the case of the other peoples of the region. The period of imperial incursions from the east from the late eighth century to the late seventh century B.C.E. would have given special urgency to this effort to account for the violent movements of history.

in their onslaught. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "from before their face," but the clear implication is fear, as from an attack, and this preposition is often used after a verb such as "to banish."

14. *came to an end.* The Hebrew verb *tum* means both "to come to an end," or "to perish," and "to finish doing something." In verse 16 it is used in the latter sense but coupled with "dying." The stylistic justification for the triple repetition is to convey emphatically the idea that this generation had absolutely and entirely died out. This pattern of repetition is phonetically reinforced by the word in verse 15 that means "to panic them," *lehumam*, which is a *rime riche* with the last word of the verse, *tumam*, "they came to an end." Panicking is what God regularly does to Israel's enemies in order to rout them in battle. Thus, the Wilderness generation is not just left to die out but stricken with terror, impelling it to self-destruction.

18. *Ar.* If this is a precise site, it has not been located, but the context suggests that it designates the whole region inhabited by the Moabites.

21. *through the Ammonites' onslaught.* The Hebrew says only "from before their faces." As before, the element of fearfulness in that preposition is represented by "onslaught," and "Ammonites'" is added to clarify an otherwise ambiguous antecedent of the pronoun.

23. *the Caphtorim, who came out of Crete.* Caphtor is the biblical name for Crete. This notice is historically accurate. The coastal plain, including Gaza, was invaded from the Mediterranean and successfully occupied by the Philistines, one of the so-called Sea Peoples, in the later thirteenth century

and twelfth century B.C.E. They are first referred to explicitly in an Egyptian inscription that has been dated to the 1180s or the 1170s. Although the Hebrew writer does not directly ascribe this invasion of a Hellenic people to the LORD's granting the territory to them as an inheritance, it does participate in the general pattern he is observing in which one well-established people is conquered and displaced by another.

25. *the peoples under all the heavens.* The Septuagint opts for the more expected idiom, "all the peoples under the heavens," and it is conceivable that the Greek translators in fact had a Hebrew text before them which read that way, but it is also quite possible that they decided to smooth out a little stylistic wrinkle actually chosen by the Deuteronomist, one that equally conveys the sense of "everywhere on earth."

26. *words of peace.* The evident contradiction between this and verse 24, where Israel is enjoined to provoke Sihon, has not been satisfactorily resolved.

27. *On the road, on the road.* The repetition clearly conveys the sense of "strictly and exclusively."

30. *hardened his spirit and toughened his heart.* The language is close enough to the reiterated formula concerning Pharaoh in the Plagues narrative to suggest a typological connection between these two kings bent on Israel's destruction. Sihon's offensive against Israel, in the face of the Israelite proposal to pass through his territory peacefully and pay for food and water, is taken as justification for the implementation of the brutal practice of the *ḥerem* or "ban" (verse 34)—the massacre of the entire population. The persistence of the Amorites as a people suggests that this drastic report does not altogether reflect historical reality. The supposed application of the *ḥerem* to the Amorites may in fact have the function of defining political borders. The *ḥerem* was to be directed against the population of the promised land. In the parallel account in Numbers, where the *ḥerem* is not applied to Sihon's people, the underlying assumption is that the promised land lies west of the Jordan, with only a special concession made to two and a half tribes to settle in trans-Jordan. As Moshe Weinfeld convincingly argues, the extension of Israelite dominion east of the Jordan chiefly occurred during Davidic and Solomonic times (tenth century B.C.E.), making it a long-established political

reality by the time our later writer framed his account, in which this region is included in the promise of the land.

36. *the town in the wadi.* A wadi is a dry riverbed that fills with water during the rainy season, but in this case, the reference seems to be to a riverbed, or perhaps some small branch of it, that is no longer the site of seasonal inundation.

there was no city that loomed too high for us. The looming high (a single verb in the Hebrew, *sagvah*) reflects the perspective of the besieging army looking up at the fortified city situated on a height. Looming high is also stressed as a response to the reiterated perception that the indigenous peoples are "lofty," a race of giants.

37. *Only the land of the Ammonites you did not approach.* This would be the hilly region farther to the east, whereas the Israelite advance is along the plain just east of the Jordan. Some recent scholars have accepted Jacob Milgrom's proposal that here the verb *q-r-b* ("approach") is used in a political extension of its cultic meaning, "to encroach upon," though there is no compelling necessity to see that sense of the word in this verse.

CHAPTER 3

[1]“And we turned and we went up on the way to the
Bashan, and Og king of Bashan sallied forth to meet
us in battle, he and all his troops, at Edrei. [2]And the
LORD said to me, ‘Do not fear him, for into your
hand I have given him and all his troops and his land,
and you shall do to him as you did to Sihon the
Amorite king who dwells in Heshbon.’ [3]And the
LORD our God gave into our hand Og king of the
Bashan, too, and all his troops, and we struck him
down until no remnant was left. [4]And we captured all
his towns at that time. There was not a city that we did
not take from them, sixty towns, all the district of
Argob, the kingdom of Og in the Bashan. [5]All these
were fortified towns with high walls, double gates, and
bolt, besides the very many open towns. [6]And we put
them under the ban as we had done to Sihon king of
Heshbon, putting under the ban every town, menfolk,
the women, and the little ones. [7]But all the beasts and
the booty of the towns we plundered for ourselves.
[8]And we took the land at that time from the hand of

the two Amorite kings who were across the Jordan,
from the Wadi Arnon as far as Mount Hermon. [9]The
Sidonians call Hermon Sirion, and the Amorites call it
Senir. [10]All the towns of the plateau and all the Gilead
and all the Bashan as far as Salcah and Edrei, the
towns of the kingdom of Og in the Bashan. [11]For only
Og king of the Bashan remained from the rest of the
Rephaim. Look, his bedstead, an iron bedstead, is it
not in Rabbah of the Ammonites? Nine cubits its
length and four cubits its width by the cubit of a man.
[12]And this land we took hold of at that time. From
Aroer which is on the Wadi Arnon and half the high
country of the Gilead and its towns, I gave to the
Reubenite and to the Gadite. [13]And the rest of the
Gilead and all of the Bashan, the kingdom of Og, I
gave to the half-tribe of Manasseh—all the district of
Argob. All of that Bashan is called Land of the
Rephaim. [14]Jair son of Manasseh took all the district
of Argob as far as the border of the Geshurite and the
Maacathites, and he called them—the Bashan—after
his own name, Jair's Hamlets, until this day. [15]And to
Machir I gave the Gilead. [16]And to the Reubenite and
to the Gadite I gave from the Gilead as far as Wadi
Arnon, with the middle of the wadi the boundary, as
far as Wadi Jabbok, the boundary of the Ammonites,
[17]and the Arabah with the Jordan the boundary, from

Chinnereth as far as the Arabah Sea, the Dead Sea,
beneath the slopes of Pisgah to the east. [18]And I
charged you at that time, saying, ‘The LORD your
God has given you this land to take hold of it. As
vanguard troops you shall cross over before your
brothers the Israelites, all the warriors. [19]Only your
wives and your little ones and your livestock—I know
you have much livestock—shall stay in your towns that
I have given to you, [20]until the LORD your God grants
repose to your brothers as to you, and they, too, take
hold of the land that the LORD your God is about to
give to them across the Jordan. Then you may go back,
each man to his inheritance that I have given to you.’
[21]And I charged Joshua at that time, saying, ‘Your own
eyes have seen all that the LORD your God did to
these two kings. So shall the LORD do to all the
kingdoms into which you are about to cross. [22]You
shall not fear them, for it is the LORD your God Who
does battle for you.’

[23]“And I pleaded with the LORD at that time, saying,
[24]‘My Master, LORD, You Yourself have begun to
show Your servant Your greatness and Your strong
hand, for what god is there in the heavens and on the
earth who could do like Your deeds and like Your

might? [25]Let me, pray, cross over that I may see the goodly land which is across the Jordan, this goodly high country the Lebanon.' [26]And the LORD was cross with me because of you, and He did not listen to me. And the LORD said to me, 'Enough for you! Do not speak more to Me of this matter. [27]Go up to the top of the Pisgah, and raise your eyes to the west and to the north and to the south and to the east and see with your own eyes, for you shall not cross this Jordan. [28]And charge Joshua and strengthen him and bid him take heart, for he shall cross over before this people and he shall give them in estate the land that you will see.' [29]And we stayed in the valley over against Beth Peor."

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Do not fear him, for . . . you shall do to him as you did to Sihon*. Although Moses has already prevailed over Sihon, he has special reason to be afraid of Og, for, as we learn in verse 11, Og, alone among these trans-Jordanian kings, is a gigantic figure, the last scion of a legendary race.

5. *fortified towns with high walls, double gates and bolt.* The looming aspect of the trans-Jordanian towns, which was stressed before, is here given architectural specification: despite the high walls and the firmly bolted gates, the Israelites found ways to breach the defenses and capture every one of the enemies' towns. These passages might well be a wishful turning around of the

strategic telescope, for in the period in which they were composed—the last century of the First Commonwealth—it was the towns of Israel and Judah that repeatedly faced assault and sometimes succumbed.

open towns. That is, without walls or other fortifications.

8. *as far as Mount Hermon.* Repeatedly in these rehearsals of the Israelite conquest, the eye of the narrator—Moses—swings in a grand panorama from trans-Jordan, where he and the people are standing and where the first victories took place, across the Jordan, and all the way to the fertile mountainous region in the north of Canaan. The lushness of the Mount Hermon region is attested by its invocation in erotic contexts in the Song of Songs.

11. *For only Og king of the Bashan remained from the rest of the Rephaim.* Since the Rephaim, as we had occasion to note in 2:10, are a race of giants, and also dwellers of the underworld, this makes Og virtually a mythological figure. In a Phoenician mortuary inscription from the sixth or fifth century B.C.E., would-be violators of the tomb are warned that the great Og will exact retribution from them. He would appear to be some sort of fierce underworld god or demon in the common lore of the region, and our text seeks to historicize him while clinging to his legendary lineaments. Because of the link between the Rephaim and the Nephilim of Genesis 6:4, several traditional commentators see Og as the last of the antediluvians.

his bedstead, an iron bedstead. The Hebrew noun *ʿeres* is a poetic term for bed, perhaps used here (instead of the more prosaic *mishkav* or *mitah*) to give this declaration an epic flourish. Moshe Weinfeld proposes that it means "bier," a secondary meaning that *mitah* has. Several scholars have noted that late in the second millennium B.C.E., iron had been only recently introduced and was still regarded as a rare metal. But the sheer hardness of the substance might be meant to indicate the martial toughness of the gigantic king.

is it not in Rabbah of the Ammonites? The speaker points to this relic of the gargantuan Og as concrete evidence of his actual existence, available for inspection by the curious tourist.

by the cubit of a man. The disproportion between the giant and an ordinary man is highlighted by giving the measurements of his bed according to "the cubit of a man," that is, the length in an average man from the elbow to the beginning of the knuckles. (The royal cubit was longer.) This would

make the bedstead around thirteen and a half feet long and approximately as wide as a modern queen-size bed (in an era when all beds were single couches).

12. *And this land we took hold of at that time.* One of the earmarks of the Deuteronomic style is the fondness it exhibits for demonstrative pronouns. Moses, recapitulating the recent history of the Israelites for the benefit of the people, likes to use what linguists call deictics—"pointing words"—to indicate what is before their eyes, the familiar objects of their collective experience.

14. *until this day.* This little flourish is an inadvertent hint that for the moment the writer is probably not thinking of Moses's time but of his own.

17. *the Arabah Sea, the Dead Sea.* The latter designation in the Hebrew is literally the Salt Sea.

Pisgah. The other name for this mountain, from whose peak Moses will look out on the promised land and then die, is Nebo.

19. *Only your wives and your little ones and your livestock.* Most of the details here of the military role assigned to the trans-Jordanian tribes correspond to the account in Numbers 32, though this version is a good deal more succinct and omits the indications of divine instruction in Numbers.

22. *it is the* LORD *your God Who does battle for you.* This clause, picked up from Exodus 14:14, serves as a kind of refrain through this whole narrative of the conquest.

23. *I pleaded.* Richard Elliott Friedman, noting the linkage between this verb and "did not listen" in verse 26, interestingly detects an allusion to Genesis 42:21, where Joseph's brothers recall how he pleaded to them and they did not listen when they sold him into slavery. Perhaps the point of the allusion is that it recalls the moment when Joseph is violently thrust away from his homeland of Canaan: Moses, who began where Joseph ended, in Egypt, will not be permitted to enter the homeland though, as we may recall, Joseph's bones will be carried into the promised land to be buried there.

24. *My Master, LORD.* The Hebrew, as it is vocalized in the Masoretic Text, reads *ʾadonai YHWH*, the first of these two words being another appellation of God. This translation follows Weinfeld's persuasive suggestion that either the original vocalization of the first word was *ʾadoni*, "my Master," a form of address often used in supplications, or that the plural suffix *ʾadonai* is a plural of majesty.

for what god is there in the heavens and on the earth. Given the Deuteronomist's rigorous monotheism, the plausible sense of these words is that the supposed gods of heaven and earth have no real substance and therefore no power to perform any acts. Nevertheless, the formulation, perhaps as a kind of verbal fossil, carries a trace of the older view that there may be other gods, but ones that are no match for YHWH.

25. *this goodly high country.* Still again one sees the Deuteronomist's fondness for the demonstrative pronoun, here used with considerable poignancy as Moses points verbally to the sweet land before him that he will not be allowed to enter.

26. *And the LORD was cross.* Although the verb used in this translation—as by Friedman—is a little too mild for the Hebrew *hitʿaber*, which is closer to "was angered," it has the virtue of preserving the pun, transparent in the Hebrew, on the same verb (*ʿ-b-r*) in the *qal* conjugation, "to cross" or "cross over," used both for the advance of the Israelites (verse 21) and in Moses's plea to God (verse 25). Such punning switches of meaning are a regular technique of biblical narrative employed to effect transitions and do not necessarily reflect thematic significance. (Compare, for example, Judges 3, in which Ehud first stabs [*taqaʿ*] the Midianite king Eglon in the belly and then, having effected his escape, blasts [*taqaʿ*] the ram's horn to muster the Israelites to rebellion.)

Enough for you. This impatient phrase, *rav lekha*, pointedly echoes *rav lakhem*, "Long enough you . . ." addressed by God to the Israelites in 1:6 and 2:3.

CHAPTER 4

[1]“And now, Israel, hear the statutes and the laws that I
am about to teach you to do, so you may live, and you
shall come and take hold of the land that the LORD
God of your fathers is about to give to you. [2]You shall
not add to the word that I charge you and you shall not
subtract from it, to keep the commands of the LORD
your God which I charge you. [3]Your own eyes have
seen that which the LORD did at Baal Peor, for every
man that went after Baal Peor did the LORD your
God destroy from your midst. [4]But you, the ones
clinging to the LORD your God, are all of you alive
today. [5]See, I have taught you the statutes and the laws
as the LORD my God has charged me, to do thus
within the land into which you are about to come to
take hold of it. [6]And you shall keep and do, for that is
your wisdom and your understanding in the eyes of the
peoples who will hear all these statutes and will say,
‘Only a wise and understanding people is this great
nation.’ [7]For what great nation is there that has gods
close to it like the LORD our God whenever we call to

Him? [8]And what great nation is there that has just statutes and laws like all this teaching that I am about to set before you today? [9]Only be you on the watch and watch yourself closely lest you forget the things that your own eyes have seen and lest they swerve from your heart—all [10]the days of your life, and you shall make them known to your sons and to your sons' sons: the day that you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb when the LORD said to me, 'Assemble the people to Me that I may have them hear My words, so that they learn to fear Me all the days that they live on the soil, and so that they teach their sons.' [11]And you came forward and stood at the bottom of the mountain, and the mountain was burning with fire to the heart of the heavens—darkness, cloud, and dense fog. [12]And the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the fire. The sound of words you did hear but no image did you see except the sound. [13]And He told you His covenant that He charged you to do, the Ten Words, and He wrote them on two tablets of stone. [14]And me did the LORD charge at that time to teach you statutes and laws for you to do in the land into which you are crossing over to take hold of it. [15]And you shall be very watchful of yourselves, for you saw no image on the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire, [16]lest you act ruinously and make you a

sculpted image of any likeness, the form of male or of female, [17]the form of any beast that is on the earth, the form of any winged bird that flies in the heavens, [18]the form of anything that crawls on the ground, the form of any fish that is in the waters under the earth, [19]lest you raise your eyes to the heavens and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the array of the heavens, and you be led astray and bow down to them and worship them, for the LORD your God allotted them to all the peoples under the heavens. [20]But you did the LORD take and He brought you out from the iron's forge, from Egypt, to become for Him a people in estate as this day. [21]And the LORD was incensed with me because of your words and He swore not to let me cross the Jordan and not to let me come into the goodly land that the LORD your God is about to give you in estate. [22]For I am about to die in this land, I am not to cross the Jordan, but you are to cross over and you will take hold of this goodly land. [23]Be you on the watch, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God which He has sealed with you, and you make for yourselves a sculpted image of any sort, against which the LORD your God has charged you. [24]For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous god. [25]When you beget sons and sons of sons and are long in the land, and you act ruinously and make a sculpted image

of any sort and do evil in the eyes of the LORD your God to anger Him, [26]I have called to witness against you the heavens and the earth that you shall surely perish quickly from upon the land into which you are about to cross the Jordan to take hold of it. You shall not long endure upon it, for you will surely be destroyed. [27]And the LORD will scatter you among the peoples and you shall be left men few in number among the nations where the LORD will drive you. [28]And you shall worship there their gods that are human handiwork, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell. [29]And you shall search for the LORD your God from there, and you shall find him when you seek Him with all your heart and with all your being. [30]When you are in straits and all these things find you in time to come, you shall turn back to the LORD your God and heed His voice. [31]For the LORD your God is a merciful god. He will not let you go and will not destroy you and will not forget your fathers' covenant that He swore to them. [32]For, pray, ask of the first days that were before you, from the day God created a human on the earth and from one end of the heavens to the other end of the heavens, has there been the like of this great thing or has its like been heard? [33]Has a people heard God's voice speaking from the midst of the fire, as you yourself

have heard, and still lived? [34]Or has God tried to come
to take Him a nation from within a nation in trials and
signs and portents and in battle and with a strong hand
and an outstretched arm and with great terrors, like all
that the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before
your eyes? [35]You yourself were shown to know that the
LORD is God, there is none besides Him. [36]From the
heavens He made you hear His voice to reprove you,
and on the earth He showed you His great fire, and His
words you heard, from the midst of the fire. [37]And
since He did love your fathers He chose their seed
after them and brought you out from Egypt through
His presence with His great power, [38]to dispossess
nations greater and mightier than you from before you,
to bring you to give to you their land in estate as on
this day. [39]And you shall know today and take to your
heart that the LORD, He is God in the heavens above
and on the earth below, there is none else. [40]And you
shall keep His statutes and His commands which I am
about to charge you today, that He do well with you
and with your sons after you and so that you long
endure on the soil that the LORD your God is about to
give you for all time."

41 Then did Moses divide off three towns across the
Jordan where the sun rises 42 for a murderer to flee
there who murdered his fellow man without knowing
and he was not his enemy in time past, that he might
flee to one of those towns and live: 43 Bezer in the
wilderness in the land of the plain for the Reubenite,
and Ramoth in the Gilead for the Gadite, and Golan in
the Bashan for the Manassite.

44 And this is the teaching that Moses set before the
Israelites. 45 These are the treaty terms and the statutes
and the laws that Moses spoke to the Israelites when
they came out from Egypt, 46 across the Jordan in the
valley opposite Beth Peor in the land of Sihon king of
the Amorite whom Moses, and the Israelites, struck
down when they came out from Egypt. 47 And they
took hold of his land and the land of Og king of the
Bashan, the two kings of the Amorite who are across
the Jordan where the sun rises, 48 from Aroer which is
on the bank of the Wadi Arnon as far as Sion, which is
Hermon, 49 and all the Arabah across the Jordan to the
east as far as the Arabah Sea, at the foot of the Pisgah
slopes.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And now, Israel, hear*. The first Hebrew word here, *we'atah*, "and now," is often used in a logical rather than a temporal sense, to introduce a conclusion or mark a transition in the stages of a discourse. At this point, it introduces the grand sermon that concludes this whole preamble to the main body of the Book of Deuteronomy (chapters 5–31). The verb "to hear," often, as here, in the imperative (*shema'*), is one of the signature terms of Deuteronomy. The Hebrew verb means "to hear," "to listen," "to heed," and "to understand," and quite frequently all those meanings come into play. In this preeminently didactic book, the Israelites are repeatedly enjoined to devote careful attention to the exhortations and the laws that Moses delivers to them—to listen, absorb, understand, and obey.

so you may live. This is another verbal refrain that punctuates the sermon. For the Deuteronomist, with deportations and the destruction of nations vividly on the political horizon, history has become a very dangerous realm, and Moses repeatedly urges Israel to follow the only path that, according to the Deuteronomic view, will avert impending disaster.

2. *You shall not add . . . you shall not subtract*. Jeffrey H. Tigay proposes that this strict-constructionist view of the Mosaic teaching is intended to be limited to the injunction to worship a single God: one is not free to add other objects of worship nor to remove YHWH as the object of worship. But such a cultic sense of "subtract" is rather strained, and it is more likely that Moses here is represented enjoining strict construction precisely in order to diminish any impression (in fact, an abundantly warranted impression) that Deuteronomy is effecting a revision of a good many earlier laws and traditions.

4. *you, the ones clinging to the LORD your God, are all of you alive today.* The very physical existence of the audience for Moses's sermon is palpable proof of the principle he announced at the beginning of the sermon, "so you may live."

6. *Only a wise and understanding people is this great nation.* The primacy of wisdom in the worldview of Deuteronomy is sharply reflected here. Israel's greatness as the other nations come to recognize it is not in its fecundity and

military might (as, for example, in Balaam's oracles in Numbers) but in its wisdom, demonstrated by its adherence to a set of just statutes and laws. The next lines (verses 7–8) are testimony to God's decision to be close to Israel through the statutes and teachings He reveals to them.

10. *the day that you stood before the LORD.* "The day" or "on the day" is an epic locution for "when." Having begun with a general exhortation to cling to God's laws, the sermon now focuses in on the defining moment four decades earlier when Israel stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and God revealed to them his law in thunder and lightning.

12. *The sound of words you did hear but no image did you see.* The account of the Sinai epiphany in Exodus is less rigorous about excluding the aspect of sight. The Israelites there are enjoined to keep their distance precisely in order that they will see nothing, and then the seventy elders in the sacred feast on the mountain are vouchsafed a vision of the effulgence surrounding God. The Deuteronomist, by contrast, is sternly aniconic, in keeping with his steady polemic against all cults of divine images; he is a writer who insists on hearing the divine, and seeing only God's portentous acts in history.

except the sound. Abraham ibn Ezra ingeniously connects this slightly odd turn of phrase with the synesthetic "and all the people were seeing the sounds [i.e., the thunder]" (Exodus 20:18).

15. *be very watchful of yourselves.* It should be noted that the Hebrew freely swings between second-person plural and second-person singular, an oscillation perfectly idiomatic in biblical Hebrew and by no means to be attributed to a collation of different sources. It may be that the speaker on occasion switches to the singular form in order to emphasize the effect of imperative address to each individual, but that is not certain.

16. *a sculpted image of any likeness, the form.* Philologists have sought to draw technical differences among these terms, but the manifest point of their deployment here is the stylistic force of their synonymity: any manner or shape of image or icon will lead Israel on the path to ruin.

16–18. *the form of male or of female . . . of any beast . . . on the earth . . . of any winged bird . . . in the heavens . . . of anything that crawls on the ground . . . of any fish that is in the waters under the earth*. The ringing language of the

sermon here is a grand evocation of the account of creation in Genesis 1, and the precise recapitulation of phrases compels the conclusion that that account, attributed to P, was familiar to the Deuteronomist in a textual form resembling the one we know. The hierarchy of creation was ordained by God for human's use and dominion, and man in turn was to recognize the single divine source of all creation. The elevation of any component of the created world to an object of worship is thus seen as a perversion of the whole plan of cosmogonic harmony and hierarchy.

18. *the waters under the earth.* In keeping with the picture of the cosmos in Genesis 1, water is imagined to be under the earth ("the great abyss"), beyond the perimeters of the dry land (the sea), and erupting from within the dry land itself in rivers and lakes.

19. *lest you raise your eyes to the heavens and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the array of the heavens.* Once again, the language harks back to the first account of creation, which concludes with the completion of the earth and the heavens "and all their array." In a historical period rife with religious syncretism and cultural assimilation, the writer stresses the dangerous enchantment of the beauty of the natural world, which could easily lead people to deify and worship the various manifestations of that beauty.

for the LORD your God allotted them to all the peoples under the heavens. This notion, which will be picked up again in the Song of Moses (chapter 32), is a curious one by the lights of later monotheism. To Israel the worship of the one overmastering God was assigned, whereas the other nations were entrusted to the supervision of lesser celestial beings, *beney ha'elohim* ("the sons of God") and came to worship these intermediary beings as though they were autonomous deities. Polytheism, in this view, is a reflection of the fact that the sundry nations, unlike Israel, have not been chosen by the one God to serve Him.

20. *But you did the LORD take and He brought you out from the iron's forge.* The argument of the sermon now moves another step back in time, from Sinai to the Exodus. The origins of Israel as a people subject to another people in whose land it dwelled, rescued from the crucible of slavery by God, are adduced as further evidence of God's unique election of Israel.

a people in estate. Literally, a people-estate—God's special property.

21. *the LORD was incensed with me because of your words.* Again, the barring of Moses from the promised land is attributed not to any act or gesture of his —for here he is the impeccable leader, God's mouthpiece—but to the mistrustful words of the Israelites in the incident of the spies.

26. *I have called to witness against you the heavens and the earth.* It was conventional in ancient Near Eastern treaties to invoke heaven and earth as witnesses, but the word pair here also nicely echoes the allusions to the Creation story in previous verses. God's heaven and earth are everlasting, but Israel will be all too ephemeral if it worships images of the natural world.

27. *And the LORD will scatter you among the peoples.* This dire prospect, which is not within the purview of the Book of Exodus, haunts the Deuteronomist, writing in a period after the Neo-Assyrian empire had instituted a policy of deporting substantial elements of subjugated populations in order to clear the conquered territory for colonization. Indeed, some sections of the book, including this one, may have been written in the Babylonian exile.

28. *And you shall worship there their gods that are human handiwork.* The ultimate catastrophe of exile is viewed as assimilation into the local pagan cults—the fate, one may reasonably surmise, of most of those exiled from the ten northern tribes after the Neo-Assyrian conquest in 721 B.C.E. and some of those exiled in 586 by the Babylonians.

wood and stone, which neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell. In the earlier books of the Torah, the gods worshipped by the other nations are imagined as lesser entities, impotent in the face of YHWH's overwhelming superiority and bound to be reduced to nullity in any competition with the God of Israel. In the antipagan polemic of Deuteronomy, as in some of the contemporaneous and slightly later Prophets, polytheism is jeeringly represented as imbecile fetishism.

29. *with all your heart and with all your being.* This phrase, with its revivalist fervor, is a recurrent one in the rhetoric of Deuteronomy.

30. *heed His voice.* The primary meaning of the verb, which has already appeared several times in this sermon, is "hear," but the preposition *bE* that follows it requires the specific sense of "heed."

32–33. *from the day God created a human on the earth . . . Has a people heard God's voice speaking from the midst of the fire.* These sentences bind together in a summarizing flourish the topics of creation and the Sinai epiphany that were underscored earlier in this speech.

33. *still lived.* The "still" is added in the translation for clarity. The obvious sense of the verb is "survived" but the level of diction of that English term would betray the monosyllabic plainness of the Hebrew. "Still lived," it should be noted, takes us back to "so you may live" at the very beginning of the sermon.

34. *to take Him a nation from within a nation.* In the almost musical structure of this oratory, we now move back to the invocation of the Exodus as testimony in verse 20.

37. *their seed after them.* The Hebrew says literally "his seed after him," but there is no real confusion because the usage has simply moved to a grammatical singular for a collective entity.

39. *take to your heart.* The literal sense of the verb before "heart" is "bring back," aligning this usage with the references to turning back to God in exile.

41–43. This brief unit on the towns of asylum, repeating a regulation laid down in greater detail in Numbers, appears to be out of place here and may have originally belonged with the material on the apportioning of the land in chapter 3.

44. *And this is the teaching.* The preamble to Deuteronomy was completed at verse 40. Verses 44–49 are a formal introduction to the long discourse that follows, which will begin with a reiteration of the Decalogue, to be followed by exhortations to obey God's teaching and then by a series of specific laws.

CHAPTER 5

[1]And Moses called to all Israel and said to them,
“Hear, Israel, the statutes and the laws that I am about
to speak in your hearing today, and you shall learn
them and watch to do them. [2]The LORD your God
sealed a covenant with us at Horeb. [3]Not with our
fathers did the LORD seal this covenant but with us—
we who are here today, all of us alive. [4]Face-to-face
did the LORD speak with you on the mountain from
the midst of the fire. [5]I was standing between the
LORD and you at that time to tell you the word of the
LORD—for you were afraid in the face of the fire and
did not go up the mountain,—saying,

““[6]I am the LORD your God Who brought you out of
the land of Egypt, out of the house of slaves. [7]You
shall have no other gods beside Me. [8]You shall make
you no carved likeness, no image of what is in the
heavens above or what is on the earth below or what is
in the waters beneath the earth. [9]You shall not bow to

them and you shall not worship them, for I am the LORD your God, a jealous god, reckoning the crime of fathers with sons, and with the third generation and with the fourth, for my foes, [10]and doing kindness to the thousandth generation for My friends and for those who keep My commands. [11]You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not acquit whosoever takes His name in vain. [12]Keep the sabbath day to hallow it as the LORD your God has charged you. [13]Six days you shall work and you shall do your tasks, [14]but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. You shall do no task, you and your son and your daughter and your male slave and your slavegirl and your ox and your donkey and all your beasts and your sojourner who is within your gates, so that your male slave and your slavegirl may rest like you. [15]And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore did the LORD charge you to make the sabbath day. [16]Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God charged you, so that your days may be long and so that He may do well with you on the soil that the LORD your God has given you. [17]You shall not murder. And you shall not commit adultery. And you shall not steal.

And you shall not bear vain witness against your fellow man. [18]And you shall not covet your fellow man's wife, and you shall not desire your fellow man's house, his field, or his male servant or his slavegirl, his ox or his donkey, or anything that your fellow man has.' [19]These words did the LORD speak to your whole assembly at the mountain from the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the dense fog, in a great voice, and nothing more. And He wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me. [20]And it happened, when you heard the voice from the midst of the darkness, with the mountain burning in fire, that you came forward to me, all the heads of your tribes and your elders. [21]And you said, 'Look, the LORD our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the fire. This day we have seen that the LORD can speak to man and he may live. [22]And now, why should we die, for this great fire will consume us. If we hear again the voice of the LORD our God, we shall die. [23]For who is mortal flesh that has heard the voice of the living God speaking from the midst of the fire as we did and has lived? [24]You go near and hear all that the LORD our God says, and you it is who will speak to us all that the LORD our God speaks to you, and we shall hear and do.' [25]And the LORD heard the sound of your words when you spoke to me, and the

LORD said to me, ‘I have heard the sound of the words of this people which they spoke to you. They have done well in all that they have spoken. [26]Would that they had this heart of theirs to fear Me and to keep My commands for all time, so that it would go well with them and with their sons forever. [27]Go, say to them, Return you to your tents. [28]And you, stand here by Me and I shall speak to you all the commands and the statutes and the laws that you will teach them, and they will do them in the land that I am about to give them to take hold of it. [29]And you shall watch to do as the LORD your God has charged you. [30]You shall not swerve to the right or left. In all the way that the LORD your God has charged you shall you go, so that you may live and it will be well with you, and you will long endure on the land of which you take hold.’”

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *sealed a covenant*. As everywhere in biblical Hebrew, the literal sense of this idiom is “cut a covenant.” The use of that verb may originate in the cutting of pieces of animals in the covenantal ritual, as in the solemn pact between Abraham and God in Genesis 15.

3. *with us—we who are here today, all of us alive.* The heavy emphasis of Moses’s language, in which, exceptionally, “us” in the accusative is followed by “we” in the nominative and then the triple language of spatial and temporal

presence, “here,” “today,” “alive,” powerfully dramatizes the logic of reenactment at the heart of Deuteronomy. This book is framed as a renewal, through rehearsal, of the law. Its initial seventh-century B.C.E. audience is constantly invited to imagine itself in the shoes, or sandals, of the Israelites who stood before Moses just east of the Jordan as he repeated the law. Moses’s rhetoric, in turn, repeatedly evokes the physical, witnessing presence of the audience he addresses as he reiterates the divine law revealed a generation earlier at Sinai.

5. *I was standing between the* LORD *and you . . . for you were afraid*. The seeming contradiction between this verse and the immediately preceding one (“Face-to-face did the LORD speak with you”) has occasioned much exegetical ingenuity, but there is actually strong thematic and narrative logic in the movement from verse 4 to verse 5. The parallel account in Exodus 19 places reiterated emphasis on the idea that the people must remain at a distance, not even touching the base of the mountain, while Moses acts as their intermediary and goes up to the heights to hear God’s words. The Deuteronomist scarcely wants to discard this notion of Moses’s necessary mediation, but, with his own concern for dramatizing Israel as the living aural witnesses of the great epiphany, he introduces two distinct, successive moments in the Sinai experience. God actually addresses the people face-to-face, conveying to them from the midst of the fire the words of revelation that they and their descendants are to remember perpetually. The people, however, cannot tolerate the fearsome directness of this divine address; they recoil from the ascent to the mountaintop and instead allow Moses to act as their intermediary.

in the face of. The verb “to fear” often is followed by a simple direct object. The preposition *mipney*, “in the face of,” pointedly glances back at “face-to-face” and also amplifies the experience of fear because it suggests a frightened drawing back from before, from the presence, from the face of, the feared object

6–18. This version of the Decalogue is in most respects textually identical with the one that appears in Exodus 20:2–17. For elucidation of many of the significant details, see the commentary on those verses in Exodus. The comments here will be limited to the points where the present version differs from the one in Exodus.

8. *no carved likeness, no image.* The Hebrew syntax could also be construed as a construct state—i.e., "no carved likeness of an image." The version in Exodus reads "no carved likeness and no image," which is probably a difference without an important distinction.

9. *and with the third generation.* The initial "and" is an addition of our text. Its absence in Exodus 20:5 produces a tighter rhythmic effect.

12. *Keep the sabbath day.* The Exodus version has "remember" (that is, be mindful of) rather than "keep." The Midrash Mekhilta famously announced, "'keep' and 'remember' in a singular utterance," and the two acts are, indeed, joined in a tight nexus: because we remember or are mindful of something, we keep it. But *shamor*, "keep," "observe," "watch," is a recurrent term in the didactic rhetoric of Deuteronomy, and so it is hardly surprising that this verb would be favored here.

as the LORD your God has charged you. This Deuteronomic clause of divine injunction is absent in Exodus 20.

14. *and your male slave.* Again, the initial "and" is added in this version. Similarly, each of the last four commandments here (verses 17–18) is introduced by an "and" lacking in the Exodus text. Though the difference is not major, the lapidary abruptness of the version without the "and's" lends support to the assumption that it is the primary text while the one here is a secondary elaboration, although one that in most respects hews very close to the original.

your ox and your donkey. Exodus has only "your beast." Ox and donkey are a kind of synecdoche for all beasts of burden, and part of the legal vocabulary of Deuteronomy.

so that your male slave and your slavegirl may rest like you. This entire clause is absent in Exodus. It serves as a lead-in to the next verse, also lacking in Exodus, in which the liberation from Egypt and the memory of slavery are invoked as the grounds for the sabbath. In Exodus, on the other hand, the sabbath is explained as *imitatio dei*—just as God rested after the six days of creation, Israel is enjoined to rest on the seventh day. The difference between these two rationales is at least in part a difference in narrative location. The initial iteration of the Decalogue occurs in the direct narration of the awe-inspiring Sinai epiphany, when God, descending from the heavens to make

His words known to Israel, powerfully manifests Himself as Creator of heaven and earth. The present reiteration of the Decalogue takes place at the moment Israel is poised to enter the promised land, establish a society, and exercise power over others.

16. *as the LORD your God charged you.* Precisely as in verse 12, this clause is added to the formulation of the corresponding commandment in Exodus.

and so that He may do well with you. This entire clause is absent in the Exodus version of this commandment, and, with its didactic emphasis of synonymity with the previous clause, is a strong indication that this formulation of the Decalogue is a secondary elaboration.

17. *vain witness.* The Exodus version reads "false witness." The present formulation chooses a synonym for "false," "empty," "lying" that is the same word used in "You shall not take [literally, bear] the name of the LORD your God in vain." This translation preserves that repetition of terms.

18. *his field.* This specification is not part of the Exodus version.

his ox. This is one of only two points in this version of the Decalogue where an initial *wE* ("and" or "or") present in Exodus is deleted, rather than the other way around.

19. *and nothing more.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "and He did not add."

21. *we have heard His voice from the midst of the fire.* This speech of the people is a detailed unpacking of what was indicated compactly, and proleptically, in verse 5. The people in this version of the story that stresses immediate witnessing have actually heard God's voice speaking the Ten Words from the summit of the mountain engulfed in fire. They draw back in terror—presumably, to the very bottom of the mountain or the approach to it—and make it clear, as they implore Moses to serve henceforth as their intermediary, that this is not an experience they would venture to undergo a second time. Thus the story succeeds in having it both ways—representing the people as having heard God's words with their own ears and firmly establishing Moses in his role as teacher and necessary intermediary between Israel and God.

23. *mortal flesh.* Literally, "all flesh."

the living God . . . has lived. There is a striking play between God's overwhelmingly powerful, incandescent, eternal life and the fragile life of ephemeral man exposed to this terrific presence of the deity. Some scholars have also seen in the epitaph "living God" a counterpoint to the lifeless fetishes that the Deuteronomist often mocks.

25. *They have done well in all that they have spoken.* At the conclusion of the episode, God resoundingly confirms the rightness of the people's entreaty that Moses stand as gobetween in all communications from the deity. One may detect in all this the interest of a royal scribal elite promoting itself as the necessary authoritative mediators of God's words for the people.

30. *so that you may live and it will be well with you, and you will long endure on the land.* This didactic flourish reflects an underlying view of history in Deuteronomy. In this era of incursions by great empires, of deportations and destruction of kingdoms, Israel's endurance on the land promised to it is constantly, dangerously, contingent on its faithfully hewing to all that God has commanded.

CHAPTER 6

[1]“And this is the command, the statutes and the laws
that the LORD your God has charged you to teach you
to do in the land into which you are about to cross to
take hold of it. [2]So that you will fear the LORD your
God to keep all His statutes and His commands which
I charge you—you and your son and your son’s son, all
the days of your life; and so that your days will be
long. [3]And you shall hear, Israel, and you shall keep to
do, that it may go well with you, and that you may
greatly multiply, as the LORD God of your fathers has
spoken concerning you, a land flowing with milk and
honey.

[4]Hear, Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one.
[5]And you shall love the LORD your God with all your
heart and with all your being and with all your might.
[6]And these words that I charge you today shall be upon
your heart. [7]And you shall rehearse them to your sons
and speak of them when you sit in your house and

when you go on the way and when you lie down and when you rise. [8]And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as circlets between your eyes. [9]And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and in your gates.

[10]"And it shall come about when the LORD your God brings you to the land that He swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to you—great and goodly towns that you did not build, [11]and houses filled with all good that you did not fill, and hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant, you will eat and be sated. [12]Watch yourself, lest you forget the LORD Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slaves. [13]The LORD your God you shall fear, and Him shall you serve, and by His name shall you swear. [14]You shall not go after other gods, from the gods of the people who are all around you. [15]For the LORD your God is a jealous god in your midst. Lest the wrath of the LORD your God flare against you and He destroy you from the face of the earth. [16]You shall not try the LORD your God as you tried Him at Massah. [17]You shall surely keep the command of the LORD your God, and His treaty terms and His statutes with

which He charged you. [18]And you shall do what is right and good in the eyes of the LORD, so that it may go well with you, and you shall come and take hold of the good land that the LORD swore to your fathers [19]to drive back all your enemies before you, as the LORD has spoken.

[20]"Should your son ask you tomorrow, saying, 'What are the treaty terms and the statutes and the laws with which the LORD our God has charged you?' [21]You shall say to your son, 'Slaves were we to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the LORD brought us out with a strong hand. [22]And the LORD wrought great and evil signs and portents against Egypt, against Pharaoh and against all his house, before our eyes. [23]But us did He take out from there, so that He might bring us to give us the land that He swore to our fathers. [24]And the LORD charged us to do these statutes, to fear the LORD our God for our own good always, to keep us in life as on this day. [25]And it will be a merit for us if we keep to do all this that is commanded before the LORD our God as He has charged us.'"

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *that it may go well with you*. Again and again, the Deuteronomist stresses the causal link between loyalty to God and prospering in the land. This notion is variously adumbrated in earlier biblical texts but never given the central emphasis it enjoys here as an overriding conception of history.

a land flowing with milk and honey. The syntactic connection of this phrase with the whole clause is a little obscure, or at least elliptic. Some scholars supply "in" before "a land." The Septuagint and the Peshitta read, "to give you a land."

4. *Hear, Israel.* This entire passage, through to verse 9, has been aptly described as a catechism, and it entirely fits its character as an exhortation to hew to God's teachings that it later should have been incorporated in the daily liturgy, recited twice each day in Jewish worship. Some translators render *ʾeḥad*, "one," as "alone," but the evidence that this common Hebrew numeral term ever meant that is questionable. The statement stands, then, as it has been traditionally construed, as a ringing declaration of monotheism. Both Rashi and Abraham ibn Ezra point to Zechariah 14:9 as an indication that in days to come the LORD our God will be recognized as the one God by all.

5. *And you shall love the LORD your God.* It is a new emphasis of Deuteronomy to add to the traditional fear of the LORD the emotion of love, perhaps in an effort to deepen psychologically the conception of monotheism. Ibn Ezra links this injunction with the immediately preceding declaration of God's oneness: "Since we have no other god but only Him alone, you have to love Him, for we have no other god." In this view, the lack of rivals obliges us to make this divine suitor the object of our affection. But "love" also belongs to the ancient Near Eastern language of international relations, appearing in treaties in which fealty is sworn to a political overlord.

with all your heart. The heart is the seat of understanding in biblical physiology, but it is also associated with feelings.

with all your being. The Hebrew *nefesh* means "life-breath" or "essential self." The traditional translation of "soul," preserved in many recent versions, is misleading because it suggests a body-soul split alien to biblical thinking.

with all your might. The Hebrew *meʾod* elsewhere is an adverb ("very"), not a noun. It is not clear whether this distinctive Deuteronomic usage reflects stylistic inventiveness in converting one part of speech to another or rather

records an idiomatic sense of the word that is simply not used elsewhere in the biblical corpus.

7. *rehearse.* The Hebrew verb *shinen* is construed here, in accord with Jeffrey H. Tigay, as a variant of *shanah*, "to repeat." Many commentators, medieval and modern, insist on the fact that the root elsewhere means "sharp," and thus that the meaning here would be "to teach incisively" or even "to incise upon." It may well be that the writer is punning on the two phonetically related verbal roots in order to suggest something like "to rehearse with incisive effect."

house . . . way . . . lie down . . . rise. These two pairs of terms, each of which is what is technically called a merism, two opposing terms that also imply everything between them, obviously have the sense of wherever you are, whatever you do.

8. *a sign on your hand . . . circlets between your eyes*. Perhaps the original meaning is metaphorical, but inscribed amulets were in fact common in the ancient Near East, and early rabbinic Judaism would interpret these words literally as the injunction for wearing *tephillin*, small leather boxes on hand and forehead containing this and other biblical passages written on parchment. The denotation and etymology of "circlet," *totafot*, are not entirely certain, though the precedent of Egyptian ornaments worn on the forehead suggests itself. See the comment on Exodus 13:9.

9. *in your gates.* These would be the gates of the city, since houses did not have gates.

11. *you will eat and be sated.* The full belly is the enemy of faith in Deuteronomy. The comforts of prosperity are thought of as leading to complacency, or perhaps even to cultic assimilationism—worshipping the gods of the previous inhabitants who planted those groves and vineyards and hewed those cisterns. Thus the history of Israel teeters on the edge of a precarious balance: if Israel punctiliously adheres to the commands of its God, it will prosper; but when it prospers, it runs the danger of falling away from its loyalty to God.

15. *For the LORD your God is a jealous God.* As in similar contexts elsewhere, it is quite likely that the adjective *qanaʿ* refers to jealousy, even in the sexual

sense, rather than to "passion," as some have claimed, for what is at stake is that the LORD will brook no rivals.

the face of the earth. The Hebrew *ʾadamah* could also mean "soil" or "land," referring to the tenure of this agricultural people in the land of Israel, but it may be more plausible to see this verse as a threat of total destruction, thus warranting the translation of *ʾadamah* as "earth."

16. *You shall not try the LORD your God.* For the incident at Massah (a name that means "trial"), see Exodus 17:1–7. The trial in Exodus was the people's lack of faith that God would provide for them in the wilderness. In this prospective instance, all sorts of bounty would have already been provided to them, and yet, with far less warrant than their ancestors, they would "try" or provoke God by casting aside their obligations of loyalty to Him.

20. *Should your son ask you.* The didactic impulse of Deuteronomy is here made perfectly explicit in the catechistic form of the entire passage. Appropriately, the passage was incorporated into the text of the Passover Haggadah as part of the rationale for the ritual retelling of the Exodus story.

22. *before our eyes.* The verse concluded by this phrase is a stringing together of formulaic locutions repeatedly used in the Plagues narrative in Exodus. What this final phrase adds is the reiterated emphasis in Deuteronomy on Israel's having been ocular witness to God's saving power.

25. *a merit.* This is the most likely meaning here of the Hebrew *tsedaqah*, which also means "righteousness" and "innocence." (For the sense of "merit," compare Genesis 15:6.) But it also occasionally means something like "bounty" (see Judges 5:11), and that sense could also work here.

CHAPTER 7

[1]“When the LORD your God brings you to the land
to which you are coming to take hold of it, He will
cast off many nations from before you—the Hittite and
the Girgashite and the Amorite and the Canaanite and
the Perizzite and the Hivvite and the Jebusite, seven
nations more numerous and mightier than you. [2]And
the LORD your God will give them before you and
you shall strike them down. You shall surely put them
under the ban. You shall not seal a covenant with them
and shall show them no mercy. [3]You shall not
intermarry with them. You shall not give your
daughter to his son, nor shall you take his daughter for
your son. [4]For he will make your son swerve from
following Me, and they will worship other gods, and
the LORD’s wrath will flare against you and He will
swiftly destroy you. [5]Rather, thus shall you do to them:
their altars you shall smash and their cultic pillars you
shall shatter and their sacred trees you shall chop down
and their images you shall burn in fire. [6]For you are a
holy people to the LORD your God. You the LORD

has chosen to become for Him a treasured people among all the peoples that are on the face of the earth. [7]Not because you are more numerous than all the peoples did the LORD desire you and choose you, for you are the fewest of all the peoples. [8]But because of the LORD's love for you and because of His keeping the vow that He swore to your fathers He has brought you out with a strong hand and ransomed you from the house of slaves, from the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. [9]And you shall know that the LORD your God, He is God, the steadfast god keeping the covenant and the faith for those who love Him and keeping His commands to the thousandth generation, [10]but He pays back those who hate Him to their face to make them perish. He will not delay—him who hates Him to his face He will pay back. [11]And you shall keep what is commanded and the statutes and the laws that I charge you today to do.

[12]"And it shall come about in consequence of your heeding these laws when you keep and do them, that the LORD your God will keep the covenant and the faith for you that he swore to your fathers. [13]And He will love you and bless you and multiply you and bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your soil, your

grain and your wine and your oil, the spawn of your herds and the calvings of your flock, upon the soil that He swore to your fathers to give to you. [14]Blessed shall you be more than all the peoples. There shall be no sterile male nor female among you nor among your beasts. [15]And the LORD shall turn away from you all illness, and all the evil ailments of Egypt which you knew He will not put upon you but will set them on all who hate you. [16]And you shall devour all the peoples that the LORD your God is about to give to you. Your eye shall not pity them and you shall not worship their gods, for it is a snare to you. [17]Should you say in your heart, 'These nations are more numerous than I. How can I dispossess them?' [18]You shall not fear them. You shall surely remember what the LORD your God did to Pharaoh, and to all Egypt, [19]the great trials that your own eyes saw, the signs and the portents and the strong hand and the outstretched arm with which the LORD your God brought you out. So will the LORD your God do to all the peoples whom you fear. [20]And the hornet, too, will the LORD your God send against them, until those who remain and hide from you perish. [21]You shall not be terrified by them, for the LORD your God is in your midst, a great and fearsome god. [22]And the LORD your God will cast off these nations from before you little by little. You will

not be able to put an end to them swiftly, lest the beasts of the field multiply against you. [23]And the LORD your God will give them before you and panic them with a great panic until they are destroyed. [24]And He will give their kings into your hand, and you shall make their name perish from under the heavens. No man will stand up before you, until you destroy them. [25]The images of their gods you shall burn in fire. You shall not covet the silver and gold upon them and take it for yourself, lest you be snared by it, for it is an abhorrence to the LORD your God. [26]And you shall bring no abhorrent thing into your house or you will be under the ban like it. You shall surely despise it and shall surely abhor it, for it is under the ban."

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *cast off*. The verbal root *n-sh-l* is elsewhere used for slipping off one's sandals or for an axehead slipping out of its haft.

nations more numerous and mightier than you. In earlier biblical accounts, the almost preternatural numerical growth of the Hebrew people is stressed. In the historical reality of the later seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E., a writer would have been keenly aware that Israel was a tiny nation surrounded by large and powerful peoples.

2. *You shall surely put them under the ban.* The verb *haḥarim* implies both total destruction and a solemn vow to carry out that grim purpose without

taking prisoners as slaves and with no secular exploitation of the booty. Moshe Weinfeld calls the emphasis on *ḥerem* (the ban) in Deuteronomy "utopian" and "wishful thinking." There is, thankfully, no archaeological evidence that this program of annihilation was ever implemented, but the insistence on it here reflects an agenda of absolute separation of Israelite and Canaanite populations for the purpose of preserving cultic purity (compare verses 3–4).

3. *You shall not give your daughter to his son.* A moment before, the Canaanites were a plural, "them." But this characteristic easy switch from plural to singular is a way of focusing on the specific act of the individual Israelite about to marry off his daughter to a Canaanite son. Marriages, of course, were arranged by the families, not by the bride and groom.

4. *he will make your son swerve.* The antecedent is ambiguous: it could be the just mentioned son who would marry your daughter, or it could be the singular, generic "Canaanite."

from following Me. Literally, "from after me."

5. *their altars you shall smash.* This string of short clauses is a vivid instance of the powerful rhetoric of iconoclastic theology that informs Deuteronomy. In quasipoetic semantic parallelism, the statement moves from one verb of violent destruction to another, more intense one, ending with the utter consummation by fire of all pagan icons.

6. *a treasured people among all the peoples.* This is a variant formulation of the phrase that appears in Exodus 19:5. The term for "treasure," *segulah*, is one that is used in other ancient Semitic languages to designate a relationship of privileged vassalage.

7. *Not because you are more numerous than all the peoples.* See the comment on the related formulation in verse 1.

8. *ransomed.* This verb is chosen for the liberation from Egypt because it is what one does to free a captive. In the event, God pays for the liberation not with ransom money but with terrible acts of retribution.

9–10. These verses amount to a summarizing paraphrase of the revelation to Moses of the divine attributes in Exodus 34 and in Numbers 14.

12. *in consequence of.* The relatively unusual Hebrew preposition *ʿeqev* literally means "on the heel[s] of."

13. *multiply . . . bless the fruit*. These terms hark back to the injunction in Genesis, here reinterpreted as a blessing actively initiated by God, to be fruitful and multiply.

grain . . . wine . . . oil . . . spawn . . . calvings. Each of these five terms is not the common one for the thing it designates. While redolent of the concrete reality of agriculture and animal husbandry, each of these words is also the name of a pagan deity associated with fertility. This usage is most evident in the exceptional *ʿashterot tsoʾnekha*, "the calvings of your flock," for *ʿashterot* is transparently the plural form of Ashtoreth, the Canaanite fertility goddess. In the antipagan polemic impetus of the Deuteronomic oration, the God of Israel supersedes all these agricultural deities as the source of fertility, reducing them to mere common nouns.

18. *You shall surely remember what the* LORD *your God did to Pharaoh.* Again and again in Deuteronomy, the Exodus story of the founding of the nation through liberation from slavery is invoked in order to exhort the people to confront their own frightening historical reality: threatened by overwhelmingly greater powers—most urgently, by the Assyrian and then the Babylonian empire—they are enjoined to recall the great narrative in which God's intervention enabled them to triumph over Egypt's imperial might. Hence the contemporary relevance of "these nations are more numerous than I," which surely goes beyond the immediate reference to the Canaanite peoples.

20. *the hornet.* The meaning of the Hebrew term *tsirʿah* is uncertain. See the philological comment on Exodus 23:28, where it is suggested that it might be a supernatural agency, the Smasher. Alternately, since the verb at the beginning of the next verse, "be terrified," reflects the same three consonants in reversed order (*ʿ-r-ts*) and appears to play on the sound of *tsirʿah*, it might mean the Terror. Abraham ibn Ezra ingeniously identifies it as some kind of epidemic by relating it to *tsaraʿat* (which also has the root *ts-r-ʿ*), a contagious skin disease.

22. *lest the beasts of the field multiply against you.* The biblical writers had to confront the repeated contradiction between the promise of a grand conquest of the Canaanite peoples and the historical fact that the conquest was only partial and gradual. Various explanations are offered in Exodus and in Judges, but this is one of the most strained.

26. *you shall bring no abhorrent thing into your house . . . for it is under the ban*. Anything under the ban (*ḥerem*) is taboo and marked for utter destruction. The antipagan polemic of Deuteronomy here extends to a fear that the material allure of the gold and silver images may lead Israelites to appropriate them, an appropriation perhaps not initially intended for cultic purposes but that could lead to the worship of the images.

CHAPTER 8

[1]“All the command which I charge you today you
shall keep to do, in order that you may live and
multiply and come and take hold of the land which the
LORD has sworn to your fathers. [2]And you shall
remember all the way on which the LORD your God
led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to
afflict you, to try you, to know what was in your heart,
whether you would keep His commands or not. [3]And
He afflicted you and made you hunger and fed you the
manna, which you did not know nor did your fathers
know, in order to make you know that not on bread
alone does the human live but on every utterance of
the LORD’s mouth does the human live. [4]Your cloak
did not wear out upon you nor did your foot swell
these forty years. [5]And you knew in your heart that as
a man chastises his son the LORD your God chastises
you. [6]And you shall keep the commands of the LORD
your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him. [7]For
the LORD your God is about to bring you to a goodly
land, a land of brooks of water, springs and deeps

coming out in valley and in mountain, [8]a land of wheat
and barley and vines and figs and pomegranates, a land
of oil olives and honey, [9]a land where not in penury
will you eat bread, you will lack nothing in it, a land
whose stones are iron and from whose mountains you
will hew copper. [10]And you will eat and be sated and
bless the LORD your God on the goodly land that He
has given you. [11]Watch yourself, lest you forget the
LORD your God and not keep His commands and His
laws and His statutes that I charge you today. [12]Lest
you eat and be sated and build goodly houses and
dwell in them. [13]And your cattle and sheep multiply,
and silver and gold multiply for you, and all that you
have multiply. [14]And your heart become haughty and
you forget the LORD your God Who brings you out of
the land of Egypt from the house of slaves, [15]Who
leads you through the great and terrible wilderness—
viper-serpent and scorpions, and thirst, where there is
no water—Who brings water out for you from
flintstone. [16]Who feeds you manna in the wilderness,
which your fathers did not know, in order to afflict you
and in order to try you, to make it go well with you in
your later time. [17]And you will say in your heart, 'My
power and the might of my hand made me this wealth.'
[18]And you will remember the LORD your God, for He
it is Who gives you power to make wealth, in order to

fulfill His covenant that He swore to your fathers as on this day. [19]And it will be, if you indeed forget the LORD your God and go after other gods and worship them and bow to them, I bear witness against you today that you shall surely perish. [20]Like the nations that the LORD causes to perish before you, so shall you perish, inasmuch as you would not heed the voice of the LORD your God."

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *these forty years in the wilderness*. As in many previous passages, the deictic "these" (Hebrew *zeh*) positions Moses's audience as the group that has just undergone the long trial of wandering in the wilderness and has witnessed God's providential power. By implication, the writer's seventh-century B.C.E. audience is invited to imagine itself vicariously in the same position.

in order to afflict you, to try you. "To afflict" (*ʿinah*) is a verb that in other contexts means "to debase" or "to abuse." "To try" is precisely what the Israelites were warned not to do to God (6:16). It is also the verb used for what God does to Abraham in the story of the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22:1). In both cases, either this is a God lacking the absolute foreknowledge ascribed to the deity by later theology, or the trial is essentially a means for man to show his mettle.

3. *the human.* The Hebrew *haʾadam* (literally, "the human") is grammatically masculine but refers to both sexes. (See the comment on Genesis 1:26.) "Man," *ʾish*, in verse 5, is unambiguously masculine because in this society it is the father's role to discipline his son.

4. *Your cloak.* The Hebrew *simlah* is not the general term for "garment," as many English versions render it, but the very outer garment that the fleeing Hebrews "borrowed" from their Egyptian neighbors and laundered before the Sinai epiphany. Thus, the concreteness of the recollected experience of the Exodus is sustained through the precise choice of terms.

7. *a goodly land, a land of brooks of water.* As a complement to the insistent rhetoric of admonition in Deuteronomy ("watch yourself," "and you shall keep the commands," etc.), one also finds a rhetoric of fulfillment, grandly evoking the abundance of the rich land that God is giving to Israel. This long sentence, which some scholars have characterized as "hymnic," rolls on resonantly all the way to the end of verse 9, punctuating its catalogue of the bounty of Canaan with an anaphoric reiteration of "land." The Israelites have been wandering through a parched wilderness "where there is no water" (verse 15), so the catalogue strategically begins with "brooks of water, springs and deeps" before going on to enumerate the agricultural produce and mineral resources of the land.

9. *not in penury.* The term *misken* ("poor man," here with the *ut* suffix of abstraction) is an Akkadian loanword that is quite rare in the Bible, occurring only here and in the late Ecclesiastes. Hence the choice in the translation of a relatively uncommon word for poverty.

10. *And you will eat and be sated and bless the* LORD. This verse became the kernel for the grace after meals in later Jewish tradition, a practice, as the Qumran scrolls reveal, that goes back as far as the late Second Temple period. But from the Deuteronomic viewpoint, the pleasure of eating one's fill carries with it the danger of forgetting one's dependence on God—hence the quick transition to "watch yourself" at the beginning of the next verse.

12. *build goodly houses.* In the related passage in 6:10–14, the houses and all the other material benefits are the work of others, taken over by the Israelites. As Moshe Weinfeld notes, the emphasis in the earlier passage is on forgetting God through sheer effortless affluence, whereas here it is rather the Israelites' satisfaction in the abundance achieved through their own effort that leads them to imagine (verse 17), "My power and the might of my hand made me all this wealth."

15. *viper-serpent.* For a catastrophic episode involving these creatures, see Numbers 21:6–9, and note the comment on Numbers 21:6 for an explanation of this term.

16. *manna in the wilderness . . . in order to afflict you and in order to try you*. These phrases of course mirror verse 3. The rhetorical structure of this whole chapter, as several modern commentators have noted, is carefully contrived in a large chiasm: a: injunction to observe God's commands and live (verse 1); b: trial in the wilderness and the gift of manna (verses 2–5); a': injunction to keep God's commands; c: prospering in the land and thanking God (verses 7–10); c': danger of forgetting God through prosperity (verses 11–14); b': gift of manna and trial in the wilderness (verses 15–16); a": danger of forgetting God's commands and perishing (verses 17–20).

CHAPTER 9

[1]“Hear, Israel, you are about to cross the Jordan to
dispossess nations greater and mightier than you, great
towns, and fortified to the heavens, [2]a great and lofty
people, sons of giants, as you yourself knew and you
yourself heard: Who can stand up before the sons of
giants? [3]And you shall know today that the LORD
your God, He it is crossing over before you, a
consuming fire. He Himself will destroy them and He
will lay them low before you, and you will dispossess
them and make them perish swiftly as the LORD has
spoken to you. [4]Do not say in your heart when the
LORD your God drives them back before you, saying,
‘Through my merit did the LORD bring me to take
hold of this land and through the wickedness of these
nations is the LORD dispossessing them’ before you.
[5]Not through your merit nor through your heart’s
rightness do you come to take hold of their land but
through the wickedness of these nations is the LORD
your God dispossessing them before you and in order
to fulfill the word that the LORD swore to your

fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. [6]And you
shall know that not through your merit is the LORD
your God giving you this goodly land to take hold of it,
for you are a stiff-necked people. [7]Remember, do not
forget, that you infuriated the LORD your God in the
wilderness from the very day you came out of the land
of Egypt until you came to this place, you have been
rebellious against the LORD. [8]And in Horeb you
infuriated the LORD, and the LORD was incensed
with you enough to destroy you. [9]When I went up the
mountain to take the stone tablets, the tablets of the
Covenant that the LORD sealed with you, and I stayed
on the mountain forty days and forty nights, no bread
did I eat nor water did I drink. [10]And the LORD gave
me the two stone tablets, written with the finger of
God, and on them all the words that the LORD spoke
with you from the midst of the fire on the day of the
assembly. [11]And it happened at the end of forty days
and forty nights, the LORD gave me the two stone
tablets, the tablets of the Covenant. [12]And the LORD
said to me, ‘Arise, go down quickly from here, for
your people that you brought out of Egypt has acted
ruinously, they have quickly swerved from the way that
I charged them, they have made them a molten image.’
[13]And the LORD said to me, saying, ‘I have seen this
people and, look, it is a stiff-necked people. [14]Leave

Me be, that I may destroy them and wipe out their name from under the heavens and make you into a greater and mightier nation than they.’ [15]And I turned and came down from the mountain, the mountain burning in fire, and the two tablets of the Covenant in my two hands. [16]And I saw and, look, you offended against the LORD your God, you made you a molten calf, you swerved quickly from the way that the LORD charged you. [17]And I seized the two tablets and flung them from my two hands and smashed them before your eyes. [18]And I threw myself before the LORD as at first, forty days and forty nights—no bread did I eat nor water did I drink—for all your offense which you committed, as you had offended, to do what was evil in the eyes of the LORD, to anger Him. [19]For I was terrified of the blazing wrath with which the LORD was furious enough with you to destroy you, and the LORD listened to me that time as well. [20]And the LORD was greatly enough incensed with Aaron to destroy him, and I interceded in behalf of Aaron, too, at that time. [21]And your offense that you made, the calf, I had taken and burned it in the fire and crushed it, grinding it well, till it was fine, into dust, and I had flung its dust into the wadi that came down from the mountain. [22]And at Taberah and at Massah and at Kibroth-Hattaavah you infuriated the LORD. [23]And

when the LORD sent you from Kadesh-Barnea, saying, ‘Go up and take hold of the land that I have given to you,’ you rebelled against the word of the LORD your God and you did not trust Him, and you did not heed His voice. [24]You have been rebellious against the LORD from the day I knew you. [25]And I threw myself before the LORD the forty days and the forty nights that I threw myself, for the LORD had intended to destroy you. [26]And I interceded with the LORD and said, ‘My Master, LORD, do not bring ruin on Your people and on Your estate that you ransomed through Your greatness, that you brought out from Egypt with a strong hand. [27]Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Turn not to the stiffness of this people nor to its wickedness and its offense. [28]Lest the peoples of the land to which you brought us out from there say, “From the LORD’s inability to bring them into the land of which He spoke to them or from His hatred of them He brought them out to put them to death in the wilderness.” [29]And they are Your people and Your estate that you brought out with Your great power and Your outstretched arm.’”

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *fortified to the heavens*. Literally, "in the heavens." The obvious force of this recurring phrase is that to the Israelite invaders these lofty fortified cities loom high as the sky.

3. *a consuming fire.* This epithet for God, which is coordinate with the repeated emphasis on the notion that at Sinai God spoke from the midst of the fire and that the mountain itself was continuously burning forty days and forty nights (a detail not part of Exodus), reflects the fiercely militant monotheism of Deuteronomy: the one God, Who is the God of Israel, will consume all adversaries.

4. *before you.* Logically this should read "before me," and for that reason the two words are placed here outside the quotation marks, as a reversion to Moses's perspective. One proposed emendation changes *mipanekha*, "before you" to *mipanai ki*, yielding "before me. For [not through your merit] the LORD did bring."

5. *merit . . . wickedness*. Perhaps these antonyms are meant to be understood in their judicial sense, referring to the respective attributes of the person in the right and the person in the wrong in a legal conflict.

6. *stiff-necked.* This idiom for stubbornness is characteristically associated with the episode of the Golden Calf, which will follow here. Various proposals have been made about the origins of the idiom, but the simplest explanation is in its suggestion of rigid pride: instead of bowing the head when submission is appropriate, the stiff-necked person remains presumptuously, defiantly, erect.

8. *enough to destroy you.* "Enough" is merely implied in the Hebrew, as it is again in the recurrence of this idiom in verses 19 and 20.

9. *the tablets of the Covenant.* Of the two equivalent Hebrew terms for "covenant," Exodus favors *ʿedut* and Deuteronomy *berit*. Perhaps the Deuteronomist prefers *berit* because it means only "covenant," whereas *ʿedut* has other meanings as well, and Deuteronomy presents itself in the most explicit terms as the great text of the renewal of Israel's Covenant with God.

10–21. This retelling of the story of the Golden Calf, as the Israeli Bible scholar Moshe Tzippor has justly observed, presupposes the audience's familiarity with the more elaborate account in Exodus 32–33. It is not a consecutive report of the incident, and some significant details are elided. It is, moreover, Moses's first-person account, reflecting what he is told by God on the mountain and then what he sees when he descends from the summit while not directly conveying information that he learns only afterward.

10. *all the words.* The Masoretic Text reads "as all the words" but several ancient versions lack the initial "as."

12. *for your people that you brought out of Egypt.* As Jeffrey H. Tigay and others have noted, God here dissociates himself from Israel—indeed, attributes even the liberation from Egypt to Moses rather than to Himself.

13. *And the LORD said to me.* According to the biblical convention, this reiteration of the formula for introducing speech, with no indication of an intervening response by the interlocutor, suggests that Moses is dumbfounded by the devastating news God reports to him and doesn't know what to say. Now God proceeds beyond announcing this one act of betrayal to a general condemnation of the character of Israel and to the proposal, as in Exodus, to annihilate the people and to begin again with Moses. In this first-person version, Moses does not immediately implore God to renounce the project of destruction as he does in Exodus. Instead, he must go down and see for himself; only afterward will he turn back to God and intercede for Israel.

16. *a molten calf.* God had given Moses the more general information that Israel had made a molten image, *masekhah*. Now, descending into the camp, Moses sees that it is the molten image of a calf, *ʿegel masekhah*, as the report continues to be faithful to his point of view.

18. *threw myself before the LORD.* This verb of prostration, *hitnapel*, is a technical term for supplication, both in biblical and rabbinic Hebrew.

19. *the blazing wrath.* This phrase reflects a hendiadys in the Hebrew, literally "the wrath and the hot-anger."

20. *incensed with Aaron to destroy him.* In this elliptical version of the Golden Calf episode, there is no direct report that it was Aaron who presided over the making of the icon, though that narrative datum is clearly implied by the divine wrath directed against Aaron which is mentioned here. In the parallel account in Exodus, we hear nothing of Aaron's being threatened with death for his complicity. It is likely that this detail is added here in keeping with the fervor of Deuteronomy's polemic against idol worship: any leader of Israel who fostered even a semblance of such cultic defection was worthy of a death sentence.

21. *your offense that you made, the calf.* It is characteristic of Deuteronomy's anti-iconic rhetoric to turn the negative terms "offense," "abhorrence," "abomination" into epithets for idols.

crushed it, grinding it well, till it was fine, into dust. Although the language of the parallel account in Exodus 32:20 is approximately repeated, this version is more thoroughgoing in detailing the process of pulverization and utter destruction—again, in accordance with the vehemence with which Deuteronomy in general conjures up the prospect of obliterating the paraphernalia of pagan worship. Moshe Weinfeld notes linguistic similarities to a Ugaritic account of the destruction of Mot, the god of death.

I had flung its dust into the wadi that came down from the mountain. This detail is a notable departure from the story in Exodus, which has the Israelites forced to drink the water into which the ashes of the burnt idol have been cast. Whatever the reason for that act—both medieval and modern commentators have proposed a trial by ordeal—the very notion of imbibing the residue of an object of wayward worship seems to be repugnant to the Deuteronomist, who prefers to have the residue swept away by a mountain freshet.

24. *You have been rebellious.* The "rebellious" here and the "rebellious" in verse 7 are not mere repetitions but a formal frame (*inclusio*) that defines Israel's behavior from the Exodus down to the episode of the spies.

27. *stiffness.* The Hebrew *qeshi* could also be rendered "hardness," but in all likelihood it is an elliptical form of *qeshi ʿoref*, the quality of being stiff-necked.

28. *the peoples of the land.* The Masoretic Text says only "the land," which would normally require a singular feminine verb, whereas the verb "say" here is conjugated as a masculine plural. The Samaritan Bible, the Septuagint, and some other ancient versions have "the peoples of," *beney*, which seems plausible.

From the LORD's inability . . . or from His hatred of them. This sentence is a citation of the parallel story in Numbers 14:15–16, but no mention is made there of hatred. Since the two alternatives are mutually contradictory, it is best to construe the *waw* that introduces the second alternative not as "and" but as "or."

29. *Your people and Your estate.* The conjunction of the two nouns, *ʿam* and *naḥalah*, which we have noted before in Deuteronomy, is probably a hendiadys, suggesting "Your very own people," "the people that is Your special acquisition."

CHAPTER 10

[1]“At that time the LORD said to me, ‘Carve you two
stone tablets like the first ones and come up to Me on
the mountain, and you shall make you a wooden ark,
[2]that I may write on the tablets the words that were on
the first tablets which you smashed, and you shall place
them in the Ark.’ [3]And I made an ark of acacia wood
and I carved two stone tablets like the first ones, and I
went up the mountain, the two tablets in my hand.
[4]And He wrote on the tablets, like the first writing, the
Ten Words that the LORD had spoken to you on the
mountain from the midst of the fire on the day of the
assembly, and the LORD gave them to me. [5]And I
turned and came down from the mountain and I put
the tablets in the Ark that I had made, and they were
there as the LORD had charged me.”

[6]“And the Israelites journeyed onward from Beeroth-
Bene-Jaakan to Moserah. There Aaron died and he
was buried there, and Eleazar his son served as priest

in his stead. [7]From there they journeyed on to Gudgod
and from Gudgod to Jotbath, a land of brooks of
water. [8]At that time the LORD divided off the tribe of
Levi to bear the Ark of the LORD's Covenant, to
stand before the LORD, to minister unto Him and to
bless in His name, until this day. [9]Therefore Levi has
had no portion and estate with his brothers, the LORD
is his estate, as the LORD your God had spoken to
him. [10]As for me, I stood on the mountain as on the
first days forty days and forty nights, and the LORD
heard me that time, too, He did not want to bring ruin
upon you. [11]And the LORD said to me, 'Rise, go upon
the journey before the people, that they may come and
take hold of the land that I swore to their fathers to
give to them.'

[12]"And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask
of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all
His ways, to love Him, and to worship the LORD your
God with all your heart and with all your being, [13]to
keep the LORD's commands and His statutes that I
charge you today for your own good? [14]Look, the
LORD your God's are the heavens and the heavens
beyond the heavens, the earth and all that is in it.
[15]Only your fathers did the LORD desire to love them,

and He chose their seed after them, chose you from all the peoples as on this day. [16]And you shall circumcise the foreskin of your heart, nor shall you show a stiff neck anymore. [17]For the LORD your God, He is the God of gods and the Master of masters, the great and mighty and fearsome God Who shows no favor and takes no bribe, [18]doing justice for orphan and widow and loving the sojourner to give him bread and cloak. [19]And you shall love the sojourner, for sojourners you were in the land of Egypt. [20]The LORD your God you shall fear, Him you shall worship, and to Him you shall cleave, and in His name you shall swear. [21]He is your praise and He is your God Who did with you these great and fearsome things that your eyes have seen. [22]With seventy persons did your fathers go down to Egypt, and now the LORD your God has set you like the stars of the heavens for multitude."

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *And I made an ark of acacia wood*. In the parallel account in Exodus, it is Bezalel, the master craftsman, who fashions the Ark. The version here may elide Bezalel simply to keep an uninterrupted focus on Moses, or—since this is, after all, Moses's first-person, abbreviated report of the earlier events—he may deem it unnecessary to mention the chief artisan who was, in effect, his agent in carrying out God's instructions for the making of the Ark.

6. *There Aaron died.* Abraham ibn Ezra notes a connection with the previous report of Moses's intercession on behalf of Aaron after the sin of the Golden Calf. He was not killed then, but after forty years he paid the price for his complicity when he died before the people crossed into the promised land.

8. *to stand before the LORD, to minister unto Him.* The first of these two phrases has the idiomatic sense of "stand in attendance," so the two phrases are virtual synonyms, deployed to underscore the role of the Levites as authorized officiants in the LORD's cult.

10. *As for me.* The initial, emphatic first-person pronoun, *we'anokhi*, here serves to mark a transition, taking us back to Moses's narration of his time on the mountain before God after the interruption of the unit that begins with the death of Aaron and ends with the designation of the Levites for cultic duties. Perhaps a contrast may be suggested between the regularized ministrations of the Levites "standing before the LORD" in the established cult and Moses's lonely stand before God on the mountain, desperately pleading on behalf of Israel.

12. *And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you.* These words signal the beginning of a new unit: after Moses's narrative report of the events at Sinai, we have an exhortation or sermon. Several commentators have noted the similarity between these words and those of the prophet Micah: "It was told you, man, what is good and what the LORD demands of you—only doing justice and loving kindness and walking humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

14. *the heavens and the heavens beyond the heavens.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "the heavens of the heavens." This structure often indicates a superlative (as in "the Song of Songs," which is to say, the finest of songs). The basic meaning of the phrase, then, is something like "the utmost heavens," but it is important to retain the repetition of "heavens" in order to suggest the powerful rhetorical flourish the Hebrew achieves through repetition.

15. *Only your fathers did the LORD desire.* Deuteronomy touches here on a fraught theological paradox: its version of Creator and creation is resoundingly monotheistic—YHWH is no local deity but the God of all the

heavens and the earth, and yet, unaccountably, He has decided to choose this one people and show it special affection.

chose you. This second "chose" is added in the translation in order to clarify the syntax, which otherwise would be confusing in English.

16. *you shall circumcise the foreskin of your heart.* This bold metaphoric application of the idea of circumcision to the organ of understanding and feeling amounts to a symbolic reinterpretation of the meaning of circumcision. Here it is not merely the sign in the flesh of Abraham's covenant with God, as enjoined in Genesis 17, but it also betokens the removal of an impeding membrane, achieving a condition of responsive openness to God's word. Paul surely had this verse in mind when he announced the replacement of the circumcision of the flesh by the circumcision of the heart in Romans.

17. *the God of gods and the Master of masters.* Although both these epithets in all likelihood are linguistic fossils of an earlier view in which YHWH was conceived as the most powerful god, not the only one, the plausible sense here is a superlative (as in "the heavens of the heavens"), i.e., "supreme God and supreme Master."

the great and mighty and fearsome God. The imperial monotheism of Deuteronomy often is expressed in this sort of hymnic style, and it is scarcely surprising that this book should have been mined by later Jewish liturgy (this string of divine epithets appears at the beginning of the Amidah prayer recited three times daily).

shows no favor and takes no bribe. There may be a causal connection between this affirmation about God and the previous one: because He is the absolute master of all things, He is absolutely disinterested as judge of humankind since He is beyond all dependence on human gifts and human attempts to curry favor.

18. *doing justice for orphan and widow and loving the sojourner.* Divine disinterestedness is joined with divine compassion for those in the society who are most vulnerable to exploitation—the widow and the orphan and the resident alien. Israel is then exhorted (verse 19) to emulate this attribute of compassion on the grounds of its own experience as an exploited alien people in Egypt.

21. *He is your praise.* Probably, this means that it is Israel's glory to worship the one great God, though the phrase could also mean that the LORD is the object of Israel's praise.

22. *With seventy persons.* This concluding sentence is an orchestrated invocation of three antecedent texts: the report of Jacob's descent into Egypt with seventy persons in Genesis 46 and in Exodus 1 and the promise to Abraham that his seed would be multitudinous as the stars in Genesis 15.

CHAPTER 11

[1]“And you shall love the LORD your God and keep
His watch and His statutes and His laws and His
commands for all time. [2]And you shall know today that
it was not with your sons who did not know and did
not see the LORD your God’s chastisement, His
greatness, His strong hand and His outstretched arm,
[3]and His signs and His deeds that He did in the midst
of Egypt to Pharaoh king of Egypt and to all his land,
[4]and that He did to Egypt’s force, its horses and its
chariots, when He made the waters of the Sea of
Reeds flood over their faces as they pursued after
them, and the LORD made them perish to this day,
[5]and that He did for you in the wilderness until you
came to this place, [6]and that He did to Dathan and to
Abiram, the sons of Eliab son of Reuben, when the
earth gaped open with its mouth and swallowed them
and their households and their tents and everything
existing that was at their feet, in the midst of all Israel,
[7]for your own eyes have seen the LORD’s great deed
that He has done. [8]And you shall keep all the

command which I charge you today, so that you may be strong and come and take hold of the land into which you are about to cross to take hold of it, [9]and so that you may long endure on the soil that the LORD your God swore to your fathers to give to them and to their seed, a land flowing with milk and honey. [10]For the land into which you are coming to take hold of it is not like the land of Egypt from which you went out, where you sow your seed and water it with your foot like a garden of greens. [11]But the land into which you are crossing to take hold of it is a land of mountains and valleys. From the rain of the heavens you will drink water—[12]a land that the LORD your God seeks out perpetually, the eyes of the LORD your God are upon it from the year's beginning to the year's end.

[13]And it shall be, if you indeed heed My commands with which I charge you today to love the LORD your God and to worship Him with all your heart and with all your being, [14]I will give the rain of your land in its season, early rains and late, and you shall gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. [15]And I will give grass in your field to your beast, and you shall eat and be sated. [16]Watch yourselves, lest your heart be seduced and you swerve and worship other gods and

bow to them. [17]And the LORD's wrath flare against you, and He hold back the heavens and there be no rain and the soil give not its yield and you perish swiftly from the goodly land that the LORD is about to give to you. [18]And you shall set these words on your heart and in your very being and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall become circlets between your eyes. [19]And you shall teach them to your sons, to speak of them, when you sit in your house and when you walk on the way and when you lie down and when you arise. [20]And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and in your gates. [21]So that your days may be many, and the days of your sons, on the soil that the LORD swore to your fathers to give to them, as the days of the heavens over the earth. [22]For if you indeed keep all this command which I charge you to do it, to love the LORD your God to walk in all His ways and to cleave to Him, [23]the LORD will dispossess all these nations before you and you will dispossess nations greater and mightier than you. [24]Every place where the sole of your foot treads, yours will be, from the wilderness and the Lebanon, from the River, the Euphrates River, and as far as the Hinder Sea, this will be your territory. [25]No man will stand up before you. Your fear and your dread the LORD your God will set

over the face of the land in which you tread, as He has spoken to you.

[26]"See, I set before you today blessing and curse: [27]the blessing, when you heed the command of the LORD your God with which I charge you today; [28]the curse, if you heed not the command of the LORD your God and swerve from the way that I charge you today, to go after other gods which you did not know. [29]And it shall be, when the LORD your God brings you to the land into which you are coming to take hold of it, I shall set the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal. [30]Are they not across the Jordan beyond the sunset way in the land of the Canaanite in the Arabah opposite the Gilgal beside the Terebinths of Moreh? [31]For you are about to cross the Jordan to come to take hold of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall take hold of it and dwell in it. [32]And you shall keep to do all the statutes and the laws that I set before you today."

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *it was not with your sons*. The particle *ʾet* that prefixes *banim*, "sons," either is a sign of the accusative or means "with." In either case, the verb that should go along with *ʾet* is absent. Rashi plausibly infers an ellipsis, the implied phrase being "I speak today." The omission of the verb may well be because the writer has lost track of the verb as he is caught up in the grand sweep of this sentence, which is quite uncharacteristic of nonoratorical biblical prose and one of the longest sentences in the biblical corpus: the long chain of clauses, gathering in a headlong rush the whole story of the Exodus and the forty years of wandering, does not reach its period until the end of verse 7.

5. *and that He did for you.* The preposition *lakhem* could mean either "for you" or "to you." Jeffrey H. Tigay argues for the latter alternative because the following clause mentions the rebels Dathan and Abiram (see Numbers 16), who were the target of God's devastating punishment. But the phrase "until you came to this place" is a strong indication that the preposition refers chiefly to God's benevolent preservation of Israel through its adversities in the wilderness. Perhaps the writer may have also wanted to exploit the ambiguity of the preposition, quickly indicating, in a manner quite in keeping with Deuteronomic theology, that the flip side of divine protection, if Israel rebels, is divine retribution: what God does for Israel can easily turn into what God does to Israel.

6. *to Dathan and to Abiram.* Korah is not mentioned, probably because the Deuteronomist is interested in the popular tradition of a rebellion of Reubenites for political power rather than in the priestly account of a rebellion of the Korahite clan for sacerdotal privilege. In Numbers 16–17 the two rebellions are intertwined. But the absence of Korah simply stems from the fact that the Deuteronomist seems to have been familiar with J and E but not P.

10. *water it with your foot.* It is not entirely certain what this phrase means. Some scholars have understood it as a reference to some sort of foot pedal used in the Egyptian system of irrigation. Because "foot water" is a biblical euphemism for urine, it has also been proposed that this might be a derisive reference to irrigation with urine, though it is unclear that the Egyptians actually did this. In any case, the lush Nile Valley is elsewhere figured in the

Bible as a fertile garden. The fertility of the more rugged land of Israel is more precarious.

11. *a land of mountains and valleys.* It is thus quite unlike the flat terrain of Egypt, and not amenable to the sort of irrigation system used in Egypt.

12. *the eyes of the* LORD *your God are upon it.* Against the reiterated assertion that "your own eyes have seen" the LORD's great acts, the eyes of the LORD will keep this land under constant watch. The phrase is double-edged: the LORD attends to this land in order to bestow special bounty on it, causing the fructifying rains to fall (verse 14), and the LORD scrutinizes the land, withholding the rains when the people is unfaithful (verse 17). The geographical fact, then, that the land of Israel is dependent on rainfall rather than on irrigation from a central river is both a blessing and a curse. Thus the reflections on divinely guided meteorology set the stage for the binary opposition of the mountain of the blessing and the mountain of the curse in verse 29.

24. *the Hinder Sea.* The reference is to the Mediterranean. The basic orientation—an English term which itself means facing the east—was toward the east, so one word for east was *qedem*, before, and a (relatively rare) term for west was *ʾaḥaron*, "hinder," what is behind.

29. *the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal.* Moshe Weinfeld, ever attentive to Mediterranean parallels, notes that the Greeks as well had foundation ceremonies when they entered into new territories. These ceremonies included inscribing divine instructions on steles, building commemorative stone pillars, and offering sacrifices. All of these elements appear in the ceremony involving the two mountains that is elaborated in chapter 27. The invocations of the mountains of the blessing and of the curse here and in chapter 27 frame the code of laws that constitutes the long central section of Deuteronomy. Weinfeld proposes two reasons for the association of these mountains respectively with the blessing and with the curse: in keeping with the orientation to the east, Gerizim is on the favored right hand and Ebal on the suspect left, and Gerizim is covered with vegetation whereas Ebal is desolate. The theology of Deuteronomy is beautifully concretized in the stark opposition of these two mountains, for the book repeatedly stresses the

forking alternatives of prosperity and disaster, depending on Israel's faithfulness to God's laws.

30. *the sunset way.* That is, the westward way, a road leading from trans-Jordan westward into Canaan.

CHAPTER 12

[1]“These are the statutes and the laws that you shall
keep to do in the land that the LORD, God of your
fathers, has given you to take hold of it all the days
that you live on the soil. [2]You shall utterly destroy all
the places where the nations whom you are to
dispossess worshipped their gods—on the high
mountains and in the valleys and under every lush tree.
[3]And you shall smash their altars and shatter their
sacred pillars, and their cultic poles you shall burn in
fire, and the images of their gods you shall chop down,
and you shall destroy their name from that place. [4]You
shall not do thus for the LORD your God. [5]But to the
place that the LORD your God will choose of all your
tribes to set His name there, to make it dwell, you shall
seek it and come there. [6]And you shall bring there your
burnt offerings and your sacrifices and your tithes and
your hand’s donation and your votive offerings and
your freewill gifts and the firstborn of your herd and
your flock. [7]And you shall eat there before the LORD
your God and you shall rejoice in all that your hand

reaches, you and your households, in which the LORD your God has blessed you. [8]You shall not do as all that we do here today, each man what is right in his eyes. [9]For you have not come as yet to the abiding estate that the LORD your God is about to give to you. [10]And you shall cross the Jordan and dwell in the land that the LORD your God is about to grant you in estate and He will give you abiding haven from all your enemies around, and you shall dwell securely. [11]And it will be, the place that the LORD your God will choose in which to make His name dwell, there you shall bring all that I charge you, your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and your hand's donation and all your choice votive offerings that you vow to the LORD. [12]And you shall rejoice before the LORD your God, you and your sons and your daughters and your male slaves and your slavegirls and the Levite who is within your gates, for he has no portion or estate with you. [13]Watch yourself, lest you offer up your burnt offerings in any place that you see. [14]Rather, in the place that the LORD will choose, in one of your tribes, there you shall offer up your burnt offerings and there you shall do all that I charge you. [15]Only wherever your appetite's craving may be you shall slaughter and eat meat, according to the blessing of the LORD your God that He has given you within all your

gates. The unclean and the clean shall eat it, like the deer or like the gazelle. [16]Only the blood you shall not eat. On the earth you shall spill it like water. [17]You shall not be able to eat within your gates the tithe of your grain and of your wine and of your oil and the firstborn of your herd and your flock and all your votive offerings that you vow and your freewill gifts and your hand's donation. [18]But before the LORD your God you shall eat it in the place that the LORD your God will choose, you and your son and your daughter and your male slave and your slavegirl and the Levite who is in your gates, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God in all that your hand reaches. [19]Watch yourself, lest you abandon the Levite all your days on your soil. [20]When the LORD your God enlarges your territory as He has spoken to you, and you say, 'Let me eat meat,' when your appetite craves eating meat, wherever your appetite's craving may be, you shall eat meat. [21]Should the place be far away from you that the LORD your God will choose to set His name there, you shall slaughter from your herd and from your flock that the LORD has given you as I have charged and you shall eat within your gates wherever your appetite's craving may be. [22]Yet, as the deer or as the gazelle is eaten, thus you shall eat it, the unclean and the clean together shall eat it. [23]Only be strong not to

eat the blood, for the blood is the life and you shall not eat the life with the meat. [24]You shall not eat it. On the earth you shall spill it like water. [25]You shall not eat it, so that it will go well with you and with your sons when you do what is right in the eyes of the LORD. [26]Only your holy things that you will have and your votive offerings you shall bear and come to the place that the LORD will choose. [27]And you shall do your burnt offerings, the meat and the blood, on the altar of the LORD your God, and the blood of your sacrifices shall be spilled on the altar of the LORD your God, but the meat you may eat. [28]Watch and heed all these things that I charge you, so that it will go well with you and with your sons after you for all time when you do what is good and right in the eyes of the LORD your God. [29]When the LORD your God cuts off before you the nations which you are coming there to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, [30]watch yourself, lest you be ensnared after them, after they are destroyed before you, and lest you seek out their gods, saying, 'How do these nations worship their gods? Let me, too, do thus.' [31]You shall not do thus for the LORD your God, for every abhorrence of the LORD that He hates they have done for their gods. For even their sons and their daughters they burn in fire to their gods.

13:1"Everything which I charge you, that shall you keep to do. You shall not add to it and you shall not subtract from it."

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *You shall utterly destroy all the places*. The noun *maqom* is a general term for "place," both in biblical and postbiblical Hebrew, but it also has the more specialized sense in the ancient period of "cultic site," and that is its meaning throughout this passage. There have been exhortations earlier in Deuteronomy to eradicate all vestiges of the local pagan cults, but here that imperative of iconoclasm is coupled with a revolutionary insistence on the centralization of the Israelite cult (verse 5 and repeatedly thereafter). In point of historical fact, what the Israelite religion did was to take over places of Canaanite worship and adapt them for the worship of the God of Israel. (Abraham in Genesis similarly is reported to have built altars at a series of sites that were old Canaanite places of worship.) Later, as Christianity spread through Europe and then to the New World, it would follow the same practice. For the Deuteronomist, the very existence of such local places of worship carries with it the danger of syncretism—the mingling of pagan rituals and concepts with the worship of the one God, and, especially, a leakage of the adoration of natural deities ("on the high mountains and in the valleys and under every lush tree") into the cult of YHWH. Thus, the whole apparatus of the local cults must be utterly destroyed, and instead, one central, exclusive place is to be designated for the worship of Israel's God.

4. *You shall not do thus for the* LORD *your God.* The preposition *lE* can mean either "for" or "to." If it had the latter meaning here, it would refer to smashing idols and cultic pillars and poles, but in any case one is not supposed to use such appurtenances in the worship of YHWH. The reference, then, is to the idea that the LORD is not to be worshipped in local sites (and in dangerously seductive natural settings), as the Canaanites worshipped their

gods, but rather in a single central sanctuary. Compare verse 31, where *lE* can mean only "for."

5. *to set His name there, to make it dwell.* It is characteristic of Deuteronomy's scrupulous avoidance of pagan concretizations of the deity that God is not said to dwell in the sanctuary He will choose, as He is represented repeatedly doing in Exodus, but rather an intermediary agency, God's name, dwells there.

you shall seek it. For clarity's sake, "it" is added.

7. *And you shall eat there before the* LORD. The burnt offerings were wholly consumed by fire on the altar, but in the case of other categories of sacrifice, only some sections of the animal were burned and the rest were reserved for the person bringing the sacrifice to be consumed in a sacred feast, after the sacrifice proper, "before the LORD."

in all that your hand reaches. Still more literally, "all the reach of your hand." The phrase *mishlaḥ-yad* clearly refers to "undertakings," and to the material yield of the undertaking. Appropriately, the phrase has come to mean "vocation" in modern Hebrew.

9. *the abiding estate.* The Hebrew is a hendiadys, *hamenuḥah wehanaḥalah*, literally, "the haven [or the rest] and the estate," meaning secure, permanent inheritance in the land.

10. *grant you in estate . . . give you abiding haven*. The writer now plays with the hendiadys introduced in the previous verse by breaking it apart and using each of the roots as a verb instead of the two nouns. "Abiding" is added in the translation to "give haven" (*hiniaḥ*) in order to preserve this play on the previous word pair.

12. *the Levite . . . for he has no portion or estate with you*. The Levites, as we are repeatedly reminded, had no tribal territory. As long as the countryside was dotted with local shrines, most Levites had a source of living close to hand, officiating at the local cult and taking their share of the offerings brought by the worshippers. One may infer that the centralization of the cult between the late eighth century B.C.E. (Hezekiah's reform) and the late seventh century (Josiah's reform) created a serious economic problem for Levites not employed in the Jerusalem temple, and so they are included here

in the category of vulnerable people who need to be the object of benefaction. The phrase "within your gates" means "wherever you may live," and so refers to Levites outside of Jerusalem.

15. *wherever your appetite's craving may be.* The versatile Hebrew *nefesh* ("life," "life-breath," "person," and also an intensive form of the personal pronoun) is most plausibly construed here as "appetite," the sense it has in Psalms 107:9. The other problem in understanding this phrase turns on the meaning of the initial particle *bE*. Most translators understand it to refer to the degree of craving (Richard Elliott Friedman: "As much as your soul desires") or to the frequency of the craving (New Jewish Publication Society: "whenever you desire"). But *bE* (primary meaning, "in") is more naturally a locative, and for an indication of degree one would expect k^e, "as." The noun phrase itself, *ʾawat nefesh*, suggests intense appetite, and the instructions that follow have to do chiefly with place—that henceforth the Israelites will be allowed to slaughter and eat meat wherever they happen to be, though sacrificial slaughter can take place only on the central altar.

you shall slaughter and eat meat. The verbal root *z-b-ḥ* means both "to slaughter" and "to sacrifice" because in ancient religion the two acts were inseparable. But now that sacrifice at local shrines has been abolished, some mechanism must be established to enable the Israelites to eat meat even when they cannot come to the central place of worship. What follows are innovative regulations for the practice that the rabbis called *sheḥitat ḥulin*, "secular slaughter."

The unclean and the clean shall eat it. In the case of sacrificial meals, only the ritually clean are allowed to partake. For secular meals the restriction does not apply.

like the deer or like the gazelle. The one category of meat always permitted outside the cult was game, neither deer nor gazelle being among the animals specified for sacrificial use. Now, animals otherwise devoted to the cult (sheep, bulls, goats, rams) may be eaten without sacrifice, just as game is eaten.

16. *On the earth you shall spill it like water.* The draining of the blood on the ground stands in contrast to sacrificial slaughter, in which the blood, as part of the ritual, is splashed on the altar by the officiant. The reason for the draining of the blood is spelled out in verse 23.

23. *Only be strong not to eat the blood.* The use of the verb "be strong" in conjunction with the prohibition against the consumption of blood is unusual, something Rashi registers by offering two opposite interpretations (that it is tempting to consume blood, that it is necessary to make a special effort even for a prohibition of something altogether unappetizing). Given the repeated emphasis on strong appetite, one may infer that the writer assumed that the consumption of blood had some special attraction, either because of its appeal to the palate (as, say, in blood sausages) or because, as the end of this verse may suggest, there was a fetishistic belief that imbibing the blood meant imbibing the life-force of the slaughtered beast.

30. *lest you be ensnared after them.* The slightly odd preposition might simply mean "by them," or it could suggest, as it sometimes does elsewhere, "following them," taking up their practices.

31. *You shall not do thus for the LORD your God.* This echo of verse 4 marks a formal *inclusio* structure that frames this whole unit. It begins and now ends with an injunction to avoid all contact with the practices of the local pagan cults. To the paraphernalia of idol worship mentioned at the beginning the writer here adds a moral abomination of pagan religion—child sacrifice. There is at least some archaeological evidence that child sacrifice was practiced among the West Semites, and at the Phoenician colony of Carthage in North Africa large numbers of urns have been unearthed containing the charred bones of children.

13:1. This verse clearly belongs at the end of this unit as a concluding summary, a placement recognized in the New King James Version, which lists it as verse 32 of chapter 12. Most Hebrew Bibles, however, set it as the first verse of chapter 13.

CHAPTER 13

[2]"Should there arise in your midst a prophet or a dreamer of dreams and give you a sign or a portent, [3]and the sign and the portent which he speaks to you come about—saying, 'Let us go after other gods that you do not know and worship them,' [4]you shall not heed the words of that prophet or of that dreamer of dreams, for the LORD your God will be trying you to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your being. [5]After the LORD your God shall you go and Him shall you fear and His commands shall you keep and His voice shall you heed and Him shall you worship and to Him shall you cleave. [6]And that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, for he has spoken falsehood against the LORD your God Who brought you out of the land of Egypt and Who ransomed you from the house of slaves, to thrust you from the way on which the LORD your God charged you to go, and you shall root out the evil from your midst. [7]Should your brother, your mother's son, or your son or your

daughter or the wife of your bosom or your companion who is like your own self incite you in secret, saying, ‘Let us go and worship other gods’ that you did not know, neither you nor your fathers, [8]from the gods of the peoples that are all around them, the ones close to you or the ones far from you from the end of the earth to the end of the earth, [9]you shall not assent to him and you shall not heed him and your eye shall not spare him and you shall not pity and shall not shield him. [10]But you shall surely kill him. Your hand shall be against him first to put him to death and the hand of all the people last. [11]And you shall stone him and he shall die, for he sought to thrust you away from the LORD your God Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slaves. [12]And all Israel will hear and see, and they will not do this evil thing again in your midst. [13]Should you hear in one of your towns which the LORD your God is about to give you to dwell there, saying, [14]“Worthless men have come out from your midst and they have thrust away the inhabitants of their town, saying, “Let us go and worship other gods” that you do not know.’ [15]And you seek and inquire and ask well, and, look, the thing is true and well-founded, this abhorrence has been done in your midst, [16]you shall surely strike down the inhabitants of that town by the edge of the sword,

putting it under the ban, it and everything in it, and its beasts, by the edge of the sword. [17]And all its booty you shall collect in the middle of its square and burn in fire—the town and all its booty—altogether to the LORD your God, and it shall be an everlasting mound, it shall never be rebuilt. [18]And nothing shall cling to your hand from the ban, so that the LORD may turn back from His blazing wrath and give you compassion, and be compassionate to you and make you multiply as He swore to your fathers, [19]when you heed the voice of the LORD your God to keep His commands with which I charge you today, to do what is right in the eyes of the LORD your God."

CHAPTER 13 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *a dreamer of dreams*. This would be a designation for a person who claims to have received a revelation from the deity through the medium of a dream. The Hebrew phrase *ḥolem ḥalom* does not mean a "diviner" or "interpreter of dreams," as some scholars have claimed. The term for someone with the special skill of deciphering the meaning of otherwise enigmatic dreams is *poter ḥalom*, as in the Joseph story.

3. *and the sign and the portent which he speaks to you come about.* This clause creates a certain theological problem because it suggests that the false prophet may have supernatural powers. Abraham ibn Ezra tries to solve the difficulty by proposing that the "sign" is merely a demonstrative gesture on the part of the prophet, as when Isaiah has his servants go naked and barefoot and gives

his sons symbolic names. But the term "come about" argues for the fulfillment of some prediction. The idea stated in the next verse that God is "trying" Israel may intimate that He has allowed the fulfillment of the prediction as an element of the trial: even if the false prophet can show you a portent, the falsehood of his message should be evident in his urging you to worship other gods.

Let us go after other gods that you do not know. As Jeffrey H. Tigay aptly observes, this is "not a literal quotation of the prophet's proposal but Moses's pejorative paraphrase of it." To generalize the underlying stylistic principle, in Deuteronomy the boundaries between quoted speech and the framing speech of Moses are fluid (much more so than the boundaries between quoted speech and narrator's discourse elsewhere in the Bible) because everything here is thematically and structurally dominated by Moses's oratory: he quotes others but readily bends the quotations to his own didactic purpose, quickly slipping from the words of others to his own words. The example here of verses 7–8 is even more extreme.

5. *After the* LORD *your God . . . Him shall you fear and His commands shall you keep . . . Him shall you worship . . . to Him shall you cleave*. This sentence is a vivid example of the vigorous hortatory style of Deuteronomy. God, or a personal pronoun standing in for God, is emphatically set at the head of each brief clause, and the clauses themselves are a series of overlapping interlocked imperatives.

6. *spoken falsehood.* This is the clear meaning of *diber sarah*, as parallel uses in Jeremiah 28:16, 29:32, and in Isaiah 59:13 demonstrate, two of them coupling the unusual *sarah* with the more common *sheqer*, "lie."

10. *But you shall surely kill him.* Your hand shall be against him first. The vehemence of this is startling, especially because the Hebrew does not use the word for judicial execution, *hamit*, "put to death," but *harog*, "kill." No mention is made of a process of judicial review, as in the case of the town seduced into idolatry (verse 15). The impelling idea seems to be that in cases of incitement to idolatry, a person must overcome all natural feelings of compassion (verse 8), even for his own offspring, for a best friend, for a brother (who came out of the same womb), or for the woman who has shared his bed, and carry out justice at once. In the three successive instances here of

incitement to idolatry, there is a progression in the enormity of the crime—from an individual who is a false prophet to the betrayal by close kin or beloved friend to the seduction by a paganizing group of an entire community.

11. *And you shall stone him.* The verb by itself, *saqol*, means "to stone," but here added to it is *ba'avanim*, "with stones," in a gesture of rhetorical emphasis.

16. *strike down the inhabitants of that town . . . putting it under the ban*. This command of implacable, total destruction made the sages of the Talmud (Sanhedrin 10:4–5 and elsewhere) sufficiently uneasy that they proposed a whole series of preconditions to the implementation of the injunction which rendered it nearly impossible to carry out. As in the case of the total destruction of the Canaanite peoples, there is no evidence that the Israelites went about wiping out their own cities when they discovered pagan practices, so this grim law, too, must be understood as "utopian." It is, in other words, a legal expression of the unswerving antipagan polemic that animates Deuteronomy. The eighteenth-century North African Hebrew commentator Or Hayim shows sensitivity to the darkest aspect of this law: its human executors, he observes, are liable to become addicted to the frenzy of bloodthirstiness unleashed in the massacre, captive to the "power of cruelty." (Or Hayim cites the murderous Islamic sect of Assassins as an example.) He then imaginatively cites the phrase "give you compassion" in the verse 18 to argue that God's compassion for Israel will be to save them, even in these terrible circumstances, from the "power of cruelty" and to imbue them with compassion. This is scarcely a likely historical scenario of mob psychology, but it is at least an exegetical effort to conceive an ethos beyond bloodlust even in the midst of this theological militancy.

17. *an everlasting mound.* The Hebrew noun *tell* specifically designates the mound of piled-up earth under which the remnants of a destroyed city are buried. It has been appropriately adopted as a technical term by archaeologists.

CHAPTER 14

[1]“You are children to the LORD your God. You shall
not gash yourselves nor shall you make a bald place on
the front of your head for the dead. [2]For you are a holy
people to the LORD your God, and you has the
LORD chosen to be a treasured people to Him of all
the peoples that are on the face of the earth.

[3]“You shall eat no abhorrent thing. [4]These are the
beasts that you may eat: ox, lamb of sheep and lamb of
goat, [5]gazelle and deer and roebuck and bison and
antelope and mountain sheep, [6]and every beast that has
hooves, that has hooves split in two, bringing up the
cud; among beasts, it you may eat. [7]But this you shall
not eat from those that bring up the cud or have a split
hoof: the camel and the rock-badger and the hare, for
they bring up the cud but they have no hoof. They are
unclean for you. [8]And the pig, for it has a hoof but no
cud. It is unclean for you. Of their flesh you shall not
eat and their carcass you shall not touch. [9]This you

may eat of all that is in the water: whatever has fins
and scales you may eat. [10]And whatever has no fins and
scales you shall not eat. It is unclean for you. [11]Every
clean bird you may eat. [12]And this you shall not eat of
them: the eagle and the vulture and the black vulture,
[13]and the kite and the falcon and the buzzard according
to its kind, [14]and every raven according to its kind,
[15]and the ostrich and the nighthawk and the seagull and
the hawk according to its kind, [16]the horned owl and
the puff owl and the hoot owl, [17]and the pelican and
the fish hawk and the cormorant, [18]and the stork and
the heron according to its kind and the hoopoe and the
bat. [19]And every swarming thing among winged
creatures is unclean for you. They shall not be eaten.
[20]Every clean winged creature you may eat. [21]You shall
not eat any carcass. To the sojourner within your gates
you may give it and he may eat it, or sell it to a
foreigner, for you are a holy people to the LORD your
God. You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk.

[22]"You shall surely tithe all the yield of your seed that
comes out in the field year after year. [23]And you shall
eat before the LORD your God in the place that He
chooses to make His name dwell the tithe of your
grain, of your wine, and of your oil, and the firstborn

of your cattle and your sheep, so that you may learn to fear the LORD your God at all times. [24]And should the way be too much for you, for you cannot carry it, as the place that the LORD your God chooses to make His name dwell there will be too far for you, when the LORD blesses you, [25]then you shall give in silver, and you shall bundle the silver in your hand and you shall go to the place that the LORD your God chooses. [26]And you may give the silver for whatever your appetite craves—cattle and sheep and wine and strong drink and whatever your appetite may prompt you to ask—and you shall eat there before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your household. [27]And the Levite who is within your gates, you shall not abandon him, for he has no share and estate with you. [28]At the end of three years you shall take out all the tithe of your yield in that year and set it down within your gates. [29]And the Levite shall come, for he has no share and estate with you, and the sojourner and the orphan and the widow who are within your gates, and they shall eat and be sated, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hand that you do."

CHAPTER 14 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *You shall not gash yourselves nor shall you make a bald place on the front of your head*. The consensus is that these were pagan rituals of mourning, specifically prohibited because they involved disfiguring the mourner's body, which as the body of one of God's "children," should be guarded in its integrity. Ritual gashing is attested in the comportment of the Baal priests on Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18, although there the intention seems to be not mourning but sympathetic magic (encouraging the descent of divine fire by spilling blood). The Ugaritic texts do reflect gashing as a gesture of mourning. The bald place "on the front of your head" (literally, "between your eyes") appears to be some sort of tonsure, something that Abraham ibn Ezra, with an eye to his Christian neighbors, registers when he observes, "like the practice of the gentiles to this day."

6. *hooves split in two, bringing up the cud.* While the governing principles that determine what creatures may not be eaten are not entirely consistent, there appears to be a recoil from consuming land animals or birds that are predators or scavengers. Thus, permissible animals must have genuine, split hooves and nothing resembling claws, and they must be ruminants, as a kind of guarantee that they are not carnivores. Some structuralist critics have proposed that the Hebrews also had a strong predilection to keep things in neat categories: a sea creature without fins or scales seemed to them, it is inferred, a violation of appropriate categories and hence was forbidden. In any event, as many commentators have noted, the dietary restrictions, coming as they do after the prohibition of two prominent pagan mourning practices, are part of a program for separating Israel from the surrounding peoples.

7–19. *the camel and the rock-badger and the hare.* In the long list that follows of prohibited animals, once we get beyond the camel and the hare and the pig (the rock-badger being a more questionable identification), it should be kept in mind that most of the English equivalents are approximations or guesses that reflect the tradition of translations more than ancient Hebrew zoology. In verse 16, for example, the three birds mentioned, *kos, yanshuf*, and *tinshemet*, may indeed be different kinds of owls (though even that is not entirely certain for all three), but no one really knows precisely what they are. The present translation improvises its own guesses, in the case of the second and third

terms guided by the suggestion of breathing, puffing, or emitting some sort of respiratory sound in the Hebrew verbal roots of *yanshuf* and *tinshemet* (puff owl and hoot owl). Other translations represent these as "the little owl, the great owl, and the white owl," with scant evidence for the choices.

12. *And this you shall not eat.* The list comprises birds of prey and scavengers.

21. *You shall not eat any carcass.* The Hebrew *nevelah* refers to the body of an animal that has died of natural causes.

To the sojourner . . . you may give it. The resident alien, generally unable to possess real property, is thought of here, as elsewhere in Deuteronomy, as economically disadvantaged and hence an appropriate object of charity. The foreigner, by contrast, is only a temporary resident or wayfarer and may bring with him economic resources from elsewhere, so he is assumed to be in a position to pay for the carcass.

You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk. See the comment on the identical prohibition in Exodus 23:19.

22. *You shall surely tithe.* Ibn Ezra proposes a link with the preceding section in regard to prohibited eating. The dietary restrictions forbid categories of animals, sea creatures, and birds; the Israelites are forbidden to eat the tithes except "in the place that He chooses"—that is, in the central temple.

23. *so that you may learn to fear the* LORD *your God.* This clause is most plausibly linked with the overriding principle of the centralization of the cult: the pilgrim, by experiencing the cult at the central sanctuary and by contact with the priestly caste there, will learn to fear the LORD.

24. *And should the way be too much for you.* The centralization of the cult entailed a practical difficulty, which was the problem of carrying large quantities of agricultural produce over long distances to the central sanctuary. The solution (verse 25) is to convert the tithed produce into easily portable silver, which then could be reconverted at the sanctuary site into either comestible animals or agricultural produce. (Hence the pragmatic need for money changers in the Temple.)

the LORD *blesses you*. As very often, this phrase refers to material bounty, a specific meaning that the context makes clear.

25. *bundle.* The weighted pieces of silver were carried in a leather bundle or purse (*tsror*, the noun cognate with the verb used here). The husband of the wayward wife in Proverbs 7 goes off on a long trip having taken "the purse of silver" (*tsror hakesef*) in his hand.

the silver. Coins did not come into use in ancient Israel until the Second Temple period, so the reference is not to money but to readily exchangeable weights of silver.

26. *may prompt you to ask.* More literally, "may ask you." In any case, the silver equivalent of 10 percent of the annual agricultural yield would give the pilgrim a great deal of money to spend in a few days, and thus enable him to purchase abundantly whatever he craved.

CHAPTER 15

[1]“At the end of seven years you shall make a
remission. [2]And this is the matter of the remission, the
remitting by every loan holder, who holds a loan
against his fellow man, he shall not dun his fellow man
and brother, for a remission to the LORD has been
proclaimed. [3]The foreigner you may dun, but that of
yours which is with your brother your hand shall remit.
[4]Yet, there will be no pauper among you, for the
LORD will surely bless you in the land which the
LORD your God is about to give you in estate to take
hold of it—[5]only if you surely heed the voice of the
LORD your God to keep to do all this command that I
charge you today. [6]For the LORD your God has
blessed you as He spoke to you, and you shall lend to
many nations but you yourself shall not borrow, and
you shall dominate many nations, but you they shall
not dominate. [7]Should there be a pauper among you,
from one of your brothers within one of your gates in
your land that the LORD your God is about to give
you, you shall not harden your heart and clench your

hand against your brother the pauper. [8]But you shall surely open your hand to him and surely lend to him enough for his want that he has. [9]Watch yourself, lest there be in your heart a base thing, saying, ‘The seventh year, the year of remission is near,’ and you look meanly at your brother the pauper and you do not give to him, and he call to the LORD against you and it be an offense in you. [10]You shall surely give to him, and your heart shall not be mean when you give to him, for by virtue of this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your doings and in all that your hand reaches. [11]For the pauper will not cease from the midst of the land. Therefore I charge you, saying, ‘You shall surely open your hand to your brother, to your poor, and to your pauper, in your land.’ [12]Should your Hebrew brother or sister be sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall send him out from you free. [13]And when you send him out from you, you shall not send him out empty-handed. [14]You shall surely provide him from your flock and from your threshing floor and from your winepress, as the LORD your God has blessed you, you shall give to him. [15]And you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God ransomed you. Therefore I charge you with this thing today. [16]And it shall be, should he say to you, ‘I will not go out from

you,' for he loves you and your household, as it is good for him with you, [17]you shall take an awl and put it through his ear and into the door, and he shall be your perpetual slave. And to your slavegirl, too, thus you shall do. [18]Let it not seem hard in your eyes when you send him out from you free, for twice the value of a hired man he served you six years, and the LORD your God will bless you in all that you do. [19]Every firstborn that is born in your herd or in your flock, the male you shall consecrate to the LORD your God. You shall not work the firstborn of your oxen nor shall you shear the firstborn of your flock. [20]Before the LORD you shall eat it, year after year, in the place that the LORD chooses, you and your household. [21]And should there be a defect in it, lameness or blindness or any bad defect, you shall not sacrifice it to the LORD your God. [22]Within your gates you may eat it, the unclean and the clean together, like the gazelle and like the deer. [23]Only its blood you shall not eat. On the ground you shall spill it like water."

CHAPTER 15 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *At the end of seven years*. The Hebrew does not say "at the end of the seventh year" because the phrase, as Abraham ibn Ezra notes, is meant to

indicate the beginning of the year that marks the end of the seven-year cycle.

a remission. The parallel passage in Exodus 23:10–11 has a verb with the root *sh-m-t* but not, as here, the noun *shemitah*. The basic meaning of the root is "to release," "to let slip out of one's hand." In the strictly agricultural context of Exodus 23, it was simply translated as "let it go," referring to the cultivated land. Deuteronomy's *shemitah* regulations, on the other hand, address a new urban and mercantile reality, and the focus of the law is consequently on debts rather than on allowing the land to lie fallow. For this business-oriented regulation, a more abstract English equivalent such as "remission" is required.

2. *dun.* The Hebrew verb is the same one reflected in the term for "taskmasters" in Exodus.

his fellow man and brother. These are equivalent terms here, and the one that will be favored through the rest of the passage is "brother." That word focuses the social ethic of Deuteronomy: whatever the social and economic differences, all Israelites should regard each other as brothers. The collocation "your brother the pauper" is especially telling in this regard—however wretched the pauper, he is still your brother.

4. *there will be no pauper among you.* This extravagant statement, which may have fueled the imaginations of some later social revolutionaries, seems flatly contradicted, first, by "Should there be a pauper among you" (verse 7) and then, more blatantly, by "For the pauper will not cease from the midst of the land" (verse 11). Ibn Ezra neatly catches the utopian character of the pronouncement: "Know that I charged you not to dun your brother—there would be no need for this if all Israel or most of them would heed God's voice, then there would be no pauper among you who needs you to lend to him." As a realist, ibn Ezra registers the unlikelihood that a majority of the people will ever actually heed God's words, hence "the pauper will not cease from the midst of the land."

6. *you shall lend to many nations.* The Hebrew verb indicates a loan given against security, with the pawned object of worth thus placing the borrower in a palpable relationship of dependence to the lender.

dominate. In the present context, the force of the verb *mashol* is obviously economic rather than political domination.

7. *harden your heart.* The more literal sense is "strengthen your heart." Though this is not one of the verbs used for Pharaoh's heart in the Exodus story, the meaning is virtually the same.

clench your hand. The language of this chapter focuses on the hand as the synecdochic image of agency: debts are remitted when the hand releases or lets them go (see verse 3); parsimony toward the indigent is figured as a clenching tight of the hand, generosity as an opening of the hand.

9. *a base thing.* Elsewhere, the Hebrew *bliya ʿal* is translated as "worthless," but the present context requires something like "base."

you look meanly. Literally, "your eye is evil."

10. *your heart shall not be mean.* Literally, "your heart shall not be evil."

12. *your Hebrew brother or sister.* Unlike the regulations concerning Hebrew slaves in Exodus 21, where distinctions are made between the sexes, evidently because the case in view is one in which the young woman has been sold into slavery with the intention of her becoming a concubine, here male and female slaves are regulated by an identical set of laws. Grammatically, masculine gender remains dominant, so even though both men and women have been mentioned, the text goes on to speak of "he" (as does this translation) representing both.

14. *You shall surely provide him.* The notion of what amounts to severance pay at the end of the period of indentured servitude is an innovation of Deuteronomy, again reflecting its humanitarian social ethos.

as the LORD your God has blessed you. That is, the bounty bestowed on the freed slave will be proportionate to the material "blessings" enjoyed by the slave owner.

17. *put it through his ear and into the door.* In Exodus 21:6, this ceremony is performed when the slave is made to "approach the gods" (or "God"), but the frame of reference now is secular. If the phrase in Exodus refers to a local sanctuary, the programmatic elimination of that institution in Deuteronomy would necessitate the secularization of the ceremony as a practical matter. The meaning, symbolic or otherwise, of the ceremony has been variously interpreted (see the first comment on Exodus 21:6).

perpetual slave. At least according to rabbinic exegesis, even this condition of servitude was abrogated in the jubilee year.

18. *twice the value of a hired man.* The word rendered as "value" usually means "pay"—logically, what the employer would render to the hired man rather than what he would extract from the laborer. But the most plausible sense is that a paid worker over a period of six years would cost his employer twice what the employer would have to lay out for the acquisition and upkeep of an indentured servant.

21. *lameness or blindness.* The Hebrew literally says "lame or blind." These physical impairments render the animal unfit as an offering to God, but since they do not necessarily involve any disease that might taint the flesh of the animals, the beasts are still fit for strictly secular consumption, "like the gazelle and like the deer," which involves no restriction of ritual purity.

CHAPTER 16

[1]Keep the month of Abib, and you shall make a
Passover to the LORD your God, for in the month of
Abib the LORD your God brought you out of Egypt in
the night. [2]And you shall sacrifice a Passover offering
to the LORD your God, sheep and cattle, in the place
that the LORD chooses to make His name dwell there.
[3]You shall not eat unleavened stuff with it. Seven days
you shall eat with it flatcakes, poverty's bread, for in
haste you did go out from the land of Egypt; so that
you will remember the day of your going out from
Egypt all the days of your life. [4]And no leavening will
be seen with you in all your territory seven days, and
nothing of the meat that you slaughter in the evening
shall be left overnight on the first day till the morning.
[5]You shall not be able to sacrifice the Passover offering
within one of your gates that the LORD your God is
about to give you. [6]But to the place that the LORD
your God chooses to make His name dwell, there shall
you sacrifice the Passover offering in the evening, as
the sun comes down, the hour of your coming out of

Egypt. [7]And you shall cook and eat in the place that
the LORD your God chooses, and you shall turn in the
morning and go to your tents. [8]Six days you shall eat
flatbread, and on the seventh day an assembly to the
LORD your God. You shall do no task.

[9]Seven weeks you shall count for yourself, from when
the sickle begins in the standing grain you shall begin
to count seven weeks. [10]And you shall make a festival
of weeks to the LORD your God, tribute of your
hand's freewill gift that you give as the LORD your
God has blessed you. [11]And you shall rejoice before
the LORD your God, you and your son and your
daughter and your male slave and your slavegirl and
the Levite who is within your gates and the sojourner
and the orphan and the widow who are in your midst
in the place that the LORD your God chooses to make
His name dwell there. [12]And you shall remember that
you were a slave in Egypt, and you shall keep and do
these statutes.

[13]A festival of huts you shall make for yourself seven
days, when you gather in from your threshing floor and
from your winepress. [14]And you shall rejoice in your
festival, you and your sons and your daughter and your

male slave and your slavegirl and the Levite and the orphan and the widow who are within your gates.
15Seven days you shall celebrate to the LORD your God in the place that the LORD chooses, for the LORD your God will bless you in all your yield and in all the work of your hands, and you shall be only joyful.

16Three times in the year every one of your males shall appear in the presence of the LORD your God in the place that He chooses: on the Festival of Flatbread and on the Festival of Weeks and on the Festival of Huts, and he shall not appear in the presence of the LORD empty-handed. 17Each man according to the gift of his hand, according to the blessing of the LORD your God that He gives him.

18Judges and overseers you shall set for yourself within all your gates that the LORD your God is about to give to you according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with just judgment. 19You shall not skew judgment. You shall recognize no face and no bribe shall you take, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the innocent. 20Justice, justice shall you pursue, so that you may live and take

hold of the land that the LORD your God is about to give you. [21]You shall plant you no cultic pole, no tree, by the altar of the LORD your God which you will make you. [22]And you shall set you up no pillar which the LORD your God hates.

CHAPTER 16 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Keep the month of Abib*. As noted in the commentary on Exodus, Abib, the month that corresponds to March–April, means "new grain" (in modern Hebrew, it comes to mean "spring"). The rabbis took the name as a warrant for introducing leap months in order to keep the lunar calendar in phase with the solar calendar. One could infer that some rudimentary mechanism of calendric correction was in place even in the early biblical period, or else the month of new grain would have fallen sometimes in midwinter, sometimes in late summer or fall. Unlike other biblical texts on the festivals, the law here does not specify which day in Abib marks the beginning of the festival—unless one interprets "month" as "new moon," a construction found among some ancient and modern commentators.

2. *sheep and cattle.* The option of cattle is new, perhaps reflecting a more sedentary form of animal husbandry than the earlier nomadic model.

3. *poverty's bread.* The noun *ʾoni* has the basic meaning of a lowly condition, and so it could equally refer to poverty, affliction, or debasement.

5. *You shall not be able to sacrifice . . . within one of your gates*. This reiterated emphasis in connection with Passover is understandable. Passover, unlike the other festivals, was primarily a home ritual: each household sacrificed a paschal lamb, and, at least in the earliest period, apotropaic blood was probably smeared on the lintel. Deuteronomy thus must take pains to relocate even this domestic festival in the central sanctuary. The reiteration of

the obligation to go "to the place that the LORD your God chooses" contributes to the lengthiness of the Passover section in comparison with the sections on the other two pilgrim festivals, although critical scholarship has also detected here a successive layering into a single law of injunctions regarding a passover (*pesaḥ*) and injunctions regarding a festival of flatbread (*matsot*), once separate observances.

6. *the hour of your coming out of Egypt.* Most traditional Hebrew commentators understand *moʿed* in its frequent sense of "fixed season," i.e., the date in the month of Abib on which Israel left Egypt. The context, however, with the stress on the time of sunset suggests that here the term means hour of the day.

7. *cook.* In other contexts, *bashel* means "boil," a mode of preparing the meat prohibited by the Passover laws in Exodus, which insists that the meat be fire-roasted. This may be another instance in which this legislation edges the observance away from its archaic origins, not enjoining the preparation of the meat in the old Bedouin fashion.

you shall turn in the morning and go to your tents. Although Deuteronomy must insist on the pilgrim obligation to celebrate at the central sanctuary, it also recognizes it could be a hardship for these agriculturalists to have to remain at the temple site a whole week, so the pilgrims are permitted (in contrast to later laws about travel on the festivals) to return home the morning after the sunset sacrifice. "Your tents" is a linguistic fossil; the actual fact of fixed settlement is reflected in the more prevalent idiom, "within your gates."

8. *Six days you shall eat flatbread.* One would have expected "seven." Either it is implied that the seventh day, the day of assembly, is included in the injunction, or the number six assumes a count that begins after the first day, on which the Passover sacrifice is offered.

9. *from when the sickle begins in the standing grain.* Although Passover is not mentioned, other biblical texts understand the counting to begin the day after the first day of Passover (interpreted by some Jewish sectarians to mean the first Sunday after the first day of Passover).

10. *your hand's freewill gift.* The repeated emphasis here, addressing a population of farmers and animal husbanders that is expected to enjoy a

degree of prosperity, is on voluntary gifts to the cult in proportion to the "blessing" that the donor has enjoyed. The Priestly predilection for lists of stipulated sacrifices is entirely absent.

13. *A festival of huts.* The holiday is called Succoth, "huts" (others, "booths," "tabernacles"), because as a harvest festival, there was evidently a celebration at the site of huts in the field (feasting and perhaps in the earliest period some sort of sacrifice). The Deuteronomist preserves the popular name (in Exodus it is called the Festival of Ingathering) but makes no reference to any observance in huts, following his usual line on the obligation of pilgrimage to the central sanctuary, the sole legitimate place to celebrate the festival.

15. *Seven days you shall celebrate . . . in the place that the* LORD *chooses*. Unlike on Passover, the pilgrim is to remain at the temple site for the full seven days. Perhaps this is because after the completion of the autumn harvest, which this festival marks, the farmer has no urgent further work to do right away, as he would in the spring.

16. *Three times in the year every one of your males shall appear.* This and the next verse summarize the obligation of the three pilgrim festivals. As elsewhere, the phrase *yera'eh 'et pney-YHWH,* "will appear [or be seen] in the presence of the LORD," is a euphemistic revocalization of *yir'eh*, "will see," to avoid the anthropomorphism of the notion that the celebrant sees the presence, or face, of God. It should be noted that the pilgrim obligation, with the attendant hardships of travel, falls only on the male, but, in fact, the Israelite is encouraged to include his daughter and his slavegirl as well as male dependents (verses 11, 14) in the celebration.

18. *overseers.* The term *shotrim* is used in Exodus for the Hebrew overseers or foremen of the slave population. Since the word derives from a root meaning to "write down" or "record" (compare the Aramaic *shtar*, "document"), its meaning here might be an amanuensis, secretary, or administrator working alongside the judge.

19. *You shall recognize no face.* As in Deuteronomy 1:17, not recognizing someone you know, or about whose guilt or innocence you might have some presumption, means showing no partiality.

for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the innocent. As Jeffrey H. Tigay justly observes, this declaration takes the form of a semantically balanced aphorism of the sort one finds in the Book of Proverbs. The parallel verse in Exodus 23:8 has "sighted" instead of "wise." The change here might be a kind of explanatory gloss on the original formulation because "sighted" could refer merely to physical sight: Deuteronomy, with its intellectualist bent, wants to stress that even the wise lose the guidance of their wisdom if they succumb to bribery (whether *shoḥad* is construed as bribery proper or as a fee paid a judge for his services).

20. *Justice, justice.* Though much ingenuity has been exercised by exegetes to explain the repetition, its function as a verbal gesture of sheer emphasis is self-evident: justice, and justice alone, shall you pursue.

21. *no cultic pole, no tree.* The *ʾasherah* may have been a carved pole. Either "tree" could be in apposition to *ʾasherah*, an extended meaning of the word to include artifacts made from trees, or it could refer to the sacred trees actually planted at the sites of Canaanite worship and reflected in the Patriarchal stories in Genesis.

22. *you shall set you up no pillar.* The patriarchs and Moses did precisely that. One way of resolving the contradiction (e.g., Abraham ibn Ezra) is to understand "which the LORD your God hates" as a restrictive clause—it is specifically the pillars (*matsevot*) associated with the pagan cult that are prohibited. But Rashi's notion of a historical development seems more likely: "For it was a practice of the Canaanites. And even though it was favored [by God] in the period of the Patriarchs, now He hated it because these people made it a practice of idolatry."

CHAPTER 17

[1]You shall not sacrifice to the LORD your God a bull
or a sheep in which there is a defect, anything wrong,
for it is an abhorrence of the LORD, your God.
[2]Should there be found in your midst, within any of
your gates that the LORD your God is about to give
you, a man or a woman who does evil in the eyes of
the LORD your God to transgress His covenant, [3]and
they go and worship other gods and bow to them, to
the sun or to the moon or to any of the array of the
heavens which I did not command, [4]and it be told to
you and you hear, and you inquire well and, look, the
thing is true, well-founded, this abhorrence has been
done in Israel, [5]you shall take out that man or that
woman who has done this evil thing to your gates, the
man or the woman, and you shall stone them to death.
[6]By the word of two witnesses or three witnesses shall
the one who dies be put to death, he shall not be put to
death by the word of one witness. [7]The hand of the
witnesses shall be against him first to put him to death

and the hand of all the people afterward and you shall root out the evil from your midst.

[8]Should the matter be beyond you to judge, between blood and blood, between case and case, and between injury and injury, affairs of grievances within your gates, you shall arise and go up to the place that the LORD your God chooses, [9]and you shall come to the levitical priests and to the judge who will be in those days, and you shall inquire and they will tell you the matter of the judgment. [10]And you shall do according to the thing that they tell you from that place which the LORD chooses, and you shall keep to all that they instruct you. [11]According to the teaching that they instruct you and according to the judgment that they say to you, you shall do, you shall not swerve from the word that they tell you right or left. [12]And the man who acts willfully not to heed the priest standing to minister there to the LORD your God, or to the judge, that man shall die, and you shall root out the evil from Israel. [13]And all the people shall listen and fear, and they shall no longer be willful.

[14]When you come into the land that the LORD your God is about to give you, and you take hold of it and

dwell in it, and you say, “Let me put a king over me like all the nations that are around me,” [15]you shall surely put over you a king whom the LORD your God chooses, from the midst of your brothers you shall put a king over you, you shall not be able to set over you a foreign man who is not your brother. [16]Only let him not get himself many horses, that he not turn the people back to Egypt in order to get many horses, when the LORD has said to you, “You shall not turn back again on this way.” [17]And let him not get himself many wives, that his heart not swerve, and let him not get himself too much silver and gold. [18]And it shall be, when he sits on his throne of kingship, that he shall write for himself a copy of this teaching in a book before the levitical priests. [19]And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, to keep all the words of this teaching and these statutes, to do them, [20]so that his heart be not haughty over his brothers and so that he swerve not from what is commanded right or left, in order that he may long endure in his kingship, he and his sons, in the midst of Israel.

CHAPTER 17 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *within any of your gates*. The recurrent phrase "within your gates" is the characteristic designation in Deuteronomy of the local town, wherever in the country it may be, in contradistinction to the place of the central sanctuary. Its use in the present context after "in your midst" suggests a subversive source of pagan contamination lurking somewhere within the closed walls of the Israelite habitations. This would be in keeping with Abraham ibn Ezra's neat observation that "after having mentioned the cultic pole by the altar, which is public to all, he comes back to warn the *individual* about worship of abominations."

3. *to the sun or to the moon or to any of the array of the heavens.* There are some indications, both biblical and extrabiblical, that worship of astral deities, a practice probably influenced by the Assyrian cult, became especially widespread in Israel during the seventh century B.C.E.

which I did not command. This clause may be a rebuke to a popular syncretistic belief that YHWH enjoined the worship of astral deities alongside worship of Him.

6. *By the word.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "by the mouth."

7. *The hand of the witnesses shall be against him first.* The frequently made observation concerning this stipulation that it will compel the witnesses to be very cautious about their testimony seems rather apologetic. Why, after all, would this opportunity to be first among the executioners not encourage a zealot or a person with a private grudge to offer hasty or even false testimony against the accused idolator? The law in general reflects the antipagan animus of Deuteronomy in an effort to forge a seamless anti-idolatrous Israelite front in which a kind of "popular justice" is carried out by the whole community.

8. *between blood and blood, between case and case, and between injury and injury.* These three phrases are meant to mark out the whole range of nonritual law. "Between blood and blood" clearly indicates legal disputes or "grievances" (*rivot*) involving accusations of capital crimes, and murder in particular. The second category, "between case and case" (*beyn din ledin*), uses a general term for a legal case, but sandwiched in between "blood" and "injury" (*nega ʿ*), it probably refers to torts involving property or money but not bodily injury.

go up to the place that the LORD *your God chooses*. This set phrase, used throughout the book to underscore the divine authorization of the centralized cult, here serves to authorize a complementary notion—the centralization of judicial power in a single court of appeals instituted at the site of the one chosen sanctuary.

9. *the levitical priests.* This somewhat odd designation—in the Hebrew it is, literally, "the priests, the Levites"—is distinctive of Deuteronomy. Scholarly consensus infers that in contradistinction to the three preceding books, which variously envisage a priestly class from a particular Levite clan officiating in the cult while the other Levites attend to maintenance chores in the sanctuary, Deuteronomy assumes that all Levites can potentially serve as priests.

and to the judge. The simplest construction is that judicial authority was shared by the priests and a layman jurist.

12. *the man who acts willfully.* Some interpreters take this as a reference to the judge in the inferior court who refuses to recognize the authority of the central court. The repetition, however, of "willful" in the next verse in connection with "all the people" suggests that it is rather an interested party in the case appealed, who has come to hear the opinion of the supreme court and then, when it proves unfavorable to him, has rejected it. Capital punishment in such a case seems severe, at least by modern standards, but the Deuteronomist, with his usual concern for the consolidation of power in one central place, is fearful that flouting a decision of the supreme court will undermine the whole system.

15. *a king whom the* LORD *your God chooses.* Thus, by using the same phrase for both temple and king, the Deuteronomist effects an alignment between the election of a central sanctuary and the election of the monarch. In keeping with the premise that all this is a Mosaic prediction, the fact that the king's political capital and the sanctuary's location are one and the same place is not spelled out, even though the seventh-century B.C.E. audience would of course have registered the connection.

16. *let him not get himself many horses, that he not turn the people back to Egypt.* The many horses, the many wives, the silver and gold, are all associated with the extravagances of royal—indeed, imperial—pomp. Egypt is linked with horses because of its celebrated chariot corps, prominent in the

Exodus story, and because it actually was an exporter of horses in the region. (In fact, the Israelties were slow to adopt horses for travel and for warfare through much of the First Temple period, preferring donkeys as mounts.) But turning the people back to Egypt may refer to a condition of virtual or actual slavery to which a profligate monarch could reduce many of his overtaxed subjects through his expenditures.

You shall not turn back again on this way. No explicit statement to this effect is recorded in the preceding books, though, as the Israeli Bible scholar David Cohen-Zemach has proposed, there may be an approximation in Exodus 13:17: "Lest the people regret when they see battle and go back to Egypt."

17. *that his heart not swerve.* The precedent of Solomon suggests that a large royal harem would involve a good many politically motivated marriages with foreign princesses, and these could lead the king astray, as in the egregious instance of Jezebel and Ahab.

18. *he shall write for himself a copy of this teaching.* The king is to be actively engaged in personally producing a text of the teaching (translations that embellish the simple verb "write" by representing it as "cause to be written" miss the point). The location of religious authority in a text, a revolutionary idea, is made dramatically clear. "A copy of this teaching," which might also be construed as "a repetition of this teaching," is in Hebrew *mishneh hatorah hazo't* and is the source of one of the Hebrew names as well as the Greek name for Deuteronomy.

in a book. The Hebrew *sefer* refers to anything written down, from letter to record to what we would call a book. (The form in any case, would be a scroll.) It may well designate here the whole book of Deuteronomy, the valedictory rehearsal of the law delivered by Moses before his death. Some interpreters want to restrict "this teaching" to the just enunciated instructions to the king, but that seems improbable, especially since the text goes on to say, "he shall read *in it* all the days of his life," hardly something he would do with a few lines about keeping tight reins on the royal budget.

19. *so that he may learn to fear the* LORD *his God.* Many commentators have cited this whole section as a demonstration that the government of ancient Israel was in essence a constitutional monarchy. Instructional texts for kings

had many precedents both in Mesopotamia and in Egypt, as Moshe Weinfeld points out, so that element is scarcely an innovation. If the document that the king is enjoined here to write and repeatedly read is the entire Book of Deuteronomy, then he has not just a set of admonitions to a monarch but a whole complex of laws and a covenantal vision of history that are binding on him. This does make his regime a constitutional monarchy, but one founded on theocratic authority, the Torah or constitution to be expounded by the priests at the central sanctuary.

20. *so that his heart be not haughty over his brothers.* The language of brotherhood, earlier used to link affluent and indigent, here links monarch and subjects. Whatever power he exerts, he is not an absolute monarch, and he does not differ in caste or in his relation to the divine from those over whom he rules.

in order that he may long endure in his kingship. In the precarious historical circumstances of the seventh century B.C.E., Deuteronomy makes the continuation of the monarchy conditional on the king's faithfulness to the words of God's teaching, just as the people's continuation in the land promised them is conditional on this fidelity to that same teaching.

CHAPTER 18

[1]The levitical priests, all the tribe of Levi, shall have
no share and estate with Israel. The fire offerings of
the LORD and His estate they shall eat. [2]And he shall
have no estate in the midst of his brothers. The LORD
is his estate, as He spoke to them. [3]And this shall be
the priests' due from the people, from the offerers of
sacrifice, whether bull or sheep: to the priest shall be
given the shoulder and the cheeks and the stomach.
[4]The first of your grain, your wine, and your oil, and
the first shearing of your flock you shall give to him.
[5]For him did the LORD your God choose of all your
tribes to minister in the name of the LORD, him and
his sons, always. [6]And should the Levite come from
one of your gates, from all of Israel, where he
sojourns, he shall come as much as his appetite craves
to the place that the LORD chooses, [7]and shall
minister in the name of the LORD his God like all his
brothers, the Levites, who stand there in attendance
before the LORD. [8]Share for share they shall eat,
besides his sales from the patrimony.

[9]When you come into the land that the LORD your God is about to give you, you shall not learn to do like the abhorrent things of these nations. [10]There shall not be found among you one who passes his son or his daughter through fire, a speller of charms, a soothsayer, or a diviner or a sorcerer, [11]or a chanter of incantations or an inquirer of ghost or familiar spirit or one who seeks out the dead. [12]For whosoever does these is the LORD's abhorrence, and because of these abhorrent things the LORD your God is about to dispossess them before you. [13]You shall be wholehearted with the LORD your God. [14]For these nations which you are about to dispossess heed soothsayers and spellers of charms, but you, the LORD your God has not given such. [15]A prophet like me from your midst, from your brothers, the LORD will raise up. Him shall you heed. [16]As all that you asked of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, "Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, and this great fire let me not see again, that I may not die." [17]And the LORD said to me, "Well have they spoken. [18]A prophet I shall raise up for them from the midst of their brothers, like you, and I shall put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I charge him. [19]And it shall be, the man who does not heed My words which he will

speak in My name, I Myself will requite it of him.
[20]But the prophet who willfully speaks a word in My
name, which I have not charged him to speak, or who
speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall
die. [21]And should you say in your heart, 'How shall we
know the word that the LORD has not spoken?' [22]That
which the prophet speaks in the name of the LORD
and the thing does not happen and does not come
about, this is the word that the LORD did not speak.
Willfully did the prophet speak it: you shall have no
dread of him."

CHAPTER 18 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The levitical priests*. Abraham ibn Ezra, with his penchant for identifying connections between consecutive passages (what we would call editorial principles), observes that this section on priests immediately follows the section on kings: the king, who acts as supreme judicial authority, is enjoined to make himself a copy of the teaching, or Torah, which the priests make available and which is their responsibility to expound.

His estate. The reference is not entirely clear, though Rashi plausibly proposes that the term indicates categories of sacrifice other than the fire offering.

6. *he shall come as much as his appetite craves to the place that the LORD chooses.* It is possible that the polyvalent *nefesh* ("appetite") here is simply an intensive substitute for the pronoun "he," though even in this case there may be a consideration of appetite because the central sanctuary is the place where all the choice cuts of meat are available for the Levites. There is to be no

hindrance for any Levite who desires to come to the central place, even though presumably the cult could not have really offered positions as officiants to all of them.

7. *stand there in attendance.* "In attendance" is not explicitly stated in the Hebrew but is implied by the idiom "stand before."

8. *Share for share.* All the Levites at the sanctuary are to have an equal share of the animals, even those not directly employed in the cult.

besides his sales from the patrimony. The Hebrew is obscure. This translation assumes the following general meaning: besides what the Levite may have realized by selling off property he has inherited from his fathers (the literal meaning of the word rendered as "patrimony"). Others revocalize *mimkaraw*, "his sales," as *mimakaraw*, "from his acquaintances"—i.e., funds or property the Levite has received from personal acquaintances, on top of whatever patrimony he has. That reading looks forced.

10. *who passes his son or his daughter through fire.* It is not certain whether this phrase refers to child sacrifice, elsewhere stringently forbidden, or to some pagan dedicatory rite in which the child was passed through or, more probably, over fire without harm.

a speller of charms, a soothsayer. The precise demarcations among these terms are no longer known, though the last three in the series all clearly refer to necromancy. Stylistically, the series may function not as a legislative list of discriminated terms but as a grand drumroll of synonyms, conveying the idea that no shape or manner of divination will be tolerated. Making predictions based on a variety of techniques, from the inspection of the liver and the entrails of a slaughtered animal to tapping the supposed knowledge of departed spirits, was a major industry throughout the ancient Near East, as thousands of divinatory texts from Egypt to Mesopotamia attest. The biblical abhorrence of these practices stems not so much from a disbelief in their efficacy as from a sense that they violate God's prerogatives by establishing a technology of the realm of spirits, which is thus assumed to be wholly susceptible to human manipulation.

13. *wholehearted.* The word *tamim* means "whole," "without blemish" but the root also appears in the collocation *tom levav*, "wholeness of heart." The idea

in context is that you cannot serve God and yet keep one foot in the pagan realm by having recourse to necromancy and divination.

15. *A prophet like me.* The envisaged future prophet is not necessarily like Moses in stature but in function—an intermediary between Israel and God (verses 16–17) and someone who hears and then transmits God's words.

18. *I shall put My words in his mouth.* In contrast to the sundry techniques of deciphering arcane patterns in entrails or smoke and pronouncing incantations, the idea of prophecy is based on articulated speech—from God to prophet and from prophet to people—and hence the verb *daber*, "speak," and the cognate noun *davar*, "word," are insisted on again and again here.

22. *the thing does not happen and does not come about.* "Thing" here is also "word," since *davar* refers both to speech and to the referent of speech, and in vatic contexts also has the technical sense of "oracle." This criterion for detecting false prophecy presents notorious difficulties and seems to be put forth here chiefly out of some general sense that a true prophet will speak the truth. The literary prophets in the biblical canon are less in the business of prediction than of castigation. The predictions they make of national catastrophe are almost always conditioned on Israel's failure to change its ways, and the predictions of glorious national restoration in the face of imminent disaster are always projected beyond the immediate future. It is conceivable that this text does not have in mind literary prophets but rather prophets who addressed mundane issues of everyday life, making short-range predictions that might be quickly verified or falsified by the events.

CHAPTER 19

[1]When the LORD your God cuts off the nations
whose land the LORD your God is about to give you
and you dispossess them and dwell in their towns and
in their houses, [2]three towns you shall set aside for
yourself within your land that the LORD your God is
about to give you to take hold of it. [3]You shall gauge
for yourself the distance and divide in three the
territory of your land that the LORD your God will
grant you in estate, and it will be for every murderer to
flee there. [4]And this is the case of the murderer who
will flee there and live—he who strikes down his
fellow man unwittingly and who was not a foe to him
in time past, [5]and he who comes with his fellow man
into the forest to hew wood and his hand slips on the
axe cutting the wood and the iron springs from the
wood and finds his fellow man and he dies, he shall
flee to one of these towns and live. [6]Lest the blood
avenger pursue the murderer when his heart is hot and
overtake him should the way be long, and strike him
down mortally, when he has no death sentence since

he was not his foe in time past. [7]Therefore do I charge you, saying: three towns you shall set aside for yourself. [8]And if the LORD your God enlarges your territory, as He swore to your fathers, and gives you all the land that He spoke to give to your fathers, [9]when you keep all this command which I charge you today to do it, to love the LORD your God and to go in His ways for all time, you shall add for yourself another three towns to these three. [10]And the blood of the innocent will not be shed in the midst of your land that the LORD your God is about to give to you in estate, and there would be bloodguilt upon you. [11]And should a man be a foe to his fellow man and lie in wait for him and rise against him and strike him down mortally and he die, and that man flee to one of these towns, [12]the elders of his town shall send and they shall take him from there and give him into the hand of the blood avenger, and he shall die. [13]Your eye shall not spare him, and you shall root out the blood of the innocent from Israel, and it will go well with you.

[14]You shall not push back your fellow man's landmark that the first ones marked out on your estate that you will inherit in the land which the LORD your God is about to give you to take hold of it. [15]A single witness

shall not rise up against a man for any crime and for any offense; in any offense that he may commit, by the word of two witnesses or by the word of three witnesses shall a case be established. [16]Should a corrupt witness rise up against a man, to testify against him falsely, [17]the two men who have a dispute shall stand before the LORD, before the priests and judges who will be in those days, [18]and the judges inquire well and, look, the witness is a false witness, he has testified falsely against his brother, you shall do to him as he plotted to do to his brother, [19]and you shall root out the evil from your midst. [20]And those who remain will listen and be afraid, and they will no longer do the like of this evil thing in your midst. [21]And your eye shall not spare—a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot.

CHAPTER 19 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the LORD your God . . . the LORD your God*. It is a stylistic peculiarity of Deuteronomy that the LORD, YHWH, very rarely occurs without "your God," and even the substitution of a pronoun, as here, is generally avoided. This linguistic oddity reflects the didactic emphasis of the book, tirelessly reminding Israel that YHWH is its God.

2. *three towns you shall set aside.* This provision of towns of asylum for involuntary man-slayers parallels the law in Numbers 35. For a discussion of

the concept, its connections with vendetta justice, and its ancient Near Eastern precedents, see the commentary on that chapter. As is often the case, Deuteronomy shifts some of the grounds of the older law, and the comments that follow will be limited to observing those changes as well as to elucidating verbal formulations distinctive to this passage.

3. *You shall gauge for yourself the distance.* The verb *takhin*, which commonly means "to make ready" and, in dynastic contexts, "to found firmly," also has the occasional sense of "measure" or "gauge," clearly the relevant sense here. "Distance" is literally "way," an extended sense of that primary term current in many languages. It is important to survey the land in order to space the three towns equally from the centers of population. Too great a distance to the town of asylum could prove fatal to the fugitive (see verse 6).

5. *and the iron springs from the wood.* As Rashi observes, it is ambiguous as to whether "the wood" refers to the tree being chopped down, from which the axe inadvertently, and lethally, rebounds, or to the haft of the axe, from which the axehead breaks loose. The former possibility seems a bit more likely because otherwise the writer would be using "the wood" in quick sequence in two different senses, and the slipping of the hand on the axe suggests that the person has lost his grip, not that the axe has come apart.

6. *Lest the blood avenger pursue the murderer . . . and strike him down mortally*. In Numbers 35, if the fugitive is careless enough to be caught in flight by the blood avenger, he is considered fair game. Here, the act of vengeance outside the asylum precincts seems to be viewed as a crime, and all possible steps should be taken to prevent it. One may surmise that the text in Numbers is a half-step closer to the archaic institution of vendetta justice and concedes it just a little more legitimacy. Here, as throughout the passage, the inadvertent killer is referred to as the *rotseaḥ*, the murderer. There is no specialized biblical term for "manslayer," but the use here of *rotseaḥ* may be meant to convey the gravity of having taken a human life, even unintentionally.

9. *to love the LORD your God and to go in His ways.* The constant reiteration of such formulaic phrases is still another manifestation of the didactic character of this book.

you shall add for yourself another three towns to these three. In Numbers, it is stipulated from the outset that there are to be three towns of asylum in trans-Jordan and three west of the Jordan. Harmonistic interpreters infer that the three trans-Jordanian sites are implied though not stated in verse 2, so that now we come to a grand total of nine. It is more plausible to conclude that the present law envisages only three towns of asylum, projecting the possibility of an additional three to some fortunate future moment when the Israelite territory will be sufficiently expanded to justify another three.

10. *And the blood of the innocent will not be shed in the midst of your land.* The innocent blood would be the blood of the manslayer, who, because he has killed unintentionally, does not deserve to die. In the parallel law in Numbers, the stress is on the idea that innocent blood shed pollutes the land, a sacral and archaic idea. Here, by contrast, the emphasis is social; innocent blood is not to be shed in "the midst of your land," evil must be expunged "from Israel" (verse 13).

11. *that man.* The Hebrew merely says "he," but English does not tolerate that degree of ambiguity in pronominal reference.

12. *give him into the hand of the blood avenger.* The prerogative of vendetta justice is recognized insofar as the blood avenger is allowed to execute the death sentence, but the implication is that the elders have first made a legal determination through a trial.

13. *root out the blood of the innocent.* This is an ellipsis for rooting out the one who has shed innocent blood.

it will go well with you. This Deuteronomic pragmatic note is absent from Numbers 35.

14. *landmark.* The Hebrew *gevul* means "border" and, by two different kinds of metonymy, the territory marked out by the border and the stone pile that marks the border.

the first ones. The early generations that established the division of the land.

15. *by the word.* Literally, "by the mouth."

17. *before the LORD, before the priests and judges.* This apposition is not entirely transparent. The normative sense of "before the LORD" in Deuteronomy is at the central sanctuary, but it is doubtful that only a single court in the entire country is envisaged. Rashi's proposal may capture the intended sense: "it should seem to them as though they were standing before God" when the litigants submit themselves to legal authority.

21. *a life for a life, an eye for an eye . . . a foot for a foot.* For a discussion of the biblical *lex talionis*, see the comment on Exodus 21:23–25. There, however, the reference is to someone who does bodily or mortal injury to another person. Here, the reference is to the intention of doing grave injury by bearing false witness. David Cohen-Zemach nicely observes that in our text first we have an abstract juridical formulation ("You shall do to him as he plotted to do to his brother.") and then a more popular, probably proverbial statement of the idea ("a life for a life," etc.). Exodus 21 uses a different preposition, *taḥat* (literally, "instead of"), whereas the present version employs *bE*, which in all likelihood expresses the function it sometimes has of "for the price of." The two formulations might be semantically identical, but it is also possible that the version in Exodus assumes an archaic idea of a life taken or an injury inflicted literally "replacing" or balancing out (*taḥat*, "instead") a life lost or an injury suffered, whereas here the *talionis* may be viewed in quasmonetary terms as payback.

CHAPTER 20

[1]When you go out to battle against your enemy and
you see horse and chariot, troops more numerous than
you, you shall not fear them, for the LORD your God
is with you, Who has brought you up from the land of
Egypt. [2]And it shall be, when you approach the battle,
that the priest shall come forward and speak to the
troops [3]and say to them, “Hear, Israel, you are
approaching the battle today against your enemies. Let
your heart be not faint. Do not fear and do not quake
and do not dread them. [4]For the LORD your God goes
before you to do battle with your enemies to rescue
you.” [5]And the overseers shall speak to the troops,
saying, “Whatever man has built a new house and not
dedicated it, let him go and return to his house, lest he
die in the battle and another man dedicate it. [6]And
whatever man has planted a vineyard and not enjoyed
it, let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the
battle and another man enjoy it. [7]And whatever man
has betrothed a woman and not wed her, let him go
and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and

another man wed her.” [8]And the overseers shall speak
further to the troops and say, “Whatever man is afraid
and faint of heart, let him go and return to his house,
that he not shake the heart of his brothers like his own
heart.” [9]And it shall be, when the overseers finish
speaking to the troops, they shall appoint the
commanders of the armies at the head of the troops.
[10]When you approach a town to do battle against it,
you shall call to it for peace. [11]And it shall be, if it
answers you in peace and opens up to you, all the
people found within it shall become forced labor for
you and serve you. [12]And if it does not make peace
with you, and does battle with you, you shall besiege it.
[13]And when the LORD gives it into your hand, you
shall strike down all its males with the edge of the
sword. [14]Only the women and the little ones and the
cattle and everything that is in the town, all its booty
you shall plunder for yourself, and you shall consume
the booty of your enemy that the LORD your God
gives to you. [15]Thus shall you do to all the towns far
distant from you, which are not of the towns of these
nations. [16]Only, of the towns of these people that the
LORD your God is about to give you in estate, you
shall let no breathing creature live. [17]But you shall
surely put them under the ban—the Hittite and the
Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivvite

and the Jebusite, as the LORD your God has charged you. [18]So that they will not teach you to do like all the abhorrent things that they did for their gods, and you would offend the LORD your God. [19]Should you besiege a town many days to do battle against it, you shall not destroy its trees to swing an axe against them, for from them you shall eat, and you shall not cut them down. For is the tree of the field a human, to come away from you in the siege? [20]Only a tree that you know is not a tree for eating, it you may destroy and cut down and build a siege-work against the town that does battle against you, until its fall.

CHAPTER 20 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *see horse and chariot*. As we are reminded elsewhere, especially in Exodus and Judges, chariots were the instruments of the great martial nations of the region, first the Egyptians and then the Canaanites, against whom the Israelites stood at a palpable disadvantage. In the early period of the conquest, the Israelites were mostly confined to the rocky high country of Canaan and often fought in what were essentially guerilla forces. This ancient equivalent of an armored corps could well have seemed terrifying to them. The allusion here to God's bringing Israel up out of Egypt, as Jeffrey H. Tigay notes, is probably meant to recall the great victory over Pharaoh's chariot corps at the Sea of Reeds.

troops. The collective noun *ʿam*, which has the more general meaning of "people," regularly designates "troops" in military contexts.

3. *Let your heart be not faint.* Rashi translates these exhortations into vividly concrete battlefield terms: "*Let your heart be not faint*—from the neighing of horses. *Do not fear*—from the clanging of shields. *And do not quake*—from the sound of the horns. *And do not dread*—the sound of the battle-cries." The "faint" heart is literally a "soft" heart in the Hebrew, but the obvious reference is to fear, not excessive compassion.

5. *the overseers.* These officials, *shotrim*, appear to be civilian authorities, empowered both to allow exemptions from military service and to appoint commanders (verse 9).

dedicated. The verb *ḥanakh* might refer to an actual ceremony of dedication, its fixed sense in later Hebrew usage, or might simply mean "to inaugurate," "to initiate use."

6. *enjoyed it.* The literal meaning of the Hebrew verb is "desacralize." The law behind that linguistic usage is as follows: during the first three years after planting a vineyard, its use was forbidden, presumably because the vines were immature; in the fourth year, the product of the vineyard was considered "holy to the LORD"; in the fifth year, its sacral status was voided and its fruits could be enjoyed without hindrance.

7. *and another man wed her.* In all these identically couched statements, the idea that someone else would enjoy what the man had anticipated enjoying suggests that the rationale for all these military exemptions was humanitarian consideration of the soldiers.

8. *and the overseers shall speak further.* This final exemption is set off from the preceding three because the rationale is not humanitarian but pragmatic: the presence of a coward in the ranks could undermine the morale of those around him.

shake the heart. In keeping with the Hebrew idiom of a "soft" heart, the verb here literally means "melt," but, again, the clear connotation is fear, not compassion.

10. *peace.* As the next verse makes clear, "peace" (*shalom*) here amounts to surrender.

13. *all its males.* As many commentators note, this would have to be adult males, for we are told in the next verse that the little ones are to be spared together with the women.

16. *you shall let no breathing creature live.* It is hard to find any mitigation for the ferocity of this injunction to total destruction. The rabbis reinterpreted it, seeking to show that it was almost never strictly applicable. Since the archaeological evidence suggests that the "ban" was never actually implemented, it seems to be the projection in legal imperative of a militant fantasy—but surely a dangerous fantasy.

19. *its trees.* The Hebrew uses a collective noun, in the singular.

20. *Only a tree that you know is not a tree for eating.* There may be an echo here of "the tree was good for eating" (Genesis 3:6), evoking the Garden world in which God provided all good things for human enjoyment, and prohibited the fruit of two of the trees. Destroying fruit trees is a despoliation of God's natural gifts, and since the inhabitants of the besieged town would be economically dependent on the trees, it is a devastating blow against them for the foreseeable future. In fact, it was quite common in the ancient world to cut down the enemy's fruit trees, either for the practical purpose of erecting siege-works or—as in some instances in which the Greeks destroyed olive groves—out of sheer spite.

CHAPTER 21

[1]Should a slain person be found on the soil that the
LORD your God is about to give you to take hold of
it, lying in the field, it not being known who struck him
down, [2]your elders and your judges shall go out and
measure to the towns that are around the slain person.
[3]And it shall be, the town closest to the slain person,
the elders of that town shall take a heifer of the herd
that has not been worked, that has not pulled in a yoke,
[4]and the elders of that town shall bring down the heifer
to a swift-running wadi that is not worked and is not
sown, and there they shall break the neck of the heifer
in the wadi. [5]And the priests, sons of Levi, shall come
forward, for them did the LORD choose to minister to
Him and to bless in the name of the LORD, and by
their word shall be every dispute and every injury.
[6]And all the elders of that town, the ones close to the
corpse, shall wash their hands over the broken-necked
heifer in the wadi. [7]And they shall bear witness and
say, “Our hands did not shed this blood, and our eyes
did not see. [8]Atone for Your people Israel whom You

ransomed and do not put innocent blood in the midst of Your people Israel, and let the blood be atoned for them.” [9]As for you, you shall root out the innocent blood from your midst, for you shall do what is right in the LORD’s eyes.

[10]Should you go out to battle against your enemies and the LORD your God give him in your hand and you take captives from him, [11]and you see among the captives a woman of comely features and you desire her and take her for yourself as wife, [12]you shall bring her into your house, and she shall shave her head and do her nails, [13]and she shall take off her captive’s cloak and stay in your house and keen for her father and her mother a month of days. And afterward you shall come to bed with her, and you shall master her and she shall become your wife. [14]And it will be, if you like her not, you shall send her away on her own, but you shall certainly not sell her for silver, you shall not garner profit from her inasmuch as you have abused her.

[15]Should a man have two wives, the one beloved and the other hated, and the beloved one and the hated one bear him sons, and the firstborn son be the hated one’s, [16]it shall be, on the day he grants estate to his sons of

what he has, he shall not be able to make the beloved one's son the firstborn over the firstborn son of the hated one. [17]For the firstborn, the son of the hated one, he shall recognize to give him double of all that belongs to him, for he is his first yield of manhood, his is the birthright's due.

[18]Should a man have a wayward and rebellious son, who does not heed his father's voice and his mother's voice, and they punish him and he does not heed them, [19]his father and his mother shall seize him and bring him out to the elders of his town and to the gate of his place, [20]and they shall say to the elders of his town, "This son of ours is wayward and rebellious, he does not heed our voice, is a glutton and a drunk." [21]All the people of his town shall stone him to death, and you shall root out the evil from your midst, that all Israel may hear and be afraid.

[22]And should there be against a man a death-sentence offense and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, [23]you shall not let his corpse stay the night on the tree but you shall surely bury it on that day, for a hanged man is God's curse, and you shall not pollute

your soil that the LORD your God is about to give you in estate.

CHAPTER 21 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *on the soil*. Although *ʾadamah* has the extended meaning of "land" (and in some cases even "the earth"), its primary sense of "soil" is especially relevant to this and many passages in Deuteronomy. Violently shed blood soaks into the soil, pollutes it, cries out for justice (as in the murder of Abel), and when the murderer remains unknown, a special ritual is required to cleanse the polluted soil and atone for the blood shed. Abraham ibn Ezra notes that this law on bloodshed within the community of Israel immediately follows the laws pertaining to conduct in violent conflict with external enemies.

3. *the elders of that town.* The whole community is plagued with the miasma of bloodguilt—like Thebes at the beginning of *Oedipus the King*—and so must act as a community through its elders to purge the guilt.

4. *a swift-running wadi.* In all likelihood, this refers to a wadi that is filled with a powerful torrent during the rainy season and would not provide suitable terrain along its banks for cultivation. The wadi thus is a wilderness water source, outside the pale of regular civilized undertakings, and therefore a suitable setting for this rite of expiation for an unsolved crime against humanity.

7. *Our hands . . . our eyes*. In this formula of exculpation, the elders declare both that they—presumably this includes everyone in the community they represent—have not committed the murder and that they have not witnessed it, and so have no knowledge of the killer's identity.

11. *a woman of comely features.* The same epithet is attached to Joseph in Genesis 39 when the captive Hebrew becomes the object of his Egyptian mistress's lustful gaze. Throughout the ancient Mediterranean world, captive

women of vanquished peoples were assumed to be the due sexual prerogative of the victors (compare Briseus at the beginning of the *Iliad*). This law exceptionally seeks to provide for the human rights of the woman who falls into this predicament.

and take her for yourself as wife. This expression is proleptic: the victor, desiring the woman, intends to make her his wife (or rather concubine), but that intention, as the next two verses clearly indicate, cannot be realized until the end of a thirty-day period after he returns home with her.

12. *she shall shave her head and do her nails.* Several of the medieval Hebrew commentators construe this as intended to make her unattractive. That is, her captor, having been smitten with desire when he first saw the beautiful woman, may now have second thoughts about her desirability and change his mind. But especially since trimming the nails would scarcely impair her attractiveness, it is more likely that this cutting of excrescences growing from the body, together with the removal of the garment of captivity, is a rite of transition that marks the woman's transformation from the daughter of an alien people to a fit mate for an Israelite man. The period of thirty days—the set duration of all mourning—for her keening for the parents she has left behind is another indication that the law encodes a ritual of transition.

13. *come to bed with her.* Literally, "come into her." For the implication of this particular idiom for sexual intercourse, see the comment on Genesis 6:4.

master her. The verb *baʿal* means "to cohabit," "to master," "to exert the capacity of a husband."

14. *if you like her not.* The implication is that this disinclination toward the woman occurs at some point after she has become the man's sexual partner.

garner profit. The Hebrew verb *hitʿamer* occurs only here and in 24:7 and its precise meaning is uncertain. Many understand it to mean "enslave" (Abraham ibn Ezra cites a supposed Persian cognate meaning "slavery"). This translation is based on the conjecture that the verb may be related to *ʿomer*, "sheaf of grain," and hence have something to do with extracting material benefit, as in a harvest.

abused her. The verb *ʿinah*, "abuse," "debase," "afflict," is also sometimes used for rape, and its employment here astringently suggests that the sexual

exploitation of a captive woman, even in a legally sanctioned arrangement of concubinage, is equivalent to rape.

15. *beloved . . . hated*. There is some evidence that these ordinary Hebrew verbs, when applied to co-wives, have the technical sense of favored and unfavored wife. But it is worth preserving the literal meaning in translation because the language thus includes the possibility of an extreme case: even when you adore one wife and despise the other, you must grant the son of the woman you despise the rights of the firstborn if they are his due.

17. *double.* Some interpreters argue that the Hebrew *pi shnayim* (literally, "the mouth of two") means two-thirds, as it does in Zechariah 13:8. The extant evidence is that there were varying proportional arrangements for favoring the firstborn in inheritance.

his first yield of manhood. This is the same phrase Jacob uses for his firstborn, Reuben, in Genesis 49:3 (see the comment there on that phrase). The idiom may well have been proverbial, a kind of kenning for the firstborn, and it appears to reflect a belief that the first production of the virile vigor (Hebrew *'on*) of a man is endowed with special power.

20. *a glutton and a drunk.* This designation is a clear indication that the carousing rebellious son is an adult.

21. *the people of his town shall stone him to death.* The sternness of this law surpasses that of ancient Near Eastern analogues, which variously punish the refractory son with public shaming, imprisonment, or disinheritance. The rabbis were sufficiently uncomfortable with this law to virtually disallow it. Thus the Babylonian Talmud: "The wayward and rebellious son never existed and never will exist. Then why is it written? To say, inquire and receive the reward [i.e., for strictly didactic purposes]" (Sanhedrin 71A). It should be noted that the whole community (presumably after judicial proceedings) takes part in the execution, and in this instance the hand of the witnesses (the parents) is not first against the condemned, so justice is transferred from parental authority to the community.

22. *hang him on a tree.* One modern view, with an eye to Assyrian practice, understands this as impalement on a pole or gibbet, though the Mishnah has in view hanging the corpse to a kind of cross after the execution. "Tree," one

might recall, in older English usage, can refer to either a gallows or to the cross.

23. *a hanged man is God's curse.* The meaning of these words is in dispute, especially because of the polyvalence of *ʾelohim*—God, gods, divine beings, spirits. Some modern commentators prefer the last of these alternatives, yielding the sense: a corpse left hanging is a curse or blight to the departed spirit that once inhabited it. This suggestion, however, does not jibe well with "You shall not pollute your soil," a clause suggesting that a corpse left unburied is a violation of the sacredness of the human body, a violation that pollutes the land. (In this connection, compare *Antigone*.) To leave a body hanging, then, may simply be a disgrace or curse in the eyes of God. Alternately, *ʾelohim* might even be simply a suffix of intensification: a hanged man is a supreme curse.

CHAPTER 22

[1]You shall not see your brother's ox or his sheep slipping away and ignore them. You shall surely return them to your brother. [2]And if your brother is not close to you and you do not know who he may be, you shall gather it into your house and it shall be with you until your brother inquires for it and you return it to him. [3]And thus shall you do for his donkey and thus shall you do for his cloak and thus shall you do for any lost thing of your brother's that may be lost by him and that you find. You shall not be able to ignore it. [4]You shall not see your brother's donkey or his ox falling on the way and ignore them. You shall surely raise them up with him.

[5]There shall not be a man's gear on a woman, and a man shall not wear a woman's garment, for whoever does all these is an abhorrence of the LORD your God. [6]Should a bird's nest chance to be before you on the way or in any tree or on the ground with fledglings

or eggs and the mother is crouched over the fledglings or over the eggs, you shall not take the mother together with the young. [7]You shall surely send off the mother, and the young you may take for yourself, so that it may go well with you and you will enjoy length of days. [8]When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, that you not put bloodguilt in your house should someone fall from it. [9]You shall not plant your vineyard with mixed seeds, lest the ripe crop be proscribed—the seed that you plant and the yield of the vineyard. [10]You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together. [11]You shall not wear *sha ʿatnez*, wool and linen together. [12]You shall make yourself tassels on the four corners of your garment with which you cover yourself. [13]Should a man take a woman, and come to bed with her and hate her, [14]and he impute to her misconduct and put out a bad name for her and say, “This woman did I take and I came close to her and I found no signs of virginity for her,” [15]the young woman’s father and her mother shall take and bring out to the elders of the town at the gate the signs of the young woman’s virginity. [16]And the young woman’s father shall say to the elders, “My daughter I gave to this man as wife, and he hated her. [17]And look, he has imputed misconduct, saying, ‘I found no signs of virginity for your daughter,’ but these are the signs of

my daughter's virginity." And they shall spread out the garment before the elders of the town. [18]And the elders of that town shall take the man out and punish him, [19]and they shall fine him a hundred weights of silver and give it to the young woman's father, for he put out a bad name for a virgin in Israel. And she shall be his wife, he shall not be able to send her away ever. [20]But if this thing be true, no signs of virginity were found for the young woman, [21]they shall take the young woman out to the entrance of her father's house and the men of her town shall stone her to death, for she has done a scurrilous thing in Israel to play the whore in her own father's house, and you shall root out the evil from your midst. [22]Should a man be found lying with a woman who has a husband, both of them shall die, the man lying with the woman and the woman as well, and you shall root out the evil from Israel. [23]Should there be a virgin young woman betrothed to a man, and a man find her in the town and lie with her, [24]you shall bring them both out to the gate of that town and stone them to death—the young woman, for her not crying out in the town, and the man, for his abusing his fellow man's wife, and you shall root out the evil from your midst. [25]But should the man find the betrothed young woman in the field and the man seize her and lie with her, only the man lying with her shall

die. [26]And to the young woman you shall do nothing, the young woman bears no capital offense, for as a man rises against his neighbor and murders him, so is this thing. [27]For he found her in the field: the young woman could have cried out and there would have been none to rescue her. [28]Should a man find a virgin young woman who is not betrothed and take hold of her and lie with her, and they be found, [29]the man lying with her shall give to the young woman's father fifty weights of silver, and she shall be his wife inasmuch as he abused her. He shall not be able to send her away all his days.

CHAPTER 22 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *your brother's ox or his sheep*. This brief group of laws about the obligation to return lost property and help one's fellow man corresponds to Exodus 23:4–5 with an important terminological difference: Exodus posits the extreme case of finding the beast of your "enemy," whereas Deuteronomy, with its commitment to imagining a united community of the Israelite people, repeatedly uses the term "your brother."

ignore. The literal meaning is "hide yourself," i.e., pretend you don't see.

2. *gather it into your house.* Although this might simply mean "take into the jurisdiction of your household," in fact Canaanite domestic structures often had an enclosure used as a stable on the ground floor. The word thus emphasizes that the finder of the beast is to keep it safe and sheltered until the owner appears.

5. *There shall not be a man's gear on a woman, and a man shall not wear a woman's garment.* The word *keli* ("gear") might mean clothing, as it does in rabbinic Hebrew, but it is an all-purpose term that could also refer to weapons, as some scholars have contended. (The fact that a verb for wearing is not used for the woman might lend support to this contention.) What is "abhorrent" about the practice of cross-dressing could be an association with pagan orgiastic activities or even with pagan magic (a Hittite text prescribes cross-dressing as the first stage in a ritual for curing impotence). In any case, the common denominator shared by this law and those that follow is, as anthropological critics have noted, a general recoil of ancient Hebrew culture from the commingling of distinct, often binary categories—male and female, nurture and killing, seeds of different plants, wool (from animals) and linen (from plants), conjugality and promiscuity.

6. *you shall not take the mother together with the young.* The often asserted humanitarian motivation of this law is a little ambiguous because, after all, the mother is separated from her fledglings or eggs, which are fated to end up on someone's dinner table. This law has sometimes been compared with the prohibition against eating a kid boiled in its mother's milk: there appears to be a sense that the order of nature is violated when the destruction of life includes the biological producer and nurturer of life. Others have detected here a pragmatic, or ecological, consideration: if one makes a practice of killing both fledglings and mother, the race of birds will not be able to reproduce itself.

8. *build a new house.* This particular law does not seem to be connected with the surrounding laws that involve the separation of distinct categories. Perhaps the editor linked it associatively with the discovery of the bird's nest because of the idea of potential death on the heights.

should someone fall from it. The Hebrew literally says, "should he who falls fall from it," the subject of the clause being, as Abraham ibn Ezra observes, a proleptic usage.

9. *lest the ripe crop be proscribed.* This phrase, and any rationale for the law other than the separation of distinct categories, are equally obscure. The meaning of *melei'ah*, "ripe crop" (from the word that means "full") is in dispute. "Proscribed" is literally "sanctified," but to be sanctified, or set aside,

can also mean to be taboo, as Rashi notes, with several biblical instances. In any case, no one has offered an entirely satisfactory explanation of why the crop of mixed seeds should be sanctified or proscribed.

10. *You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together.* In this case, the separation of the two kinds of beasts has a clear humanitarian motive, for the smaller animal would suffer in this yoking.

11. *shaʿatnez.* This term seems to be a foreign loanword, perhaps from the Egyptian, and so, lest its sense be obscure, the rest of the verse is a gloss on its meaning. Minglings of wool and linen were worn by the priests and used in the sanctuary trappings, so the separation of categories here may be intended to draw a line between the profane and the holy.

12. *tassels.* The Hebrew word *gedilim* differs from "fringe," *tsitsit*, used in Numbers 15:38–41, and here no mention is made that the tassel is a mnemonic device for the believing Israelites. Fringes at the hems of garments were fairly common in ancient Near Eastern apparel.

13. *come to bed with her and hate her.* The extreme concision of the sequence of verbs in the Hebrew does not allow us to conclude whether the man was immediately disaffected with the woman out of sexual dissatisfaction or whether he simply came to be displeased with her with the passage of conjugal time.

14. *I came close to her.* In his denunciation of the woman, the husband uses a euphemism, an idiom not restricted to sex, instead of the narrator's plain "came to bed with" (literally, "came into").

no signs of virginity. The Hebrew *betulim* means both the condition of virginity and the concrete evidence of virginity. In this case, the husband is claiming that he found neither an intact hymen nor signs of blood after the consummation of the act.

15. *bring out to the elders of the town at the gate the signs of . . . virginity*. One infers that the bride would have entrusted to the safekeeping of her parents—probably, her mother—as legal insurance the bloodied sheet or garment (sleeping in one's garment being common in this culture) after the nuptial night.

16. *and he hated her.* The parents of the bride, though recycling words already used, understandably delete the verb for sexual intercourse.

18. *punish him.* The rabbinic understanding of this term, which is historically plausible, is that it means public flogging.

19. *fine him.* A fine is appropriate because the man's calculation may have been chiefly financial: he would have been able to divorce the woman without the defamation but in that case would have been obliged to restore her dowry to her, which served as a kind of divorce insurance for the wife.

give it to the young woman's father. One must keep in mind that in this society marriage was chiefly a transaction between the father of the bride and the groom (or the groom together with his father). The defamatory husband has essentially suggested that the young woman's father passed off damaged goods on him, and so now he owes the father an indemnity.

he shall not be able to send her away ever. "Send her away" here has the technical sense of "divorce." It might seem a dubious recompense for a woman to continue as wife of a man who hates her and has tried to destroy her reputation. (Even more extremely, the unbetrothed victim of a rapist, verse 29, is to become his wife, without possibility of divorce.) But in this society, the condition of a woman who is not a virgin and has no husband is quite desperate (witness Tamar's sense that her life is virtually ended after she has been raped, 2 Samuel 13). The law is no prescription for her happiness, but at least it guarantees her social and economic security.

21. *stone her to death.* This is still another instance of a draconian law in Deuteronomy—the capital punishment for premarital sex far exceeds even the sternness of other ancient Near Eastern codes—which the rabbis sought to mitigate through exegesis. Since death sentences are not supposed to be issued without the firm testimony of at least two eyewitnesses, "if this thing be true," the rabbis plausibly argued, means that the sentence could be pronounced only if two witnesses actually observed the illicit act of intercourse, merely circumstantial evidence being excluded by principle. If that is the case, implementation of the death sentence would have been extremely rare.

for she has done a scurrilous thing in Israel. This particular Hebrew phrase, *nevalah beyisra'el*, is regularly used to indicate a shameful sexual act.

in her own father's house. The phrase might mean simply, while she was under her father's jurisdiction, but the concreteness of the idiom leaves open the more scandalous possibility that her assignations actually took place under her father's roof.

24. *to the gate of that town.* Repeatedly, the gate is the place of public judgment.

25. *in the field.* The obvious point is that out in the open, beyond the town, there is no one else present to hear the woman's cry for help. But "the field," beyond the perimeters of safe communal existence, often figures in biblical language as a dangerous zone where marauders, wild animals, even demons prey on people.

and the man seize her. This verb, indicating that the man is forcing himself on her, is absent from the law about the woman in the town. There the presumption is that she is a willing partner since, had he forcibly "seized" her, she would have called out for help and presumably gotten it. One should keep in mind that Canaanite or Israelite towns were small and crowded, lacking the desolate neighborhoods with empty streets one can find in a large modern city. Precisely for that reason, this translation regularly renders the Hebrew term *ʿir* as "town," not "city."

29. *the man . . . shall give to the young woman's father fifty weights of silver*. Deflowering the unbetrothed young woman would make her unmarriageable (see the third comment on verse 19) and entail financial loss for her father, who would be deprived of the bride-price. The double remedy of the law, however odd it may seem to modern eyes in permanently binding the rape victim and the rapist, is to decree that the man marry the woman without possibility of divorce, and that he pay a bride-price to her father. It is not clear whether there was a standard bride-price in Israelite society, but fifty weights of silver sounds generous.

CHAPTER 23

[1]A man shall not wed his father's wife, and he shall
not uncover his father's skirt. [2]No one with crushed
testes or lopped member shall come into the LORD's
assembly. [3]No misbegotten shall come into the
LORD's assembly. Even his tenth generation shall not
come into the LORD's assembly. [4]No Ammonite nor
Moabite shall come into the LORD's assembly. Even
his tenth generation shall not come into the LORD's
assembly ever. [5]Because they did not greet you with
bread and water on the way when you came out of
Egypt, and for their hiring against you Balaam son of
Beor from Aram Naharaim to curse you. [6]But the
LORD your God did not want to listen to Balaam, and
the LORD your God turned the curse into blessing for
you, for the LORD your God loves you. [7]You shall not
seek their well-being and their good all your days,
forever. [8]You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is
your brother. You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you
were a sojourner in his land. [9]The sons that are born to

them, their third generation may come into the LORD's assembly.

[10]When you sally forth in a camp against your enemy, you shall keep yourself from every evil thing. [11]Should there be among you a man who is not clean through nocturnal emission, he shall go outside the camp and not come into the camp. [12]And it shall be, toward evening, he shall bathe in water and as the sun sets he may come inside the camp. [13]And you shall have a marker outside the camp and shall go there outside. [14]And you shall have a spike together with your battle gear, and it shall be, when you sit outside, you shall dig with it and go back and cover your excrement. [15]For the LORD your God walks about in the midst of your camp to rescue you and to give your enemies before you, and your camp shall be holy, that He should not see among you anything shamefully exposed and turn back from you.

[16]You shall not hand over to his master a slave who escapes to you from his master. [17]With you he shall stay, in your midst, in the place that he chooses within one of your gates wherever is good for him. You shall not mistreat him. [18]There shall be no cult-harlot from

the daughters of Israel, and there shall be no cult-
catamite from the sons of Israel. [19]You shall not bring
a whore's pay nor a dog's price to the house of the
LORD your God for any votive offering, for both of
them are the abhorrence of the LORD your God.
[20]You shall not exact interest from your brother,
interest of silver, interest of food, or interest of
anything that will bear interest. [21]From the stranger
you may exact interest but from your brother you shall
not exact interest, so that the LORD your God may
bless you in all that your hand reaches on the land to
which you are coming to take hold of it. [22]Should you
make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not
delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will surely
require it of you and there would be an offense in you.
[23]And should you refrain from making a vow, there
will be no offense in you. [24]The utterance of your lips
you shall keep, and you shall do as you have vowed to
the LORD your God, the freewill gift that you spoke
with your mouth. [25]Should you come into your fellow
man's vineyard, you may eat grapes as much as you
crave—to your fill—but you shall not put them in your
pouch. [26]Should you come into your fellow man's
standing grain, you may pluck tender ears with your
hand but you shall not wield a sickle on your fellow
man's standing grain.

CHAPTER 23 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *his father's wife*. Since the term "wed" could not be used for a man's mother or for a woman currently married to the man's father, the phrase would have to mean his father's widow (who might be fairly young, in light of the early age at which girls were married off) or a woman divorced from his father.

he shall not uncover his father's skirt. What is involved is taboo by metonymic contamination: a man should not come in contact with the female nakedness that was once in conjugal contact with his own father's nakedness. David Cohen-Zemach interestingly detects here an allusion to Ham's seeing his father Noah's nakedness (Genesis 9:22), Ham being the father of Canaan, the eponymous progenitor of the Canaanite peoples. What closely follows (verse 4) is a prohibition against ever accepting the Moabites and the Ammonites, two peoples purportedly engendered out of incestuous union with a father, into the Israelite community.

2. *crushed testes or lopped member.* This prohibition may simply express a vehement rejection of both forms of castration, in fact fairly commonly practiced in the ancient Near East. But the law as it is formulated also excludes from the assembly a man who is sexually mutilated through some accident. In this patriarchal culture, the integrity of the body is strongly connected with the integrity of the capacity for fatherhood. The prohibition, then, is thematically related to the immediately preceding prohibition against uncovering one's father's skirt, both expressing a horror of violation of the body of the father.

3. *misbegotten.* The Hebrew *mamzer* (etymology uncertain) later comes to mean "bastard," but the convincing consensus of both traditional and modern commentators is that it refers to the offspring of a taboo, or incestuous, union.

4. *Ammonite nor Moabite.* It is not entirely clear why these two peoples should be permanently excluded for their hostility toward the Israelites approaching

Canaan, whereas the Edomites, who were scarcely more friendly, and the Egyptians, who wanted to murder the entire population of Hebrew male infants, are to be accepted in the community. The issue is further complicated by the fact that Boaz married a Moabite woman, Ruth, who then became progenitrix of David's royal line. (Abraham ibn Ezra's contention that the ban is against Moabite men, not women, seems strained.) One must conclude that as historical circumstances shifted, attitudes in ancient Israel toward the sundry neighboring peoples also changed, and these changes are reflected in the inconsistencies of the texts.

shall not come into the LORD's assembly. Jeffrey H. Tigay argues persuasively that the assembly is primarily a civic concept, roughly analogous to the polis among the Greeks. To come into the assembly, then, means to become a naturalized citizen. That status, of course, would also have entailed worship of the God of Israel.

11. *not clean through nocturnal emission.* This cluster of regulations about remaining in a state of purity in the military camp is predicated on the notion that "the LORD your God walks about in the midst of your camp" (verse 15), acting as guarantor of victory. Soldiers on a campaign at least sometimes took upon themselves a vow of sexual abstinence for the duration of the fighting, as one sees in the David story (1 Samuel 21:5–6), and the ritual impurity imparted by an involuntary emission of semen is related to that practice.

13. *a marker.* The Hebrew *yad* (primary meaning, "hand") also means "monument" or "marker." The common claim that here the sense is "place" stands on scanty philological grounds.

14. *a spike.* The Hebrew *yated* usually means "tent peg."

battle gear. The rare term *ʾazen* is probably an Aramaizing form of *zayin*, "weapon."

15. *shamefully exposed.* The Hebrew is literally "nakedness of a thing," but the word for "nakedness," *ʿerwah*, is specifically the term for prohibited sexual nakedness, that which should never be exposed, and so carries a strong connotation of shame.

16. *You shall not hand over to his master a slave.* The scholarly consensus is that this injunction to offer asylum to runaway slaves (an unusual law in the

ancient world) refers to foreign slaves. Israelite slaves, who were in essence indentured servants, would have been freed after six years.

18. *cult-harlot . . . cult-catamite*. The precise meaning of these two terms, *qedeshah* and *qadesh*, is disputed. There is no clear-cut evidence that ritual prostitution was practiced in the ancient Near East, although it remains an undeniable possibility. (Ritual prostitution was known in nearby Asia Minor, the original homeland of the Hittites who often pass through the biblical scene.) Exceptionally, the female *qedeshah* is presented here before the male *qadesh*, suggesting she was the more familiar type. The story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 makes it clear that *qedeshah* was some sort of more refined or dignified designation for a prostitute: Judah takes Tamar for a "whore" (*zonah*); Hirah his emissary then refers to her more decorously as a *qedeshah*. Since the root means "sacred," it is a reasonable inference that the *qedeshah* was either a woman who prostituted herself as part of the cult (in that case, a fertility cult) or a prostitute working near the site of a sanctuary who devoted part of her professional income to the sanctuary. Since the pilgrim obligation to participate in the temple service was laid upon the males, the *qadesh* would in all likelihood have been a homosexual prostitute, as the translation "cult-catamite" is meant to indicate.

19. *a whore's pay nor a dog's price.* It is not clear whether the second of these phrases refers literally to what is gained by selling or bartering a dog or whether (perhaps more probably, because dogs had limited economic value in this society) "dog" is a contemptuous term for the *qadesh*. Dogs, we should recall, were despised in ancient Hebrew culture, thought of chiefly as unpleasant scavengers. They were not kept as pets and may not have been used for hunting or shepherding.

21. *From the stranger you may exact interest but from your brother you shall not exact interest.* The prohibition against interest (the term, at least etymologically, means "bite") is predicated on an agrarian society of "brothers" in which loans are extended as a form of temporary charity. The ban may not have included properly mercantile loans, and it was not generally applied as Israelite society became more fully urbanized. Foreigners can be required to pay interest because the paradigmatic case would be foreign merchants traveling among the Israelites for business purposes.

23. *should you refrain from making a vow.* The vow is a "freewill gift," and no one is under any obligation to make such a vow. But should a person in fact undertake a vow, he is strictly responsible to fulfill it promptly.

25. *Should you come into your fellow man's vineyard.* This is by no means a country crisscrossed with highways, and thus it would often have been necessary to pass through someone's vineyard or field on a narrow path in order to reach one's destination.

26. *you may pluck tender ears.* The Hebrew *melilot* is derived from a verbal stem that means to rub between the fingers and is distinct from *shibolim*, "mature ears of grain." The *melilot* (like the grapes) are thus a kind of available snack for the hungry pedestrian, but neither ears nor grapes are to be the object of actual harvesting, by wielding a sickle or filling a pouch.

CHAPTER 24

[1]When a man takes a wife and beds her, it shall be, if she does not find favor in his eyes because he finds in her some shamefully exposed thing, and he writes her a document of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her away from his house, [2]and she goes out from his house and goes and becomes another man's, [3]and the second man hates her and writes her a document of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her away from his house, or the second man, who took her to him as wife, dies, [4]her first husband, who sent her away, shall not be able to come back and take her to be his wife after she has been defiled, for it is an abhorrence before the LORD, and you shall not lead the land to offend that the LORD your God is about to give you in estate. [5]When a man takes a new wife, he shall not go out in the army and shall not cross over on its account for any matter. He shall be exempt in his house for a year and gladden his wife whom he has taken. [6]One may not take in pawn a hand mill or an upper millstone, for one would be taking in pawn a

life. [7]Should a man be found stealing a living person of his brothers, of the Israelites, and garner profit from him and sell him, that thief shall die, and you shall root out the evil from your midst. [8]Watch yourself in regard to the plague of skin blanch to watch carefully and to do. According to all that the levitical priests will teach you as I have charged them you shall watch to do. [9]Remember what the LORD your God did to Miriam on the way when you came out of Egypt. [10]Should you make a loan of anything to your fellow man, you shall not come into his house to take his pledge. [11]You shall stand outside, and the man to whom you have made the loan shall bring out the pledge to you outside. [12]And if he is a poor man, you shall not lie down in his pledge. [13]You shall surely give the pledge back to him as the sun sets, that he may lie down in his cloak and bless you and it be a merit for you before the LORD your God. [14]You shall not oppress a poor and needy hired worker from your brothers or from your sojourners who are in your land within your gates. [15]In his day you shall give his wages, and the sun shall not set on him—for he is poor and his heart counts on it—that he call not against you to the LORD and there be an offense in you. [16]Fathers shall not be put to death over sons, and sons shall not be put to death over fathers. Each man shall be put to

death for his own offense. [17]You shall not skew the
case of a sojourner or an orphan, and you shall not
take as pawn a widow's garment. [18]And you shall
remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the
LORD your God ransomed you from there. Therefore
do I charge you to do this thing. [19]When you reap your
harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you
shall not go back to take it. For the sojourner and for
the orphan and for the widow it shall be, so that the
LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your
hands. [20]When you beat your olive trees, you shall not
strip the branches of what is left behind you. For the
sojourner, for the orphan, and for the widow it shall
be. [21]When you glean your vineyard, you shall not
pluck the young grapes left behind you. For the
sojourner, for the orphan, and for the widow it shall
be. [22]And you shall remember that you were a slave in
Egypt. Therefore do I charge you to do this thing.

CHAPTER 24 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1–4. These verses are all one long run-on sentence, describing in quasinarrative terms a special case of divorce, remarriage, and divorce rather than addressing the general predicament of divorce.

1. *he finds in her some shamefully exposed thing.* This is the same idiom for something disgraceful that appears in 23:15 (see the comment there). The vagueness of the expression leaves open the possibility that the husband has discovered something morally reprehensible in his wife or that what has repelled him is a physical defect, perhaps something about her that displeases him sexually

a document of divorce. The use of a written document for divorce (the actual divorce procedure is not spelled out in biblical law) is registered only in Deuteronomy and later texts. The reasonable inference is that in earlier periods divorce was effected by the act of banishing the woman from the house and/or by an oral declaration on the part of the husband. The literal meaning of the phrase used here, *sefer keritut*, is "document [or scroll] of cutting-off." Since *keritut* is not one of the usual biblical terms for divorce, scholars have conjectured that it refers to a ceremony in which the husband cut off a corner of the wife's garment as a sign that he was severing relations with her. In 1 Samuel 15, when Saul inadvertently tears the hem of Samuel's garment, the prophet immediately seizes on the act as a symbol that God is about to tear away the kingship from Saul.

5. *When a man takes a new wife.* The thematic connection with the previous law is the issue of sexual consummation in marriage.

shall not cross over on its account for any matter. The "it" may refer to the army—i.e., the man shall stay put and not go off anywhere for military purposes—but the Hebrew is rather cryptic, as this literal translation indicates, and no one has provided an entirely satisfactory interpretation.

gladden his wife. The verb here could refer specifically to giving her sexual pleasure, though it does not exclude the more general pleasure of conjugal sociability. This law differs from the parallel law of exemption from military service for the newlywed in chapter 20 in introducing a humane concern for the bride.

6. *a hand mill or an upper millstone.* Although the Hebrew *reiḥayim* is the general term for mill, the large agricultural mill, several feet in diameter, would be too massive to move, so the reference must be to a hand mill. Even in that case, the heavy netherstone (*shekhev*) would have been hard to carry off, but it would have sufficed to seize the much lighter upper millstone (*rekhev*) in order to disable the mill.

for one would be taking in pawn a life. A household typically ground its own grain for bread, and hand mills were thus a necessary tool in even the poor home, as the great number of them uncovered by archaeologists confirms.

7. *a living person.* The term used here, *nefesh*, is the same one used for "life" in the previous verse concerning the poor man and his hand mill and thus provides a link between the two laws. A human life is not to be disregarded for the purpose of profit.

9. *Remember what the* LORD *your God did to Miriam.* The story in Numbers 12:10–15, in which Miriam is stricken with this disfiguring skin disease for maligning Moses, is invoked because it provides an especially horrific representation of the disease, as Aaron's words to Moses make clear: "Let her not be, pray, like one dead who when he comes out of his mother's womb, half his flesh is eaten away."

11. *outside.* The seemingly redundant term of location at the very end of the sentence—already clearly indicated in the verb "bring out"—serves to emphasize that the creditor must remain beyond the perimeters of the debtor's home and not violate his private space.

12. *you shall not lie down in his pledge.* This is a kind of pun: you shall not go to sleep, retaining his pledge, and you shall not sleep in it, as the poor man himself would sleep in his cloak, his sole bedding.

14. *sojourners.* The Hebrew uses a singular form.

15. *his heart counts on it.* More literally: "his life [or his very self] lifts toward it."

16. *Fathers . . . sons*. Collective punishment, or measure-for-measure punishment (you killed my son, your son shall be killed), was common in ancient Near Eastern legal codes, and this law is a protest against it.

17. *you shall not take as pawn a widow's garment.* This appears to be a greater restriction than the one for the poor man, in whose case the garment may be held by the creditor during the day but must be returned to the owner

at sunset. Perhaps the law regarded it as a form of shameful exposure (*ʿerwat davar*) to deprive the widow of her (outer?) garment at any time, thus leaving her to go about insufficiently covered.

20. *beat your olive trees.* This was the general practice for harvesting ripe olives.

you shall not strip the branches of what is left behind you. The relatively rare verb *peʾer* is derived from *poʾrah*, "branch." It might have involved plucking the less ripe olives not shaken loose by beating. "What is left" is added in the translation to clarify the compact Hebrew.

21. *you shall not pluck the young grapes left behind you.* Another unusual verb, *ʿolel*, is derived from *ʿolelot*, "small grapes."

CHAPTER 25

[1]When there is a dispute between men, they shall
approach the court of justice, and they shall judge
them and find for the one in the right and against the
one in the wrong. [2]And it shall be, if the one in the
wrong deserves blows, the judge shall make him lie
down and have him struck before him, according to
his wrongdoing in number. [3]Forty blows he may strike
him, he shall not go farther, lest he go on to strike him
beyond these a great many blows, and your brother
seem of no account in your eyes. [4]You shall not muzzle
an ox when it threshes. [5]Should brothers dwell together
and one of them die and have no son, the wife of the
dead man shall not become wife outside to a stranger.
Her brother-in-law shall come to bed with her and take
her to him as wife, and carry out a brother-in-law's
duty toward her. [6]And it shall be, the firstborn whom
she bears shall be established in the name of his dead
brother, that his name be not wiped out from Israel.
[7]And if the man does not want to wed his sister-in-law,
his sister-in-law shall go up to the gate to the elders

and say, “My brother-in-law has refused to establish a name for his brother, a name in Israel. He did not want to carry out a brother-in-law’s duty toward me.” [8]And the elders of his town shall call to him and speak to him, and if he stands and says, “I do not want to wed her,” [9]his sister-in-law shall approach him before the eyes of the elders and slip his sandal from his foot and spit in his face and speak out and say, “So shall be done to the man who will not build his brother’s house.” [10]And his name shall be called in Israel: the House of the Slipped-off Sandal. [11]Should men brawl together, a man and his brother, and the wife of one of them come forward to rescue her man from the hand of the one striking him, and she reach out her hand and seize his pudenda, [12]you shall cut off her hand, your eye shall not spare her. [13]You shall not have in your pouch different weight-stones, a big one and a small one. [14]You shall not have in your house different *ephah* measures, a big one and a small one. [15]A whole and honest weight-stone you shall have; a whole and honest *ephah* measure you shall have, so that you may enjoy length of days on the soil that the LORD your God is about to give you. [16]For the abhorrence of the LORD your God is anyone who does all these things, who commits any fraud. [17]Remember what Amalek did to you on the way when you came out of Egypt,

[18]how he fell upon you on the way and cut down all the stragglers, with you famished and exhausted, and he did not fear God. [19]And it shall be, when the LORD your God grants you respite from all your enemies around in the land that the LORD your God is about to give you in estate to take hold of it, you shall wipe out the remembrance of Amalek from under the heavens, you shall not forget.

CHAPTER 25 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *court of justice*. The single Hebrew word *mishpat* can mean "law," "judgment," "justice," "the institution or court of justice," besides several non-judicial senses.

2. *deserves blows.* The corporal punishment would be either lashes or blows delivered with a rod or cane. Biblical law is reticent about what infractions merited this punishment, mentioning only the instance of a man who defames his wife (22:18).

3. *Forty blows.* Rabbinic law stipulates thirty-nine lashes in order to avert the possibility that the executor of the punishment might inadvertently exceed the limit of forty. It also stipulates that if the guilty person is in any way infirm or shows signs of losing physical control during the lashing, the number of blows shall be reduced accordingly.

a great many blows. Literally, "a multitudinous blow."

4. *You shall not muzzle an ox when it threshes.* The humanitarian motive of this law is obvious. Threshing was done by oxen either with their hooves or

pulling a threshing sledge. In either case, the ox is not to be prevented from nibbling during the work.

5. *Should brothers dwell together.* Although this might mean in the same extended household, the probable reference is to contiguous properties or properties in close proximity.

carry out a brother-in-law's duty toward her. This is a single verb in the Hebrew *weyibmah*, derived from *yabam*, "brother-in-law." The institution assumed here is the socalled levirate marriage (from the Latin *levir*, "brother-in-law"). The continuity provided by male offspring in this patrilineal society was the sole form of "immortality" a man could expect, which would also have the economic ramification of bequeathing one's property to a son. A man who dies without having begotten a son is thus cut off, his "name wiped out from Israel." His brother serves as a kind of proxy for the dead man, and the son he begets with the widow is to bear the name—that is, the patronymic—of the dead brother. The practice of the levirate marriage seems to have shifted at different points in the biblical period. In the Book of Ruth, "brother" is clearly extended to cover the nearest available kinsman, even a distant cousin.

6. *established.* The literal meaning of the verb is "to arise."

8. *if he stands.* Some interpreters understand this ordinary verb of physical position to mean "persist" here.

9. *slip his sandal from his foot.* There are differing opinions about the symbolism of this gesture. Some understand it as a gesture of severance: as the widow removes the sandal, she removes herself from obligatory connection with the brother-in-law and is free to marry someone else. But calling his house the House of the Slipped-off Sandal clearly is a shaming act. Perhaps because only the indigent would go about barefoot, slipping off the man's sandal in public is a ritual of disgrace (especially since the law seems to assume that he and his deceased brother are men who have property).

spit in his face. Abraham ibn Ezra, Rashi, and many modern commentators interpret this as "before him," i.e., on the ground in front of him, which the Hebrew preposition could definitely mean. But a more shocking gesture of humiliation may be more in keeping with the harsh tenor of her declaration "So shall be done to the man . . ."

11. *Should men brawl together.* Ibn Ezra shrewdly identifies this as an antithetical echo of "Should brothers dwell together" (verse 5).

pudenda. The Hebrew term *mevushim*, like the Latinate English term, is derived from the root that means "shame."

12. *you shall cut off her hand.* Once again, the draconian severity of this law led the rabbis to reinterpret it to mean monetary compensation. The law may register a vehement response to a breach of modesty on the part of the woman, but a Middle Assyrian parallel suggests that the case in mind is one where the woman inflicts serious injury on the man by seizing his testicles. If an impairment of reproductive function is involved, this would be grave, and would link this law to the concern for the continuation of man's name in the levirate marriage.

13. *weight-stones.* The Hebrew says simply "stones," but the meaning is unambiguous, and weight-stones were abundantly used for commercial transactions.

14. ephah *measures.* The Hebrew says simply "ephah," a unit of dry measure equal to about 19 liters, though some think it might have been bigger.

17. *Remember what Amalek did to you.* It is not entirely clear why Amalek (compare Exodus 17:8–16) is singled out as the archenemy of Israel. In historical terms, the Amalekites, a seminomadic people of the Negeb and southern trans-Jordan region, carried out frequent and brutal marauding raids against Israelite settlements (see the story about the Amalekite raid against David's town of Ziklag in 1 Samuel 30). Deuteronomy here offers an explanation for the opprobrium of Amalek not mentioned in Exodus—that the Amalekites attacked the Israelite stragglers, who would have been the old, the infirm, and women and children, and slaughtered them.

18. *he fell upon you . . . and he did not fear God*. This language suggests an ambush of the stragglers. S. D. Luzatto, the nineteenth-century Italian Hebrew exegete, proposes that this injunction is connected to the previous one about false weights and measures through the idea of deception.

19. *when the LORD your God grants you respite from all your enemies.* Historically, a campaign to wipe out the Amalekites was undertaken in the

time of Hezekiah, in the late eighth century B.C.E.

you shall wipe out the remembrance of Amalek. The noun *zekher*, which is also used in the parallel verse in Exodus 17:14, means "name" but derives from the root meaning "remembrance." Etymologically, a name is the remembrance a man leaves after him, and *zekher*, "remembrance," is strongly linked with *zakha*r, "male." (Compare the necessity of male offspring to prevent a name from being wiped out in the levirate marriage.) But it is important to retain the idea of remembering in translation because the writer is pointedly playing with "remembrance . . . do not forget."

CHAPTER 26

[1]And it shall be, when you come into the land that the LORD your God is about to give you in estate, and you take hold of it and dwell in it, [2]you shall take from the first yield of all the fruit of the soil that you will bring from your land which the LORD your God is about to give you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God chooses to make His name dwell there. [3]And you shall come to the priest who will be in those days, and you shall say to him, “I have told today to the LORD your God that I have come into the land which the LORD swore to our fathers to give to us.” [4]And the priest shall take the basket from your hand and lay it down before the altar of the LORD your God. [5]And you shall speak out and say before the LORD your God: “My father was an Aramean about to perish, and he went down to Egypt, and he sojourned there with a few people, and he became there a great and mighty and multitudinous nation. [6]And the Egyptians did evil to us and abused us and set upon us hard labor. [7]And we cried out to the

LORD God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our abuse and our trouble and our oppression. [8]And the LORD brought us out from Egypt with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm and with great terror and with signs and with portents. [9]And He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. [10]And now, look, I have brought the first yield of the fruit of the soil that You gave me, LORD." And you shall lay it down before the LORD your God, and you shall bow before the LORD your God. [11]And you shall rejoice in all the bounty that the LORD your God has given you and your household, you and the Levite and the sojourner who is in your midst.

[12]When you finish tithing all the tithe of your produce in the third year, the year of tithing, you shall give it to the Levite, to the sojourner, to the orphan, and to the widow, and they shall eat within your gates and be sated. [13]And you shall say before the LORD your God, "I have rooted out what is to be sanctified from the house and, what's more, I have given it to the Levite and to the sojourner, to the orphan, and to the widow, according to all Your command that You charged me. I have not transgressed Your command and I have not

forgotten. [14]I have not eaten of it in mourning, and I have not rooted it out while unclean, and I have not given of it for the dead. I have heeded the voice of the LORD my God according to all that you charged me. [15]Look down from Your holy dwelling place, from the heavens, and bless your people Israel and the soil that You have given us as You swore to our fathers, a land flowing with milk and honey."

[16]This day the LORD your God charges you to do these statutes and these laws, and you shall keep and do them with all your heart and with all your being. [17]The LORD you have proclaimed today to be your God, and to go in His ways and to keep His statutes and His commands and His laws and to heed His voice. [18]And the LORD has proclaimed you today to be to Him a treasured people, as He has spoken to you, and to keep all His commands, [19]and to set you high above all the nations that He made, for praise and for acclaim and for glory, and for you to be a holy people to the LORD your God, as He has spoken.

CHAPTER 26 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *from the first yield of all the fruit of the soil*. Neither the amount to be taken nor the kinds of produce are specified. The early rabbis understood this to refer to the seven kinds of agricultural produce (*shivʿat haminim*) for which the land of Israel was famous.

3. *I have told today.* "Told" (*higid*) here has the obvious sense of making a formal declaration. In keeping with the textualization of biblical culture that is one of the central innovations of Deuteronomy, these verses and the next group of verses in this chapter offer an actual liturgy, the first full-fledged liturgy in the Torah, to be recited by each Israelite farmer.

5. *an Aramean about to perish.* The two most likely candidates for the Aramean are Abraham, who came from Mesopotamia, and Jacob, who spent twenty years there after fleeing from Esau. The surprising use of "Aramean" as an epithet for a patriarch may reflect the antiquity of this recited formula, since the Arameans later chiefly figured as enemies. The precise meaning of the verb *ʾoved* has long been in dispute. Some understand it to mean "wandering," though when it is used elsewhere in that sense, the meaning appears to be closer to "lost," which would not fit here. Because the end of the sentence registers going down into Egypt, implicitly in a time of famine, which both Abraham and Jacob did, it is likely that the intended reference is to the patriarch's being on the point of perishing. Thus the prosperous farmer, even as he brings to the sanctuary specimens of the first yield of his crop, recalls how his forefathers were close to dying from famine and were obliged to go down to Egypt, where in due course they were enslaved. As Jeffrey H. Tigay notes, this liturgy shifts the grounds of the ritual of first fruits from the agricultural cycle to a rehearsal of history. Some scholars have gone a step further in conjecturing that this emphasis on the God of history in the presentation of the first fruits is an implied polemic against pagan agricultural rites, in which the deities were invoked strictly in regard to their function in guaranteeing the fertility of the crops.

10. *And you shall lay it down before the* LORD *your God.* This appears to contradict verse 4, in which, with the same verb used, the priest is the one who lays down the basket. The explanation of the Mishnah, that both priest and layman laid down the basket at different points in the ceremony, may well reflect the actual biblical procedure: "With the basket still on his shoulder, he

recites from 'I have told today to the LORD your God' as far as 'My father was an Aramean about to perish.' Then he puts down the basket from his shoulder and grasps it by its edges, and the priest sets his hand beneath it and elevates it, and then he recites from 'My father was an Aramean about to perish' until he finishes the entire passage, and then lays it down alongside the altar and bows and goes out" (Bikurim 3:6).

13. *I have rooted out what is to be sanctified.* The same verb, *biʿer*, that is repeatedly used for the uprooting of evil from the midst of Israel is employed here to suggest how rigorous one must be in setting aside and not appropriating the tithe dedicated to the poor ("what is to be sanctified").

14. *I have not eaten of it in mourning.* The mourner, having been in recent contact with the dead, might impart ritual impurity to the foodstuffs that must be *qodesh*, "sanctified," for the consumption of the needy.

I have not given of it for the dead. Food offerings intended to nourish the spirits of the dead were a common practice in both Canaanite religion and Israelite popular religion. It would be a violation of the tithe law to take any part of what is supposed to be consecrated to the needy and use it for an offering to the dead. Such an offering would also be proscribed because the person would become ritually impure ("unclean") by entering into a burial site.

15. *from Your holy dwelling place, from the heavens.* This identification of the divine abode is important in the theology of Deuteronomy. The West Semitic peoples often thought of the gods dwelling on a high mountain (like Olympus among the Greeks). In Deuteronomy, God is to choose one place where He will make His name dwell (and the audience would have recognized that as a mountaintop, Mount Zion), but that place is not to be thought of as God's actual abode.

17. *you have proclaimed.* The verb *haʾamir* occurs only here. The most convincing construction of its meaning is to see it as a *hiphʿil* form of *ʾamar*, "to say." Since the *hiphʿil* conjugation often has a causative sense, "cause to say" would mean something like "to declare concerning," "to make a solemn proclamation about." The idea of solemn declarations on the part of both Israel and God fits nicely with the move toward liturgical confessions of principle and commitment that we encounter in this section of Deuteronomy.

CHAPTER 27

[1]And Moses, and the elders of Israel with him,
charged the people, saying, “Keep all the command
that I charge you today. [2]And it shall be, on the day
that you cross the Jordan into the land that the LORD
your God is about to give you, you shall set up for
yourself great stones and coat them with plaster. [3]And
you shall write on them the words of this teaching
when you cross over, so that you may come into the
land that the LORD your God is about to give you, a
land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD God
of your fathers has spoken to you. [4]And it shall be
when you cross the Jordan, you shall set up these
stones that I charge you today on Mount Ebal, and you
shall coat them with plaster. [5]And you shall build there
an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones.
You shall not wield iron over them. [6]Whole stones you
shall build the altar of the LORD your God and offer
up upon it burnt offerings to the LORD your God.
[7]And you shall sacrifice communion sacrifices, and you
shall eat there and rejoice before the LORD your God.

[8]And you shall write on the stones all the words of this
teaching very clearly." [9]And Moses, and the levitical
priests with him, spoke to all Israel, saying, "Be still
and listen, Israel. This day you have become a people
to the LORD your God. [10]And you shall heed the voice
of the LORD your God and do His commands and His
statutes which I charge you today." [11]And Moses
charged the people on that day, saying, [12]"These shall
stand to bless the people on Mount Gerizim as you
cross the Jordan: Simeon and Levi and Judah and
Issachar and Joseph and Benjamin. [13]And these shall
stand over the curse on Mount Ebal: Reuben, Gad and
Asher and Zebulun, Dan and Naphtali. [14]And the
Levites shall call out and say to every man of Israel in
a loud voice: [15]'Cursed be the man who makes a statue
or molten image, the LORD's abhorrence,
stonemason's handiwork, and sets it up in secret.' And
all the people shall call out and say, 'Amen.' [16]'Cursed
be he who treats his father or his mother with
contempt.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'
[17]'Cursed be he who moves his fellow man's landmark.'
And all the people shall say, 'Amen.' [18]'Cursed be he
who leads a blind man astray on the road.' And all the
people shall say, 'Amen.' [19]'Cursed be he who skews
the case of a sojourner, orphan, or widow.' And all the
people shall say, 'Amen.' [20]'Cursed be he who lies with

his father's wife, for he has uncovered his father's skirt.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.' [21]'Cursed be he who lies with any beast.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.' [22]'Cursed be he who lies with his sister, his father's daughter or his mother's daughter.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.' [23]'Cursed be he who lies with his mother-in-law.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.' [24]'Cursed be he who strikes down his fellow man in secret.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.' [25]'Cursed be he who takes payment to strike down a life—innocent blood.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.' [26]'Cursed be he who does not fulfill the words of this teaching to do them.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'"

CHAPTER 27 NOTES

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2. *you shall set up for yourself great stones*. These would be steles, upright monumental stone slabs.

coat them with plaster. Writing on plaster, in order to make the letters stand out more distinctly (compare "very clearly" in verse 8), was a known procedure in the ancient Near East. The Balaam inscription found at Deir ʿAlla in Jordan is written on plaster (see the comment on Numbers 22:9). Inscriptions on plaster-coated steles of course would not have lasted too long under the assault of the elements, but since the Deuteronomist presumably did not have the actual inscriptions to display to his audience, that very fact of

material transience would have served his purpose, allowing him to evoke the idea of monumental writing without the actual monuments.

3. *write on them the words of this teaching.* The most plausible reference of this phrase is to the code of laws (chapters 12–26) that has just been enunciated, although it could refer to the whole Book of Deuteronomy. Jeffrey H. Tigay notes that two steles of the size on which the Code of Hammurabi are inscribed could contain more than the entire text of Deuteronomy. In any case, inscribing "the words of this teaching [*torah*]" on stone is a powerfully concrete image of the idea of the text as the enduring source of authority, which is a central ideological innovation of Deuteronomy.

5. *You shall not wield iron over them.* This injunction to make the altar of whole stones is in keeping with Exodus 20:25. See the comment on that verse.

8. *very clearly.* The infinitive *ba'er* is the same verb used in Deuteronomy 1:5 in the perfect tense, where it refers to clear expounding. Here the reference is instead to clear writing.

9. *This day you have become a people to the* LORD. In Exodus, it is the Sinai epiphany that transforms the Israelites into the people of the LORD. Deuteronomy must insist on "this day"—repeated several times in close sequence here and frequently occurring elsewhere—as the transforming moment because it is here, as the people stand ready to cross the Jordan, that Deuteronomy's authoritative rehearsal/revision of the Law is given to them.

12. *These shall stand to bless.* In this solemn ceremony, the twelve tribes are divided six and six on the two mountains, to pronounce respectively the blessing and the curse. Attempts to explain the division in terms of the genealogy of the tribes or the moral behavior of their eponymous founders in Genesis seem strained. Geography may be the best, if imperfect, explanation: all six tribes stationed on the northern mountain, Ebal, had territories in the north or east of the Jordan and became part of the northern kingdom of Israel; four of the six tribes stationed on the southern mountain, Gerizim, ended up in territory south of the Jezreel Valley.

13. *stand over the curse.* This phrase avoids the direct object (as in "to bless the people"), introducing a slight obliquity into the dire act of cursing. Moshe Weinfeld has shown that ceremonies of this sort, in which curses of just this nature were invoked against those who strayed from the dictates of the gods, were widely practiced by the Greeks when they established new colonies.

15. *and sets it up in secret.* Several commentators, medieval and modern, have taken this indication of clandestine idolatry as a clue that all the transgressions in this list that follows are acts performed in secret. (Compare the secret murderer in verse 24.) But one wonders whether secrecy is generally feasible in denying legal justice to the helpless (verse 19).

20. *lies with his father's wife.* This would be either his father's ex-wife or widow or, given the institution of polygamy, a wife of his father who was not the man's mother.

22. *Cursed be he who lies with his sister.* The second half of the verse makes clear that even a half sister is taboo. Tamar's attempt to ward off sexual assault from her half brother Amnon (2 Samuel 13) by saying that perhaps their father David might arrange a marriage between them either is an act of desperate stalling or reflects an earlier moment in biblical law when such unions were acceptable.

25. *who takes payment to strike down a life.* The word translated as "payment," *shoḥad*, usually means "bribe," and this has led most interpreters to understand this verse to refer to a judge's taking a bribe in a case involving capital punishment. The problem with this view is that the idiom "strike down a life"—i.e., mortally strike—means to kill, by a violent act, and only by questionable conjecture could it be extended to judicial murder. *Shoḥad*, however, does not invariably mean "bribe." See, for example, 1 Kings 15:19, where Asa, king of Judah, sends a message to the king of Aram, "I have sent you a payment [*shoḥad*] of silver and gold. Go, revoke your pact with Baasha king of Israel." The most likely reference of our verse is to someone who takes payment in order to carry out a murder (a "contract") on behalf of someone else. It may well be that the phrase "innocent blood," which seems syntactically disjunct, was added as a kind of gloss by an editor who understood *shoḥad* in its judicial sense.

26. *Cursed be he who does not fulfill the words of this teaching.* The acts upon which curses are pronounced come to twelve, one for each tribe. They encompass idolatry and moral and sexual turpitude. This twelfth curse is clearly a summarizing one, which refers not to any specific transgression but to a general failure to uphold the words of the Law that Deuteronomy has conveyed.

CHAPTER 28

[1]“And it shall be, if you truly heed the voice of the
LORD your God to keep to do all His commands that
I charge you today, the LORD your God will set you
high above all the nations of the earth. [2]And all these
blessings will come upon you and overtake you when
you heed the voice of the LORD your God. [3]Blessed
you will be in the town and blessed you will be in the
field. [4]Blessed the fruit of your womb and the fruit of
your soil and the fruit of your beasts, the get of your
herds and the offspring of your flock. [5]Blessed your
basket and your kneading pan. [6]Blessed you will be
when you come in and blessed you will be when you
go out. [7]The LORD will render your enemies who rise
against you routed before you. On one way they will
sally forth toward you and on seven ways they will flee
before you. [8]The LORD will ordain the blessing with
you in your granaries and in all that your hand reaches,
and He will bless you in the land that the LORD your
God is about to give you. [9]The LORD will set you up
for Him as a holy people as He has sworn to you when

you keep the command of the LORD your God and walk in His ways. [10]And all the peoples of the earth will see that the name of the LORD is called over you and they will fear you. [11]And the LORD will give you an extra measure for the good in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your beasts and in the fruit of your soil on the soil that the LORD swore to your fathers to give to you. [12]The LORD will open for you His goodly treasure, the heavens, to give your land's rain in its season and to bless all your handiwork, and you will put many nations in your debt and you will not be a debtor. [13]And the LORD will set you as head and not as tail, and you will be only above and you will not be below when you heed the command of the LORD your God which I charge you today to keep and to do. [14]And you shall not swerve from all the words that I charge you today to the right or to the left to go after other gods to worship them.

[15]"And it shall be, if you do not heed the voice of the LORD your God to keep to do all His commands and His statutes that I charge you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you. [16]Cursed you will be in the town and cursed you will be in the field. [17]Cursed your basket and your kneading pan. [18]Cursed

the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your soil, the get of your herds and the offspring of your flock. [19]Cursed you will be when you come in and cursed you will be when you go out. [20]The LORD will send against you blight and panic and disaster in all that your hand reaches, that you do, until you are destroyed and until you perish swiftly because of the evil of your acts, as you will have forsaken Me. [21]The LORD will make the plague cling to you until He wipes you out from the face of the soil to which you are coming to take hold of it. [22]The LORD will strike you with consumption and with fever and with inflammation and with burning and with desiccation and with emaciation and with jaundice, and they will pursue you till you perish. [23]And your heavens that are over your head will be bronze and the earth that is under you iron. [24]The LORD will turn your land's rain into dust, and dirt from the heavens will come down upon you until you are destroyed. [25]The LORD will render you routed before your enemies. On one way you will sally forth toward him, and on seven ways you will flee before him. And you will be a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. [26]And your carcass will become food for the birds of the heavens and for the beasts of the earth, with none to make them afraid. [27]The LORD will strike you with the burning rash of Egypt and with

hemorrhoids and with boils and with scabs from which you will not be able to be healed. [28]The LORD will strike you with madness and with blindness and with confounding of the heart. [29]And you will grope at noon as the blind man gropes in darkness, and you will not make your ways prosper, and you will be only exploited and robbed always with no rescuer. [30]A woman you will betroth and another man will bed her. A house you will build and you will not dwell in it. A vineyard you will plant and you will not enjoy its fruits. [31]Your ox will be slaughtered before your eyes and you will not eat of it. Your donkey will be robbed from you and will not come back to you. Your sheep will be given to your enemies and you will have no rescuer. [32]Your sons and your daughters will be given to another people with your own eyes seeing and wasting away for them all day long, and your hand will be powerless. [33]The fruit of your soil and all your enterprise a people that you knew not will eat up, and you will be only exploited and crushed always. [34]And you will be crazed by the sight of your eyes that you will see. [35]The LORD will strike you with evil burning rash on the knees and on the thighs, you will not be able to be cured, from the sole of your foot to your pate. [36]The LORD will lead you and your king whom you set up over you to a nation that you knew not,

neither you nor your fathers, and you will worship there other gods, wood and stone. [37]And you will become a derision, a byword, and an adage among all the peoples where the LORD will drive you. [38]Much seed the field will bring forth and little will you gather, for the locust will consume it. [39]Vineyards you will plant and work, but wine you will not drink and will not store up, for the worm will eat them. [40]Olive trees you will have throughout your territory but no oil will you rub on, for your olives will drop away. [41]Sons and daughters you will beget, but you will not have them, for they will go off in captivity. [42]All your trees and the fruit of your soil the grasshopper will despoil. [43]The sojourner who is in your midst will rise up high above you and you will go down far below. [44]He will put you in debt and you will not put him in debt. He will become the head and you will become the tail. [45]And all these curses will come upon you and pursue you and overtake you until you are destroyed. For you will not have heeded the voice of the LORD your God to keep His commands and His statutes which He charged you. [46]And they will be a sign and a portent in you and in your seed for all time. [47]Inasmuch as you will not have served the LORD your God in joy and with a good heart out of an abundance of all things, [48]you will serve your enemies whom the LORD will

send against you in hunger and in thirst and in nakedness and in the lack of all things, and he will put an iron yoke on your neck until you are destroyed.
[49]The LORD will carry against you a nation from afar, from the end of the earth, as the eagle swoops, a nation whose tongue you will not understand, [50]a fierce-faced nation that will show no favorable face to an old man and will not pity a lad. [51]And he will eat the fruit of your beasts and the fruit of your soil until you are destroyed, as he will not leave you grain, wine, and oil, the get of your herds and the offspring of your flock, until he makes you perish. [52]And he will besiege you in all your gates until your high and fortified walls in which you trust come down throughout your land, and he will besiege you in all your gates throughout your land which the LORD your God gave you. [53]And you will eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your sons and your daughters whom the LORD your God gave you, in the siege and in the straits in which your enemy will press you. [54]The tender and delicate man among you, his eye will be cast meanly on his brother and on the wife of his bosom and on the remnant of his children that he will have left, [55]not to give to a single one of them from his children's flesh that he will eat because he will have nothing left in the siege and in the straits in which your enemy will press you in your

gates. [56]The tender and delicate woman among you,
who has not ventured to set the sole of her foot on the
ground from delicacy and from tenderness, her eye
will be cast meanly on the husband of her bosom and
on her son and on her daughter [57]and on her afterbirth
coming out from between her legs and on her children
whom she will bear, for she will eat them in the lack
of all things and in secret, in the siege and in the straits
in which your enemy will press you in your gates. [58]If
you do not keep to do all the words of this teaching
written in this book to fear this solemn and fearsome
name, the LORD your God, [59]the LORD will make
your plagues and the plagues of your seed astounding,
great and relentless plagues, evil and relentless
illnesses. [60]And He will bring back to you all the
ailments of Egypt which you dreaded, and they will
cling to you. [61]What's more, every illness and every
plague that is not written in this book of teaching the
LORD will bring down upon you until you are
destroyed. [62]And you will remain a scant few instead of
your being like the stars of the heavens in multitude,
for you will not have heeded the voice of the LORD
your God. [63]And it shall be, as the LORD exulted over
you to do well with you and to multiply you, so will
the LORD exult over you to make you perish, to
destroy you, and you will be torn from the soil to

which you are coming to take hold of it. [64]And the
LORD will scatter you among all the peoples from one
end of the earth to the other, and you will worship
there other gods that you did not know, neither you
nor your fathers, wood and stone. [65]And among those
nations you will have no quiet and the sole of your foot
will have no resting place, and the LORD will give you
there a quaking heart and a wasting away of the eyes
and an anguished spirit. [66]And your life will dangle
before you, and you will be afraid night and day and
will have no faith in your life. [67]In the morning you
will say, 'Would that it were evening,' and in the
evening you will say, 'Would that it were morning,'
from your heart's fright with which you will be afraid
and from the sight of your eyes that you will see. [68]And
the LORD will bring you back to Egypt in ships, on
the way that I said to you, 'You shall not see it again,'
and you will put yourselves up for sale there to your
enemies as male slaves and slavegirls, and there will be
no buyer."

[69]These are the words of the Covenant that the LORD
charged Moses to seal with the Israelites in the land of
Moab, besides the Covenant that He sealed with them
at Horeb.

CHAPTER 28 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *set you high above all the nations of the earth*. The parallel statements of divine favor to the Israelite people in Exodus stress the act of election itself and the grant of the promised land but not this idea of supremacy—verses 7 and 12 make clear that this means military and economic supremacy—over all other nations. The immediate political background for this conditional pronouncement is a period in which powerful nations to the east periodically threatened Israel's national existence.

2. *overtake you.* The verb is a little surprising because it is the word used for catching up with someone who is fleeing. The idea is that an unimaginable profusion of bounties will come down on the Israelite in ways he could scarcely expect, but the usage is also obviously dictated by the need to create a precise verbal parallelism with verse 15, "all these curses will come upon you and overtake you."

7. *On one way . . . on seven ways*. This formulaic numerical increase, sometimes found between the two versets in lines of poetry, offers, as Rashi notes, a vivid image of the unity of the attack, the disarray of the retreat.

10. *the name of the LORD is called over you.* According to the biblical conception of naming, this means that the LORD has a special proprietary relationship with the people, and will protect them.

12. *His goodly treasure, the heavens, to give your land's rain in its season.* Moses's speech has already called attention to the strict dependence of agriculture in the land of Israel upon rainfall (11:11).

15. *these curses.* Famously, four times more space is devoted to the curses than to the blessings. Historically, the implementation of the curses seemed much more imminent in the seventh century B.C.E. than the fulfillment of the blessings. In any case, the chief function of the entire verbal enactment of this stupendous ceremony of blessings and curses is admonition, so it is not

surprising that a long catalogue of bloodcurdling catastrophes far outweighs the list of happier events.

20. *The LORD will send against you blight.* After verses 15–19, which mirror verbatim the formulation of the blessings in verses 2–6, the pronouncement of curses begins its own vivid elaborations of possibilities of disaster. The order of the terms in verses 4–5 is reversed in verses 17–18, forming a kind of chiasm.

until you perish. This phrase, or a close equivalent, becomes a kind of refrain in the recitation of curses. The point is that not only will catastrophes visit the people but they will end by destroying its very national existence.

22. *desiccation.* Although the term *ḥerev* looks like the ordinary word for "sword," a long tradition of interpreters, going back to Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, plausibly understands it in the present context of physical pathologies as a variant of *ḥorev*, the condition of being parched.

23. *your heavens . . . bronze . . . the earth . . . iron*. This tremendous image of devastating sterility is borrowed from the treaty of the Assyrian emperor Assarhadon with his vassals (672 B.C.E.). Other phrases in the list of curses, as Moshe Weinfeld has observed, also seem to have been inspired by the language of that treaty, such as the acts of cannibalism against one's own near kin in time of siege, the sightless stumbling, and the ravishing of the women by the enemy.

24. *turn your land's rain into dust.* Without rain, as Abraham ibn Ezra notes, the winds would whip up vast clouds of dust that would cover the land. The similarity of this particular disaster with one of the Ten Plagues is pointed, and in verse 27 "the burning rash of Egypt" will be explicitly mentioned.

26. *your carcass will become food for the birds.* To be denied burial and consumed as carrion is an ultimate curse throughout the Mediterranean, including Greece. Equivalents of this phrase abound in the Prophets.

with none to make them afraid. That is, there will be no one to drive off the vultures.

28. *madness . . . blindness . . . confounding of the heart*. All the physical afflictions are followed, causally, by the psychological devastation of the

afflicted.

30. *A woman . . . A house . . . A vineyard*. As several commentators have noted, this list of unfulfillments echoes the one in chapter 20 for which exemption from military service is granted.

35. *evil burning rash on the knees and on the thighs.* Before the culminating political disaster of exile, and after a reiteration of the curse of madness, the list reverts to an intolerable inflammation of the skin, here located on specific parts of the body, as though the physical immediacy of the skin, as in the Job story, were the best way to make suffering palpable.

36. *you will worship there other gods, wood and stone.* From the viewpoint of Deuteronomy's militant monotheism, the ultimate curse is not exile itself but being driven into a place where the exiles will be forced to turn into pagans or, indeed, fetishists.

43. *The sojourner who is in your midst will rise up high.* At first blush, this may seem odd because the sojourner has not elsewhere been regarded as a hostile element in the population. The sojourner, however, is repeatedly mentioned as legally and economically vulnerable, dependent on the benevolence of the native Israelites. Now he will have the upper hand, and perhaps there is a hint of the idea that an occupying force, having abrogated Israelite national sovereignty, will grant special privilege and power to the aliens residing in the land.

45. *come upon you and pursue you and overtake you.* In a pattern of intensifying incremental repetition, "pursue" is now added to the previous iterations of this formula.

48. *he will put an iron yoke on your neck.* In a characteristic move of biblical Hebrew from plural to singular, "he" refers to "your enemy," which in the previous clause was a plural.

50. *a fierce-faced nation that will show no favorable face to an old man.* Showing no favorable face (literally, "lifting face"), i.e., showing no special consideration, is played off against the "fierce-faced" appearance of the invaders, whose very language is unintelligible to their helpless victims.

52. *your high and fortified walls in which you trust.* The implication—standard doctrine in the Bible—is that it is futile to trust in fortifications or weapons; God alone can guarantee the nation's security.

53. *the flesh of your sons and your daughters.* Such ghastly acts of cannibalism did in fact occur in the desperation of starvation in time of siege, as they would occur in other times and places (e.g., during the religious wars in France in the sixteenth century).

55. *not to give to a single one of them.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "from giving to a single one of them."

56. *who has not ventured.* In the Hebrew, the subject of the verb is "sole of the foot."

61. *What's more, every illness and every plague that is not written.* Lest the long catalogue of terrifying plagues and disasters be incomplete, this clause is added at the end to make it clear that all other conceivable plagues and disasters are included by implication.

65. *a quaking heart and a wasting away of the eyes and an anguished spirit.* Physical suffering, bereavement, and finally exile are capped by the most unbearable inner torment. The closest analogue in the Bible to what is said here and in the next two verses (especially, "In the morning you will say, 'Would that it were evening' . . .") occurs in Job 7.

68. *bring you back to Egypt in ships.* The reference to ships is not entirely clear. Perhaps, since all this constitutes a reversal of the narrative of national liberation in Exodus, the idea of an arduous trek on foot up out of Egypt is contrasted by the notion here of a rapid voyage by sea along the Mediterranean coast back to Egypt.

you will put yourselves up for sale there. This clause is obviously an ironic recollection of Joseph, the first Hebrew to be sold down to Egypt as a slave, and also invokes the enslavement of the whole people recounted at the beginning of Exodus. Jeffrey H. Tigay proposes as a rationale for the attempted sale that the Israelites, presumably after having taken flight by sea to Egypt, will find themselves in a condition of such utter destitution that they will try to sell themselves as slaves. The sardonic conclusion of this curse is

that no one will want to buy them—perhaps because they have become known throughout the earth as “a derision, a byword, and an adage,” scarcely fit even for slavery.

CHAPTER 29

[1]And Moses called to all Israel and said to them, “You have seen all that the LORD did before your own eyes in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, [2]the great trials that your own eyes have seen, those great signs and portents. [3]But the LORD has not given you a heart to know and eyes to see and ears to hear until this day. And I led you forty years through the wilderness. [4]Your cloaks did not wear out upon you and your sandal did not wear out upon your foot. [5]Bread you did not eat, and wine and strong drink you did not drink, so that you might know that I am the LORD your God. [6]And you came to this place, and Sihon king of Heshbon and Og king of the Bashan sallied forth to meet us in battle, and we struck them down. [7]And we took their land, and we gave it in estate to the Reubenite and to the Gadite and to the half-tribe of the Manassite. [8]And you shall keep the words of this covenant and do them in order that you may prosper in all that you do. [9]You are stationed here today all of you before the LORD your God, your

heads, your tribes, your elders, and your overseers,
every man of Israel. [10]Your little ones, your wives, and
your sojourner who is in the midst of your camps,
from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your
water, [11]for you to pass into the Covenant of the
LORD your God and into His oath that the LORD
your God is to seal with you today, [12]in order to raise
you up for Him today as a people, and He will be for
you a God, as He spoke to you and as He swore to
your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. [13]And
not with you alone do I seal this covenant and this oath
[14]but with him who is here standing with us this day
before the LORD our God and with him who is not
here with us this day. [15]For you yourselves know how
we dwelled in the land of Egypt and how we passed
through in the midst of the nations through which you
passed. [16]And you saw their abominations and their
foulnesses, wood and stone, silver and gold, that were
with them. [17]Should there be among you a man or a
woman or a clan or a tribe whose heart turns away
today from the LORD our God to go worship the gods
of those nations, should there be among you a root
bearing fruit of hemlock and wormwood, [18]it shall be,
when he hears the words of this oath and deems
himself blessed in his heart, saying, ‘It will be well
with me, though I go in my heart’s obduracy’ in order

to sweep away the moist with the parched, [19]the LORD shall not want to forgive him, for then shall the LORD's wrath and His jealousy smoulder against that man, and all the oath that is written in this book shall come down upon him, and the LORD shall wipe out his name from under the heavens. [20]And the LORD shall divide him off for evil from all the tribes of Israel according to all the oaths of the Covenant written in this book of teaching. [21]And a later generation will say —your children who will rise up after you and the stranger who will come from a distant land and will see the blows against this land and its ills with which the LORD afflicts it, [22]brimstone and salt, all the land a burning, it cannot be sown and it cannot flourish and no grass will grow in it, like the overturning of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim which the LORD overturned in His wrath and in His anger, [23]all these nations will say, 'For what has the LORD done this to this land? What is this great smouldering wrath?' [24]And they will say, 'For their having abandoned the Covenant of the LORD, God of their fathers, which He sealed with them when He brought them out of the land of Egypt. [25]And they went and worshipped other gods and bowed to them, gods that they did not know and that He did not apportion to them. [26]And the LORD's wrath flared against that land to bring upon it

all the curse written in this book. [27]And the LORD tore them from upon their soil in wrath and in anger and in great fury and flung them into another land as on this day.' [28]Things hidden are for the LORD our God and things revealed for us and for our children forever to do all the words of this teaching."

CHAPTER 29 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Moses called to all Israel*. As is often the case, this verb has the force of "invoke" or "summon"—here, to a national assembly in which a solemn covenant between God and Israel will be ratified—but its primary sense of "calling out" is also important because, like the rest of Deuteronomy, this is very much a piece of *oratory* delivered by Moses.

all that the LORD did. The rapid rehearsal here of the narrative of the Wilderness experience corresponds to passages to the same effect in Moses's discourse at the beginning of the book and is also similar to the mention of royal triumphs in the Assyrian treaty texts with which this entire passage has a generic kinship.

3. *But the LORD has not given you a heart to know*. This negative declaration is hardly surprising. Abraham ibn Ezra succinctly explains, "Because they had tried God ten times and never mentioned the signs they had seen." Moses must balance the compelling importance of the idea that the Wilderness generation were eyewitnesses to God's great acts with their repeated recalcitrance to follow God's ways. The underlying justification for this grand covenantal ceremony, forty years after Sinai, is that now at last, on the verge of crossing into the land, the people is granted the discernment to see God's real power.

4. *Your cloaks . . . your sandal*. This miraculous durability of clothing through forty years of desert treks is a new detail.

5. *Bread you did not eat, and wine . . . you did not drink*. These words are another reference to God's miraculous provision of the people's needs. They did not eat bread but manna. They did not drink wine but water that God brought forth from the rock. In the Song of Moses (chapter 32), this second detail will be hyperbolically elevated to "He suckled him honey from the crag / and oil from the flinty stone."

9. *your heads, your tribes.* Some ancient versions have a smoother phrasing, "the heads of your tribes," and the Septuagint reads "your heads, your judges" (a difference of one Hebrew consonant).

11. *for you to pass into the Covenant.* The relatively rare verb for concluding a covenant is probably a linguistic fossil, reflecting an early practice in which a covenant was sealed by cutting animals in two and, evidently, having the two parties pass between the cut parts. (See Genesis 15 and the comments there.) It is a reasonable guess that the old—perhaps archaic—idiom is used here to underscore the binding solemnity of this covenant.

14. *but with him who is here standing with us this day . . . and with him who is not here with us this day*. This idea is paramount for the whole theological-historical project of the Book of Deuteronomy. The awesome covenant, evoked through Moses's strong rhetoric, whereby Israel binds itself to God, is a timeless model, to be reenacted scrupulously by all future generations. The force of the idea is nicely caught by the rabbinic notion that all unborn generations were already standing here at Sinai.

15. *we passed . . . you passed*. The Hebrew exercises considerable freedom in slipping from first person to second person, just as it does from Moses's discourse (the beginning of this entire speech) to God's discourse (e.g., verse 5, "so that you might know that I am the LORD your God").

16. *their abominations and their foulnesses.* Deuteronomy, with its antipagan polemic, is rich in terms of invective for idols. The second word here, *gilulim*, may derive from a term that means "stele," but Rashi and others, with some

plausibility, link it to *gelalim*, "turds," and it is vocalized in the Masoretic Text to mirror the vowels of *shiqutsim*, "abominations."

wood and stone, silver and gold. As elsewhere, the Deuteronomist reduces the idols to their sheer materiality, turning them into fetishes.

17. *a root bearing fruit of hemlock and wormwood.* The image may correspond to the idea in the next verse of an act of idolatry committed in the secrecy of the heart: buried roots bear poisonous fruit; the secret idolator will end by having a pernicious effect on all around him. The metaphor of poison and wormwood will come back in the Song of Moses.

18. *It will be well with me.* Or: I shall have peace. That is, nothing will happen to me, despite my betrayal of the cult of YHWH.

in order to sweep away the moist with the parched. This sounds very much like the citation of a proverbial saying, but lacking the original colloquial context, later readers have not been able to determine the precise reference. One often-repeated guess, citing the use of the same verb, "sweep away," in Abraham's bargaining with God over the survival of Sodom (Genesis 18), is that "the moist" are the innocent and "the parched" the wicked. The idea would then be that the behavior of the clandestine idolators will bring down destruction on others as well, good and bad alike. This interpretation, however, is by no means certain.

19. *oath.* The Hebrew term *ʾalah* can mean either "solemn oath" or "imprecation." In this case, the first sense leads to the second: if Israel takes upon itself this oath and then betrays the conditions to which it has committed itself, it will be the target of a terrible imprecation.

21. *And a later generation will say.* The sentence that begins with these words does not conclude until the end of verse 24, when the actual words of the later generation, together with the foreigners, are quoted. The fondness for long, breathless sentences, often employed to build up vehement rhetorical momentum, and with the syntactical ligaments somewhat slackened, is distinctive of the style of Deuteronomy.

this land. Technically, the demonstrative pronoun used would mean "that land," but to translate it that way might give the impression that the reference is to the distant land from which the foreigners have come.

22. *brimstone and salt, all the land a burning, it cannot be sown and it cannot flourish.* This powerful image of the promised land turned into the Cities of the Plain, blasted and desiccated forever, is all the more shocking because this land is supposed to be the thematic and agricultural antithesis of Sodom and Gomorrah—a land flowing with milk and honey.

23. *smouldering wrath.* Though the link between wrath and burning or hot breath is idiomatic, it is also vividly apt for the scorched Sodom-like landscape that the speaker beholds.

25. *And they went and worshipped.* Repeatedly, the verb "to go" precedes the indication of worshipping other gods. This usage is not just a stylistic tic but serves to make a theological point: Israel, after having been made the object of God's special favor and having been given God's law, must pick up its feet and go off from the way upon which it has been set in order to serve alien gods.

and that He did not apportion to them. This is another recurring idea in Deuteronomy—that God, having chosen Israel as His people, has also shared out the worship of other gods to the sundry peoples all around. Why God would want them to serve what the Deuteronomist must have regarded as pseudo-gods is not entirely clear. Perhaps he is actually alluding here to a notion that appears in the Song of Moses, a considerably older text, and one that appears not to assume absolute monotheism.

27. *tore them . . . in great fury and flung them*. Onkelos represents the first of these two verbs by the Aramaic term that means "to shake," "violently displace." The uprooting of exile is clearly imagined as sudden, abrupt, and painful.

into another land as on this day. The temporal indicator here of course reflects the perspective of those who behold the devastation of Israel, and it is not strictly necessary to infer, as some critical scholars have done, that both the phrase and the whole evocation of exile reflect the fact that this textual unit was composed after 586 B.C.E. The entire Book of Deuteronomy was written in a period of ominous threats to national existence, after the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C.E., and it took little effort of imagination to conjure up an imminent prospect of calamitous destruction and exile, as is done at several points in the book.

28. *Things hidden . . . things revealed*. This grim promise of future disasters if Israel betrays the Covenant ends—if indeed this sentence is in its proper place—with a gnomic declaration. What the declaration actually refers to is disputed, but if the relevant context is the preceding passage on idolatry (and, especially, its clandestine practice), then the consensus of the medieval Hebrew commentators is plausible: acts of betrayal hidden from the eyes of others will be visible to God, and He alone can exact retribution for them; when such acts are committed publicly rather than in secret, it is the obligation of the community to take steps against the perpetrators. One must grant that this construction of the verse is not assured, and the difficulty is compounded by the fact that the two Hebrew words which mean "for us and for our children" have a row of dots above them in the Masoretic Text, a device often used by ancient scribes to indicate erasure.

CHAPTER 30

[1]“And it shall be, when all these things come upon
you, the blessing and the curse that I have set before
you, that your heart shall turn back among all the
nations to which the LORD your God will make you
to stray. [2]And you shall turn back to the LORD your
God and heed His voice as all that I charge you today,
you and your children, with all your heart and with all
your being. [3]And the LORD your God shall turn back
your former state and have mercy upon you and He
shall turn back and gather you in from all the peoples
to which the LORD your God has scattered you.
[4]Should your strayed one be at the edge of the heavens,
from there shall the LORD your God gather you in
and from there shall He take you. [5]And the LORD
your God shall bring you to the land that your fathers
took hold of, and you shall take hold of it, and He
shall do well with you and make you more
multitudinous than your fathers. [6]And the LORD your
God shall circumcise your heart and the heart of your
seed to love the LORD your God with all your heart

and with all your being for your life's sake. [7]And the
LORD your God shall set all these imprecations upon
your enemies and your foes who pursued you. [8]And
you, you shall turn back and heed the LORD's voice,
and you shall do all His commands which I charge you
today. [9]And the LORD your God shall give you an
extra measure for the good in all your handiwork, in
the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your beasts
and in the fruit of your soil, for the LORD shall turn
back to exult over you for good as He exulted over
your fathers, [10]when you heed the voice of the LORD
your God to keep His commands and His statutes
written in this book of teaching, when you turn back
to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all
your being. [11]For this command which I charge you
today is not too wondrous for you nor is it distant. [12]It
is not in the heavens, to say, 'Who will go up for us to
the heavens and take it for us and let us hear it, that we
may do it?' [13]And it is not beyond the sea, to say, 'Who
will cross over for us beyond the sea and take it for us
and let us hear it, that we may do it?' [14]But the word is
very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to
do it. [15]See, I have set before you today life and good
and death and evil, [16]that I charge you today to love the
LORD your God, to go in His ways and to keep His
commands and His statutes and His laws. And you

shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God shall bless you in the land into which you are coming to take hold of it. [17]And if your heart turns away and you do not listen, and you go astray and bow to other gods and worship them, [18]I tell you today that you shall surely perish, you shall not long endure on the soil to which you are about to cross the Jordan to come there to take hold of it. [19]I call to witness for you today the heavens and the earth. Life and death I set before you, the blessing and the curse, and you shall choose life so that you may live, you and your seed. [20]To love the LORD your God, to heed His voice, and to cling to Him, for He is your life and your length of days to dwell on the soil which the LORD your God swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them."

CHAPTER 30 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse*. This opening clause pointedly refers to the great catalogue of blessings and curses laid out in chapter 28. In fact, the immediate reference is to the curses because the end of the verse assumes the condition of exile as an accomplished fact. The blessings and the curses, presented in chapter 28 as alternatives between which Israel is to choose by its future actions, here occur as a historical sequence: first the curse of exile, then the blessing of restoration.

that your heart shall turn back. Manifestly, the term "turn back" (*shuv*, reiterated in this chapter) is the thematic center of this passage, alternating between Israel and God in dialectic interplay.

2. *And you shall turn back to the* LORD *your God and heed His voice as all that I charge you today.* The grand exhortation of this whole speech, evoking the prospect of Israel's return to God, exhorting Israel to choose life and good rather than death and evil, and reminding Israel that the divine word is intimately accessible, makes it a fitting peroration to the series of speeches or sermons that constitute the bulk of the Book of Deuteronomy. Appropriately, the closing of the frame here includes several verbal echoes of the frame at the beginning, especially chapter 4. After this speech, the book moves on to matters pertaining to Moses's death and the transfer of authority and to the two poems that mark the book's conclusion.

3. *And the* LORD *your God shall turn back your former state.* The meaning of *shevut*, here rendered as "former state," has long been disputed. Many interpreters derive it from the root *sh-b-h* and hence understand it to mean "captivity." The use of the same verb (*shuv*) with this noun *shevut* in Jeremiah 48:46 immediately after the term *shivyah*, which unambiguously means "captivity," would seem to lend support to this understanding. But precisely this idiom is employed for the restoration of the fortunes of Job (42:10), where there is no question of Job's having been in a prior state of captivity.

6. *And the* LORD *your God shall circumcise your heart.* A two-stage process is envisaged. First, the heart of Israel, in the depths of exile, will turn back to God. As a response to this spiritual renewal on the part of the people, God will restore them to their land and sensitize the heart that has already turned back to Him, endowing it with a heightened capacity to love Him and to cling to His teaching. This second stage seems to eliminate the prospect of another exile after the first.

7. *all these imprecations.* The noun invoked is *ʾalah*, the solemn oath mentioned at the ceremony of the blessings and the curses, which when violated becomes dire imprecation.

11. *wondrous.* The force of the Hebrew root *p-l-ʾ* is something hidden (as Abraham ibn Ezra says) or beyond human ken. The crucial theological point

is that divine wisdom is in no way esoteric—it has been clearly set out in "this book of teaching" and is accessible to every man and woman in Israel.

12–13. *It is not in the heavens . . . it is not beyond the sea*. The Deuteronomist, having given God's teaching a local place and habitation in a text available to all, proceeds to reject the older mythological notion of the secrets or wisdom of the gods. It is the daring hero of the pagan epic who, unlike ordinary men, makes bold to climb the sky or cross the great sea to bring back the hidden treasures of the divine realm—as Gilgamesh crosses the sea in an effort to bring back the secret of immortality. This mythological and heroic era, the Deuteronomist now proclaims, is at an end, for God's word, inscribed in a book, has become the intimate property of every person.

15. *life and good and death and evil.* It is reductive to represent the primary terms "good" and "evil" as "prosperity" and "adversity" (New Jewish Publication Society). There is probably an echo here of "the tree of knowledge good and evil," and the point is that good, which may lead to prosperity, is associated with life just as evil, which may lead to adversity, is associated with death. The Deuteronomic assumptions about historical causation may seem problematic or, indeed, untenable, but this powerful notion of the urgency of moral choice continues to resonate.

19. *I call to witness for you today the heavens and the earth.* These eternal witnesses will again be invoked at the beginning of the Song of Moses.

CHAPTER 31

[1]And Moses finished speaking these words to all
Israel. [2]And he said to them, “A hundred and twenty
years old I am today. I can no longer sally forth and
come in, and the LORD has said to me, ‘You shall not
cross this Jordan.’ [3]The LORD your God, He it is who
crosses over before you. He shall destroy these nations
before you and you shall dispossess them. Joshua, he it
is who is to cross over before you as the LORD has
spoken. [4]And the LORD will do to them as He did to
Sihon and to Og, the kings of the Amorite, and to their
land, when He destroyed them. [5]And the LORD will
give them before you, and you shall do to them
according to all the command that I have charged you.
[6]Be strong and stalwart. Do not fear and do not dread
them, for the LORD your God, He it is Who goes with
you. He will not let go of you and He will not forsake
you.”

[7]And Moses called to Joshua and said to him before the eyes of all Israel, “Be strong and stalwart, for you will come with this people into the land which the LORD swore to their fathers to give to them, and you will grant it to them in estate. [8]And the LORD, He it is Who goes before you. He will be with you and will not forsake you. You shall not fear and you shall not be dismayed.”

[9]And Moses wrote this teaching and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who bear the Ark of the LORD’s Covenant, and to all the elders of Israel. [10]And Moses charged them, saying, “At the end of seven years, in the set season of the sabbatical year at the Festival of Huts, [11]when all Israel comes to appear before the presence of the LORD your God in the place that He chooses, you shall read this teaching before all Israel, in their hearing. [12]Assemble the people, the men and the women and the little ones and your sojourner who is within your gates, so that they may hear and so that they may learn, and they will fear the LORD your God and keep to do all the words of this teaching. [13]And your children who know not will hear and learn to fear the LORD your God all the days

that you live on the soil to which you are about to cross the Jordan to take hold of."

[14]And the LORD said to Moses, "Look, your time to die has drawn near. Call Joshua and station yourselves in the Tent of Meeting, that I may charge him." And Moses, and Joshua, went and stationed themselves in the Tent of Meeting. [15]And the LORD appeared in the Tent in a pillar of cloud, and the pillar of cloud stayed over the entrance to the Tent.

[16]And the LORD said to Moses, "Look, you are about to lie with your fathers, and this people will rise and go whoring after the alien gods of the land into the midst of which they are coming, and they will forsake Me and break My covenant that I have sealed with them. [17]And My wrath will flare against them on that day, and I shall forsake them and hide My face from them, and they will become fodder, and many evils and troubles will find them, and they will say on that day, 'Is it not because our God is not in our midst that these evils have found us?' [18]And as for Me, I will surely hide My face on that day for all the evil that they have done, for they turned to other gods. [19]And now, write you this song and teach it to the Israelites, put it in

their mouths, so that this song will be a witness against the Israelites. [20]When I bring them to the soil that I swore to their fathers, flowing with milk and honey, and they eat and are sated and grow sleek and turn to other gods and worship them and despise Me and break My covenant, [21]it shall be, when many evils and troubles find them, this song shall testify before them as witness, for it shall not be forgotten in the mouth of their seed, that I knew their devisings that they do today before I brought them into the land which I vowed." [22]And Moses wrote down this song on that day and taught it to the Israelites. [23]And he charged Joshua son of Nun and said, "Be strong and stalwart, for you will bring the Israelites into the land which He vowed to them, and I shall be with you." [24]And it happened, when Moses finished writing the words of this teaching in a book to their very end, [25]Moses charged the Levites, bearers of the Ark of the LORD's Covenant, saying, [26]"Take this book of teaching and place it alongside the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD your God, and it shall be there as witness against you. [27]For I myself have known your rebelliousness and your stiff neck. Look, while I am still alive with you today you have rebelled against the LORD, and how much more after my death!
[28]Assemble to me all the elders of your tribes and your

overseers, and let me speak in your hearing these words, that I may call to witness against you the heavens and the earth. [29]For I know, after my death that you will surely act ruinously and swerve from the way which I charged you, and the evil will befall you in the latter days, for you will do evil in the eyes of the LORD, to vex Him with your handiwork." [30]And Moses spoke in the hearing of all the assembly of Israel the words of this song to their very end:

CHAPTER 31 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Moses finished speaking*. The Masoretic Text reads, "And Moses went and spoke." This translation follows the Deuteronomy text found at Qumran, which accords with the Septuagint. The third-person forms of the verb "went," *wayelekh*, and the verb "finished," *wayekhal*, have the same consonants, and the order of the last two consonants could easily have been reversed in a scribal transcription. The difference between the two versions is essential because the Qumran version makes this a proper introduction to the entire epilogue of Deuteronomy (chapters 31–34). Moses has *completed* his discourses—the monitory sermons, the Laws, the blessings and curses—and he is not "going" anywhere to speak further words. Rather, the epilogue will now concern itself with the following topics of closure: the transfer of authority to Joshua, Moses's imminent death, the instructions for the public reading of "this teaching" (the Book of Deuteronomy or at least substantial portions of it), the recitation of the Song of Moses, which is to bear witness against Israel, and the poem blessing the twelve tribes.

2. *I can no longer sally forth and come in.* The idiom "go out and come in" (elsewhere, "bring out and bring in") means to lead the forces in battle. It is

an apt phrase for Moses to use because Joshua, whom he is about to designate as his successor, figures above all as the military commander of the conquest.

7. *Be strong and stalwart.* These words of encouragement, used in verse 6 in the plural for the Israelites, before the armed confrontation with the Canaanites are, as Abraham ibn Ezra properly notes, the same words Moses addresses now to Joshua (verses 7 and 23).

you will come with this people. Three ancient versions read here "you will bring this people" (the same verb in a different conjugation), which matches the use of the verb in verse 23.

8. *the LORD, He it is Who goes before you.* This is a recurring motif, picked up from Exodus: God is imagined as a celestial warrior headed out in front of the people against its enemies. The presence of that divine vanguard is the reassurance the people have when faced with adversaries superior in numbers.

9. *And Moses wrote this teaching.* As elsewhere in Deuteronomy, "this teaching," *torah*, refers to Deuteronomy itself. In verse 24, Moses is said to have written "the words of this teaching in a book." That last noun, *sefer*, refers in biblical Hebrew to anything recorded in writing, and it of course would not look physically like a book in our sense because the bound book or codex had not yet been invented. But the scroll, or series of scrolls, on which the text of Moses's valedictory discourses was set down clearly constitutes a book. Indeed, it may well inaugurate the clear-cut concept of the book in ancient Israel.

10. *in the set season of the sabbatical year at the Festival of Huts.* In the sabbatical year the fields are allowed to lie fallow, and the Festival of Huts (Succoth), the fall harvest festival, would conclude all harvesting from the previous year, thus leaving the entire people, with its agriculturally based economy, free to come to the central sanctuary and listen to the public reading of the book of teaching. In later tradition, this reading of Deuteronomy once every seven years would be replaced by the practice of reading all Five Books of Moses annually, divided into weekly portions through the year. That practice has its roots in the institution of the public reading of the Torah by Ezra in the fifth century B.C.E.

11. *in their hearing.* Literally, "in their ears."

12. *Assemble the people.* The assembly of the people to listen to the recitation of the Mosaic teaching is, as David Cohen-Zenach aptly observes, a reenactment of the hearing of the Law at Sinai, an event that Deuteronomy calls "the day of the assembly."

13. *your children who know not.* That is, your children who have not known, have not witnessed, all these great signs and portents that you have seen with your own eyes.

14. *Call Joshua . . . that I may charge him*. Critical scholarship has identified a whole series of duplications, contradictions, interruptions, and shifts in terminology in this chapter and generally has attributed them to a collation of different literary sources. The transfer of authority to Joshua is probably the most salient of these contradictory repetitions. In verses 7–8, Moses confers authority on Joshua in a declaration made before the whole people and God plays no direct role. Here it is God Who charges Joshua, and the investment of leadership is enacted away from the eyes of the people, in the sacrosanct space of the Tent of Meeting. The intricacies of the interwoven sources in this chapter need not detain us. Suffice it to say that there appear to be four layers: an old source, well antedating the composition of Deuteronomy; a Deuteronomic source; some work by the presumably exilic editor of Deuteronomy; and, finally, the editorial intervention of the redactor of the Torah as a whole. An orchestration of different strands may have been deemed necessary to provide an adequate conclusion to the book. Modern readers must keep in mind that the notion that most books were composite, heterogeneous in both authorship and literary genre, the product of collage, was naturally assumed in ancient Hebrew literature.

16. *and this people will rise and go whoring.* Abraham ibn Ezra emphatically observes that "it could not possibly be connected with what precedes." We might expect here a speech from God directed to Joshua, or to Joshua and Moses, in the Tent of Meeting. Instead, we have a divine prediction of Israel's future idolatry, leading to the withdrawal of the divine presence from Israel, and cast in language reminiscent of the depiction of idolatry in Exodus and in Numbers rather than in the distinctive style of Deuteronomy.

they are coming. Throughout this passage, "people" is singular, but the repetition of "it" would be awkward in English.

17. *they will become fodder.* Literally, “food,” that is, easy prey for their enemies.

because our God is not in our midst. It is equally possible to understand this as “because our gods are not in our midst.” Jeffrey H. Tigay argues for this possibility, suggesting that the people persist in their idolatrous beliefs even after disaster occurs. It may be more plausible, however, to coordinate the people’s sense of God’s absence with His declaration that he will hide His face.

19. *this song will be a witness.* The sequence of verses from 18 to 22 are the first preface to the Song of Moses (traditionally called in Hebrew Shirat Haʾazinu, after the first word of the poem). But the text, instead of proceeding, as one might have anticipated, to the lead-in line of verse 30 and then the Song proper (chapter 32), will go on to two other topics first. Poetry is memorable and formally articulated (in the Hebrew, through semantic and syntactic parallelism between halves of the poetic line) in ways that facilitate actual memorization. Thus, Moses is enjoined to “put it in their mouths,” that is, to make them learn it by heart. (A similar idiom for memorization is attested in other ancient Semitic languages, and in postbiblical Hebrew, the idiom for “by heart” is *beʿal peh*, literally, “in/on the mouth.”) But there is a fail-safe second measure for permanence that Moses must take: he must not rely on memorization but must write the poem out, until the last word. The textual permanence of the poem thus makes it an eternal “witness” that will confront every generation of the people of Israel.

20. *eat . . . grow sleek and turn to other gods . . . and despise Me*. The language here abounds in terms that anticipate the actual language, not just the themes, of the Song.

21. *I knew their devisings.* This relatively unusual word, *yetser*, is surely a pointed allusion directing us to God’s bleak words about human nature after the Flood: “For the devisings of the human heart are evil from youth” (Genesis 8:21).

23. *And he charged Joshua.* This verse, which essentially repeats verse 8, appears to interrupt the narrative continuity at this point.

26. *Take this book of teaching . . . and it shall be there as witness against you*. First the Song is identified as witness; now it is the book of teaching, to be placed alongside the Ark, which is to be the witness. At least from the viewpoint of the editor, the aim is to suggest an equivalence between these two texts: the Song of Moses, culminating the Book of Deuteronomy, provides a powerful focus in the concentrated form of poetry for the book's major themes, and so both the larger text and the text within the text serve the same function.

27. *I myself have known your rebelliousness.* The emphatic *ʾanokhi*, "I myself," before the conjugated verb has autobiographical resonance for the speaker Moses, who through forty years has had to cope with the refractory nature of the people and to be the repeated target of their resentment.

28. *that I may call to witness against you the heavens and the earth.* This clause verbally anticipates the very beginning of the Song, "Give ear, O heavens, that I may speak, / and let the earth hear my mouth's utterances." Thus Moses segues from writing the book (verse 26) to declaiming the Song.

CHAPTER 32

[1]“Give ear, O heavens, that I may
speak,
and let the earth hear my mouth’s
utterances.
[2]Let my teaching drop like rain,
my saying flow like dew,
like showers on the green
and like cloudbursts on the grass.
[3]For the name of the LORD do I
call.
Hail greatness for our God.
[4]The Rock, His acts are perfect,
for all His ways are justice.
A steadfast God without wrong,
true and right is He.
[5]Did He act ruinously? No, his sons’
the fault—
A perverse and twisted brood.
[6]To the LORD will you requite thus,
base and unwise people?

Is He not your father, your shaper,
He made you and set you
unshaken?
7Remember the days of old,
give thought to the years of times
past.
Ask your father, that he may tell
you,
your elders, that they may say to
you.
8When Elyon gave estates to nations,
when He split up the sons of man,
He set out the boundaries of
peoples,
by the number of the sundry gods.
9Yes, the LORD's portion is His
people
Jacob the parcel of His estate.
10He found him in the wilderness
land,
in the waste of the howling desert.
He encircled him, gave mind to him,
watched him like the apple of His
eye.
11Like an eagle who rouses his nest,
over his fledglings he hovers,

He spread His wings, He took him,
He bore him on His pinion.
[12]The LORD alone did lead him,
no alien god by His side.
[13]He set him down on the heights of the land,
and he ate the bounty of the field.
He suckled him honey from the crag
and oil from the flinty stone,
[14]Cattle's curd and milk of the flocks
with the fat of lambs
and rams of Bashan and he-goats
with the fat of kernels of wheat,
and the blood of the grape you drank as mead.
[15]And Jeshurun fattened and kicked —
you fattened, you thickened, grew gross—
and abandoned the God Who had made him
and despised the Rock of his rescue.
[16]He provoked Him with strangers,
with abhorrences he did vex Him.

[17]They sacrificed to the demons, the ungods,
gods they had not known,
new ones just come lately,
whom their fathers had not feared.
[18]The Rock your bearer you neglected
you forgot the God Who gave you birth.
[19]The LORD saw and He spurned,
from the vexation of His sons and His daughters.
[20]And He said, ‘Let Me hide My face from them,
I shall see what their end will be.
For a wayward brood are they,
children with no trust in them.
[21]They provoked Me with an ungod,
they vexed Me with their empty things.
And I, I will provoke them with an unpeople
with a base nation I will vex them.
[22]For fire has flared in My nostrils
and blazed to Sheol down below,
eaten up earth and its yield

and kindled the mountains'
foundations.
[23]I will sweep down evils upon them,
my arrows spending against them
[24]wasted with famine, withered by
blight and bitter scourge,
and the fang of beasts will I send
against them,
with the venom of creepers in
the dust.
[25]Outside will the sword bereave
and within chambers—terror.
Both youth and virgin,
suckling and gray-haired man.
[26]I would have said, "Let Me wipe
them out,
let Me make their name cease
among men."
[27]Had I not feared the foe's
provocation,
lest their enemies dissemble,
lest they say, "Our hand was
high,
and not the LORD has
wrought all this.'"

[28]For a nation lost in counsel are
they,
there is no understanding among
them.
[29]Were they wise they would give
mind to this,
understand their latter days:
[30]O how could one chase a thousand,
or two put ten thousand to flight,
had not their Rock handed them
over,
had the LORD not given them
up?
[31]For not like our Rock is their rock,
our enemies' would-be gods.
[32]Yes, Sodom's vine is their vine,
from the vineyards of Gomorrah.
Their grapes are grapes of poison,
death-bitter clusters they have.
[33]Venom of vipers their wine,
and pitiless poison of asps.
[34]Look, it is concealed with Me,
sealed up in My stores.
[35]Mine is vengeance, requital,
at the moment their foot will slip.
For their day of disaster is close,

what is readied then swiftly
comes.
[36]Yes, the LORD champions His
people,
for His servants He shows change
of heart
when He sees that power is gone,
no ruler or helper remains.
[37]He will say, ‘Where are their gods,
the rock in whom they sheltered,
[38]who ate the fat of their offerings,
drank their libation wine?
Let them arise and help you,
be over you as a shield!’
[39]See now that I, I am He,
and no god is by My side.
I put to death and give life,
I smash and I also heal
and none rescues from My
hand.
[40]When I raise to the heavens My
hand
and say, ‘As I live forever.’
[41]When I hone the flash of My sword
and My hand takes hold of
justice,

I will bring back vengeance to My
foes
and My enemies I will requite.
42 I will make My shafts drunk with
blood,
and My sword will eat up flesh,
from the blood of the fallen and
captive,
from the flesh of the long-haired
foe.
43 Nations, O gladden His people,
for His servants' blood will He
avenge,
and vengeance turn back on His
foes,
and purge His soil, His people."

44 And Moses came and spoke all the words of this
song in the hearing of the people—he and Hosea son
of Nun. 45 And Moses finished speaking all these words
to all Israel. 46 And he said to them, "Set your hearts
upon all these words with which I bear witness against
you today, that you charge your sons with them to
keep to do all the words of this teaching. 47 For it is not
an empty thing for you, but it is your life, and through

this thing you will long endure on the soil to which you are about to cross the Jordan to take hold of there."

[48]And the LORD spoke to Moses on that very day, saying, [49]"Go up to this Mount Abarim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab by Jericho, and see the land of Canaan that I am about to give to the Israelites as a holding. [50]And die on the mountain where you are going up and be gathered to your kin, as Aaron your brother died in Hor the Mountain and was gathered to his kin, [51]because you two betrayed Me in the midst of the Israelites through the waters of Meribath-Kadesh in the Wilderness of Zin, because you did not sanctify Me in the midst of the Israelites. For from the far side you will see the land, [52]but you will not come there, to the land that I give to the Israelites."

CHAPTER 32 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Give ear, O heavens*. The high stylistic solemnity of the poem is signaled by a formal beginning (verses 1–2) that calls attention to the poet's own act of uttering sublime speech. This convention constitutes an approximate analogy to the invocation of the muse and the proclamation of the subject of the poem at the beginning of the Homeric epics. The address here to heaven and earth as witnesses is replicated, as many commentators have noted, by the opening lines of Isaiah 1. The Song of Moses (traditionally referred to in Hebrew, as

we have noted, as Shirat [the song of] Haʾazinu) is certainly older than the body of Deuteronomy, though how much older is a matter of scholarly debate. Many (though not all) of the grammatical and morphological features of the language as well as certain aspects of the syntax are archaic, and numerous formulaic word pairs in the parallel members of the lines are ones that also occur in the prebiblical poetry of Ugarit. On stylistic grounds, then, the poem—or at least much of it—could be as early as the period of the Judges, that is, the eleventh century B.C.E. As with any archaic poem, one encounters rare terms of uncertain meaning and a number of points where the text appears to have been scrambled in scribal transmission, whether out of sheer confusion or through theological censorship of the ancient materials. The more salient instances of these lexical and textual difficulties will be noted below.

2. *cloudbursts.* The only thing certain about the unique Hebrew noun *seʿirim* is that it has to be some form of precipitation. If it is cognate with *seʿarah*, "storm," then "cloudburst" would be a likely meaning.

4. *The Rock.* This epithet for God, with the obvious sense of bastion or stronghold, is common in Psalms. It is used seven times in the poem, which exhibits a predilection for repeating key terms a formulaic number of times.

5. *Did He act ruinously? No, his sons' the fault.* The Hebrew syntax here is impacted and hence the meaning obscure. This translation—like all others, only a guess at the sense of the original—follows the sequence of Hebrew words fairly literally.

8. *When Elyon gave estates to nations.* Elyon (the High One) is the sky god of the Canaanite pantheon, who appears to have been assimilated into biblical monotheism as an epithet for the God of Israel (see the comment on Genesis 14:19–20). The use of this designation here probably reflects the antiquity of the poem.

by the number of the sundry gods. The Masoretic Text here reads *lemispar beney yisraʾel*, "by the number of the sons of Israel." It is hard to make much sense of that reading, though traditional exegetes try to do that by noting that Israel/Jacob had seventy male descendants when he went down to Egypt and that there are, at least proverbially, seventy nations. This translation adopts the reading of the text found at Qumran (which seems close to the Hebrew text

used by the Septuagint translators): *lemispar beney ʾelohim*. This phrase, which appears to reflect a very early stage in the evolution of biblical monotheism, caused later transmitters of the text theological discomfort and was probably deliberately changed in the interests of piety. In the older world-picture, registered in a variety of biblical texts, God is surrounded by a celestial entourage of divine beings or lesser deities, *beney ʾelim* or *beney ʾelohim*, who are nevertheless subordinate to the supreme God. The Song of Moses assumes that God, in allotting portions of the earth to the various peoples, also allowed each people its own lesser deity. Compare Moses's remark about the astral deities in Deuteronomy 4:19.

9. *Yes, the LORD's portion is His people.* This affirmation stands in contrast to the preceding statement that God has allotted different deities to the sundry peoples. The LORD has made Israel His special possession through His acts of historical providence toward them, and thus Israel must worship the LORD alone.

11. *who rouses his nest.* "Rouses" is the usual sense of this Hebrew verb. But some scholars have pointed to a possible Ugaritic cognate that would yield the sense "guard over."

13. *He suckled him honey from the crag / and oil from the flinty stone.* This line is a lovely illustration of the dynamic of intensification that characterizes much of the semantic parallelism in biblical poetry. Because the verb "suckled" does double duty for both clauses, the poet has extra rhythmic room in the second verset—a unit of one word, one accented syllable—that he can exploit by elaborating or heightening the parallel object of the verb, moving from the general term "crag" to a particularly hard kind of rock, "the flinty stone." There is also a move from an image that can readily be understood in naturalistic terms, finding honeycombs in crevices, to one that seems more flatly miraculous, being suckled oil from flintstone. The effort of many commentators to "explain" the latter image as a reference to olive trees growing on crags may not be altogether beside the point but diminishes the striking immediacy of the image.

14. *the fat of lambs . . . the fat of kernels of wheat.* In both cases, "fat" may mean what it says or may be idiomatic for "the best of" (as in "the fat of the land").

15. *Jeshurun.* An epithet for Israel. Since the etymology suggests "straight," its use here is ironic, as the poem pointedly associates crookedness with Israel.

17. *the ungods.* The Hebrew is *lo' 'eloha*. One of the distinctive stylistic traits of this poem is the fondness it exhibits for such negative prefixes. Compare verse 21.

had not feared. The verb *se'arum* is unique to this text and its meaning is disputed. One interesting suggestion is that it plays on the noun *se'irim*, "demons" or perhaps "goat-gods," an approximate synonym for *shedim*, "demons," in this verse.

21. *their empty things.* Literally, "their mere vapors." The Hebrew *hevel* is the same word that will be repeatedly used in Qohelet for insubstantiality, "mere breath" ("vanity of vanities," King James Version), and here it glosses "ungod."

unpeople. The Hebrew is *lo'-'am*. Jeffrey H. Tigay thinks the reference may be to nomads, and hence would reflect the premonarchic period of nomadic marauders, but the term might simply be a self-evident pejorative for an alien people.

22. *For fire has flared in My nostrils.* This pyrotechnic representation of an angry warrior-god, drawing on polytheistic antecedents, occurs frequently in biblical poetry (compare, for example, 2 Samuel 22:8–16). Thus, God's hiding His face from Israel (verse 20) is not merely a withdrawal of the divine presence but the opposite of showing favor (in biblical idiom, "lifting the face to")—a wrathful God actively assaults Israel. The weapons of the warrior deity are lightning (God's "arrows"), earthquake, a whole panoply of plagues and noxious beasts, and hostile nations.

26. *I would have said.* In this moment of fury, provoked by Israel's betrayal of its obligation of loyalty to YHWH, God expresses no compassion for His people; it is only concern for the divine reputation ("lest they say, 'Our hand was high, / and not the LORD has wrought all this'" [verse 27]) that prevents Him from utterly destroying Israel.

28. *For a nation lost in counsel are they.* As the following lines make clear, the reference is not to Israel but to its triumphant enemy. Had they real

understanding, they would realize that such a spectacular defeat as they inflicted on Israel could only have been God's doing.

30. *one chase a thousand, / or two put ten thousand to flight.* This paradigmatic line neatly illustrates the pattern of intensification that informs biblical poetic parallelism. Were the system based on actual synonymity, one would expect numerical equivalents in the two parallel versets, but the prevailing rule, precisely as with nonnumerical elements in poetic parallelism, is that something must be increased or heightened: from one to two, from a thousand to ten thousand.

31. *our enemies' would-be gods.* The second of the two Hebrew words here, *we'oyveinu pelilim*, is a notorious crux, evidently already a source of puzzlement to the ancient Greek translators. The ostensible verbal root of *pelilim* is related to the idea of judgment or assessment, but every attempt to construe the two words in light of that meaning seems strained. Tigay proposes an Akkadian cognate that means "leader" or "guardian" and serves as an epithet for deities. If one notes that *pelilim* rhymes richly with *'elilim*, "idols," and if one recalls this poet's verbal inventiveness in coining designations for the nonentity of the pagan gods, "would-be gods" is a distinct possibility.

32. *death-bitter.* The Hebrew *merorot* by itself suggests only bitterness, but in context the line is clearly referring to poison.

34. *Look, it is concealed with Me, / sealed up in My stores.* The poet picks up an idea current in ancient Near Eastern mythology, also reflected in Job 38:22–23, that the deity stores up weapons in a cosmic armory or storehouse (Hebrew *'otsar*) for a day of apocalyptic battle.

36. *no ruler or helper.* The Hebrew phrase *'atsur we'azuv* has invited highly divergent interpretations, but its use elsewhere (compare 1 Kings 14:10 and 2 Kings 9:8) suggests a link with political leadership.

42. *I will make My shafts drunk with blood.* Now the warrior-god turns His ferocity from Israel to its enemies. It is a commonplace of biblical figurative language that arrows drink blood, the sword consumes flesh.

from the flesh of the long-haired foe. The Masoretic Text says, very literally, "from the head of the long hair [or unbound hair] of the foe." This reading raises two problems: if the long hair is the object of the sword, not much blood would be involved; and "head" makes an odd parallel to "blood" in the preceding verset. This translation adopts a proposed emendation that simply reverses the order of consonants of "head," *roʾsh*, yielding *sheʾer*, "flesh."

43. *Nations, O gladden His people.* Although the formulation of the Hebrew is a little obscure, the sense seems to be something like "Nations, congratulate God's people as He exacts vengeance from their enemies and restores them to their place in their land." The Qumran text, again approximately confirming the Septuagint, has a partly divergent reading: "Gladden, O heavens, His people, / and let all divine beings bow before Him. / For His sons' blood He will avenge / and vengeance turn back on His foes. / And His enemies He will requite / and purge His people's soil." There are grounds for thinking this reading might be more authentic than the Masoretic Text. The invocation of the heavens at the end of the poem would correspond neatly to the apostrophe to the heavens at the beginning, whereas turning to the nations at the end is a little odd. As in the probable substitution of "sons of Israel" for "sundry gods" in verse 8, later editors for reasons of monotheistic rigor might have been impelled to delete the reference that follows to all divine beings (*kol ʾelohim*) bowing before the triumphant LORD. Finally, "His people's soil" (*ʾadmat ʿamo*, in the construct state) makes better idiomatic sense than "His soil, His people" (*ʾadmato ʿamo* in seeming apposition).

44. *Hosea son of Nun.* Hosea is a variant form of Joshua.

46. *bear witness against you.* The poem, as chapter 31 makes clear, is the eternal witness. The phrase could also mean "warn you" or even "impose upon you."

50. *And die on the mountain.* This a rare, and shocking, use of the verb "to die" in the imperative.

51. *because you two betrayed Me.* The word "two" is added in the translation to make clear in English what is transparent in the Hebrew through the plural

form of the verb—that both Moses and Aaron betrayed God at the waters of Meribah and thus each was doomed to die on his own mountain.

CHAPTER 33

[1]And this is the blessing that Moses the man of God,
blessed the Israelites before his death. [2]And he said:

"The LORD from Sinai came
and from Seir He dawned upon
them,
He shone from Mount Paran
and appeared from Ribeboth-
Kodesh,
from His right hand, fire-bolts
for them.
[3]Yes, lover of peoples is He,
all His holy ones in your hand,
and they are flung down at Your feet,
he bears Your utterances.
[4]"A teaching did Moses charge us,
a heritage for Jacob's assembly!'
[5]And He became a king in Jeshurun

when the chiefs of the people
gathered,
all together the tribes of Israel.
[6]Let Reuben live and not die,
though his menfolk be but few.
[7]And this is for Judah, and he said:
Hear, LORD, Judah's voice
and to his people You shall
bring him.
With his hands he strives for
himself—
a help against his foes You shall
be.
[8]And for Levi he said:
Your Thummim and Your Urim
for your devoted man,
whom you tested at Massah,
you disputed with him at the
waters of Meribah,
[9]who says of his father and mother,
I have not seen them,
and his brothers he recognized not,
and his sons he did not know.
For they kept Your pronouncement
and Your covenant they preserved.
[10]They shall teach Your laws to Jacob

and Your teaching to Israel.
They shall put incense in Your
nostrils
and whole offerings on Your altar.
[11]Bless, O LORD his abundance,
and his handiwork look on with
favor.
Smash the loins of his foes,
that his enemies rise no more.
[12]For Benjamin he said:
The LORD's friend, may he dwell
securely,
He shelters him constantly,
and between His shoulders
he dwells.
[13]And for Joseph he said:
Blessed of the LORD is his land,
from the bounty of heavens,
from dew,
and from the deep that
couches below,
[14]and from the bounty of yield of the
sun
and from the bounty of crop of
the moon,

[15]and from the top of the age-old
mountains,
from the bounty of hills
everlasting,
[16]and from the bounty of earth and
its fullness
and the favor of the bush-dwelling
One.
May these come on the head of
Joseph,
on the brow of him set apart from
his brothers.
[17]His firstborn bull is his glory,
wild ox's antlers his horns.
With them he gores peoples,
all together, the ends of the earth,
and they are the myriads of Ephraim
and they are Manasseh's
thousands.
[18]And for Zebulun he said:
Rejoice, Zebulun, when you go
out
and Issachar, in your tents.
[19]Peoples they call to the mountain,
there they sacrifice offerings of
triumph.

For the plenty of seas do they suckle
and the hidden treasures of sand.
[20]And for Gad he said:
Blessed he who enlarges Gad.
Like a lion he dwells
and tears apart arm, even
pate.
[21]And he saw the prime for himself,
for there is the lot of the hidden
chieftain.
And the heads of the people came,
he performed the LORD's
benefaction,
and His judgments for Israel.
[22]And for Dan he said:
Dan is a lion's whelp,
he springs forth from the
Bashan.
[23]And for Naphtali he said:
Naphtali is sated with favor
and filled with the blessing of
the LORD.
To the west and the south his
possession.
[24]And for Asher he said:
Blessed among sons is Asher,

May he be favored of his
brothers
and bathe in oil his foot.
[25]Iron and bronze your gate-bolts,
and as your days be your might.
[26]There is none like the God of
Jeshurun
riding through heavens as your
help—
and in His triumph through the
skies.
[27]A refuge, the God of old,
from beneath, the arms
everlasting.
He drove from before you the enemy
and He said, ‘Destroy!’
[28]And Israel dwelled securely,
untroubled Jacob’s abode,
in a land of grain and wine,
its heavens, too, drop dew.
[29]Happy are you, Israel. Who is like
you?
A people rescued by the LORD,
Your shield of help and the sword of
your triumph.
Your enemies cower before you,

and you on their backs will
tread.”

CHAPTER 33 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And this is the blessing that Moses . . . blessed the Israelites before his death*. This second, concluding poem is placed exactly in the same position, just before the end of the book, as Jacob’s blessings before his death to the twelve future tribes. There are some precise echoes of Jacob’s blessing here (compare verses 13, 15, and 16 with Genesis 49:25 and 26.) There are also some parallels to the Song of Deborah. These correspondences suggest that in the premonarchic period there may have been an oral reservoir of poetic sayings about the tribes from which poets could draw to celebrate them. The archaic nature of the language and the political situation envisaged by the poem argue for its origins in the era before the monarchy was established. Judah here (in contrast to Genesis 49) is not represented as the tribe of kings. The poem appears to assume some form of national federation of all twelve tribes. The centralization of the cult at a single national site, one of the great themes of Deuteronomy, is nowhere implied: on the contrary, Zebulun and Issachar are said to offer sacrifices in their tribal territory (verse 19). Finally, because of the antiquity of the poem, the text shows signs of having been mangled at several points—the most egregious of these will be noted below—and at these junctures all efforts to rescue intelligible meaning from the reading that has come down to us are liable to be unavailing.

2. *from Sinai.* This poem, like the Song of Deborah and a few psalms, registers what looks like an early tribal memory that the grand inception of YHWH’s relationship with Israel was to the south, in the Sinai peninsula and in a series of associated sites, though there are some indications in the poetic texts that Mount Sinai might have been placed in northern Arabia.

He shone. This choice of verb, like the preceding “dawned,” reflects an early biblical poetic notion of the LORD’s powerful appearance in awesome refulgence.

appeared from Ribeboth-Kodesh. It is safest to construe the last term here as an otherwise unattested place-name, although some scholars understand it as "the myriads of Kadesh" or "the myriads of holy ones." The verb for "apppeared" (or "came") is the Hebrew cognate of the Aramaic *ʾatah*, which in early biblical Hebrew is restricted to poetic diction.

fire-bolts for them. The Hebrew *ʾeshdat*, anachronistically construed by later Hebrew exegetes to mean "fire of the law," is not intelligible. Since God in biblical poetry, following Canaanite conventions, is often represented coming down to earth hurling lightning bolts as His weapons, this translation embraces the proposal that the text originally read *ʾesh d[oleq]et* (burning, or racing, fire) or something similar.

3. *Yes, lover of peoples is He.* This entire verse is one of the most problematic in the poem. Its principal difficulties: the epithet "lover of peoples" for God is peculiar, and one is constrained by the nationalist character of the poem to understand "peoples" as "the tribes." The lines lurch from third-person to second-person references to God, leaving some doubt as to where the poet is talking about God and where about Israel. The verb rendered as "flung down" is uncertain of meaning. It is not entirely clear who the "holy ones" are and what is meant by "he bears Your utterances." The inevitable conclusion is that this verse suffered serious damage in transmission.

4. *A teaching.* Since Moses here is referred to in the third person, the simplest way to understand this without emending the line is as an exclamation of the people—hence the quotation marks in the translation.

5. *when the chiefs of the people gathered, / all together the tribes of Israel.* The poet clearly envisages a grand assembly of all the tribes—an obviously premonarchic event—to confirm God's kingship over Israel. (Jeshurun is of course an epithet for Israel.) This flourish concludes the introductory section of the poem and sets us up for the blessings of the tribes one by one.

6. *Let Reuben . . . not die, / though his menfolk be but few*. These urgent words, more prayer than blessing, obviously reflect a moment in early Israelite history when the tribe of Reuben, inhabiting territory east of the Jordan, habitually threatened by marauders, perhaps also in the process of being swallowed up by neighboring Gad, appeared to run the risk of extinction.

7. *to his people You shall bring him.* Jeffrey H. Tigay plausibly suggests that the reference is to bringing him back safe from battle. The next line in fact invokes combat.

8. *Your Thummim and Your Urim.* These oracular devices (see the comment on Exodus 28:30) appear in all other occurrences with Urim in first position. Perhaps the reversal was encouraged by the poetic form.

whom You tested at Massah. The story of the waters of Massah and Meribah (Exodus 17:2–7) makes no mention of a crucial role for the Levites. One may infer that this early poem drew on a narrative tradition not reflected in the story told in the Torah.

9. *who says of his father and mother.* The reference is obscure, but this sounds rather like the Levites' ruthless denial of kinfolk in playing the role of the LORD's avengers in the episode of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:26–29). Perhaps this same motif was attached to the Levites in an early story about Massah and Meribah that did not survive elsewhere.

11. *Smash the loins.* This violent image of martial triumph does not accord with the later sacerdotal role of the Levites, which exempted them from military duty. What it may pick up is the preceding allusion to the Levites as YHWH's special militia, wielding their swords against all who betrayed him, even against their own kin.

12. *between His shoulders he dwells.* This appears to be an image of Benjamin carried on God's shoulders. Rashi and others link the image with the proximity of Benjamin's tribal territory to the Temple in Jerusalem, but that seems doubtful—especially because this poem does not envisage a central sanctuary.

13. *Blessed of the LORD is his land.* The tribal territory of Joseph was obviously proverbial for its fertility, and the language of the blessing to Joseph here strongly echoes the wording of Jacob's blessing for Joseph in Genesis 49, which similarly invokes the heavens above the watery deep (*tehom*) below, and the bounty of hills everlasting.

from dew. Some manuscripts read *me'al*, "above," instead of the Masoretic *mital*, "from dew." The attraction of that reading is that it makes a perfect parallelism with "below" at the end of the next verset.

16. *the bush-dwelling One.* This unique kenning for God is justified by the fact that it is Moses who is speaking. Moses first encountered God in the burning bush, and this poem begins by announcing that the LORD has come from Sinai—the mountain on which the bush (*seneh*) grew.

17. *His firstborn bull is his glory.* The idea of the firstborn bull as an embodiment of fierce power is clear enough, but the antecedent of "his" is ambiguous. Some attach it to Jacob, Joseph's father, but Joseph was not Jacob's firstborn, though he was Rachel's firstborn. The most likely candidate is Joseph himself, the image of the goring bull representing his son Ephraim, who displaces the firstborn (see Genesis 48) and thus has "myriads" while his brother Manasseh has only "thousands."

the ends of the earth. There is an ellipsis here. The sense is: "he gores peoples, / all together [the inhabitants of] the ends of the earth."

and they are. This explains the reference of the bull metaphor. The myriads and the thousands are of course the subject, not the object, of the goring.

18. *Rejoice, Zebulun, when you go out / and Issachar, in your tents.* The bracketing of these two tribes under one blessing, and in one poetic parallelism, is unique in this poem. It seems plausible that these two neighboring tribes, both offspring of Leah, were so intertwined at an early point in Israelite national history that it was deemed appropriate to join them in a single blessing.

19. *Peoples they call to the mountain.* Most commentators understand "peoples," *ʿamim*, as a poetic designation of the tribes, but one cannot exclude the possibility that Zebulun and Issachar actually invited (the sense of "call" here) neighboring peoples to participate in their sacrifices. It is unclear what mountain the poet has in mind, though it would have to be in the northern Galilee.

the plenty of seas . . . the hidden treasures of sand. In light of what is known about the tribal territory of Zebulun and Issachar, the sea in question would be the Sea of Galilee (Lake Kinneret). But "the hidden treasures of sand" must refer to the murex, from which the precious purple dye was extracted, and perhaps also to glass (Phoenicia was famous for both). These natural resources would bring us to the shore of the Mediterranean, not of

Lake Kinneret. Some scholars have speculated that after Barak's victory over the Canaanites (Judges 4), these two tribes may have expanded westward to the seacoast.

21. *the prime.* The Hebrew *reʾshit* usually means "beginning," but it also has the sense of the choice part or best, which the next verset seems to require.

for there is the lot of the hidden chieftain. This entire clause, and the rest of the verse as well, is one of the most obscure moments in the poem. Many traditional interpreters take this as a reference to the burial site of Moses, but difficulties abound: it is implausible that Moses would speak of his own future burial place; the term "chieftain," *meḥoqeq* (perhaps literally, "one who gives the statute"), is nowhere else linked with Moses, and some even think it actually refers here to a digging tool, as it appears to do in Numbers 21:18. These lines probably invoke a once well-known story, now irretrievably lost, about a hidden (or, in the term's rabbinic sense, important) leader, or even about some legendary spade, which explains the eminence of Gad. We remain equally in the dark about what event is alluded to when Gad is praised for performing "the LORD's benefaction, / and His judgments for Israel."

24. *bathe in oil his foot.* Though this phrase might refer to an abundance of olive trees in Asher's territory, rubbing oneself with oil was a way of taking pleasurable care of the body, a kind of ancient Near Eastern antecedent to modern body lotions.

25. *Iron and bronze your gate-bolts.* The noun *minʿalim* means "shoes" in rabbinic Hebrew. Rashi preserves this sense by understanding the whole clause metaphorically: your land is shod in iron and bronze by virtue of the mountains in it that yield those metals. It is more likely that the image is one of military security, and the verbal stem *n-ʿ-l* does mean "to lock."

your might. The Hebrew noun *dovʾe* appears only here in the biblical corpus, and so one is compelled to infer its meaning from context. The inference of "might" is as old as Onkelos's Aramaic translation, which renders the word as *toqpakh*.

26. *There is none like the God of Jeshurun.* The Masoretic vocalization, *kaʾel yeshurun* turns this into a vocative, "There's none like God, O Jeshurun." It seems more likely that this is an epithet for the God of Israel, *keʾel yeshurun*, the two nouns linked in the construct state. In any case, this clause signals the

summarizing movement of the poem, the blessings of the individual tribes having been completed.

riding through heavens. The image of God as a celestial warrior, riding a cherub through the skies, is drawn from Canaanite poetry and appears a number of times in Psalms and elsewhere. It is worth noting that the word for "help," *ʿezer*, often has the sense of "rescue" from military threat.

27. *from beneath, the arms everlasting.* That is, God embraces or physically supports Israel.

28. *untroubled Jacob's abode.* The normal meaning of *ʿeyn yaʿqov* would be "Jacob's well," which makes little sense here. Most scholars construe the noun as a derivative of the root *ʿ-w-n*, "to abide," which thus yields a neat parallelism with "Israel dwelled securely." This same root is reflected in *maʿon*, "refuge," at the beginning of verse 27.

29. *rescued.* This verb is frequently associated with military victory, and the rest of this verse emphatically confirms that sense. The poem concludes with a triumphalist flourish that is dictated by the geostrategic reality of the Land of Israel. The tribes may be blessed with an abundance of natural resources—grain and wine and oil and the treasures of the sea and its shore—but they are surrounded and interpenetrated by alien peoples with hostile intentions, so that in order to enjoy their land, they must above all be militarily powerful. This idea that the LORD is Israel's shield and sword betrays none of the concern expressed in the Song of Moses that Israel will swerve from God's covenant and be doomed to catastrophic defeat and exile as a punishment.

on their backs will tread. Although most biblical occurrences of the noun *bamot* use it in the sense of "high places," it appears that the topographical meaning of the term was an extension of its original anatomical sense (i.e., the "backs" of hills). Job 9:8 describes God "trampl[ing] on the crest [or backs] of the sea," probably a reference to His triumph over the primordial sea monster Yamm. The linking of exactly the same verb and noun here is a virtually iconographic representation of utterly subjugating a defeated enemy.

CHAPTER 34

[1]And Moses went up from the steppes of Moab to
Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which faces
Jericho. And the LORD let him see all the land, from
the Gilead as far as Dan, [2]and all Naphtali, and the
land of Ephraim and Manasseh, and all the land of
Judah as far as the Hinder Sea, [3]and the Negeb, and
the plain of the Valley of Jericho, town of the palm
trees, as far as Zoar. [4]And the LORD said to him,
“This is the land that I swore to Abraham, to Isaac,
and to Jacob, saying, ‘To your seed I will give it.’ I
have let you see with your own eyes, but you shall not
cross over there.” [5]And Moses, the LORD’s servant,
died there in the land of Moab by the word of the
LORD. [6]And he was buried in the glen in the land of
Moab opposite Beth Peor, and no man has known his
burial place to this day. [7]And Moses was one hundred
and twenty years old when he died. His eye had not
grown bleary and his sap had not fled. [8]And the
Israelites keened for Moses in the steppes of Moab
thirty days, and the days of keening in mourning for

Moses came to an end. [9]And Joshua son of Nun was filled with a spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands upon him, and the Israelites heeded him and did as the LORD had charged Moses. [10]But no prophet again arose in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face-to-face, [11]with all the signs and the portents which the LORD sent him to do in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, [12]and with all the strong hand and with all the great fear that Moses did before the eyes of all Israel.

CHAPTER 34 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Moses went up*. He of course has to go up to reach the mountaintop from where he will see the grand panorama of the land which he will not enter. The action of ascent, however, also signals the trajectory of Moses's life: he is born in the Nile Valley, first encounters God in the burning bush on a mountain, returns from his mission in Egypt to that same mountain to receive the law there, and now dies on a mountaintop.

the LORD let him see. Elsewhere, this verb (the *hiph'il* or causative conjugation of the verb *r-'-h*, "to see") has been translated as "show," but here it is important to preserve the literal sense of allowing or causing to see because that is the pointed meaning of this verb when it occurs again in verse 4.

from the Gilead as far as Dan. Moses's gaze is directed first to the north, to the trans-Jordanian region of the Gilead, and then westward to the tribal territory of Dan in the northernmost part of the Land of Israel. Dan's original settlement was near the coastal plain in the south, and only later did the tribe

migrate to the north; so the indication of tribal geography reflects the time of writing, not that of Moses.

2. *and all Naphtali.* The gaze now begins to sweep to the south, ending with the Negeb and the plain along the Dead Sea.

4. *the land that I swore to Abraham.* This final mention of the promise to the forefathers links the end of Deuteronomy with the beginning of the Patriarchal narrative in Genesis.

5. *by the word of the LORD.* The literal sense of this idiom, repeatedly used elsewhere in the Torah, is "by the mouth of the LORD," i.e., by divine decree. But the use of "mouth" encouraged the Midrash to imagine here a "death by a kiss" (*mitat neshiqah*), the ultimate favor granted to the righteous leader.

6. *And he was buried.* The Hebrew says literally, "and he buried him," but the third-person singular verb without specified grammatical subject is not infrequently used in biblical Hebrew in place of a passive verb. Many interpreters have understood this ostensibly active verb to mean that God buried Moses. That possibility cannot be dismissed, but God's acting as a gravedigger for Moses seems incongruous with the representation of the deity in these narratives, and thus construing the verb as a passive is more likely.

in the glen. This note of location is of a piece with the mystifying reticence in the whole report of Moses's death. It is unclear how or by whom he was brought down from the mountaintop to be buried in a glen, though the evident purpose of this removal from the heights is to underline Moses's irreducible humanity: we are not to imagine any act of "assumption" into the celestial sphere; Moses is buried down below, like all his fellow men.

no man has known his burial place to this day. As many commentators have observed, the occultation of the grave of Moses serves to prevent any possibility of a cult of Moses, with pilgrimages to his gravesite. The phrase "to this day" is a giveaway of the temporal perspective from which this concluding chapter of the Torah was written. Both the rabbis of the Talmud and the medieval Hebrew commentators were perplexed about the authorship of the story of the death of Moses. One opinion was that Joshua wrote this chapter; another, more poignant one, was that God dictated it and Moses wrote it down, weeping (Baba Batra 14B). But the phrase "to this day" is regularly used in biblical narrative to signal a present moment shared by the

writer and his audience that is many generations removed from the time of the reported events.

7. *one hundred and twenty years old.* This is, of course, the typological number for the extreme limit of a human life (see Genesis 6:3, which first sets this limit), based on the Mesopotamian sexagesimal numerical system. Several eminent rabbinic sages are given biographies that divide their lives into three large periods of forty (another formulaic number), and some commentators have suggested that such a division may also be implied in the life of Moses: forty years in Egypt, forty years in Midian until his return to Egypt, forty years as leader of Israel in the wilderness.

10. *no prophet again arose in Israel like Moses.* This clause again reflects the temporal distance of the writer from the event reported. There will be other prophets in Israel, but none will enjoy the unique stature of Moses, whom God knew (or embraced—the same verb that is used in different contexts for sexual intimacy) face-to-face. Deuteronomy in this way concludes with an implicit claim for its own irrevocable authority, for no subsequent revelation of God's will to a prophet can equal the words conveyed to Israel by the one prophet whom God knew face-to-face. Some interpreters detect here a clue to the composition of this passage in the time of Ezra, when the period of prophecy was deemed to have come to an end, but it is safer simply to infer that the Book of Deuteronomy is confirming its own status, and that of the entire Torah which it now concludes, as the product of an unparalleled prophecy that suffers no amendment or replacement.

11–12. *with all the signs . . . to all his servants and to all his land, and with all the strong hand . . . before the eyes of all Israel*. It is fitting that the Book of Deuteronomy concludes with one last instance of the grand sweeping sentences that are characteristic of its style, here running from the beginning of verse 10 to the end of verse 12. This final flourish flaunts the anaphora of "all" to convey the comprehensiveness of Moses's epic undertaking: he executed all the signs that God had directed him to do, made all their spectacular effects manifest to all Pharaoh's servants in all the land of Egypt, before the eyes of all Israel. It is beautifully apt that the last words of the book should be *leʿeyney kol-yisraʾel*, "before the eyes of all Israel," for these words pick up the strong rhetoric of witnessing that has informed the book.

The claims of the book on the sense of history and the religious loyalty of its audience are founded on Israel's having witnessed God's great portents in the formative experience of national liberation. The envisaged result of that experience is a unified nation sharing the legacy of its supreme prophet—"all Israel," the concluding words of the book.

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Detail of *Mem Lamed Kaph Yod* from *The Creation,* ca. 1978-1980, a series of ten tapestries designed by Mordecai Ardon (1896-1922). The tapestries, executed at the Georges Goldstein Atelier, Jerusalem, were donated by Ardon to Shaare Zedek Medical Center, Jerusalem, where they are permanently exhibited. © Mordecai Ardon / Courtesy Ardon Estate / Photo: Courtesy Shaare Zedeck Medical Center, Jerusalem.

THE HEBREW BIBLE

VOLUME 2

PROPHETS

NEVI'IM

A TRANSLATION WITH COMMENTARY

ROBERT ALTER

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For Jonas, Judah, Amos,
and, especially, Michael,
dear friends now gone whose
presence in my life made a
difference in all this.

About the Author

Robert Alter's translation of the Hebrew Bible, the magnificent capstone to a lifetime of distinguished scholarly work, has won the PEN Center Literary Award for Translation and the Koret Jewish Book Award. His immense achievements in scholarship ranging from the eighteenth-century European novel to contemporary Hebrew and American literature earned Alter the Robert Kirsch Award for Lifetime Achievement from the *Los Angeles Times*. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society, Alter is Emeritus Class of 1937 Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley.

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Introduction to the Hebrew Bible

I. THE BIBLE IN ENGLISH AND THE HERESY OF EXPLANATION

Why, after so many English versions, a new translation of the Hebrew Bible? There is, as I shall explain in detail, something seriously wrong with all the familiar English translations, traditional and recent, of the Hebrew Bible. Broadly speaking, one may say that in the case of the modern versions, the problem is a shaky sense of English and in the case of the King James Version, a shaky sense of Hebrew. The present translation is an experiment in re-presenting the Bible —and, above all, biblical narrative prose—in a language that conveys with some precision the semantic nuances and the lively orchestration of literary effects of the Hebrew and at the same time has stylistic and rhythmic integrity as literary English. I shall presently give a more specific account of the kind of English I have aimed for and of the features of the Hebrew that have prompted my choices, but I think it will be helpful for me to say something first about why

English translations of the Bible have been problematic—more problematic, perhaps, than most readers may realize.

It is an old and in some ways unfair cliché to say that translation is always a betrayal, but modern English versions of the Bible provide unfortunately persuasive evidence for that uncompromising generalization. At first thought, it is rather puzzling that this should be the case. In purely quantitative terms, we live in a great age of Bible translation. Several integral translations of the Bible have been done since the middle of the twentieth century, and a spate of English versions of individual biblical books has appeared. This period, moreover, is one in which our understanding of ancient Hebrew has become considerably more nuanced and precise than it once was, thanks to comparative Semitic philology aided by archaeology, and also thanks to the careful reanalysis of the formal structures—syntax, grammar, morphology, verb tenses—of biblical Hebrew. One might have expected that this recent flurry of translation activity, informed by the newly focused awareness of the meanings of biblical Hebrew, would have produced at least some English versions that would be both vividly precise and closer to the feel of the original than any of the older translations. Instead,

the modern English versions—especially in their treatment of Hebrew narrative prose—have placed readers at a grotesque distance from the distinctive literary experience of the Bible in its original language. As a consequence, the King James Version, as Gerald Hammond, an eminent British authority on Bible translations, has convincingly argued, remains the closest approach for English readers to the original—despite its frequent and at times embarrassing inaccuracies, despite its archaisms, and despite its insistent substitution of Renaissance English tonalities and rhythms for biblical ones.

Some observers have sought to explain the inadequacy of modern Bible translations in terms of the general decline of the English language. It is certainly true that there are far fewer people these days with a cultivated sensitivity to the expressive resources of the language, the nuances of lexical values, the force of metaphor and rhythm; and one is certainly much less likely to find such people on a committee of ecclesiastical or scholarly experts than one would have in the first decade of the seventeenth century. There are, nevertheless, still some brilliant stylists among English prose writers; and if our age has been graced with remarkable translations of Homer, Sophocles, and Dante, why not of the Bible?

Part of the explanation, I suspect, is in the conjunction of philological scholarship and translation. I intend no churlish disrespect to philology. On the contrary, without it, our reading of the Bible, or indeed of any older text, is no better than walking through a great museum on a very gloomy day with all the lights turned out. To read the Bible over the shoulder of a great philological critic, like Abraham ibn Ezra (1092–1167), one of the earliest and still eminently worth studying, is to see many important things in fine focus for the first time. There is, however, a crucial difference between philology as a tool for understanding literary texts and philology as an end in itself, for literature and philology work with extremely different conceptions of what constitutes knowledge. To be fair to the broad enterprise of philology, which has included some great literary critics, I use the term here as shorthand for "biblical philology," a discipline that, especially in its Anglo-American applications, has often come down to lexicography and the analysis of grammar.

For the philologist, the great goal is the achievement of clarity. It is scarcely necessary to say that in all sorts of important, but also delimited, ways clarity is indispensable in a translator's wrestling with the original text. The simplest case, but a pervasive

one, consists of getting a handle on the meaning of particular terms. It is truly helpful, for example, to know that biblical *naḥal* most commonly indicates not any sort of brook, creek, or stream but the kind of freshet, called a *wadi* in both Arabic and modern Hebrew, that floods a dry desert gulch during the rainy months and vanishes in the heat of the summer. Suddenly, Job's "my brothers betrayed like a *naḥal*" (Job 6:14) becomes a striking poetic image, where before it might have been a minor puzzlement. But philological clarity in literary texts can quickly turn into too much of a good thing. Literature in general, and the narrative prose of the Hebrew Bible in particular, cultivates certain profound and haunting enigmas, delights in leaving its audiences guessing about motives and connections, and, above all, loves to set ambiguities of word choice and image against one another in an endless interplay that resists neat resolution. In polar contrast, the impulse of the philologist is—here a barbarous term nicely catches the tenor of the activity—"to disambiguate" the terms of the text. The general result when applied to translation is to reduce, simplify, and denature the Bible. These unfortunate consequences are all the more pronounced when the philologist, however acutely trained in that discipline, has an

underdeveloped sense of literary diction, rhythm, and the uses of figurative language; and that, alas, is often the case in an era in which literary culture is not widely disseminated even among the technically educated.

The unacknowledged heresy underlying most modern English versions of the Bible is the use of translation as a vehicle for *explaining* the Bible instead of representing it in another language, and in the most egregious instances this amounts to explaining away the Bible. This impulse may be attributed not only to a rather reduced sense of the philological enterprise but also to a feeling that the Bible, because of its canonical status, has to be made accessible—indeed, transparent—to all. (The one signal exception to all these generalizations is Everett Fox's 1995 American version of the Torah. Emulating the model of the German translation by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig [begun in 1925, completed in 1961], which flaunts Hebrew etymologies, preserves nearly all repetitions of Hebrew terms, and invents German words, Fox goes to the opposite extreme of other modern versions: his English has the great virtue of reminding us verse after verse of the strangeness of the Hebrew original, but it does so at the cost of often being not quite English and consequently of becoming a text for study rather than

a fluently readable version that conveys the stylistic poise and power of the Hebrew.) Modern translators, in their zeal to uncover the meanings of the biblical text for the instruction of a modern readership, frequently lose sight of how the text intimates its meanings—the distinctive, artfully deployed features of ancient Hebrew prose and poetry that are the instruments for the articulation of all meaning, message, insight, and vision.

One of the most salient characteristics of biblical Hebrew is its extraordinary concreteness, manifested especially in a fondness for images rooted in the human body. The general predisposition of modern translators is to convert most of this concrete language into more abstract terms that have the purported advantage of clarity but turn the pungency of the original into stale paraphrase. A good deal of this concrete biblical language based on the body is what a linguist would call lexicalized metaphor—imagery, here taken from body parts and bodily functions, that is made to stand for some general concept as a fixed item in the vocabulary of the language (as "eye" in English can be used to mean "perceptiveness" or "connoisseur's understanding"). Dead metaphors, however, are the one persuasive instance of the resurrection of the dead—for at least the ghosts of the

old concrete meanings float over the supposedly abstract acceptations of the terms, and this is something the philologically driven translators do not appear to understand. “Many modern versions,” Gerald Hammond tartly observes, “eschew anything which smacks of imagery or metaphor—based on the curious assumption, I guess, that modern English is an image-free language.” The price paid for this avoidance of the metaphorical will become evident by considering two characteristic and recurrent Hebrew terms and the role they play in representing the world in the biblical story.

The Hebrew noun *zeraʿ** has the general meaning of “seed,” which can be applied either in the agricultural sense or to human beings, as the term for semen. By metaphorical extension, semen becomes the established designation for what it produces, progeny. Modern translators, evidently unwilling to trust the ability of adult readers to understand that “seed”—as regularly in the King James Version—may mean progeny, repeatedly render it as offspring, descendants, heirs, progeny, posterity. But I think there is convincing evidence in the texts themselves that the biblical writers never entirely forgot that their term for offspring also meant semen and had a precise equivalent in the vegetable world. To cite a distinctly

physical example, when Onan "knew that the seed would not be his," that is, the progeny of his brother's widow should he impregnate her, "he would waste his seed on the ground, so to give no seed to his brother" (Genesis 38:9). Modern translators, despite their discomfort with body terms, can scarcely avoid the wasted "seed" here because without it the representation of spilling semen on the ground in coitus interruptus becomes unintelligible. E. A. Speiser substitutes "offspring" for "seed" at the end of the verse, however, and the Revised English Bible goes him one better by putting "offspring" at the beginning as well ("Onan knew that the offspring would not count as his") and introducing "seed" in the middle as object of the verb "to spill" and scuttling back to the decorousness of "offspring" at the end—a prime instance of explanation under the guise of translation. But the biblical writer is referring to "seed" as much at the end of the verse as at the beginning. Onan adopts the stratagem of coitus interruptus in order not to "give seed"—that is, semen—to Tamar, and, as a necessary consequence of this contraceptive act, he avoids providing her with offspring. The thematic point of this moment, anchored in sexual practice, law, and human interaction, is blunted by not preserving "seed" throughout.

Even in contexts not directly related to sexuality, the concreteness of this term often amplifies the meaning of the utterance. When, for example, at the end of the story of the binding of Isaac, God reiterates His promise to Abraham, the multiplication of seed is strongly linked with cosmic imagery—harking back to the Creation story—of heaven and earth: "I will greatly bless you and will greatly multiply your seed, as the stars in the heavens and as the sand on the shore of the sea" (Genesis 22:17). If "seed" here is rendered as "offspring" or "descendants," what we get are two essentially mathematical similes of numerical increase. That is, in fact, the primary burden of the language God addresses to Abraham, but as figurative language it also imposes itself visually on the retina of the imagination, and so underlying the idea of a single late-born son whose progeny will be countless millions is an image of human seed (perhaps reinforced by the shared white color of semen and stars) scattered across the vast expanses of the starry skies and through the innumerable particles of sand on the shore of the sea. To substitute "offspring" for "seed" here may not fundamentally alter the meaning but it diminishes the vividness of the statement, making it just a little harder for readers to sense why these ancient texts have been so compelling down through the ages.

The most metaphorically extended body part in biblical Hebrew is the hand, though head and foot are also abundantly represented in figurative senses. Now it is obvious enough, given the equivalent usages in modern Western languages, that "hand" can be employed figuratively to express such notions as power, control, responsibility, and trust—to which biblical Hebrew adds one meaning peculiar to itself, commemorative monument. But most modern translators substitute one or another of these abstract terms, introducing supposed clarity where things were perfectly clear to begin with and subverting the literary integrity of the story. In the two sequential episodes that end with Joseph's being cast into a pit—the first is a dry cistern, the second an Egyptian prison, but the two are explicitly linked by the use of the term *bor* for both—the recurrently invoked "hand" is a focusing device that both defines and complicates the moral themes of the story. Reuben, hearing his brothers' murderous intentions, seeks to rescue Joseph "from their hands." He implores his brothers, "Lay not a hand upon him," just as, in the other strand of the story, Judah says, "Let not our hand be against him." E. A. Speiser, faithful to the clarifying impulse of the modern Bible scholar's philological imagination, renders both these phrases as "do away with,"

explaining that it would be illogical to have Reuben, or Judah, say “Don’t lay a hand on him,” since in fact the counsel proffered involves seizing him, stripping him, and throwing him into the pit. But in fact this alleged illogic is the luminous logic of the writer’s moral critique. Reuben pleads with his brothers not to lay a hand on Joseph, that is, not to shed his blood (this is the phrase he uses at the beginning of his speech), but neither his plea nor Judah’s proposal is an entirely innocent one: although each urges that the brothers lay no hand on Joseph, there is a violent laying on of hands necessitated by the course of action each proposes. Even more pointedly, once Joseph is headed south with the caravan, those same fraternal hands will take his ornamented tunic (the King James Version’s “coat of many colors”), slaughter a kid, dip the garment in the blood, and send it off to Jacob.

The image of hands holding a garment belonging to Joseph that is turned into false evidence brilliantly returns at the climactic moment of the next episode involving him, in Genesis 39. When Joseph flees from the lust of his master’s wife, “he left his garment in her hand” because she has virtually torn it off his back in trying to effect her reiterated “Lie with me” by seizing him. In her accusation of Joseph, she alters the narrator’s twice-stated “in her hand” to “by me,”

implying that he disrobed deliberately before attempting to rape her. But the narrator's cunning deployment of repeated terms has conditioned us to zero in on these two pivotal words, *waya'azov beyad,* "he left in the hand of," for in the six initial framing verses of the story, "hand" appears four times, with the last, most significant occurrence being this summary of the comprehensiveness of Joseph's stewardship: "And he left all that he had in Joseph's hands" (39:6). (Hebrew idiom allows the writer to use "hand" in the singular, thus creating an exact phrasal identity between the figurative reference to the hand in which the trust of stewardship is left and the literal reference to the hand in which the garment belonging to the object of sexual desire is left.) The invocation of "hand" in chapters 37 and 39—the story of Judah and Tamar lies between them—forms an elegant A B A B pattern: in chapter 37 hands are laid on Joseph, an action carried forward in the resumptive repetition at the very beginning of chapter 39 when he is bought "from the hands of the Ishmaelites"; then we have the supremely competent hand, or hands, of Joseph, into which everything is placed, or left, and by which everything succeeds; then again a violent hand is laid on Joseph, involving the stripping of his garment, as in the episode with the brothers; and at the end of the

chapter, Joseph in prison again has everything entrusted to his dependable hands, with this key term twice stated in the three and a half verses of the closing frame. A kind of dialectic is created in the thematic unfolding of the story between hand as the agency of violent impulse and hand as the instrument of scrupulous management. Although the concrete term is probably used with more formal precision in this particular sequence than is usually the case elsewhere, the hands of Joseph and the hands upon Joseph provide a fine object lesson about how biblical narrative is misrepresented when translators tamper with the purposeful and insistent physicality of its language, as here when "hand" is transmuted into "trust" or "care." Such substitutions offer explanations or interpretations instead of translations and thus betray the original.

There are, alas, more pervasive ways than the choice of terms in which nearly all the modern English versions commit the heresy of explanation. The most global of these is the prevalent modern strategy of repackaging biblical syntax for an audience whose reading experience is assumed to be limited to *Time, Newsweek,* the *New York Times* or the *Times* of London, and the internet. Now, it is often asserted, with seemingly self-evident justice, that the

fundamental difference between biblical syntax and modern English syntax is between a system in which parallel clauses linked by “and” predominate (what linguists call “parataxis”) and one in which the use of subordinate clauses and complex sentences predominates (what linguists call “hypotaxis”). Modern English has a broad array of modal and temporal discriminations in its system of verbs and a whole armament of subordinate conjunctions to stipulate different relations among clauses. Biblical Hebrew, on the other hand, has only two aspects[†] (they are probably not tenses in our sense) of verbs, together with one indication of a jussive mode—when a verb is used to express a desire or exhortation to perform the action in question—and a modest number of subordinate conjunctions. Although there are certainly instances of significant syntactic subordination, the characteristic biblical syntax is additive, working with parallel clauses linked by “and”—which in the Hebrew is not even a separate word but rather a particle, *waw*[‡] (it means “hook”), that is prefixed to the first word of the clause.

The assumption of most modern translators has been that this sort of syntax will be either unintelligible or at least alienating to modern readers, and so should be entirely rearranged as modern

English. There are two basic problems with this procedure. First, it ignores the fact that parataxis is the essential literary vehicle of biblical narrative: it is the way the ancient Hebrew writers saw the world, linked events in it, artfully ordered it, and narrated it, and one gets a very different world if their syntax is jettisoned. Second, rejection of biblical parataxis presupposes a very simplistic notion of what constitutes modern literary English. The implicit model seems to be, as I have suggested, the popular press, as well as perhaps high-school textbooks, bureaucratic directives, and ordinary conversation. But serious writers almost never accept such leveling limitation to a bland norm of popular usage. If one thinks of the great English stylists among twentieth-century novelists—writers like Joyce, Nabokov, Faulkner, and Virginia Woolf—there is not one among them whose use of language, including the deployment of syntax, even vaguely resembles the workaday simplicity and patly consistent orderliness that recent translators of the Bible have posited as the norm of modern English. It is also well to keep in mind that literary style, like many other aspects of literature, is constantly self-recapitulative, invoking recollections of its near and distant literary antecedents, so that modernists like Joyce and Faulkner sometimes echo biblical language and

cadences, and a mannered stylist like Hemingway, in making “and” his most prominent connective, surely has the King James Version of the Bible in mind. And in any event, the broad history of both Semitic and European languages and literatures evinces a strong differentiation in most periods between everyday language and the language of literature.

The assumption of biblical philologists that parallel syntax is alien to modern literary English is belied by the persistent presence of highly wrought paratactic prose even at the end of the twentieth century and beyond. A variety of self-conscious English stylists in the modern era, from Gertrude Stein to Cormac McCarthy, have exhibited a fondness for chains of parallel utterances linked by “and” in which the basic sentence-type is the same structurally as that used again and again in biblical prose. What such a style makes manifest in a narrative is a series of more or less discrete events, or micro-events, in a chain, not unlike the biblical names of begetters and begotten that are strung one after another in the chains of the genealogical lists. The biblical writers generally chose not to order these events in ramified networks of causal, conceptual, or temporal subordination, not because hypotaxis was an unavailable option, as the opening verses of the second Creation story (Genesis

2:4–5) clearly demonstrate. The continuing appeal, moreover, for writers in our own age of this syntax dominated by "and," which highlights the discrete event, suggests that parallel syntax may still be a perfectly viable way to represent in English the studied parallelism of verbs and clauses of ancient Hebrew narrative.

Since a literary style is composed of very small elements as well as larger structural features, an English translator must confront the pesky question of whether the ubiquitous Hebrew particle that means "and" should be represented at all in translation. This is obviously not a problem when the *waw* simply connects two nouns—as in "the heavens and the earth"—but what of its constant use at the beginning of sentences and clauses prefixed to verbs? The argument against translating it in these cases is that the primary function of the *waw* appended to a verb is not to signify "and" but to indicate that the Hebrew prefix conjugation, which otherwise is used for actions yet to be completed, is reporting past events (hence its designation in the terminology of classical Hebrew grammar as "the *waw* of conversion"). It is far from clear, as modern Bible scholars tend to assume, that the fulfillment of one linguistic function by a particle of speech automatically excludes any others; on the

contrary, it is entirely likely that for the ancient audience the *waw* appended to the verb both converted its temporal aspect and continued to signify "and." But, semantics aside, the general practice of modern English translators of suppressing the "and" when it is attached to a verb has the effect of changing the tempo, rhythm, and construction of events in biblical narrative. Let me illustrate by quoting a narrative sequence from Genesis 24 first in my own version, which reproduces every "and" and every element of parataxis, and then in the version of the Revised English Bible. The Revised English Bible is in general one of the most compulsive repackagers of biblical language, though in this instance the reordering of the Hebrew is relatively minor. Its rendering of these sentences is roughly interchangeable with any of the other modern versions—the Jerusalem Bible, the New Jewish Publication Society, Speiser—one might choose. I begin in the middle of verse 16, where Rebekah becomes the subject of a series of actions.

> And she came down to the spring and filled her jug and came back up. And the servant ran toward her and said, "Pray, let me sip a bit of water from your jug." And she said, "Drink, my lord," and she hurried and tipped down her jug on one hand and let him drink. And she let him drink his fill and said, "For your camels, too, I shall draw water until they drink

> their fill." And she hurried and emptied her jug into the trough, and she ran again to the well to draw water and drew water for all his camels.

And this is how the Revised English Bible, in keeping with the prevailing assumptions of most recent translations, renders these verses in what is presumed to be sensible modern English:

> She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and came up again. Abraham's servant hurried to meet her and said, "Will you give me a little water from your jar?" "Please drink, sir," she answered, and at once lowered her jar on her hand to let him drink. When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I shall draw water also for your camels until they have had enough." She quickly emptied her jar into the water trough, and then hurrying again to the well she drew water and watered all the camels.

There is, as one would expect, some modification of biblical parataxis, though it is not so extreme here as elsewhere in the Revised English Bible: "And she let him drink his fill" is converted into an introductory adverbial clause, "When she had finished giving him a drink" (actually in consonance with the otherwise paratactic King James Version): "and she hurried" is compressed into "quickly"; "and she ran again" becomes the participial "hurrying again." (Moves of this sort, it should be said, push translation to the verge of paraphrase—recasting and interpreting the original instead of representing it.) The most striking

divergence between these two versions is that mine has fifteen "and's," corresponding precisely to fifteen occurrences of the particle *waw* in the Hebrew, whereas the Revised English Bible manages with just five. What difference does this make? To begin with, it should be observed that the *waw,* whatever is claimed about its linguistic function, is by no means an inaudible element in the phonetics of the Hebrew text: we must keep constantly in mind that these narratives were composed to be *heard*, not merely to be decoded by a reader's eye. The reiterated "and," then, plays an important role in creating the rhythm of the story, in phonetically punctuating the forward-driving movement of the prose. The elimination of the "and" in the Revised English Bible and in all its modern cousins produces—certainly to my ear—an abrupt, awkward effect in the sound pattern of the language, or to put it more strictly, a kind of narrative arrhythmia.

More is at stake here than pleasing sounds, for the heroine of the repeated actions is in fact subtly but significantly reduced in all the rhythmically deficient versions. She of course performs roughly the same acts in the different versions—politely offering water to the stranger, lowering her jug so that he can drink, rapidly going back and forth to the spring to bring water for

the camels. But in the compressions, syntactical reorderings, and stop-and-start movements of the modernizing version, the encounter at the well and Rebekah's actions are made to seem rather matter-of-fact, however exemplary her impulse of hospitality. This tends to obscure what the Hebrew highlights, which is that she is doing something quite extraordinary. Rebekah at the well presents one of the rare biblical instances of the performance of an act of "Homeric" heroism. The servant begins by asking modestly to "sip a bit of water," as though all he wanted were to wet his lips. But we need to remember, as the ancient audience surely did, that a camel after a long desert journey can drink as much as twenty-five gallons of water, and there are ten camels here whom Rebekah offers to water "until they drink their fill." The chain of verbs tightly linked by all the "and's" does an admirable job in conveying this sense of the young woman's hurling herself with prodigious speed into the sequence of required actions. Even her dialogue is scarcely a pause in the narrative momentum, but is integrated syntactically and rhythmically into the chain: "And she said, 'Drink, my lord,' and she hurried and tipped down her jug. . . . And she hurried and emptied her jug into the trough, and she ran again to the well to draw water and drew

water for all his camels." The parallel syntax and the barrage of "and's," far from being the reflex of a "primitive" language, are as artfully effective in furthering the ends of the narrative as any device one could find in a sophisticated modern novelist.

Beyond these issues of syntax and local word choice lies a fundamental question that no modern translator I know of has really confronted: What level, or perhaps levels, of style is represented in biblical Hebrew? There is no reason, I believe, to be awestruck by the sheer antiquity of the text. If biblical Hebrew could be shown to reflect a pungent colloquial usage in the ancient setting, or a free commingling of colloquial and formal language, it would be only logical to render it with equivalent levels of diction in modern English. As a matter of fact, all the modern translators—from Speiser to Fox to the sundry ecclesiastical committees in both America and England—have shown a deaf ear to diction, acting as though the only important considerations in rendering a literary text were lexical values and grammatical structures, while the English terms chosen could be promiscuously borrowed from boardroom or bedroom or scholar's word hoard, with little regard to the tonality and connotation the words carried with them from their native linguistic habitat.

Whatever conclusions we may draw about the stylistic level of biblical Hebrew are a little precarious because we of course have no record of the ancient spoken language, and if, as seems likely, there were extracanonical varieties or genres of Hebrew writing in the ancient world, the vestiges have long since crumbled into dust. Did, for example, the citizens of Judah in the time of Jeremiah speak in a parallel syntax, using the *waw* consecutive, and employing roughly the same vocabulary that we find in his prophecies, or in Deuteronomy and Genesis? Although there is no proof, my guess is that vernacular syntax and grammar probably differed in some ways from their literary counterparts. In regard to vocabulary, there is evidence that what we see in the canonical books would not have been identical with everyday usage. First, there is the problem of the relative paucity of vocabulary in biblical literature. As the Spanish Hebrew scholar Angel Sáenz-Badillos has observed in his *History of the Hebrew Language* (1993), the biblical lexicon is so restricted that it is hard to believe it could have served all the purposes of quotidian existence in a highly developed society. The instance of the poetry of Job, with its unusual number of words not found elsewhere in Scripture, is instructive in this regard: the Job-poet, in his powerful

impulse to forge a poetic imagery that would represent humankind, God, and nature in a new and even startling light, draws on highly specific language from manufacturing processes, food preparation, commercial and legal institutions, which would never be used in biblical narrative. The plausible conclusion is that the Hebrew of the Bible is a conventionally delimited language, roughly analagous in this respect to the French of the neoclassical theater: it was understood by writers and their audiences, at least in the case of narrative, that only certain words were appropriate for the literary rendering of events.

There is evidence, moreover, that people in everyday life may have had different words for many of the basic concepts and entities that are mentioned in the Bible. This argument was persuasively made by the Israeli linguist Abba ben David in his still indispensable 1967 study, available only in Hebrew, *The Language of the Bible and the Language of the Sages*. Ben David offers a fascinating explanation for one of the great mysteries of the Hebrew language—the emergence, toward the end of the pre-Christian era, of a new kind of Hebrew, which became the language of the early rabbis. Now, it is widely recognized that this new Hebrew reflected the influence of the Aramaic vernacular in morphology, in

grammar, and in some of its vocabulary, and that, understandably, it also incorporated a vast number of Greek and Latin loanwords. But what is puzzling is that rabbinic Hebrew also uses a good many indigenous Hebrew terms that are absent from the biblical corpus, or reflected only in rare and marginal biblical cognates. The standard terms in rabbinical Hebrew for sun and moon, and some of its frequently used verbs like to look, to take, to enter, to clean, are entirely different from their biblical counterparts, without visible influence from any of the languages impinging on Hebrew. Where did these words come from? Ben David, observing, as have others before him, that there are incipient signs of an emergent rabbinic Hebrew in late biblical books like Jonah and the Song of Songs, makes the bold and, to my mind, convincing proposal that rabbinic Hebrew was built upon an ancient vernacular that for the most part had been excluded from the literary language used for the canonical texts. This makes particular sense if one keeps in mind that the early rabbis were anxious to draw a line between their own “Oral Torah” and the written Torah they were expounding. For the purposes of legal and homiletic exegesis, they naturally would have used a vernacular Hebrew rather than the literary language, and when their discourse was first given

written formulation in the Mishnah in the early third century C.E., that text would have recorded this vernacular, which probably had a long prehistory in the biblical period. It is distinctly possible that when a ninth-century B.C.E. Israelite farmer mopped his brow under the blazing sun, he did not point to it and say *shemesh,* as it is invariably called in biblical prose texts, but rather *ḥamah*, as it is regularly designated in the Mishnah.

There is, of course, no way of plotting a clear chronology of the evolution of rabbinic Hebrew from an older vernacular, no way of determining how far back into the biblical period various elements of rabbinic language may go. It is sufficient for our effort to gauge the level of style of the Bible's literary prose merely to grant the very high likelihood that the language of the canonical texts was not identical with the vernacular, that it reflected a specialized or elevated vocabulary, and perhaps even a distinct grammar and syntax. Let me cite a momentary exception to the rule of biblical usage that may give us a glimpse into this excluded vernacular background of a more formal literary language. It is well-known that in biblical dialogue all the characters speak proper literary Hebrew, with no intimations of slang, dialect, or idiolect. The single striking exception is impatient

Esau's first speech to Jacob in Genesis 25: "Let me gulp down some of this red red stuff." Inarticulate with hunger, he cannot come up with the ordinary Hebrew term for "stew," and so he makes do with *haʾadom haʾadom hazeh*—literally "this red red." But what is more interesting for our purpose is the verb Esau uses for "feeding," *halʿiteini*. This is the sole occurrence of this verb in the biblical corpus, but in the Talmud it is a commonly used term with the specific meaning of stuffing food into the mouth of an animal. One cannot be certain this was its precise meaning in the biblical period because words do, after all, undergo semantic shifts in a period of considerably more than a thousand years. But it seems safe to assume, minimally, that even a millennium before the rabbis *halʿit* would have been a cruder term for feeding than the standard biblical *haʾakhil*. What I think happened at this point in Genesis is that the author, in the writerly zest with which he sought to characterize Esau's crudeness, allowed himself, quite exceptionally, to introduce a vernacular term for coarse eating or animal feeding into the dialogue that would jibe nicely with his phrase "this red red stuff." After the close of the biblical era, this otherwise excluded term would surface in the legal pronouncements of the rabbis on animal husbandry, together with a host of vernacular words used in the

ancient period but never permitted to enter the canonical texts.

All this strongly suggests that the language of biblical narrative in its own time was stylized, decorous, dignified, and readily identified by its audiences as a language of literature, in certain ways distinct from the language of quotidian reality. The tricky complication, however, is that in most respects it also was not a lofty style, and was certainly neither ornate nor euphemistic. If some of its vocabulary may have reflected a specialized literary lexicon, the language of biblical narrative also makes abundant use of ordinary Hebrew words that must have been in everyone's mouth from day to day. Just to mention the few recurrent terms on which I have commented, "hand," "house," "all," and "seed" are primary words in every phase of the history of Hebrew, and they continue to appear as such in the rabbinic language, where so much else is altered. Biblical prose, then, is a formal literary language but also, paradoxically, a plainspoken one, and, moreover, a language that evinces a strong commitment to using a limited set of terms again and again, making an aesthetic virtue out of the repetition. It should be added that the language of the Bible reflects not one level of diction but a certain range of dictions, as I shall explain presently.

What is the implication of this analysis for an appropriate modern English equivalent to ancient Hebrew style? The right direction, I think, was hit on by the King James Version, following the great model of Tyndale a century before it. There is no good reason to render biblical Hebrew as contemporary English, either lexically or syntactically. This is not to suggest that the Bible should be represented as fussily old-fashioned English, but a limited degree of archaizing coloration is entirely appropriate, employed with other strategies for creating a language that is stylized yet simple and direct, free of the overtones of contemporary colloquial usage but with a certain timeless homespun quality. An adequate English version should be able to indicate the small but significant modulations in diction in the biblical language—something the stylistically uniform King James Version, however, entirely fails to do. A suitable English version should avoid at all costs the modern abomination of elegant synonymous variation, for the literary prose of the Bible turns everywhere on significant repetition, not variation. Similarly, the translation of terms on the basis of immediate context —except when it becomes grotesque to do otherwise —is to be resisted as another instance of the heresy of explanation. Finally, the mesmerizing effect of these

ancient stories will scarcely be conveyed if they are not rendered in cadenced English prose that at least in some ways corresponds to the powerful cadences of the Hebrew. Let me now comment more particularly on the distinctive biblical treatment of diction, word choice, syntax, and rhythm and what it implies for translation.

The biblical prose writers favor what we may think of as a primary vocabulary. They revel in repetition, sometimes of a stately, refrainlike sort, sometimes deployed in ingenious patterns through which different meanings of the same term are played against one another. Elegant synonymity is alien to biblical prose, and it is only rarely that a highly specialized term is used instead of the more general word. Here is a characteristic biblical way of putting things: "And God made the two great lights, the great light for dominion of day and the small light for dominion of night, and the stars" (Genesis 1:16). In addition to the poised emphasis of the internal repetitions in the sentence, one should note that the primary term for a source of light—*maʾor,* transparently cognate with *ʾor*, the light that is divided from the darkness in 1:4—is placed in the foreground. In fact, there are half a dozen biblical

synonyms for “light,” suggesting a range roughly equivalent to English terms like “illumination,” “effulgence,” “brilliance,” and “splendor,” but these are all reserved for the more elaborate vocabulary of poetry, whereas in prose the writer sticks to the simplicity of *ʾor* and *maʾor,* and everywhere it behooves a translator to do the same with English equivalents.

Some biblical scholars might object that my example is skewed because it is taken from the so-called Priestly source (P), which has a stylistic predilection for high decorousness and cadenced repetitions. But the stylistic difference in this regard between P and the two other conjectured source documents of the Pentateuch, designated J and E, is one of degree, not kind. Thus, when the second version of the Creation story, commonly identified as J’s, begins in Genesis 2:4, we do get some greater degree of specification in the language, in keeping with the way creation is here imagined. Instead of the verbs “to create” (*bara*ʾ) and “to make” (*ʿasah*) that accompany God’s speaking the world into being in chapter 1 we are given the potter’s term “to fashion” (*yatsar*) and the architectural term “to build” (*banah*). These remain, however, within the limits of a primary vocabulary. The nuanced and specialized lexicon of

manufacturing processes one encounters in the poetry of Job and of Deutero-Isaiah is firmly excluded from the stylistic horizon of this narrative prose, though the subject might have invited it.

The translator's task, then, is to mirror the repetitions as much as is feasible. Let me cite one small example, where I learned from my own mistake. When Joseph's brothers recount to Jacob what happened on their first trip to Egypt, they say, in the English of my first draft, "The man who is lord of the land spoke harshly to us and accused us of being spies in the land" (Genesis 42:30). (The verb "accused" is also used in the New Jewish Publication Society translation.) On rereading, I realized that I had violated the cardinal principle, not to translate according to context. The Hebrew says, very literally, "gave us as spies," "give" in biblical usage being one of those all-purpose verbs that variously means "to set," "to place," "to grant," "to deem." I hastened to change the last clause to "made us out to be spies" because "to make," with or without an accompanying preposition, is precisely such a primary term that serves many purposes and so is very much in keeping with biblical stylistic practice.

What is surprising about the biblical writers' use of this deliberately limited vocabulary is that it can be so

precise and even nuanced. Our own cultural preconceptions of writers scrupulously devoted to finding exactly the right word are associated with figures like Flaubert and Joyce, who meticulously choose the terms of their narratives from a large repertory of finely discriminated lexical items. Biblical prose often exhibits an analogous precision within the severe limits of its primary vocabulary. There are, for example, two paired terms, masculine and feminine, in biblical Hebrew to designate young people: *naʿar*/*naʿarah* (in this translation, "lad" and "young woman") and *yeled*/*yaldah* (in this translation, "child" and "girl"). The first pair is somewhat asymmetrical because *naʿar* often also means "servant" or anyone in a subaltern position, and sometimes means "elite soldier," whereas *naʿarah* usually refers to a nubile young woman, and only occasionally to a servant girl. Though there are rare biblical occurrences of *yeled* in the sense of "young man," it generally designates someone younger than a *naʿar*—etymologically, it means "the one who is born," reflecting a development parallel to the French *enfant*.

With this little to work with, it is remarkable how much the biblical writers accomplish in their deployment of the terms. In the first part of the story of the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 21),

Ishmael is referred to consistently as “the child,” as was his infant half brother Isaac at the beginning of this chapter. The grief-stricken mother in the wilderness says to herself, “Let me not see when the child dies.” From the moment God speaks in the story (verse 17), Ishmael is invariably referred to as “the lad”—evidently with an intimation of tenderness but also with the suggestion that he is a young man, *naʿar,* who will go on to have a future. In the elaborately parallel episode in the next chapter that features Abraham and Isaac in the wilderness, Isaac is referred to by man and God as “the lad,” and the term is played off against “the lads” who are Abraham’s servants accompanying him on his journey, and not his flesh and blood (“And Abraham said to his lads, ‘Sit you here with the donkey and let me and the lad walk ahead’”).

In the story of the rape of Dinah (Genesis 34), she is first referred to as “Leah’s daughter”—and not Jacob’s daughter, for it is Leah’s sons, Simeon and Levi, who will exact vengeance for her. The initial designation of “daughter” aligns her with both “the daughters of the land” among whom she goes out to see, and Shechem, Hamor’s son (“son” and “daughter” are cognates in Hebrew), who sees her, takes her, and rapes her. After the act of violation, Shechem is

overcome with love for Dinah, and he implores his father, “Take me this girl [*yaldah*] as wife.” Speaking to his father, then, he identifies—tenderly?—the victim of his own lust as a girl-child. When he parleys with Dinah’s brothers, asking permission to marry her, he says, “Give me the young woman [*naʿarah*] as wife,” now using the term for a nubile woman that is strictly appropriate to betrothal negotiations. After the brothers stipulate their surgical precondition for the betrothal, the narrator reports, “And the lad [*naʿar*] lost no time in doing the thing, for he wanted Jacob’s daughter.” Suddenly, as the catastrophe of this gruesome tale becomes imminent, we learn that the sexually impulsive man is only a lad, probably an adolescent like Dinah—a discovery that is bound to complicate our task of moral judgment. And now Dinah is called Jacob’s daughter, not Leah’s, probably because that is how Shechem sees her, not realizing that the significant relationship is through her mother to her two full brothers who are plotting a terrible retribution for her violation.

It should be clear from all this that a translation that respects the literary precision of the biblical story must strive to reproduce its nice discrimination of terms, and cannot be free to translate a word here one way and there another, for the sake of variety or for

the sake of context. It must be admitted, however, that some compromises are inevitable because modern English clearly does not coincide semantically with ancient Hebrew in many respects. The stuff from which the first human is fashioned, for example, *ʾadamah,* manifestly means "soil," and it continues to have that meaning as it recurs at crucial junctures in the story of the Garden and the primordial banishment. But, alas, *ʾadamah* also means "land," "farmland," "country," and even "earth," and to translate it invariably as "soil" for the sake of terminological consistency (as Everett Fox does) leads to local confusions and conspicuous peculiarities. To take a more extreme example, a term that has no semantic analogue in English, the Hebrew *nefesh,* which the King James Version, following the Vulgate, often translates as "soul," refers to the breath of life in the nostrils of a living creature and, by extension, "lifeblood" or simply "life," and by another slide of association, "person"; and it is also used as an intensifying form of the personal pronoun, having roughly the sense of "very self." In the face of this bewildering diversity of meaning, one is compelled to abandon the admirable principle of lexical consistency and to translate, regretfully, according to immediate context.

Finally, though many recurring biblical terms have serviceable English equivalents (like “lad” for *naʿar*), there are instances in which a translation must make another kind of compromise because, given the differences between modern and biblical culture, the social, moral, and ideological connotations of terms in the two languages do not adequately correspond. Consider the tricky case of verbs for sexual intercourse. In English, these tend to be either clinical and technical, or rude, or bawdy, or euphemistic, and absolutely none of this is true of the verbs used for sex in the Bible. In Genesis, three different terms occur: “to know,” “to lie with,” and “to come into.” “To know,” with one striking antithetical exception, indicates sexual possession by a man of his legitimate spouse. Modern solutions such as “to be intimate with,” “to cohabit with,” “to sleep with,” are all egregiously wrong in tone and implication. Fortunately the King James Version has established a strong precedent in English by translating the verb literally, and “carnal knowledge” is part of our language, so it is feasible to preserve the literal Hebrew usage in translation. (There is, I think, a good deal to be said for the general procedure of Tyndale and the King James Version in imitating many Hebrew idioms and thus giving the English a certain Hebraic coloration.)

“Lie with” is a literal equivalent of the Hebrew, though in English it is vaguely euphemistic, whereas in Hebrew it is a more brutally direct or carnally explicit idiom for sexual intercourse, without, however, any suggestion of obscenity.

The most intractable of the three expressions is “to come into” or “to enter.” In nonsexual contexts, this is the ordinary biblical verb for entering, or arriving. “To enter,” or “to come into,” however, is a misleading translation because the term clearly refers not merely to sexual penetration but to the whole act of sexual consummation. It is used with great precision—not registered by biblical scholarship—to indicate a man’s having intercourse with a woman he has not yet had as a sexual partner, whether she is his wife, his concubine, or a whore. The underlying spatial imagery of the term, I think, is of the man’s entering the woman’s sphere for the first time through a series of concentric circles: her tent or chamber, her bed, her body. A translator, then, ought not surrender the image of coming into, but “come into” by itself doesn’t quite do it. My own solution, in keeping with the slight strangeness of Hebraizing idioms of the translation as a whole, was to stretch an English idiom to cover the biblical usage: this translation consistently renders the Hebrew expression in question as “come to bed with,”

an idiom that in accepted usage a woman could plausibly use to a man referring to herself ("come to bed with me") but that in my translation is extended to a woman's reference to another woman ("come to bed with my slavegirl") and to a reference in the third person by the narrator or a male character to sexual consummation ("Give me my wife," Jacob says to Laban, "and let me come to bed with her").

Biblical syntax, beyond the basic pattern of parallel clauses, provides another occasion for what I have called a slight strangeness. The word order in biblical narrative is very often as finely expressive as the lexical choices. In many instances, the significant sequence of terms can be reproduced effortlessly and idiomatically in English, and it is a testament to the literary insensitivity of modern translators that they so often neglect to do so. Here, for example, is how the narrator reports Abimelech's discovery of the conjugal connection between Isaac and the woman Isaac had claimed was his sister: "Abimelech . . . looked out the window and saw—and there was Isaac playing with Rebekah his wife" (Genesis 26:8). The move into the character's point of view after the verbs of seeing is signaled by the so-called presentative, *wehineh* (rather like *voici* in French), which in this case I have represented by "there" but usually render as "look"

(following the King James Version's "behold" and so deliberately coining an English idiom because the biblical term is so crucial for indicating shifts in narrative perspective). What follows "and there" is the precise sequence of Abimelech's perception as he looks out through the window: first Isaac, then the act of sexual play or fondling, then the identity of the female partner in the dalliance, and at the very end, the conclusion that Rebekah must be Isaac's wife. All this is perfectly fluent as English, and modern translations like the Revised English Bible, the New Jewish Publication Society, and Speiser that place "wife" before Rebekah spoil a nice narrative effect in the original.

But biblical syntax is also more flexible than modern English syntax, and there are hundreds of instances in the Hebrew Bible of significant syntactical inversions and, especially, emphatic first positioning of weighted terms. Syntactical inversion, however, is familiar enough in the more traditional strata of literary English, and if one adopts a general norm of decorous stylization for the prose of the translation, as I have done on the grounds I explained earlier, it becomes feasible to reproduce most of the Hebrew reconfigurations of syntax, preserving the thematic or psychological emphases they are meant to convey. The

present translation does this, I think, to a greater degree than all previous English versions.

God repeatedly promises the patriarchs, “To your seed I will give this land” (e.g., Genesis 12:7), pointedly putting “your seed” at the beginning of the statement. Less rhetorically, more dramatically, when Hagar is asked by the divine messenger in the wilderness where she is going, she responds, “From Sarai my mistress I am fleeing” (Genesis 16:8), placing Sarai, the implacable source of her misery, at the beginning of the sentence. Still more strikingly, when Jacob is told by his sons that Simeon has been detained as a hostage in Egypt and that the Egyptian regent insists Benjamin be brought down to him, the old man begins his lament by saying, “Me you have bereaved” (Genesis 42:36). It is profoundly revelatory of Jacob’s psychological posture that he should place himself as the object of suffering at the very beginning of his utterance (and again at the end, in a little formal symmetry). Normally, biblical Hebrew indicates a pronominal object of a verb by attaching a suffix to the verb itself. Here, however, instead of the usual accusative suffix we get an accusative first-person pronoun—*’oti*—placed before the verb, a procedure that beautifully expresses Jacob’s self-dramatization as anguished and resentful father continually at the mercy

of his sons. The “me” urgently needs to be thrust into the ear of the listener. Many translations simply suppress the inversion, but to put it decorously as “It is I” (Everett Fox) or paraphrastically as “It is always me” (New Jewish Publication Society) is to dilute the dramatic force of the original.

The sharpness and vividness of biblical style are also diluted when it is represented in English, as virtually all the versions do, by a single, indifferent level of diction. As I noted earlier, there seems to be nothing genuinely colloquial in the prose used by the narrator; but there is a palpable variation between passages that are more cadenced, more inclined to balanced structures of terms and elevated language, like the narrative of the Flood, and looser, more stylistically flexible passages. There are many instances, moreover, of single word choices that pointedly break with the stylistic decorum of the surrounding narrative, and for the most part these are fudged by the sundry English translations. When Hagar and Ishmael use up their supply of water in the wilderness, the despairing mother “flung the child under one of the bushes” (Genesis 21:15). The verb here, *hishlikh,* always means “to throw,” usually abruptly or violently. This is somewhat softened by the King James Version and Fox, who use “cast.” The

Revised English Bible is uncomfortable with the idea of throwing a child and so translates “thrust.” Speiser and the New Jewish Publication Society Bible altogether disapprove of spasmodic maternal gestures and hence dissolve “flung” into a gentler “left.” In all such manipulation, the violence of Hagar’s action and feelings disappears. When Laban berates Jacob for running off with his daughters, he says, “What have you done, . . . driving my daughters like captives of the sword?” (Genesis 31:26). All the English versions represent the verb here as “carrying away” or some approximation thereof, but *nahag* is a term for driving animals, and is used precisely in that sense earlier in this very chapter (verse 18). To translate it otherwise is to lose the edge of brutal exaggeration in Laban’s angry words. In the throes of the great famine, the destitute Egyptians say to Joseph, “Nothing is left for our lord but our carcasses and our farmland” (Genesis 47:18). Most English versions use “bodies” instead of “carcasses,” with a couple of modern translations flattening the language even more by rendering the term as “persons.” But the Hebrew *gewiyah,* with the sole exception of one famous mythopoeic text in Ezekiel, invariably means “corpse” or “carcass.” What the miserable Egyptians are saying to their great overlord is that they have been reduced to little more

than walking corpses, and he might as well have those. This sort of pungency can be conveyed if the translator recognizes that the Hebrew does not operate at a single bland level and that literary expression is not inevitably bound to decorous "logic."

These last two examples were taken from dialogue, and it is chiefly in dialogue that we get small but vivid intimations of the colloquial. Again, these are eliminated in the flat regularity of conventional Bible translation. When God rebukes Abimelech for taking Sarah into his harem, the king vehemently protests that he has acted in good conscience: "Did not he say to me, 'She is my sister'? and she, she, too, said, 'He is my brother'" (Genesis 20:5). The repetition of "she, she, too" is a stammer or splutter of indignation clearly indicated in the Hebrew. In some English versions, it disappears altogether. The King James Version turns it into a rhetorical flourish: "she, even she herself." Everett Fox, because of his commitment to literalism, comes closer but without quite the requisite feeling of colloquial mimesis: "and also she, she said." The seventeen-year-old Joseph reports the first of his dreams to his brothers in the following manner: "And, look, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, look, my sheaf arose and actually [*wegam*] stood up, and, look, your sheaves drew round and bowed to my

sheaf" (Genesis 37:7). The language here is surely crafted mimetically to capture the gee-gosh wonderment of this naïve adolescent who blithely assumes his brothers will share his sense of amazement at his dream. The presentative *hineh* ("look") is the conventional term dreamers use to report the visual images of their dreams, perhaps partly because it readily introduces a surprising new perception, but here Joseph repeats the term three times in one breathless sentence, and the effect of naïve astonishment is equally expressed in his redundant "arose and actually stood up" (the Hebrew adverb *gam* most often means "also" but fairly frequently serves as well as a term of emphasis or intensification). The point is that the adolescent Joseph speaking to his brothers does not at all sound like the adult Joseph addressing Pharaoh, and a translation should not reduce either dialogue or narrator's language to a single dead level.

In the range of diction of the biblical text, the complementary opposite to these moments of colloquial mimesis occurs in the poetic insets. Most of these in the Torah are only a line or two of verse, though Genesis and Deuteronomy conclude with relatively long poems, and Exodus incorporates the Song of the Sea as Numbers does Balaam's oracles.

Now, it has long been recognized by scholarship that biblical poetry reflects a stratum of Hebrew older than biblical prose: some of the grammatical forms are different, and there is a distinctive poetic vocabulary, a good deal of it archaic. No previous English translation has made a serious effort to represent the elevated and archaic nature of the poetic language in contradistinction to the prose, though that is clearly part of the intended literary effect of biblical narrative. The present translation tries to suggest this contrast in levels of style—through a more liberal use of syntactic inversion in the poetry, through a selective invocation of slightly archaic terms, and through the occasional deployment of rhetorical gestures broadly associated with older English poetry (like the ejaculation "O"). I wish I could have gone further in this direction, but there is a manifest danger in sounding merely quaint instead of eloquently archaic, and so the stylistic baggage of "anent" and "forsooth" had to be firmly excluded.

Two minute examples will illustrate how these discriminations of stylistic level are made in the Hebrew and how they might be conveyed in English. The enigmatic notice about the Nephilim, the human-divine hybrids of the primeval age, concludes with these words: "They are the heroes of yore, the men of

renown" (Genesis 6:4). This line could conceivably be a fragment from an old mythological poem; more probably, it reads in the original as a kind of stylistic citation of the epic genre. The clearest clue to this in the Hebrew is the word "they," which here is *hemah* rather than the standard *hem*. This variant with the extra syllable is in all likelihood an older form: it occurs four times more often in poetry than in prose, and even in prose is often reserved for rather ceremonial gestures. There is no English variant of "they" that is similarly marked as poetic diction, and my translation compensates by using "of yore" instead of the phrase "of old" adopted by the King James Version and by most later English versions. In the next chapter, the unleashing of the Deluge is reported in this line of verse, with emphatic semantic parallelism and four Hebrew accents against three in the two halves of the line: "All the wellsprings of the great deep burst, / and the casements of the heavens opened" (7:11). In order to convey a sense that this is poetry, beyond the mechanics of typography, a translator of course has to create a good deal of rhythmic regularity, but there remains a problem of diction. The Hebrew word represented by "casements" is *ʾarubot*. It is a rare term, occurring only a few times elsewhere in the Bible, and it clearly means "window"

or “window-like niche.” The decision of several different modern translators to render it as “sluices” or “floodgates” has no philological warrant and is a conspicuous instance of translation by context. “Windows” in the King James Version is on target semantically but not stylistically. The occurrence of a cognate of *ʾarubot* in Ugaritic poetry, several centuries before the composition of Genesis, is further indication that the term is poetic and probably somewhat archaic for the later Hebrew audience. “Casements,” with its echoes of Keats and of Shakespeare behind Keats, seemed like a happy solution to the problem of diction. Though not all shifts in stylistic level in the Hebrew can be so readily represented by English equivalents, a translation that tries to do justice to the richness of the Hebrew must aim for some approximation of the nuances of diction in the original.

The most pervasive aspect of the magic of biblical style that has been neglected by English translators is its beautiful rhythms. An important reason for the magnetic appeal of these stories when you read them in the Hebrew is the rhythmic power of the words that convey the story. The British critic A. Alvarez has aptly described the crucial role of rhythm in all literary art: “the rhythm—the way the sounds move, combine,

separate, recombine—is the vehicle for the feeling. . . . And without that inner movement or disturbance, the words, no matter how fetching, remain inert. In this way at least, the dynamics of poetry—and probably of all the arts—are the same as the dynamics of dreaming." I know of no modern English translation of the Bible that is not blotted by constant patches of arrhythmia, and the result is precisely the sense of inertness of which Alvarez speaks. The King James Version, of course, has its grand rhythmic movements —cultivated people around 1611 clearly had a much firmer sense of expressive sound in language than has been true of recent generations. But these rhythms are more orotund, less powerfully compact, than those of the Hebrew, and in fact there are far more local lapses in rhythm than nostalgic readers of the King James Version may recall.

The final arbiter of rhythmic effectiveness must be the inner ear of the sensitive reader, but I would like to show that there is a vital dimension of biblical prose that translation has to engage by quoting a couple of verses in transliteration and then in three English versions, together with my own. In regard to the transliteration, it should be kept in mind that we have an approximate notion, not an exact one, of how biblical Hebrew was originally pronounced. There is

some question about vowels in particular because vowel-points were added to the consonantal texts by the Masoretes—the Hebrew scholars of sixth- to tenth-century Tiberias who fixed the text of the Bible, with full punctuation, standard since then—more than a millennium after the texts were composed. There was, however, a continuous tradition for recitation of the texts on which the Masoretes drew, and anyone who has listened to the Masoretic Text read out loud can attest to its strong rhythmic integrity, which argues that its system of pronunciation was by no means an arbitrary imposition. Here is the narrative report of Noah's entering the ark as the Deluge is unleashed (Genesis 7:13–14). (Acute accents are used to indicate accented syllables. *W* is used for the letter *waw* [pronounced as *v* in modern Hebrew but as *w* in biblical times], especially to distinguish it from *bet* without *dagesh,* pronounced as *v*. *Ḥ* indicates a light fricative [something like Spanish *j*]; *kh* represents a heavier fricative, like the German *ch* in Bach.)

13. *Beʿétsem hayóm hazéh ba' nóaḥ weshém-weḥám wayéfet benei-nóaḥ weʾéshet nóaḥ ushlóshet neshéi-vanáw ʾitám' el hateváh.* 14. *Hémah wekhol-haḥayáh lemináh wekhol-habehemáh lemináh wekhol-harémes haroméśʿal-ha'árets leminéhu wekhol-haʿóf leminéhu kól tsipór kol-kanáf.*

The Hebrew rhythm unfolds in groupings of three or four words marked by three or four stresses, usually with no more than one or two unstressed syllables between the stressed ones, and the sense of the words invites a slight pause between one grouping and the next. The overall effect is that of a grand solemn sweep, a sort of epic march, and that effect is reinforced in the diction by the use of *hémah* instead of *hem* for "they" at the beginning of the second verse.

Here is the King James Version:

> 13. In the selfsame day entered Noah, and Shem, and Ham, and Japheth, the sons of Noah, and Noah's wife, and the three wives of his sons with them, into the ark; 14. they, and every beast after its kind, and all the cattle after their kind, and every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth after his kind, and every fowl after his kind, every bird of every sort.

The first of the two verses (up to "into the ark") is nearly perfect. I envy the freedom of the King James Version to follow the Hebrew syntax and write "entered Noah," an inversion feasible at the beginning of the seventeenth century but a little too odd, I am afraid, at the beginning of the twenty-first. But in the second verse rhythmic difficulties emerge. The repeated "after its kind," with its sequencing of a trochee and an iamb and its two stresses, is an ungainly

equivalent of the Hebrew *lemináh*; “every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth” is a whole mouthful of syllables in exchange for the compactness of the Hebrew; and “every bird of every sort” falls flat as a final cadence (apart from being inaccurate as a translation).

Here is E. A. Speiser’s version of these two verses —a version, to be sure, intended to be accompanied by a philological commentary, but one that helped set a norm for recent Bible translations:

> 13. On the aforesaid day, Noah and his sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, Noah’s wife, and the three wives of his sons had entered the ark—14. they as well as every kind of beast, every kind of creature that creeps on earth, and every kind of bird, every winged thing.

The initial phrase, “on the aforesaid day,” is an ill-starred beginning in regard to diction as well as to rhythm. Something as mechanical as the list of the passengers of the ark is divided up in a way that undercuts its rhythmic momentum: at best, one can say that this version has intermittent moments of escape into rhythm.

Everett Fox, the most boldly literal of modern Bible translators, does a little better, but his attention to rhythm is by no means unflagging.

13. On that very day came Noah, and Shem, Ham, and Yefet, Noah's sons, Noah's wife and his three sons' wives with them, into the Ark, 14. they and all wildlife after their kind, all herd-animals after their kind, all crawling things that crawl upon the earth after their kind, all fowl after their kind, all chirping-things, all winged-things.

The first short clause, with the courageous inversion of verb and subject, rings nicely in the ear. But the simple deletion of the "and" between Shem and Ham collapses the rhythm, and Fox's grouping of the list is not much better rhythmically than Speiser's. As in the King James Version, the decision to use "after" four times introduces a series of unwelcome extra syllables, and rhythm is virtually lost in "all herd-animals after their kind, all crawling things that crawl upon the earth after their kind."

Here is my own version, far from perfect, but meant to preserve more of the phonetic compactness of the Hebrew and to avoid such glaring lapses into arrhythmia:

13. That very day, Noah and Shem and Ham and Japheth, the sons of Noah, and Noah's wife, and the three wives of his sons together with them, came into the ark, 14. they as well as beasts of each kind and cattle of each kind and each kind of crawling thing that crawls on the earth and each kind of bird, each winged thing.

Biblical Hebrew, in sum, has a distinctive music, a lovely precision of lexical choice, a meaningful

concreteness, and a suppleness of expressive syntax that by and large have been given short shrift by translators with their eyes on other goals. The present translation, whatever its imperfections, seeks to do fuller justice to all these aspects of biblical style in the hope of making the rich literary experience of the Hebrew more accessible to readers of English.

II. ON TRANSLATING THE NAMES OF GOD

The God of Israel is referred to through a variety of names in these texts, and it is by no means self-evident how to render the names in English. The most difficult of them is the Tetragrammaton, YHWH. Modern biblical scholarship has agreed to represent this as "Yahweh," but there are problems with using that form in translation. The original Hebrew texts of the Bible were entirely consonantal, vowel-points having been added well over a millennium after the original composition of the texts. Because by then the Tetragrammaton was deemed ineffable by Jewish tradition, it was revocalized to be pronounced as though it read *ʾadonai*, LORD. The confidence of biblical scholarship that the original pronunciation was

in fact Yahweh may not be entirely warranted. (See the comment on Exodus 3:14.) In any case, “Yahweh” would have given the English version a certain academic-archaeological coloration that I preferred to avoid, and it would also have introduced a certain discomfort at least for some Jewish readers of the translation. I rejected the option of using “YHWH” because it cannot be pronounced whereas the dimension of sound seemed to me vital to the translation. I have therefore followed the precedent of the King James Version in representing YHWH as the LORD, the last three letters in small uppercase to indicate that, like *ʾadonai*, it is an anomaly, a substitution for another name.

The other most common designation of the deity is *ʾelohim*, a word that is plural in form (perhaps, though this is far from certain, a plural of “majesty”) but that is generally treated grammatically as a singular. “God” is the natural English equivalent, but in some contexts, where the generic character of the name seems prominent, I have rendered it with a lowercase *g*as “god,” and when the name is treated as a plural, especially when the narrative context involves polytheism, I have translated it as “gods.” Three other names for the deity, all borrowed from the Canaanite pantheon, occur in these books—El, Elyon, and

Shaddai. Especially in poetry and at narrative moments of high solemnity, the writers appear to play on the archaic resonances of these names, and so for the most part I have given them in their Hebrew form, for in the particular contexts in which they typically appear a touch of linguistic archaeology seemed to me entirely appropriate.

Admittedly, any of the choices I have described may be debatable, but in all of them my aim has been to name the deity in English in ways that would be in keeping with the overall concert of literary effects that the translation strives to create.

III. ABOUT THE COMMENTARY

My original intention when I set out to translate Genesis in the mid-1990s had been simply to provide brief translator's notes. Puns, wordplay in the sundry naming-speeches, and other untranslatable maneuvers of the Hebrew needed to be glossed. The reader also had to be informed, I felt, of the occasional junctures where I adopted a reading that varied from the Masoretic Text, the received Hebrew text of the Bible. Similarly, it seemed proper to offer some explanation

for translation choices that were likely to surprise either the general reader or the scholarly reader, or both. In some instances, such a choice reflects a proposed new solution to a crux in the Hebrew text. More often, it is an effort to represent a more precise understanding of the Hebrew than previous translations have shown (e.g., the tree of knowledge is "lovely to look at," not "lovely to impart wisdom"; Pharaoh puts a "golden collar" around Joseph's neck, not a "gold chain"). And most pervasively, the little surprises in the translation are attempts to find English equivalents for the nuances of implication and the significant changes of diction in the Hebrew that have not been much regarded by previous translators. Finally, since this translation is, within the limits of readable English style, quite literal—not out of fundamentalist principle but in an effort to reproduce some of the distinctive literary effects of the original—when the interests of English intelligibility compelled me to diverge from a literal translation, I have alerted readers to the divergence and given the literal sense of the Hebrew words in a note. And beyond all such considerations of word choice and level of style, I thought it necessary to offer succinct explanations of some of the ancient Near Eastern cultural practices and social institutions that are presupposed by the

narratives, for without an understanding of them it is sometimes hard to see exactly what is going on in the story.

This last category of explanation is, of course, standard fare in modern Bible commentaries, where it is sometimes dished out in very large portions, and it is admittedly intended here as an aid for the relatively uninitiated. But as I got caught up once again in this endlessly fascinating text, it struck me that there were important features that by and large had been given short shrift in the modern commentaries. In fact, a good many of my observations on stylistic choices already shaded into a discussion of the literary vehicle of the biblical narratives, and this was the point at which the tightly cinched annotation I had originally intended began to loosen its bonds and reach out to commentary. There were whole orders of questions, it seemed to me, that had been neglected or addressed only intermittently and impressionistically by the modern commentators. Where are there detectible shifts of stylistic level in the Hebrew, and why do they occur? What are the reasons for the small poetic insets in the prose narratives? What are the principles on which dialogue is organized, and how are the speakers differentiated? Where and why are there shifts from the narrator's point of view to that of one of the

characters? What are the devices of analogy, recurrent motifs, and key words that invite us to link and contrast one episode with another? How is the poetry formally constructed? And do these books, granted their composite origins, exhibit overarching thematic and structural unities or lines of development?

On all these challenging questions I have surely not said the last word. Rather I have aspired to say some helpful first words in a commentary that I have sought to hold to modest proportions. Clearly, there is no way of separating a literary illumination of the biblical text from a confrontation with philological issues, on the one side, and, perhaps more indirectly, with historical issues, on the other. In any case, the exploration of the Bible as literary expression is the central focus of this commentary, and I would hope it would be of interest to everyone, from reader at large to scholar, who is drawn to the imaginative liveliness, the complexities, the stylistic vigor, and the sheer inventiveness of these splendid ancient stories and poems and legal and moral discourses.

* The symbol ʿ represents the Hebrew consonant *ayin,* a glottal stop that might sound something like the Cockney pronunciation of the middle consonant of "bottle," in which the dentalized *t* is replaced by a gulping sound produced from the larynx.

† Instead of a clear-cut expression of the temporal frame in which actions occur—past, present, future, past perfect, and so forth—aspects indicate chiefly whether the action has been completed or is to be completed.

‡ The modern Hebrew pronunciation is *vav,* with the vowel sounding like the short *a* in a French word like *bave,* with which it would rhyme.

Introduction to Prophets

This middle unit of the traditional tripartite division of the Hebrew canon, which is the largest of the three, comprises two very different sets of materials. The first, designated the Former Prophets for somewhat confusing reasons that will be explained below, is in fact a set of narratives, purportedly historical (Joshua, Judges, and the early chapters of Samuel) or substantially historical (much of Samuel and Kings).

The second large set of texts is a collection of prophecies in the proper sense of the term. These Prophetic books, although they incorporate some narrative materials, are by and large hortatory, much of them cast in poetry. The nature of the collection will be outlined in the section on the Prophets in this introduction. Because the two large blocks of texts were thought of as one set of "Prophetic" books, the traditional practice was to run them together with no formal dividing line between the end of Kings and the beginning of Isaiah and all that follows. This practice will be maintained here.

THE FORMER PROPHETS

To many readers, the rubric "the Former Prophets" may be puzzling. Some will not recognize it as the designation of a part of the Bible with which they are familiar. Some will wonder which prophets are involved, for the figures we usually think of as prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel are nowhere in evidence, and Isaiah has only a late walk-on appearance toward the end of 2 Kings. Then, the question poses itself: Former to what? Or even, what did they do after they stopped being prophets?

This conventional English title is a literal translation of the Hebrew *neviʾim riʾshonim*. The founders of Jewish tradition seem to have thought of the first of these two units as Prophetic literature because they imagined it as having been composed by various of the so-called writing prophets. This is not a view in any way embraced by modern scholarship. More plausible grounds for calling this sequence of narratives the Former Prophets is that, from Samuel onward, figures identified as prophets keep popping up, for the most part to frame the narrative with prophecies of doom. (This is not true for Joshua and Judges. The sole exception is Deborah in Judges 4,

who is called a "prophet-woman," *ʾishah neviʾah*, but she is not shown exercising that vocation.)

Biblical scholars, since the work in Germany by Martin Noth in the middle of the twentieth century, have adopted a more precise though less pronounceable designation for the large narrative from Joshua and Judges to Samuel and Kings: the Deuteronomistic History. In the late seventh century B.C.E., a major revolution in the religion of ancient Israel was effected when, in the course of renovation work on the Temple in the reign of King Josiah, a long scroll was purportedly discovered (see 2 Kings 22–23); it was referred to as "this book of teaching," *sefer hatorah hazeh.* Most scholars since the early nineteenth century have concluded that it was a version of Deuteronomy and surmise that it was actually composed around this time by reformers in Josiah's court. It put forth a new insistence on the exclusivity of the cult in the Jerusalem temple, vehemently polemicized against the use of any image or icon in worship, and proposed a system of historical causation in which the survival of a given king and of the covenanted people was strictly dependent on their loyalty—above all, cultic loyalty—to their God. All this was cast in language that highlighted certain formulaic phrases—"to love the LORD your God with

all your heart and with all your might," "to keep His statutes, His commands and His dictates"—and in a distinctive rhetoric that, unlike other biblical prose, favored long periodic sentences and the oratorical insistence of anaphora, that is, emphatic repetition.

At the same time that Deuteronomy proper (which would acquire some additional layers when it was edited in the Babylonian exile only a few decades after its initial promulgation in 621 B.C.E.) was exhorting the people to follow what it deemed to be the right path, writers in this same circle sought to make sense of the history of the nation in the revelatory light of the new reforming book. A religious intellectual—it may actually have been a whole group, but for convenience's sake, scholarship refers to him schematically as the Deuteronomist—who was swept up in Josiah's reforms set out to assemble a more or less continuous version of the national history from the conquest of the land to his own time, covering roughly five centuries. This first Deuteronomistic historian does not envisage the destruction of the southern kingdom (the northern kingdom of Israel had disappeared a century earlier, in 721 B.C.E., at the hands of the Assyrians) or of the cutting off of the Davidic dynasty, so it is plausible to date him to the late seventh century B.C.E. Then, in the view of most

scholars, a second and more or less final edition of the Deuteronomistic History was executed in the Babylonian exile after 586 B.C.E., probably just a few decades later (it contains as yet no vision of a return to Zion), incorporating an account of the devastation of the kingdom of Judah and the humiliation, mutilation, and exile of its last king

An elusive question about this entire chain of books is what exactly was the role played by the Deuteronomist in their composition. Some scholars are inclined to speak of him as the "author" of the history, a writer who utilized older textual and perhaps also oral materials but edited them and reworked them freely according to his own ideological bent. I find this view implausible. The Deuteronomist clearly drew on a wide variety of preexisting texts, some of them probably preserved in royal archives, from annals to folktales and legends to the most artfully articulated historical narratives. He punctuated these disparate materials, especially in the Book of Kings, with formulaic assertions, often reminiscent of the language of Deuteronomy, of his own interpretation as to why particular historic events happened as they did. But there is abundant evidence that the old stories resisted the pressure of his insistent interpretation, showing their own view of things, and that for the most part he

did not feel at liberty to tamper with the literary documents he had inherited.

Let me cite one central instance. Nearly a third of the Former Prophets is devoted to the story of Saul and David (1 Samuel 8 through 2 Kings 2). As a literary composition, this story manifestly antedates the Deuteronomist, perhaps even by as much as three centuries. It also happens to be one of the greatest pieces of narrative in all of Western literature. Biblical scholars have a lamentable habit of referring to it as "royal propaganda," and also of breaking it down into purportedly disparate sources in a fashion that does violence to its powerful continuities of style, image, motif, and character. Although David is clearly represented as divinely elected king in this narrative, he is also seen quite strikingly in all his human weakness, in his relentlessness, and in his moral ambiguity—hardly a figure of royal propaganda. And in regard to the issue of historic causation, events here are the consequence of human actions—in the preponderance of these stories, there is nothing miraculous and no divine intervention. When the aged king is dying, he calls Solomon to his bedside and instructs him to use his "wisdom" to get rid of two men against whom David has a score to pay off, and who also might well threaten Solomon's throne. This

final gesture, worthy of a mafia chieftain, was evidently too much for the Deuteronomist, and so he inserted before David's hit list a whole swatch of dialogue, in which David, deploying an uninterrupted pastiche of Deuteronomistic phrases, piously enjoins Solomon to walk in God's ways and keep His commands. What the editor did not feel free to do was to change the inherited text or delete the parts of it he found objectionable.

This combination of tendentious editorial framing with an assemblage of disparate narrative texts from different periods and probably different regions of the country has been a source of debate and perplexity among scholars. General readers, on the other hand, may be grateful for the extravagant heterogeneity of these books. Each has its own distinctive character. The first half of Joshua is an account of conquest and destruction, enlivened by the tale of Rahab and the two spies and the fall of Jericho; the second half is a mapping out of the tribal territories in which the supposedly conquered land now appears far from fully conquered. Judges comprises a series of episodes of martial derring-do in the sundry struggles of the tribes with the surrounding peoples, and it includes the unforgettable cycle of stories about the Herculean folk-hero Samson. After the anarchic period recorded in

Judges, Samuel recounts the founding of the monarchy in the long continuous story, which is the artistic pinnacle of these books, of David from brilliant youth to the sad infirmity of old age. It is in Samuel, as the German scholar Gerhard von Rad argued seven decades ago, that the writing becomes properly historical, liberated from the heavy dependence on legend and sheer authorial invention. The Book of Kings, in more miscellaneous fashion, and with more conspicuous interventions of the Deuteronomist, continues the historical narrative, tapping the royal annals of both kingdoms but also liberally introducing folktales and legends, especially visible in the cycle of stories about Elijah and Elisha.

What results from this amalgam is a richly overflowing miscellany. It incorporates folk memories or fantasies about ideal and magically powerful figures; historical accounts of deadly court intrigues; representations of the intricate and dangerous complexities of life in the political realm; and reports of the great powers surrounding the small kingdoms of Israel and Judah and of their military campaigns in the land of Canaan. Over it all hovers the somber awareness of the Deuteronomist that these two nation-states, located at the crossroads of aggressive empires to the east and to the south, lived under constant threat

and in the end might not endure. What did endure, embodied in the stories themselves, was the people's memories, their vision of God and history and national purpose. All these, preserved in their Hebrew texts, they would one day bring back from exile as the potent instrument of an unprecedented national revival.

THE PROPHETS

Prophecy in the sense of soothsaying and the prediction of future events was of course widespread in the ancient Near East, as it is in many early cultures. Figures who practice prophecy of this sort appear in some of the narratives in the Former Prophets. But in the middle decades of the eighth century B.C.E. a new phenomenon emerged—prophets who, while retaining a good deal of the predictive function of their earlier counterparts, assumed the role of the conscience of the people, carrying out missions of moral castigation directed not just at rulers—as, say, in the case of Elijah in the Book of Kings—but at the general populace. They delivered their message in a form of elevated speech that was often, though not always, framed as poetry, a procedure encouraged by the fact

that they typically claimed to be quoting God's very words ("Thus said the LORD" is the recurrent introductory formula for their prophecies). Some of the prophets were poets of the first rank—this is manifestly the case for Isaiah son of Amoz and for the anonymous poet of the Babylonian exile whose prophecies are included in the Book of Isaiah beginning in chapter 40, and there is remarkable poetry in Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, and in others of these figures. Elsewhere in the Bible, with the exception of Ezra–Nehemiah, the authors remain cloaked in anonymity, but the work of the prophets is, one might say, signed. We know who most of these writers were (even if the production of different prophets is often editorially inserted in the books that bear their name), and we are even given a certain amount of biographical information, some of it quite arresting, about a few of them.

This untypical highlighting of authors reflects a shared sense on the part of the prophets themselves that the vocation of mediating the word of God is a challenging and even anguishing undertaking—Jeremiah is the prime example—in which the imperative of a divine mission in an individual life draws simultaneous attention to the content of God's message and to the particular human bearer of the

message. The scathing critique that the prophets focus on their society oscillates between outrage against the perversion of justice, the exploitation of the poor and helpless, debauchery, and misrule, on the one hand, and cultic betrayal, the worship of pagan deities, on the other. Although both emphases appear in most of the Prophets, some favor one (Isaiah is above all a moral critic) and some the other (the slide into paganism is what especially provokes Ezekiel).

Given the immense historical distance that separates us from the prophets, it is hard to evaluate their reiterated claim that they are speaking God's words. That claim is certainly much more than a pious fraud. There are indications that the prophets, or at least many of them, may have delivered their words in some sort of ecstatic state. It is quite conceivable that they felt they had heard God speaking to them in the precise words of Hebrew poetry—sometimes sublime poetry—or visionary prose that they conveyed to their audiences. But perhaps what they heard from God was the content of the message about Israel's abominations, the destiny of disaster that awaited the people if it did not change its ways, as well as the luminous hope of national restoration after the disaster had fallen; they then proceeded to fashion this content in language, exercising their own human mastery of poetry and

rhetoric. This is a complicated issue that may not be the same from one prophet to the next. It will be explored as we consider the interaction between the personality of the prophet and his message in the introductions later in this volume to the individual prophets.

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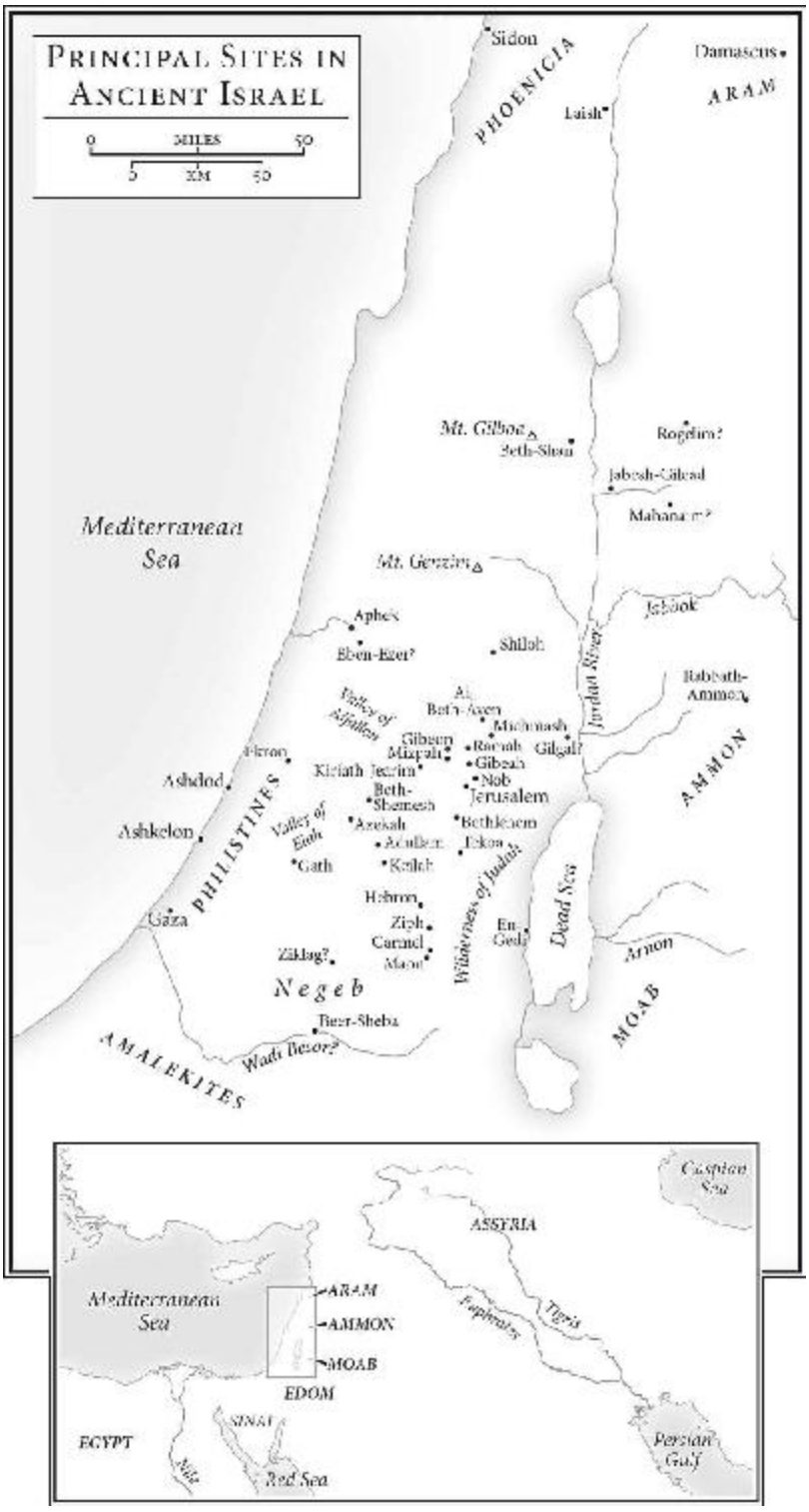
PRINCIPAL SITES IN ANCIENT ISRAEL
0 MILES 50
5 KM 50
Sidon
PHOENICIA
Damascus
ARAM
Laish
Mt. Gilboa
Beth-Shean
Ramoth-Gilead?
Jabesh-Gilead
Mahanaim?
Mediterranean Sea
Mt. Gerizim
Aphek
Jabbok
Eben-Ezer?
Shiloh
Jordan River
Rabbath-Ammon
Valley of Aijalon
Bethhoron
Michmash
Gibeon
Mizpah
Ramah
Gilgal?
Kiriath Jearim
Gibeah
Nob
Ashdod
Beth-Shemesh
Jerusalem
AMMON
Valley of Elah
Azekah
Bethlehem
Ashkelon
PHILISTINES
Adullam
Tekoa
Gath
Keilah
Wilderness of Judah
Hebron
Dead Sea
Gaza
Ziph
En-Gedi
Arnon
Carmel
Ziklag?
Maon
Negeb
MOAB
Beer-Sheba
Wadi Besor?
AMALEKITES
Caspian Sea
ASSYRIA
Mediterranean Sea
ARAM
AMMON
MOAB
EDOM
Euphrates
Tigris
SINAI
EGYPT
Nile
Red Sea
Persian Gulf

JOSHUA

Introduction

The Book of Joshua, sandwiched in between the grand oratory of Deuteronomy and the vivid accounts of guerilla warfare and civil war in Judges, is a text that many modern readers may find off-putting. Its early chapters do include two memorable episodes—the expedition of the two spies to Jericho and the miraculous destruction of the walls of Jericho that enables its conquest. The prevailing sense, however, of the first half of the book is ruthlessness, and the general effect of the second half is tedium. Nowhere in the Bible is there a more palpable discrepancy between the values and expectations of the ancient Near Eastern era in which the book was written and those of twenty-first-century readers.

Joshua is really two books, symmetrically divided into twelve chapters each. The first of these we may call the Book of Conquests. It appears to be

predominantly the work of the school of Deuteronomy, though it is not altogether uniform, and there is evidence that other sources have been drawn on, some of them probably older than Deuteronomy. The second half of Joshua can be given the rubric the Book of Apportionments. Its provenance is largely Priestly, although it ends with an emphatic Deuteronomistic flourish. There is some narrative material in the last three chapters, but the bulk of it is devoted to mapping out the sundry tribal territories in elaborate detail.

This book as a whole is offered as a historical account of the conquest of the land and the division of its territories, but the connection with history of both its large components is tenuous. Archaeologists in the earlier twentieth century were often bent on confirming the biblical record through their discoveries, but that project has not stood the test of time. What the last several decades of archaeological investigation have established is that there was no sweeping conquest of Canaan by invaders from the east in the late thirteenth century B.C.E.—which would have been the time of Joshua—and that many of the towns listed as objects of Israelite conquest were either uninhabited at this time or did not come under Israelite rule until considerably later. Jericho, the

gateway town in the Jordan Valley and the one whose conquest has become etched in collective memory, was an important fortified city in the Middle Bronze Age (two or three centuries before the putative time of Joshua), but in the late thirteenth century it was an abandoned site or at most not much more than a large village without walls. Lachish, another important town said to have been taken by Joshua's forces, fell under Israelite domination only during the period of the monarchy.

The fact that this narrative does not correspond to what we can reconstruct of the actual history of Canaan offers one great consolation: the bloodcurdling report of the massacre of the entire population of Canaanite towns—men, women, children, and in some cases livestock as well—never happened. Some reflection on why these imagined mass murders are included in the book may provide a sense of the aim of the pseudo-historiographical project of the Book of Joshua. The *ḥerem*, the practice of total destruction that scholars call "the ban" (a usage adopted in the present translation), was not unique to ancient Israel, and there is some evidence that it was occasionally carried out in warfare by other peoples of the region. The question is why the Hebrew writers, largely under the ideological influence of Deuteronomy, felt

impelled to invent a narrative of the conquest of the land in which a genocidal onslaught on its indigenous population is repeatedly stressed.

Deuteronomy, which crystallized as a canonical book during and after the sweeping religious reforms of King Josiah—the purported discovery of the book took place in 621 B.C.E.—articulates an agenda of uncompromising monotheism that insists on two principal points: the exclusive centralization of the cult in Jerusalem and the absolute separation of the Israelites from the Canaanite population. There is an underlying connection between these two emphases: the worship of YHWH in sundry local sanctuaries and on rural hillside altars was liable to be more susceptible to the influences of Canaanite paganism, or so the Deuteronomist seems to have feared, than a central cult in Jerusalem overseen by a priestly bureaucracy and under the shadow of the monarchy. One strong expression of the program to separate the population is the injunction to carry out the ban in the conquest of the land, an undertaking that at the fictional time of the writing of Deuteronomy (the thirteenth century B.C.E.) had not yet begun. The Book of Joshua, then, which is offered as a report of the subsequent conquest, presents as a historical

account the implementation of that wholesale slaughter of the indigenous population in town after town.

This gruesome story is intended as an explanation of a circumstance observed by audiences of the book in the seventh century and later—that by then a non-Israelite Canaanite population was only vestigially in evidence. Where, one might wonder, did all these peoples—seven in the traditional enumeration repeatedly invoked here—go? Joshua's answer is that they were wiped out in the conquest, as Deuteronomy had enjoined. But the narrative of the *ḥerem* is a cover-up as well as an explanation. If the Canaanites seem to have disappeared, it was not because they were extirpated but because they had been assimilated by the Israelites, who had come to exercise political dominion over large portions of the land. There is good reason to assume that the Canaanites intermarried with the Israelites (a taboo for the Deuteronomist), had all kinds of social and economic intercourse with them, and shared with them many of their religious practices as well as many elements of their theology.

This story, then, of the annihilation of the indigenous population of Canaan belongs not to historical memory but rather to cultural memory, a concept that Ronald Handel has aptly applied to

biblical literature in his book *Remembering Abraham*. That is to say, what is reported as the national past is grounded not in the factual historical experience of the nation but in the image of the nation that the guardians of the national literary legacy seek to fix for their audiences and for future generations. Thus, Israel is represented in this narrative as "a people that dwells apart" (Numbers 23:9), though in historical actuality its life was intricately entangled not only with the sundry peoples of Canaan but also with the cultures of Egypt to the south and of Mesopotamia to the east.

The story of the Gibeonites recounted in chapter 9 is in this regard an instructive case in point. The audience of the story, we may safely infer, would have been aware of the Gibeonites as a group of different ethnic stock from the Israelites yet "dwelling in their midst"—that is, having close social and economic relations with them, perhaps of the subservient order indicated in the biblical account. But what were they doing there if the systematic plan of the conquest was to wipe out all traces of the indigenous inhabitants of the land? This difficulty is resolved by the account here of the subterfuge of the Gibeonites: disguising themselves as representatives of a people living in a distant country and hence not subject to the ban, they trick the Israelites into making a binding pact of

peaceful coexistence with them, and hence for all future times they must be spared. The ostensible exception to the programmatic rule of total destruction is thus given a narrative explanation or etiology.

What should also be observed about the story of the conquest in Joshua is that it is a vision of overwhelming military triumph. It is a triumph that is repeatedly attributed to God's power, not to Israel's martial prowess (although a couple of the reported episodes do show cunning tactical moves on the part of the Israelites). That notion is perfectly in keeping with the Deuteronomistic view of historical causation, in which God causes Israel to prevail when it is loyal to the covenant and brings defeat on the people when Israel betrays its commitment to God. The message, however, of an irresistible sweep of the Israelite forces through the land of Canaan addresses a geopolitical situation of the Israelite nation that was quite the opposite. It was the historical fate of Israel to sit at the bloody crossroads between powerful empires to the east and the south with some dire threats from the north as well. This chronic predicament came to seem much graver in the span of years from the destruction by Assyria of the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C.E. to the conquest of the southern kingdom of Judah by Babylonia in 589 B.C.E.—the very period in

which the early nucleus of Deuteronomy was formulated and when the book as a whole achieved its first general recension. What must have been in the minds of a good many Judahites after 721 B.C.E. was that national existence itself was a highly contingent affair, that the people which had come to think of itself as chosen by God for a grand destiny, as the Patriarchal narratives in Genesis repeatedly asserted, could easily suffer disastrous defeat, bitter exile, perhaps even extinction. Whatever the rousing promises and consolations of theology, it would have been difficult to dismiss the awareness of imperial powers that could bring to bear overwhelming force on the tiny Israelite nation. The story of the conquest, then, served as a countermove in the work of cultural memory: Israel had entered its land in a stirring triumphal drive as a power before which no man could stand. The theological warrant for this vision, antithetical as it was to the historical facts, was that as long as Israel remained faithful to all that its God had enjoined upon it, the people would be invincible.

Against this general background of theological explanation of historical events, the story of Achan in chapter 7 is meant to play an exemplary role. Achan violates the ban, which is represented as an obligation imposed by God. The direct consequence is military

defeat, and Israel cannot continue on its triumphal progress until the transgressor is singled out and punished by death. That punishment grimly extends to his entire family, as if the guilt were a kind of contagion that infected everyone in immediate contact with him and thus had to be ruthlessly expunged. If the transgression of a single person can have such dire widespread effects, how much more so when large numbers of the people backslide. This is the prospect raised by Joshua in his two valedictory addresses (chapters 23 and 24). The emphasis of both these speeches is heavily Deuteronomistic: Joshua fears that the Israelites will intermarry with the surrounding peoples and worship their gods; he expresses doubt as to whether Israel will be up to the challenge of faithfulness to this demanding God—"You will not be able to serve the LORD, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God, He will not put up with your crimes and your offenses" (24:19). Although his audience responds with a solemn pledge of fealty, the somber prospect has been evoked that Israel will betray its God and therefore suffer cataclysmic defeat and exile. In this fashion, there is a tension between the first twelve chapters of Joshua and the conclusion of the book, a contradiction between the vision of a grand conquest and the threat of national disaster.

Some of that tension is also detectable in the discrepancy between the Book of Conquests and the Book of Apportionments. The function of the elaborate drawing of tribal borders in the second of these two texts is to convey a sense of a systematic and orderly division of the land. Because the determination of the tribal territories is made by lot (*goral*), which is a divinely inspired oracular device, the clear implication is that God dictates the boundaries within which the sundry tribes are to live. The aim is to provide theological authentication and solidity to the existing tribal territories. In fact, there were likely to have been ad hoc arrangements marked by a good deal of fluidity, with tribes encroaching on one another's territories, migrating in pursuit of better pastureland and tillable soil, and, at least in the case of Dan, being completely displaced by political circumstances. The mapping of boundaries, however, also incorporates several indications that the conquest of the land was not as comprehensive as the first twelve chapters of Joshua might lead one to conclude. This chronicle concedes that there were instances in which the Israelites were unable "to dispossess"—which is to say, conquer and destroy—the local Canaanites, an uncomfortable circumstance that the writer seeks to mitigate by noting that these unsubdued populations

were reduced to the status of forced laborers as they continued to live alongside the Israelites.

The Book of Joshua thus registers a double awareness of Israel's historical predicament. The people had been promised the land by God, and its success in establishing an autonomous state, which very quickly became two states, over a large portion of Canaan was testimony to the fulfillment of that promise. The fulfillment is inscribed in the first half of the book. The conquest, however, was not total, and its permanency was menaced by a series of foreign powers. The book translates this contradiction into theological terms: Israel in the flush of its military triumph is imagined as staunchly loyal to its God, with the single exception of Achan; Israel, having taken possession of the land and drawn its boundaries, is seen as teetering on the brink of future disloyalties that will entail disastrous consequences. Though the tension between the two halves of the book is arguably an artifact of the redactional process that joined two different sources, the effect is to produce a dialectical perspective on the history of the nation. The Book of Judges follows logically from this because there it is vividly clear that Israel's tenure in the land before the monarchic period is unstable, that much of the Israelite population is either subject to foreign

domination or exposed to the attacks of marauders. Accounting for the incompleteness of the conquest, which is already adumbrated in the latter part of Joshua, will become the task of the book that follows.

CHAPTER 1

[1]And it happened after the death of Moses servant of the LORD, that the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses's attendant, saying: [2]"Moses My servant is dead. And now, arise, cross this Jordan, you, and all this people, to the land I am about to give to them, to the Israelites. [3]Every place where the sole of your foot treads, to you I have given it, as I spoke to Moses, [4]from the wilderness and this Lebanon to the Great River, the River Euphrates, the whole land of the Hittites, and to the Great Sea, where the sun sets, will be your territory. [5]No man will stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, I shall be with you. I shall not let go of you and I shall not forsake you. [6]Be strong and stalwart, for you will make this people inherit the land that I vowed to their fathers to give to them. [7]But you must be very strong and stalwart to keep and do according to all the teaching that Moses My servant charged you. You shall not swerve from it to the right or the left, so that you may prosper wherever you go. [8]This book of teaching shall

not depart from your mouth, and you shall murmur it day and night, so that you may keep to do according to all that is written in it; then you will make your ways succeed and then you will prosper. [9]Have I not charged you, ‘Be strong and stalwart’? Do not be terror-stricken and do not cower, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”

[10]And Joshua charged the people’s overseers, saying: [11]“Pass through the midst of the camp and charge the people, saying, ‘Prepare yourselves provisions, for in three days you are to cross this Jordan to come to take hold of the land that the LORD your God is about to give you to take hold of it.’” [12]And to the Reubenites and to the Gadites, and to the half-tribe of Manasseh, Joshua said: [13]“Recall the word that Moses servant of the LORD charged you, saying, ‘The LORD your God is about to grant you rest and will give you this land. [14]Your wives, your little ones, and your herds shall dwell in this land that Moses has given you across the Jordan, but you shall cross over arrayed for combat before your brothers, all the mighty warriors, and you shall help them, [15]until the LORD grants rest to your brothers like you and they too take hold of the land that the LORD their God is about to give to them, and

you shall return to the land of your holding and take hold of it, which Moses servant of the LORD has given to you across the Jordan where the sun rises.'" [16]And they answered Joshua, saying, "All that you charged us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go. [17]As in all that we heeded Moses, so we will heed you. Only may the LORD your God be with you as He was with Moses. [18]Every man who flouts your command and does not heed your word in all that you charge him shall be put to death. Only be strong and stalwart."

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And it happened after the death of Moses*. These opening words are an explicit device to create a direct link with the end of Deuteronomy, which reports the death of Moses (Deuteronomy 34:5ff.), and the beginning of this book, in which Joshua takes up Moses's task.

servant of the LORD. This identifying phrase, reiterated in this initial passage, is a formal epithet for Moses, also used in Deuteronomy. Joshua is called his "attendant," as he is in Numbers 11:28; the implication is that the attendant of the LORD's servant will now assume the role of his master.

2. *this Jordan . . . this people*. The repeated use of the deictic *zeh*, "this" (and again in verse 4, "this Lebanon") is positional. God is addressing Joshua across the Jordan from Canaan. First, He points to "this Jordan," across which Joshua will have to take the people, then to "this people," whom Joshua must lead, and then to "this Lebanon," marking the northern limits of the land.

4. *from the wilderness and this Lebanon to the Great River, the River Euphrates*. These are utopian—or perhaps one should say fantastic—borders never occupied by Israel and never within its military capacity to occupy.

the whole land of the Hittites. This can scarcely be the region in Asia Minor that was once the center of a Hittite empire. There were Hittite immigrants scattered through Canaan from an early period. Shmuel Ahituv proposes that the phrase reflects a usage in Neo-Assyrian texts where it indicates everything west of the Euphrates, including the Land of Israel.

to the Great Sea. The "Great Sea" is, as elsewhere, the Mediterranean.

6. *Be strong and stalwart*. This reiterated exhortation clearly reflects the military setting of this initial charge by God to Joshua, who is commander in chief of the army about to invade the land.

8. *This book of teaching shall not depart from your mouth*. The book in question is almost certainly Deuteronomy, and the phrasing of the entire verse is strongly Deuteronomistic.

10. *the people's overseers*. This is the same term used in the Exodus story (5:6ff.). It derives from a verb meaning to document or record, and so it is not necessarily a specialized military term.

11. *three days*. This is a conventional time span in biblical narrative for an interval of relatively short duration.

13. *Recall the word that Moses . . . charged you*. The episode of the two and a half tribes that chose to settle on land east of the Jordan is initially reported in Numbers 32.

grant you rest. The verb here has the obvious technical sense of granting respite from previously hostile neighboring peoples.

14. *arrayed for combat*. The Hebrew *ḥamushim* appears to derive from the word for "five," and it has been plausibly explained as referring to a battle formation, with troops on all four sides and a unit of fighting men inside the rectangle. In modern Hebrew, it means "armed."

17. *As in all that we heeded Moses, so we will heed you*. The Israelites in fact were repeatedly rebellious against Moses, but it is best to view this

declaration of unswerving loyalty as an idealized representation of the people, not as an intended irony.

18. *Every man who flouts your command . . . shall be put to death*. What appears to be reflected in these stern words is the strictness of military justice: Israel is about to enter into battle, and whosoever does not obey the commander's orders will be summarily executed.

Only be strong and stalwart. The opening section of Joshua comprises four speeches: God to Joshua, Joshua to the people's overseers, Joshua to the trans-Jordanian tribes, and the response of the trans-Jordanian tribes to Joshua. These interlocked speeches are meant to convey a sense of perfect solidarity on the eve of the conquest of the land. Thus, the concluding words of the tribal spokesman exactly echo God's twice-asserted exhortation to Joshua, with the addition of the emphatic *raq*, "only."

CHAPTER 2

[1]And Joshua son of Nun sent out in secret two men as spies from Shittim, saying, “Go, see the land, and Jericho.” And they went and they came to the house of a whore-woman whose name was Rahab, and they slept there. [2]And it was said to the king of Jericho, saying, “Look, men of the Israelites have come here tonight to search out the land.” [3]And the king of Jericho sent to Rahab, saying, “Bring out the men who have come to you, who came to your house, for they have come to search out the whole land.” [4]And the woman had taken the two men and hidden them, and she said, “The men indeed came to me and I did not know from where they were. [5]And as the gate was about to close at dark, the men went out. I know not where the men went. Pursue them quickly, for you can overtake them.” [6]And she had taken them up to the roof and had hidden them in the stalks of flax laid out for her on the roof. [7]And the men pursued them along the Jordan by the fords, and they closed the gate when the pursuers had gone out after them. [8]They had not

yet bedded down when she went up to them on the roof. [9]And she said to the men, “I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that your terror has fallen upon us and that all the dwellers of the land quail before you. [10]For we have heard how the LORD dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two Amorite kings across the Jordan, to Sihon and to Og, whom you put to the ban. [11]And we heard, and our heart failed, and no spirit arose in any man before you, for the LORD your God, He is God in the heavens above and on the earth below: [12]And now, pray, vow to me by the LORD, for I have done kindness with you, that you, too, shall do kindness with my father’s house and give me a faithful sign, [13]and let my father and mother live, and my brothers and my sisters, and all that is theirs, and save our lives from death.” [14]And the men said to her, “Our own lives in your stead to die! So long as you do not tell of this mission of ours. And so, when the LORD gives us this land, we shall do faithful kindness with you.” [15]And she lowered them with a rope through the window, for her house was in the outer wall, and in the wall she dwelled. [16]And she had said to them, “Go to the high country, lest the pursuers encounter you, and hide there three days until the pursuers come back. Then you may go on your

way.” [17]And the men had said to her, “We will be clear of this vow that you made us vow. [18]Except, when we come into the land, this scarlet cord you must tie in the window through which you lowered us, and your father and your mother and all your father’s house you must gather to you within the house. [19]And so, whosoever comes out of the doors of your house to the street, his blood shall be on his head, and we will be clear. But whoever will be with you in the house, his blood is on our head if any hand should touch him. [20]And should you tell of this mission of ours, we will be clear of your vow that you made us vow.” [21]And she said, “According to your words, so shall it be.” And she sent them off and they went, and she tied the scarlet cord in the window. [22]And they went and came to the high country and stayed there three days, until the pursuers went back. And the pursuers searched all along the way and did not find them. [23]And the two men went back and came down from the high country and crossed over to Joshua son of Nun and recounted to him all that had befallen them. [24]And they said to Joshua, “Yes, the LORD has given all the land into our hands, and what’s more, all the dwellers of the land quail before us.”

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *two men as spies*. The two spies evoke the two spies in the story in Numbers 13–14, Joshua and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who did not come back with a fearful report like their ten companions. This story, then, on the eve of the conquest, is framed as a pointed reversal of the failed spy mission in Numbers: there the Israelites quail before the gigantic inhabitants of the land; here a Canaanite woman reports that the inhabitants of the land quail before the Israelites.

Shittim. This place-name means "the Acacias."

the house of a whore-woman . . . and they slept there. Sometimes biblical usage adds "woman" in this fashion to the designation of profession. "Whore," in turn, seems to be used neutrally, not as a term of opprobrium. Though she may merely be providing the two men lodging, the narrative coyly plays with the sexual meaning of the verb *shakhav*, which also means simply to lie down, to sleep, or spend the night. Similarly, the verb "come to," used in verses 3 and 4, also has a sexual meaning when the object of the preposition is a woman. In fact, Rahab in answering the king's inquiry may be saying that the two men were merely her customers, and hence she had no idea that they might be spies.

3. *the whole land*. The king adds "whole" to the report that has been brought to him: these spies have come on an extensive reconnaissance mission. Jericho is a city-state, the prevalent political form in Canaan in this era, and would have governed surrounding territory.

4. *the woman had taken the two men and hidden them*. The sense of the verb is evidently pluperfect: she had hidden the spies before the arrival of the king's emissaries.

as the gate was about to close at dark. The gates of the walled city were locked at nightfall.

5. *Pursue them quickly, for you can overtake them*. In this shrewd maneuver, Rahab simultaneously makes herself sound like a loyal subject of Jericho and encourages the king's men to leave her house immediately, heading in what she correctly calculates will be the wrong direction.

6. *stalks of flax laid out for her on the roof*. The flax would have been laid out on the roof to dry in the sun. Hiding in the flax stalks may be a reminiscence of baby Moses hidden (the same Hebrew verb) in the ark among the bulrushes.

7. *along the Jordan by the fords*. This, as Rahab has rightly surmised, would be the most plausible route of pursuit because the men from Jericho are aware that the Israelites are encamped east of the Jordan and assume that the spies will try to reach a ford over which they can cross to return to their people.

9. *your terror has fallen upon us and . . . all the dwellers of the land quail before you*. Rahab is directly quoting the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:15–16), merely reversing the order of terms in the poem: "all the dwellers of Canaan quailed. / Terror and fear did fall upon them." Her words are a verbatim confirmation of the assertion in the Song that the great news of the event at the Sea of Reeds reached the Canaanites and dismayed them.

10. *what you did to the two Amorite kings*. This triumph, reported in Numbers 21, at the other end of the story of Wilderness wanderings from the victory at the Sea of Reeds, is a recent event, perhaps having occurred in the last few months before the present narrative moment.

11. *for the LORD your God, He is God in the heavens above and on the earth below*. Rahab is cast as a good monotheist, persuaded of the LORD's supreme sovereignty, as the Israelites are expected to be, by His dramatic intervention in history.

14. *Our . . . lives in your stead to die.* This drastic offer expresses their recognition of the awesome solemnity of the vow they are taking.

15. *for her house was in the outer wall*. Many fortified cities in the region had a double wall, and most interpreters understand the seemingly redundant *qir haḥomah* ("wall of the wall") as an indication of the outer wall. In this way, being lowered by a rope from her window enables them to get out of the city even though the gate is locked.

16. *And she had said to them*. The context requires construing the verbs here and at the beginning of the next verse as pluperfects. Otherwise, one is left with the absurd situation of this dialogue taking place at a distance, both parties shouting, after she has lowered them with the rope.

Go to the high country. This is the mountainous area to the west of the Jordan Valley and in the opposite direction from the one taken by the pursuers. The terrain would also have afforded hiding places.

three days. As in chapter 1, the time span is formulaic, but it is also a plausible interval to wait until the pursuers have given up the chase.

17. *We will be clear of this vow*. Having stated that they are prepared to die in her stead should they violate the terms of the vow, they now stress that they will have no obligation to carry it out unless she strictly adheres to her own terms that they stipulate.

18. *this scarlet cord you must tie in the window*. This is a purely practical stipulation: the attackers need a sign to know which house they are to spare. The scarlet cord recalls the scarlet thread attached to the hand of the newborn twin Zerah in Genesis 38:28–30 and probably also the blood smeared on the lintel to ward off the Destroyer in Exodus 12:7–13.

20. *And should you tell of this mission of ours, we will be clear of your vow*. The concluding statement regarding a release from the vow concerns the vital interest of the two spies rather than the practical provision for the safety of Rahab and her family.

21. *she tied the scarlet cord in the window*. Though it is possible to understand this as an act she performs later, it may be that, mindful of the grave warning of the two men, she hastens to affix the agreed-on sign as soon as they leave, even though she knows the attack will not come for at least several days.

22. *all along the way*. This would be the road parallel to the Jordan.

23. *crossed over*. Now they take a ford across the Jordan back to the Israelite camp.

24. *all the dwellers of the land quail before us*. They are directly quoting one of those inhabitants, Rahab, who in turn is quoting the Song of the Sea. Thus

the line from the poem becomes a kind of refrain that punctuates the middle and the end of this episode.

CHAPTER 3

[1]And Joshua rose early in the morning, and they journeyed on from Shittim and came to the Jordan, he and all the Israelites, and they spent the night there before they crossed over. [2]And it happened at the end of three days that the overseers passed through the midst of the camp. [3]And they charged the people, saying, “When you see the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD your God, with the levitical priests carrying it, then you shall journey from your place and go after it. [4]But keep a distance between you and it, about two thousand cubits in measure. Do not come close to it. So that you may know the way in which you should go, for you have not passed over this way in time past.” [5]And Joshua said, “Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders in your midst.” [6]And Joshua said to the priests, saying, “Carry the Ark of the Covenant, and cross over before the people.” And they carried the Ark of the Covenant and went before the people. [7]And the LORD said to Joshua, “This day I shall begin to make you great in the eyes of

all Israel, so they may know that as I was with Moses, I shall be with you. [8]And you, charge the priests, bearers of the Ark of the Covenant, saying, ‘When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.’” [9]And Joshua said to the Israelites, “Draw near and hear the words of the LORD your God.” [10]And Joshua said, “By this you shall know that a living God is in your midst, and He will utterly dispossess before you the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Hivvite and the Perizzite and the Girgashite and the Amorite and the Jebusite. [11]Look, the Ark of the Covenant of the Master of all the earth is about to cross over the Jordan before you. [12]And now, take for yourselves twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one man from each tribe. [13]And so when the footsoles of the priests, bearers of the Ark of the LORD, Master of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan coming down from above will be cut off and stand up as a single mound.” [14]And it happened, when the people journeyed forth from its tents to cross the Jordan, with the priests, bearers of the Ark of the Covenant before the people, [15]and when the bearers of the Ark reached the Jordan and the feet of the priests, bearers of the Ark, were immersed in the water’s edge—the Jordan being full to all its banks throughout the harvest days—[16]the water coming down

from above stood still, rose up in a single mound, very far off from the town of Adam which is by Zanethan, and the water going down to the Arabah Sea, the Salt Sea, was completely cut off, and the people crossed over opposite Jericho. [17]And the priests, bearers of the Ark of the LORD's Covenant, stood firm on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, with all Israel crossing over on dry ground until the whole nation finished crossing the Jordan.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *crossed over*. The verb *ʿavar*, which means either to cross over or, as in verses 2 and 4, to pass through or over, is repeated eight times in this chapter, thus marking the episode as a portentous liminal moment when the people of Israel cross over from their long Wilderness wanderings into the land they have been promised.

2. *at the end of three days*. The recurrence of this formulaic interval suggests a certain symmetry with the experience of the spies, who hide out in the high country for three days.

3. *the Ark of the Covenant*. The Ark contains the stone tablets of the Law. It is imagined as both a sacred and a magical object, and as such is also a numinous vessel carried into battle, as one sees in the early chapters of Samuel.

4. *But keep a distance*. The Ark, saturated with divine aura, is also a dangerous object. In 2 Samuel 6, when Uzza puts his hand on the Ark to prevent it from slipping from the cart in which it is carried, he is struck dead.

about two thousand cubits. This would be a little over half a mile.

7. *as I was with Moses, I shall be with you*. The "wonder" that God is about to perform will in fact replicate a miracle done for Moses.

9–10. *And Joshua said . . . And Joshua said*. As a rule, when the formula for the introduction of dialogue is repeated without an intervening response from the second party, the repetition indicates some difficulty in response—puzzlement, amazement, embarrassment, and so forth. Here the repetition has a purely dramatic function. Joshua invites the people to draw close; they do so, scarcely having an opening to say anything to him; then, when his audience is gathered around him, Joshua goes on to give detailed instructions.

10. *the Canaanite and the Hittite.* In all, seven peoples are mentioned, filling out the formulaic number. The list itself is heterogeneous: Canaanite and Amorite are general designations for the inhabitants of this territory; the Hittites are immigrants from Asia Minor who were probably not a distinctive Canaanite people in any political sense; little is known about the Perizzites and the Girgashites, though the latter may have come from Asia Minor. In any case, the enumeration of seven peoples does reflect a historical memory of Canaan divided up among small city-states.

11. *Master of all the earth*. This is not an epithet that occurs in the Torah, and since designations of the deity are important indicators of sources, its use may point to a literary source distinct from those of the Pentateuch.

12. *take for yourselves twelve men from the tribes of Israel*. These men play no role in what immediately follows, though in the next chapter they are assigned the task of placing twelve stones in the riverbed. While this verse could be construed as a prolepsis, it is more likely that it was erroneously transposed in copying from the next section of the story, where it is duplicated in 4:2.

13. *the waters of the Jordan coming down*. This formulation harbors an etymological pun. The Jordan, *Yarden*, is called that because it "comes down" (verbal stem *y-r-d*) from mountain heights in the north to the Dead Sea, the lowest point on the face of the earth.

14–16. *And it happened.* The syntax of these three verses, constituting one long run-on sentence, is quite untypical of biblical prose, and its use here builds a sense of climactic fulfillment as the miracle is enacted.

15. *the Jordan being full to all its banks throughout the harvest days*. This rather awkward parenthetical clause, still further complicating the syntax, appears to be an effort to explain a difficulty. As we learned in chapter 2, there are numerous fords across the Jordan, and the two spies obviously used one of those to cross back and forth. But the story needs an impassable Jordan to enable the miracle of immobilizing its waters, and so we are reminded that in this moment at the beginning of the spring (in the month of Nissan), the river would have been overflowing after the winter rains. The reference to harvest days is a little puzzling because early April is too soon for a harvest. Perhaps the phrase means to say that this high level of the Jordan continues until the end of the first harvest in late May-early June.

16. *rose up in a single mound*. These words are the clearest indication that this incident is a repetition of the drying up of the Sea of Reeds because the rare term *ned*, "mound," is used, as it is in the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:8). History for the biblical writers moves forward but also repeats itself in significant patterns. This notion prepared the way for later typological conceptions of history.

very far off from the town of Adam which is by Zanethan. This odd and seemingly gratuitous specification of a place at some distance from the reported event is a strategy of "documenting" the miracle by locating it along geographical coordinates.

the Arabah Sea. The Arabah is the geological rift through which the Jordan runs.

17. *dry ground*. The Hebrew here, *ḥaravah*, is a different word from *yabashah*, "dry land," the term used in Exodus 14–15 and also in Genesis.

CHAPTER 4

[1]And it happened, when the whole nation had finished
crossing over the Jordan, that the LORD said to
Joshua, saying, [2]"Take for yourselves from the people
twelve men, one man from each tribe, [3]and charge
them, saying, 'Carry from here, from the Jordan, from
the place where the feet of the priests stand firm,
twelve stones and bring them across with you and set
them down at the encampment where tonight you will
spend the night.'" [4]And Joshua called to twelve men
whom he had readied from the Israelites, one man
from each tribe. [5]And Joshua said to them, "Cross over
before the Ark of the LORD your God into the middle
of the Jordan and each of you lift up one stone on his
shoulder according to the number of the tribes of
Israel, [6]so this may be a sign in your midst: Should
your children ask you tomorrow, saying, 'What are
these stones to you?,' [7]you shall say, 'That the waters
of the Jordan were cut off before the Ark of the
LORD's Covenant, when it was crossing over the
Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off, and

these stones became a memorial for the Israelites forever.’” [8]And thus did the Israelites do, as Joshua had charged them, and they carried twelve stones from the Jordan as the LORD had spoken to Joshua, according to the number of the tribes of Israel, and they brought them across with them to the encampment and set them down there. [9]And Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan in the place where the feet of the priests, bearers of the Ark of the Covenant, had stood, and they have been there to this day. [10]And the priests, bearers of the Ark of the Covenant, were standing in the Jordan until all the mission that the LORD had charged Joshua to speak to the people was finished, as all that Moses had charged Joshua. And the people hurried and crossed over. [11]And it happened, when all the people had finished crossing over, that the Ark of the LORD, and the priests with it, crossed over before the people. [12]And the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh crossed over in battle array before the Israelites as Moses had spoken to them, [13]about forty thousand, vanguard of the army, crossed over before the LORD for battle to the plains of Jericho. [14]On that day the LORD made Joshua great in the eyes of all Israel, and they feared him as they had feared Moses all the days of his life. [15]And the LORD said to Joshua,

saying, [16]“Charge the priests, bearers of the Ark of the Covenant, that they come up from the Jordan.” [17]And Joshua charged the priests, saying, “Come up from the Jordan.” [18]And it happened when the priests, bearers of the Ark of the LORD’s Covenant, came up from within the Jordan, that the priests’ footsoles pulled up onto dry ground and the waters of the Jordan went back to their place and flowed as in time past over all its banks. [19]And the people had come up from the Jordan on the tenth of the first month, and they camped at Gilgal at the eastern edge of Jericho. [20]And these twelve stones that they had taken from the Jordan, Joshua set up at Gilgal. [21]And he said to the Israelites, saying, “When your children ask their fathers tomorrow, saying, ‘What are these stones?,’ [22]you shall inform your children, saying, ‘On dry land Israel crossed over this Jordan. [23]For the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before them until they crossed over, as the LORD your God had done to the Sea of Reeds, which He dried up before us until we crossed over, [24]so that all the peoples of the earth might know the hand of the LORD, for it is strong, so that you might fear the LORD your God at all times.’”

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

6. *Should your children ask you tomorrow*. This is a liturgical or, as some put it, catechistic formula, which has fairly close parallels in Exodus 12:26–27, Exodus 13:14–15, and Deuteronomy 6:20. "Tomorrow" is, of course, a homey idiom for "in future times." The commemorative stones become a didactic occasion for recounting the ancient miracle to future generations.

9. *And Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan*. This second set of twelve stones looks redundant. There may have been a competing account of the event in which the conveyers of the traditional material felt that the more appropriate memorial was on the very spot where the feet of the priests had stood, and the redactor decided to include both versions. This would, however, be an underwater memorial scarcely visible except when the Jordan was nearly dry. But see the next comment on the question of the stones' visibility.

and they have been there to this day. This is an explicitly etiological tag absent in the report about the other set of twelve stones. It leads one to wonder whether there in fact might have been a pattern of stones in the riverbed detectable from the surface around which this story was woven.

10. *as all that Moses had charged Joshua*. This clause is puzzling because Moses clearly had no role in instructing Joshua about the procedure for crossing the Jordan. The clause does not appear in the Septuagint, and one suspects a scribe inadvertently added it here because it was a set formula, and akin to the concluding clause of verse 12, where the reference to Moses is appropriate.

14. *feared him*. The context makes clear that the force of the verb is not an experience of fright but reverence or, perhaps more specifically, acceptance of his authority. After the enactment of a miracle that closely corresponds to the great miracle performed for Moses at the Sea of Reeds, Joshua's position as legitimate leader is fully confirmed.

16. *Ark of the Covenant*. Here a different term *ʿedut* ("witnessing") is used, but it appears to be a synonym for *brit*, "covenant."

19. *on the tenth of the first month*. This is the month of Nissan, approximately corresponding to April. The tenth of Nissan is four days before the Passover festival.

the eastern edge of Jericho. This would mean the edge opposite Jericho's territory.

20. *And these twelve stones . . . Joshua set up at Gilgal*. The name Gilgal means "circle" (although it is given a secondary etymology in the next episode), and so we may assume that the stones were set up in a circle. Gilgal was an important cultic site in the first two centuries of the monarchy and figures significantly in the stories of Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha. As with other sacred places in ancient Israel, it may well have been a locus of pagan worship before it was taken over by the Israelites. There is some likelihood, then, that the stones arrayed in a circle were originally *matseivot*, cultic steles, and that the story is framed to make them integral to the monotheistic narrative.

22. *dry land*. Here *yabashah* is used, the term that occurs in Exodus 14–15.

23. *which He dried up before us*. The switch from third person ("dried up the waters of the Jordan before them") to first-person plural reflects the operation of the commemorative ritual: it was the Israelites of Joshua's generation who experienced the miracle at the Jordan, but all Israel of every generation—beginning with everyone over twenty who was with Moses, the generation that has purportedly died out—participates in the defining moment of the parting of the Sea of Reeds, replicated at the Jordan.

24. *so that all the peoples of the earth might know the hand of the* LORD. This theme is similar to the one reiterated in the narrative of the Ten Plagues in Exodus. Its validity will then be confirmed in the first verse of chapter 5, which in all likelihood is the actual conclusion of this narrative unit.

so that you might fear the LORD *your God at all times*. The repetition of "so that," *lemaʿan*, inscribes a causal chain: the other nations recognize the power of the God of Israel through this great miracle, and Israel fears, or reveres, its God both through the direct experience of the miracle and through its confirmation in the eyes of the surrounding peoples.

CHAPTER 5

[1]And it happened, when the Amorite kings who were
across the Jordan to the west, and all the Canaanite
kings who were by the sea, heard that the LORD had
dried up the waters of the Jordan before the Israelites
until they crossed over, their heart failed and there was
no longer any spirit within them before the Israelites.

[2]At that time the LORD said to Joshua, “Make you
flint knives and again circumcise the Israelites a
second time.” [3]And Joshua made flint knives and he
circumcised the Israelites at the Hill of Foreskins.
[4]And this is the reason that Joshua circumcised them:
all the people who had come out of Egypt, all the
males, the men of war, had died out on the way in the
wilderness when they came out of Egypt. [5]For all the
people who came out were circumcised, but all the
people who were born in the wilderness on the way
when they came out of Egypt were not circumcised.
[6]For forty years did the Israelites go in the wilderness

until the whole generation was finished, the men of war coming out of Egypt, who had not heeded the LORD's voice, as the LORD had vowed to them not to show them the land that the LORD had vowed to their fathers to give to us, a land flowing with milk and honey. [7]And their sons He put up in their stead, them did Joshua circumcise, for they were uncircumcised, as they had not been circumcised on the way. [8]And it happened when the whole nation had finished being circumcised, they remained in their place until they revived. [9]And the LORD said to Joshua, "I have rolled away from you the shame of Egypt," and the name of the place has been called Gilgal to this day. [10]And the Israelites encamped at Gilgal and performed the Passover rite on the fourteenth day of the month, in the evening, on the plains of Jericho. [11]And they ate from the yield of the land from the day after the Passover sacrifice, flatbread and parched grain on that very day. [12]And the manna ceased on the day after, when they ate from the yield of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna, and they ate from the produce of the land of Canaan in that year.

[13]And it happened when Joshua was at Jericho that he raised his eyes and saw, and look, a man was standing

before him, his sword unsheathed in his hand. And Joshua went toward him and said to him, “Are you ours or our foes’?” [14]And he said, “No. For I am the commander of the LORD’s army. Now have I come.” And Joshua fell on his face to the ground and did obeisance, and he said to him, “What does my master say to his servant?” [15]And the commander of the LORD’s army said to Joshua, “Take off your sandal from your foot, for the place on which you stand is holy.” And so Joshua did.

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *flint knives*. The story takes place in the Late Bronze Age and was composed sometime in the Iron Age, but flint knives are introduced precisely because they are archaic, and hence the appropriate implements for this ritual act. In the enigmatic story of the Bridegroom of Blood, Exodus 4:24–26, Moses’s wife takes a flint knife to circumcise their son, and the phrase “on the way” that is used in this story appears three times here in relation to the lack of circumcision

4. *Joshua circumcised them*. The object of the verb in this clause, “them,” is merely implied.

the males, the men of war. This is an indication of age, twenty years old being the beginning point for military service. This generation, now died out, is about to be replaced by a new generation of adult males who will carry out the campaign of invasion.

6. *the whole generation*. The Masoretic Text reads "the whole nation," which is surely too sweeping, but several Hebrew manuscripts as well as the Targum show "generation" instead of "nation."

who had not heeded the LORD's voice. The specific reference is to the pusillanimous report of the ten spies, an episode already invoked in the story of the two spies who go to Jericho. The ten spies in fact use the formula of a land flowing with milk and honey.

7. *they had not been circumcised*. Literally, "they had not circumcised them."

8. *they remained in their place until they revived*. It must be said that, in realistic terms, circumcision of all the fighting men just three days before battle is joined would be a rather imprudent measure. But the writer is focusing on the state of ritual purity necessary for the celebration of Passover and for the conduct of warfare, and so he is prepared to have us assume that all the men are fully recovered and ready for action after three days.

9. *I have rolled away from you the shame of Egypt*. The verb here, *galoti*, is an etymological pun on Gilgal, a word that can mean either "circle" or, as in this instance, "wheel." The "shame of Egypt" may have a double sense, referring to slavery—now, as free men entered into the covenant of Abraham, the Israelites are ready to conquer their own land—and to their uncircumcised condition, which was not the case while they were in Egypt but was entailed by their flight from Egypt and their wanderings, during which it was not feasible to circumcise the male infants.

10. *performed the Passover rite*. Of all the stipulated festival sacrifices, it was the Passover that confirmed a person's full participation in the community of Israel. For a male, being circumcised was a necessary condition for taking part in the rite, as is made clear in Exodus 12:44. The celebration of the first Passover took place on the eve of the departure from Egypt, and so this second Passover marks the liminal moment of leaving the wilderness for the land as the first Passover marks the leaving of Egypt for the wilderness.

11. *they ate from the yield of the land*. Evidently, the Israelite troops have been foraging in the territory adjacent to Jericho. The substitution of the produce of the land for the manna is another marker of the end of the Wilderness experience.

13. *at Jericho*. The Hebrew particle *b^{e}*, which usually means "in," here must refer to the vicinity of Jericho, which Joshua may be reconnoitering.

and look, a man was standing before him. This is a crystal-clear instance of the use of the presentative *hineh*, "look," as a shifter to the character's visual perspective. The as yet unidentified figure is thus called "a man" because that is how he appears to Joshua.

Are you ours or our foes'? The translation seeks to emulate the compactness of the Hebrew, *halanu ʾatah ʾim-letsareinu*. This brisk wording is beautifully appropriate to the military context, as a sentry might urgently challenge an unknown figure, wasting no words.

14. *I am the commander of the* LORD*'s army*. This is a bit of fleshed-out mythology not attested to elsewhere. God, who is not infrequently a warrior god, is often referred to as the LORD of Armies, but elsewhere there are no indications that He has an officer staff. This piece of imagining is perfectly apt in a dedication scene for Joshua because the LORD's emissary can address him as (superior) commander to commander.

Now have I come. This pronouncement, just two words in the Hebrew, is meant to sound portentous: now is the beginning of my great mission of conquest in which you will serve as my human deputy.

15. *Take off your sandal from your foot, for the place on which you stand is holy*. This is a direct quotation of God's words to Moses at the burning bush, Exodus 3:5, with the marginal difference that both "sandal" and "foot" are plurals in the Exodus story (here the singular usage implies the plural and might be thought of as a kind of synecdoche). The alignment of the present episode with the one of Moses at Mount Horeb points to differences as well as similarities. Both stories are dedication episodes as a leader is about to embark on his mission. But Moses is addressed by God Himself, as is appropriate for the greatest of prophets and the lawgiver, and at the site is a miraculously burning bush, proleptic of the moment when this very mountain will be enveloped in lightning during the great epiphany. Joshua is the legitimate heir of Moses but a lesser figure and no prophet, so he is addressed by the commander of the LORD's army, not by God Himself, and there is no pyrotechnic display on this holy ground.

CHAPTER 6

[1]And Jericho was shut tight before the Israelites—no
one came out and no one went in. [2]And the LORD
said to Joshua, “See, I have given into your hand
Jericho and its king and the mighty warriors. [3]And you
shall go round the town, all the men of war, encircling
the town once. Thus you shall do six days. [4]And seven
priests shall bear seven ram’s horns before the Ark,
and on the seventh day you shall go round the town
seven times and the priests shall blow the ram’s horns.
[5]And so, when the horn of the ram sounds a long blast,
when you hear the sound of the ram’s horn, all the
people shall let out a great shout, and the wall of the
town shall fall where it stands, and the people shall go
up, every man straight before him.” [6]And Joshua son
of Nun called to the priests and said to them, “Bear
the Ark of the Covenant, and seven priests shall bear
seven ram’s horns before the Ark of the Covenant.”
[7]And he said to the people, “Cross over and go round
the town, and the vanguard will cross over before the
Ark of the LORD.” [8]And it happened as Joshua spoke

to the people that the seven priests bearing the seven ram's horns before the LORD crossed over and blew on the ram's horns, with the Ark of the LORD's Covenant going after them. [9]And the vanguard was going before the priests who were blowing the ram's horns, and the rear guard was going behind the Ark as they went and blew the ram's horns. [10]And Joshua had charged the people, saying, "You shall not shout and you shall not let your voice be heard, and no word shall come out of your mouths until the moment I say to you, 'Shout,' and then you shall shout." [11]And the Ark of the LORD went round the town encircling it once, and they came to the camp and spent the night in the camp. [12]And Joshua rose early in the morning, and the priests bore the Ark of the LORD. [13]And the seven priests bearing seven ram's horns before the Ark of the LORD went along blowing the ram's horns, with the vanguard going before them and the rear guard going behind the Ark of the LORD, along they went blowing the ram's horns. [14]And they went round the town once on the second day, and they returned to camp—so did they do six days. [15]And it happened on the seventh day that they rose early as dawn broke and went round the town in this fashion seven times. Only on that day did they go round the city seven times. [16]And it happened when the priests blew the ram's horns for the seventh

time that Joshua said to the people “Shout! For the LORD has given the town to you. [17]And the town and all that is within it shall be under the ban to the LORD, except that Rahab the whore shall live and whoever is with her in the house, for she hid the messengers whom we sent. [18]Only you, you must keep from the ban, lest you covet and take of the ban and put the camp of Israel under the ban and stir up trouble for it. [19]And all the silver and gold and vessels of bronze and iron shall be holy to the LORD, they shall enter into the LORD’s treasury.” [20]And the people shouted and blew the ram’s horns, and it happened when the people had heard the sound of the ram’s horn, the people let out a great shout, and the wall fell where it stood, and the people went up into the town, every man straight before him, and they took the town. [21]And they put under the ban everything that was in the town, from man to woman, from lad to elder, and to ox and sheep and donkey, by the edge of the sword. [22]And to the two men who had spied out the land Joshua had said, “Go into the house of the whore-woman, and bring the woman out from there and all that is hers, as you vowed to her.” [23]And the young spies came and brought out Rahab and her father and her mother and her brothers and all that was hers, and all her clan they brought out, and they put them

outside the camp of Israel. [24]And the town they burned
in fire and everything in it. Only the silver and the gold
and the vessels of bronze and iron they placed in the
treasury of the LORD's house. [25]And Rahab the whore
and her father's house and all that was hers Joshua
kept alive, and she has dwelled in the midst of Israel to
this day, for she hid the messengers that Joshua had
sent to spy out Jericho. [26]And Joshua imposed a vow at
that time, saying, "Cursed be the man before the
LORD who will arise and rebuild this town, Jericho.

With his firstborn shall he found it,
and with his youngest set up its
portals."

[27]And the LORD was with Joshua, and his fame was
throughout the land.

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *and the mighty warriors*. The Masoretic Text lacks "and," which has been added in the translation.

3. *town*. At most, Jericho would have had a scant few thousand inhabitants. So "city" would be an exaggeration.

4. *seven priests . . . seven ram's horns . . . on the seventh day . . . seven times*. The rite devised to bring down the walls of the town involves a quadrupling of the sacred number seven. But the destruction of the town is also an anti-Creation story: six days they go round the wall, and on the climactic seventh day, it collapses and the town is reduced to rubble.

ram's horns. These were primitive trumpets that produced a shrill and piercing sound. They were used to assemble troops in battle and at coronations.

5. *the people*. Given the military context, *ʿam* may have its secondary sense of "troops."

9. *blowing*. The consonantal text seems to read "they blew," but the Masoretic marginal correction properly has this as *toqʿey*, "blowing."

10. *until the moment*. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "until the day," but the word for "day," *yom*, is often a fluid indicator of time.

17. *the ban*. This total prescription of destruction, *ḥerem*, of the conquered city, which means annihilating its population and its animals and, at least in this instance, dedicating all objects of value to the LORD's treasury, is the grimmest aspect of this triumphalist story. The enactment of the *ḥerem* is in keeping with the reiterated injunction in Deuteronomy to exterminate the native population of Canaan. That project is what Moshe Weinfeld has called a "utopian" plan because it is highly unlikely that it was ever acted upon. For the Deuteronomist, it is a brutal way of expressing the absolute separation from the pagan population—a separation that never really occurred—called for in his program of uncompromising monotheism, and the hallmark of the Deuteronomist is often detectable in Joshua. The *ḥerem* was not an Israelite invention, as there is archaeological evidence that it was sometimes practiced by various Canaanite peoples.

except that Rahab the whore shall live and whoever is with her in the house. There is, of course, a contradiction here with the story of the collapse of the wall. If the wall around the town collapsed, how could Rahab, whose house was in the wall, have been saved, and what good would the scarlet cord, which implied protection against conscious human destroyers, have done? The medieval Hebrew commentator David Kimchi tried to save the consistency of the text by proposing that only one part of the wall fell,

through which breach the Israelites entered the town, though all the encircling with ram's horns certainly leads one to imagine that the entire wall came down. One suspects that the story of the two spies and the story of the ram's horns reflect two different traditions about the conquest of Jericho. Indeed, if the plan was to bring down the walls miraculously, there would scarcely have been any need to reconnoiter the town and the surrounding terrain, and the tale of the spies appears to assume a scenario in which the Israelite warriors will break into the city using conventional means of warfare.

18. *lest you covet.* The received text reads, "lest you put under the ban," *pen taḥarimu*, which doesn't make much sense. The translation follows the Septuagint, which appears to have used a Hebrew text that showed *pen taḥmedu* (a reversal of consonants and a *dalet* for the similar-looking *resh*), "lest you covet."

20. *the people let out a great shout, and the wall fell where it stood.* Attempts have been made to recover a historical kernel for this fabulous event by proposing that it records the memory of an earthquake that leveled Jericho. (In fact, Jericho was built on a seismic fault and has been subject to earthquakes over the ages.) But nothing in the telling of the tale remotely suggests an earthquake. The ground is not said to move, and the destruction occurs through the deployment of sevens and the ram's horns' blasts and the shouting. One can also dismiss the idea of shock waves of sound splitting the walls as a scientific non-starter. The whole point of the story is its miraculous character. Almost everywhere in biblical narrative, Israel triumphs not through any martial powers, which get scant representation, but because God battles for Israel (compare the Song of the Sea, the Song of Deborah, and Moses' upraised arms in the defeat of the Amalekites). This story, then, is framed to vividly illustrate how the Israelite conquest of the first principal Canaanite town in the Jordan Valley is entirely due to the spectacular intervention of the LORD, Who gives Joshua the detailed instructions for the procedures of circumambulating the town with the Ark and the ram's horns. It should also be noted that the extensive archaeological exploration of Jericho indicates that its conquest by Joshua could not have taken place. There was a very old town on this site, but it was destroyed by the Middle Bronze Age, and at the putative time of Joshua's conquest in the Late Bronze Age, toward the end of the thirteenth century B.C.E., there had been no walled town on this

site at least for a couple of centuries. The writer no doubt had in mind Jericho's antiquity—it is one of the oldest cities in the world—and its role as eastern gateway to Canaan, but historically it could not have been an object of Joshua's conquest.

23. *the young spies*. Only here are they identified as *ne'arim*, "lads" or young men, although it is possible that the term has its secondary sense of "elite soldiers."

24. *the LORD's house*. This phrase is an anachronism—in general, it refers to the Temple—because at the time of the conquest there would have been only a portable sanctuary, not referred to as a "house."

25. *she has dwelled in the midst of Israel to this day*. This clause must mean that Rahab's descendants have dwelled in the midst of Israel to this day. It is thus an etiological note, explaining how a particular Canaanite clan came to be naturalized Israelites.

26. *Cursed be the man . . . who will . . . rebuild this town*. The reason for the implacability toward Jericho is not entirely clear since there is no indication that its inhabitants perpetrated war crimes, as did the Amalekites in Exodus. Perhaps this should be understood in the context of the miraculous destruction of the walls: that event is a token for the laying low of the inhabitants of the land before the invading Israelites (something that never happened historically), and so as a sign and symbol of the whole conquest, the town razed through divine intervention should never be rebuilt.

With his firstborn shall he found it, / and with his youngest set up its portals. The solemnity of the vow is reinforced by casting this dire prediction in a line of poetry. Rashi nicely catches the narrative progression from the first verset to the second: "At the beginning of the foundation when he rebuilds it, his firstborn son will die, whom he will bury and go on until the youngest dies at the completion of the work, which is setting up the portals." In 1 Kings 16:34, it is recorded that at the time of Ahab, "Hiel the Bethelite built up Jericho. At the cost of Abiram his firstborn he laid its foundation and at the cost of Segib his youngest he put up its gates, according to the word of the LORD that He spoke through Joshua son of Nun." Joshua's curse may have been formulated to explain a calamitous event that occurred three and a half centuries later.

CHAPTER 7

[1] And the Israelites violated the ban, and Achan son of
Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah from the tribe of
Judah took from the ban, and the LORD's wrath flared
against the Israelites.

[2] And Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is by
Beth-Aven to the east of Bethel, and he said to them,
saying, "Go up and spy out the land," and the men
went up and spied out Ai. [3] And they came back to
Joshua and said to him, "Let not the whole people go
up. Let about two thousand men or three thousand
men go up and strike Ai. Do not weary the whole
people there, for they are few." [4] And about three
thousand men from the people went up there, and they
fled before the men of Ai. [5] And the men of Ai struck
down about thirty-six of them and pursued them from
before the gate as far as Shebarim and struck them
down on the slope. And the people's heart failed and
turned to water. [6] And Joshua tore his robes and flung

himself on his face to the ground before the Ark of the LORD till evening—he and the elders of Israel—and they put dust on their heads. [7]And Joshua said, “Alas, O Master LORD, why did You insist on bringing this people across the Jordan to give us into the hand of the Amorite and to destroy us? Would that we had been content to dwell across the Jordan. [8]I beseech you, my Master, what should I say after Israel has turned tail before its enemies? [9]And the Canaanites and all the dwellers in the land will hear and draw round us and cut off our name from the earth. And what will You do for Your great name?” [10]And the LORD said to Joshua, “Rise up. Why have you fallen on your face? [11]Israel has offended and also has broken My covenant that I charged them and also has taken from the ban and also stolen and also denied it and also put it in their bags. [12]And the Israelites have not been able to stand up against their enemies. They have turned tail before their enemies, for they themselves have come under the ban. I will not continue to be with you if you do not destroy the banned things from your midst. [13]Rise, consecrate the people, and say ‘Consecrate yourselves for the morrow, for thus the LORD God of Israel has said, There are banned things in your midst, O Israel! You will not be able to stand up against your enemies until you remove the banned

things from your midst. [14]And you shall draw near in
the morning according to your tribes. And it shall be,
that the tribe on which the LORD lets the lot fall shall
draw near according to its clans, and the clan on which
the LORD lets the lot fall shall draw near according to
its households, and the household on which the LORD
lets the lot fall shall draw near according to its men.
[15]And it shall be, that he on whom the lot falls for
taking the banned things shall be burned in fire, he and
all that is his, because he broke the LORD's covenant
and because he has done a scurrilous thing in Israel.'"
[16]And Joshua rose early in the morning and brought
Israel near according to its tribes, and the lot fell on
the tribe of Judah. [17]And he brought near the clans of
Judah, and the lot fell on the clan of Zerah, and he
brought near the clan of Zerah, and the lot fell on
Zabdi. [18]And he brought near his household according
to the men, and the lot fell on Achan son of Carmi son
of Zerah of the tribe of Judah. [19]And Joshua said to
Achan, "My son, show honor, pray, to the LORD God
of Israel, and make confession to Him, and tell me,
pray, what you have done. Do not conceal it from me."
[20]And Achan answered Joshua and said, "Indeed, it is I
who offended against the LORD God of Israel, and
thus and so I have done. [21]I saw in the booty a fine fur
mantle and two hundred shekels of silver and an ingot

of gold fifty shekels in weight, and I coveted them and took them, and there they are, buried in the ground within my tent, and the silver is underneath them.”
[22]And Joshua sent messengers and they ran to the tent, and there it was buried in his tent, with the silver underneath it. [23]And they took these from within the tent and brought them to Joshua and to all the Israelites, and he presented them before the LORD.
[24]And Joshua took Achan son of Zerah and the silver and the mantle and the ingot of gold and his sons and his daughters and his ox and his donkey and his flock and his tent and all that was his, and all Israel was with him, and he brought them up to the Valley of Achor.
[25]And Joshua said, “Even as you have stirred up trouble for us, the LORD shall stir up trouble for you on this day.” And all Israel pelted them with stones and burned them in fire and pelted them with stones.
[26]And they piled up over him a great heap of stones to this day, and the LORD turned back from His blazing wrath. Therefore is the name of that place called the Valley of Achor to this day.

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the Israelites violated the ban . . . Achan . . . took from the ban*. This conjunction of subjects intimates why, in the harsh retribution of this episode, Achan must be extirpated: his violation of the ban imparts guilt, as though by contagion, to the whole people, as the defeat at Ai will immediately demonstrate.

3. *about two thousand men or three thousand men*. Boling's contention that *ʾelef* here is not a number but means a "contingent," perhaps no more than twenty or thirty men, may be supported by the fact that thirty-six deaths in the defeat are regarded as a catastrophic loss. This is not, however, conclusive evidence because the Israelites are supposed to carry out the conquest virtually unscathed, as at Jericho. Boling's claim that the particle *k*^{e} before the number means "precisely" and not, as it usually does, "about," is dubious because the alternative of "two or three," whether thousand or contingents, suggests approximation, not exactitude.

5. *pursued them from before the gate*. The evident strategy is a sudden sortie from the gate of the town, taking the besiegers, who are too few in number, by surprise.

7. *why did You insist on bringing this people across the Jordan to give us into the hand of the Amorite and to destroy us*? Joshua's complaint is distinctly reminiscent of the complaints of the Israelites in the wilderness to Moses, asking him why he brought them into the wilderness to perish instead of leaving them in peace in Egypt. The echo may suggest that Joshua is not quite as fit a leader as Moses.

9. *the Canaanites*. There is a loose interchange of reference between "Amorites" and "Canaanites."

And what will You do for Your great name? God's reputation as all-powerful deity is contingent on the success of His chosen people. Moses uses the same argument when God in His anger threatens to wipe out Israel.

11. *also . . . also . . . also . . . also*. These repetitions of *gam*—which equally has the sense of "even" or "actually"—vividly express God's wrathful indignation.

12. *they themselves have come under the ban*. Through the contamination of having taken objects devoted to destruction, they have become subject to destruction. The word "themselves" has been added in the translation for the sake of clarity.

14. *draw near*. This is a technical term for approaching the Ark of the Covenant.

lets the lot fall. The verb repeatedly used in this section also means "to catch" or "to trap." What is involved in this process is an oracular device—most likely the Urim and Thummim—that yields a binary yes/no answer, thus serving to select one from many.

17. *the clans of Judah*. The received text has "the clan of Judah," but a tribe is not a clan. Several Hebrew manuscripts show the more plausible plural form.

19. *My son, show honor, pray, to the* LORD *God of Israel, and make confession to Him*. Joshua's language in addressing Achan is cunningly gentle, suggesting he intends to draw in his interlocutor and then lead him to divulge his crime. He begins by calling Achan "my son," elsewhere an affectionate form of address in the Bible; he uses the polite particle of entreaty, *na'*, "pray," and at first does not mention guilt but rather honoring God. The idiom for "make confession," *ten todah*, more frequently means "to give thanks," so it sounds almost as though Joshua were about to say something quite positive to the man who will be made to confess his guilt and then undergo horrendous punishment.

20. *Indeed, it is I who offended*. Achan's immediate and full confession is probably best explained by his awareness that the oracle has singled him out, the lot falling on him alone of all the multitude of Israel, and so he feels he has no choice but to admit his guilt. Joshua's ostensibly fatherly approach to him may also make him sense that he is a member of this community now gravely endangered by his act, and hence he must make restitution, whatever the price.

thus and so I have done. Although this is an idiom that can be used in place of a detailed account, here it is proleptic: the precise content of "thus and so" is laid out in the next verse.

21. *a fine fur mantle*. The Masoretic Text reads "a fine Shinar mantle," neatly rendered in the King James Version as "a goodly Babylonish garment" because Shinar is another name for Babylon. There is no evidence that Shinar specialized in exporting fine apparel, and this translation reads instead of *shinʿar*, deleting the middle consonant, *seiʿar,* "hair" or "fur."

24. *And Joshua took Achan . . . and the silver and the mantle . . . and his sons and his daughters.* The lining up in a single syntactic string of human beings, material treasure, and animal possessions is disturbing. The evident assumption about the family members is that they have been contaminated by Achan's violation of the ban, and hence they must perish with him. One notes that Achan has considerable possessions (the donkey and ox may well be collective nouns), which makes his crime all the more heinous. The collective punishment is nevertheless troubling.

the Valley of Achor. This means the Valley of Trouble, making the end of this story an etiological tale about the origin of the place-name. It may have been originally called the Valley of Trouble for entirely different reasons—for example, because its terrain was treacherous or bleak and barren.

25. *burned them in fire and pelted them with stones*. The burning may refer only to the material objects because it was not customary to burn bodies after stoning. The repeated clause about pelting with stones seems redundant.

26. *Therefore is the name of that place called*. This is an explicit etiological formula.

CHAPTER 8

[1]And God said to Joshua, “Do not be afraid and do
not cower. Take with you all the combat troops and
rise, go up to Ai. See, I have given in your hand the
king of Ai and his people and his town and his land.
[2]And you shall do to Ai as you did to Jericho and to its
king. Only its booty and its cattle you may plunder. Set
up for yourself an ambush against the town behind it.”
[3]And Joshua arose, and all the combat troops with
him, to go up to Ai. And Joshua chose thirty thousand
men, sturdy warriors, and sent them out at night. [4]And
Joshua charged them, saying, “See, you are to lie in
ambush against the town behind the town. Do not keep
very far away from the town, and all of you must be on
the ready. [5]And I and the troops that are with me, we
shall draw near the town, and so, when they come out
toward us as before, we shall flee from them, [6]and they
will come out after us till we draw them away from the
town, for they will think, ‘They are fleeing from us as
before,’ and we shall flee from them. [7]And you will
rise from the ambush and take hold of the town, and

the LORD your God will give it into your hand. [8]And so, when you seize the town, you will set fire to the town, according to the word of the LORD you will do. See, I have charged you." [9]And Joshua sent them off, and they went to the ambush, and they stayed between Bethel and Ai to the west of Ai. And Joshua spent that night among the troops. [10]And Joshua rose early in the morning and marshaled the troops, he and the elders of Israel, before the troops, to Ai. [11]And all the combat troops who were with him went up and approached and came opposite the town, and they camped to the north, with the ravine between them and Ai. [12]And he took about five thousand men and set them as an ambush between Bethel and Ai to the west of the town. [13]And they put the troops, the whole camp, to the north of the town, and its covert contingent, to the west of the town. And Joshua spent that night in the valley. [14]And it happened, when the king of Ai saw it, that the men of the town hurried in the early morning and came out toward Israel to do battle, he and all his troops, at the set place opposite the Arabah. He did not know there was an ambush against him behind the town. [15]And Joshua and all Israel were routed before them and fled on the road to the wilderness. [16]And all the troops who were in the town were mustered to pursue Joshua, and were drawn away from the town.

[17]And not a man remained in the town, in Ai, who did
not go out after Israel, and they left the town open and
pursued Israel. [18]And the LORD said to Joshua,
“Reach out with the javelin that is in your hand toward
Ai, for into your hand I shall give it,” and Joshua
reached out with the javelin that was in his hand
toward the town. [19]And the ambushers rose quickly
from their place and ran as his hand reached out, and
they entered the town and took it, and they hurried and
set the town on fire. [20]And the men of Ai turned
behind them and saw and, look, smoke was rising from
the town toward the heavens, and they had no place in
any direction to flee, while the troops who had fled to
the wilderness became the pursuers. [21]And Joshua and
all Israel saw that the ambushers had taken the town
and that the smoke from the town was rising, and they
struck down the men of Ai. [22]And these had come out
of the town toward them so that they were in the midst
of Israel, who were on both sides, and they struck
them down till they left among them no remnant or
survivor. [23]And the king of Ai they caught alive and
brought him forth to Joshua. [24]And it happened, when
Israel had finished killing all the inhabitants of Ai in
the field, in the wilderness where they had pursued
them, all of them by the edge of the sword to the last
of them, all Israel turned back to Ai and struck it with

the edge of the sword. [25]And all who fell on that day,
men and women, came to twelve thousand, all the
people of Ai. [26]And Joshua did not pull back his hand
that he had reached out with the javelin until he had
put all the inhabitants of Ai under the ban. [27]Only the
cattle and the booty of that town did the Israelites
plunder, according to the word of the LORD that He
charged to Joshua. [28]And Joshua burned Ai and turned
it into an everlasting heap, a devastation to this day.
[29]And the king of Ai he impaled on a pole till eventide,
and when the sun was setting, Joshua gave orders, and
they took his corpse down from the pole and flung it
by the entrance of the town gate and put over it a pile
of stones to this day. [30]Then did Joshua build an altar
to the LORD God of Israel on Mount Ebal, [31]as Moses
the servant of the LORD had charged the Israelites, as
it is written in the book of the teaching of Moses, “an
altar of whole stones, over which no iron has been
brandished,” and they offered up on it burnt offerings
to the LORD, and they sacrificed well-being sacrifices.
[32]And he wrote there on the stones the repetition of the
teaching of Moses, which he had written in the
presence of the Israelites. [33]And all Israel and its elders
and its overseers and its judges were standing on both
sides of the Ark opposite the levitical priests, bearers
of the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD, sojourner

and native alike, over against Mount Gerizim, and its other half over against Mount Ebal, as Moses, servant of the LORD, had formerly charged to bless Israel. [34]And afterward he read out all the words of the teaching, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the teaching. [35]There was no word of all that Moses had charged that Joshua did not read out before the whole assembly of Israel and the women and the little ones and the sojourners who went in their midst.

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Only its booty and its cattle you may plunder*. Ai, like Jericho, is to be put to the ban, its structures burned and all its inhabitants massacred, but an exception is made for booty, which the conquering Israelites are allowed to take.

3. *the combat troops*. Throughout this episode, *'am*, elsewhere "people," clearly has this military sense.

thirty thousand men. The very large number here for men in an ambush is cited by proponents of the idea that *'elef* must refer to a small contingent and does not mean a thousand. But highly exaggerated numbers are often used in ancient narrative, and the sense of "contingent" in the count of the deaths of the town's inhabitants in verse 25 is problematic.

4–8. Although God had said he would deliver Ai to Joshua, it is Joshua's shrewdness as a strategist that brings about the fall of the town. The elaboration of the details of military strategy is untypical of biblical narrative.

Scholars have pointed out a similarity not only in strategy but also in wording between this story and the account of the siege of Gibeah in the civil war reported in Judges 20, and it is generally thought that this story draws on the one in Judges. Joshua shrewdly capitalizes on the previous defeat of the Israelites at Ai by seeming to repeat the same tactical error, positioning his troops in front of the town gate and then retreating. This time, however, he hides an attack unit behind the town that will move forward against it once the armed men of the town have been drawn out in pursuit of the main body of Israelites.

4. *behind the town*. This would be west of the town. The main gates of the town are evidently on the eastern side, and the main Israelite camp is northeast of the city.

10. *before the troops*. This phrase looks odd and may reflect a scribal error.

12. *And he took about five thousand men*. This verse seems to replicate verses 3–4 using a different (somewhat more plausible) number—5,000 instead of 30,000. It also puts the sending out of the ambush troops after the general encampment, not before it. Two different versions may have been awkwardly spliced together.

13. *And they put the troops, the whole camp*. Like the translation, the wording of the Hebrew is a bit clumsy and the syntax ambiguous.

its covert contingent. The Hebrew *ʿaqev* usually means "heel." There is no evidence that it means "rear guard," as some claim, and an ambush is not a rear guard. It is equally questionable that it could mean "far edge," again an inappropriate term for ambush. The translation follows the Targum of Jonathan, Rashi, and Kimchi, in relating *ʿaqev* to *ʿoqbah*, a term that suggests deviousness and that might apply to an ambush.

Joshua spent that night. The Masoretic Text reads *wayelekh*, "walked," but a few manuscripts show *wayalen*, "spent the night," which seems more plausible.

14. *the Arabah*. This is the north-south rift of the Jordan Valley and is equivalent to the wilderness several times mentioned in this episode.

15. *were routed*. The obvious implication in context is: pretended to be routed. The verb used *wayinagʿu* (literally, "were smitten/plagued") comes instead of the expected *wayinagfu*, and may be influenced by the parallel passage in Judges 20, where the same verbal stem is employed in a different sense.

18. *Reach out with the javelin that is in your hand*. The exact nature of the weapon, *kidon*, is in dispute. (Modern Hebrew has adopted it as the term for bayonet.) Some scholars think it is a kind of scimitar. In any case, the outstretched *kidon* is both a signal for the men in the ambush to move against the town and a magical act pointedly reminiscent of Moses's upraised staff in the battle against Amalek reported in Exodus 17.

21. *the ambushers*. The Hebrew term *haʾorev* can refer either to the ambush or, as a collective noun, to the combatants carrying out the ambush.

22. *And these had come out of the town toward them*. These are the ambushers, who, having put the town to the torch, now attack its troops outside, who are caught in a pincer movement between the main Israelite force and the ambushers (whether 5,000 or 30,000). The reference to no place to flee in verse 20 may be out of chronological order because it makes good sense here, when the men of Ai are attacked from both sides.

24. *turned back to Ai and struck it with the edge of the sword*. The gruesome reality of this report is as follows: the ambushing force, after setting fire to the town and then coming out to join in the attack on the troops of Ai, now comes back with the main Israelite camp to the town to slaughter the women and elders and children left there.

29. *impaled on a pole*. This is the form of execution that many modern scholars think likely. But the traditional rendering of "hanged on a tree" remains a distinct possibility.

they took his corpse down from the pole and flung it by the entrance of the town gate. The use of the verb "flung" is a clear indication that this is not an honorable burial, though the biblical prohibition against leaving a body hanging overnight is preserved. The place of burial may point toward the area in front of the gates of the town where the Israelites were killed in their earlier attack.

30. *Then did Joshua build an altar*. This textual unit invokes the two mountains of blessing and curse mentioned in Deuteronomy 11:26–32, and is a direct implementation of the command in Deuteronomy 27:2–3, "on the day that you cross the Jordan into the land that the LORD your God is about to give you, you shall set up for yourself great stones and coat them with plaster. And you shall write on them the words of this teaching. . . ." But the placement of the episode has puzzled both ancient and modern commentators. Temporally, it does not happen right after the crossing of the Jordan as it should, and geographically, the Israelites at Ai are not opposite Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim.

31. *an altar of whole stones, over which no iron has been brandished*. This is an approximate quotation of Exodus 20:25.

32. *the repetition of the teaching of Moses*. The Hebrew *mishneh torat mosheh* refers to Deuteronomy (that Greek name itself being a rendering of the Hebrew *mishneh torah*). The Deuteronomist behind this story is clearly promoting the interests of his own privileged text.

CHAPTER 9

[1]And it happened when all the kings heard who were
beyond the Jordan, in the high country and in the
lowland and along the whole shore of the Great Sea
opposite Lebanon, the Hittite and the Amorite, the
Canaanite, the Perizzite, the Hivvite and the Jebusite,
[2]that they gathered together to do battle with Joshua
and with Israel in united resolve. [3]And the inhabitants
of Gibeon had heard what Joshua did to Jericho and to
Ai. [4]And they on their part acted with cunning and
provisioned themselves and took worn-out sacks for
their donkeys and worn-out and cracked and trussed-
up wineskins, [5]and worn-out and patched sandals on
their feet and worn-out cloaks upon them, and all the
bread of their provision was dry and moldy. [6]And they
went to Joshua at the Gilgal camp and said to him and
to the men of Israel, “We have come from a faraway
land, and now seal a pact with us.” [7]And the men of
Israel said to the Hivvites, “Perhaps you dwell in our
midst, so how can we seal a pact with you?” [8]And they
said to Joshua, “We are your servants.” And Joshua

said to them, “From where are you and from where do you come?” 9And they said to them, “From a very faraway land, your servants have come through the fame of the LORD your God, for we have heard the report of Him and all that He did in Egypt, 10and all that He did to the two Amorite kings who were across the Jordan, to Sihon king of Heshbon and to Og king of Bashan which is in Ashtaroth. 11And our elders and all the inhabitants of our land said to us, saying, ‘Take in your hand provisions for the way and go to them and say to them, We are your servants, and now seal a pact with us.’ 12This bread of ours we took still warm as provisions from our homes on the day we went out toward you, and now, look, it is dry and has turned moldy. 13And these wineskins that we filled were new, and now they are cracked, and these cloaks of ours and our sandals have worn out from the very long way.” 14And the men took from their provisions, and they did not inquire of the LORD. 15And Joshua made peace with them, and sealed a pact with them to preserve their lives, and the chieftains of the community made a vow to them. 16And it happened at the end of three days after they had sealed the pact with them, that they heard that they were neighbors and were dwelling in their midst. 17And the Israelites journeyed forth and came to their towns on the third day, and their towns

were Gibeon and Chephirah and Beeroth and Kiriath-Jearim. [18]But the Israelites did not strike them down, for the chieftains of the community had made a vow to them in the name of the LORD God of Israel, and all the community complained against the chieftains. [19]And all the chieftains said to the whole community, “We have made a vow to them in the name of the LORD God of Israel, and now we cannot touch them. [20]This let us do to them, letting them live, that there be no fury against us for the vow we made to them.” [21]And the chieftains said of them, “Let them live, and they will be hewers of wood and drawers of water for the whole community, as the chieftains have said of them.” [22]And Joshua called to them and spoke to them, saying, “Why did you deceive us, saying, ‘We are very far away from you,’ when you dwell in our midst? [23]And now, you are cursed, and no slave or hewer of wood or drawer of water for the house of my God will cease to be among you.” [24]And they answered Joshua and said, “For it was indeed told to your servants that the LORD your God had charged Moses to give all the land to you and to destroy the inhabitants of the land before you. And we were very afraid for our lives because of you, and so we did this thing. [25]And now, here we are in your hand. What is good and what is right in your eyes to do to us, do.” [26]And he did thus to

them and saved them from the hand of the Israelites, and they did not kill them. [27]And on that day Joshua made them hewers of wood and drawers of water for the community and for the LORD's altar to this day, at the place He was to choose.

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *beyond the Jordan*. Since all the peoples enumerated here are Canaanites living on the western side of the Jordan, this phrase would have to mean beyond the Jordan from the viewpoint of the Israelites coming from the eastern side, even though elsewhere it almost always refers to trans-Jordanian territory.

2. *in united resolve*. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "with one mouth." It is historically quite unlikely that the divided city-kingdoms of Canaan could have constituted themselves as a single united force.

4. *they on their part acted with cunning*. In context, the "on their part" (or "too") must refer to the immediately preceding story of the conquest of Ai. There the Israelites used the cunning of the ambush strategy to destroy the town; here, by contrast, cunning is used by the Gibeonites to save themselves.

provisioned themselves. The Masoretic Text reads *wayitstayru*, which might mean "they painted themselves"—that is (perhaps), "they disguised themselves." An emendation yields *wayitsdaydu* (the letters *resh* and *dalet* look quite similar), which seems more plausible, especially given the prominence of the cognate noun *tsayid*, "provisions," in this episode.

trussed-up. The wineskins are held together with cords or strips of leather because they are falling apart.

6. *We have come from a faraway land*. With the evidence of the just consummated destruction of Jericho and Ai, the Gibeonites seem aware that

the Israelites are embarked on a campaign to annihilate the indigenous population of Canaan, and so they adopt the subterfuge of pretending to be from a land far from Canaan. This entire story is in fact an elaborate etiological tale that betrays the shaky historical basis of this canonical account of the conquest. Deuteronomy, with its call for a radical separation from the pagan peoples of the land, enunciated a program of genocide. Such a program was never actually carried out, and the situation of Israel among the Canaanites was by and large the opposite: the two populations frequently mingled, and the Israelites were often open to cultural and religious influences from the Canaanite peoples. The author of this episode was trying to resolve a contradiction: a particular group of Canaanites—the Gibeonites—not only were living cheek by jowl with the Israelites but were performing subservient duties at an Israelite sanctuary at Gibeon. The story comes to explain how the Gibeonites were not wiped out, as the program of total destruction dictated, and how they came to play a role in an Israelite cultic place.

9. *a very faraway land*. Pushed by Joshua, they add "very" to their previous words.

14. *And the men took from their provisions*. It may seem puzzling that Israelites should want to eat the dry and moldy bread of the Gibeonites, but Kimchi is probably right in surmising that breaking bread—even virtually inedible bread—with the strangers was a way of ritually confirming a treaty of peace with them.

they did not inquire of the LORD. This is the technical idiom for inquiring of an oracle. Without such guidance, Joshua and the Israelites are taken in by the deception.

17. *on the third day*. Though this is the formulaic number for relatively short journeys, it is also an implication that the Gibeonite towns are well within the borders of Canaan.

19. *We have made a vow to them . . . and now we cannot touch them*. Vows made in the name of the deity—compare the story of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11—are irrevocable and cannot be renegotiated.

20. *fury*. The Hebrew *qetsef* means divine rage, characteristically manifested in a plague.

21. *hewers of wood and drawers of water*. These are menial workers at the lowest point in the social hierarchy, as is clear in Deuteronomy 29:9–10: "You are stationed here today all of you before the LORD your God, your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your overseers, every man of Israel. Your little ones, your wives, and your sojourner who is in the midst of your camps, from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water."

23. *for the house of my God*. In verse 21, it was "for the whole community." In historical fact, the Gibeonites could conceivably have performed these functions in both the sacred and the profane realm.

will cease to be among you. Literally, "will not be cut off from you."

24. *For it was indeed told to your servants*. In this fiction, the Gibeonites somehow have been given a full report of the promise of the land and the program of genocide articulated in Deuteronomy.

26. *saved them from the hand of the Israelites*. This formulation may suggest that, despite the solemn vow, there was some popular sentiment among the Israelites, outraged by this deception, to destroy the Gibeonites. The quick maneuver of the chieftains implemented by Joshua to make them menial servants would be devised to fend off such an assault.

27. *to this day*. This is the formal marker of the etiological tale: if you wonder why the Gibeonites are hewers of wood and drawers of water for the Israelites, this story explains it.

at the place He was to choose. This phrase in Deuteronomistic texts invariably refers to Jerusalem, but it is a misplaced editorial tic here because the sanctuary in question is located at Gibeon.

CHAPTER 10

[1]And it happened when Adoni-Zedek king of
Jerusalem heard that Joshua had taken Ai and put it
under the ban, as he had done to Jericho and its king,
so had he done to Ai and its king, and that the
inhabitants of Gibeon had made peace with Israel and
were in their midst, [2]that he was very afraid, for
Gibeon was a big town, like one of the royal towns,
and it was bigger than Ai, and all its men were
warriors. [3]And Adoni-Zedek king of Jerusalem sent to
Hoham king of Hebron and to Piram king of Jarmuth,
Japhia king of Lachish, and Debir king of Eglon,
saying, [4]"Come up to me and help me, and let us strike
Gibeon, for it has made peace with Joshua and with
the Israelites." [5]And the five Amorite kings, the king
of Jerusalem, the king of Hebron, the king of Jarmuth,
the king of Lachish, the king of Eglon, gathered
together, they and all their camps, and they encamped
against Gibeon and did battle against it. [6]And the men
of Gibeon sent messengers to Joshua at the Gilgal
camp, saying, "Do not let go of your servants. Come

up quickly to us and rescue us and help us, for all the
Amorite kings who live in the high country have
gathered against us.” [7]And Joshua came up from
Gilgal, he and all the combat troops with him, and all
the valiant warriors. [8]And the LORD said to Joshua,
“Do not fear them, for I have given them into your
hand. No man of them will stand up before you.” [9]And
Joshua came against them suddenly—all night long he
had come up from Gilgal. [10]And the LORD panicked
them before Israel, and they struck them a great blow
at Gilgal, and they pursued them on the road of the
ascent to Beth-Horon, and they struck them down as
far as Azekah and as far as Makkedah. [11]And it
happened when they fled before Israel, that they were
on the descent from Beth-Horon when the LORD
flung down on them great stones from the heavens as
far as Azekah, and those who died from the hailstones
were many more than the Israelites killed by the
sword. [12]Then did Joshua speak to the LORD on the
day the LORD gave the Amorites over to the
Israelites, and he said in the sight of Israel:

“O sun in Gibeon halt,
and the moon in Ajalon Valley.”
[13]And the sun halted

and the moon stood still
till the nation wreaked
vengeance on its foes.

Is it not written in the Book of Jashar?—“And the sun
stood still in the middle of the heavens and did not
hasten to set for a whole day. 14And there was nothing
like that day before it or after it, in the LORD’s
heeding the voice of a man, for the LORD did battle
for Israel.” 15And Joshua went back, and all Israel with
him, to the Gilgal camp. 16And those five kings fled
and hid in a cave at Makkedah. 17And it was told to
Joshua, saying, “The five kings have been found hiding
in the cave at Makkedah. 18And Joshua said, “Roll
great stones over the mouth of the cave, and set men
over it to guard them. 19As for you, do not stand still.
Pursue your enemies and cut them down from behind.
Do not let them enter their towns, for the LORD your
God has given them into your hand.” 20And it
happened when Joshua and the Israelites had finished
striking them a very great blow, to the last of them,
that a remnant of them survived and entered the
fortified towns. 21And the troops came back safely to
the camp to Joshua, no man so much as snarled at the
Israelites. 22And Joshua said, “Open the mouth of the

cave, and bring these five kings out to me from the cave.” [23]And so they did, and they brought those five kings out to him from the cave—the king of Jerusalem, the king of Hebron, the king of Jarmuth, the king of Lachish, the king of Eglon. [24]And it happened when they brought out those kings to Joshua, that Joshua called out to all the men of Israel and said to the captains of the men of war who had gone with him: “Put your feet on the necks of these kings.” And they drew near and put their feet on their necks. [25]And Joshua said to them, “Do not fear and do not cower. Be strong and stalwart, for thus shall the LORD do to all your enemies with whom you do battle.” [26]And afterward Joshua struck them down and put them to death, and he impaled them on five poles, and they remained impaled on the poles till evening. [27]And it happened as the sun was setting that Joshua gave the command and they took them down from the poles and flung them into the cave in which they had hidden, and they put great stones over the mouth of the cave, to this very day. [28]And Joshua took Makkedah on that day and struck it and its king with the edge of the sword and every living thing within it. He left no survivor, and he did to the king of Makkedah as he had done to the king of Jericho. [29]And Joshua moved on, and all Israel with him, from

Makkedah to Libnah, and he did battle with Libnah.
30And the LORD gave it as well into the hand of Israel
with its king, and he struck it with the edge of the
sword and every living thing within it. He left no
survivor, and he did to its king as he had done to the
king of Jericho. 31And Joshua moved on, and all Israel
with him, from Libnah to Lachish, and he camped
against it and did battle against it. 32And the LORD
gave Lachish into the hand of Israel, and he took it on
the second day and struck it by the edge of the sword
and every living thing within it, as all that he had done
to Libnah. 33Then did Horam king of Gezer come up
to help Lachish, and Joshua struck him down, and all
his troops with him, till he left no survivor of him.
34And Joshua moved on, and all Israel with him, from
Lachish to Eglon, and they camped against it and did
battle against it. 35And they took it on that day and
struck it with the edge of the sword and every living
thing within it. On that day he passed it under the ban
as all he had done to Lachish. 36And Joshua went up,
and all Israel with him, from Eglon to Hebron, and
they did battle against it. 37And they took it and struck
it with the edge of the sword, and its king and all its
towns and every living thing within it. He left no
survivor, as all he had done to Eglon, and he put it
under the ban and every living thing within it. 38And

Joshua, and all Israel with him, turned back to Debir and did battle against it. [39]And he took it, and its king and all its towns, and he struck them with the edge of the sword, and he put under the ban every living thing within it. He left no survivor. As he had done to Hebron, so he did to Debir and its king and as he had done to Libnah and to its king. [40]And Joshua struck the whole land, the high country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes and all their kings. And he left no survivor of it. And every breathing thing he put under the ban as the LORD God of Israel had charged. [41]And Joshua struck them from Kadesh-Barnea to Gaza, and the whole land of Goshen to Gibeon. [42]And all these kings and their land Joshua took in one fell swoop, for the LORD God of Israel did battle for Israel. [43]And Joshua, and all Israel with him, turned back to the Gilgal camp.

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Adoni-Zedek*. The name means “master of justice” or “master of victory,” and as several medieval Hebrew commentators note, it is probably a hereditary title rather than a proper name. Melchizedek king of Salem (probably a variant of “Jerusalem”), mentioned in Genesis 14:18, has a similar titular name, which means “king of justice” or “king of victory.”

2. *like one of the royal towns*. Even though there is no monarchy in Gibeon, its size and importance make it the equivalent of a royal town.

6. *Do not let go of your servants*. That is, hang on to us; do not leave us in the lurch.

help us. The simple verb "to help" also has technical sense, exhibited in many psalms and in narrative contexts such as this, which is to render military support.

7. *the combat troops . . . all the valiant warriors*. These terms probably indicate that Joshua led elite troops, the ancient Near Eastern equivalent of commandos, on this mission.

9. *Joshua came against them suddenly*. By marching all night long the considerable distance from Gilgal to Gibeon, he is able to carry out a surprise attack, perhaps just at daybreak.

10. *and the* LORD *panicked them*. This is a vivid illustration of the system of dual causation sometimes adopted by the biblical writers. The soldiers of the alliance of five kings are of course in the first instance panicked by Joshua's surprise attack, a shrewd tactical maneuver, but now the panic is explained as God's direct intervention.

11. *the descent from Beth-Horon*. This is the same steep road that is called "ascent" in the previous verse, now imagined from Beth-Horon looking down rather than the other way around.

great stones from the heavens. This wording gives the initial impression of an entirely supernatural event, but then it is explained naturalistically as a reference to hailstones. Even so, the hailstones would have had to be improbably big in order to be lethal.

12. *O sun in Gibeon halt*. The reason for the prayer is explained in the next verse: the sun is to halt its movement across the sky and the moon not to appear in its place in order to give Joshua a long extension of daylight in which to hunt down and destroy his enemies.

13. *the Book of Jashar*. This lost text is also mentioned in 2 Samuel 1:18 as the literary source in which David's elegy for Saul and Jonathon appears. It is

safe to assume that it is a very old book, largely poetic or even epic, in which martial themes are prominent. The name *jashar* would appear to mean "the upright," though Shmuel Ahituv, mindful of the practice of calling books by their opening words, interestingly proposes that it could mean "he sang" (revocalizing *jashar* as *jashir*).

And the sun stood still. This translation construes the remainder of this verse as a continuation of the quotation from the Book of Jashar. It does not scan as poetry, but the language is elevated, with epic flourishes.

did not hasten to set. Psalm 19 imagines the sun racing across the sky like a warrior running on his path, and that mythological imagery is probably behind the verb "hasten" here.

19. *cut them down from behind*. The verb *zanev*, derived from *zanav*, "tail," means etymologically "to cut off the tail." It is used in Deuteronomy 25:18.

20. *to the last of them*. More literally, "until they came to an end." But as the next clause makes clear, this actually means that they were almost entirely wiped out but some escaped.

21. *no man*. The Hebrew says "to no man," but the prefix *l*^{e} is probably a dittography triggered by *le yisraʾel*, "at [or to] Israel."

24. *Put your feet on the necks of these kings*. As both Egyptian and Assyrian art abundantly demonstrate, this was a symbolic gesture by the victors for subjugating the defeated enemies.

26. *he impaled them on five poles*. Since it would be somewhat odd to hang a dead body by the neck, this particular verse offers credibility to the view that the Hebrew verb in question when applied to an execution means to impale, not to hang. Impaling the body for public display would be an act of shaming.

27. *to this very day*. This is again the etiological tag—the story explains why one finds great stones piled over the mouth of the cave at Makkedah.

28. *and Joshua took Makkedah on that day and struck it and its king*. Here begins a catalogue of Joshua's conquests, conveyed in more or less identical formulas, and probably from a different literary source.

32. *And the LORD gave Lachish into the hand of Israel*. This notation is still another indication of the tenuous relation to history of this account of the conquest because extrabiblical evidence shows that in the thirteenth century B.C.E. (the time of Joshua) and well beyond it, Lachish was not in Israelite hands. Altogether, this report of a lightning campaign in which a large swath of the land was conquered does not accord with the archaeological record for the history of this period. One might also observe an internal contradiction between the catalogue of conquests and the episode that precedes it. One of the five kings put to death at the Makkedah cave is the king of Jerusalem, the very man who organized the anti-Israelite alliance. One would expect that the conquest of Jerusalem should then logically figure in this account, but it was of course general knowledge that Jerusalem remained in Jebusite hands until over two centuries later, when it was taken by David. One suspects that the source from which the catalogue of conquests was drawn knew nothing of an Adoni-Zedek king of Jerusalem who played a central role in these battles, and that the redactor did not reconcile the two accounts.

40. *the Negeb and the lowland*. In David's time, much of the Negeb was dominated by the Amalekites, and the lowland was Philistine territory.

41. *from Kadesh-Barnea*. This would be extravagantly far to the south, in the northern part of the Sinai peninsula.

42. *in one fell swoop*. Literally, "one time" or "at once." This hyperbolic flourish again raises the problem of historicity.

CHAPTER 11

[1]And it happened when Jabin king of Hazor heard,
that he sent to Jobab king of Madon and to the king of
Shimron and the king of Achshaph, [2]and to the kings
who were in the north, in the high country and in the
Arabah, south of Chinneroth, and in the lowland and
in Naphoth-Dor on the west, [3]the Canaanite from the
east, and to the west, and the Amorite and the Hittite
and the Perizzite and the Jebusite in the high country,
and the Hivvite below Hermon in Mizpah land. [4]And
they sallied forth, they and all their camps with them,
troops more numerous than the sand that is on the
shore of the sea in number, and very many horses and
chariots. [5]And all these kings joined forces and came
and camped together by the waters of Merom to do
battle with Israel. [6]And the LORD said to Joshua, “Do
not fear them, for tomorrow at this time I shall cause
all of them to be slain before Israel. Their horses you
will hamstring and their chariots you will burn in fire.”
[7]And Joshua, and all the combat troops with him,
came against them suddenly at the waters of Merom,

and fell upon them. [8]And the LORD gave them into
the hand of Israel, and they struck them down and
pursued them to Greater Sidon and to Misrephoth-
Mayim and to Mizpeh Valley to the east, and they
struck them down until no survivor was left of them.
[9]And Joshua did to them as the LORD had said to
him, their horses he hamstrung and their chariots he
burned in fire. [0]And Joshua came back at that time and
took Hazor, and its king he struck down with the
sword. For Hazor in those days was chief of these
kingdoms. [11]And he struck down every living person
who was in it with the edge of the sword, putting it
under the ban. No breathing person was left, and he
burned Hazor in fire. [12]And all the towns of these
kings and all their kings Joshua took and struck them
down with the edge of the sword, he put them under
ban as Moses servant of the LORD had charged.
[13]Only all the towns standing on their mounds Israel
did not burn, except for Hazor alone that Joshua
burned. [14]And all the booty of these towns and the
cattle the Israelites plundered. Only the human beings
they struck down with the edge of the sword until they
had destroyed them—they left no breathing person.
[15]As the LORD had charged Moses His servant, so
Moses charged Joshua, who neglected nothing of all
that the LORD had charged Moses. [16]And Joshua took

all this land, the high country and all the Negeb and all the land of Goshen and the lowland and the Arabah and the high country of Israel and its lowland, [17]from Mount Halak going up to Seir as far as Baal-Gad in the Lebanon valley beneath Mount Hermon. And their kings he captured and struck them down and put them to death. [18]Many days Joshua did battle with these kings. [19]There was no town that made peace with the Israelites except the Hivvites dwelling in Gibeon. Everything they took in battle. [20]For it was from the LORD to harden their heart for battle against Israel, so that they would be put under the ban with no mercy shown them in order that they be destroyed, as the LORD had charged Moses. [21]And Joshua came at that time and cut down the Anakites from the high country, from Hebron, from Debir, from Anab, and from the high country of Judah and from all the high country of Israel, with their towns, Joshua put them under the ban. [22]No Anakites were left in the land of the Israelites. Only in Gaza, in Gath, and in Ashdod did they remain. [23]And Joshua took the whole land according to all that the LORD had spoken to Moses. And Joshua gave it in estate to Israel according to their divisions by their tribes. And the land was at rest from war.

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *when Jabin king of Hazor heard*. Though no grammatical object for the verb appears, the obvious sense is that he heard of Joshua's initial conquests. The pointed parallel with 10:1 makes this clear. Altogether, this whole chapter appears to have been composed to create a symmetrical complement to the account of the defeat of the southern alliance in the previous chapter. Here, the alliance is one of northern kings. The reach of this new conquest, going all the way to Sidon in Lebanon and, to the south on the Mediterranean coast, to Misrephoth-Mayim, is scarcely historical, and it seems devised to convey the idea of the completeness of the conquest of the land.

Hazor. This was an important city in northeastern Canaan in the Middle Bronze Age, a memory perhaps reflected in making its king the leader of the alliance, but by Joshua's time it had become a relatively small town.

2. *Chinneroth*. This is the same place as Kinneret, the Sea of Galilee.

3. *Hermon*. This is a mountain to the northeast, on the border between present-day Israel and Syria.

5. *the waters of Merom*. The location is in the high country of north-central Canaan.

6. *Their horses you will hamstring and their chariots you will burn in fire*. The chariot, a formidable instrument of warfare, was not generally adopted by the Israelites, who were essentially guerilla fighters from the high country, for another two centuries. These Canaanite chariots in all likelihood were made out of wood, hence the burning. As to hamstringing of the horses, Boling and others think this was a cunning strategy to disable the horses at the onset of the battle, although it is not entirely clear how easy it would have been for the Israelite warriors to get close enough to the chariots in order to maim the horses. Alternately, they might have hamstrung the horses after the victory in order to make sure they would not be used again to draw chariots, a

possibility encouraged by the previous verse in which the enemy troops appear to be defeated before the hamstringing.

7. *came against them suddenly at the waters of Merom*. This is the same strategy of surprise attack used against the southern alliance, with the enemy caught unawares at its own encampment.

11. *living person . . . breathing person*. The two Hebrew terms, *nefesh* and *neshamah*, are phonetically and semantically related. *Nefesh* is the life-breath and, by extension, the living person; *neshamah* explicitly means breath or anything that breathes.

13. *the towns standing on their mounds*. The "mound," *tell*, is the heaped-up layers of earlier habitation on which old cities stand. (It has become a technical archaeological term.) What the expression may mean in context is towns of notable antiquity, though that is not entirely certain.

15. *As the LORD had charged Moses*. The genocidal imperative is spelled out several times in Deuteronomy.

16. *the high country of Israel*. This rather odd phrase, matched in verse 21 with "the high country of Judah," probably reflects an awareness of the division into a southern and northern kingdom after the death of Solomon.

17. *Mount Halak*. Boling wittily and accurately observes that this could be translated as Bald Mountain.

18. *Many days*. The Hebrew *yamim* is an elastic indicator of time, and so it could mean here months or even years.

20. *For it was from the LORD to harden their heart for battle against Israel*. This is one of two verbs used in the Exodus story for the hardening or toughening of the heart of Pharaoh. There, the divinely instigated obduracy was in order to enable the display of God's overwhelming power. Here it is to provide grounds for wiping out the indigenous population.

21. *the Anakites*. Although in the present context this looks like a gentilic designation, in other biblical texts the word refers to giants.

22. *Only in Gaza, in Gath, and in Ashdod did they remain*. These are three of the five Philistine towns on the southern part of the Mediterranean coast. Goliath the Philistine was, of course, a giant, though the Hebrew *ʿanaq* is not attached to him in the story in 1 Samuel 17. It is conceivable that the association of huge physical proportions with the Anakites derives from a perception that the Philistines, of original Aegean stock, were bigger than the indigenous population of Canaan though archaeological evidence suggests the Canaanites were also big. The Philistines invaded the coastal areas around 1200 B.C.E., but later writers (as in Genesis) imagined them as longtime residents of the coastal strip.

CHAPTER 12

[1]And these are the kings of the land whom the
Israelites struck down and whose land they took hold
of, across the Jordan where the sun rises, from Wadi
Arnon to Mount Hermon and all the Arabah to the
east: [2]Sihon king of the Amorites who dwelled in
Heshbon, who ruled from Aroer on the banks of Wadi
Arnon and within the wadi, and half of Gilead as far
as Wadi Jabbok, border of the Ammonites, [3]and the
Arabah as far as Lake Chinneroth to the east and as
far as the Arabah Sea, the Salt Sea, to the east, by way
of Beth-Jeshimoth, and to the south below the slopes
of Pisgah. [4]And the region of Og king of Bashan, from
the remnant of the Rephaim, who dwelt in Ashtaroth
and in Edrei, [5]and ruled over Mount Hermon and
Salkah and all of the Bashan as far as the border of the
Geshurite and the Maacathite and half of Gilead, the
border of Sihon king of the Amorites. [6]Moses servant
of the LORD and the Israelites struck them down, and
Moses servant of the LORD gave it as an inheritance
to the Reubenites and to the Gadites and to the half-

tribe of Manasseh. [7]And these are the kings of the land whom Joshua and the Israelites struck down on the other side of the Jordan to the west, from Baal-Gad in the Lebanon valley as far as Mount Halak, which goes up toward Seir. And Joshua gave it to the tribes of Israel as an inheritance according to their divisions. [8]In the high country and in the lowland and in the Arabah and on the slopes and in the wilderness and in the Negeb of the Hittite, the Amorite, the Canaanite, the Perizzite, the Hivvite, and the Jebusite:

[9]the king of Jericho—one,
the king of Ai which is alongside Bethel—one,
[10]the king of Jerusalem—one,
the king of Hebron—one,
[11]the king of Jarmuth—one,
the king of Lachish—one,
[12]the king of Eglon—one,
the king of Gezer—one,
[13]the king of Debir—one,
the king of Geder—one,
[14]the king of Hormah—one,
the king of Arad—one,
[15]the king of Libnah—one,
the king of Adullam—one,

[16]the king of Makkedah—one,
the king of Bethel—one,
[17]the king of Tapuah—one,
the king of Hepher—one,
[18]the king of Aphek—one,
the king of Sharon—one,
[19]the king of Madon—one,
the king of Hazor—one,
[20]the king of Shimron-Merom—one,
the king of Achshaph—one,
[21]the king of Taanach—one,
the king of Megiddo—one,
[22]the king of Kedesh—one,
the king of Jokneam in Carmel—one,
[23]the king of Dor in Naphoth-Dor—one,
the king of Goiim in Gilgal—one,
[24]the king of Tirzah—one,
all the kings were thirty-one.

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And these are the kings of the land whom the Israelites struck down . . . across the Jordan where the sun rises*. The second half of the Book of Joshua, which begins in the next chapter, essentially abandons narrative to offer, after this catalogue of conquests, a tabulation of the apportioning of the land according to tribal divisions. Only in the three concluding chapters do we

return to narrative. The first six verses of this chapter report the victories of Moses over the sundry trans-Jordanian kings that are narrated in Numbers. The remainder of the chapter gives us a list of Joshua's victories west of the Jordan.

3. *Lake Chinneroth*. As before, this is a variant form of Lake Kinneret, or the Sea of Galilee.

4. *the remnant of the Rephaim*. Some scholars think this term originally referred to elite warriors. In biblical usage it can mean either "shades," which is scarcely a relevant sense here, or "giants." In Deuteronomy 3:11, Og is reported to have possessed gigantic proportions.

6. *Moses servant of the LORD gave it as an inheritance*. By the time this material was edited, late in the seventh century B.C.E. or in the sixth century, the Israelites no longer had possession of this trans-Jordanian region. The list thus serves as a kind of ideal map of sovereignty in times past.

9. *the king of Jericho—one*. This system of tallying is unusual. The evident aim is to arrive at a complete sum of all the conquests. Though, as we have seen, the historical reality of much of this account is in doubt, the numbering of thirty-one kings does accurately reflect a historical situation in which Canaan was splintered into a large number of city-kingdoms controlling quite small territories. Even if these rulers actually bore the title of king, they probably were closer to what today would be thought of as tribal warlords. This list obviously picks up names from the preceding narrative report, although it also includes several kings not mentioned earlier.

CHAPTER 13

[1]And Joshua was old, advanced in years. And the
LORD said to him, “You are old, advanced in years,
and very much of the land remains to take hold of.
[2]This is the land remaining: all the provinces of the
Philistines and all of the Geshurites, [3]from the Shihor,
which faces Egypt, to the region of Ekron to the north,
it is reckoned Canaanite. The five Philistine overlords,
the Gazite, and the Ashdodite, the Ascolonite, the
Gittite, and the Ekronite. And the Avvites [4]on the
south, all the Canaanite land from Arah of the
Sidonians to Aphek, which is on the Amorite border,
[5]and the land of the Giblite, and all of Lebanon to the
east, from Baal-Gad below Mount Hermon to the
approach to Hamath. [6]All the inhabitants of the high
country from Lebanon to Misrephoth-Mayim, all the
Sidonians, I Myself will dispossess them before the
Israelites, only to make it fall in estate to Israel as I
have charged you. [7]And now, divide this land in estate
among the nine tribes and the half-tribe of Manasseh,
[8]with whom the Reubenites and the Gadites took their

estate that Moses gave them across the Jordan to the east, as Moses servant of the LORD gave them, [9]from Aroer, which is on the banks of Wadi Arnon, and the town that is in the wadi, and the plain from Medeba to Dibon, [10]and all the towns of Sihon king of the Amorites, who reigned in Heshbon, to the border of the Ammonites, [11]and Gilead and the territory of the Geshurites and the Maacathites, and all of Mount Hermon and all Bashan to Saleah, [12]and all the kingdoms of Og in Bashan, who reigned in Ashtaroth and in Edrei—he remained from the remnant of the Rephaim, and Moses struck them down and dispossessed them. [13]But the Israelites did not dispossess the Geshurites and the Maacathites, and Geshur and Maacath have dwelled in the midst of Israel to this day. [14]Only to the tribe of Levi he gave no estate. The fire offerings of the LORD God of Israel, they are its estate, as He had spoken to it. [15]And Moses gave to the tribe of the Reubenites according to its clans, [16]and it became their territory from Aroer, which is on the banks of Wadi Arnon, and the town that is in the wadi and the whole plain to Medeba. [17]Heshbon and all its towns that are on the plain, Dibon and Bamoth-Baal and Beth-Baal-Meon, [18]and Jaza and Kedemoth and Mephaath, [19]and Kiriathaim and Sibma and Zereth-Shahar on the Mountain of the Valley,

[20]and Beth-Peor and the slopes of Pisgah and Beth-
Jeshimoth, [21]and all the towns of the plain and all the
kingdom of Sihon king of the Amorites, who reigned
in Heshbon, whom Moses struck down—and the
princes of Midian, Evi and Rekem and Zur and Hur
and Reba, princes of Sihon who dwelled in the land.
[22]And Balaam son of Beor, the soothsayer, the
Israelites killed by the sword with the rest of their
slain. [23]And the border of the Reubenites was the
Jordan. This was the estate of the Reubenites by their
clans, the towns and their hamlets. [24]And Moses had
given it to the tribe of Gad and to the Gadites by their
clans, [25]and it became their territory: Jazer and all the
towns of Gilead and half of the land of the
Ammonites as far as Aroer, which is just before
Rabbah, [26]and from Heshbon as far as Ramoth-
Mizpeh, and Betonim, and from Mahanaim to the
border of Lidber, [27]and in the Valley, Beth-Haran and
Beth-Nimrah and Succoth and Zaphon, the rest of the
kingdoms of Sihon king of Heshbon, from the Jordan
and its border to the edge of the Sea of Chinnereth
across the Jordan to the east. [28]This is the estate of the
Gadites according to their clans, the towns and their
hamlets. [29]And Moses gave it to the half-tribe of
Manasseh and it went to the half-tribe of the
Manassites according to their clans, [30]and their

territory was from Mahanaim, all of Bashan, all the kingdom of Og king of Bashan, and all of Havvoth-Jair, which is in Bashan, sixty towns, [31]and half of Gilead and Ashtaroth and Edrei, the royal towns of Og in Bashan, to the sons of Machir son of Manasseh, to half of the sons of Machir according to their clans. [32]These were what Moses apportioned in estate in the plains of Moab across the Jordan to the east of Jericho. [33]But to the tribe of Levi Moses gave no estate —the LORD God of Israel, He is their estate, as He had spoken to them."

CHAPTER 13 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *very much of the land remains to take hold of*. There is a tension between the section that begins here and the previous account of Joshua's conquest. In the preceding chapters, one gets the impression of a grand sweep of victories in which the Israelite forces led by Joshua took town after town, virtually the whole land. But the audience of this narrative was well aware that there were substantial regions of the land that for long periods were not controlled by the Israelites, and this awareness is registered here.

2. *all the provinces of the Philistines*. In fact, the Philistines did not establish their pentapolis along the Mediterranean shore, having arrived perhaps from the Aegean, until a generation or more after the putative time of Joshua.

3. *overlords*. The Hebrew *seren* is in all likelihood a loanword from the Philistine language. Some scholars think it is cognate with the Greek *tyrranos*.

the Avvites. These are an indigenous Canaanite people bordering on Philistine territory who remained unconquered by the Philistines.

4. *from Arah*. The received text reads "and from Arah." Arah is not a known place-name, and some emend it to Acco, which was a Sidonian town. Strenuous scholarly efforts have been made, and will not be recapitulated here, to identify all the towns and regions. Some names in the list nevertheless defy identification, and there are elements in the geographical indications that seem scrambled.

7. *the nine tribes and the half-tribe of Manasseh*. These are the tribes that settled west of the Jordan, the other two and a half tribes remaining on the east side of the Jordan.

8. *with whom the Reubenites and the Gadites took their estate*. That is, these two tribes plus the other half of the tribe of Manasseh. The more likely historical scenario is not that Israelites settled east of the Jordan in the original conquest but that they migrated there by stages later in search of land.

10. *border*. The Hebrew *gevul* sometimes means "border" and sometimes "territory" or "region," the meaning shifting in this chapter.

12. *he remained from the remnant of the Rephaim*. See the comment on 12:4.

13. *Maacath*. This is either a variant, archaic form of Maachah or a scribal error.

dwelled in the midst of Israel. As elsewhere, this phrase does not mean that they were geographically integrated with Israel but that they had peaceful relations with the Israelites.

14. *the fire offerings of the* LORD *God of Israel, they are its estate*. A substantial part of these sacrifices was not burned and thus was available to the Levites as food. This verse, reiterated at the end of the chapter, probably reflects a Deuteronomistic background in which the cult has been centralized in Jerusalem.

22. *Balaam son of Beor*. The killing off of Balaam, who in Numbers 22–24 delivered, against his own intention, a grand prophecy of blessing about Israel, may reflect a nationalist nervousness over the prominence of this Aramean soothsayer. Lest one think he lived happily ever after once he had returned to his native land, here he is included among the victims of the conquest.

CHAPTER 14

[1]And these are what the Israelites took in estate in the land of Canaan, which Eleazar the priest and Joshua son of Nun and the patriarchal heads of the Israelite tribes gave them in estate, [2]in the portion of their estate, as the LORD had charged through Moses for the nine and a half tribes. [3]For Moses had given an estate to the two and a half tribes across the Jordan, but to the Levites he gave no estate in their midst. [4]For the sons of Joseph were two tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh. And they gave no share in the land to the Levites except for towns to dwell in and their pastures for their livestock and their possessions. [5]As the LORD had charged Moses, so did the Israelites do, and they divided up the land. [6]And the Judahites came forward to Joshua in Gilgal, and Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite said to him, “You yourself know the word that the LORD spoke to Moses man of God about me and about you in Kadesh-Barnea. [7]I was forty years old when Moses servant of the LORD sent me from Kadesh-Barnea to spy out the land, and I

brought him back word just as I thought. [8]But my brothers who came up with me made the people's heart faint, yet I followed after the LORD my God. [9]And Moses vowed on that day, saying, 'The land on which your foot trod shall surely be yours in estate, and your sons', for all time, for you have followed after the LORD my God.' [10]And now, look, the LORD has kept me alive, as He had spoken, forty-five years since the LORDspoke this word to Moses while Israel went in the wilderness. And now, look, I am eighty-five years old. [11]I am still today as strong as the day Moses sent me. As my vigor then is my vigor now, for battle and for command. [12]And now, give me this mountain, as the LORD spoke on that day, for you yourself heard on that day that there were giants there and great fortified towns. Perhaps the LORD will be with me and I shall dispossess them as the LORD has spoken." [13]And Joshua blessed him and gave Hebron to Caleb son of Jephunneh in estate. [14]Therefore has Hebron been in estate to Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite to this day because he followed after the LORD God of Israel. [15]And the name of Hebron formerly was Kiriath-Arba—he was the biggest person among the giants. And the land was at rest from war.

CHAPTER 14 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *in the land of Canaan*. As the next two verses make clear, this phrase indicates the land west of the Jordan.

4. *except for towns to dwell in*. These towns were a practical concession to the Levites from the other tribes and not inalienable territory.

6. *And the Judahites came forward*. Although what is in question is the inheritance of Caleb, head of one of the clans of Judah, it is also regarded as a tribal issue because he is part of the tribe.

You yourself know. Caleb uses the emphatic form in which the personal pronoun is added before the conjugated verb, because Joshua was there with him, joining him in the positive minority report against the fearful assessment of the other ten spies.

7. *brought him back word*. This phrase is used in the spy narrative in Numbers 13:26.

just as I thought. That is, honestly. The literal sense is "as it was with my heart."

8. *made the people's heart faint*. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "made the people's heart melt," but in English that phrase unfortunately suggests gushing sentiment. The same idiom is used in the recapitulation of the story of the spies in Deuteronomy 1:28.

I followed after the LORD my God. The literal sense of the idiom is "I filled after." The clear meaning is to carry out implicitly the will or command of someone. The same expression is used in the original story of the spies in Numbers 14:24.

10. *I am eighty-five years old*. The Talmudic sages, calculating that the incident of the spies took place two years into the forty years of Wilderness wandering, conclude from this that the conquest of the land took seven years.

11. *As my vigor then is my vigor now, for battle and for command*. The region around Hebron still requires conquering, as Caleb's words in verse 12 show.

The idiom rendered as “command” is literally “to go out and to come back,” and it means to lead troops in battle.

12. *you yourself heard on that day that there were giants there*. The narrative context makes clear that the Hebrew ʿ*anaqim* is not in this instance a gentilic (“Anakites”) but means “giants,” the adversaries of daunting proportions before whom the ten fearful spies felt themselves to be like grasshoppers.

14. *Therefore*. As often elsewhere the Hebrew ʿ*al-ken* introduces an etiological explanation.

15. *Kiriath-Arba*. The Hebrew name means “city of four”—perhaps, as many scholars have inferred, because it was divided into four neighborhoods. But here “Arba” is construed as a man’s name—the largest of the indigenous giants.

CHAPTER 15

[1]And the portion for the Judahites according to their clans was southward to the border of Edom, the Wilderness of Zin on the far south. [2]And their southern boundary was from the edge of the Salt Sea, from the tongue that turns southward. [3]And it extended to the south, to the ascent of Akrabbim, and passed on to Zin and went up from the south to Kadesh-Barnea, and passed on to Hezron and went up to Addar and swung round to Karka. [4]And it passed on to Azmon and extended to the Wadi of Egypt, and the far reaches of the border came to the sea. This shall be for you the southern boundary. [5]And the boundary to the east is the Salt Sea south of the Jordan, and the boundary on the northern side from the tongue of the Sea to the mouth of the Jordan. [6]And the boundary went up to Beth-Hoglah and passed on north of Beth-Arabah, and the boundary went up to the Stone of Bohan son of Reuben. [7]And the boundary went up to Debir from the Valley of Achor and turned north to Gilgal, which is opposite the Ascent of Adummim,

which is south of the wadi, and the boundary passed on to the waters of Ein-Shemesh, and its far reaches were to Ein-Rogel. [8]And the boundary went up to the Vale of Ben-Hinnom to the flank of the Jebusite on the south, which is Jerusalem, and it went up to the mountaintop which overlooks the Vale of Ben-Hinnom to the west, which is at the end of the Valley of Rephaim to the north. [9]And the border swung round from the mountaintop to the spring of the waters of Nephtoah and extended to the towns of the high country of Ephron, and the boundary swung round to Baalah, which is Kiriath-Jearim. [10]And the boundary turned from Baalah westward to Mount Seir and passed on northward to the flank of Mount Jearim, which is Kesalon, and went down to Beth-Shemesh and passed on to Timnah. [11]And the boundary extended to the flank of Ekron to the north, and the boundary swung round to Shikkron and passed on to Mount Baalah and extended to Jabneel, and the far reaches of the boundary were to the sea. [12]And the western boundary—the Great Sea. And this boundary is the boundary of the Judahites all around, according to their clans. [13]And Caleb the son of Jephunneh was given a share in the midst of the Judahites at the behest of the LORD through Joshua—Kiriath-Arba, father of the giant, which is Hebron. [14]And Caleb

dispossessed from there the three sons of the giant,
Sheshai and Ahiman and Talmai, offspring of the
giant. [15]And he went up from there to the inhabitants
of Debir, and the name of Debir formerly was Kiriath-
Sepher. [16]And Caleb said, “Whoever strikes Kiriath-
Sepher and takes it, to him I shall give Achsah my
daughter as wife.” [17]And Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb’s
brother, took it, and he gave him Achsah his daughter
as wife. [18]And it happened when she came, that she
enticed him to ask a field of her father, and she
alighted from the donkey, and Caleb said to her,
“What troubles you?” [19]And she said, “Give me a
present, for you have given me desert-land, and you
should give me springs of water.” And he gave her the
upper springs and the lower springs. [20]This is the estate
of the tribe of the Judahites according to their clans.
[21]And the towns at the edge of the Judahites by the
boundary of Edom to the south were Kabzeel and
Eder and Yagur. [22]And Kinah and Dimonah and
Adadah. [23]And Kedesh and Hazor and Ithnan. [24]Ziph
and Telem and Bealoth. [25]And Hazor-Hadattah and
Kerioth-Hezron, which is Hazor. [26]Amam and Shema
and Moladah. [27]And Hazar-Gaddah and Heshmon and
Beth-Pelet. [28]And Hazar-Shual and Beersheba and
Beziothiah. [29]Baalah and Iim and Ezem. [30]And Eltolad
and Kesil and Hormah. [31]And Ziklag and Madmenah

and Sansanah. [32]And Lebaoth and Shilhin and Ain and
Rimmon. All the towns with their pasturelands came
to twenty-nine. [33]In the lowland: Eshtaol and Zorah
and Ashnah. [34]And Zanoah and Ein-Gannim, Tapuah
and Einan. [35]Jarmuth and Adullam, Socoh and
Azekah. [36]And Shaaraim and Aditaim and Gederah
and Gederothaim—fourteen towns with their
pastureland. [37]Zenan and Hadashah and Migdal-Gad.
[38]And Dilan and Mizpeh and Joktheel. [39]Lachish and
Bozkath and Eglon. [40]And Cabbon and Lahmas and
Kithlish. [41]And Gederoth, Beth-Dagon, and Naamah
and Makkedah—sixteen towns with their pasturelands.
[42]Libnah and Ether and Ashan. [43]And Iphtah and
Ashmah and Nezib. [44]And Keilah and Achzib and
Mareshah—nine towns with their pasturelands.
[45]Ekron with its hamlets and its pasturelands. [46]From
Ekron westward, all that is by Ashdod, with their
pasturelands. [47]Ashdod, its hamlets and its
pasturelands, Gaza, its hamlets and its pasturelands, to
the Wadi of Egypt, and the Great Sea is the boundary.
[48]And in the high country, Shamir and Jattir and
Socoh. [49]And Dannah and Kiriath-Sannah, which is
Debir. [50]And Anab and Eshtamoa and Anim. [51]And
Goshen and Holon and Giloh—eleven towns with their
pasturelands. [52]Arab and Dumah and Eshan. [53]And
Janim and Beth-Tapuah and Aphekah. [54]And Humtah

and Kiriath-Arba, which is Hebron, and Zior—nine towns with their pasturelands. [55]Maon, Carmel, Ziph, and Juttah. [56]And Jezreel and Jokneam and Zanoah. [57]Kain, Gibeah, and Timnah—ten towns with their pasturelands. [58]Halhul, Beth-Zur and Gedor. [59]And Maaroth and Beth-Anot and Eltekon—six towns with their pasturelands. [60]Kiriath-Baal, which is Kiriath-Jearim, and Rabbah—two towns with their pasturelands. [61]In the wilderness, Beth-Arabah, Middin, and Secacah. [62]And Nishban and Salt Town and Ein-Gedi—six towns with their pasturelands. [63]But the Jebusites, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Judahites were not able to dispossess, and the Jebusites have dwelled alongside the Judahites to this day.

CHAPTER 15 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the portion*. The Hebrew *goral* means "lot"—evidently, an aleatory device used to portion out the various territories—and through metonymy, it also means what is indicated by the lot, the portion or share.

southward to the border of Edom. What begins here and runs through the chapter is an elaborate geographical tracing of Judah's tribal territory. The general reader can scarcely be expected to follow all these details, and any reader would need a complicated map to do it. What is noteworthy is the inordinate amount of space devoted to Judah's possessions, which appear to cover most of central and southern Israel from the Jordan to the Mediterranean. As many scholars have inferred, this account probably reflects

a later period—seventh century?—when a centralized monarchy coming from the tribe of Judah governed the entire southern kingdom, with Jerusalem as its capital. The towns in this list are so numerous that many of them were probably not much bigger than substantial villages. Some of the names are well-known, can be confidently located, and are sites of important biblical events. Others remain elusive.

9. *Baalah, which is Kiriath-Jearim*. This, like at least one other item on the list, cites first an old pagan name and then its replacement (which means "Forest City").

13. *Caleb*. He was the other one of the twelve spies, besides Joshua, who brought back an encouraging report about the land, and Hebron with the surrounding territory was to be his reward.

17. *Othniel*. He is to become the first of the Judges.

18. *she enticed him to ask a field of her father*. The Septuagint reads "he enticed her," which makes the sequence of events easier to follow, but perhaps one should hew to the philological principle of adopting the more difficult reading. In that case, Achsah enticed her husband but then did the asking herself, perhaps because Othniel's request was rebuffed.

19. *present*. More literally, "blessing."

desert-land. In the Hebrew "Negeb-land," the Negeb serving as the model for arid country. The term is associated by etymology with dryness.

46. *Ekron . . . Ashdod*. These towns, like Gaza in the next verse, are Philistine cities. They could scarcely have been allotted to Judah in the thirteenth century, though by the time this list was compiled the Philistines had long been vanquished.

63. *But the Jebusites, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Judahites were not able to dispossess*. The writer is obliged to make this notation because it was well-known that Jerusalem remained in Jebusite hands until David conquered it, more than two centuries after the time of Joshua.

and the Jebusites have dwelled alongside the Judahites to this day. This second clause is somewhat misleading after the first clause. It could not mean,

as it may appear, that the Jebusites were never conquered but rather that after having been conquered by David, many of them remained as landholding residents of the city. See the account of David's purchase of the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite for use as a cultic site in 2 Samuel 24:18–25)—he buys it and does not take it by right of conquest.

CHAPTER 16

[1]And the portion for the sons of Joseph came out—
from the Jordan at Jericho to the waters of Jericho to
the east of the wilderness that goes up from Jericho
through the high country of Beth-el. [2]And it went out
to Beth-el, Luz, and passed on to the boundary of the
Ataroth Archite. [3]And it went down westward to the
boundary of the Japhletite as far as the boundary of
lower Beth-Horon and as far as Gezer, and its far
reaches were to the Sea. [4]And the sons of Joseph,
Manasseh and Ephraim, took their estates. [5]And the
boundary of the Ephraimites according to their clans
—the boundary of their estate on the east was Ataroth
Addar as far as Upper Beth-Horon. [6]And the boundary
went out to the Sea, to Michmethath on the north, and
the boundary swung round to the east of Taanath-
Shiloh, and passed through it to the east of Janoah.
[7]And it went down from Janoah to Ataroth and to
Naarath and touched on Jericho and came out at the
Jordan. [8]From Tapuah the boundary goes westward to
Wadi Kanah, and its far reaches are to the Sea. This is

the estate of the Ephraimite tribe according to its clans. [9]And the towns set apart for the Ephraimites within the estate of the Manassite—all the towns and their pasturelands. [10]And they did not dispossess the Canaanites dwelling in Gezer, and the Canaanites have dwelled in the midst of Ephraim to this day, and they became forced laborers.

CHAPTER 16 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And the portion for the sons of Joseph came out*. As above, the Hebrew *goral*, "portion," refers both to the aleatory device used to indicate the portion of territory and to the result of using the device—that is, the portion itself. In this instance, the verb "came out" refers to the toss of the oracular stone rather than to the boundary.

2. *Beth-el, Luz*. The received text brackets these two names together, but in Genesis 28:19 we are informed that Luz was the older name that was replaced by Beth-el.

9. *the towns set apart for the Ephraimites within the estate of the Manassite*. This indication suggests that not all the tribal boundaries were hard and fast, and that there were sometimes enclaves of one tribe within the territory of another tribe.

10. *they became forced laborers*. In keeping with the historiographical agenda of the writers, whatever Canaanite population that is not destroyed or driven out becomes subjugated to the Israelites. It is questionable whether this corresponds to historical reality.

CHAPTER 17

[1]And the portion for the tribe of Manasseh, for he was
Joseph's firstborn, to Machir Manasseh's firstborn,
father of Gilead, for he was a man of war—Gilead and
Bashan were his. [2]And to the remaining sons of
Manasseh according to their clans, to the sons of
Abiezer and to the sons of Helek and to the sons of
Asriel and to the sons of Shechem and to the sons of
Hepher and to the sons of Shemida—these are the
male offspring of Manasseh son of Joseph according
to their clans. [3]And Zelophehad son of Hepher son of
Gilead son of Machir son of Manesseh did not have
sons but daughters, and these are the names of his
daughters: Mahlah and Noa, Hoglah, Milkah, and
Tirzah. [4]And they approached Eleazar the priest and
Joshua son of Nun and the chieftains, saying, "The
LORD charged Moses to give us an estate in the midst
of our kinsmen." And he gave them at the LORD's
behest an estate in the midst of their father's kinsmen.
[5]And the shares of Manasseh fell out as ten, besides
the land of Gilead and Bashan that is across the

Jordan. [6]For the daughters of Manasseh took an estate
in the midst of his sons, and the land of Gilead went to
the remaining sons of Manasseh. [7]And the boundary
of Manasseh was from Asher to Michmethath, which
is by Shechem, and the boundary went southward to
the inhabitants of Ein-Tapuah. [8]The land of Tapuah
was Manasseh's, but Tapuah to the boundary of
Manasseh was the Ephraimites'. [9]And the boundary
went down to Wadi Kanah south of the wadi. These
towns were Ephraim's in the midst of the towns of
Manasseh, and the boundary of Manasseh was north
of the wadi, and its far reaches were to the Sea, [10]south
of Ephraim and north of Manasseh, and the Sea was
its boundary, and they touched Asher from the north
and Issachar from the east. [11]And within Issachar and
Asher, Manasseh had Beth-She'an and its hamlets and
Ibleam and its hamlets and the inhabitants of Dor and
its hamlets and the inhabitants of Taanach and its
hamlets and the inhabitants of Megiddo and its
hamlets—the three regions. [12]And the Manassites were
unable to take hold of these towns, and the Canaanites
went on dwelling in this land. [13]And it happened when
the Israelites grew strong, that they subjected the
Canaanites to forced labor, but they did not absolutely
dispossess them. [14]And the sons of Joseph spoke to
Joshua, saying, "Why did you give me in estate one

portion and one share when I am a numerous people, and until now the LORD has blessed me?” [15]And Joshua said to them, “If you are a numerous people, go up to the forest and clear it for yourself there in the land of the Perizzite and the Rephaim, for the high country of Ephraim is too cramped for you.” [16]And the sons of Joseph said, “The high country is not enough for us, and there are iron chariots among all the Canaanites who dwell in the valley land, those in Beth-She’an and its hamlets and those in the Valley of Jezreel.” [17]And Joshua said to the house of Joseph, to Ephraim and to Manasseh, saying, “You are a numerous people and you have great power. You shall not have just one portion. [18]But the high country shall be yours, for it is forest and you shall clear it, and its far reaches will be yours, for you shall dispossess the Canaanites, though they have iron chariots and though they are strong.”

CHAPTER 17 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *for he was Joseph’s firstborn*. Hence the clan of Machir is alotted the choice region of Gilead and Bashan. But the further notation about Machir as “a man of war” suggests that it was the military prowess of the clan that enabled it to take hold of this territory.

3. *And Zelophehad . . . did not have sons but daughters*. This report of the inheritance of the daughters of Zelophehad picks up the story that appears in Numbers 27:1–11, echoing some of its language.

4. *kinsmen*. The Hebrew *aḥim* here has to have its extended sense and cannot mean "brothers" because these five women have no brothers.

5. *the shares . . . fell out*. The verb here reflects the use of a lottery or some kind of aleatory device, but the term for "shares," *ḥavalim*, also means "ropes" and has the sense of share or portion of land because ropes were used to measure out the land.

10. *south of Ephraim*. This phrase is confusing because the text is describing the boundaries of Ephraim.

12. *take hold of these towns*. The Hebrew verb means "dispossess." Either a logical object such as "inhabitants" has dropped out of the text, or the verb is used here in the sense it has in a different conjugation (*yarash* instead of *horish*), "to take hold of."

14. *Why did you give me*. It is fairly common in biblical dialogue assigned to collective speakers to use the first-person singular.

and until now. The Hebrew wording is obscure and the text may be corrupt.

15. *go up to the forest and clear it*. There is archaeological evidence that a good deal of deforestation took place in this period in the high country, with the trees replaced by terraced agriculture.

the land of the Perizzite and the Rephaim. This geographical designation is obscure and may reflect a scribal error.

16. *there are iron chariots among all the Canaanites*. These armored vehicles, readily deployed in the valleys but not in mountainous regions, give a military advantage to the Canaanites over the Israelites, who, by and large, conducted warfare in guerilla style. (The characterization of "iron," however, may be an exaggeration because the archaeological evidence indicates that Canaanite chariots were primarily built of wood.) Thus the members of the Joseph

tribes fear that they will not be able to overcome the Canaanites in the flatlands.

17. *You are a numerous people and you have great power*. Joshua seizes on the very phrase the Josephites have used to claim more territory and employs it in a double sense: as a numerous people, you deserve more than a single portion, and as a numerous people, you have the power to conquer the Canaanites.

CHAPTER 18

[1]And the whole community of Israelites assembled at
Shiloh and they set up the Tent of Meeting there, and
the land was conquered before them. [2]And there
remained seven tribes among the Israelites that had not
taken the share of their estate. [3]And Joshua said to the
Israelites, “How long will you be idle about coming to
take hold of the land that the LORD God of your
fathers has given to you? [4]Set out for yourselves three
men to a tribe, that I may send them and they may rise
up and go about the land and write it out according to
their estate, and come to me. [5]And they shall share it
out in seven parts. Judah will stay by its territory in the
south, and the house of Joseph will stay by its territory
in the north. [6]As for you, you shall write out the land
in seven parts and bring them back to me here, and I
shall cast a lot for you here before the LORD our God.
[7]But the Levites have no share in your midst, for the
LORD’s priesthood is their estate.” And Gad and
Reuben and the half-tribes of Manasseh had taken
their estate across the Jordan to the east, which Moses

servant of the LORD had given them. [8]And the men
rose up and went off, and Joshua charged those who
went to write out the land, saying, “Up, go about in the
land and write it out and come back to me, and here I
shall cast the lot for you before the LORD in Shiloh.
[9]And the men went off and passed through the land
and wrote it out by towns into seven parts in a scroll,
and they came back to Joshua, to the camp at Shiloh.
[10]And Joshua cast the lot for them in Shiloh before the
LORD, and Joshua shared out the land to the Israelites
according to their portions. [11]And the lot of the tribe
of the Benjaminites fell out, and the territory by their
lot came out between the Judahites and the Josephites.
[12]And they had the boundary on the northern edge
from the Jordan, and the boundary went up to the
flank of Jericho on the north and went up to the high
country westward, and its far reaches were the
Wilderness of Beth-Aven. [13]And the boundary passed
on from there to the flank of Luz, which is Bethel, to
the south, and the boundary went down to Atroth
Addar in the high country that is south of Lower Beth-
Horon. [14]And the boundary swung round south toward
the sea of the high country which is opposite Beth-
Horon to the south, and its far reaches were at Kiriath-
Baal, which is Kiriath-Jearim, town of the Judahites.
This was the western edge. [15]And the southern edge

was from the border of Kiriath-Jearim, and the boundary went out westward, and went out to the spring of the waters of Naphtoah. [16]And the boundary went down to the edge of the high country which is opposite the Vale of Ben-Hinnom, which is in the Valley of Rephaim to the north, and it went down the Vale of Hinnom to the flank of the Jebusites on the south and down to Ein-Rogel. [17]And it swung round from the north and went out to Ein-Shemesh and went out to Geliloth, which is over against the Ascent of Adummim, and it went down to the Stone of Bohan son of Reuben. [18]And it passed on northward to the flank opposite the Arabah and went down to the Arabah. [19]And the boundary passed on northward to the flank of Beth-Hoglah to the edge of the Jordan, and the far reaches of the boundary northward were at the tongue of the Salt Sea at the southern end of the Jordan. This was the southern boundary. [20]And the Jordan marked its boundary at the eastern edge. This was the estate of the Benjaminites by its boundaries all around, according to their clans. [21]And the towns that were the Benjaminite tribe's were Jericho and Beth-Hoglah and Emek-Keziz, [22]and Beth-Arabah and Zemaraim and Bethel, [23]and Avvim and Parah and Ophrah, [24]and Chephar-Ammonah and Ophni and Geba—twelve towns and their pasturelands. [25]Gibeon

and Ramah and Beeroth, [26]and Mizpeh and Chephirah
and Mozah, [27]and Rekem and Irpeel and Taralah, [28]and
Zela-Eleph, and the Jebusite, which is Jerusalem,
Gibeath, Kiriath-Jearim. Fourteen towns and their
pasturelands—this was the estate of the Benjaminites
according to their clans.

CHAPTER 18 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And the whole community of Israelites assembled at Shiloh*. This marks a shift from the role of the encampment at Gilgal as the national assembly place. Shiloh, as its representation in the early chapters of 1 Samuel indicates, was a central sanctuary, until its destruction by the Philistines sometime in the eleventh century B.C.E. Placing the Tent of Meeting there would have confirmed its centrality. In subsequent narratives, the Tent of Meeting is not mentioned but rather the Ark of the Covenant, which would have been within the Tent of Meeting.

2. *And there remained seven tribes*. If one subtracts Judah, Reuben, Ephraim, Manasseh, and Levi, all of which have already been accounted for, seven tribes are left to be given their tribal territories.

6. *write out the land*. Still more literally, this would be "write the land." The obvious sense is to draw up a set of notations of the boundaries of the tribal territories.

I shall cast a lot for you here before the LORD. The drawing up of tribal boundaries by the representatives of the seven tribes is then to be confirmed by divine lot. As Shmuel Ahituv has shown, the use of such a lottery for the division of land was widespread in the ancient Near East.

10. *cast the lot*. The Hebrew text here uses a different verb from the one in verse 6, but both mean to cast or fling, suggesting that the mechanism for the lot involved dicelike objects.

11. *fell out*. Literally, "went up."

16. *Vale of Ben-Hinnom . . . the Valley of Rephaim*. The Hebrew uses two different words for "valley," *gei*ʾ and ʿ*emeq*. It is possible that the former designates a smaller topographical entity. Both valleys are within the perimeters of modern-day Jerusalem, though they would have been outside the city to the west in ancient times.

28. *Jerusalem*. It is a little surprising that Jerusalem, conquered from the Jebusites by David, who was a Judahite, is here assigned to the tribe of Benjamin. It has been suggested that this apportionment reflects a later period, when the unity of Benjamin and Judah, the two southern tribes, was firmly established and the old rivalry between the two, registered in the Book of Samuel, had long since vanished.

Kiriath-Jearim. The Masoretic Text reads *qiryat* ʿ*arim*, "Kiriath towns" (or "city of towns"). This translation adopts a proposal, in part based on the Septuagint, that a haplography occurred, with the original text reading *qiryat ye*ʿ*arim* ʿ*arim*, "Kiriath-Jearim, [fourteen] towns."

CHAPTER 19

[1]And the second lot fell out for Simeon, for the tribe
of the Simeonites according to their clans, and their
estate was within the estate of the Judahites. [2]And they
had in their estate Beersheba and Sheba and Moladah,
[3]and Hazar-Shual and Belah and Ezem, [4]and Eltolad
and Bethul and Hormah, [5]and Ziklag and Beth-
Marcaboth and Hazar-Susah, [6]and Beth-Lebaoth and
Sharuhen—thirteen towns and their pasturelands.
[7]Ayin, Rimmon, Ether and Ashan—four towns and
their pasturelands, [8]and all the pasturelands that are
around these towns as far as Baalath-Beer, Ramath-
Negeb—this is the estate of the tribe of the
Simeonites according to their clans. [9]The estate of the
Simeonites was from the territory of the Judahites, for
the share of the Judahites was too large for them, and
the Simeonites took an estate within their estate. [10]And
the third lot fell out for the Zebulunites according to
their clans, and the boundary of their estate was as far
as Sarid. [11]And their boundary went up westward to
Maralah and touched Dabbesheth and touched the

wadi which is opposite Jokneam. [12]And it turned back
from Sarid eastward where the sun rises to the
boundary of Cisloth-Tabor, and it went out to
Dabereth and went up to Japhia. [13]And from there it
passed on eastward, toward the sunrise, to Gath-
Hepher, Ittah, Kazin, and it went out and swung round
to Neah. [14]And the boundary on the north turned
round to Hannathon, and its far reaches were the Vale
of Iphtah-El, [15]and Kattath and Nahalal and Shimron
and Idalah and Bethlehem—twelve towns and their
pasturelands. [16]This is the estate of the Zebulunites
according to their clans, these towns and their
pasturelands. [17]The fourth lot fell out for Issachar, for
the Issacharites according to their clans. [18]And their
boundary was to Jezreel and Chesulloth and Shunem,
[19]and Hapharaim and Shion and Anaharath, [20]and
Rabbith and Kishon and Ebez, [21]and Remeth and Ein-
Gannim and Ein-Haddah and Beth-Pazzez. [22]And the
boundary touched Tabor and Shahazimah and Beth-
Shemesh, and the far reaches of their boundary were
at the Jordan—sixteen towns and their pasturelands.
[23]This is the estate of the Issacharites according to
their clans, and the towns and their enclosures. [24]And
the fifth lot fell out to the tribe of the Asherites
according to their clans. [25]And their boundary was
Helkath and Hali and Beten and Akshaph, [26]and

Alammelech and Amad and Mishal. And it touched
Carmel on the west and Shihor-Libnath. [27]And it
turned back to Beth-Dagon where the sun rises and
touched Zebulun and the Vale of Iphtah-El on the
north, Beth-Emek and Neiel, and the boundary came
out to Cabul on the north, [28]and Ebron and Rehob and
Hammon and Kanah, as far as Greater Sidon. [29]And
the boundary turned back to Ramah and as far as the
fortress city of Tyre, and its far reaches, and the
boundary turned back to Hosah, and its far reaches
were the Sea, Mehebel, to Achzib, [30]and Ummah and
Aphek and Rehob—twenty-two towns and their
pasturelands. [31]This is the estate of the tribe of
Asherites according to their clans—these towns and
their pasturelands. [32]For the Naphtalites the sixth lot
came out, for the Naphtalites according to their clans.
[33]And their boundary was from Heleph, from Elon-in-
Zaananim and Adami-Nekeb and Jabneel as far as
Kum, and its far reaches were at the Jordan. [34]And the
boundary turned back westward to Aznoth-Tabor and
went from there to Hukok and touched Zebulun from
the south and touched Asher from the west and Judah
at the Jordan where the sun rises. [35]And the fortress
towns were Ziddim, Zer, Hamath, Rakkath, and
Chinnereth, [36]and Adamah and Ramah and Hazor,
[37]and Kedesh and Edrei and Ein-Hazor, [38]and Iron and

Migdal-El, Horam, Beth-Anath and Beth-Shemesh—
nineteen towns and their pasturelands. [39]This is the
estate of the tribe of the Naphtalites according to their
clans, the towns and their pasturelands. [40]For the tribe
of the Danites according to their clans the seventh lot
came out. [41]And the territory of their estate was Zorah
and Eshtaol and Ir-Shemesh, [42]and Shaalbim and
Ajalon and Ithlah, [43]and Elon and Timnathah and
Ekron, [44]and Eltekeh and Gibthon and Baalath, [45]and
Jehud and Benei Brak and Gath-Rimmon, [46]and the
Jarkon Waters and Rakkon by the boundary over
against Joppa. [47]And the territory of the Danites fell
from their hands. And the Danites went up and did
battle with Leshem and took it. And they struck it with
the edge of the sword and took hold of it and dwelled
in it. And they called Leshem Dan, like the name of
Dan their forefather. [48]This is the estate of the tribe of
the Danites according to their clans—these towns and
their pasturelands.

[49]And they finished taking possession of the land
according to its boundaries, and the Israelites gave
Joshua son of Nun an estate in their midst. [50]At the
behest of the LORD they gave him the town that he
had asked for, Timnath-Serah in the high country of

Ephraim, and he rebuilt the town and dwelled in it.
[51]These are the estates that Eleazar the priest and Joshua son of Nun and the heads of the Israelite tribes conferred by lot in Shiloh before the LORD at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. And they finished sharing out the land.

CHAPTER 19 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *their estate was within the estate of the Judahites*. Unlike the other tribes, Simeon did not have a territory with clear-cut boundaries but rather enclaves within the territory of Judah. This situation is reflected in the curse Jacob pronounces on Simeon and Levi: "I will divide them in Jacob, / disperse them in Israel" (Genesis 49:7). (Levi's dispersal was manifested in its having no tribal territory, only levitical towns.) The anomaly of the portion assigned to Simeon is explained in verse 9.

27. *the Vale of Iphtah-El*. The Masoretic Text here reads "the sons of Iphtah-El," a noun that doesn't make sense as the object of the verb "touched." This translation reflects the reading of the Septuagint.

28. *as far as Greater Sidon*. The territory of Asher could not have included Sidon, a Phoenician city, but perhaps the qualifier "greater" is meant to suggest something like the far southern reach of the region controlled by Sidon.

47. *And the territory of the Danites fell from their hands*. More literally: "went out from them." Their original territory was in the southwestern region bordering on Philistine country—a location reflected in the stories about Samson, who was a Danite. At some relatively early point, perhaps as early as the twelfth century B.C.E., the Danites were forced out of their original tribal

territory and migrated to the far north of the country, where they conquered a new area for settlement. This northern location is reflected in the story of Micah's idol in Judges 18. The reading of this verse in the Septuagint shows a report that might be the original version or might be an explanatory gloss: "The Danites did not dispossess the Amorites, who forced them into the high country. The Amorites did not let them come down into the plain, and their territory was too confining for them."

Leshem. Elsewhere, this town is called Layish.

49. *the Israelites gave Joshua son of Nun an estate in their midst*. One infers that Joshua waited until all the tribes had been allocated their territories before he took his own estate. As Shmuel Ahituv notes, his portion was a special assignment of territory to the commander in chief.

50. *rebuilt*. The Hebrew verb ordinarily means "to build," but in contexts where the object is in ruins, as may be the case here because of conquest, it can mean "rebuild."

CHAPTER 20

[1]And the LORD spoke to Joshua, saying: [2]“Speak to
the Israelites, saying, Set aside for yourselves the towns
of asylum about which I spoke to you through Moses
[3]where a murderer, one who strikes down a person in
errance, without intending, may flee, and they will be
an asylum for you from the blood avenger. [4]And he
may flee to one of these towns and stand at the
gateway to the town and speak his words in the hearing
of the elders of that town, and they will take him to
them into that town and give him a place and he will
dwell with them. [5]And should the blood avenger
pursue him, they will not hand the murderer over to
him, for he struck down his fellow man without
intending, and he had not been his enemy in times
past. [6]And he shall dwell in that town until he stands
before the community in judgment, until the death of
the high priest who will be in those days. Then the
murderer shall return and come to his town and to his
home and to the town from which he had fled.” [7]And
they dedicated Kedesh in the Galilee in the high

country of Naphtali and Shechem in the high country of Ephraim and Kiriath-Arba, which is Hebron, in the high country of Judah, [8]and across the Jordan from Jericho, to the east, Bezer in the wilderness on the plain, from the tribe of Reuben and Ramoth in Gilead from the tribe of Gad and Golan in Bashan from the tribe of Manasseh. [9]These were the towns marked out for all the Israelites and for the sojourners sojourning in their midst to flee there, anyone striking down a person in errance, that he not die by the hand of the blood avenger, until he stand before the community.

CHAPTER 20 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the towns of asylum about which I spoke to you through Moses*. The laws for the town of asylum are laid out in Numbers 35 and restated, in somewhat different terms, in Deuteronomy 19. Although the literary formulation of the laws here was probably done two or three centuries after the founding of the monarchy, the laws themselves reflect the tribal period when there was no centralized judicial authority, and vendetta justice prevailed in cases of murder or manslaughter.

3. *a murderer*. The Hebrew *rotseaḥ*, which generally means "murderer," also encompasses "manslayer," as in the present context. Perhaps it is used to stress the gravity of destroying a life, even unintentionally.

in errance, without intending. This duplication of language brings together the term used in Numbers with the one used in Deuteronomy.

blood avenger. The literal sense of this designation is "blood redeemer." That idiom reflects an archaic notion that when the blood of one's kin is shed,

it has been lost to—or perhaps drained away from—the family, and it must be "redeemed" by shedding the blood of the killer.

6. *until he stands before the community in judgment, until the death of the high priest*. These look suspiciously like contradictory terms. The fugitive has already received what amounts to a verdict of innocent when the elders accept his plea in the gateway of the town (the place of judgment). If a general amnesty obtains after the death of the high priest, why does the fugitive have to stand trial a second time? It is possible that the writer responsible for this passage was uneasy with the idea of a blanket exculpation at the time of the death of the high priest and wanted to emphasize that the fugitive's innocence had to be determined by judicial proceedings.

and to the town from which he had fled. This phrase seems redundant after "to his town." Perhaps one should drop the "and" and read it as an explanatory apposition, "to his town. . . . to the town from which he has fled."

9. *to flee there, anyone striking down a person in errance, that he not die by the hand of the blood avenger*. This phraseology repeats the language of the beginning of this section in an envelope structure.

until he stand before the community. He stands before the community to be judged, as verse 6 makes explicit. Here at the end, no mention is made of the death of the high priest, perhaps because the writer wanted to emphasize judicial proceedings, not amnesty.

CHAPTER 21

[1]And the heads of the patriarchal houses of the
Levites approached Eleazar the priest and Joshua son
of Nun and the heads of the patriarchal houses of the
Israelite tribes, [2]and they spoke to them in Shiloh in
the land of Canaan, saying, “The LORD charged
through Moses to give us towns in which to dwell and
their fields for our cattle.” [3]And the Israelites gave
these towns and fields to the Levites from their estate
at the behest of the LORD. [4]And the lot came out for
the Kohathite clans, and by lot the sons of Aaron the
priest from the Levites had thirteen towns from the
tribe of Judah and from the tribe of Simeon and from
the tribe of Benjamin. [5]And the remaining Kohathites
had by lot ten towns from the tribe of Ephraim and
from the tribe of Dan and from the half-tribe of
Manasseh. [6]And the sons of Gershon according to
their clans had by lot thirteen towns from the tribe of
Issachar and from the tribe of Asher and from the
tribe of Naphtali and from the half-tribe of Manasseh
in Bashan. [7]The sons of Merari according to their clans

had twelve towns from the tribe of Reuben and from the tribe of Gad and from the tribe of Zebulun. [8]And the Israelites gave to the Levites by lot these towns and their fields as the LORD had charged through Moses. [9]And they gave from the tribe of the Judahites and from the tribe of the Simeonites these towns which will here be called by name. [10]And it came to the sons of Aaron for the Kohathite clans from the sons of Levi, for theirs was the first lot, [11]and they gave them Kiriath-Arba father of Anak, which is Hebron, in the high country of Judah, and its fields around it. [12]And the town's open land and its pastureland they gave to Caleb son of Jephunneh in his holding. [13]And to the sons of Aaron the priest they gave the town of asylum for the murderer, Hebron and its fields, and Libnah and its fields, [14]and Jattir and its fields and Eshtamoa and its fields, [15]and Holon and its fields and Debir and its fields, [16]and Ain and its fields and Juttah and its fields, and Beth-Shemesh and its fields—nine towns from these tribes. [17]And from the tribe of Benjamin, Gibeon and its fields and Geba and its fields, [18]Anathoth and its fields and Almon and its fields—four towns. [19]All the towns of the sons of Aaron, the priest, were thirteen towns and their fields. [20]And for the clans of the Kohathites, the remaining Levites of the Kohathites, the towns of their lot were from the

tribe of Ephraim. [21]And they gave the towns of asylum
for the murderer, Shechem and its fields in the high
country of Ephraim and Gezer and its fields, [22]and
Kibzaim and its fields and Beth-Horon and its fields—
four towns. [23]And from the tribe of Dan, Elteta and its
fields, Gibthon and its fields, [24]Ajalon and its fields,
Gath-Rimmon and its fields—four towns. [25]And from
the half-tribe of Manasseh, Taanach and its fields and
Gath-Rimmon and its fields—two towns. [26]All the
towns and their fields were ten for the remaining
Kohathites. [27]And to the Gershonites from the clans of
the Levites, from the half-tribe of Manasseh the
asylum town for the murderer, Golan in Bashan and its
fields and Beeshterah and its fields—two towns. [28]And
from the tribe of Issachar, Keshion and its fields,
Dobrath and its fields, [29]Jarmuth and its fields, Ein-
Gannim and its fields—four towns. [30]And from the
tribe of Asher, Mishal and its fields, Abdon and its
fields. [31]Helkath and its fields and Rehob and its fields
—four towns. [32]And from the tribe of Naphtali, the
town of asylum for the murderer, Kedesh in the
Galilee and its fields and Hamath-Dor and its fields
and Kartan and its fields—three towns. [33]All the towns
of the Gershonites according to their clans were
thirteen towns and their fields. [34]And for the clans of
the remaining Merarites, from the tribe of Zebulun,

Jokneam and its fields, Kartah and its fields, [35]Dimnah and its fields, Nahalal and its fields—four towns. [36]And from the tribe of Gad, the town of asylum for the murderer, Ramoth in Gilead and its fields, and Mahanaim and its fields, [37]Heshbon and its fields and Jazer and its fields—all the towns were four. [38]All the towns for the remaining Merarites according to their clans that were their lot came to twelve towns. [39]All the towns of the Levites within the holdings of the Israelites were forty-eight towns and their fields. [40]These towns, each town and its fields all around, thus these towns were. [41]And the LORD gave to Israel the whole land that He had vowed to give to their fathers, and they took hold of it and dwelled in it. [42]And the LORD granted them rest round about, as all that He had vowed to their fathers, and no man of all their enemies could stand against them—the LORD delivered all their enemies into their hand. [43]Nothing failed of all the good things that the LORD had spoken to the House of Israel—everything came about.

CHAPTER 21 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *The LORD charged . . . to give us towns*. It is difficult to assess to what extent the list of levitical towns reflects historical reality. It is improbable that the Levites actually had forty-eight of their own settlements, or that the other tribes would have ceded that much real estate to them. Ahituv plausibly suggests that what they were given was quarters within the towns, which continued to be part of the domain of the host tribe.

4. *the sons of Aaron the priest*. Through verse 19, we have the apportionment of towns to the priests (*kohanim*). What follows is the apportionment to the Levites, who make up the rest of the tribe of Levi.

8. *these towns and their fields*. In an agricultural economy, the houses within the town would have been places of residence but not sites from which income could be generated. Hence the need to have a share in the fields outside the town where crops could be grown or flocks pastured. For these areas outside the town, three terms are used: *migrash*, "field," as here; *ḥatseir*, "pastureland," evidently an enclosed field; and (verse 12) *sadeh*, "open land," probably extending beyond the *migrashim*.

21. *towns of asylum*. As this list makes clear, all the towns of asylum are levitical towns, but many others assigned to the Levites are not towns of asylum.

36. *And from the tribe of Gad*. In between the end of the preceding verse and these words, some Hebrew manuscripts insert the following: "and from the tribe of Reuben Bezer and its fields and Johzah and its fields, Kedemoth and its fields, and Mephath and its fields—four towns."

40. *These towns, each town and its fields all around, thus these towns were*. The syntax of the Hebrew is rather crabbed, but this seems to be the sense of the verse.

43. *Nothing failed*. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "nothing fell."
the good things. The Hebrew uses a singular noun and it could also be understood to mean "the good word."

CHAPTER 22

[1]Then did Joshua call to the Reubenites and the
Gadites and to the half-tribe of Manesseh, [2]and he said
to them, “You have kept all that Moses, servant of the
LORD, charged you, and you have heeded my voice in
all that I have charged you. [3]You have not forsaken
your brothers for many days until this day, and you
have kept the watch of the LORD your God. [4]And
now the LORD your God has granted rest to your
brothers, as He had spoken to them, so now turn and
go off to your tents, to the land of your holding that
Moses, servant of the LORD, gave to you across the
Jordan. [5]Only watch carefully to do the command and
the teaching that Moses, servant of the LORD,
charged you, to love the LORD your God and to walk
in all His ways, to keep His commands and to cling to
Him and to serve Him with all your heart and with all
your being.” [6]And Joshua blessed them and sent them
off, and they went to their tents. [7]And to the half-tribe
of Manasseh Moses had given land in Bashan, and to
the other half Joshua gave land with their brothers

west of the Jordan. And what's more, when Joshua sent them off to their tents and blessed them, [8]he said to them, saying, "With many possessions return to your tents and with very abundant livestock, with silver and with gold and with bronze and with iron and with a great many cloaks. Share the booty of your enemies with your brothers." [9]And the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh turned back and went from Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan, to go to the land of Gilead, to the land of their holding in which they had taken hold at the behest of the LORD through Moses. [10]And they came to the Jordan districts that are in the land of Canaan, and the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh built there a great altar to be seen by all. [11]And the Israelites heard, saying, "Look, the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh have built an altar over against the land of Canaan in the Jordan districts across from the Israelites." [12]And the Israelites heard, and all the community of the Israelites assembled at Shiloh to go up against them as an army. [13]And the Israelites sent Phineas son of Eleazar the priest to the Reubenites and to the Gadites and to the half-tribe of Manasseh, [14]and ten chieftains were with him, one chieftain for a patriarchal house for each of the tribes of Israel, each

the head of a patriarchal house for the clan-groups of Israel. [15]And they came to the Reubenites and to the Gadites and to the half-tribe of Manasseh and spoke with them, saying: [16]"Thus said the whole community of the LORD: 'What is this violation that you have committed against the God of Israel, to turn back today from the LORD by building for yourselves an altar to rebel today against the LORD? [17]Is the crime of Peor, from which we have not been cleansed to this day, too little for us, as the scourge came upon the community of the LORD? [18]As for you, you turn back today from the LORD, and it will happen that should you rebel today against the LORD, tomorrow His fury will be against the whole community of Israel. [19]And if indeed the land of your holding is unclean, cross over to the land of the LORD's holding where the LORD's sanctuary dwells and take a holding within it, but do not rebel against the LORD, and against us do not rebel, in your building yourselves an altar other than the altar of the LORD our God. [20]Did not Achan son of Zerah violate the ban, and the fury was against the whole community of Israel while he, a single man, did not perish through his crime?'" [21]And the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh answered and spoke to the heads of the clan-groups of Israel: [22]"God of gods is the LORD. God of gods is the

LORD! He knows, and Israel shall know. If in rebellion and in violation against the LORD, [23]to build us an altar to turn back from the LORD, do not rescue us this day. And if to offer up on it burnt offering and grain offering, and if to prepare on it well-being offerings—let the LORD seek it out. [24]Or if not from concern for one thing we have done this, saying, 'Tomorrow your sons will say to our sons, saying, What do you have to do with the LORD God of Israel, [25]when the LORD has fixed a boundary, the Jordan, between you and us, O Reubenites and Gadites? You have no share in the LORD.' And your children will prevent our children from fearing the LORD. [26]And so we thought, 'Let us act, pray, to build an altar not for burnt offerings and not for sacrifices, [27]but let it be a witness between you and us and for our generations after us to do the service of the LORD before Him with our burnt offerings and our sacrifices and our well-being offerings, that your children say not tomorrow to our children, You have no share in the LORD.' [28]And we thought, when it happens that our generations tomorrow say to us, we shall say, 'See the image of the LORD's altar that your forefathers made, not for burnt offerings and not for sacrifices but as a witness between you and us. [29]Far be it from us to rebel against the LORD and to turn back today from

the LORD to build an altar for burnt offerings and for grain offerings and for sacrifice other than the altar of the LORD our God which is before His sanctuary.'" [30]And Phineas the priest, and the chieftains of the community and the heads of the clan-groups of Israel with him, heard what the Reubenites and the Gadites and the Manassites had spoken, and it was good in their eyes. [31]And Phineas son of Eleazar the priest said to the Reubenites and to the Gadites and to the Manassites, "Today we know that the LORD is in our midst, for you have not committed this violation against the LORD, and so you have saved the Israelites from the LORD's hand." [32]And Phineas son of Eleazar the priest, and the chieftains with him, turned back from the Reubenites and from the Gadites, from the land of Gilead to the land of Canaan, to the Israelites, and they brought back word to them. [33]And the thing was good in the eyes of the Israelites, and the Israelites blessed God, and they did not think to go up as an army to lay ruin to the land in which the Reubenites and the Gadites were dwelling. [34]And the Reubenites and the Gadites called the altar Witness, "for it is a witness among us that the LORD is God."

CHAPTER 22 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Then did Joshua call*. Boling aptly describes the Hebrew phrasing *ʾaz yiqraʾ yehoshuʿa* as "an expansive opening to a climactic unit." The small stylistic flourish in the translation seeks to mirror this effect.

the Reubenites and the Gadites and to the half-tribe of Manasseh. The book began with the necessity for the trans-Jordanian tribes to join their brothers in the conquest of the land west of the Jordan. Now that the conquest is complete, we come back to these tribes, in an envelope structure, as they are sent back to their own territory.

3. *for many days*. These are the days, or period, of the conquest.

4. *granted rest*. As elsewhere, this idiom indicates subduing all enemies.

5. *to do the command and the teaching . . . to keep His commands and to cling to Him and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your being*. This string of phrases is a hallmark of Deuteronomistic prose.

8. *Share the booty of your enemies*. The source of the great abundance of possessions just listed is here spelled out.

10. *the Jordan districts*. These lie evidently alongside the Jordan, though one cannot determine a precise location.

to be seen by all. The words "by all" have been added in the translation because of the requirements of English usage. The literal sense is "a great altar for sight."

16. *Thus said*. This is the so-called messenger-formula, regularly used to introduce the text of a message, whether oral or written.

to turn back today from the LORD by building for yourselves an altar. The idiom "to turn back" is repeated five times in this single episode, always in the sense of "to fall away from," "to abandon." The objection to building an altar east of the Jordan is a little odd because regional altars were permissible in this period, and the trans-Jordanian territory, allotted by God through Moses to the two and a half tribes, could not plausibly be defined as "unclean" land. There was, however, an officially authorized altar in front of the sanctuary at

Shiloh, and this new altar was thought to set up illegitimate competition to the cis-Jordanian one. Many scholars have detected a Priestly agenda in this story.

17. *the crime of Peor, from which we have not been cleansed to this day*. This episode, which involves an orgiastic sexual rite in which Israelite men are lured by Midianite women, is recounted in Numbers 25. The punishment for the transgression is a plague that sweeps through the ranks of Israel. The Israelites' claim here that they still have not been cleansed of the crime of Peor may reflect some present-day epidemic, which is construed theologically as continuing punishment for that initial crime. Perhaps, then, the Israelites understand the erection of an altar east of the Jordan, where the hinterland is pagan, as the top of a slippery slope leading to corruption by pagan practices.

19. *an altar other than the altar of the LORD our God*. Although the first part of this verse introduces the notion of trans-Jordan as an "unclean" land, the emphasis here is on the idea that there should be no alternative to the nationally recognized shrine at Shiloh.

20. *Achan*. Achan's transgression in violating the ban (chapter 7) is comparable to the putative transgression of the tribes east of the Jordan only in regard to its consequences—it is not the transgressor but the whole people that suffers because of the violation.

22. *God of gods is the LORD*. This solemn, repeated pronouncement marks the beginning of a sacred vow in which the two and a half tribes declare the innocence of their intentions before God and Israel.

He knows, and Israel shall know. The difference in tense is significant: God knows that we did not intend to betray Him in building this grand altar, and when we have finished making our declaration, Israel will know as well.

23. *do not rescue us this day*. If in fact the building of the altar was meant as an act of rebellion against God, let your assembled army destroy us.

25. *your children will prevent our children from fearing the LORD*. The phrase "fearing the LORD" does not indicate an inner state of piety but rather participation in the national cult: the cis-Jordanian tribes, seeing that the two and a half tribes live beyond the Jordan in territory that the Israelite majority

may not regard as an intrinsic part of the land, will exclude them from nation and cult.

28. *See the image of the LORD's altar*. The altar we have built is a symbolic altar, the image or simulacrum (*tavnit*) of the LORD's altar that we, like you, recognize as the authorized site of public worship.

31. *and so you have saved the Israelites from the LORD's hand*. That is, you have saved us from attacking you without warrant, an act that would then have brought down retribution on us.

33. *the Israelites blessed God, and they did not think to go up as an army to lay ruin to the land*. This concluding narrative episode of the Book of Joshua is a story of civil war averted and national reconciliation, whereas the Book of Judges concludes with the story of a bloody civil war.

34. *called the altar Witness*. The received text says only "called the altar," but some Hebrew manuscripts as well as the Targum Yonatan show the more coherent text with the additional word as it is translated here. Rashi arrives at the same conclusion by inferring an ellipsis: "This is one of the abbreviated biblical texts, and it is necessary to add to it one word: 'and the Reubenites and the Gadites and the Manassites called the altar Witness.'"

CHAPTER 23

[1]And it happened many years after the LORD had granted rest to Israel from all their enemies round about that Joshua grew old, advanced in years. [2]And Joshua called to all Israel, to its elders and to its chieftains and to its judges and to its overseers. And he said to them, “I have grown old, advanced in years. [3]As for you, you have seen all that the LORD your God has done to all these nations before you, for the LORD your God, it is He who did battle for you. [4]See, I have made all these remaining nations fall to you in estate according to your tribes, and all the nations that I cut off, from the Jordan to the Great Sea where the sun goes down. [5]And the LORD your God, it is He Who will drive them back before you and dispossess them before you, and you will take hold of their land as the LORD your God has spoken to you. [6]And you must be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the book of Moses’s teaching, not to swerve from it to the right or to the left, [7]not to come among these nations that remain alongside you, nor to invoke the name of

their gods nor swear by them nor worship them and bow to them. [8]But to the LORD your God you shall cling as you have done till this day. [9]And the LORD has dispossessed before you great and mighty nations, and you—no man has stood before you till this day. [10]One man of you pursues a thousand, for the LORD your God, it is He Who does battle for you as He spoke to you. [11]And you must be very careful for your own sake to love the LORD your God. [12]For should you indeed turn back and cling to the rest of these remaining nations alongside you and intermarry with them and come among them, and they among you, [13]you must surely know that the LORD your God will no longer dispossess these nations before you, and they will become a trap and a snare for you and a whip against your side and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good country that the LORD your God has given you. [14]And, look, I am about to go today on the way of all the earth, and you know with all your heart and with all your being that not a single thing has failed of all the good things that the LORD your God has spoken about you. Everything has befallen you, not a single thing of it has failed. [15]And it shall be, just as every good thing that the LORD your God has spoken of you has befallen you, so shall the LORD bring upon you every evil thing until He

destroys you from this good country that the LORD your God has given you. [16]When you overturn the pact of the LORD your God that He charged you and you go and worship other gods and bow to them, the wrath of the LORD will flare against you, and you will perish swiftly from the good land that He has given you.

CHAPTER 23 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *after the LORD had granted rest to Israel from all their enemies*. This ringing declaration is subverted by the threat of exile that hovers over the end of the chapter. This is a tension that runs through both Joshua and Judges: God has enabled Israel to conquer all its enemies, yet the land is not completely conquered, and enemies threaten both within it and from surrounding nations. Even in this passage, the conquest of the Canaanite peoples alternates between being a completed process, as here, or a future activity, as in verse 5.

2. *I have grown old, advanced in years*. As several commentators have noted, Joshua's valedictory address stands in a line with those of Moses, Samuel, and David.

4. *all the nations that I cut off*. The Hebrew of this verse seems a little scrambled, with this clause appearing after "from the Jordan." In addition, "the Great Sea" lacks "to" in the Hebrew, and the preposition has been supplied in the translation.

6. *you must be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the book of Moses's teaching*. Here, as in much of the speech, the phraseology is strongly reminiscent of Deuteronomy. In the book as a whole, the presence of the Deuteronomist is palpable but intermittent. As editor, he appears to have wanted to put his strong imprint on the conclusion.

13. *a whip against your side*. The Masoretic Text reads *leshotet*, which would mean, implausibly, "to roam." The assumption of this translation is that the second *tet* is a dittography and hence the Hebrew originally read *leshot*, "as a whip."

14. *I am about to go . . . on the way of all the earth*. David on his deathbed, 1 Kings 2:2, uses the same language.

not a single thing. This could also be construed as "not a single word."

15. *until He destroys you from this good country*. The term for "country," *ʾadamah*, often means "soil," and its use here might reflect a desire to introduce a connotation of the land's fruitfulness. The notion that Israel will be driven from its land if it betrays its pact with God is preeminently Deuteronomistic. The years after 621 B.C.E., with the Assyrian and then the Babylonian threat uppermost in the minds of the Judahites as well as the memory of the uprooting of the northern kingdom of Israel a century earlier, were a time when, with good reason, national existence in the Land of Israel had come to seem painfully precarious.

CHAPTER 24

[1]And Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel at
Shechem, and he called to the elders of Israel and to
its chieftains and to its judges and to its overseers, and
they stood forth before God. [2]And Joshua said to all
the people: “Thus said the LORD God of Israel: ‘Your
forefathers dwelled across the Euphrates long ago—
Terah father of Abraham and father of Nahor, and
they served other gods. [3]And I took your father
Abraham from across the Euphrates and led him to the
land of Canaan, and I multiplied his seed and gave
him Isaac. [4]And I gave to Isaac Jacob and Esau, and I
gave to Esau the high country of Seir to take hold of,
but Jacob and his sons went down to Egypt. [5]And I
sent Moses and Aaron, and I struck Egypt with
plagues that I wrought in its midst, and afterward I
brought you out. [6]And I brought your forefathers out of
Egypt, and you came to the sea, and the Egyptians
pursued your forefathers with chariots and horsemen
in the Sea of Reeds. [7]And they cried out to the LORD,
and He put a veil of darkness between you and the

Egyptians and brought the sea against them, and it
covered them, and your own eyes saw that which I
wrought against Egypt, and you dwelled in the
wilderness many years. [8]And I brought you to the land
of the Amorites dwelling across the Jordan, and they
did battle against you, and I gave them into your hand,
and you took hold of their land, and I destroyed them
before you. [9]And Balak son of Zippor king of Moab
rose up and did battle against Israel, and he sent out
and called Balaam son of Beor to curse you. [10]And I
was unwilling to listen to Balaam, and in fact he
blessed you, and I saved you from his hand. [11]And you
crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho, and the lords
of Jericho did battle against you—the Amorite and the
Perizzite and the Canaanite and the Hittite and the
Girgashite, the Hivvite and the Jebusite. And I gave
them into your hand. [12]And I sent the hornet before
you, and it drove them from before you—the two
Amorite kings—not by your sword and not by your
bow. [13]And I gave you a land in which you had not
toiled and towns that you had not built, and you
dwelled in them; from vineyards and olive groves that
you did not plant you are eating the fruit.' [14]And now,
fear the LORD and serve Him in wholeness and truth,
and put away the gods that your forefathers served
across the Euphrates and in Egypt, and serve the

LORD. [15]And if it be evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose today whom you would serve, whether the gods that your forefathers served across the Euphrates or whether the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell, but I and my household will serve the LORD." [16]And the people answered and said, "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods. [17]For the LORD our God, it is He Who brings our forefathers and us up from the land of Egypt, from the house of slaves, and Who has wrought before our eyes these great signs and guarded us on all the way that we have gone and among all the peoples through whose midst we have passed. [18]And the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites, inhabitants of the land. We, too, will serve the LORD, for He is our God." [19]And Joshua said to the people, "You will not be able to serve the LORD, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God, He will not put up with your crimes and your offenses. [20]For should you forsake the LORD and serve alien gods, He shall turn back and do harm to you and put an end to you after having been good to you." [21]And the people said to Joshua, "No! For we will serve the LORD." [22]And Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses for yourselves that you have chosen the LORD to serve Him." And they said, "We are witnesses." [23]"And now, put away the alien

gods that are in your midst, and bend your hearts to the LORD God of Israel." [24]And the people said to Joshua, "The LORD we will serve and His voice we will heed." [25]And Joshua sealed a pact for the people on that day and set it for them as statute and law at Shechem. [26]And Joshua wrote these things in the book of God's teaching, and he took a great stone and set it under the terebinth that is in God's sanctuary. [27]And Joshua said to all the people, "Look, this stone shall be witness for us because it has heard all the LORD's sayings that He spoke to us, and it shall be witness to you lest you deny your God." [28]And Joshua sent the people each man to his estate.

[29]And it happened after these things that Joshua son of Nun servant of the LORD died, a hundred ten years old. [30]And they buried him in the territory of his estate in Timnath-Serah, which is in the high country of Ephraim north of Mount Gaash. [31]And Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and who had known all the acts of the LORD that He wrought for Israel. [32]And the bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, they buried in Shechem in the plot of land that Jacob had bought from the sons of

Hamor for a hundred *kesitahs*, so that it became an estate for the sons of Joseph. [33]And Eleazar the son of Aaron died, and they buried him on the hill of Phineas his son, which had been given to him in the high country of Ephraim.

CHAPTER 24 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Joshua gathered all the tribes*. The book appropriately ends with a renewal of the covenant between Israel and its God, followed by the obituary notices for Joshua and Eleazar.

2. *Your forefathers dwelled across the Euphrates . . . and they served other gods*. Joshua's recapitulation of national history begins all the way back with Abraham's ancestral family in Mesopotamia. ("Euphrates" in the Hebrew, as elsewhere in biblical usage, is "the River"). But he immediately reminds his audience that before Abraham these people were idolators, for the danger of backsliding into idolatry is uppermost in his mind throughout the speech.

4. *Jacob and Esau*. It is noteworthy that Esau, together with his territorial inheritance, is mentioned with Jacob. There may be a gesture of restitution here for Jacob's stealing the paternal blessing.

5. *I struck Egypt with plagues that I wrought in its midst*. The Hebrew text shows what looks like a small glitch: "I struck Egypt with plagues as [or when, *kaʾasher*] I wrought in its midst." The Septuagint has a smoother reading: "I struck Egypt with plagues as I wrought signs in its midst."

7. *a veil of darkness*. The Hebrew *maʾafel*, cognate to the more common *ʾapheilah,* "darkness," is unique to this verse. The clear reference is to the pillar of cloud in Exodus.

8. *the land of the Amorites dwelling across the Jordan*. These are the trans-Jordanian kings vanquished by Israel under Moses, as reported in Numbers and in Deuteronomy.

9. *Balak . . . did battle against Israel*. Because no actual battle is reported in Numbers 22:36–41, some commentators have claimed that a variant tradition is reflected here, but this is an unnecessary inference. Balak clearly saw Israel as his enemy and sought to destroy it using the curses of a professional hexer as his weapon of choice.

11. *the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Girgashite, the Hivvite and the Jebusite*. It is odd that all the seven peoples of Canaan are introduced here as though they had fought at Jericho, whereas no mention of a Canaanite alliance appears in the Jericho story. Perhaps Jericho, as the gateway town of Canaan and the first conquered, triggered the invocation of all these peoples, in a kind of synecdoche.

12. *the hornet*. This is the traditional understanding of *tsirʿah*, leading some scholars to claim that noxious insects were actually used as weapons. But, on etymological grounds, as I proposed in comments on Exodus 23:28 and Deuteronomy 7:20, the term could mean "the Smasher," a mythological rather than a zoological entity.

13. *you are eating the fruit*. "Fruit" is implied by ellipsis. Pointedly, the verb for enjoying the fruit of vineyard and olive grove switches from past to a present participle, emphasizing to the audience that they themselves are benefiting from the conquest.

14. *in wholeness and truth*. Many construe these two Hebrew nouns as a hendiadys, having the sense of "in absolute truth."

15. *whether the gods that your forefathers served . . . or . . . the gods of the Amorites*. There is surely a note of sarcasm here: if you really want to serve foreign gods, just take your pick between Mesopotamian and Canaanite deities.

18. *all the peoples, the Amorites*. "Amorites" is sometimes a particular people and sometimes a general rubric for the sundry peoples of Canaan.

19. *You will not be able to serve the LORD, for He is a holy God*. In the face of the people's solemn declaration to remain faithful to the God of Israel, Joshua expresses grave doubt: YHWH is a holy God, making severe demands of exclusive loyalty, and I don't believe you will be able to meet these demands. This view sets the stage for the series of idolatrous backslidings in Judges.

25. *set it for them as statute and law*. The same phrase is used in Exodus 15:25.

26. *the book of God's teaching*. This is a new designation, on the model of "the book of Moses's teaching" and so can refer either to Deuteronomy or to the Five Books of Moses, unless what Joshua writes is an appendix to them.

27. *this stone shall be witness*. Commemorative stone markers confirming treaties appear a number of times in the Hebrew Bible and were common in much of the ancient Near East.

29. *servant of the LORD*. Here at the end Joshua is given the same epithet as Moses.

a hundred ten years old. The narrative pointedly allots Joshua ten years fewer than Moses, using instead the Egyptian number for a very full life span.

33. The received text of Joshua ends on a relatively harmonious note of renewal of the covenant and the death in ripe old age of the military leader Joshua and the priestly leader Eleazar. But the ancient Greek translator used a Hebrew text that concludes more discordantly with the following verse, which confirms Joshua's doubts and looks forward to Judges: "And the Israelites went each man to his place and to the town, and the Israelites served Ashtoreth and the Ashtaroth and the gods of the peoples round about them, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Eglon king of Moab, and he ruled over them eighteen years." Though a variant manuscript might have added this report in order to create a bridge with the beginning of Judges, it seems more likely that a scribe or an editor deleted it out of motives of national piety, so as not to conclude the book with an image of Israel's shame.

JUDGES

Introduction

Like so many biblical books, Judges reflects an editorial splicing together of disparate narrative materials. Some of these materials, at least in their oral origins, could conceivably go back to the last century of the second millennium B.C.E., incorporating memories, or rather legendary elaborations, of actual historical figures. In any case, the redaction and final literary formulation of these stories are much later—perhaps, as some scholars have inferred, toward the end of the eighth century B.C.E., some years after the destruction of the northern kingdom in 721 B.C.E. and before the reforms of King Josiah a century later.

The word *shofet*, traditionally translated as "judge," has two different meanings—"judge" in the judicial sense and "leader" or "chieftain." The latter sense is obviously the relevant one for this book, though the sole female judge, Deborah, in fact also

acts as a judicial authority, sitting under the palm tree named after her. The narrative contexts make perfectly clear that these judges are ad hoc military leaders—in several instances, guerilla commanders—but it would have been a gratuitous confusion to readers to call this text the Book of Chieftains or even to designate these figures in the text proper as chieftains or leaders rather than judges.

The first two chapters are both a prologue to what follows and a bridge from the end of the Book of Joshua. They incorporate a report of Joshua's death and an account of the incompletion of the conquest of the land, for which at least two rather different explanations are offered. The unconsummated conquest sets the stage for the sequence of stories in which Israel is sorely oppressed by enemies on all sides —the Philistines based on the coastal plain, the Midianites and the Moabites to the east, and the Canaanites in the heartland of the country. From the latter part of chapter 3 to the end of chapter 12, there is a formulaic rhythm of events: Israel's disloyalty to its God, its oppression by enemies as punishment for the dereliction, the crying out to God by the Israelites, God's raising up a judge to rescue them. This process of "raising up" leaders is what led Max Weber to borrow a term from the Greek and call a political

system of this sort charismatic leadership. That is, the authority of the leader derives neither from a hereditary line nor from election by peers but comes about suddenly when the spirit of the LORD descends upon him: through this investiture, he is filled with a sense of power and urgency that is recognized by those around him, who thus become his followers.

The pattern remains the same, but for some of the Judges we have no more than a bare notice of their name and their rescuing Israel (see, for example, the very first judge, Othniel son of Kenaz, 3:9–10) whereas for others we are given a detailed report of an act of military prowess (Ehud) or a whole series of narrative episodes (Gideon, Jephthah). The story of the fratricidal Abimelech breaks the sequence of Judge narratives but provides foreshadowing of the bloody civil war at the end of the book.

The last in the series of Judges is Samson, who is in several ways quite unlike those who precede him. Only Samson is a figure announced by prenatal prophecy, with the full panoply of an annunciation type-scene. Only in the case of Samson is the first advent of the spirit of the LORD indicated not by a verb of descent (*tsalaḥ*) or investment (*labash*) but of violent pounding (*paʿam*). Unlike the other judges, Samson acts entirely alone, and his motive for

devastating the Philistines is personal vengeance, not an effort of national liberation. Most strikingly, only Samson among all the Judges exercises supernatural power. It seems likely, as many scholars have concluded, that the sequence of episodes about Samson reflects folkloric traditions concerning a Herculean, quasimythological hero, though the narrative as it has been formulated shows evidence of subtle literary craft. In any case, the Samson stories, editorially placed as the last in the series of Judge narratives, exemplify the breakdown of the whole system of charismatic leadership. Samson, battling alone with unconventional weapons or with his bare hands, more drawn to the sexual arena than to national struggle, hostilely confronted by fellow Israelites, sowing destruction all around him to the very end, like the fire with which he is associated from before his conception, is a figure of anarchic impulse: the man in whom the spirit of the LORD pounds down enemies but offers no leadership at all for his people, which may be a final verdict on the whole system of governance by charismatic warriors represented in the preceding episodes of the book.

The Samson narrative suggests that the shape given to Judges by its editors may be more purposeful than is often assumed. What follows the Samson cycle is the

bizarre story of Micah's idol (chapters 17–18) and then the grisly tale of the concubine at Gibeah who is gang-raped to death by the local Benjaminites, leading to a costly civil war between Benjamin and the other tribes (chapters 19–21). These two blocks of material are often described as an appendix to the Book of Judges, and although it is true that they differ strikingly in subject matter and to some extent in style from the stories about the Judges, they also show significant connections as well both with the immediately preceding Samson narrative and with the book as a whole. Divisiveness in the Israelite community, adumbrated in Samson's confrontation with the men of Judah, is vividly manifested both in the story of Micah and that of the concubine. Micah's narrative begins with his stealing eleven hundred shekels (the exact amount that the Philistines offer to Delilah) from his mother. Part of this purloined fortune, returned to his mother, is used to create a molten image of dubious monotheistic provenance, which will then become an object of contention. The displaced Danites, arriving on the scene as a military contingent, have no compunction about confiscating a whole set of cultic objects and buying off the young Levite whom Micah has hired to minister in his private sanctuary. The Danites then go on to conquer a new

northern town in which to settle their southern tribe, but this is hardly a story that ends with the land quiet for forty years: tensions, verging on a clash of arms, between Micah and the Danites; dishonesty and deception; venality and the ruthless pursuit of personal and tribal self-interest—such far-from-edifying behavior dominates the story from beginning to end.

The morality exhibited in the book's concluding narrative is even worse. Another Levite, considerably more egregious than the one engaged by Micah, ends up reenacting the story of Sodom with a bitter reversal. In this tale devoid of divine intervention, there are no supernatural beings to blind the brutal sexual assailants; the Levite pushes his concubine out the door to be raped all night long; and when he finds her prostrate on the threshold in the morning, he brusquely orders her to get up so that they can continue their journey, not realizing at first that she has expired. His remedy for this atrocity is as bad as the violation itself: he butchers her body into twelve parts that he sends out to the sundry tribes to rouse their indignation against Benjamin, and the ensuing civil war, in which the other tribes suffer extensive casualties, comes close to wiping out the tribe of Benjamin. Unbridled lust, implacable hostility, and mutual mayhem provide ample warrant for the

implicitly monarchist refrain of these chapters: “In those days there was no king in Israel. Every man did what was right in his own eyes.”

Anarchy and lust link these stories directly with the Samson narrative. But the theme of violence, threatened in Micah’s story, shockingly realized in the narrative that follows, ties in the concluding chapters of Judges with everything that precedes them in the book. Judges represents, one might say, the Wild West era of the biblical story. Men are a law unto themselves—“Every man did what was right in his eyes.” There are warriors who can toss a stone from a slingshot at a hair and not miss; a bold left-handed assassin who deftly pulls out a short sword strapped to his right thigh to stab the Moabite king in the soft underbelly; another warrior-chieftain who panics the enemy camp in the middle of the night with the shock and awe of piercing ram’s horn blasts and smashed pitchers.

All this is certainly exciting in a way that is analogous to the gunslinger justice of the Wild West, but there is an implicit sense, which becomes explicit at the end of the book, that survival through violence, without a coherent and stable political framework, cannot be sustained and runs the danger of turning into sheer destruction. In the first chapter of the book,

before any of the Judges are introduced, we are presented with the image of the conquered Canaanite king, Adoni-Bezek, whose thumbs and big toes are chopped off by his Judahite captors. This barbaric act of dismemberment, presumably intended to disable the king from any capacity for combat, presages a whole series of episodes in which body parts are hacked, mutilated, crushed. King Eglon's death by Ehud's hidden short sword is particularly grisly: his killer thrusts the weapon into his belly all the way up to the top of the hilt, and his death spasm grotesquely triggers the malodorous release of the anal sphincter. Women are also adept at this bloody work: there is a vividly concrete report of how Jael drives the tent peg through the temple of Sisera the Canaanite general and into the ground; another woman, this one anonymous, smashes the head of the nefarious Abimelech with a millstone she drops on him from her perch in a besieged tower. Samson's slaughter of a thousand Philistines with a donkey's jawbone is surely a messy business of smashing and mashing—no neat spear's thrust here—though descriptive details are not offered. The grand finale of Samson's story, in which thousands of Philistine men and women, together with the Israelite hero, are crushed by the toppling temple, is an even more extensive crushing and mangling of bodies.

Against this background, one can see a line of imagistic and thematic continuity from the maiming of Adoni-Bezek at the very beginning of the book to the dismembering of the concubine at the end. That act of chopping a body into pieces, of course, is intended as a means to unite the tribes against Benjamin and its murderous rapists, but there is a paradoxical tension between the project of unity—unity, however, for a violent purpose—and the butchering of the body, the violation of its integrity, which in the biblical world as in ours was supposed to be respected through burial. The famous lines that Yeats wrote at a moment of violent upheaval in European and Irish history precisely capture the thematic thrust of Judges:

> Things fall apart; the centre
> cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon
> the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is
> loosed. . . .

After this dark impasse to which the Book of Judges comes, it will be the task of the next great narrative sequence, which is the Book of Samuel,

concluding in the second chapter of 1 Kings, to imagine a political means to create a center and leash the anarchy. That goal is in part realized, but the undertaking itself is an arduous one; and because these stories turn increasingly from legend and lore to a tough engagement in history, even as a center begins to hold, the blood-dimmed tide is never stemmed.

CHAPTER 1

[1]And it happened after the death of Joshua that the
Israelites inquired of the LORD, saying, “Who will go
up for us first against the Canaanite to do battle with
him?” [2]And the LORD said, “Judah shall go up. Look,
I have given the land into his hand.” [3]And Judah said
to Simeon his brother, “Go up with me in my portion,
and let us do battle with the Canaanite, and I, too, shall
go with you in your portion.” And Simeon went with
him. [4]And Judah went up, and the LORD gave the
Canaanite and the Perizzite into their hand, and they
struck them down in Bezek—ten thousand men. [5]And
they found Adoni-Bezek in Bezek and did battle with
him, and they struck down the Canaanite and the
Perizzite. [6]And Adoni-Bezek fled, and they pursued
him and seized him, and they chopped off his thumbs
and his big toes. [7]And Adoni-Bezek said: “Seventy
kings, their thumbs and their big toes chopped off,
used to gather scraps under my table. As I have done,
so has God paid me back.” And they brought him to
Jerusalem, and he died there. [8]And the Judahites did

battle against Jerusalem, and they took it and struck it
down with the edge of the sword, and the town they
set on fire. [9]And afterward the Judahites went down to
do battle with the Canaanite dwelling in the high
country and the Negeb and the lowland. [10]And Judah
went against the Canaanite dwelling in Hebron—and
the name of Hebron was formerly Kiriath-Arba—and
they struck down Sheshai and Achiman and Talmai.
[11]And they went from there against the inhabitants of
Debir—and the name of Debir was formerly Kiriath-
Sepher. [12]And Caleb said, “Whoever strikes Kiriath-
Sepher and takes it, to him I shall give Achsah my
daughter as wife.” [13]And Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb’s
younger brother, took it, and he gave him Achsah as
wife. [14]And it happened when she came, that she
enticed him to ask a field of her father, and she
alighted from the donkey, and Caleb said to her,
“What troubles you?” [15]And she said to him, “Give me
a present, for you have given me desert-land, and you
should have given me springs of water.” And Caleb
gave her the upper springs and the lower springs. [16]And
the sons of the Kenite, the father-in-law of Moses,
came up from the Town of Palms with the Judahites
from the Wilderness of Judah which is in the Negeb of
Arad, and they went and dwelled with the people.
[17]And Judah went with Simeon his brother and they

struck down the Canaanite dwelling in Zephath and put it under the ban, and they called the name of the town Hormah.

[18]And Judah took Gaza and its territory and Ashkelon and its territory and Ekron and its territory. [19]And the LORD was with Judah, and he took possession of the high country, but he was not able to dispossess the inhabitants of the valley, for they had iron chariots. [20]And they gave Hebron to Caleb as Moses had spoken, and he dispossessed from there the three sons of the giant. [21]But the Jebusite dwelling in Jerusalem, the Benjaminites did not dispossess, and the Jebusite has been dwelling with the Benjaminites in Jerusalem to this day. [22]And the sons of Joseph, too, went up to Bethel, and the LORD was with them. [23]And the House of Joseph scouted out Bethel—and the name of the town was formerly Luz. [24]And the lookout saw a man coming out of the town and said to him, “Show us, pray, the way into the town, and we shall deal kindly with you.” [25]And he showed them the way into the town, and they struck the town by the edge of the sword, but the man and his clan they sent off. [26]And the man went to the land of the Hittites and built a town and called its name Luz—that is its name to this

day. [27]And Manasseh did not take possession of Beth-Sheʾan and its hamlets nor Taanach and its hamlets nor the inhabitants of Dor and its hamlets nor the inhabitants of Ibleam and its hamlets nor the inhabitants of Megiddo and its hamlets, but the Canaanite went on dwelling in this land. [28]And it happened, when Israel grew strong, that it put the Canaanite to forced labor, but it did not dispossess him. [29]And Ephraim did not dispossess the Canaanite dwelling in Gezer, and the Canaanite dwelled in his midst in Gezer. [30]Zebulun did not dispossess the inhabitants of Kitron, nor the inhabitants of Nahalal, and the Canaanite dwelled in his midst and did forced labor. [31]Asher did not dispossess the inhabitants of Acco, nor the inhabitants of Sidon, Ahiab, Ach zib, Helbah, Aphek, and Rehob. [32]And the Asherite dwelled in the midst of the Canaanites, inhabitants of the land, for he did not dispossess them. [33]Naphtali did not dispossess the inhabitants of Beth-Shemesh and the inhabitants of Baal-Anath, and he dwelled amidst the Canaanites inhabitants of the land, and the inhabitants of Beth-Shemesh and of Beth-Anath did forced labor for them. [34]And the Amorites drove the Danites into the high country, for they did not let them come down into the valley. [35]And the Amorite continued to dwell in Mount Heres, in Ajalon, and in

Shaalbim, but the hand of the house of Joseph lay heavy upon them, and they did forced labor. [36]And the territory of the Amorites was from the Ascent of Akrabbim, from Sela on up.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And it happened after the death of Joshua*. These words are a pointed repetition of the formula that begins the Book of Joshua, "And it happened after the death of Moses."

the Israelites inquired of the LORD. This idiom indicates inquiry of an oracle in all likelihood, the Urim and Thummim, which could be used to yield a yes-no answer or to select an individual from a group. Some commentators have suggested that after Joshua's death, there was no longer a central leader with access to God and hence the oracular device was necessary.

2. *Judah shall go up*. The prominence of Judah in the vanguard of the conquest patently reflects a later period when Judah was the seat of the Davidic monarchy and the chief remaining tribe. The report here moves from Judah's military success in the south to the failures of the other tribes in the north.

3. *Simeon his brother*. This indication of fraternity and military cooperation probably derives from a moment in later history when Simeon was closely allied with or assimilated in Judah.

4. *ten thousand men*. Like almost all numbers in biblical narrative, this is formulaic, meant to indicate a large group. The reference to "seventy kings" in verse 7 is similarly formulaic, although it does register the fact that Canaan was divided among many small city-kingdoms, which were often at war with one another.

5. *Adoni-Bezek*. This name, which means "master of Bezek," appears to be a hereditary title rather than a proper noun.

6. *they chopped off his thumbs and his big toes*. The mutilation, which on the evidence of Adoni-Bezek's own words in the next verse was evidently a common practice, is both a humiliation and a means of permanently preventing the captured leader from becoming a combatant again because he would be unable to wield a bow or sword or run on the battlefield. It should be observed, moreover, that this grisly detail is an apt thematic and imagistic introduction to Judges, the most violent of all the books of the Bible. In the stories that follow, swords will be thrust into bellies, tent pegs into heads; people will be variously mashed and crushed; and toward the end of the book, the dismembered parts of a murdered woman's body will be sent out to the sundry tribes in order to ignite a civil war. The mutilation of the king, then, introduces us to a realm of political instability in which both people and groups are violently torn asunder.

7. *And they brought him to Jerusalem, and he died there*. This notation and the one in the next verse about the total destruction of Jerusalem by Judah are a puzzlement. It is contradicted here by verse 21, in which it is said that Judah was unable to drive out the Jebusites but continued to coexist with them. 2 Samuel 5 reports, with some historical plausibility, that it was David who conquered Jerusalem from the Jebusites (almost two centuries after the putative time of the events in Judges). One suspects that the Judahite writer was swept up by the momentum of his own historical moment: Jerusalem had long been the capital city of the Davidic monarchy, and so it was difficult for the writer to imagine that it had not been part of the initial conquest of his tribe.

12. *Whoever strikes Kiriath-Sepher and takes it, to him I shall give Achsah my daughter as wife*. The story here, including the two previous verses, repeats in virtually identical language the story told in Joshua 15:13–19. The offer of the hand of the daughter to the victorious hero is an obvious folkloric motif and recurs in the episode of David and Goliath.

13. *Othniel*. He is to become the first judge.

15. *desert-land*. The term *negev* (rendered elsewhere in this translation as the place-name "Negeb") means terrain that supports little or no vegetation, probably deriving from a verbal stem that means "dry" or "desolate." The region in the southern part of the Land of Israel is that sort of terrain and hence is given the geographical name Negeb. Another term, *midbar*, is represented in this version, as it is in most English translations, as "wilderness" because it includes land in which animals can graze.

16. *the Town of Palms*. On the basis of other biblical occurrences, this is Jericho.

17. *Hormah*. The name puns on *ḥerem*, "ban."

18. *And Judah took Gaza and its territory*. This verse is another instance in which the writer's location in a time when the Philistine coastal enclave had long been subdued is retrojected to the period of the Judges. Here three of the five towns of the Philistine pentopolis are said to be conquered by Judah. But in the subsequent narrative, down to the time of David, the Philistines remain autonomous and a potent military threat; and in Judges itself, in the Samson story, Gaza is very much in the hands of the Philistines.

19. *was not able*. The Hebrew of the received text sounds odd at this point: "was not able" occurs in Onkelos's Aramaic version.

20. *the three sons of the giant*. Though many interpreters prefer to understand the last term here, *ʿanaq*, as a proper noun, it does mean "giant," and there is a clear tradition reflected in Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, and Judges that some of the indigenous inhabitants of the land were giants.

22. *Bethel*. The report now moves to the north. Bethel was to become a central cultic location in the northern kingdom of Israel after the split in the monarchy.

24. *the way into the town*. Yigal Yadin has cited archaeological evidence that some Canaanite towns had tunnels that provided secret access to them. That sounds plausible here because the lookouts are surely not asking directions to the main gate of the town.

28. *Israel . . . put the Canaanite to forced labor, but it did not dispossess him*. Whether this subjugation of the Canaanite population to the Israelites was a historical fact or is merely a face-saving formula for the failure of the conquest is uncertain. In any case, the chapter from this point on spells out a theme of incompletion that had fluctuated through the Book of Joshua. In the first half of Joshua, the conquest of the land appears to be comprehensive; in the second half, there are some indications that much remains to be conquered. Now we have a whole catalogue of failed conquests, all attributed to the northern tribes that would constitute the breakaway kingdom of Israel.

31. *Acco . . . Sidon, Ahiab, Achzib*. These coastal towns bring us far to the north, near present-day Haifa and beyond, with Sidon actually being a Phoenician city.

35. *upon them*. These words are merely implied in the Hebrew.

CHAPTER 2

[1]And a messenger of the LORD came up from Gilgal
to Bochim, and he said: “I have taken you up from
Egypt and brought you to the land that I swore to your
fathers, and I said, I will never break My covenant
with you. [2]As for you, you shall not seal a covenant
with the inhabitants of this land—their altars you shall
smash. And you did not heed My voice. What is this
you have done? [3]And I also said, ‘I will not drive them
out before you, and they shall become thorns to you,
and their gods shall become a snare for you.” [4]And it
happened, when the LORD’s messenger spoke these
words to the Israelites, that the people raised their
voices and wept. [5]And they called the name of the
place Bochim, and they sacrificed there to the LORD.
[6]And Joshua sent off the people, and the Israelites
went every man to his estate to take hold of the land.
[7]And the people served the LORD all the days of
Joshua and all the days of the elders who outlived
Joshua, who had seen the great acts of the LORD that
He did for Israel. [8]And Joshua son of Nun servant of

the LORD died, a hundred ten years old. [9]And they
buried him in the territory of his estate, in Timnath-
Heres in the high country of Ephraim north of Mount
Gaash. [10]And that whole generation as well was
gathered to its fathers, and another generation arose
after them that did not know the LORD or the acts He
had done for Israel. [11]And the Israelites did evil in the
eyes of the LORD, and they served the Baalim. [12]And
they forsook the LORD God of their fathers Who had
brought them out of the land of Egypt, and they went
after other gods, of the gods of the peoples that were
all around them, and they bowed to them and vexed
the LORD. [13]And they forsook the LORD and served
Baal and the Ashtoroth. [14]And the LORD's wrath
flared up against Israel, and He gave them into the
hand of plunderers who plundered them, and He
handed them over to their enemies all around, and they
were no longer able to stand up against their enemies.
[15]Whenever they sallied forth, the LORD's hand was
against them for harm, as the LORD had spoken and
as the LORD had vowed to them, and they were in
sore straits. [16]And the LORD raised up judges and
rescued them from their plunderers. [17]And their
judges, too, they did not heed, for they went whoring
after other gods and bowed to them, they swerved
quickly from the way in which their fathers had gone

to heed the LORD's command. They did not do so.
[18]And when the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge and rescued them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge, for the LORD felt regret for their groaning because of their oppressors and their harassers. [19]And it happened, when the judge died, they went back and acted more ruinously than their fathers, to go after other gods, to serve them, to bow to them. They left off nothing of their actions and their stubborn way. [20]And the LORD's wrath flared up against Israel, and He said, "Because this nation has violated My covenant that I charged to their fathers and has not heeded My voice, [21]I on my part will not continue to dispossess before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died [22]in order to test Israel through them, whether or not they will keep the LORD's way to go in it." [23]And the LORD had left aside these nations, not dispossessing them quickly, and He had not given them into the hand of Joshua.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Bochim*. The name, which means "weepers," is proleptic, and its origin will be explained in verses 5–6.

I have taken you up from Egypt. The LORD's messenger is not speaking in his own person but is serving as God's mouthpiece, quoting His words.

I said. This verb in Hebrew can also mean "I thought" (perhaps an ellipsis for "I said in my heart"), and it is not clear whether God actually addresses these words to Israel or merely thinks them. The same ambiguity hovers over "I also said" in verse 3.

2. *their altars you shall smash*. This is in keeping with the vehement antipagan agenda of Deuteronomy.

3. *thorns*. The Hebrew *tsidim* would appear to mean "sides." A common expression in contexts like this one is "thorns [*tsinim*] in your side." This might be an ellipsis here, or, more likely, the similarity of the two words might have led a scribe to inadvertently replace *tsinim* with *tsidim*.

6. *And Joshua sent off the people*. The appearance of Joshua makes it clear that this entire passage loops back chronologically to the end of the Book of Joshua (chapter 24), when Joshua addresses the people, perhaps not long before his death.

7. *And the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua*. This entire verse approximately repeats Joshua 24:31.

the great acts. The Hebrew uses a singular noun with collective force. The same usage occurs in verse 10.

11. *they served the Baalim*. This is the plural form of Baal, the Canaanite weather god and probably the most widely worshipped deity in the Canaanite pantheon. Many interpreters infer that the plural form indicates Baal and other pagan gods.

13. *Baal and the Ashtoroth*. Here "Baal" is singular and "Ashtoroth" shows a feminine plural ending (the singular in this traditional transliteration would be "Ashtoreth"). Ashtoreth is the Canaanite fertility goddess, though in some Ugaritic texts she appears also as a warrior-goddess. The plural form, as with Baalim in verse 11, may suggest that a variety of pagan goddesses is meant.

15. *Whenever they sallied forth, the LORD's hand was against them for harm*. This whole passage articulates a clear-cut theological explanation for Israel's

failure to conquer the entire land: its swerve into idolatry enrages God and causes Him to bring about Israel's defeat by its enemies.

16. *judges*. The Hebrew verbal noun *shofet* means both one who judges and one who rules, and the latter sense is more prominent here and in all that follows in this book. As a result, some modern translations opt for "chieftain" or an equivalent term. The *shofet* was an ad hoc military leader (in this regard, "chieftain," suggesting a fixed and perhaps hereditary political institution, is misleading). From the subsequent narratives in this book, the Judge was seen by his followers—or, at any rate, by the writer—as a figure suddenly invested with a divine spirit that impelled him to action and enabled his success. It is precisely on the model of the biblical judges that Max Weber borrowed the term "charisma" from the Greek to indicate a purely personal political power.

18. *the LORD was with the judge and rescued them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge*. A theological reason is offered here for a continuing unstable military situation. The Judges were basically guerilla commanders. A judge, exercising personal magnetism and military prowess, could for a certain amount of time harass and drive back enemy forces that were probably superior in numbers and weaponry, but such successes were bound to be temporary. This fluctuating pattern is explained in terms of cultic loyalty and backsliding: under the charismatic influence of the Judge, the Israelites were faithful to their God; when the Judge died, they reverted to their pagan practices. Verse 17 suggests that they did not heed their judges, or only temporarily.

19. *their actions*. The implication in context is "evil actions," though the Hebrew noun used is not intrinsically negative.

21–22. *the nations that Joshua left when he died in order to test Israel through them*. Here a new theological explanation of the incompleteness of the conquest is introduced. Joshua, given his sweeping military successes reported in Joshua 1–12, might well have conquered the entire land, but he left some of it in Canaanite hands in order to see whether future generations of Israel would be faithful to their God and thus be worthy of taking hold of the rest of the land. God's words in these two verses affirm that the people has failed the test and so will not be able to complete the conquest. The next verse

then makes clear that Joshua's leaving part of the land unconquered was actually God's devising.

CHAPTER 3

[1]And these are the nations that the LORD left aside to test Israel through them—all who knew not the wars of Canaan, [2]only so that the generations of Israel might know, to teach them warfare, which before they did not know: [3]the five overlords of the Philistines and all the Canaanites and the Sidonites and the Hivvites dwelling in the high country of Lebanon from Mount Baal Hermon to Lebo-Hamath. [4]And they came to test Israel through them, to know whether they would heed the command of the LORD with which He charged their fathers by Moses. [5]And the Israelites dwelled in the midst of the Canaanites, the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Jebusites. [6]And they took their daughters for themselves as wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons, and they served their gods. [7]And the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and they forgot the LORD their God, and they served the Baalim and the Asheroth. [8]And the LORD's wrath flared up against Israel, and He handed them over to Cushan Rishathaim king of

Aram Naharaim, and the Israelites served Cushan Rishathaim eight years. [9]And the Israelites cried out to the LORD, and the LORD raised up a rescuer for the Israelites, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's young brother, who rescued them. [10]And the spirit of the LORD was upon him, and he led Israel and went out to battle, and the LORD gave into his hand Cushan Rishathaim king of Aram, and his hand was strong against Cushan Rishathaim. [11]And the land was quiet forty years, and Othniel son of Kenaz died.

[12]And the Israelites continued to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, and the LORD strengthened Eglon king of Moab over Israel because they had done evil in the eyes of the LORD. [13]And he gathered round him the Ammonites and the Amalekites, and he struck Israel and they took hold of the Town of Palms. [14]And the Israelites served Eglon king of Moab eighteen years. [15]And the Israelites cried out to the LORD, and the LORD raised up a rescuer for them, Ehud son of Gera the Benjaminite, a left-handed man. And the Israelites sent tribute in his hand to Eglon king of Moab. [16]And Ehud made himself a double-edged sword, a *gomed* in length, and strapped it under his garments on his right thigh. [17]And he presented the tribute to Eglon king of

Moab, and Eglon was a very fat man. [18]And it
happened when he had finished presenting the tribute
that he sent away the people bearing the tribute. [19]And
he had come back from Pesilim, which is by Gilgal.
And he said, “A secret word I have for you, king.”
And he said, “Silence!” And all those standing in
attendance on him went out from his presence. [20]When
Ehud had come to him, he was sitting alone in the cool
upper chamber that he had. And Ehud said, “A word
of God I have for you.” And he rose from the seat.
[21]And Ehud reached with his left hand and took the
sword from his right thigh and thrust it into his belly.
[22]And the hilt, too, went in after the blade and the fat
closed over the blade, for he did not withdraw the
sword from his belly, and the filth came out. [23]And
Ehud went out to the vestibule and closed the doors of
the upper chamber and locked them. [24]He had just
gone out, when Eglon’s courtiers came and saw, and,
look, the doors of the upper chamber were locked.
And they said, “He must be relieving himself in the
cool chamber.” [25]And they waited a long while, and,
look, no one was opening the doors of the upper
chamber. And they took the key and opened them,
and, look, their master was fallen to the ground, dead.
[26]And Ehud had escaped while they tarried, and he
passed Pesilim and escaped to Seirah. [27]And it

happened when he came, that he blasted the ram's horn in the high country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came down with him from the high country, and he was before them. [28]And he said to them, "Come down after me, for the LORD has given your enemies, Moab, in your hand." And they came down after him and took the fords of the Jordan from Moab, and they did not let anyone cross over. [29]And at that time they struck down Moab, about ten thousand men, every stout fellow and every valiant man, and not a man escaped. [30]And on that day Moab was laid low under the hand of Israel. And the land was quiet eighty years.

[31]And after him there was Shamgar son of Anath. And he struck down the Philistines, six hundred men, with an ox-goad, and he, too, rescued Israel.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *all who knew not the wars of Canaan*. The translation mirrors the looseness of the Hebrew syntax, although this clause clearly modifies "Israel."

2. *to teach them warfare, which before they did not know*. Here an entirely different reason for the incompleteness of the conquest is introduced: Israel had to learn the skills of war in gradual stages through conflict with the Canaanites before it was prepared to conquer them.

4. *to test Israel . . . to know whether they would heed the command of the* LORD. Now the writer reverts to the theological explanation for the incompleteness of the conquest put forth in 2:21–23.

7. *the Asheroth*. In the plural feminine form, a different Canaanite goddess is evoked, not Ashtoreth but Asherah, the consort of the sky god El.

8. *Cushan Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim*. There are two oddities in this name and title. Rishathaim, which means "double-evil," sounds more like a symbolic epithet than an actual name. Aram Naharaim is Mesopotamian Aram (there were Arameans closer to the eastern border of Israel), which would be a long distance from which to exert temporary dominance over any population west of the Jordan.

9. *Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's young brother*. He has already figured in the narrative both in this book and in Joshua as the conqueror of Hebron. In that instance, however, his military prowess was not enabled by the descent of the spirit upon him, according to the pattern of the Judges. His appearance now as the first judge is no doubt intended to establish a bridge between the period of Joshua and the period of the Judges. All the elements of the Judge paradigm are evident: Israel's defection, its subjugation, its crying out, God's response in raising up a rescuer, the descent of the spirit, the ensuing victory. But only the outline of the pattern appears—no details are offered of Othniel's exploits.

15. *the Benjaminite*. The tribe of Benjamin, as the subsequent narrative will affirm, was noted for its skill in battle.

a left-handed man. The literal sense of the Hebrew idiom is "a man impaired [or bound up] in his right hand." Ehud's left-handedness plays a crucial part in his assassination of Eglon.

in his hand. Though the idiom means "through his agency," with verse 18 making clear that there are at least several people physically bearing the considerable tribute, the use of "hand" picks up the appearance of the ominous left hand in the previous verse and its lethal deployment in verse 21.

16. *a* gomed. This measure of length occurs only here, but it has an evident cognate, *garmida*, in rabbinic Aramaic, which is a cubit, about seventeen inches. This would be short enough to conceal the weapon strapped to the

thigh. The double edge of the straight sword makes it a thrusting weapon. Typical swords of this period were single-edged and sickle-shaped and were wielded by slashing.

17. *Eglon was a very fat man*. The name Eglon strongly suggests *ʾegel*, "calf." In this satiric view of the enemy, he is a gross fatted calf, ready for slaughter.

19. *Pesilim*. This appears to be a place-name, but it means "the idols" (there is a definite article), and so it is probably a cultic site.

Silence! The Hebrew *hass* is onomatopoeic, something like shhh! When Ehud tells Eglon that he has a secret to convey, these words elicit exactly the response intended by the assassin: the king doesn't want anyone else to hear, so he tells Ehud to keep quiet and orders everyone else out of the chamber. It should be noted that Ehud's words to the king are abrupt, lacking the language of deference ("my lord the king") required when addressing a royal personage. Eglon, in his eagerness to hear the secret, takes no note of this.

20. *A word of God*. At first, Eglon might have thought that the secret word was some piece of military intelligence that this supposed collaborator was offering him. Now Ehud presents it as an oracle, something that would be especially likely if Eglon is aware that he has arrived by way of Pesilim. (In this second bit of dialogue, Ehud is even more abrupt, now omitting the title "king.") Eglon rises either because this is the proper posture in which to receive an oracle or because of his eagerness to hear the "word of God" up close. By standing, of course, he makes himself a perfect target for the sword thrust.

21. *Ehud reached with his left hand*. Because Eglon does not see this as the weapon hand, Ehud gains a decisive moment as he whips out the sword before Eglon can make a move to evade it.

22. *the hilt, too, went in after the blade*. The image of the weapon entirely encased in Eglon's corpulence is deliberately grotesque.

the filth. The Hebrew *parshedonah* clearly shows the element *peresh*, excrement. The anomalous ending of the word may be a scribal duplication of the ending of *misderonah*, "to the vestibule," which is the third word after this one in the Hebrew text. The release of the anal sphincter in the death spasm adds a scatological note to the representation of the killing of Eglon.

23. *Ehud went out to the vestibule*. The exact meaning of the Hebrew noun is uncertain, and our knowledge of the floor plan of Moabite palaces remains imperfect in this regard, though one scholar, Baruch Halperin, has made a heroic effort to reconstruct the architectural scene. But this would have to be some sort of courtyard or rear chamber on the other side of the king's special chamber from the anteroom in which his attendants await him. The closing and locking of the doors, then, would be pluperfect: Ehud locks them from within and goes out through another, unspecified, exit.

24. *and, look, the doors of the upper chamber were locked*. The use of the presentative *hineh*, "look," to mark a shift to the characters' point of view is tactically effective here and in what follows: the courtiers are confronted by locked doors, and perplexed.

He must be relieving himself. The scatological detail is comic here: they can clearly smell the consequences of the released sphincter, and they use their inference to explain both the locked doors and the long delay.

25. *they took the key and opened them*. These doors evidently can be locked or unlocked from either side.

and, look, their master was fallen to the ground, dead. The management of narrative point of view is both eloquent and dramatic. They look and first make out "their master" (which is how they would have silently referred to him), take in the fact that he is sprawled on the floor, and then realize, at the very end of the syntactic chain, that he is dead. (With the short sword entirely buried in his belly, it is possible that no blood would be visible.)

26. *And Ehud had escaped while they tarried*. The courtiers' long wait while they supposed their king was relieving himself gives the assassin ample time to get away.

27. *he blasted the ram's horn*. It often happens in biblical narrative that two juxtaposed scenes are linked by the repetition of a term, in a different sense. The verb *taqa'* means "to stab" or "to thrust" and is used for Ehud's killing of Eglon. But it also means "to blast" (on a ram's horn or trumpet), which is what he does now as a signal to rally fighters around him.

28. *Come down after me*. The received text says *ridfu ʾaḥaray*, which means "pursue me," an idiom that always suggests hostile intent. The Septuagint

reads *redu*, “come down,” and it is very likely that the extra consonant, generating a wrong meaning, was inadvertently introduced through scribal copying in the Masoretic Text.

29. *every stout fellow*. The Hebrew adjective *shamen* usually means “fat” but here has the sense of “stalwart” or “strong,” a double meaning also exhibited by the English term “stout.” Its use here, however, clearly plays back ironically against the corpulence of Eglon.

30. *eighty years*. In this case, it is twice the formulaic forty.

31. *Shamgar son of Anath*. Anath is the Canaanite warrior-goddess. Some scholars think Shamgar may incorporate the name of the Hurrian sun god. It is a puzzle that this judge should sport two eminently pagan names. It is possible that the folk-traditions on which the tales of the Judges draw might actually reflect a fluid and syncretic situation in this early period in which on occasion a warrior of Canaanite lineage might have fought alongside some Israelite group.

with an ox-goad. This unconventional weapon anticipates Samson’s slaying Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey. The very oddness of this detail—the sole detail we are given about Shamgar’s exploits—might suggest an actual memory of a fighter who used an improvised destructive implement, though the number of six hundred killed (six hundred is a set figure for military contingents) is unlikely.

CHAPTER 4

[1]And the Israelites continued to do evil in the eyes of
the LORD—and Ehud had died. [2]And the LORD
handed them over to Jabin, king of Canaan, who
reigned in Hazor, and the commander of his army was
Sisera, and he lived in Harosheth-Goiim. [3]And the
Israelites cried out to the LORD—for he had nine
hundred iron chariots and he had oppressed the
Israelites mightily for twenty years. [4]And Deborah, a
prophet-woman, wife of Lappidoth, she it was who
judged Israel at that time. [5]And she would sit under the
Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the
high country of Ephraim, and the Israelites would
come up to her for judgment. [6]And she sent and called
to Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh-Naphtali and
said to him, “Has not the LORD God of Israel charged
you: ‘Go, and draw around you on Mount Tabor and
take with you ten thousand men from the Naphtalites
and the Zebulunites. [7]And I shall draw down to you at
the Kishon Wadi Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s
army, and his chariots and his force, and I shall give

him into your hand.’” [8]And Barak said to her, “If you
go with me, I will go, and if you do not go with me, I
will not go.” [9]And she said, “I will certainly go with
you, but it will not be your glory on the way that you
are going, for in the hand of a woman the LORD will
deliver Sisera.” And Deborah rose and went with
Barak to Kedesh. [10]And Barak mustered Zebulun and
Naphtali at Kedesh, and he brought up at his heels ten
thousand men, and Deborah went up with him. [11]And
Heber the Kenite had separated from Kayin, from the
sons of Hobeb father-in-law of Moses, and he pitched
his tent at Elon-in-Zaananim, which is by Kedesh.
[12]And they told Sisera that Barak son of Abinoam had
gone up to Mount Tabor. [13]And Sisera mustered all his
chariots, nine hundred iron chariots, and all the troops
that were with him, from Harosheth-Goiim to the
Kishon Wadi. [14]And Deborah said to Barak, “Arise,
for this is the day that the LORD has given Sisera into
your hand. Has not the LORD sallied forth before
you?” And Barak came down from Mount Tabor, and
ten thousand men after him. [15]And the LORD
panicked Sisera and all the chariots and all the camp
by the edge of the sword before Barak, and Sisera got
down from the chariot and fled on foot. [16]And Barak
had pursued the chariots and the camp as far as
Harosheth-Goiim, and all the camp of Sisera fell by

the edge of the sword, not one remained. [17]And Sisera had fled on foot to the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, for there was peace between Jabin king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite. [18]And Jael came out to meet Sisera and said to him, “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me, do not fear.” And he turned aside to her, to the tent, and she covered him with a blanket. [19]And he said to her, “Give me, pray, a bit of water to drink, for I am thirsty.” And she opened the skin of milk and gave him to drink and covered him. [20]And he said to her, “Stand at the opening of the tent, and then, should a man come and ask you, ‘Is there a man here?,’ you shall say there is not.” [21]And Jael wife of Heber took the tent peg and put a mallet in her hand and came to him stealthily and drove the peg through his temple and it sunk into the ground—as for him, he had been asleep, exhausted—and he died. [22]And, look, Barak was pursuing Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him and said to him, “Come, that I may show you the man you seek.” And he went inside, and, look, Sisera was fallen, dead, the peg in his temple.

[23]And on that day God laid low Jabin king of Canaan before the Israelites. [24]And the hand of the Israelites

came down ever harder upon Jabin king of Canaan till they cut off Jabin king of Canaan.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *and Ehud had died*. The Hebrew indicates a pluperfect by placing the subject before the verb and using the suffix conjugation (*qatal*) of the verb: Ehud's death leaves a hiatus, and Israel reverts to its wayward behavior.

2. *Jabin, king of Canaan*. This designation is a kind of hyperbole because there was no single king of Canaan. Hazor, however, was an important city, and so its king would have exercised considerable power among the city-states of Canaan. Later in the chapter, Jabin is called "king of Hazor."

3. *iron chariots*. As elsewhere, this characterization is an exaggeration, perhaps meant to emphasize the fearsome power of the chariots, because in this era the chariots were wooden, with at most iron reinforcing elements.

4. *a prophet-woman*. The translation mirrors the structure of the Hebrew, which does not say *nevi'ah* ("prophetess") but *'ishah nevi'ah*. The introduction of the "woman" component, which is not strictly required by idiomatic usage, highlights the prominence of woman vis-à-vis man that is evident both in Deborah's relation to Barak and in the story of Jael and Sisera.

she it was who judged Israel at that time. The figure of Deborah manifests the ambiguity of the role of "judge," *shofet*. She is called a prophet because she evidently has a direct line of intelligence about God's strategic plans for Israel. In this, she resembles the martial judges, who are invested with the spirit of God. She is not called a judge, perhaps because she herself, as a woman, does not go out to the battlefield, but she is the subject of the verb "judge," a capacity she exercises in the judicial sense, as becomes entirely clear in the next verse.

6. *Has not the LORD God of Israel charged you*. Deborah would know what God commands Barak because she is a prophet.

draw around you. The Hebrew verb says merely "draw," although the evident meaning in context is to muster or rally. This verb is pointedly repeated in God's speech in the next verse: Barak is to draw fighters around him, and God will then draw the enemy into a place where he will be defeated.

8. *If you go with me, I will go*. Barak's hesitancy makes it evident that the male commander needs this woman behind him in order to go out to battle. Thus he becomes a kind of proxy for Deborah, who is to all intents and purposes also a "judge" in the military sense.

9. *for in the hand of a woman the LORD will deliver Sisera*. The sentence has a double meaning. The woman in the first instance is the "prophet-woman" Deborah, who can rightly take credit for the victory. It also turns out to be Jael, whose actual hand, driving in the tent peg, will finish off Sisera.

10. *Zebulun and Naphtali*. In this prose version, which is almost certainly later than the poetic version in chapter 5, there are only two tribes involved and not an alliance of several tribes.

at his heels. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "at his feet."

11. *Kayin*. This name is conventionally represented as "Cain" but is here spelled as it is to indicate that the ethnic group is the same as Heber's identifying ethnic tag, "the Kenite."

14. *Has not the LORD sallied forth before you?* In almost all the reports of battle in the Deuteronomistic History, YHWH figures as the warrior-god who defeats the enemy, and there is little representation of human acts of martial prowess or strategic cunning. The next verse invokes a characteristic locution: the LORD "panics" the enemy, thus causing his defeat.

15. *Sisera got down from the chariot*. The same Hebrew verb is used here as when Barak "came down" from Mount Tabor: the first coming down is a rapid descent in an attack, and the second is a flight on foot from an encumbered or perhaps damaged chariot.

18. *Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me*. Her words, with an alliteration of sibilants in the Hebrew (*surah, ʾadoni, surah ʾelay*), are soothingly reassuring, almost seductive.

19. *she opened the skin of milk and gave him to drink*. Sisera has asked for water; Jael in a gesture of hospitality offers him milk. The detail picks up a line from the poem (5:25), but whereas the poem, in an epic flourish, has her offering the milk in a "princely bowl," the prose narrative turns this into the homey realistic receptacle of a skin bag. It also highlights, as the poem does not, the ironic suggestion of Jael's playing a maternal role toward the man she is about to kill: first she covers him with a blanket, then she gives him milk to drink and readjusts the blanket.

20. *should a man come and ask you, 'Is there a man here?'* The repetition of "man" (*'ish*) plays against the previous repetitions of "woman" as the man speaking is about to be undone by a woman.

21. *and it sunk into the ground*. This grisly detail indicates that Jael has driven in the sharpened tent peg with terrific power.

22. *Come, that I may show you the man you seek*. She was instructed to answer the question "Is there a man here?" by saying "there is not." Meeting Barak in front of her tent, she volunteers the information that there is a man within before being asked, but she withholds the fact that it is a dead man.

and, look, Sisera was fallen, dead, the peg in his temple. As with the report of the courtiers seeing the dead Eglon in chapter 3, the character's visual point of view is marked by the presentative *hineh*, "look," and the sequence of details follows his visual intake: the identity of the man, Sisera; the fact that he is lying on the ground; the fact that he is dead; the instrument of death thrust through his temple.

23. *God laid low Jabin king of Canaan*. Jabin had not taken part in the battle. Now, after the defeat of his principal force and his armored corps under the command of Sisera, he and his kingdom are laid low by the Israelites.

24. *the hand of the Israelites came down ever harder*. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "the hand of the Israelites went ever harder."

CHAPTER 5

[1]And Deborah sang, and Barak son of Abinoam with
her on that day, saying:

[2]“When bonds were loosed in Israel,
when the people answered the
call, bless the LORD!
[3]Hear, O kings, give ear, O chiefs—
I to the LORD, I shall sing.
I shall hymn to the LORD, God
of Israel.
[4]O LORD, when You came forth
from Seir,
when You strode from the fields
of Edom,
the earth heaved, the very heavens
dripped rain,
the clouds, O they dripped water.
[5]Mountains melted before the LORD
—

He of Sinai—
before the LORD, God of
Israel.
[6]In the days of Shamgar son of
Anath,
in the days of Jael, the caravans
ceased,
and wayfarers walked on
roundabout paths.
[7]Unwalled cities ceased,
in Israel, they ceased,
till you arose, Deborah,
till you arose, O mother in Israel.
[8]They chose new gods,
then was there war at the gates.
No shield nor lance was seen
amidst forty thousand of Israel.
[9]My heart to the leaders of Israel,
who answered the call for the
people, bless the LORD!
[10]Riders on pure-white she-asses,
sitting on regal cloths.
O wayfarers, speak out,
[11]louder than the sound of archers,
by the watering places.

There let them retell the LORD's
bounties,
His bounties for unwalled cities in
Israel.
Then the LORD's people went
down to the gates.
[12]Awake, awake, O Deborah,
awake, awake, O speak the
song.
Arise, Barak,
take your captives, Abinoam's
son!
[13]Then the remnant of the mighty
came down,
the LORD's people came down
from amidst the warriors.
[14]From Ephraim, their roots in
Amalek.
After you, O Benjamin, with
your forces!
From Machir the leaders came
down,
and from Zebulun, wielders of
the baton.
[15]And the commanders of Issachar
with Deborah,

and Issachar like Barak, in the
valley ran free.
In the clans of Reuben,
great were the heart's probings.
16 Why did you stay among the
sheepfolds,
listening to the piping for the
flocks?
In the clans of Reuben,
great were the heart's probings.
17 Gilead across the Jordan dwelled,
and Dan, why did he linger by
the ships?
Asher stayed by the shore of the sea,
and by its inlets he dwelled.
18 Zebulun, a people that challenged
death,
and Naphtali on the heights of
the field.
19 Kings came, did battle,
then Canaan's kings did battle,
in Taanach, by the waters of
Megiddo,
no spoil of silver did they take.
20 From the heavens the stars did
battle,

from their course they did
battle with Sisera.
[21]The Kishon Wadi swept them off,
an ancient wadi the Kishon
Wadi.
March on, my being, in
valor!
[22]The hooves of the horses
hammered,
from the gallop, the gallop of
his steeds.
[23]‘Curse Meroz,’ said the LORD’s
messenger,
‘Curse, O curse its dwellers,
for they did not come to the aid of
the LORD,
to the aid of the LORD midst the
warriors.’
[24]Blessed above women Jael,
wife of Heber the Kenite,
above women in tents be she
blessed.
[25]Water he asked for, milk did she
give,
in a princely bowl she served him
curds.

[26]Her hand for the tent peg reached
out
and her right hand for the
workman's hammer.
And she hammered Sisera, cracked
his head.
She smashed and pierced his
temple.
[27]Between her legs he kneeled, fell,
lay,
between her legs he kneeled, he
fell,
where he kneeled he fell,
destroyed.
[28]Through the window she looked
out, moaned,
Sisera's mother, through the
lattice:
'Why is his chariot so long in
coming,
why so late the clatter of his cars?'
[29]The wisest of her ladies answer her,
she, too, replies on her own:
[30]'Why, they will find and share out
the spoils—
a damsel or two for every man.

Spoil of dyed stuff for Sisera,
spoil of dyed stuff,
dyed needlework,
needlework pairs for every neck.'
[31]Thus perish all Your enemies, O LORD!
And be His friends like the sun
coming out in its might."

And the land was quiet forty years.

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Deborah sang, and Barak son of Abinoam with her*. The use of a singular verb (feminine) followed by a compound subject is an indication in biblical grammar that the first of the subjects named is the primary actor and the second one ancillary to the action. Deborah is introduced as singer of the victory song, but that is not a claim of authorship, and elsewhere in the poem she is addressed in the second person. In any case, the scholarly consensus is that this is one of the oldest texts in the Bible, perhaps composed not long after the battle it reports, around 1100 B.C.E. Its language abounds in archaisms, many of them uncertain in meaning and probably some of them scrambled in scribal transmission.

2. *When bonds were loosed in Israel*. The Hebrew verb can mean undoing hair or casting off restraints. In the context here, it might refer to a time of wildness in military crisis when the ordinary social and political order was in abeyance.

when the people answered the call. The noun here (*'am*) and the verbal stem *n-d-b* often occur as joined terms. The verb suggests volunteering or answering the call, but is also particularly associated with noblemen, who would be the ones to fling themselves into the fray as leaders with the rest of the people following them.

4. *Seir . . . Edom*. These places mark the route of conquest from the southeast toward Canaan reported in Numbers and Deuteronomy. YHWH as warrior god marches ahead of the people.

dripped rain. "Rain" is merely implied in the Hebrew.

6. *In the days of Shamgar . . . in the days of Jael, the caravans ceased*. Shamgar, the first of the Judges, is represented as chronologically overlapping with Jael, the heroine of the poem. Israelite caravans, according to the poem, were unable to journey safely because of the danger from Canaanite warriors.

7. *Unwalled cities*. There are wildly different interpretations of the obscure Hebrew noun *perazon*. This translation links it to the verbal stem *p-r-ts*, "to breach," and understands it to indicate a town without walls. At a moment of grave military instability, Israelites could no longer live in such unprotected places.

ceased, / in Israel, they ceased. This pattern of incremental repetition (the increment here is "in Israel") strongly marks this poem and is a hallmark of its archaic character. Incremental repetition is the most explicit form of development or intensification from the first half of the line to the second, a pattern in which something is literally added in the second verset.

till you arose, Deborah, / till you arose, O mother in Israel. This is another line built on incremental repetition. Although the ending of the verbs looks, according to later normative grammar, like a first-person singular, it is almost certainly an archaic second-person feminine ending.

8. *They chose new gods*. As in the prose narratives, cultic disloyalty leads to military catastrophe—"then was there war at the gates."

9. *who answered the call for the people*. Here the association of the verbal stem *n-d-b* with nobility is made explicit because these are "the leaders of Israel." The martial ethos of noble warriors prepared to risk all has a certain affinity with the Homeric poems.

10. *Riders on pure-white she-asses*. In this early period, these would be the mounts of noblemen or princes.

11. *archers*. Although this is a common understanding of *meḥatsetsim*, linking it to *ḥets*, "arrow," widely different interpretations have been proposed. If in fact the word refers to archers, the sound would be the twanging of many bows and the whizzing of arrows as volleys are shot.

unwalled cities. This is the same word that is used in verse 7. God's "bounties" would be in reestablishing a safe order for the tribes of Israel in which they could once more live in unfortified towns.

went down to the gates. Battle is often engaged before the gates of the city.

12. *speak the song*. Yairah Amit proposes that the choice of the verb "speak," *dabri*, is motivated by a pun on the name Deborah. The phrase here is the increment in still another incremental repetition.

13. *came down*. The Masoretic vocalization *yerad* is anomalous and has led many interpreters to see an entirely different verb here. The most plausible construction, however, is to understand it as an archaic variant of *yarad*, "came down." Since battle is joined at a wadi and the Israelite forces assemble in the hills, "came down" seems appropriate.

14. *After you, O Benjamin, with your forces*. The tribe of Benjamin, known for its military prowess, would be a likely candidate to lead the allied tribes into the fray.

15. *great were the heart's probings*. The translation follows several variant manuscripts that show *ḥiqrey*, "probings," as in the next verse, instead of *ḥiqeqey*, "rulings" (?). Given that Reuben is denounced in the next line for not joining the assembled tribes in battle, this phrase is probably sarcastic: the Reubenites give themselves to indecisive thought and speculation instead of marshaling their forces for battle. This entire verse and the next one reflect a real situation a century before the monarchy in which there is no central governing force and not all the tribes can be counted on to "answer the call" in a time of crisis.

17. *Dan, why did he linger by the ships?* The reference is puzzling because Dan did not occupy coastal territory either in its early phase east of the Philistines or in its later migration to the north.

18. *challenged death*. Literally, "exposed its life to death."

19. *Kings came, did battle, / then Canaan's kings did battle*. This is another fine flourish of incremental repetition. "Then" is repeated through the poem, marking its narrative momentum. Unlike the narrative version of this story in chapter 4, which has only one enemy king, Jabin, the Canaanite forces here are led more plausibly by an alliance of kings.

no spoil of silver did they take. This is the first clear indication that they are defeated. It also anticipates the self-deluding notion of the Canaanite noblewomen at the end of the poem that their men are about to bring home an abundance of spoils.

20. *From the heavens the stars did battle*. This is a characteristic move of Israelite war poetry: no feats of valor on the battlefield are reported, for the victory comes from divine intervention. The fact that in Hebrew idiom the clustered stars are referred to as the "army" or "host" (*tzava'*) of the heavens encourages this representation of the stars battling on behalf of Israel.

21. *The Kishon Wadi swept them off*. Although the poem's narrative report here is highly elliptical, it looks as though there is an evocation of the victory at the Sea of Reeds: perhaps here, too, the chariots are disabled in the muck of the wadi, which might be the concrete manifestation of the stars' battling for Israel.

22. *The hooves of the horses hammered*. This pounding of hoofbeats steps up the "march" or "tread," of the preceding line. The entire line in Hebrew is strongly alliterative and onomatopoeic, an effect the translation seeks to emulate.

23. *Curse Meroz*. Nothing is known about this particular town other than its representation in the poem as a place of egregious failure to join the general effort of battle.

the aid of the LORD midst the warriors. In this incremental repetition, it is evident that YHWH needs His human warriors in order to be victorious. The

poem wavers in this fashion between understanding victory as a miraculous event and as the accomplishment of heroic deeds by brave warriors. Jael at the end certainly needs no divine assistance.

24. *above women in tents be she blessed*. This incremental repetition, by introducing an ostensibly automatic epithet for women with their domestic sphere, "in tents," sets the scene for the killing with the tent peg.

25. *Water he asked for, milk did she give*. Unlike the prose narrative, there is no dialogue, with its delineation of interaction of characters, only a series of gestures and acts.

in a princely bowl she served him curds. This is an eloquent flourish and heightening of the giving of milk in the first verset. At the same time, the offering of the bowl to Sisera (who has not yet been named) focuses visual attention on the hands of the woman bearing the bowl, and in the next line those hands will be murderous.

26. *Her hand for the tent peg reached out*. This would have to be her left hand. In the elliptical narrative report of the poem, we are not told that Sisera has fallen asleep, although the understanding of the prose story that this is the case sounds plausible. Alternatively, as he was drinking, his face deep in the bowl, she might have attacked him from behind, though he appears to be facing her when he falls.

she hammered Sisera, cracked his head. / She smashed and pierced his temple. The noun "hammer" at the end of the previous line now becomes a verb. In a related way, the entire report of the killing uses sequences of overlapping verbs, like cinematic frames one after the other—here: hammered, cracked, smashed, pierced. The verb "hammered" was previously applied to hoofbeats.

27. *Between her legs he kneeled, fell, lay*. His death agony is a kind of grotesque parody and reversal of sexual assault, a common practice in warfare, as we are reminded at the beginning of verse 30. This triadic line is one of the most brilliant deployments of incremental repetition in the poem, culminating in the climactic increment "destroyed" at the end.

28. *Through the window she looked out*. In a maneuver akin to cinematic *faux raccord*, we do not yet know that the "she" is Sisera's mother, and for a

moment we might even imagine that the poem is referring to Jael, though the window could not belong in a tent.

moaned. The Hebrew verbal stem *y-b-b* appears only here in the biblical corpus, and so one must surmise from context that it is some sort of lament, moan, or complaint.

window . . . lattice. It then becomes apparent that the scene has switched from the simple setting of a tent to a luxurious palace.

the clatter of his cars. The term "clatter" is more literally "pounding" and thus picks up the hammering hoofbeats of verse 22.

30. *they will find and share out the spoils*. The reason for the delayed return, they imagine, is that the victorious warriors are taking time to gather booty.

a damsel or two. The Hebrew *raḥam* is an archaic term, with a cognate that figures in Ugaritic texts, hence the choice of "damsel." But it is transparently linked with *reḥem*, "womb," and so might conceivably be a coarser term for a captive woman. In this warrior culture, the women unquestionably assume that it is the prerogative of the men to bring back fresh bedmates for themselves—even two to a customer—from the conquered enemy.

spoil of dyed stuff. But the women can anticipate their own special share in the spoils—gorgeous embroidered cloth taken from the women of the enemy. If this is the raiment of the captive women, they will have no need of such finery as sex slaves of their captors.

CHAPTER 6

[1]And the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD,
and He gave them into the hand of Midian seven
years. [2]And the hand of Midian was strong over Israel.
Because of Midian the Israelites made themselves the
dugouts that are in the mountains and the caves and
the strongholds. [3]And it happened when Israel planted,
that Midian and Amalek and the Easterners came up
against them. [4]And they encamped against them and
destroyed the yield of the land all the way to Gaza, and
they would not leave a source of livelihood in Israel,
nor sheep nor ox nor donkey. [5]For they with their
flocks and tents would come up, like locusts in
multitude, and they and their camels were beyond
numbering, and they came into the land to destroy it.
[6]And Israel was sorely impoverished because of
Midian, and the Israelites cried out to the LORD.
[7]And it happened, when the Israelites cried out to the
LORD about Midian, [8]that the LORD sent a prophet-
man to the Israelites, and he said to them, “Thus said
the LORD God of Israel, ‘It is I Who brought you up

from Egypt and brought you out from the house of slaves. [9]And I saved you from the hand of Egypt and from the hand of all your oppressors, and I drove them out before you and I gave you their land. [10]And I said to you—I am the LORD your God. You shall not revere the gods of the Amorite in whose land you dwell. And you did not heed My voice.'" [11]And the LORD's messenger came and sat under the terebinth that is in Ophrah, which belongs to Joash the Abiezerite, and Gideon his son was threshing wheat in the winepress to conceal it from Midian. [12]And the LORD's messenger appeared to him and said, "The LORD is with you, valiant warrior." [13]And Gideon said to him, "Please, my lord, if the LORD is with us, why has all this overtaken us, and where are all His wonders of which our fathers told us, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' And now the LORD has abandoned us and given us into the grip of Midian." [14]And the LORD's messenger turned to him and said, "Go in this power of yours and rescue Israel from the grip of Midian. Have I not sent you?" [15]And he said to him, "Please, my lord, how shall I rescue Israel? Look, my clan is poor in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house." [16]And the LORD's messenger said to him, "For I shall be with you, and you will strike down Midian as a single man." [17]And he

said to him, “If, pray, I have found favor in your eyes,
give me a sign that you are speaking with me. [18]Pray,
do not move from here until I come to you and bring
out my offering and set it before you.” And he said, “I
shall sit here until you return.” [19]And Gideon had gone
and prepared a kid and an *ephah* worth of flour of
flatbread. He put the meat in a basket and the broth in
a pot, and he brought it out to him under the terebinth
and brought it forward. [20]And God’s messenger said to
him, “Take the meat and the flatbread, and set them on
yonder crag, and pour out the broth.” And so he did.
[21]And the LORD’s messenger reached out with the tip
of the walking stick that was in his hand and touched
the meat and the flatbread, and fire went up from the
rock and consumed the meat and the flatbread. And
the LORD’s messenger went from his sight. [22]And
Gideon saw that he was a messenger of the LORD.
And Gideon said, “Alas, LORD my Master, for I
indeed have seen a messenger of the LORD face-to-
face.” [23]And the LORD said to him, “It is well with
you. Do not fear. You shall not die.” [24]And Gideon
built there an altar to the LORD, and called it YHWH
Shalom. To this day it is still in Ophrah of the
Abiezerites. [25]And it happened on that night that the
LORD said to him, “Take the bull which is your
father’s and the second bull, seven years old, and you

shall destroy the altar of Baal which is your father's,
and the cultic pole that is on it you shall cut down.
[26]And you shall build an altar to the LORD your God
on top of this stronghold on the surface, and you shall
take the second bull and offer it up as a burnt offering
on the wood of the cultic pole that you cut down."
[27]And Gideon took ten men of his servants and did as
the LORD had spoken to him. And it happened as his
father's household and the men of the town feared to
do it by day, that he did it at night. [28]And the men of
the town rose early in the morning, and, look, the altar
of Baal was shattered and the cultic pole that was on it
was cut down, and the second bull was offered up on
the altar that had been built. [29]And every man said to
his fellow, "Who has done this thing?" And they
inquired and sought out, and they said, "Gideon son of
Joash has done this thing." [30]And the men of the town
said to Joash, "Bring out your son that he may die, for
he has shattered the altar of Baal and cut down the
cultic pole that was on it." [31]And Joash said to all who
stood round him, "Will you contend for Baal, will you
rescue him? Let he who would contend for him be put
to death by morning. If he is a god, he will contend for
himself, for his altar has been shattered." [32]And he was
called on that day Jerubaal, which is to say, "Let him
contend for himself, for his altar has been shattered."

[33]And all of Midian and Amalek and the Easterners
gathered together, and they crossed over and camped
in the Valley of Jezreel. [34]And the spirit of the LORD
invested Gideon, and he blasted the ram's horn, and
Abiezer was mustered behind him. [35]And he sent
messengers throughout Manasseh, and it, too, was
mustered behind him. And he sent messengers in
Asher and in Zebulun and in Naphtali, and they went
up to meet them. [36]And Gideon said to God, "If You
are going to rescue Israel by my hand as You have
spoken, [37]look, I am about to place a fleece of wool on
the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece alone
but on the ground it is dry, I shall know that You will
rescue Israel by my hand as You have spoken." [38]And
so it was: he rose early the next day and squeezed the
fleece and wrung out dew from the fleece, a bowlful of
water. [39]And Gideon said to God, "Let Your wrath not
flare up against me. I would speak just this one time
more and I would make a trial, pray, just this one time
more with the fleece. Let it be dry on the fleece alone,
and on the ground let there be dew." [40]And, so God did
on that night, and it was dry on the fleece alone and on
all the ground there was dew.

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Midian*. The Midianites, unlike the indigenous peoples of Canaan confronted by Deborah and Barak, are nomads whose chief territory is east of the Jordan.

2. *the dugouts*. On the basis of an Arab cognate, the term probably refers to some sort of man-made trench. In modern Hebrew, this word, *minharah*, is used for "tunnel."

strongholds. These would not be architectural structures but the tops of crags that are adapted as fortifications.

4. *destroyed the yield of the land*. The Midianites are not an invading army but ruthless marauders, and so they pillage the fields or use them for grazing and confiscate the Israelites' livestock.

5. *camels*. These beasts, only recently domesticated toward the end of the second millennium B.C.E., were the distinctive mounts of the desert-dwelling Midianites. The Israelites for the most part used donkeys.

11. *Gideon*. The name transparently derives from the verbal stem *g-d-ʿ*, which means "to hack down." Since the name appears to be a consequence of his first act in the story, one might guess that his original name was actually the pagan name Jerubaal, which would mean, "Baal contends [for his loyal worshippers]," and not, as verse 32 suggests, "Let Baal contend for himself," or perhaps, referring to Gideon, "he contends with Baal."

12. *the LORD's messenger*. The Masoretic Text reads "the LORD," but some Hebrew manuscripts have "the LORD's messenger." The same problem occurs in verse 16. There are scholars who think "messenger" was piously added earlier and later in the passage in order to avoid excessive anthropomorphism, but, on the other hand, the image of God Himself poking at something with the tip of a walking stick (verse 21) would be anomalous, and so it seems wiser to assume that the interlocutor throughout is a divine emissary, not the divinity.

valiant warrior. He has not yet earned this epithet, which is thus predictive, and in fact he seems, as Yairah Amit has observed, a rather fearful

man.

14. *Go in this power of yours*. This phrase probably suggests that the LORD's messenger is conferring power on Gideon.

15. *my clan is poor . . . I am the youngest*. Such professions of inadequacy regularly occur in the call narratives of the prophets, and they are evident in Moses's call narrative—that is, the call to prophecy. In fact, the possession of numerous servants (or, perhaps, slaves) indicates that Gideon's family is well off.

20. *pour out the broth*. Though the liquid in question is not conventional in the cult, this looks like a libation.

21. *And the LORD's messenger went from his sight*. Given the fact that he has just miraculously ignited a fire on the rock, it is likely that his going away is equally miraculous—a sudden vanishing.

22. *Alas, LORD my Master*. Here the direct reference to God is appropriate because one would pray to God, not to a divine emissary. But Gideon fears that beholding even a messenger of God could mean death for him.

24. *YHWH Shalom*. That is, "the LORD—it is well," the words God spoke to Gideon.

25. *the second bull*. This second bull is a puzzle because nothing afterward is done in the story with what appears to be a first bull. Some scholars solve the problem by emending *sheini*, "second," to *shamen*, "fat," thus eliminating the multiplicity of bulls.

26. *this stronghold*. See the comment on verse 2.

on the surface. The Hebrew *maʿarakhah* is a little odd. It usually refers to anything arrayed in a set order, like the items in a sacrifice or troops in an army. Perhaps here it is a kind of metonymy, as David Kimchi surmised, indicating the flat surface of the rock on which the sacrifice is to be laid out.

27. *the men of the town feared to do it by day*. Here the fearful ones are Gideon's subordinates, not Gideon himself. This nocturnal act is of a piece

with the clandestine threshing of wheat in a winepress. However, the people feared here are not Midianite marauders but the Israelite inhabitants of the town, who have made Baal worship the official cult there, as we see vividly in their resolution to execute Gideon for having desecrated the altar of Baal.

31. *Let he who would contend for him be put to death*. Joash shrewdly argues that if Baal has real power as a god, he will fight his own battles and exact punishment from the person who violated his altar. If he does not do that, he is not worthy of worship.

33. *crossed over*. The term indicates crossing the Jordan from their habitual territory to the east.

34. *blasted the ram's horn*. As in the Ehud story, this is a call to arms.

37. *I am about to place a fleece of wool*. Moses, too, was given signs before the beginning of his mission, but the apprehensive Gideon sets up an elaborate test for a sign and then reverses its terms for a second test.

39. *Let Your wrath not flare up*. Gideon obviously feels he is pushing matters with God, but he nevertheless requires an additional proof that God will be with him when he leads the insurrection against the powerful Midianites.

Let it be dry on the fleece alone, and on the ground let there be dew. This is a more miraculous outcome than the first test because fleece would naturally absorb moisture that might well evaporate from the ground.

CHAPTER 7

[1]And Jerubaal, that is, Gideon, rose early, and all the troops that were with him, and they camped by Ein Harod. And the camp of Midian was north of Gibeath Hamoreh in the valley. [2]And the LORD said to Gideon, “The troops that are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hand, lest Israel boast to Me saying, ‘My own hand made me victorious.’ [3]And, now, call out, pray, in the hearing of the troops, saying: ‘Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him turn round from Mount Gilead.’” And twenty-two thousand turned back from the troops, and ten thousand remained. [4]And the LORD said to Gideon, “The troops are still too many. Bring them down to the water and I shall sift them out for you there. And so, of whom I say to you, ‘This one shall go with you,’ he shall go with you, and all of whom I say, ‘This one shall not go with you,’ he shall not go.” [5]And he brought the troops down to the water. And the LORD said to Gideon, “Whoever laps the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, set him apart, and whoever

kneels on his knees to drink, set him apart.” [6]And the number of those lapping from their hand to their mouth came to three hundred men. And all the rest of the troops kneeled on their knees to drink water. [7]And the LORD said to Gideon, “With the three hundred men who lapped I shall make you victorious and give Midian into your hand, and let all the other troops go each to his place. [8]And they took the provisions of the troops in their hand as well as their ram’s horns, and he sent off all the men of Israel each to his tent, and he held onto the three hundred men. And the camp of Midian was below him in the valley. [9]And it happened on that night that the LORD said to him, “Arise. Go down into the camp, for I have given it into your hand. [10]And if you are afraid to go down, go down both you and Purah your lad. [11]And you shall listen to what they say, and then your hands will be strengthened and you shall go down into the camp.” And he went down, and Purah his lad with him, to the edge of the armed men who were in the camp. [12]And Midian and Amalek and all the Easterners lay along the valley, like locusts in multitude, and their camels were beyond numbering, like the sand that is on the shore of the sea in multitude. [13]And Gideon came, and, look, a man was recounting a dream to his fellow, and he said, “Look, I dreamed a dream, and, look, a loaf of barley bread

was rolling over through the camp of Midian and came
up to the tent and struck it and overturned it and the
tent fell.” [14]And his fellow answered and said, “That
could only be the sword of Gideon son of Joash man
of Israel. God has given into his hand Midian and all
its camp.” [15]And it happened, when Gideon heard the
recounting of the dream and its explanation, that he
bowed down and went back to the camp of Israel and
said, “Arise, for the LORD has given into your hand
the camp of Midian.” [16]And he split the three hundred
men into three columns and put ram’s horns in
everyone’s hand and empty pitchers with torches inside
the pitchers. [17]And he said to them, “Look to me and
do the same, and just when I come to the edge of the
camp, so as I do, do the same. [18]And when I blast on
the ram’s horn, and all those by me, you too shall blast
on the ram’s horns all round the camp and say, ‘For the
LORD and for Gideon!’” [19]And Gideon came, and the
hundred men who were with him, to the edge of the
camp, at the beginning of the middle watch—they had
just then posted the watchmen—and they blasted on
the ram’s horns and smashed the pitchers that were in
their hands. [20]And the three columns blasted on the
ram’s horns and broke the pitchers and held the
torches with their left hand, and their right hand the
ram’s horns to blast on, and called out: “Sword for the

LORD and for Gideon!” [21]And each one stood in his
place all round the camp. And all the camp ran off and
shouted and fled. [22]And they blasted on the three
hundred ram’s horns and the LORD set every man’s
sword against his fellow throughout the camp, and the
camp fled to Beth-Shittah, toward Sererah, to the
banks of the Meholah brook by Tabbath. [23]And the
men of Israel rallied, from Naphtali and from Asher
and from all Manasseh, and they pursued Midian.
[24]And Gideon sent messengers throughout the high
country of Ephraim, saying, “Come down to meet
Midian and take from them the water sources, as far as
Beth-Barah, and the Jordan.” And all the men of
Ephraim rallied and took the water sources as far as
Beth-Barah, and the Jordan. [25]And they took the two
Midianite commanders, Oreb and Zeeb, and they
killed Oreb at the Rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they killed
in the Winepress of Zeeb, and they pursued Midian.
And the heads of Oreb and Zeeb they brought to
Gideon from across the Jordan.

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *The troops that are with you are too many*. One suspects that behind this tale of a test that eliminates the vast majority of the fighting men there may

lie a historical memory of a small group of guerillas that defeated numerically superior Midianite forces in a surprise attack.

3. *turn round*. The verb *ts-p-r* is unusual and the meaning uncertain, but there is a noun derived from this root that suggests going around.

5. *Whoever laps the water with his tongue, as a dog laps*. The point of the first of the two winnowing procedures—sending home whoever is afraid—is self-evident. This second elimination procedure is at first blush peculiar because similarity to a dog—in general a reviled animal in the biblical world—might not appear to be a recommendation for a good soldier. The lapping of the water, as the next verse clarifies, is not done by putting face to water source but rather by scooping up water in one's palm and then lapping it. The fighters who drink in this way remain alert and ready for combat even as they drink, unlike those who kneel to drink. Perhaps the feral and dangerous connotations of "dog" in Hebrew usage are also invoked here.

8. *of the troops*. The troops in question would have to be those who were sent back, leaving their provisions and ram's horns (which in this context serve as battle horns) behind.

10. *if you are afraid to go down*. God has already experienced Gideon's hesitancy in the two miraculous signs Gideon asked of Him.

your lad. The all-purpose noun *na'ar* in this context clearly indicates a function like "attendant" or even "armor bearer."

12. *like locusts in multitude . . . beyond numbering*, *like the sand that is on the shore of the sea*. This repetition of the vastness of the Midianite forces is an obvious counterpoint to the bare three hundred men whom Gideon now leads. The Hebrew writer evinces a special fascination with the numerous camels, the unfamiliar mounts of the Midianite marauders.

13. *loaf*. The meaning of the Hebrew *tselil* is disputed. Some interpreters link it to the root *ts-l-l*, which means to make a ringing noise and thus understand it to have a sense like "commotion" or "noise." Rolling noise, however, is a problematic notion. Many medieval Hebrew commentators derive it, plausibly, from *tseli*, "roast," construing it as a term for a round flat loaf baked over coals, which in fact is how Bedouins to this day make their *pittah*. It

remains a puzzle as to why bread, and specifically barley bread, is the instrument of destruction in the dream, other than its being totally unexpected in this function, like Gideon's strategy with the horns and the torches. It might be linked with the first image of Gideon threshing grain.

15. *he bowed down*. This may be a gesture of obeisance to God, Who, as he now confidently knows, is about to make him triumph.

16. *he split the three hundred men into three columns*. This move makes it possible for Gideon's men to come down on the Midianite from three sides. Perhaps four sides would have been even more strategically effective, but that consideration is trumped by the numerical neatness of three hundred divided by three.

17. *Look to me and do the same*. In the Hebrew, the force of this command is underscored by a rhyme: *mimeni tirʾu wekhein taʿasu*.

18. *and all those by me*. These would be the one hundred men in the column headed by Gideon, as we see in the next verse.

For the LORD and for Gideon. Some Hebrew manuscripts and two ancient versions show "sword for the LORD," as in verse 20.

19. *at the beginning of the middle watch*. The night was divided into three watches (which here neatly correspond to the tripartite division of Gideon's fighters), so this would be sometime approaching midnight, when the Midianite troops were deep in slumber.

they had just then posted the watchmen. Either they have not yet settled into their positions of observation or they are not yet fully alert because they have just been wakened to take up their watch.

20. *held the torches with their left hand, and their right hand the ram's horns*. Presumably, their swords remained strapped to their sides as they rely entirely on the effect of panic caused by the sudden blaring sound and the torchlight.

21. *each one stood in his place*. These are the horn-blowing, torch-wielding Israelites.

22. *the LORD set every man's sword against his fellow*. In other accounts of Israelite victories, we are told that the LORD "panicked" the enemy. Only here do we get the mechanism of the panic, which in fact is a stratagem devised by Gideon to terrorize the sleeping army.

brook. Though most translations treat *ʾavel* as a proper noun ("Abel"), it means "brook," being an alternate form of the more common *yuval*. Representing it as "brook" clarifies the meaning of "banks" (the Hebrew *sefat* is a singular noun).

24. *Gideon sent messengers*. Having routed the large Midianite army with only three hundred men, he now rallies behind him a much larger force to pursue the fleeing enemy.

took the water sources. In the first instance, they take hold of brooks to the west of the Jordan, where they can readily cut down the Midianites seeking to ford the streams, and then they take hold of the fords of the Jordan itself. The prominence of bodies of water in the destruction of the Midianites loops back to the test of how the Israelite fighters drink water from a stream.

25. *Oreb and Zeeb*. The two names mean, respectively, "raven" and "wolf." Animal names were common among the Northwest Semites, including the Israelites.

they brought to Gideon from across the Jordan. The fleeing Midianite commanders are overtaken and killed east of the Jordan, having eluded the Israelite forces holding the fords. Gideon himself is still on the west side of the Jordan. He will cross it in the next episode in pursuit of the enemy.

CHAPTER 8

[1]And the men of Ephraim said to him, “What is this
thing you have done to us, not to call us when you
went to do battle with Midian?” And they contended
vehemently with him. [2]And he said to them, “What
have I done now to you? Are not the gleanings of
Ephraim’s grapes better than the vintage of Abiezer?
[3]Into your hand God gave the commanders of Midian,
Oreb and Zeeb, and what could I have done like you?”
Then their anger against him abated when he spoke
this thing. [4]And Gideon came to the Jordan, about to
cross over, he and the three hundred men who were
with him, famished and in pursuit. [5]And he said to the
men of Succoth, “Give, pray, some loaves of bread to
the troops that are at my heels, for they are famished,
and I am pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, the Midianite
kings.” [6]And the notables of Succoth said, “Is the palm
of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand that we
should give bread to your army?” [7]And Gideon said,
“Then when the LORD gives Zebah and Zalmunna
into my hand, I will harrow your flesh with the thorns

and thistles of the wilderness!” [8]And he went up from
there to Penuel, and he spoke to them in the same
fashion, and the men of Penuel answered him as the
men of Succoth had answered. [9]And he said as well to
the men of Penuel, saying, “When I come back safe
and sound, I will smash this tower!” [10]And Zebah and
Zalmunna were in Karkor and their camps with them,
about fifteen thousand, all who remained from all the
Easterners, and their fallen were a hundred fifty
thousand sword-wielding men. [11]And Gideon went up
on the road of the tent dwellers east of Nobah and
Jogbahah, and he struck the camp when the camp
thought itself secure. [12]And Zebah and Zalmunna fled,
and he pursued them and took the two Midianite
kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, and he made all the camp
tremble. [13]And Gideon son of Joash came back from
the battle at Heres Ascent. [14]And he caught a lad from
the men of Succoth, and questioned him and the lad
wrote down for him the notables and the elders of
Succoth, seventy-seven men. [15]And he came to the
men of Succoth and said, “Here are Zebah and
Zalmunna about whom you insulted me saying, ‘Is the
palm of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand
that we should give bread to your famished men?’”
[16]And he took the elders of the town and the thorns
and the thistles of the wilderness and harrowed with

them the men of Succoth. [17]And the tower of Penuel
he smashed, and he killed the men of the town. [18]And
he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, “Who are the men
whom you killed in Tabor?” And they said, “They
were just like you, like princes in their features.” [19]And
he said, “They were my brothers, my mother’s sons.
By the LORD, had you let them live, I would not kill
you.” [20]And he said to Jether his firstborn, “Rise, kill
them!” And the lad did not draw his sword, for he was
afraid, for he was still a lad. [21]And Zebah and
Zalmunna said, “You rise and stab us, for as the man,
so is his valor.” And Gideon rose and killed Zebah and
Zalmunna, and he took the crescent ornaments that
were on the necks of their camels. [22]And the men of
Israel said, “Rule over us, you and also your son and
also your son’s son, for you have rescued us from the
hand of Midian.” [23]And Gideon said to them, “I will
not rule over you nor will my son rule over you. The
LORD will rule over you.” [24]And Gideon said to them,
“Let me ask something of you—give me, every man of
you, his ring taken as booty,” for they had golden
rings, as they were Ishmaelites. [25]And they said, “We
will certainly give.” And they spread out a cloak, and
each man flung there his ring taken as booty. [26]And the
weight of the golden rings for which he had asked
came to seventeen hundred shekels of gold, besides the

pendants and the garments of purple that had been on the Midianite kings and besides the collars that were on the necks of their camels. [27]And Gideon made them into an ephod and set it out in his town, in Ophrah, and all Israel went whoring after it there, and it became a snare for Gideon and for his household. [28]And Midian was laid low before Israel, and they no longer lifted their heads, and the land was quiet forty years. [29]And Jerubaal son of Joash went and returned to his house. [30]And Gideon had seventy sons, issue of his loins, for he had many wives. [31]And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech. [32]And Gideon son of Joash died in ripe old age and was buried in the grave of Joash his father the Abiezerite in Ophrah. [33]And it happened when Gideon died that the Israelites again went whoring after the Baalim, and they made Baal-Berith their god. [34]And the Israelites did not recall the LORD their God Who had saved them from the hand of all their enemies round about. [35]And they did not do kindness with the house of Jerubaal-Gideon as all the good he had done for Israel.

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *What have I done now to you*? The received text says "like you," but many manuscripts show "to" (literally, "in" or "against"). An error in copying may have been triggered by "what could I have done like you" in verse 3.

Are not the gleanings of Ephraim's grapes better than the vintage of Abiezer? Gideon now exhibits a new skill as a leader—the shrewd use of persuasive rhetoric. The Ephraimites had been resentful because Gideon did not summon them to fight in the first stage of the conflict with Midian. He responds with a pointed aphorism that would have spoken to any viticulturist: Ephraim, having been responsible for the capture and execution of Oreb and Zeeb, is so much superior to Gideon's clan, Abiezer, that the stray grapes it leaves behind in the harvest are better than what Abiezer actually harvests in the vineyard.

5. *the Midianite kings*. It is improbable that Midian would have more than one king, so the term appears to be used loosely here to mean "leader."

6. *Is the palm of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand*. Given the extended period during which the Israelites were painfully vulnerable to the Midianites, the town elders don't really believe that Gideon will subdue this enemy, and so, in fear of Midianite retribution, they do not want to offer him aid. Amit proposes that the palm is mentioned because of a practice, attested among the Egyptians, of slicing off the palms of a defeated enemy.

7. *I will harrow your flesh with the thorns*. This fierce declaration—the literal sense of the Hebrew verb used is "thresh"—and of the matching one to the elders of Penuel is less a matter of personal vengeance than of military justice: the failure to give provisions to an army that is in desperate need is an act of treason and will be punished as such.

11. *the road of the tent dwellers*. These would be encampments of nomads (still evident in the Jordan Valley)—Gideon is heading into desert country.

thought itself secure. "Thought itself" is merely implied in the Hebrew.

14. *the lad wrote down for him the notables and the elders of Succoth*. The captive boy is constrained to be an informer. Though it is likely that literacy at this moment in the history of Israel was limited to a privileged elite, the writer evidently assumed that it was sufficiently widespread that he could attribute the skill of writing to a random lad seized by Gideon.

15. *give bread to your famished men*. Gideon, in his verbatim repetition of the words of the notables, adds a single telling word, "famished," which was used by the narrator but not by them, and changes "army" to "men." That is to say: to famished fighting men you were brazen enough to deny food.

16. *harrowed with them the men of Succoth*. Given that he goes on to kill the elders of Penuel, we may infer that the same fatal result is achieved at Succoth by the harrowing—a slow and painful death. In the Masoretic Text, the verb used appears to mean "cause to know" (hence the bizarre King James Version, in which Gideon "taught" the elders with thorns and thistle). The Septuagint shows "harrowed" (a difference of one consonant in the Hebrew), which is the likely reading.

18. *They were just like you, like princes in their features*. The Midianite kings imagine that they are flattering Gideon, but in divulging the family resemblance, they pronounce their own death sentence. By the ethic of family blood vengeance, he now feels obliged to kill them.

19. *my mother's sons*. And not the sons of any other of my father's wives. The connection, then, with Gideon is a strong one because these were not merely half brothers.

20. *Jether his firstborn*. Blood vengeance is a family affair, and so Gideon wants his firstborn to carry out the sentence. He may also want to toughen him to killing, which is, in a sense, the family business.

he was afraid. He was afraid, of course, not of the captive (and probably fettered) kings but of the act of stabbing them.

21. *You rise and stab us, for as the man, so is his valor*. Killing is a grown man's business for both sides in the martial code of this story. They also may assume that a proven warrior like Gideon will finish them off with one swift blow.

the crescent ornaments. This detail is proleptic of the agreement to which he comes with his men.

23. *I will not rule over you nor will my son rule over you. The* LORD *will rule over you*. This emphatic repetition of their proposal that he establish a dynasty reflects an ideology circulating in premonarchic Israel, and which will

still be maintained by the prophet Samuel. The vehicle of the LORD's rule is the spirit, or charisma, with which He invests the ad hoc leaders of Israel.

24. *And Gideon said to them*. This repetition of the formula for introducing dialogue without an intervening response from the second party in the dialogue indicates that they are baffled, or perhaps even angered, by his refusal to accept their offer of kingship. Gideon realizes that he now has to propose something to placate or reassure them, but what he proposes proves to be disastrous.

rings. These are earrings or nose-rings, not rings worn on the finger.

as they were Ishmaelites. Ishmaelite and Midianite are often interchangeable terms. These semi-nomadic folk were evidently known for wearing golden ornaments.

27. *Gideon made them into an ephod*. The clear allusion in this episode is to Aaron's fashioning the Golden Calf from the golden ornaments that he collects from the Israelites. In other contexts, the ephod is a priestly breastplate or an oracular device. The latter function may come into play here. In any case, the declaration that Israel "went whoring after it" clearly indicates it was treated as a sacred icon to be worshipped instead of God.

31. *Abimelech*. This name, which had some general currency (see Genesis 20), incorporates the element *melekh*, "king," the very role that Gideon rejected when it was offered but that this reprobate son will try to arrogate for himself. Although Gideon himself dies in ripe old age, retribution, perhaps for making the ephod, overtakes his offspring through the malefic agency of Abimelech.

CHAPTER 9

[1]And Abimelech son of Jerubaal went to his mother's
brothers and to all the clan of his mother's patriarchal
house, saying, [2]"Speak, pray, in the hearing of all the
notables of Shechem: 'What is better for you, that
seventy men should rule over you, all the sons of
Jerubaal, or that one man should rule over you? And
you should remember that I am your bone and your
flesh.'" [3]And his mother's brothers spoke about him all
these words in the hearing of the notables of Shechem
and their heart was swayed to follow Abimelech, for
they said, "He is our kinsman." [4]And they gave him
seventy shekels of silver from the house of Baal-
Berith, and Abimelech hired with them no-account
reckless men, and they followed him. [5]And he came to
his father's house in Ophrah and killed his brothers,
the sons of Jerubaal, seventy men on one stone, and
Jotham the youngest son of Jerubaal was left, for he
had hidden. [6]And all the notables of Shechem and all
Beth-Millo gathered and proclaimed Abimelech king
by the standing terebinth which is in Shechem. [7]And

they told Jotham, and he went and stood on the top of Mount Gerizim, and he raised his voice and called out and said to them: “Listen to me, O notables of Shechem, that God may listen to you. [8]Once upon a time the trees went to anoint a king over them. And they said to the olive tree, ‘Reign over us.’ [9]And the olive tree said, ‘Have I left off my rich oil, for which God and men honor me, that I should go sway over the trees?’ [10]And the trees said to the fig tree, ‘Go, you, reign over us.’ [11]And the fig tree said to them, ‘Have I left off my sweetness and my goodly yield that I should go sway over the trees?’ [12]And the trees said to the vine, ‘Go, you, reign over us.’ [13]And the vine said to them, ‘Have I left off my new wine, that gladdens God and men, that I should go sway over the trees?’ [14]And all the trees said to the thornbush, ‘Go, you, reign over us.’ [15]And the thornbush said to the trees, ‘If you are really about to anoint me king over you, come shelter in my shade. And if not, a fire shall come out from the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon.’ [16]And now, if you have acted truly and honestly in making Abimelech king over you and if you have acted well toward Jerubaal and his house and have acted toward him as he deserves, [17]for my father fought for you and risked his life and saved you from the hand of Midian, [18]yet you rose up against my father’s house today and

killed seventy men on one stone and made Abimelech
the son of his slavegirl king over the notables of
Shechem, for he was your kinsman. [19]And if you have
acted truly and honestly toward Jerubaal and toward
his house on this day, rejoice in Abimelech and let
him, too, rejoice in you. [20]And if not, let a fire come
out from Abimelech and consume the notables of
Shechem and Beth-Millo, and let a fire come out from
the notables of Shechem and from Beth-Millo and
consume Abimelech." [21]And Jotham fled and ran off
and went to Beer and stayed there because of
Abimelech his brother. [22]And Abimelech lorded it over
Israel three years. [23]And God sent an evil spirit
between Abimelech and the notables of Shechem, and
the notables of Shechem betrayed Abimelech, [24]that
the outage of the seventy sons of Jerubaal and their
blood should come upon Abimelech their brother, who
killed them, and upon the notables of Shechem, who
abetted him in killing his brothers. [25]And the notables
of Shechem laid ambushes for him on the
mountaintops, and they robbed whoever passed over
them on the way. And it was told to Abimelech. [26]And
Gaal son of Ebed came with his kinsmen and passed
through Shechem, and the notables of Shechem
trusted him. [27]And they went out to the field and
harvested their vineyards and trod the vintage and held

a celebration and came to the house of their god and
ate and drank and reviled Abimelech. [28]And Gaal son
of Ebed said, “Who is Abimelech and who the men of
Shechem that we should be subject to them? Were not
the son of Jerubaal and Zebul his officer subject to the
men of Hamor father of Shechem? So why should we
be subject to him? [29]Would that this people were in my
hands. I would remove Abimelech, and I would say to
Abimelech, ‘Muster the full strength of your army and
sally forth.’” [30]And Zebul, the commander of the town,
heard the words of Gaal son of Ebed, and his wrath
flared. [31]And he sent messengers to Abimelech in
Arumah, saying, “Look, Gaal son of Ebed and his
kinsmen are coming to Shechem, and they are about to
turn the town against you. [32]And now rise in the night,
you and the troops who are with you, and lie in
ambush in the field. [33]And so, in the morning, as the
sun comes up, rise early and attack the town, and,
look, he and the troops who are with him will be
coming out toward you, and you shall do whatever you
are able.” [34]And Abimelech rose, and all the troops
who were with him, in the night, and they lay in
ambush against Shechem in four columns. [35]And Gaal
son of Ebed came out and stood at the entrance of the
gate of the town, and Abimelech and the troops who
were with him rose up from the ambush. [36]And Gaal

saw the troops and said to Zebul, “Look, troops are coming down from the mountaintops.” And Zebul said to him, “You are seeing the shadows of the mountains as though they were men.” [37]And Gaal spoke again and said, “Look, troops are coming down from the heartland and one column is coming from Elon Meonenim.” [38]And Zebul said to him, “Where then is your big mouth that you should have said, ‘Who is Abimelech that we should be subject to him?’ Are not these the troops whom you scorned? Sally forth now, pray, and do battle with them.” [39]And Gaal sallied forth before the notables of Shechem and did battle with Abimelech. [40]And Abimelech pursued him, and he fled from him, and many slain fell as far as the entrance of the gate. [41]And Abimelech stayed in Arumah, and Zebul drove out Gaal and his kinsmen from dwelling in Shechem. [42]And it happened the next day that the troops sallied forth to the field, and they told Abimelech. [43]And he took his troops and split them into three columns and lay in ambush in the field. And he saw and, look, the troops were sallying forth from the town, and he rose against them and struck them. [44]And Abimelech and the column that was with him attacked and took a stance at the entrance of the town’s gate, and the two columns attacked whoever was in the field. [45]And Abimelech did battle with the

town all that day, and he took the town and killed the people who were in it and smashed the town and sowed it with salt. [46]And all the notables of Shechem Tower heard, and they went into the redoubt of the house of El-Berith. [47]And it was told to Abimelech that all the notables of Shechem Tower had gathered together. [48]And Abimelech went up Mount Zalmon, he and all the troops who were with him, and he took one of the axes in his hand and cut down a bough and lifted it up and put it on his shoulder. And he said to the troops who were with him, “What you saw me doing, quick, do as I do.” [49]And all the troops cut down each one his bough and followed Abimelech and put them against the redoubt and set fire with them to the redoubt. And all the people of Shechem Tower died, about a thousand men and women. [50]And Abimelech went to Thebez and camped against Thebez and took it. [51]And there was a tower stronghold within the town, and all the men and women and all the notables of the town fled there and shut themselves in and went up on the roof of the tower. [52]And Abimelech came up to the tower and did battle against it. And he approached the entrance of the tower to burn it in fire. [53]And a certain woman flung down an upper millstone on Abimelech’s head and shattered his skull. [54]And he called quickly to the lad who was his armor bearer and said to him,

“Draw your sword and put me to death lest they say, ‘A woman killed him.’” And his lad ran him through and he died. [55]And the men of Israel saw that Abimelech had died and each man went back to his place. [56]And God turned back the evil of Abimelech that he had done to his father to kill his seventy brothers. [57]And all the evil of the men of Shechem God turned back on their heads, and the curse of Jotham son of Jerubaal came down upon them.

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *to his mother’s brothers and to all the clan of his mother’s patriarchal house*. The initial base of support that he enlists is his relatives—first his uncles and then the larger clan.

2. *that one man should rule over you*. His language takes us back to the proposal of Gideon’s warriors that he rule over them, with the scoundrel Abimelech obviously assuming the opposite view from Gideon’s about the advisability of monarchic rule.

4. *the house of Baal-Berith*. This is the local pagan temple. One should keep in mind throughout this story that the principal actors are Canaanites, not Israelites, and that Abimelech, though his father was an Israelite, shows no allegiance to the people or the God of Israel.

5. *on one stone*. This detail, which is repeated in the story, suggests an execution-style killing: first he captures and fetters his brothers, then murders them one by one, probably either by stabbing or beheading.

6. *the standing terebinth*. Though this is a reasonable construction of the two Hebrew words, they look odd syntactically.

8. *Once upon a time*. The Hebrew formula *hayoh hayah* signals the beginning of a parable. The attempts of some scholars to scan it as formal verse are unconvincing, but its rhythmic character and its use of stylized repetition, with the three-plus-one folktale structure, set it apart formally from the surrounding narrative.

13. *gladdens God and men*. This might also justifiably be construed as "gladdens gods and men," reflecting a mythological background in which the gods, as in Greek tradition, quaff wine.

15. *come shelter in my shade*. This is, of course, sarcastic—the lowly thornbush gives no shade. The argument of the parable works both against Abimelech—a low and prickly character—and against the institution of kingship: only a nasty and unproductive type would aspire to the power of a king.

a fire shall come out. It is in the nature of kings to broadcast destruction, as Abimelech has already done in murdering his seventy brothers and as he will do much more extensively. In the last moments of his lethal career, he will in fact use fire as a weapon.

18. *the son of his slavegirl*. Jotham chooses a term of opprobrium for the concubine, just as Sarah does for Hagar in Genesis 21:10.

24. *abetted him*. Literally, "strengthened his hands."

25. *they robbed whoever passed*. Despoiling wayfarers is hardly required to combat Abimelech, and so it is a sign that the notables of Shechem are as scurrilous as he, and both parties will come to a bad end. In fact, these depredations may be what gives away to Abimelech their location on the heights.

26. *Gaal son of Ebed*. The patronymic means either "son of a slave" or Ebed is a shortened form for "Obadiah," which means "slave/servant of God."

27. *held a celebration*. The vintage celebration involves drinking, and it is in a state of drunkenness that Gaal can confidently incite the celebrants to rebel against Abimelech, who is, after all, a ruthless killer and also, as will become clear, a savvy military commander.

28. *Were not the son of Jerubaal and Zebul his officer subject to . . . Hamor father of Shechem?* Abimelech is the son of an Israelite father who was not a native of Shechem. As such, he has no legitimate claim to dominate the Shechemites.

29. *Muster the full strength of your army*. Literally, "multiply your army," the idea being: show me all you have—I can handle it.

31. *Arumah*. The received text says Tormah, but Abimelech is in Arumah.

36. *the shadows of the mountains*. The Hebrew has a singular "shadow." Zebul's canny strategem is to make Gaal think there is no army swooping down on him until it is too late. Given that it is very early in the morning, mountains to the east would cast long shadows.

37. *troops are coming down from the heartland*. Some time has elapsed, and Gaal now can clearly see that these are troops, and that one column is headed toward him from a particular place, Elon Meonenim (which means "Soothsayers' Terebinth"). The exact meaning of *tabur haʾarets*, translated here as "heartland," is uncertain because *tabur* appears only here and in Ezekiel 38:12. The Septuagint renders it as "navel of the land," and in later Hebrew this was taken up as the word for "navel."

38. *your big mouth*. The Hebrew says only "your mouth," but a sarcastic sense of this sort is strongly implied.

42. *the troops*. These troops are the armed men of Shechem.

44. *the column*. The Masoretic Text shows a plural, but Abimelech would have to be leading only one of the three columns, and the singular is reflected in one version of the Septuagint.

45. *sowed it with salt*. Although there is some dispute about the meaning of this gesture, sowing a field with salt would make it infertile, so the likely intention is to mark the site as a place of eternal desolation.

46. *Shechem Tower*. In all likelihood this name indicates a place close to Shechem but not part of it.

the redoubt. The Hebrew *tsariaḥ* is a rare term, and its exact meaning is uncertain. Its occurrence in 1 Samuel 13:6 suggests it was some sort of fortified underground structure.

the house of El-Berith. The god to which this temple is dedicated is probably the same as Baal-Berith, mentioned in verse 4.

48. *one of the axes*. The received text reads "the axes," but the Septuagint appears to have used a Hebrew text that showed "one of the axes."

53. *a certain woman*. It is noteworthy that in this book based on a male warrior culture, first Jael and now this anonymous woman of Thebez deliver deathblows to an enemy. In a more seductive feminine mode, Delilah will bring down the Israelite hero Samson.

an upper millstone. This is the lighter of the two millstones and therefore feasible for a woman to lift up and drop from the tower.

54. *lest they say, "A woman killed him*." In 2 Samuel 11:21, we learn from Joab's words to the messenger that in fact Abimelech's death by the hand of a woman had become proverbial. His last wish, then, is frustrated.

CHAPTER 10

[1]And after Abimelech Tola son of Pua, son of Dodo, a
man of Issachar, arose to rescue Israel, and he dwelled
in Shamir in the high country of Ephraim. [2]And he led
Israel twenty-three years, and he died and was buried
in Shamir. [3]And after him Jair the Gileadite arose and
led Israel twenty-two years. [4]And he had thirty sons
who rode on thirty donkeys, and they had thirty towns.
They call them Jair's Hamlets to this day, which are in
the land of Gilead. [5]And Jair died and was buried in
Camon.

[6]And the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of
the LORD and served the Baalim and the Ashtaroth
and the gods of Aram and the gods of Sidon and the
gods of Moab and the gods of the Ammonites and the
gods of the Philistines. And they forsook the LORD
and did not serve Him. [7]And the LORD's wrath flared
against Israel, and He handed them over to the
Philistines and to the Ammonites. [8]And they smashed

and shattered the Israelites in that year—eighteen years, all the Israelites who were across the Jordan in the land of the Amorites which is in Gilead. [9]And the Ammonites crossed the Jordan to do battle as well with Judah and Benjamin and the house of Ephraim, and Israel was sorely distressed. [10]And the Israelites cried out to the LORD, saying, “We have offended against you and we have forsaken our God and served the Baalim.” [11]And the LORD said to the Israelites, “Was it not from Egypt and from the Amorites and from the Ammonites and from the Philistines, [12]and the Sidonites and Amalek and Maon—they oppressed you and you cried out to me and I rescued you from their hand? [13]But you forsook Me and served other gods. Therefore I will no longer rescue you. [14]Go, cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them rescue you in the hour of your distress.” [15]And the Israelites said to the LORD, “We have offended. Do to us whatever is good in Your eyes, but save us, pray, this day.” [16]And they removed the alien gods from their midst and served the LORD, and He could not bear the misery of Israel.

[17]And the Ammonites were mustered and camped in Gilead, and the Israelites gathered and camped at

Mizpah. [18]And the troops, the commanders of Gilead, said to each other, “Whoever the man who begins to do battle with the Ammonites, he shall become chief of all the inhabitants of Gilead.”

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *after Abimelech*. This is merely an indication of chronology since Abimelech was no rescuer of Israel.

Tola son of Pua, son of Dodo. The first five verses of this chapter are devoted to bare notices of two judges, Tola and Jair, with no accompanying narrative material. The number of years of their leadership, respectively, twenty-three and twenty-two, are not formulaic, which could conceivably mean that they record actual historical memory.

4. *he had thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys*. In this period, donkeys, not horses, were the usual mounts for nobility. The number of sons, donkeys, and towns looks formulaic, but the detail about riding is odd enough that it might reflect a remembered historical fact.

6. *served the Baalim and the Ashtaroth and the gods of Aram*. The first two items are generic terms for pagan gods and goddesses, respectively; adding the gods of the five surrounding peoples mentioned here, one comes to the formulaic number seven.

7. *to the Philistines and to the Ammonites*. These are enemies to the southwest and to the northeast of the major concentration of Israelite population.

8. *in that year—eighteen years*. If the received text is correct (some manuscripts of the Septuagint do not show “in that year”), this would mean that the Philistines and the Ammonites battered Israel in direct assaults for a year and continued to dominate them for eighteen years.

11. *Was it not from Egypt*. The syntax is a little odd, but this is probably best construed as a periodic sentence continuing to the end of verse 12 with the verb "rescued" referring back to the chain of nations, most of which are preceded by "from." Rashi neatly observes, "Seven rescues appear here corresponding to the seven idolatries that they practiced."

15. *We have offended*. God's sarcastic invitation to Israel to turn for help to the gods it has worshipped drives home to them the point that only He can save them from their enemies.

Do to us whatever is good in Your eyes. The Hebrew uses an emphatic form, literally, "You, do to us." What they are saying is that they are ready to submit to punishment for their defection, but they nevertheless implore God to rescue them from oppression, which is too unbearable a punishment.

17. *And the Ammonites were mustered*. A new unit begins here: the circumstances for the impending battle with the Ammonites are established, and the need for a military leader sets the stage for the appearance of Jephthah.

18. *the troops, the commanders of Gilead*. Perhaps *ʿam* here means "people." The appositional phrase "the commanders of Gilead" is awkward and might be a scribal gloss.

the man who begins to do battle. They scarcely permit themselves to imagine victory but are prepared to proclaim as chief whoever will dare to fight the Ammonites.

CHAPTER 11

[1]And Jephthah the Gileadite was a valiant warrior, and he was the son of a whore-woman, and Gilead had begotten Jephthah. [2]And Gilead's wife bore him sons, and the wife's sons grew up and they drove Jephthah out and said to him, "You shall not inherit in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman." [3]And Jephthah fled from his brothers and dwelled in the land of Tob, and no-account men drew round Jephthah and sallied forth with him. [4]And it happened after a time that the Ammonites did battle with Israel. [5]And it happened when the Ammonites did battle with Israel, that the elders of Gilead went to take Jephthah from the land of Tob. [6]And they said to Jephthah, "Come, be our captain, that we may do battle with the Ammonites." [7]And Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "Did you not hate me and drive me out from my father's house, and why do you come to me now when you are in distress?" [8]And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "Therefore now we have come back to you, and you shall go with us and do battle with the

Ammonites, and you shall become chief for us, for all the inhabitants of Gilead.” [9]And Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, “If you bring me back to do battle with the Ammonites and the LORD gives them to me, it is I who will be your chief.” [10]And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, “May the LORD be witness between us that we will surely do according to your word.” [11]And Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people set him over them as chief and captain, and Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD at Mizpah.

[12]And Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites, saying, “What is between you and me that you have come to do battle in my land?” [13]And the king of the Ammonites said to Jephthah’s messengers, “For Israel took my land when it came up from Egypt, from the Arnon to the Jabbok and to the Jordan. And now, give them back in peace.” [14]And Jephthah again sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites, [15]and he said to him, “Thus says Jephthah: Israel did not take the land of Moab and the land of the Ammonites, [16]but when it came up from Egypt, Israel went in the wilderness as far as the Sea of Reeds and came to Kadesh. [17]And Israel sent messengers to the king of

Edom, saying, ‘Let me pass, pray, through your land,’ and the king of Edom did not listen. And to the king of Moab, too, they sent and he would not agree. And Israel stayed in Kadesh. 18And they went through the wilderness and swung round the land of Edom and the land of Moab and came from the east of the land of Moab and camped across the Arnon and did not come into the territory of Moab because the Arnon is the border of Moab. 19And Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, king of Heshbon, and said to him, ‘Let us pass, pray, through your land to our place.’ 20And Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory, and Sihon gathered all his troops, and they camped at Jahaz and did battle with Israel. 21And the LORD God of Israel gave Sihon and all his troops into the hand of Israel, and they struck them down, and Israel took hold of all the land of the Amorites, the inhabitants of that land. 22And they took hold of all the territory of the Amorites from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the wilderness to the Jordan. 23And so, the LORD God of Israel dispossessed the Amorites before His people Israel, and would you possess it? 24Do you not take possession of what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And all that the LORD our God has given us to possess, of that we shall take possession. 25And now, are you really better

than Balak son of Zippor king of Moab? Did he strive with Israel, did he do battle with them? [26]When Israel dwelled in Heshbon and in its hamlets and in Aroer and in its hamlets and in all the towns that are along the Arnon three hundred years, why did you not recover them in all that time? [27]I on my part have committed no offense against you, yet you are doing evil to battle with me. Let the LORD, Who is judge, judge today between the Israelites and the Moabites." [28]But the king of the Ammonites did not listen to Jephthah's words that he had sent him.

[29]And the spirit of the LORD was upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh and passed through Mizpeh Gilead, and from Mizpeh Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites. [30]And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, "If You indeed give the Ammonites into my hand, [31]it shall be that whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return safe and sound from the Ammonites shall be the LORD's, and I shall offer it up as a burnt offering." [32]And Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to do battle with them, and the LORD gave them into his hand. [33]And he struck them from Aroer to where you come to Minnith, twenty towns, and to Abel Ceramim,

a very great blow, and the Ammonites were laid low
before Israel. [34]And Jephthah came to his house at
Mizpah, and, look, his daughter was coming out to
meet him with timbrels and with dances, and she was
an only child—besides her, he had neither son nor
daughter. [35]And it happened when he saw her, that he
rent his garments, and he said, “Alas, my daughter,
you have indeed laid me low and you have joined
ranks with my troublers, for I myself have opened my
mouth to the LORD, and I cannot turn back.” [36]And
she said to him, “My father, you have opened your
mouth to the LORD. Do to me as it came out from
your mouth, after the LORD has wreaked vengeance
for you from your enemies, from the Ammonites.”
[37]And she said to her father, “Let this thing be done for
me: let me be for two months, that I may go and weep
on the mountains and keen for my maidenhood, I and
my companions.” [38]And he said, “Go.” And he sent her
off for two months, her and her companions, and she
keened for her maidenhood on the mountains. [39]And it
happened at the end of the two months, that she came
back to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed,
and she had known no man. And it became a fixed
practice in Israel [40]that each year the daughters of
Israel would go to lament the daughter of Jephthah the
Gileadite four days in the year.

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Gilead's wife bore him sons*. The probable, though not inevitable, inference is that the legitimate sons were born after Jephthah, he belonging to his father's wild-oats phase.

You shall not inherit in our father's house. This declaration, accompanied by the banishment, appears to be a performative speech-act with legal force.

for you are the son of another woman. They don't dare call his mother a whore to his face, and so they use a euphemism. Their behavior toward him, however, is brutal (in this regard, see the next comment).

3. *And Jephthah fled from his brothers*. The fact that he has to flee suggests that their driving him out was implemented with a threat of doing him bodily harm.

the land of Tob. This is a remote region in the northeastern sector of Gilead.

no-account men. The same term, *reiqim* (literally, "empty") is also used for the mercenaries hired by Abimelech. It probably refers to men without property, on the margins of society, who have nothing to lose and readily join a band of guerillas or bandits. The young David also puts together a private militia of this sort when he flees from Saul.

5. *the elders of Gilead went to take Jephthah from the land of Tob*. Their going to seek him out in the badlands where he has located with his fighters obviously reflects the dire straits in which they find themselves.

6. *Come, be our captain*. Their initial speech to him is brusque, devoid of deference or diplomatic gesture. The position they offer him is military commander, *qatsin*.

7. *Did you not hate me and drive me out from my father's house*. We now learn something new about the banishment: the brothers' harsh act either had the tacit endorsement of the elders or was actively abetted by them.

8. *Therefore now we have come back to you*. The "therefore" amounts to a concession on their part: precisely because we were complicit in your banishment, we now come to you to make amends. "Come back" or "bring back" is a thematic key word in this story.

chief. Now they up the political ante: he will not be merely a captain but chief, or head, *roʿsh*, of the whole community.

9. *If you bring me back*. The man who was driven out now contemplates being brought back, as the elders have "come back" to him. Instead of accepting the immediate offer to be chief, he stipulates that he will assume that position only if he is victorious in battle, but he would have to become captain in order to undertake the battle.

it is I. The Hebrew puts the pronoun "I," usually not needed, before the conjugated verb in a structure of emphasis.

10. *May the LORD be witness*. Literally, "May the LORD listen."

11. *the people set him over them as chief and captain*. In the event, both positions are conferred on him before the battle.

Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD. This is a prayer before the battle or perhaps an inquiry of an oracle.

12. *And Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites*. The scholarly consensus is that this entire passage of attempted diplomatic negotiation has been spliced in from another source. According to the account in Numbers 20 and 33, it is Moab, not Ammon, that refuses right of transit to Israel, and, in fact, Moab is mentioned first here (verse 15) and more often, together with Edom and the Amorites. "The land of the Ammonites" may well be an editorial addition intended to link this passage with the surrounding narrative. Chemosh, the deity mentioned in verse 24, is the national god of the Moabites, whereas the Ammonite god would be Milcom.

24. *Do you not take possession of what Chemosh your god gives you to possess?* The theological assumption of this statement is perfectly characteristic of this early period of Israelite history. Israel has its own God, YHWH ("the LORD"), believed to be more powerful than other gods, but each nation has its guiding deity, assumed to look after the national destiny.

25. *Did he strive with Israel, did he do battle with them?* In fact, he fought against Israel, as is reported in Numbers 22, but to no avail, for YHWH caused him to be defeated.

29. *And the spirit of the LORD was upon Jephthah*. Only now, when Jephthah actually leads his troops into battle, do we have the formula of the investment by the divine spirit, the leader's charisma, that is used for most of the other judges.

31. *whatever comes out of the door of the house to meet me*. The Hebrew is ambiguous: it could mean "whatever" or "whoever." Some scholars have argued for the latter because "to meet" seems to imply a person, but the Hebrew, which is in fact a preposition and not a verb, has the sense of "toward," and it seems unlikely that Jephthah would have deliberately envisaged human sacrifice from the start. In any case, it is a rash vow: the Midrash Tanhuma shrewdly notes that the first creature out of the house could have been a dog or a pig, animals unfit for sacrifice. The vow focuses on the act of return to the house, but the killing of Jephthah's only child will mean the destruction of his house in the extended sense of the term.

32. *the LORD gave them into his hand*. This is all we are provided by way of a description of the battle.

34. *and, look*. As repeatedly used elsewhere, the presentative term marks the switch to the visual point of view of the character.

with timbrels and with dances. It was the role of young women to celebrate the victory in this fashion. The dance of joy will immediately turn into lamentation.

35. *my daughter*. This is an affectionate form of address, like "child."

for I myself have opened my mouth to the LORD. The Hebrew incorporates a crucial pun. Jephthah's name, *yiftaḥ*, means "he opens." The verb used here, *patsah*, is slightly different from the verb *pataḥ* on which the name is based, but it is a close phonetic and semantic cousin. The belief shared by father and daughter is that vows to God are irrevocable and nonnegotiable: what comes out of the mouth cannot be brought back ("I cannot turn back," a locution heavy with ironic resonances in light of Jephthah's attempt to come back to the house from which he was driven).

36. *Do to me as it came out from your mouth*. Neither she nor her father can bring themselves to mention explicitly the horrific content of the vow. She speaks almost as though the vow were an autonomous agent that came out of her father's mouth and cannot be called back.

37. *And she said to her father*. This is one of the most arresting instances of the convention of repeating the formula for the introduction of speech with no intervening answer in order to indicate a difficulty in responding on the part of the interlocutor in the dialogue. Jephthah, hearing his daughter's declaration that she is willing to become a burnt offering in fulfillment of the vow, is dumbfounded and doesn't know what to say. His daughter then goes on to add her special request to the affirmation of compliance she has just uttered.

weep. The Hebrew verb *weyaradti* in the form in which it appears would normally mean "and I shall go down," but going down upon mountains doesn't make much sense. The least strained solution is to assume it is a scrambling of *ʾarid*, which in Psalm 55:3 is a verb associated with weeping or complaint. Another possibility is to link the term here with the rare verbal stem *r-w-d*, which probably means something like "wander."

38. *And he said, "Go."* Jephthah's extreme brevity of response suggests a man choked with emotion, barely able to speak.

her and her companions. Here and in the previous verse, it is unambiguous in the Hebrew that the companions are female—nubile young women like Jephthah's daughter.

39. *he did to her as he had vowed*. The narrator, like father and daughter in the dialogue, avoids spelling out the terrible act of child sacrifice. This whole story has parallels elsewhere in the ancient Mediterranean world, the most obvious being Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia in order to obtain favorable winds to sail to the Trojan war. The parallel episode within the Bible is the Binding of Isaac, but here, in contrast to Genesis 22, the ending is tragic.

and she had known no man. This concluding note about her virginity underscores the point of keening for her maidenhood: she is cut off from the living without ever having had the opportunity to enjoy the fulfillment that life has in store for a woman.

40. *each year the daughters of Israel would go to lament the daughter of Jephthah*. The long-standing scholarly hypothesis that this is an etiological tale to explain an annual ritual still seems valid: one suspects a pagan practice in which young women go off to mourn the descent into the underworld each year of a vegetation goddess, a virgin like themselves, roughly analogous to the Greek Persephone and to the Mesopotamian male vegetation god, Tammuz.

CHAPTER 12

[1]And the men of Ephraim were mustered and they
crossed over northward and said to Jephthah, “Why
did you cross over to do battle with the Ammonites,
but us you did not call to go with you? We will burn
down your house upon you.” [2]And Jephthah said to
them, “I and my people were in strife and the
Ammonites sorely afflicted me, and I summoned you,
but you did not rescue me from their hand. [3]And I saw
that you were not about to rescue me, and I put my life
at risk and crossed over to the Ammonites, and the
LORD gave them into my hand. And why have you
come up to me this day to do battle with me?” [4]And
Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and did battle
with Ephraim, and the men of Gilead struck down
Ephraim, for Ephraim’s fugitives had said, “You,
Gilead, are in the midst of Ephraim, in the midst of
Manasseh.” [5]And Gilead took the fords of the Jordan
from Ephraim, and it happened when a fugitive of
Ephraim would say, “Let me cross over,” the men of
Gilead would say to him, “Are you an Ephraimite?”

and he would say “No.” [6]And they would say to him, “Say, pray, shibboleth,” and he would say “sibboleth,” and he would not manage to pronounce it right, and they would seize him and slaughter him at the fords of the Jordan. And at that time forty-two thousand of Ephraim fell. [7]And Jephthah led Israel six years, and Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in his town, in Gilead.

[8]And after him Ibzan from Bethlehem led Israel. [9]And he had thirty sons, and thirty daughters he sent outside, and thirty girls he brought for his sons from outside. And he led Israel seven years. [10]And Ibzan died and was buried in Bethlehem. [11]And after him Elon the Zebulunite led Israel ten years. [12]And Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried in Ajalon in the land of Zebulun. [13]And after him Abdon son of Hillel the Pirathonite led Israel. [14]And he had forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode on seventy donkeys. And he led Israel eight years. And Abdon son of Hillel the Pirathonite died and was buried in Pirathon in the land of Ephraim in the high country of the Amalekite.

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *they crossed over*. This verb—Hebrew *ʿavar*—is a key word in the episode. In their challenge to Jephthah, they will say, "Why did you cross over?" These occurrences prepare the way for the testing of the Ephraimite fugitives who seek to cross over the Jordan at the fords (the Hebrew noun for "ford" derives from this same verb, *ʿavar*).

We will burn down your house. Jephthah, who was driven from his father's house and whose familial house has been destroyed in the sacrifice of his daughter, is now threatened with the destruction of his physical house.

2. *I and my people were in strife and the Ammonites sorely afflicted me*. The received text is syntactically distorted here, reading: "I and my people were in strife with the Ammonites very." The translation adopts a reading attested in several versions of the Septuagint, which appear to have used a Hebrew text that had one additional word, *ʿinuni*, "they afflicted me" before "very" (or "very much").

4. *Ephraim's fugitives had said, "You, Gilead, are in the midst of Ephraim, in the midst of Manasseh*." The obscure wording here has given rise to conflicting interpretations. The one followed in this translation is Rashi's proposal: even the least important, the fugitives, of Ephraim tell the Gileadites that they are no more than a tolerated presence in the midst of Ephraim and its brother tribe, Manasseh. In the denouement of the civil war, all the Ephraimite warriors will become fugitives to be slaughtered at the fords of the Jordan.

6. *shibboleth . . . sibboleth*. In contrast to the English use of "shibboleth," here it is a password. The necessary inference is that in the dialect of Hebrew spoken by the Ephraimites, *sh* was pronounced as *s*. The Hebrew word can mean either "stream" or "stalk of grain," but, given the proximity to the Jordan, the former sense is more likely. One might note that what comes out of the mouth of the fugitives leads to death, as was the case with Jephthah's vow.

forty-two thousand. As with numbers elsewhere, this is hardly realistic.

7. *in his town, in Gilead*. The Masoretic Text reads "in the towns of Gilead," but the Septuagint shows the reading adopted here.

9. *outside*. The probable meaning is "outside the clan."

14. *who rode on seventy donkeys*. See the comment on 10:4.

CHAPTER 13

[1]And the Israelites once more did evil in the eyes of
the LORD, and He gave them into the hand of the
Philistines for forty years.

[2]And there was a man from Zorah from the clan of the
Danite, and his name was Manoah. And his woman
was barren, she had born no child. [3]And a messenger
of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her,
“Look, pray, you are barren and have born no child.
But you shall conceive and bear a son. [4]And now,
guard yourself, pray, and drink no wine or strong
drink and eat no unclean thing. [5]For you are about to
conceive and bear a son, and no razor shall touch his
head, for the lad shall be a nazirite of God from the
womb. And he shall begin to rescue Israel from the
hand of the Philistines.” [6]And the woman came and
said to her husband, saying, “A man of God came to
me, and his appearance was like the appearance of a
messenger of God, very fearsome. And I did not ask

him from where he was, and his name he did not tell
me. [7]And he said to me, ‘You are about to conceive
and bear a son. And now, drink no wine or strong
drink and eat no unclean thing, for the lad shall be a
nazirite of God from the womb till his dying day.’”
[8]And Manoah entreated the LORD and said, “Please,
my Master, the man of God whom you sent, let him,
pray, come again to us and teach us what we should do
for the lad who is to be born.” [9]And God heeded
Manoah’s voice, and the messenger of God came again
to the woman, when she was sitting in the field and
Manoah her husband was not with her. [10]And the
woman hurried and ran and told her husband and said
to him, “Look, the man that came to me during the
day has appeared to me.” [11]And Manoah arose and
went after his wife and came to the man and said to
him, “Are you the man who spoke to the woman?”
And he said, “I am.” [12]And Manoah said, “Now, may
your word come true! What shall be the conduct of the
lad and his acts?” [13]And the LORD’s messenger said to
Manoah, “From all that I said to the woman she must
guard herself. [14]From all that comes from the vine she
shall not eat, and wine and strong drink she shall not
drink, and no unclean thing shall she eat. All that I
charged her she must keep.” [15]And Manoah said to the
LORD’s messenger, “Let us detain you, pray, and we

shall prepare a kid for you." [16]And the LORD's
messenger said to Manoah, "If you detain me, I cannot
eat of your food, and if you prepare a burnt offering,
to the LORD you shall offer it up." For Manoah did
not know that he was a messenger of the LORD.
[17]And Manoah said to the LORD's messenger, "What
is your name? When your word comes true, we shall
honor you." [18]And the LORD's messenger said to him,
"Why do you ask my name when it is a mystery?"
[19]And Manoah took the kid and the grain offering and
offered them up on a rock to the LORD, and the other
was performing a wonder, with Manoah and his
woman watching. [20]And it happened when the flame
went up from the altar to the heavens, that the LORD's
messenger went up in the flame of the altar, with
Manoah and his woman watching, and they fell on
their faces to the ground. [21]And the LORD's
messenger appeared no more to Manoah and to his
woman. Then Manoah knew that he was a messenger
of the LORD. [22]And Manoah said to his woman, "We
are doomed to die, for we have seen God." [23]And his
woman said to him, "Had the LORD desired to put us
to death, He would not have taken from our hand
burnt offering and grain offering, nor would He have
shown us all these things and at this time instructed us
in this manner." [24]And the woman bore a son, and she

called his name Samson, and the lad grew up, and the LORD blessed him. [25]And the spirit of the LORD began to drive him in the camp of Dan between Zorah and Eshtaol.

CHAPTER 13 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *his woman was barren*. The Hebrew noun *ʾishah*, like *femme* in French, can mean either "woman" or "wife." This translation renders it as "woman" throughout the chapter because it is a thematic key word that sets the stage for the story of Samson and his involvement with women. Indeed, the reason that she is not given a name, in contrast to her husband, may be to enable the narrator to repeat the word "woman" again and again in this episode.

his woman was barren, she had born no child. These words signal the inception of the annunciation type-scene. Of all the Judges, only Samson is accorded this scene, which, as we shall see, has several features that distinguish it from the other annunciations.

4. *strong drink*. The indication in verse 14 that specifically products of the vine are prohibited is evidence that this is liquor, *sheikhar*, derived from grapes, a form of grappa.

5. *touch his head*. Literally, "go up on his head."

nazirite. The nazirite (see Numbers 6) is a person who takes on himself special vows of abstinence. The noun derives from a verbal stem that means to be separated or set apart.

he shall begin to rescue Israel. The divine messenger chooses his words carefully: any victory Samson achieves over the Philistines will be incomplete.

6. *A man of God*. Since he appears to her in human form, however "fearsome," she has no reason to assume that he is a divine being, though he might seem to resemble one.

7. *drink no wine or strong drink*. Since the fetus feeds from the mother, the clear implication is that this prohibition, which begins in her pregnancy, will also be obligatory for the future nazirite. Nazirites in general refrain from alcoholic beverages. It is noteworthy that she says nothing about the ban on cutting the hair, which is another general practice for nazirites.

till his dying day. For the divine messenger's "will begin to rescue Israel," she substitutes this phrase, ominously introducing the idea of Samson's death into the story before he is even conceived.

9. *And God heeded Manoah's voice, and the messenger of God came again to the woman*. In fact, God does not send a response to the two of them ("come again to us") as Manoah asked but only to the woman who is alone in the field. This version of the annunciation type-scene systematically sidelines the man, who really doesn't grasp what is going on.

10. *during the day*. This slightly obscure phrase evidently refers to the day before.

12. *his acts*. The Hebrew uses a singular.

13. *From all that I said to the woman she must guard herself*. There is a little note of annoyance in these words: after all, I already explained to your wife what should be done about the child, and so why are you being so obtuse as to ask me to repeat myself? As a matter of fact, the celestial messenger does not directly answer Manoah's question about what will be the conduct of the child because everything he says pertains to the restrictions that the future mother must observe. It is probably implied that all these restrictions must be followed by the son as well. The most striking aspect of this response to Manoah is a crucial omission: no word is said about not cutting the hair, as though this were a secret shared between the divine messenger and the woman that neither will entrust to Manoah. In the ensuing story, it is the secret of Samson's indomitable strength that, when revealed to a woman, brings about his downfall.

16. *I cannot eat of your food*. The word for "food" here is literally "bread," but because the proffered meal is kid's meat, the literal translation could be confusing. The alimentary ground rules, one should note, for divine beings

have changed: in Genesis 18, God and His two supernatural companions partake of the feast that Abraham prepares for them.

For Manoah did not know. Even at this late point in the story, he still doesn't get it. And thus he goes on to ask for the name of the mysterious stranger, so that after the birth of the child he can find a way to pay honor to the bearer of the good tidings.

18. *a mystery*. The Hebrew root of this term is the same as the verb for performing a wonder in the next verse.

19. *the other*. The Hebrew simply says "he." This translation is meant to avoid the erroneous notion that it is Manoah who is performing the wonder.

20. *the LORD's messenger went up in the flame of the altar*. Of all the annunciation scenes, only here does the bringer of the annunciation disappear into the heavens in a column of flame. That pyrotechnic exit of course points to the supernatural character of the child to be born, but, even more strategically, it announces the motif of fire that will recur in Samson's story. At the end, even when fire is not present either literally or in the figurative language of the story, it remains as a powerful analogue for Samson, the hero who blindly sows destruction, like fire.

21. *And the LORD's messenger appeared no more*. This clause could equally mean that he disappeared from their sight and that he did not again come to them.

Then Manoah knew. It takes all this to get him finally to recognize the real identity of the bearer of the tidings.

23. *Had the LORD desired to put us to death, He would not have taken from our hand burnt offering and grain offering, nor would He have shown us all these things*. As her husband quails in terror, she calmly points out to him with impeccable logic that God could scarcely have intended to kill them (for beholding a divine creature) if He went to all the trouble of conveying to them instructions about their promised son. The annunciation type-scene is fundamentally matriarchal, the revelations being vouchsafed to the future mother, but here we are given a virtually satiric version of the annunciation, highlighting male obtuseness and the good sense of the woman. This scene thus becomes a perfect prelude to the story of a brawny male hero whose

lapses of judgment in regard to women entangle him in repeated difficulties and ultimately destroy him.

24. *Samson*. Alhough the *–on* suffix of the Hebrew *Shimshon* is used for quite a few biblical names, it could also be related to *ʾon*, "potency," making the name suggest "sun of potency." Some scholars have conjectured that behind this figure there might be traditions about a solar deity. In any case, the link with the sun is another warrant for the fire motif. In terms of mythological patterns, this figure also bears some resemblance to Hercules, a muscular hero who performs arduous labors.

25. *drive him*. Now, at last, we get the descent of the spirit on the Judge. But the carefully chosen verb is unique to Samson: it means, more literally, "to pound/pulsate [within]" him, and neatly adumbrates his career of intermittent violent action.

CHAPTER 14

[1]And Samson went down to Timnah and saw a woman
in Timnah of the daughters of the Philistines. [2]And he
went up and told his father and his mother and said,
“A woman I have seen in Timnah of the daughters of
the Philistines, and now, take her for me as a wife.”
[3]And his father and his mother said to him, “Is there
no woman among your kinsmen’s daughters or in all
my people that you should go to take a wife from the
uncircumcised Philistines?” And Samson said to his
father, “Her take for me because she pleases me.” [4]But
his father and his mother did not know that it was
from the LORD, for He sought a pretext from the
Philistines, and at that time the Philistines were ruling
over Israel. [5]And Samson went down, and his father
and his mother with him, to Timnah, and they came as
far as the vineyards of Timnah, and, look, a young lion
came roaring at him. [6]And the spirit of the LORD
seized him, and he ripped it apart as one would rip
apart a kid, with nothing in his hand, and he did not
tell his father and his mother what he had done. [7]And

he went down and spoke to the woman, and she
pleased Samson. [8]And he came back after a time to
marry her and turned aside to see the place where the
lion had fallen, and, look, there was a swarm of bees in
the lion's carcass, and honey. [9]And he scooped it up
into his palms and went off eating as he went, and he
went to his father and to his mother and gave them,
and they ate. And he did not tell them that he had
scooped up the honey from the lion's carcass. [10]And
his father went down to the woman, and Samson made
a feast there, for thus did the young men do. [11]And it
happened when they saw him, that they took thirty
companions to be with him. [12]And Samson said to
them, "Let me pose you a riddle. If you actually
explain it to me during the seven days of the feast and
find the solution, I shall give you thirty fine cloths and
thirty changes of garment. [13]And if you are not able to
explain it to me, you shall give me thirty fine cloths
and thirty changes of garment." And they said to him,
"Pose your riddle, that we may hear it." [14]And he said
to them:

"From the eater food came forth,
and from the strong sweet came
forth."

And they could not explain the riddle for three days.
15 And it happened on the fourth day that they said to
Samson's wife, "Entice your husband that he explain
the riddle or we will burn you and your father's house
in fire. Did the two of you call us here to beggar us?"
16 And Samson's wife wept before him and said, "You
only hate me and don't love me. You posed a riddle to
my countrymen, but to me you did not explain it." And
he said to her, "Look, to my father and my mother I
did not explain it, and shall I explain it to you?" 17 And
she wept before him the seven days that they had the
feast, and it happened on the seventh day, that he
explained it to her, for she had badgered him. And she
explained the riddle to her countrymen. 18 And the
townsmen said to him on the seventh day before the
sun went down:

"What is sweeter than honey,
and what is stronger than a lion?"

And he said to them:

"Had you not plowed with my heifer,
you would not have solved my
riddle."

[19]And the spirit of the LORD seized him, and he went down to Ashkelon and struck down from among them thirty men and took their armor, and he gave the changes of garment to the explainers of the riddle. And his wrath flared, and he went up to his father's house. [20]And Samson's wife was given to one of his companions who had been in his company.

CHAPTER 14 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Samson went down to Timnah and saw a woman*. The first common noun that appears in the Samson narrative is "woman," a word that will be reiterated and that picks up the repeated use of "woman" in the annunciation scene. "Woman" is also the very first word of dialogue assigned to Samson (and for that reason, this translation follows the syntactic order of the Hebrew).

3. *my people*. Some scholars emend this to "your people."

the uncircumcised Philistines. This is a recurrent epithet for the Philistines, a people of Hellenic origin, and is not used for the Canaanites, who in some instances may have possibly practiced circumcision. The foreskin is an obvious mark of difference but it also focuses a sense of sexual recoil: the Philistine woman, whom Samson would have as a sexual partner, belongs to an uncircumcised people and was begotten by an uncircumcised male.

because she pleases me. The literal sense is "because she is right in my eyes." Since there is no indication that Samson has exchanged a single word with the woman, we may infer that his only reason for wanting her as wife is physical attraction—what he has seen.

4. *it was from the LORD*. The theological explanation is a little shaky: God knows that the only way to get this particular hero to act against the

Philistines is to involve him with a woman, which will lead to his being tricked by her countrymen, which then will provoke him to vengeance.

5. *and, look, a young lion came roaring at him*. The shift of perspective marked by "look" is of course to Samson's viewpoint. At this moment, though he has been accompanied by his parents, he is clearly separated from them, and they do not witness the killing of the lion. Arnold Ehrlich proposes that Samson, as an energetic young man, has bounded far ahead of his parents, who are walking slowly on the path to Timnah.

6. *And the spirit of the LORD seized him*. In Samson's case, the divine afflatus enables violent action by the hero and is not the charisma of an ad hoc military leader. All his heroic acts are performed by him alone.

he did not tell his father and his mother. Samson has a penchant for secrets, but he gets himself in trouble when he reveals his secrets to women.

7. *he went down and spoke to the woman*. The verb "spoke" here, as in some other contexts, is probably a technical term for a proposal of marriage.

9. *And he scooped it up into his palms*. It should be noted that carcasses are considered to be ritually unclean, so that by taking food from the lion's bones Samson is violating one of the terms of the nazirite vow. The setting, moreover, is a vineyard, although he does not touch the grapes.

11. *companions*. They are, in effect, designated companions for the bridegroom during the seven days of the feast, though Samson has no personal relationship with them.

12. *find the solution*. The Hebrew uses an ellipsis, merely the verb "find."

I shall give you thirty fine cloths and thirty changes of garment. The confident Samson takes on himself an indemnity in the bet thirty times that of each of the Philistine men.

14. *From the eater food came forth*. The Hebrew uses cognate terms: from the eater what-is-eaten came forth. The riddle, as is appropriate for riddles, is cast in a line of verse. It is, of course, an unfair riddle (hence Samson's confidence) because it depends on unique circumstances known only to the riddler, and nothing in its formulation provides a clue to the solution.

15. *on the fourth day*. The translation follows the Septuagint; the Masoretic Text reads "on the seventh day," but it is not credible that they would have waited until the very last moment, and this would also contradict the report that she pestered him for the solution day after day. There remains some problem about the number of days because in verse 17 she is said to have been weeping before Samson seven days, not four.

Entice. The Hebrew verb in context means something like "cajole" or "coax," but it also has a sexual connotation, "entice" or "seduce," and the Philistine men are clearly suggesting that she use her feminine wiles on her husband.

or we will burn you and your father's house in fire. Here the fire motif introduced in the annunciation scene enters the story proper. This is, of course, an offer that the woman cannot refuse.

Did the two of you call us here to beggar us? The Hebrew conjugates the verb "call" (in the sense of "invite") in the plural, and the translation uses "the two of you" to make that clear: in effect, they are angrily accusing the woman of conspiring against them with her Israelite husband.

here. Reading *halom*, with the Septuagint, for the Masoretic *halo'*.

16. *You only hate me and don't love me*. Here the dialogue has a sharp edge of realism: if you really loved me, you wouldn't keep secrets from me. And her speech, moreover, is accompanied by tears. Samson tries to resist and hold on to the secret, as we see in his immediate response, but in the end he succumbs to her persistent tears and imploring.

18. *before the sun went down*. They wait until the last possible moment to spring the answer on him, an effect perhaps highlighted here by the use of a quasi-epic flourish *beterem yavo' haḥarsah* in which the word for sun, *ḥarsah*, is archaic and poetic instead of the standard *shemesh*.

Had you not plowed with my heifer, / you would not have solved my riddle. Their statement of the solution to the riddle, like the riddle itself, is cast in a line of verse with three accents in each verset. Samson's response is equally a 3/3 line, although he also uses rhyme (an occasional occurrence in biblical poetry): *'eglati / ḥidati*. The plowing image is obviously sexual: if you had not played around with my wife, she would not have revealed the secret to you. Thus, Samson has no notion that his wife acted under a death threat but instead imagines that she has been unfaithful to him—perhaps, with thirty

different men! He therefore departs enraged not only against the thirty "companions" but also against his wife.

19. *he went down to Ashkelon*. Timnah is a small Philistine town in the lowlands (Shephelah), whereas Ashkelon is one of the five principal Philistine towns on the Mediterranean coast.

their armor. From the one other biblical occurrence of this term, *ḥalitsah*, in 2 Samuel 2:21, it is clear that it refers to armor, not clothing in general. Samson, then, chooses to confront and kill armed warriors. It is probably the armor that he sends as "changes of garment" to the thirty men who were at his wedding: this would be an act of defiance, demonstrating to them the bold and deadly thing he has done. No mention is made of the fine cloths, perhaps because the armor is far more than the equivalent in value of fine cloth and garment.

20. *Samson's wife was given to one of his companions*. The marriage is in effect annulled, and the plowing with Samson's heifer takes place after the fact of his mentioning it to the companions.

one of his companions who had been in his company. The Hebrew uses a cognate noun and verb and literally says, "his companion." The subject and object of the verb are ambiguous: it could be read either as "he [the companion] befriended/was companion to him [Samson]" or "he [Samson] befriended/was companion to him [the companion]."

CHAPTER 15

[1]And after a time, in the days of the wheat harvest, Samson visited his wife with a kid, and he said, “Let me come to my wife in the chamber,” and her father would not let him come in. [2]And her father said, “I surely thought that you altogether hated her, and I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister better than she? Let her be yours instead of her.” [3]And Samson said to them, “This time I am clear of the Philistines, for I am about to do harm to them.” [4]And Samson went and caught three hundred foxes and took torches and turned tail to tail and put one torch between each two tails. [5]And he set fire to the torches and sent them into the Philistines’ standing grain and set fire to the stacked grain and the standing grain and the vineyards and the olive trees. [6]And the Philistines said, “Who did this?” And they said, “Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite, for he took his wife and gave her to his companion.” And the Philistines came up and burned her and her father in fire. [7]And Samson said to them, “If this is what you do, I will be avenged

of you, and then I will stop.” [8]And he struck them a great blow, hip on thigh, and went down and stayed in the crevice of the rock of Eitam. [9]And the Philistines came up and camped in Judah and deployed at Lehi. [10]And the men of Judah said, “Why have you come up against us?” And they said, “We have come up to bind Samson, to do to him as he has done to us.” [11]And three thousand men of Judah went down to the crevice of the rock of Eitam and said to Samson, “Do you not know that the Philistines rule over us? And what have you done to us?” And he said to them, “As they did to me, so I have done to them.” [12]And they said to him, “We have come down to bind you, to give you into the hand of the Philistines.” And Samson said to them, “Vow to me that you yourselves will not harm me.” [13]And they said to him, “No, for we will certainly bind you and give you into their hand, but we will not put you to death.” And they bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rock. [14]He was coming up to Lehi when the Philistines shouted to greet him, and the spirit of the LORD seized him, and the ropes that were on his arms became like flax burning in fire, and his bonds fell apart from upon his hands. [15]And he found the fresh jawbone of a donkey and reached out his hand and took it, and he struck down a thousand men with it. [16]And Samson said:

“With a donkey’s jawbone,
mound upon mound,
With a donkey’s jawbone,
I struck down a thousand men.”

[17]And it happened when he finished speaking, that he flung the jawbone from his hand, and he called that place Ramath Lehi. [18]And he was very thirsty, and he called out to the LORD: “You Yourself gave a great victory in the hand of your servant, and now should I die from thirst and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised?” [19]And God split open the hollow that was in Lehi, and water came out of it, and he drank and his spirit returned and he revived. Therefore has its name been called Ein Hakkore to this day. [20]And he led Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years.

CHAPTER 15 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Let me come to my wife in the chamber*. What he has in mind is obviously sex, and, in fact, the initial verb could also be construed as “let me come to bed with my wife.”

2. *I surely thought that you altogether hated her*. He has two good reasons for thinking this: Samson’s angry declaration that his wife has been unfaithful to

him with the thirty companions (14:18) and his abrupt return to his own father's house.

3. *to them*. Evidently, he is addressing not only his father-in-law but other Philistines he views as complicit in wronging him.

This time I am clear of the Philistines. I am clear of guilt for what I will do to them, seeing as how they have behaved toward me. The emphasis on "this time" returns later in the story.

4. *caught three hundred foxes*. Most of the numbers in the story are multiples of three. Samson, himself a feral hero, is repeatedly involved with animals: the lion, the foxes, and then the jawbone of a donkey. The foxes, running wild through the fields with fire at their tails, are an effective delivery system for spreading incendiary destruction.

5. *the stacked grain and the standing grain and the vineyards and the olive trees*. These items cover most of the principal products of agriculture in this region, and, moreover, the wheat harvest is just taking place, so the overall destruction is devastating.

6. *burned her and her father in fire*. Many manuscripts and two ancient translations read "her and her father's house." Fire answers fire now, and it is in the nature of fire uncontrolled to destroy everything in its path, much like Samson.

7. *If this is what you do, I will be avenged of you*. The Philistine retaliation leads to a second round of vengeance for Samson.

8. *he struck them a great blow, hip on thigh*. The implication is that he battered down a large throng of Philistines, though the number in this case is not specified. The word for "hip" actually means "leg" or "calf of the leg," but "hip on thigh" is a fine old locution coined by the King James translators that effectively conveys the intended sense of a murderous thrashing.

9. *Lehi*. As elsewhere, the name, which means "jawbone," is proleptic, and is explained in verse 17.

10. *to bind Samson*. He is such a lethally powerful adversary that before they can think of killing him, they have to imagine immobilizing him by trussing him up. The notion of binding Samson will return in Delilah's dealings with him.

11. *three thousand men*. This is still another multiple of three.

As they did to me, so I have done to them. This unbending code of vengeful retaliation is fully shared by Samson and the Philistines. Compare verse 10.

12. *Vow to me that you yourselves will not harm me*. He uses the emphatic pronoun before the conjugated verb to make sure that they are not the ones who intend to harm him. If they were, he would have to exert his power and wreak havoc among his countrymen, which he wants to avoid. On this condition, he allows himself to be bound.

14. *the ropes that were on his arms became like flax burning in fire*. The fire motif is continued here in a simile, as it will be in Delilah's failed attempts to have him bound. New ropes also occur in the Delilah episode, the idea being that new ropes are in no way worn or frayed and so are very hard to break.

fell apart. Literally, "melted."

15. *the fresh jawbone of a donkey*. The skeletal remains of the beast are relatively new, and so the jawbone would not be dry and brittle. As before, Samson fights with an improvised and unconventional weapon. This is the second time he comes in contact with what is left of an animal carcass—an unclean object: the first time, he draws out something sweet; now, antithetically, he finds a weapon.

16. *With a donkey's jawbone, / mound upon mound*. Samson seals his conquest, like Lamech in Genesis 4, with an exulting poem of triumph. The meaning of the second verset of this line is not certain. A long tradition of interpretation understands it as "mounds"—perhaps, the mounds of bodies of the slain. In that case, the two Hebrew words *ḥamor ḥamorataym* would be a pun on *ḥamor,* "donkey." But the word for "mound" requires different vowels, so it is possible that the phrase is actually an incremental repetition of "donkey" in the first verset and means "a donkey, a pair."

17. *Ramath Lehi*. The name means “casting of the jawbone.”

19. *hollow*. The Hebrew *makhteish* means “mortar” (as in mortar and pestle) and by extension a concave formation in rock.

Ein Hakkore. In this etiology of the name, it is understood to mean “the spring of the one who calls out.” But the Hebrew *qorei'*, one who calls out, has a homonym that means “partridge,” and it is likely that a place originally called Partridge Spring, because partridges frequented the area, was given this new narrative explanation for its name.

20. *And he led Israel . . . twenty years*. This notice of the length of Samson’s career seems out of place because further episodes of his story follow. The statement is repeated at the very end of his story, where we would expect it, with the verb “led” (or “judged”) in the pluperfect.

CHAPTER 16

[1]And Samson went to Gaza, and he saw there a whore-woman and came to bed with her. [2]And it was told to the Gazites saying, “Samson has come here.” And they lay in ambush for him all night long at the town gate, and they plotted together all night long, saying, “At morning’s light, we shall kill him.” [3]And Samson lay till midnight, and he arose at midnight and seized the doors of the town’s gate and the two doorposts and pulled them free with the bolt and put them on his shoulders and took them up to the top of the mountain that faces Hebron.

[4]And it happened afterward that he loved a woman in Nahal Sorek, and her name was Delilah. [5]And the Philistine overlords went up to her and said to her, “Entice him and see in what his great power lies and with what we can prevail against him and bind him to torture him. As for us, each of us will give you eleven hundred silver shekels.” [6]And Delilah said to Samson,

“Tell me, pray, in what your great power lies, and with what could you be bound to be tortured?” [7]And Samson said, “If they were to bind me with seven moist thongs that had not been dried out, I would be weakened and become like any man.” [8]And the Philistine overlords brought up to her seven moist thongs that had not been dried out, and she bound him with them. [9]And the ambush was laid in her chamber. And she said to him, “Philistines are upon you, Samson!” And he snapped the cords as the wick of tow snaps when it touches fire, and the secret of his power was not known. [10]And Delilah said to Samson, “Look, you have mocked me and spoken lies to me. Now, tell me, pray, with what could you be bound?” [11]And he said to her, “If they make sure to bind me with new ropes with which no task has been done, I would be weakened and become like any man.” [12]And Delilah took new ropes and bound him with them, and she said to him, “Philistines are upon you, Samson!” And the ambush was laid in the chamber. And he snapped them from his arms like a thread. [13]And Delilah said, “Until now you have mocked me and spoken lies to me. Tell me, with what could you be bound?” And he said to her, “If you weave my head’s seven tresses together with the web and drive them with a peg into the wall, I would be weakened and

become like any man.” [14]And she drove them with a peg into the wall, and she said to him, “Philistines are upon you, Samson!” And he awoke from his sleep and pulled free the peg and the loom and the web. [15]And she said to him, “You only say ‘I love you,’ but your heart is not with me. Three times now you have mocked me and have not told me in what lies your great power.” [16]And it happened when she badgered him with her words day after day and beleaguered him, that he was vexed unto the death. [17]And he told her all that was in his heart, and he said, “No razor has touched my head, for I have been a nazirite of God from my mother’s womb. Were I shaven, my power would turn away from me and I would be weakened and become like any man.” [18]And Delilah saw that he had told her all that was in his heart, and she sent and called the Philistine overlords, saying, “Come up, for he has told me all that is in his heart.” And the Philistine overlords came up to her and brought the silver in their hand. [19]And she put him to sleep on her knees and called the man and shaved his head’s seven tresses, and she began to torture him, and his power turned away from him. [20]And she said, “Philistines are upon you, Samson!” And he awoke from his sleep, and said, “I will go out as all the other times and shake myself loose,” but he did not know that the LORD had

turned away from him. [21]And the Philistines seized
him and gouged out his eyes. And they brought him
down to Gaza and bound him in fetters, and he was
put to grinding in the prison. [22]And the hair of his head
began to grow as soon as it was shaven. [23]And the
Philistine overlords had gathered to offer a great
sacrifice to Dagon their god and to celebrate, and they
said, “Our god has given into our hand Samson our
enemy.” [24]And the people saw him and praised their
god, for they said, “Our god has given into our hand
our enemy, the destroyer of our land, him who brought
down many victims among us.” [25]And it happened
when they were merry that they said, “Call Samson,
that he may play for us.” And they called Samson from
the prison, and he played before them, and they set
him between the pillars. [26]And Samson said to the lad
who was holding his hand, “Let me rest and feel the
pillars on which the temple stands, that I may lean on
them.” [27]And the temple was filled with men and
women, and all the Philistine overlords were there, and
on the roof about three thousand men and women
watching as Samson played. [28]And Samson called to
the LORD and said “My Master, LORD, recall me,
pray, and strengthen me just this time, O God, that I
may avenge myself in one act of vengeance from the
Philistines for my two eyes.” [29]And Samson grasped

the two central pillars on which the temple stood and pushed against them, one with his right hand and one with his left hand. [30]And Samson said, “Let me die with the Philistines!,” and he pushed powerfully, and the temple fell on the overlords and on all the people who were in it. And the dead that he killed in his death were more than he had killed in his life. [31]And his kinsmen and all his father’s household came down and bore him off and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the grave of Manoah his father. And he had led Israel twenty years.

CHAPTER 16 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *he saw there a whore-woman*. This is a precise verbal echo of his first encounter with a Philistine woman, only the professional designation “whore” being added. There is a certain parallel with the story of the two spies who came to Jericho to Rahab the whore, but Samson comes only for his own pleasure, avails himself of the woman’s services, and does not have to hide or flee because he can rely on his strength.

2. *And it was told*. Those words are added from the Septuagint.

3. *seized the doors of the town’s gate*. In this provocative act, he not only asserts his invulnerability but also leaves the town exposed.

4. *he loved a woman in Nahal Sorek*. In this climactic episode in the series of three women with whom Samson is involved, we are told that he actually loves the woman, and of the three, only Delilah is given a name. Nahal Sorek

(Wadi of the Vine) is in Israelite territory, and Delilah may well be an Israelite woman.

5. *the Philistine overlords*. The term *seranim* always appears in the plural and is the title of the rulers of the five towns that make up the Philistine pentapolis. Many scholars think it is cognate with the Greek *tyrranos*. The fact that the overlords themselves should come to make the appeal to Delilah reflects the importance they attach to the capture of this deadly Israelite adversary.

bind him to torture him. They are frank about their brutal intentions toward Samson: instead of killing him on the spot, they want him rendered helpless so that they can torment and abuse this despised enemy who has wreaked such havoc among them.

eleven hundred silver shekels. This is a vast sum—5500 shekels all told—and so more than enough to appeal to her mercenary impulses.

6. *with what could you be bound to be tortured*. In repeating the words of the overlords, Delilah does not hesitate to speak openly of torture. Presumably, she is putting this to Samson as a merely hypothetical condition, although the talk of binding and torture also makes this sound like a perverse sex game they are playing.

7. *moist thongs*. These are either animal tendons or cords plaited from leather—in either case, still moist so that they are very hard to tear apart.

9. *when it touches fire*. The fire motif returns in the simile.

12. *Delilah took new ropes*. Here the aid of the Philistine overlords is not mentioned, though it may be implied.

13. *If you weave my head's seven tresses together with the web*. Only now do we learn how Samson wears his uncut hair (and one should note the magical number seven). In the third of his three false explanations, he edges toward the real secret because his hair is involved. This version also comes close to his actual predicament because it conjures up entanglement in a woman's instrument, the loom.

and drive them with a peg into the wall, I would be weakened and become like any man. Both these clauses are absent in the Masoretic Text, which is

manifestly incomplete here, but they appear in the Septuagint, in the Targum Yonatan, and in the Peshitta.

14. *And she drove them with a peg into the wall*. "Into the wall" is supplied from the Septuagint. The driving of the peg recalls Jael and Sisera, but in this instance the woman's deadly intent is not realized.

15. *You only say "I love you."* She uses the same feminine argument as Samson's first wife.

Three times now. The folktale pattern of three times—in this case, three times with a fourth time that swerves to a new outcome—is made an object of deliberate attention. The story as a whole is organized around threes—three women, and the multiples of three killed by Samson.

17. *all that was in his heart*. Literally, "all his heart."

19. *she put him to sleep on her knees*. This is, of course, necessary so that his hair can be cut, but it is also a powerful image of the seductive woman lulling the mighty hero and reducing him to a baby in her lap.

called the man and shaved his head's seven tresses. The verb "shaved" is conjugated in the feminine. Some emend it to a masculine form; others claim, with little philological warrant, that it means "caused him to be shaved." It makes more sense to assume that Delilah, who can't very well move with Samson asleep on her knees, calls the man to bring her a razor so that she can then shave Samson's head. Her performance of the act herself is thematically and psychologically apt: the seductress cuts away the source of Samson's potency.

she began to torture him. She is the very first to torment him in an appropriately sadistic move.

20. *as all the other times*. The times motif recurs here (the Hebrew, *kefaʿam befaʿam*, doubles the word "time").

21. *gouged out his eyes*. A Freudian would see an upward displacement of castration in this act, but it should be noted that these were the eyes that saw the women who led to all the trouble. Gouging out the eyes was also a punishment for a rebellious vassal (compare the blinding of Zedekiah by the Babylonians, 2 Kings 25:7).

25. *that he may play for us*. The playing might be dancing or, more likely, blindly stumbling about, while the audience laughs (the same Hebrew verb as "play").

26. *Let me rest*. This might also be construed to mean "lead me."

27. *all the Philistine overlords were there*. So that Samson's vengeance may be complete, the rulers of the five Philistine towns, the very men who plotted his blinding and captivity, are present.

on the roof about three thousand men and women. Again, we have a multiple of three. It is clearly implied that there are many more people in the main space of the temple.

28. *just this time*. At the penultimate moment of the story, the thematically fraught word *pa'am*, "time," appears again. It shows, pointedly, the same root as the verb "drive" or "pound" in 13:25 that marks the beginning of Samson's narrative.

that I may avenge myself in one act of vengeance from the Philistines. It is true that Samson in his last moment turns in prayer to God—perhaps feeling that his great strength has returned but not being quite sure and in any case recognizing that its ultimate source is God. But even now, his motive is personal vengeance: one sees why the messenger of the LORD prophesied that Samson would no more than "begin" to rescue Israel from the Philistines.

30. *And the dead that he killed in his death were more than he had killed in his life*. Samson's career as an Israelite champion ends in an act of wholesale destruction in which he, too, dies, like fire that consumes everything in its path and eventually itself as well.

CHAPTER 17

[1]There was a man from the high country of Ephraim,
and his name was Micayhu. [2]And he said to his
mother, “The eleven hundred silver shekels that were
taken from you, and you yourself uttered a curse and
even said it in my hearing—look, the silver is with me,
it is I who took it.” And his mother said, “Blessed are
you, my son, to the LORD.” [3]And he gave back the
eleven hundred silver shekels to his mother, and his
mother said, “I had solemnly dedicated the silver to
the LORD from my hand to my son, to make a statue
and molten image, and now I give it back to you.”
[4]And he gave the silver to his mother, and his mother
took two hundred silver shekels and gave them to the
silversmith, and he made out of it a statue and molten
image. And they were in the house of Micayhu. [5]And
the man Micah had a house God, and he made an
ephod and teraphim and installed one of his sons, and
he became a priest for him. [6]In those days there was no
king in Israel, every man did what was right in his
eyes. [7]And there was a lad from the town of

Bethlehem in Judah from the clan of Judah, and he was a Levite, and he sojourned there. [8]And the man went from the town, from Bethlehem in Judah, to sojourn wherever he chanced, and he came to the high country of Ephraim to the house of Micah, wending his way. [9]And Micah said to him, “From where do you come?” And the Levite said to him, “I am from Bethlehem in Judah, and I go to sojourn wherever I chance.” [10]And Micah said to him, “Stay with me, and be father and priest for me, and I on my part will give you ten silver shekels a year and a set of clothing and your board.” And the Levite went, [11]and the Levite agreed to stay with the man, and the lad became for him like one of his sons. [12]And Micah installed the Levite, and the lad became a priest for him, and he was in Micah’s house. [13]And Micah said, “Now I know that the LORD will deal well with me, for the Levite has become my priest.”

CHAPTER 17 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *There was a man from the high country of Ephraim*. This formula signals the beginning of a story that does not involve a judge. The two narratives that unfold respectively in chapters 17–18 and 19–21 constitute a kind of epilogue to the Book of Judges, illustrating the general condition of moral and political anarchy in the period before the monarchy.

Micayhu. Later in the story, the name appears without the theophoric ending as "Micah."

2. *the eleven hundred silver shekels*. Rashi shrewdly observes that this is the precise amount that each of the Philistine overlords paid Delilah: "The episodes are linked through the evil silver equal in amount, and in both cases it is a kind of silver that leads to disaster."

you yourself uttered a curse. She pronounced a curse on whoever stole the silver.

look, the silver is with me. He evidently is frightened by the curse and so is ready to admit he has "taken" (he avoids saying "stolen") the silver and will now give it back.

Blessed are you. Ehrlich suggests that by these words she seeks to reverse the curse.

3. *to make a statue and molten image*. Amit argues that this is a hendiadys—a statue that is a molten image, though in 18:20 they are separated syntactically by ephod and teraphim. In any case, although the mother dedicates the silver to the LORD, this expression has a strong association with idolatry.

and now I give it back to you. If the received text is correct, the silver passes back and forth: he takes it from her, gives it back to her; she gives it to him; he gives it back to her. This rapid exchange may be intentional: it is "hot" treasure, first stolen by the son from his mother, then earmarked for a questionable end.

4. *two hundred silver shekels*. Either this is the payment for the silversmith's work and the remaining nine hundred shekels are used to fashion the statue, or she has quietly pocketed nine hundred, despite her pious vow.

5. *an ephod and teraphim*. These are both divinatory devices, the latter term used elsewhere to designate household idols. Micah is clearly setting up shop in his little house of God, probably with the intention of exacting payment for rendering sundry cultic services.

6. *every man did what was right in his eyes*. The last phrase here is the same one used in 14:3 by Samson in relation to the Philistine woman he sees in Timnah, but there it is translated as "pleases me" because the character is referring to a woman he finds attractive.

7. *Bethlehem in Judah*. There was another Bethlehem ("house of bread") in Zebulun.

from the clan of Judah. This looks like a contradiction because he is a Levite. It has been proposed that the story harks back to an early moment in Israelite history when the Levites' tribal identity may not have crystallized and "Levite" might be the designation of a cultic officiant.

sojourned. This is a term of temporary residence, and as the story unfolds, it is evident that the Levite is an itinerant.

10. *father and priest*. "Father" here means someone in a position of authority. In fact, the Levite is a "lad," a generation younger than Micah, as one may infer from verse 12. Micah had already installed one of his sons to act as priest, but he prefers to have the Levite because he is a cultic professional (whether hereditary or not is unclear).

ten silver shekels a year. If this is a reasonable annual income, the amount of eleven hundred shekels would have been enormous.

And the Levite went. This brief clause (two Hebrew words) seems extraneous, and some textual critics propose deleting it.

12. *and he was in Micah's house*. The blandness of the verb "to be" here—not "he dwelled/stayed" or "he sojourned"—introduces a hint of ambiguity about his relation to Micah's house. In the event, he will betray Micah and move on.

CHAPTER 18

[1]In those days there was no king in Israel. And in
those days the tribe of the Danites was seeking an
estate for itself in which to dwell, for till that day no
estate had fallen to it in the midst of the tribes of
Israel. [2]And the Danites sent out from their clans, from
the pick of them, five men who were valiant warriors
from Zorah and from Eshtaol to spy out the land and
to search it, and they said to them, “Go, search the
land.” And they came to the high country of Ephraim
to Micah’s house, and they spent the night there. [3]They
were at Micah’s house, and they recognized the voice
of the Levite lad and turned aside there and said to
him, “Who brought you here, and what are you doing
in this place, and what do you have here?” [4]And he
said to them, “Thus and so has Micah done for me,
and he has hired me, and I have become a priest for
him.” [5]And they said to him, “Inquire, pray, of God,
that we may know whether our way on which we go
will prosper.” [6]And the priest said to them, “Go in
peace—before the LORD is your way on which you

go.” [7]And the five men went and came to Laish, and they saw the people within it dwelling secure in the manner of the Sidonians, quiet and secure, and no one in the land troubled them, and there was no heir to the throne, and they were far off from the Sidonians, nor did they have any dealings with other people. [8]And they came back to their kinsmen in Zorah and Eshtaol, and their kinsmen said to them, “How is it with you?” [9]And they said, “Arise, and let us go up against them, for we have seen the land, and, look, it is very good, and you remain silent! Do not be idle about going to come and take hold of the land. [10]When you come, you will come to a people that dwells secure, and the land is spacious—why, God has given it into your hand!—a place in which nothing on earth is lacking.” [11]And the six hundred men from the tribe of the Danites, from Zorah and Eshtaol, girded in battle gear, journeyed from there. [12]And they went up and camped at Kiriath-Jearim in Judah. Therefore have they called that place the Camp of Dan to this day—there it is, west of Kiriath-Jearim. [13]And they passed on from there to the high country of Ephraim and came to Micah’s house. [14]And the five men who had gone to spy out the land of Laish spoke up and said to their kinsmen, “Did you know that in these houses there are an ephod and teraphim and a statue and molten image? And now,

know what you should do.” [15]And they turned aside
there and came to the house of the Levite lad, at
Micah’s house, and asked him how he fared. [16]And the
six hundred men girded in their battle gear, who were
from the Danites, stationed themselves at the entrance
of the gate. [17]And the five men who had gone to spy
out the land came in there, took the statue and the
ephod and the teraphim and the molten image, and the
priest was stationed at the entrance to the gate, and the
six hundred men girded in battle gear. [18]And the
former group had come into Micah’s house and taken
the statue and the ephod and the teraphim and the
molten image. And the priest said to them, “What are
you doing?” [19]And they said to him, “Be quiet! Put
your hand over your mouth and go with us and be
father and priest for us. Is it better for you to be priest
for the house of one man or to be priest for a tribe and
clan in Israel?” [20]And the priest was pleased, and he
took the ephod and the teraphim and the statue, and
joined the troops. [21]And they turned and went, and
they put before them the little ones and the cattle and
the heavy goods. [22]They had gone a distance from
Micah’s house when the people in the houses that were
by Micah’s house were mustered, and they overtook
the Danites. [23]And they called out to the Danites, and
they turned round and said to Micah, “What’s the

matter with you that you have mustered?” [24]And he said, “My god that I made you have taken and the priest, and you have gone off. And what else do I have, and how is this you say to me, ‘What’s the matter with you’?” [25]And the Danites said to him, “Don’t raise your voice to us, lest embittered men assault you and you lose your life and the lives of your household.” [26]And the Danites went on their way, and Micah saw that they were stronger than he, and he turned and went back to his house. [27]And they had taken what Micah made and the priest that he had. And they came against Laish, against a quiet and secure people, and they struck them down with the sword, and the town they burned in fire. [28]And there was none to save it, for it was far off from Sidon, nor did they have any dealings with other people. And it was in the Valley of Beth-Rehob. And they rebuilt the town and dwelled in it. [29]And they called the town Dan, like the name of Dan their forefather who was born to Israel, but Laish was the name of the town at first. [30]And the Danites set up the statue for themselves, and Jonathan son of Gershom son of Moses, he and his sons were priests for the tribe of the Danites till the day the land went into exile. [31]And they set out for themselves Micah’s statue that he had made all the days that the house of God was in Shiloh.

CHAPTER 18 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *till that day no estate had fallen to it in the midst of the tribes of Israel*. This formulation gives the impression that no tribal territory was assigned to the Danites. The actual case was that they were not able to hold their own against their Philistine neighbors and the local Canaanites and so were driven to migrate. The Philistine pressure on Dan is evident in the Samson narrative, which immediately precedes this story.

3. *they recognized the voice of the Levite lad*. Given his itinerancy, they may have actually run across him somewhere else in the south. Others conjecture that they detect a Judahite accent.

4. *Thus and so has Micah done for me*. This summarizing formula, which one would not find in novelistic dialogue, is occasionally introduced into biblical dialogue. "Thus and so" obviously refers to the Levite's appointment as priest with the annual stipend.

5. *Inquire, pray, of God*. This idiom indicates inquiry of an oracle; the probable instrument would have been the ephod.

6. *before the* LORD *is your way on which you go*. Though the burden of this clause is that God will favor their endeavor, the formulation is a bit vague and even ambiguous: like oracles everywhere, the Levite is hedging his bets.

7. *dwelling secure in the manner of the Sidonians*. The inhabitants of the Phoenician city of Sidon, to the north on the Mediterranean coast, were evidently thought to live relatively free of fear from foreign attacks.

they were far off from the Sidonians, nor did they have any dealings with other people. Although the gist of these two clauses is that Laish was isolated and had no allies on which to rely, the wording—especially of the second clause—is somewhat obscure.

10. *a people that dwells secure*. As the use of this phrase in verse 7 makes clear, the gist is that this people lives in a sense of security, not suspecting that they will be attacked.

11. *six hundred men*. As the recurrence of this number in military contexts in the Book of Samuel suggests, this is the fixed size of a combat unit, something like a battalion.

14. *these houses*. From the plural, one infers that Micah's house was part of a small compound.

And now, know what you should do. Anticipating the conquest of Laish, they want to acquire the paraphernalia to set up a cult there after they take the town.

16. *the six hundred men . . . stationed themselves at the entrance of the gate*. The five spies, whom the Levite already knows, are sent in to parlay with him, while the armed enforcers wait at the gate.

17. *took the statue and the ephod and the teraphim and the molten image*. They immediately seize the cultic objects, not asking the Levite, who is in no position to resist.

18. *And the former group*. The Hebrew says merely "and these," but it has to refer to the five spies in contradistinction to the six hundred men.

19. *Put your hand over your mouth and go with us and be father and priest for us*. They follow an implied threat—shut up, if you know what is good for you—with the inducement of an offered position.

20. *And the priest was pleased*. Nobody in this story, beginning with Micah and his mother, has noble motives. The Levite immediately recognizes that this new position, priest for a tribe, is a considerable advancement, no doubt with a larger salary, and so he happily colludes in the theft of the cultic articles.

21. *they put before them the little ones and the cattle and the heavy goods*. Only now do we learn that the six hundred warriors are not just a raiding party but the first wave of a tribal migration, having brought with them their children

(and presumably their wives) and their possessions. They put all these in front of them because the attack they anticipate would come from the rear, from a pursuing party of Micah and his men.

24. *My god that I made*. His language here, in keeping with "statue" and "molten image," is frankly pagan. No one in this story appears to be a serious monotheist. Even though the narrative was composed late (see the comment on verse 30), the whole bizarre story appears to be an authentic reflection of an early moment in premonotheistic Israelite history when the exclusive worship of YHWH was not generally established.

25. *embittered men*. This is their condition because they have been displaced from their tribal territory and are for the moment homeless.

26. *Micah saw that they were stronger than he*. The story plays out through force. Micah can scarcely contend with six hundred heavily armed ruthless men who have just threatened to kill him and his whole household, and so he has to let them keep the precious objects they have stolen from him, which he had fashioned with silver he originally stole from his mother.

27. *they struck them down with the sword*. No moral considerations are involved. These people have attractive land; Dan needs land; the Danites slaughter the inhabitants of Laish and build their own town there.

29. *like the name*. The Masoretic Text reads "in the name," but many Hebrew manuscripts show the standard idiom "like the name."

who was born to Israel. The reference is to Jacob, not to the nation.

30. *Jonathan son of Gershom son of Moses*. At the very end, we are given the name and genealogy of the Levite. The Masoretic Text inserts a superscript *nun* in *Moshe*, Moses, turning it into *Menashe*, Manasseh, but this can't be right because Gershom was the son of Moses and Manasseh is not a priestly tribe. Rashi aptly explains the orthographic oddity: "Out of respect for Moses, a *nun* is inscribed in order to change the name." The genealogy marks a steep decline: Moses's own grandson is a base sacerdotal mercenary, officiating in a cult that is at the very least semipagan. Placing the Levite just two generations after Moses would mean that the whole story is supposed to take place very early, at the beginning of the twelfth century B.C.E., a temporal

location that has the inconvenient consequence of putting the Danite migration before the time of Samson, a Danite living in the south near the Philistines.

till the day the land went into exile. The reference is to the exile of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 721 B.C.E., which means that the story, at least in its final formulation, had to be composed after that date, unless this final notation is a later editorial addition.

31. *all the days that the house of God was in Shiloh*. The anomalous introduction of this reference to the Shiloh sanctuary at the very end of the story is in all likelihood, as Yair Zakovitch has argued, an editorial move to link the material here with the beginning of the Book of Samuel, where Shiloh plays a central role.

CHAPTER 19

[1]And it happened in those days, when there was no king in Israel, that a Levite man was sojourning in the far reaches of the high country of Ephraim, and he took for himself a concubine-woman from Bethlehem in Judah. [2]And his concubine played the whore against him and went away from him to her father's house in Bethlehem in Judah, and she was there for a while, four months. [3]And her husband arose and went after her to speak to her heart to bring her back, and his lad was with him and a pair of donkeys. And she brought him into her father's house, and the young woman's father saw him and rejoiced to greet him. [4]And his father-in-law, the young woman's father, entreated him, and he stayed with him three days, and they ate and drank and lodged there. [5]And it happened on the fourth day that they rose early in the morning, and he got up to go, and the young woman's father said to his son-in-law, "Refresh yourself with a morsel of bread, and afterward you may both go." [6]And the two of them sat and ate together, and the young woman's

father said to the man, “Consent, pray, to spend the night, that you may enjoy good cheer.” [7]And the man got up to go, and his father-in-law pressed him and he stayed and spent the night there. [8]And he rose early in the morning on the fifth day to go, and the young woman’s father said, “Refresh yourself, pray.” And they lingered till the day was waning, and the two of them ate. [9]And the man got up to go, he and his concubine and his lad. And his father-in-law, the young woman’s father, said to him, “Look, the day is declining toward evening. Spend the night, pray. Look, the day is gone. Spend the night here, that you may enjoy good cheer, and tomorrow you both will rise early on your way, and you will go to your tent.” [10]But the man did not want to spend the night, and he arose and went and came opposite Jebus, which is to say, Jerusalem, and with him were the pair of saddled donkeys and his concubine with him. [11]They were by Jebus, and the day was very far spent, and his lad said to his master, “Come, pray, and let us turn aside to this town of the Jebusites that we may spend the night there.” [12]And his master said to him, “We shall not turn aside to a town of strangers who are not of the Israelites. Let us pass on as far as Gibeah.” [13]And he said to his lad, “Come and let us approach one of the places, and we shall spend the night in Gibeah or in

Ramah.” [14]And they passed on and went, and the sun
set on them by Gibeah, which is Benjamin’s. [15]And
they turned aside to come to spend the night, and he
came and sat in the town square, but there was no man
to take them in to spend the night. [16]And, look, an old
man was coming from his work in the field in the
evening. And the man was from the high country of
Ephraim and he was sojourning in Gibeah, but the
people of the place were Benjaminites. [17]And he raised
his eyes and saw the wayfaring man in the town
square, and the old man said, “Where are you going
and from where do you come?” [18]And he said to him,
“We are passing from Bethlehem in Judah to the far
reaches of the high country of Ephraim—I am from
there, and I have gone to Bethlehem in Judah—and I
am going to the house of the LORD, but no man is
taking me in. [19]And there is even straw and provender
for our donkeys, and there is even bread and wine for
me and for your slavegirl and for the lad who is with
your servant. Nothing is lacking.” [20]And the old man
said to him. “It is well with you. Only all your lack is
upon me. Only do not spend the night in the square.”
[21]And he brought him into his house and mixed fodder
for the donkeys, and they washed their feet and ate and
drank. [22]They were making good cheer when, look, the
men of the town, worthless men, drew round the

house, pounding on the door, and they said to the old man who was master of the house, saying, “Bring out the man that has come to your house that we may know him.” [23]And the man who was master of the house went out to them and said, “No, my brothers, no, pray, do no harm. Seeing that this man has come into my house, do not do this scurrilous thing. [24]Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine. Let me, pray, bring them out, and rape them and do to them whatever you want. But to this man do not do this scurrilous act.” [25]But the men did not want to listen to him, and the man seized his concubine and brought her out to them. And they knew her and abused her all night long till morning, and they let her go at daybreak. [26]And the woman came toward morning and fell at the entrance to the house of the man where her master was as the light was coming up. [27]And her master arose in the morning and opened the doors of the house and went out to go on his way. And, look, the woman, his concubine, was fallen at the entrance of the house, her hands on the threshold. [28]And he said to her, “Get up, and let us go.” And there was no answer. And he took her on his donkey, and the man arose and went to his place. [29]And he came into his house and took a cleaver and held his concubine and cut her up limb by limb into twelve pieces, and he sent

her through all the territory of Israel. [30]And so whoever saw her would say, “There has not been nor has there been seen such a thing from the day the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt to this day. Pay heed about her, take counsel, and speak.”

CHAPTER 19 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *a Levite*. Though nothing further is made in the story of his status as Levite, and no reference is made to any sacerdotal function performed by him, there is an obvious link with the morally dubious Levite lad in the immediately preceding story. Hereditary connection with the cult is clearly no guarantee of character.

2. *played the whore against him*. Given that a man and his concubine are involved, this could refer to sexual infidelity, but the fact that she goes off to her father’s house and that he wants her back argues for the metaphorical sense of this idiom: she pulled away from him, no longer wanted to remain with him.

3. *his lad was with him and a pair of donkeys*. Both servant and donkey will have a role to play as the story darkens.

the young woman’s. The fact that she is young, a *naʿarah*, will make what ensues all the more painful.

rejoiced to greet him. The rejoicing may be from the father’s perception that his daughter and the Levite will now be reconciled, but there is an odd emphasis in the story that the father is somehow smitten with the Levite, to the exclusion of concern for his daughter.

5. *a morsel of bread*. This is a polite understatement for a full meal.

6. *enjoy good cheer*. This mood idiom usually implies feasting and drinking.

7. *his father-in-law pressed him and he stayed*. In this story that turns on the refusal and then violation of hospitality, the father-in-law's importuning of his guest looks in its exaggeration like a grotesque parody of hospitality.

8–9. *the day was waning . . . the day is declining toward evening*. This proliferation of expressions for the approach of night underscores the zone of danger into which the Levite and his concubine will enter as night falls.

8. *the two of them ate*. The Levite and his father-in-law. The concubine is not part of the feast.

10. *the pair of saddled donkeys*. At the end of the story, one of them will carry a grisly load on its back.

12. *We shall not turn aside to a town of strangers*. In the event, this consideration proves to be a bitter delusion because Israelites will behave more barbarically to them than any strangers.

13. *And he said to his lad*. The repetition of the formula for introducing speech indicates that the servant is perplexed or disturbed by what his master says but has no way of answering him: why, he must be thinking, does he insist that we move on when the only reasonable thing to do would be to seek refuge in this nearby Jebusite town?

15. *but there was no man to take them in*. This is the first signal of the network of allusions to the story of the visit of the two divine messengers to Sodom in Genesis 19.

16. *the man was from the high country of Ephraim*. Pointedly, the sole person in Gibeah prepared to honor the civilized obligation of hospitality is not a Benjaminite.

18. *to the house of the* LORD. This is a little odd because there is no indication that he lives in a sanctuary back in the far reaches of the high country of Ephraim. Also, instead of the preposition *ʾel*, "to," the text shows an accusative particle, *ʾet*. Many, following the Septuagint, emend the two Hebrew words here to read, "to my house."

20. *Only all your lack is upon me*. The old man refuses the Levite's offer to bring his own provisions into the house.

Only do not spend the night in the square. The old man knows how dangerous it would be to spend the night outside exposed to the lubricious townsmen. The parallel with the story of Lot and his two daughters begins to become explicit.

22. *They were making good cheer*. As before, this is a mood idiom associated with eating and drinking.

worthless men. This judgmental phrase is added to the near verbatim quotation from Genesis 19:4.

Bring out the man . . . that we may know him. This is a direct quotation of Genesis 19:5, except that there the plural "men" appears because there are two of them. The gang-rapists' initial preference is homosexual, but they clearly would also have been aware that the stranger was traveling with a young woman.

23. *No, my brothers, no, pray, do no harm*. These words are quoted from Genesis 19.8.

scurrilous thing. The Hebrew *nevalah* is a term generally used for shameful sexual acts.

24. *Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine*. This replicates Lot's offer of his two virgin daughters to the rapists (Genesis 19:8). One does not know which is the more outrageous proposal, offering his daughter to be gang-raped or his guest's concubine, over whom he surely does not have jurisdiction.

rape them and do to them whatever you want. The parallel text in Genesis 19:8 lacks the brutally direct "rape" (or "abuse"). Its insertion makes us wonder all the more what kind of father the old man is and what kind of host he is to the young woman, whom he appears to regard as a piece of disposable property.

25. *the man seized his concubine and brought her out to them*. In the event, it is the Levite, prepared to do anything to save his own skin, who thrusts his concubine into the clutches of the rapists. No action follows on the old man's offer of his daughter to the rapists. Perhaps, seeing the Levite thrust his concubine outside, he concludes that one victim will suffice.

And they knew her and abused her all night long till morning. The source story in Genesis takes place in legendary times when there was supernatural intervention in human affairs. The two strangers, because they are divine beings, blind the would-be rapists and secure the safety of those within the house. In the latter-day era of the present story, there is no miraculous intervention—the female victim is gang-raped all night long and dies at daybreak from the prolonged violent abuse.

26. *fell at the entrance to the house*. She expires in this liminal space, her arms stretching out across the threshold of the house where she might have been safe, her body sprawled on the ground before the house, which is the outside zone of anarchic and destructive lust.

27. *her master*. Only at the end of the story is he called, repeatedly and almost ironically, "her master."

arose . . . and opened the doors of the house and went out to go on his way. He is all brisk business and seems unconcerned about the fate of his concubine.

And, look, the woman, his concubine. Only now does he look down and see her brutalized body, identifying her first as a woman and then as his concubine.

28. *Get up, and let us go*. He at first does not realize that she is dead. This brusque command reveals his utter moral callousness: he expects the woman, after having been gang-raped hour after hour, to pick herself up quickly and join him on the journey back.

he took her on his donkey. At first, we may think he means to give her a decent burial near his home.

29. *took a cleaver and held his concubine and cut her up limb by limb into twelve pieces*. Although the intention is to trigger outrage in all the tribes—the number twelve is automatic, but it would actually be eleven, because Benjamin is excluded—over the atrocity that has been perpetrated, the act itself is barbaric, and in biblical terms, it is a desecration of the human body. It should be said, moreover, that the Levite until this point has himself been singularly lacking in outrage over the gang-rape of his concubine. In any case, the butchering of her body completes the set of images of mutilation and other violence done to the body that begins in the opening chapter of Judges

with the chopping off of the thumbs and big toes of the captured king Adoni-Bezek.

CHAPTER 20

[1]And all the Israelites went out, and the community
assembled as one man from Dan to Beersheba in the
land of Gilead before the LORD at Mizpah. [2]And all
the leaders of the people, all the tribes of Israel in the
assembly of God's people, took their stance, four
hundred thousand sword-wielding foot soldiers. [3]And
the Benjaminites heard that the Israelites had gone up
to Mizpah. And the Israelites said, "Speak! How did
this evil come about?" [4]And the Levite man, husband
of the murdered woman, answered and said, "I came
with my concubine to Gibeah to spend the night. [5]And
the notables of Gibeah rose against me and surrounded
the house upon me at night. Me they thought to kill,
and my concubine they raped, and she died. [6]And I
seized my concubine and cut her up and sent her
through all the lands of Israel's estate, for they did a
foul and scurrilous thing in Israel. [7]Look, you are all
Israelites. Offer a word of counsel here." [8]And the
whole people rose as one man, saying, "We will not go
each to his tent and we will not turn aside each to his

home! [9]And now, this is the thing we shall do to
Gibeah: we shall go up against it by lot. [10]And we shall
take ten men out of a hundred from all the tribes of
Israel and a hundred out of a thousand and a thousand
out of ten thousand to take provisions for the troops, to
do for those coming to Benjamin's Gibeah, according
to all the scurrilous thing they did in Israel." [11]And all
the men of Israel gathered at the town, joined as one
man. [12]And the tribes of Israel sent throughout the
tribe of Benjamin, saying, "What is this evil that has
come about among you? [13]And now, give over the
worthless men who are in Gibeah that we may put
them to death and root out the evil from Israel." But
the Benjaminites did not want to heed the voice of
their Israelite brothers. [14]And the Benjaminites
gathered from the towns at Gibeah to go out to battle
with the Israelites. [15]And the Benjaminites from the
towns mustered on that day twenty-six thousand
sword-wielding men, besides the inhabitants of Gibeah
who mustered seven hundred picked men. [16]From all
these troops there were seven hundred picked men,
left-handers; every one of them could sling a stone at a
hair and not miss. [17]And the men of Israel, except for
Benjamin, mustered four hundred thousand sword-
wielding men, every one of them a man of war. [18]And
they arose and went up to Bethel and inquired of God,

and the Israelites said, “Who shall go up first for us in battle with the Benjaminites?” and the LORD said, “Judah first.” [19]And the Israelites arose in the morning and encamped against Gibeah. [20]And the men of Israel went out to battle with Benjamin, and the men of Israel were arrayed for battle with them at Gibeah. [21]And the Benjaminites sallied forth from Gibeah, and they laid waste among Israel on that day twenty-two thousand men. [22]And the troops of the men of Israel summoned their strength and once again were arrayed for battle in the place where they had been arrayed on the first day. [23]And the Israelites went up and wept before the LORD till evening, and they inquired of the LORD, saying, “Shall I once again join battle with my Benjaminite brother?” And the LORD said, “Go up against him.” [24]And the Israelites drew near to the Benjaminites on the second day. [25]And Benjamin sallied forth to meet them from Gibeah on the second day, and they laid waste among the Israelites another eighteen thousand men, all of them sword-wielding. [26]And the Israelites and all the troops went up and came to Bethel and wept, and they sat there before the LORD and fasted on that day till evening, and they offered up burnt offerings and well-being sacrifices before the LORD. [27]And the Israelites inquired of the LORD—and in those days the Ark of God’s Covenant

was there, [28]and Phineas son of Eleazar son of Aaron
was in attendance before Him in those days—saying,
“Shall I once again sally forth in battle with my
Benjaminite brother or shall I leave off?” And the
LORD said, “Go up, for tomorrow I shall give him
into your hand.” [29]And Israel placed ambushers round
about Gibeah. [30]And the Israelites went up against the
Benjaminites on the third day and were arrayed against
Gibeah as on the times before. [31]And the Benjaminites
sallied forth to meet the troops, they were drawn away
from the town, and they began to strike down from the
troops, as on the times before, on the highways, one
going up to Bethel and one to Gibeah, about thirty
men of Israel. [32]And the Benjaminites thought, “They
are routed before us as before.” But the Israelites had
said, “Let us flee and draw them away from the town
to the highways.” [33]And all the men of Israel had arisen
from their place and were arrayed in Baal-Tamar, and
the Israelite ambush was emerging from its place west
of Gibeah. [34]And ten thousand picked men from all
Israel came opposite Gibeah, and the battle was fierce,
but the Benjaminites did not know that harm was
about to touch them. [35]And the LORD routed
Benjamin before Israel, and the Israelites laid waste
among Benjamin on that day twenty-five thousand one
hundred men, all of them sword-wielding. [36]And the

Benjaminites saw that they were routed. And the men of Israel gave ground before Benjamin, for they trusted the ambush that they had set for Gibeah. [37]And the ambushers rushed out and assaulted Gibeah, and the ambushers drew together and struck the whole town with the edge of the sword. [38]And the time that had been set for the men of Israel with the ambushers was when they sent up a column of smoke from the town, [39]the men of Israel were to turn round in the battle. And Benjamin had begun to strike down among the men of Israel about thirty men, for they thought, "Why, he is surely routed before us as in the first battle." [40]And the column began to go up from the town, a pillar of smoke, and Benjamin turned around to its rear and, look, the entire town had gone up in smoke to the heavens. [41]And the men of Israel turned round, and the men of Benjamin panicked, for they saw that harm had touched them. [42]And they turned from before the men of Israel to the wilderness road, but the battle overtook both them and the ones from the town. They were laying waste to them within it. [43]They had encircled Benjamin, pursued him to Menuhah, led him to a point over against Gibeah from the east. [44]And eighteen thousand men of Benjamin fell, all of them valiant men. [45]And they turned and fled to the wilderness to the Rock of Rimmon, but

they picked off five thousand men of them on the highways, and they overtook them at Gidom and struck down two thousand men of them. [46]And all those who fell of Benjamin on that day came to twenty-five thousand sword-wielding men, all of them valiant men. [47]And six hundred men turned and fled to the wilderness to the Rock of Rimmon and stayed at the Rock of Rimmon four months. [48]And the men of Israel had turned back against the Benjaminites, and they struck them by the edge of the sword from the town, from man to beast, whatever was there. All the towns, too, that were there they set on fire.

CHAPTER 20 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *as one man*. This phrase recurs in the story, emphasizing the solidarity of the eleven tribes in their opposition to Benjamin.

2. *four hundred thousand sword-wielding foot soldiers*. Although military numbers in all these stories are exaggerated, this figure is especially fantastic. At no time in the history of ancient Israel could the nation have deployed this large an army.

4. *husband of the murdered woman*. Only now does the narrative spell out that the night-long gang-rape is tantamount to murder.

I came with my concubine. The Hebrew uses “I came” in the singular, followed by a second grammatical subject of the verb “my concubine,” a form

that indicates that the first subject of the verb is primary. The Levite remains true to character, making the woman ancillary to himself.

5. *Me they thought to kill*. In fact, the men of Gibeah sought to have sex with him, a detail the Levite prefers not to mention, substituting for it a purported direct threat to his life.

and my concubine they raped. He says nothing about the fact that he himself thrust her out the door into the hands of the rapists.

6. *I seized my concubine and cut her up*. He has already said that she died, but this way of putting it creates the macabre impression of his cutting up the person, not the corpse.

7. *Offer a word of counsel here*. Obviously, the word he assumes his tale will elicit is a resolution of vengeance.

10. *ten men out of a hundred*. Though it seems evident that 10 percent of the assembled troops are to provide logistical support to the warriors, the wording —ten out of a hundred, a hundred out of a thousand, a thousand out of ten thousand—is a bit confusing.

for those coming to Benjamin's Gibeah. The translation follows the reading in the Septuagint. The Masoretic Text looks garbled here: "for their coming."

12. *the tribe of Benjamin*. The received text shows, illogically, a plural, "tribes," but both the Septuagint and the Vulgate have a singular noun.

13. *But the Benjaminites did not want to heed the voice of their Israelite brothers*. The Israelites at first sought to punish only the perpetrators of the murderous sex crime. The refusal of the Benjaminites to hand them over then sets the stage for the bloody civil war.

14. *gathered from the towns*. These would have to be the sundry towns besides Gibeah that were in the tribal territory of Benjamin.

15. *twenty-six thousand sword-wielding men*. There is an unresolved discrepancy between this number and verse 35, where the total number of Benjaminite fighting men is given as 25,100.

16. *left-handers*. This might have been a genetic trait common among the Benjaminites, or they might have trained themselves to use their left hand in combat, like the great tennis player Rafael Nadal. One recalls that the Benjaminite Ehud used his left-handed prowess to take Eglon by surprise.

every one of them could sling a stone at a hair and not miss. Thus the Benjaminites, although vastly outnumbered, are formidable warriors. The large casualties they inflict on the first two days of battle may be because they can accurately strike their enemies from a distance, with a weapon that has a greater range than a spear and can be deployed more mobilely than a bow.

18. *inquired of God*. It was standard procedure throughout the ancient Near East to inquire of an oracle before battle.

Judah first. The oracle is extremely terse, and it offers no guidance as to how to conduct the battle.

21. *laid waste*. This is an unusual idiom for killing enemies in battle (the literal sense is: "waste to the ground"). It is possible that the usage, repeated several times in the story, is intended to evoke an association of cutting off progeny because it is precisely the idiom used to describe Onan's practice of coitus interruptus (Genesis 38:9). The question of progeny and the survival of Benjamin becomes urgent in the next chapter.

23. *Go up against him*. Again, the oracle offers no counsel or prediction about the battle.

27. *in those days the Ark of God's Covenant was there*. This clause and the next, which runs through the first half of verse 28, are an editorial interpolation intended to explain to a later audience why the Israelites had come to Bethel to inquire of the oracle.

28. *Go up, for tomorrow I shall give him into your hand*. Following the familiar folktale pattern of three repetitions with a reversal the third time, God now assures the Israelites that this time they will be victorious. Some interpreters see a contradiction between God's granting the victory and its achievement through a military stratagem—the ambush and the false retreat—but this account is actually in keeping with the system of dual causation one often finds in biblical narrative: events are attributed to divine intervention but are implemented by human initiative.

31. *the highways*. Unlike *derekh*, which is any kind of road or way, these *mesilot* are paved roads.

about thirty men. In this third battle, the casualties they inflict before they are trapped and overwhelmed are insignificant.

37. *the ambushers drew together and struck the whole town with the edge of the sword*. The stratagem used here to capture and destroy the town is identical with the one deployed by the Israelite forces against Ai in Joshua 8. Many scholars think that the writer in Joshua drew on this story.

38. *the time that had been set for the men of Israel with the ambushers was when they sent up a column of smoke*. In the parallel episode in Joshua, it is Joshua who gives the signal by raising his javelin, as Moses raised his staff against Amalek. Here we have the more likely military device of a signal fire. The Masoretic Text has an anomalous word *herev* ("much"?) after "the ambushers," but this is in all likelihood a dittography for *haʾorev*, "the ambushers," and so it has been deleted in the translation.

39. *And Benjamin had begun to strike down among the men of Israel about thirty men*. This duplicates verse 31 and may reflect an editorial glitch.

41. *they saw that harm had touched them*. They now realize that they are caught in a pincer move between the ambushers and the main Israelite force.

42. *They were laying waste to them within it*. The wording of the Hebrew is somewhat crabbed, and this trait is reflected in the translation.

47. *six hundred men . . . stayed at the Rock of Rimmon*. It seems unlikely that this wilderness crag was either impregnable or invisible to the pursuing army, so the Israelites may have made a decision to spare some remnant of the Benjaminite fighting men.

48. *they struck them by the edge of the sword from the town, from man to beast*. This formulation would seem to suggest that Gibeah and the other Benjaminite towns were put under the ban, the *ḥerem*. For the phrase "from man to beast," the translation, following some manuscripts and two ancient versions, reads *mimetim* (literally, "from people") rather than the Masoretic *metom* ("unwounded spot").

CHAPTER 21

[1]And the men of Israel had vowed at Mizpah, saying,
“No man of us will give his daughter as wife to
Benjamin.” [2]And the people came to Bethel and stayed
there till evening before God, and they raised their
voice and wept bitterly. [3]And they said, “Why, O
LORD God of Israel, has this come about in Israel,
that today one tribe should be missing from Israel?”
[4]And it happened on the next day that the people rose
early and built an altar there and offered up burnt
offerings and well-being offerings. [5]And the Israelites
said, “Who has not come up in the assembly to the
LORD from all the tribes of Israel?”—for great was
the vow concerning whoever had not gone up to the
LORD at Mizpah, saying, “He is doomed to die.”
[6]And the Israelites were regretful about Benjamin their
brother, and they said, “Today one tribe has been cut
off from Israel. [7]What shall we do for wives for those
who remain, as we have vowed to the LORD not to
give our daughters to them as wives?” [8]And they said,
“Which is the one of the tribes of Israel that did not

come up to the LORD at Mizpah?” And, look, not a man had come to the camp from Jabesh-Gilead to the assembly. [9]And the troops were mustered, and, look, there was no man there from the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead. [10]And the community sent there twelve thousand of the valiant men and charged them, saying, “Go and strike down the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead by the edge of the sword, and the women and the little ones. [11]And this is the thing that you shall do: every male and every woman who has lain with a male you shall put under the ban.” [12]And they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead four hundred young virgin women who had not lain with a male, and they brought them to the camp at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan. [13]And all the community sent and spoke to the Benjaminites who were at the Rock of Rimmon, and they declared peace with them. [14]And Benjamin came back at that time, and they gave them the women that they had kept alive from the women of Jabesh-Gilead, but they did not find enough for them. [15]And the people had become regretful concerning Benjamin, for the LORD had made a breach in the tribes of Israel. [16]And the elders of the community said, “What shall we do for wives for those left, for the women of Benjamin have been destroyed?” [17]And they said, “How will a remnant be left for Benjamin, that a

tribe not be wiped out from Israel, [18]and we cannot
give them wives from our daughters, for the Israelites
vowed, saying, ‘Cursed be he who gives a wife to
Benjamin’?” [19]And they said, “Look, there is a festival
to the LORD every year in Shiloh, which is north of
Bethel, east of the highway that goes up from Bethel to
Shechem and south of Lebonah.” [20]And they charged
the Benjaminites, saying, “Go and lie in wait in the
vineyards. [21]And when you see that, look, the
daughters of Shiloh come out to dance, you shall
snatch each of you his wife from the daughters of
Shiloh, and you shall go to the land of Benjamin.
[22]And should their fathers or their brothers come in
dispute to us, we shall say to them, ‘We showed mercy
to them, for no man of them took his wife in battle,
for it was not you who gave to them. Now should you
bear guilt?’” [23]And thus the Benjaminites did, and they
took wives according to their number from the
dancing girls whom they stole away, and they returned
to their estate and rebuilt the towns and dwelled within
them. [24]And the Israelites went off from there at that
time each man to his tribe and to his clan, and they
went out from there each man to his estate.

[25]In those days there was no king in Israel. Every man did what was right in his own eyes.

CHAPTER 21 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the men of Israel had vowed at Mizpah*. The Hebrew indicates a pluperfect because this solemn vow was taken before the beginning of the war with Benjamin.

3. *Why . . . has this come about in Israel*. Now, after the victory, the people are confronted with a dilemma because of their binding vow, for its consequence will be the elimination of one of the twelve tribes of Israel.

5. *for great was the vow*. This second vow, to destroy whoever held back from joining in the war against Benjamin, will be used to find a way out of the first vow.

6. *cut off*. The Hebrew uses a rather violent verb, *nigdaʿ* (literally, "hacked off"), instead of the usual *nikhrat*. Some scholars prefer to read *nigraʿ*, "is taken away," which would be in keeping with "missing" in verse 3.

8. *Jabesh-Gilead*. This northern territory to the east of the Jordan was allied with Benjamin, as will be clear in the story of Saul in 1 Samuel. Many have inferred that the whole story of the civil war and of the place of Jabesh-Gilead in its aftermath is meant to discredit Benjamin, Saul's tribe.

10. *Go and strike down the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead*. Jabesh-Gilead is to be put under the ban, all its population except for female virgins to be massacred. It is historically unlikely that the *ḥerem* was practiced by one set of Israelites on another, and as Amit points out, it would have been a singularly bad solution to the dilemma of Benjamin's survival to achieve it by wiping out a whole group of Israelites, men, women, and children.

12. *they brought them to the camp at Shiloh*. The setting now shifts from Bethel to Shiloh, laying the ground for the opening chapters of the Book of Samuel, which are centered in Shiloh.

14. *but they did not find enough for them*. There are six hundred Benjaminites at the Rock of Rimmon, so the shortfall in brides is two hundred. But in all likelihood, the story of the delivery of the four hundred young women from Jabesh-Gilead and the story of the snatching of the dancing girls in the vineyards are two different versions of how the surviving Benjaminites got their brides that have been edited together, with the numerical deficiency introduced in the first story so that it can be made up in the second.

19. *there is a festival to the LORD every year in Shiloh*. The name and nature of the festival are unspecified. The fact that it is said to be in Shiloh might encourage the inference that it was a special local celebration at Shiloh. On the other hand, the Mishnah (Taʿanit 4:8) reports a practice on the fifteenth of Av and on Yom Kippur in which the nubile young women went out dancing in the vineyards in borrowed white garments to be chosen as wives by the young men of the community.

21. *you shall snatch each of you his wife from the daughters of Shiloh*. What is involved is a kind of abduction, not rape, or, if the report in the Mishnah is historically grounded, a collective mating ceremony. This odd tale of snatching brides during the celebration of a festival has parallels in Herodotus (where it is a festival honoring Artemis) and in Livy's well-known story of the abduction of the Sabine women (where the festival is dedicated to Neptune). In any case, the Book of Judges, which begins in violence and is dominated by violence, ends here on an upbeat note with dancing girls and the taking of brides.

22. *We showed mercy to them, for no man of them took his wife in battle*. This whole speech is somewhat garbled (and the verb that means "show mercy" is conjugated in an untenable way in the Masoretic Text). The received text has "we took," but three ancient versions read "they took." The sense one can extract, without entirely rewriting the verse, is: The Benjaminites did not take these young women as war captives; we showed mercy to them and arranged for the taking of brides; you yourselves did not give the girls as brides, for the

vow against doing that was incumbent on you. Now why should you oppose our proper procedure and incur guilt?

23. *stole away*. The Hebrew verb *gazal*, it should be said, generally indicates the illicit appropriation of someone else's possessions.

25. *In those days there was no king in Israel. Every man did what was right in his own eyes*. This refrain is now inserted at the end as a kind of epilogue to the Book of Judges. The state of political anarchy has been especially manifest in the story of the concubine at Gibeah and the civil war it triggers, and perhaps in the war's aftermath as well. The refrain sets the stage for the Book of Samuel, which will move in swift steps to the founding of the monarchy.

SAMUEL

Introduction

The major sequence that runs, according to the conventional book and chapter divisions of later editorial traditions, from 1 Samuel 1 to 1 Kings 2 is one of the most astounding pieces of narrative that has come down to us from the ancient world. The story of David is probably the greatest single narrative representation in Antiquity of a human life evolving by slow stages through time, shaped and altered by the pressures of political life, public institutions, family, the impulses of body and spirit, the eventual sad decay of the flesh. It also provides the most unflinching insight into the cruel processes of history and into human behavior warped by the pursuit of power. And nowhere is the Bible's astringent narrative economy, its ability to define characters and etch revelatory dialogue in a few telling strokes, more brilliantly deployed.

It must also be said, after nearly two centuries of excavative scholarship, that the precise literary history and authorship of this great narrative remain beyond recovery. To specialists who have exercised painstaking analysis in order to expose an intricate patchwork of sources and historical layers in the book as a whole and in most of its episodes, it may seem a provocation or an expression of ignorance to speak at all of the story of Samuel, Saul, and David. Even a reader looking for unity must concede that certain passages are not of a piece with the rest. The most salient of these is the coda placed just before the end of the David story (2 Samuel 21–24), which comprises material from four different sources, none of them reflecting the style or perspective of the David story proper. It may be unwise to think of these disparate passages as intrusions because creating a purposeful collage of sources was demonstrably a standard literary procedure in ancient Israel. In any case, the architectonic cohesion of the narrative from the birth of Samuel to the death of David has been made increasingly clear by the innovative literary commentary of the past four decades, and much of the richness and complexity of the story is lost by those who imagine this book as a stringing together of virtually independent sources: a prophetic Samuel

narrative, a cycle of Saul stories, a History of the Rise of David, a Succession Narrative, and so forth.

Readers should not be confused by the conventional division into books. The entities 1 and 2 Samuel are purely an artifact of ancient manuscript production. Scrolls used by scribes were roughly the same length, and when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek in the third century B.C.E., a single scroll was not long enough to encompass the whole book, so it was divided into two parts in no way intrinsic to the original composition. (The Talmud speaks of a single Book of Samuel.) It is also demonstrable that the first two chapters of 1 Kings, as I shall try to show in my commentary, are the real conclusion of the book, subtly echoing earlier moments in the story and evincing the same distinctive literary mastery. Later redactors placed these two episodes at the beginning of Kings so that they could serve as a preface to the story of Solomon.

But if the ancient editors passed this material down to posterity as a book, what are we to make of its composite nature? Two fundamental issues are involved: the presence of the so-called Deuteronomist in the book, and the introduction of purportedly independent narratives. In regard to the second of these two considerations, the baseline for modern

scholarly discussion was set in a 1926 monograph by the German scholar Leonhard Rost. He concentrated on what he saw as two independent narratives—an Ark Narrative (1 Samuel 4–7:1, plus 2 Samuel 6) and a Succession Narrative (2 Samuel 9–20 and 1 Kings 1–2). The argument for an originally independent Ark Narrative has a good deal of plausibility: there are some stylistic differences in this segment; human agents, at the center of the surrounding narrative, are marginal; miraculous intervention by God, not in evidence elsewhere, is decisive; and the figure of Samuel with which the story began temporarily disappears. The Ark Narrative is often thought to be the oldest component of the Book of Samuel, perhaps actually pre-Davidic, because it does not envisage a royal cult in Jerusalem and has no interest in the more political concerns of the larger story. Even in this case, however, the narrative in question has to be read in the context of the comprehensive literary structure into which it has been integrated, whether by editorial ingenuity or by the allusive artistry of the author of the David story. Thus, the old priest Eli, sitting at the gate awaiting the news of disaster from the battlefield (news that will include the death of his sons), generates a haunting avatar in the aging David at Mahanaim, sitting between the two gates of the walled city,

anxiously awaiting the messenger from the battlefield who will tell him of the death of his son. A second scene of receiving catastrophic tidings is tied in with Eli: the old priest hears an uproar in the town, asks what it means, and then a messenger arrives to give him a breathless report of the terrible defeat, just as the usurper Adonijah, at the end of the David story, will hear an uproar in the town and then a breathless report from an eyewitness of the developments that have destroyed his hopes for the throne.

The argument for an independent Succession Narrative, long embraced by scholarly consensus, is shakier. Rost's contention that it is stylistically distinct from the preceding text is unconvincing, and his notions of style are extremely vague. One may question whether the succession to the throne is actually the central concern of this sequence of episodes, which are more powerfully focused on David's sin and the consequent theme of the unfolding of the prophet's curse on the house of David. (This theme has a certain affinity with Greek tragedy, as Faulkner, ultimately a better reader of the David story than Rost, keenly understood in *Absalom, Absalom!*) The powerful imaginative continuities in the representation of David from agile youth to decrepit old age speak for themselves. To read, for example,

David's grim response to the death of his infant son by Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12) as part of an independent Succession Narrative, unrelated to his previous public utterances and acts in a purported History of the Rise of David, is to do palpable violence to the beautiful integrity of the story as the probing representation of a human life. Over the past four decades, admirable work has been done by scholars from different points on the geographical and methodological map to illuminate the fine and complex interconnections among the various phases of the story of David, Saul, and Samuel. The most notable contributions are those of the Dutch scholar J. P. Fokkelman, the North American Robert Polzin, and the Israeli Shimon Bar-Efrat, and I shall frequently follow their precedent or build on their insights in my comments on the text.

The other pervasive question about the stratification of this book involves its Deuteronomistic editing. No one knows with certainty when the main part of the original narrative was written, though there is good reason to place it, as a recurrent scholarly view does, quite close to David's own time, in the first half of the tenth century B.C.E. (Gerhard von Rad proposed the court of Solomon as the setting for the composition of the story.) Samuel is set into the larger history that runs from Joshua to the end of 2 Kings

and that scholarly usage designates as the Deuteronomistic History. The book was probably edited at the time of King Josiah's cultic and theological reforms in the late seventh century B.C.E., although it may well have undergone a secondary Deuteronomistic redaction in the Babylonian exile, during the sixth century B.C.E. But to what extent is Samuel a product of the work of the Deuteronomist? The bulk of the story shows no traces of the peculiar brand of nationalist pietism that marks the Deuteronomistic movement—its emphasis on the purity and the centralization of the cult, its insistence on a direct causal link between Israelite defection from its covenant with God and national catastrophe, and its distinctive and strikingly formulaic vocabulary for expressing this outlook. The compelling conclusion is that the Deuteronomistic editors did no more with the inherited narrative than to provide some minimal editorial framing and transition (far less than in the Book of Judges) and to interpolate a few brief passages. Thus I strenuously disagree with Robert Polzin, one of the most finely perceptive readers of this book (in his two volumes *Samuel and the Deuteronomist* and *David and the Deuteronomist*). Exercising great ingenuity, Polzin sees the historical

perspective of the Deuteronomist manifested in all the minute details of the story.

Let me recall a signal instance I mentioned in my introduction to the Former Prophets (pages xlv–lvi), where the Deuteronomist has patently inserted a bit of dialogue of his own contrivance into the story that probably antedates his editing by more than three centuries, for the contrast with what immediately follows vividly illustrates the kind of world that defines David, Joab, Saul, Abner, and all these memorable figures steeped in the bitter juices of politics and history. Here, full quotation with commentary may be helpful. On his deathbed, David summons Solomon in order to convey to him an oral last will and testament (1 Kings 2: 2–6):

> I am going on the way of all the earth. And you must be strong, and be a man. *And keep what the* LORD *your God enjoins, to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, His commands, and His dictates and His admonitions, as it is written in the Teaching of Moses, so that you may prosper in everything you do and in everything to which you turn. So that the* LORD *may fulfill His word that He spoke unto me, saying, "If your sons keep their way to walk before Me in truth with their whole heart and with their whole being, no man of yours will be cut off from the throne of Israel."* And, what's more, you yourself know what Joab son of Zeruiah did to me, what he did to the two commanders of the armies of Israel, Abner son of Ner and Amasa son of Jether—he killed them, and shed the blood of war in peace, and put the blood of war on his belt that was round his waist and on his sandals that were on his feet. And you must act in your wisdom, and do not let his gray head go down in peace to Sheol.

Every word in the italicized section of the passage shows the fingerprints of the Deuteronomist. The phraseology is almost identical with recurrent phraseology in the Book of Deuteronomy: the heavy stress on "keeping" and "commands," whole strings of terms such as "walk in His ways," "His statutes, His commands, and His dictates and His admonitions," "so that you may prosper in everything you do," "to walk before Me in truth with their whole heart and with their whole being." The very mention of the "Teaching [*torah*] of Moses" is a Deuteronomistic rallying point that would scarcely have been invoked in the tenth century. Stylistically, moreover, these long-winded sentences loaded with didactically insistent synonyms are nothing like the sentences spoken by characters in the David story.

Why did the Deuteronomist interpolate these lines of dialogue? The most plausible inference is that, given his brand of pious monotheism, he was uncomfortable with the vengeful way the founding king of the divinely elected dynasty speaks on his deathbed. David and Joab go back together half a century. David has been repeatedly dependent on Joab's resourcefulness and ruthlessness as his principal strongman, but he also feels himself to have been terribly wronged by his henchman—above all, in

Joab's self-interested and treacherous murders of two army commanders whom David had embraced (and also in his killing of Absalom, against the king's explicit orders, which David refrains from mentioning). The image of Joab splashed in blood from waist to feet strongly recalls the narrative report of his butchering Amasa with a stealthy sword thrust to the belly, and invokes the recurrence of spilled blood as material substance and moral symbol throughout the story. When David enjoins the proverbially wise Solomon to act in his wisdom, the quality in question is not the wisdom of the Torah of Moses but rather the wisdom of a Talleyrand. Soon after David's death, Solomon will show how adept he is in exercising that faculty of wary calculation. The Deuteronomistic editor could not delete this material, but he sought to provide a counterweight to its unblinking realism by first having David on his deathbed speak in a high moral tone. In fact, nobody in the David story talks like this. The dialogues show nothing of this hortatory style, nothing of this unalloyed didacticism. It is not that the writer is devoid of any ideological viewpoint: he believes in a morally imperative covenantal relationship between God and Israel; he believes in the authority of prophecy; and he believes in the divine election of the Davidic line. But

one must hasten to say that he believes in all these things only with enormous dialectic complication, an order of complication so probing that at times it borders on subversion.

The dialectic complication of national ideology is a phenomenon worth explaining, for it brings us to the heart of the greatness of the David story. Biblical scholarship by and large has badly underread this book by imagining that ideological strands can be identified like so many varieties of potatoes and understood as simple expressions of advocacy. In this fashion, it is repeatedly claimed in the critical literature that one component of the book is prophetic, promoting the interests of prophetic circles; that another is "Saulide"; that a third is basically a narrative apologetic for the Davidic dynasty; and so forth. All of this strikes me as badly misconceived, and it is blind to the complexity of vision of this extraordinary writer.

The representation of the prophet Samuel is instructive in this connection. It has been conjectured that a "prophetic" writer, active perhaps a century or two after the reported events, is responsible for this portion of the book as well as for the ones in which Nathan the prophet figures. But there is scant evidence in the text for the construction of this hypothetical entity. It is rather like assuming that Shakespeare must

have been a “royalist,” or perhaps even royal, writer in order to have written *Henry IV*. What, in fact, is the writer’s attitude toward Samuel? There is no question that he is shown to be a prophet confirmed in his vocation by God Himself, as the dedication scene, in which God calls to him in the night at the Shiloh sanctuary (1 Samuel 3), makes clear. It is concomitantly stressed that Samuel has been chosen to exercise a spiritual authority that will displace the priestly authority of the house of Eli, on which an irrevocable curse is pronounced soon after the report of Samuel’s birth. The entire people becomes subservient to Samuel, and they feel that only through the initiative of the prophet (however grudging) can they get the king they want. In all this, one could claim that the story is confirming a prophetic ideology by reinforcing the notion of the indispensability of prophetic authority to Israelite national life.

Yet as in the case of Saul, David, and all the principal figures around them, Samuel is a densely imagined character, and, it must be said, in many respects a rather unattractive one. The Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai neatly catches the dubiety of the mature Samuel in a wry little poem: “When Samuel was born, she said words of Torah, / ‘For this lad I prayed.’ / When he grew up and did the deeds of his

life, / she asked, 'For this lad I prayed?'" The prophet Samuel may have God on his side, but he is also an implacable, irascible man, and often a palpably self-interested one as well. His resistance to the establishment of the monarchy may express a commitment to the noble ideal of the direct kingship of God over Israel, but it is also motivated by resentment that he must surrender authority, and the second of his two antimonarchic speeches is informed by belligerent self-defensiveness about his own career as national leader. When he chooses Saul, he wants to play him as his puppet, dictating elaborate scenarios to the neophyte king, even setting him up for failure by arriving at an arranged rendezvous at the last possible moment. He is proud, imperious, histrionic—until the very end, when he is conjured up by Saul as a ghost on the eve of the fatal battle at Mount Gilboa.

It would be misleading, I think, to imagine that any of this is intended to discredit the idea of prophetic authority. Samuel is invested with prophetic power by an act of God. But the writer understands that he is also a man, all too human, and that any kind of power, including spiritual power, can lead to abuse. Samuel toys with the idea of creating a kind of prophetic dynasty through his two sons, even though they are just as corrupt as the two sons of Eli, whose immoral

behavior seals the doom of their father's priestly line. Is Samuel's choice of Saul really dictated by God, or rather by his own human preconceptions? (He is on the point of making the same mistake twice when he is ready to anoint David's eldest brother, Eliab, another strapping young man who seems to stand out from the crowd.) When he insists it is God's will that the entire population and all the livestock of Amalek should be slaughtered, and then offers King Agag as a kind of human sacrifice to the LORD, does he act with divinely authorized prophetic rightness, or, as Martin Buber thought, is he confusing his own human impulses with God's will? The story of Samuel, then, far from being a simple promotion of prophetic ideology, enormously complicates the notion of prophecy by concretely imagining what may become of the imperfect stuff of humanity when the mantle of prophecy is cast over it.

The representation of David is another instance, far more complex and compelling, of the complication of ideology through the imaginative reconstruction of historical figures and events. Before I try to explain how that process is played out in the David story, a few words are in order about the relation of this entire narrative to history.

As with almost every major issue of biblical studies, there have been sharp differences among scholars on this particular question. On the one hand, Gerhard von Rad in the 1940s and others after him have seen the David story as the beginning of history writing in the Western tradition. On the other hand, one group of contemporary scholars, sometimes known as minimalists, is skeptical about whether there ever was a King David and likes to say that this narrative has about the same relation to historical events as do the British legends about King Arthur. The gritty historical realism of the story—what Hans Frei shrewdly identified as its "history-like" character—surely argues against the notion that it is simply legendary. Were David an invention of much later national tradition, he would be the most peculiar of legendary founding kings: a figure who early on is shown as a collaborator with the archenemies of Israel, the Philistines; who compounds adultery with murder; who more than once exposes himself to humiliation, is repeatedly seen in his weakness, and oscillates from nobility of sentiment and act to harsh vindictiveness on his very deathbed. (On this last point, the editorial intervention of the Deuteronomist that we observed suggests that he had inherited not a legendary account but a historical report that made him squirm.) If,

moreover, the bulk of the story was actually composed within a generation or two, or perhaps three, after the reported actions, it is hard to imagine how such encompassing national events as a civil war between the house of Saul and the house of David, the Davidic campaigns of conquest east of the Jordan, and the usurpation of the throne by Absalom with the consequent military struggle, could have been invented out of whole cloth.

This narrative nevertheless has many signs of what we would call fictional shaping—interior monologues, dialogues between the historical personages in circumstances where there could have been no witness to what was said, pointed allusions in the turns of the dialogue as well as in the narrative details to Genesis, Joshua, and Judges. What we have in this great story, as I have proposed elsewhere, is not merely a report of history but an imagining of history that is analogous to what Shakespeare did with historical figures and events in his history plays. That is, the known general contours of the historical events and of the principal players are not tampered with, but the writer brings to bear the resources of his literary art in order to imagine deeply, and critically, the concrete moral and emotional predicaments of living in history, in the political realm. To this end, the writer feels free to

invent an inner language for the characters, to give their dialogues revelatory shape, to weave together episodes and characters with a fine mesh of recurrent motifs and phrases and analogies of incident, and to define the meaning of the events through allusion, metaphor, and symbol. The writer does all this not to fabricate history but in order to understand it.

In this elaborately wrought literary vehicle, David turns out to be one of the most unfathomable figures of ancient literature. He begins as the fair-haired boy of Israel—if the term "red" or "ruddy" in his initial description refers to hair color, it might be something like auburn. Everyone seems to love him. He is beautiful, he is musical, and he is brave and brilliantly resourceful on the battlefield. He is also, from the start, quite calculating, and it can scarcely be an accident that until the midpoint of his story every one of his utterances, without exception, is made on a public occasion and arguably is contrived to serve his political interests. The narrative repeatedly reveals to us the churning fears and confusions within Saul while blocking access to David's inner world. Beset by mortal dangers, David is constantly prepared to do almost anything in order to survive: with the help of his devoted wife, Michal, wordlessly fleeing Saul's assassins; playing the drooling madman before the

Philistine king Achish; serving as vassal to the Philistines, massacring whole towns in order to keep his real actions unknown to his overlords; profiting politically from the chain of violent deaths in the house of Saul while vehemently dissociating himself from each of the killings. He is, in sum, the first full-length portrait of a Machiavellian prince in Western literature. The Book of Samuel is one of those rare masterworks that, like Stendhal's *Charterhouse of Parma,* evinces an unblinking and abidingly instructive knowingness about man as a political animal in all his contradictions and venality and in all his susceptibility to the brutalization and the seductions of exercising power.

And yet, David is more than a probing representation of the ambiguities of political power. He is also an affecting and troubling image of human destiny as husband and father and as a man moving from youth to prime to the decrepitude of old age. The great pivotal moment of the whole story in this regard is when he turns to his perplexed courtiers, after putting aside the trappings of mourning he had assumed for his ailing infant son, now dead, and says, "I am going to him. He will not come back to me." These are the very first words David pronounces that have no conceivable political motive, that give us a

glimpse into his inwardness, revealing his sense of naked vulnerability to the inexorable mortality that is the fate of all humankind. For the rest of the story, we shall see David's weakness and his bonds of intimate attachment in fluctuating conflict with the imperatives of power that drive him as a king surrounded by potential enemies and betrayers.

The story of David, in turn, cannot be separated from the story of the man he displaces, Saul. (The moral and psychological complication with which both men are imagined argues powerfully against the simplification of sorting out the book into "Davidic" and "Saulide" narratives.) As a number of observers have proposed—perhaps most vividly, in a series of ballads, the early-twentieth-century Hebrew poet Saul Tchernikhovsky—Saul is the closest approximation of a tragic hero in the Hebrew Bible. A farm boy from Benjamin seeking his father's lost donkeys, he is overtaken by a destiny of kingship of which he had not dreamed and that at first he tries to escape. Ambivalence and oscillation are the hallmarks of the story of Saul, and the writer may have been led to mirror this condition in his abundant use of paired or even tripled episodes: three different coronation scenes are required for the reluctant Saul; two tales of Saul among the prophets, the first elevating him at the

beginning of his career and the second devastating him at the end; two incidents of Saul's hurling his spear at David; two encounters with the fugitive David, who spares his life and receives a pledge of love and a kind of endorsement from Saul, still not to be trusted by David as the older man veers wildly between opposed feelings.

The stories of Saul and David interlock antithetically on the theme of knowledge. Saul, from first to last, is a man deprived of the knowledge he desperately seeks. At the outset, he has to turn to the seer Samuel in order to find his father's asses. In subsequent episodes, he has no luck with oracles and divination in guiding him on his military way, and he tries to coerce fate by imposing a rash vow of fasting on his troops in the midst of battle. He seizes on the report of informers in his pursuit of David, but David continues to elude him. At the very end, on the eve of his last battle, he tries oracle and prophecy and dreams in order to find out what the impending future will be, but all fail, and he is compelled to resort to the very art of necromancy that he himself had made a capital crime. The knowledge he then receives from the implacable ghost of Samuel is nothing but the news of his own imminent doom.

David, on the other hand, at first seems peculiarly favored with knowledge. The position that he is brought to the court to fill is for a man "skilled in playing" (the literal meaning of the Hebrew is "*knowing* to play") and "prudent in speech." In what follows, David demonstrates impressive prudence and agile resourcefulness. It also emerges that once he has become a fugitive, he is rapidly equipped with an oracular ephod and a priest to use it and so, in contrast to Saul, has a direct line of communication with God in making his key decisions. Much later in the story, when things have begun to fall apart, the wise woman from Tekoa will tell David, "My lord is wise as with the wisdom of a messenger of God, to know everything in the land" (2 Samuel 14:20). By this point, however, it has become painfully evident that her words are a gesture of deference to the king that is ironically contradicted by fact. The knowing David of the earlier part of the narrative has become the king isolated in his palace. He must even send intermediaries to discover the identity of the naked beauty bathing on the rooftop in view of his palace, though she seems to be the daughter of one of the members of his own elite guard. He is singularly unaware of his son Amnon's lust for his half sister Tamar, then of Absalom's plot to murder Amnon in

revenge, then of Absalom's scheme to usurp the throne. The pitiful image of the shivering, bedridden David, ignorant of the grand feast of self-coronation arranged by his son Adonijah, then reminded or perhaps rather persuaded by Bathsheba and Nathan that he has promised the throne to Solomon, is the ultimate representation of the painful decline of knowledge in this once perspicacious figure, the brilliant successor to the purblind Saul.

Who could have written a story like this, and what could his motives have been? The way this question is typically posed in biblical studies is to ask what interests the writer could have been serving, but it seems to me that framing the issue in those terms involves a certain reductionism that harks back to the historical positivism of the nineteenth century. Although it is safe to assume that no biblical author wrote merely to entertain his audiences, and although there is no evidence of a class of professional storytellers in ancient Israel analogous to the bards of Greece, the social location and political aims of the biblical writer remain unclear. (The Prophets, who sometimes incorporated autobiographical passages in their writing, and who stand out sharply as critics of society and often of the royal establishment, are the one clear exception to this rule.) Scholars of the Bible

often speak of “schools” or “circles” of biblical writing (Prophetic, Priestly, Wisdom, Davidic, and so forth), but in fact we have no direct knowledge of such groups as cultural institutions. The one school or movement for which a very strong case can be made is the Deuteronomistic movement. In this instance, a comprehensive, uncompromising reform of cultic practice, theology, and law was instituted during the reign of Josiah, around 621 B.C.E. The Book of Deuteronomy was composed, with abundant satellite literature to come after it, as a forceful literary instrument of the reform. In the great speeches of Deuteronomy, literature has patently been marshaled to inculcate an ideological program. Yet the very contrast we observed in 1 Kings 2 between the didacticism of the Deuteronomist and the worldly realism of the author of the David story argues for the idea that the latter had very different aims in mind from the simple promotion of a political program.

My guess is that the author of the David story thought of himself as a historian. But even if he frequented the court in Jerusalem, a plausible but not at all necessary supposition, he was by no means a writer of court annals or chronicles of the kings of Judah, and, as I have argued, he was far from being an apologist for the Davidic dynasty. I would imagine that

he was impelled to write out of a desire to convey to his contemporaries and to posterity a true account of the significant events involved in the founding of the monarchy that governed the nation. It is conceivable that he had some written reports of these events at his disposal or at any rate drew on oral accounts of the events. Perhaps he had spoken with old-timers who were actual participants, or, if one places him very early, he himself might have been an observer of some of what he reports. He also did not hesitate to exploit etiological tales (Saul among the prophets) and folktales (David slaying the giant Goliath) in order to flesh out his historical account and dramatize its meanings. Although committed to telling the truth about history, his notion of historical factuality was decidedly different from modern ones. His conception of history writing involved not merely registering what had happened and who had been the principal actors but also reflecting on the shifting interplay between character and historical act, on the way social and political institutions shape and distort individual lives, on the human costs of particular political choices.

The author of the David story was in all likelihood firmly committed to the legitimacy of the Davidic line. In the book he wrote, after all, God explicitly elects David once Saul has been rejected and later promises

that the throne of David will remain unshaken for all time. But the author approaches the David story as an imaginative writer, giving play to that dialectic fullness of conception that leads the greatest writers (Shakespeare, Stendhal, Balzac, Tolstoy, Proust, to name a few apposite instances) to transcend the limitations of their own ideological points of departure. Even though the vocational identity of "imaginative writer" was not socially defined in ancient Israel as it would be in later cultures, the accomplished facts of literary art in many cultures, ancient and modern, suggest that the impulse of literary creation, with the breadth of vision that at its best it encourages, is universal.

The person who wrote this story is not only a formidably shrewd observer of politics and human nature but also someone who manifestly delights in the writerly pleasures of his craft and is sometimes led to surprising insights by his exploration of those pleasures. He has an ear for dialogue, and for the contrastive treatment of the two interlocutors in particular dialogues, that Joyce might have envied. Though both narrator and characters are sparing in figurative language, the metaphors he gives them are telling, and sometimes set up electrically charged links between one moment of the story and another. This

writer has a keen sense of the thematic uses of analogy between one episode and another, as when he gives us Amnon lying in a pretended sickbed so that he can summon his sister Tamar to serve his violent lust, right after the story of David's rising from his siesta bed to see the bathing Bathsheba and then summon her to the palace for his illicit pleasure. (Both prohibited sexual acts lead to murder and political disarray.) Like most of the great masters of narrative art, the author of the David story is constantly asking himself what it must be like concretely—emotionally, psychologically, morally, even physically—to be one or another of these characters in a particular predicament, and it is this salutary imaginative habit that generates many of the dialectic complications of the historical account. Saul on the last night of his life is represented as not merely fearful of the Philistine foe but driven by desperation into the necromancer's den. This last gesture of grasping for knowledge denied makes the fate of the defeated king seem wrenching, indeed, tragic. David's flight from Absalom is not merely a story of political intrigue and opposing interests but also a tale of anguished conflict between father and king in the same man, culminating in David's horrendous stutter of grief over Absalom's death and

followed by Joab's harsh rebuke to him for his behavior.

One of the hallmarks of this whole writerly relation to the historical material is the freighted imagining of the detail not strictly necessary to the historical account. Let me offer one brief instance that may stand for all the others. David's first wife, Michal, it will be recalled, is married off by her father, Saul, to a man named Paltiel son of Laish after David's flight from his father-in-law's assassins. We know nothing about Paltiel except his name, and nothing about Michal's feelings concerning the union with him imposed by her father. When Abner, the commander of the forces of the house of Saul, comes to transfer his fealty to David and end the civil war, David stipulates that Michal daughter of Saul must first be sent back to him. (Presumably, his motive is strictly political.) Michal is duly removed by Abner's decree from Paltiel, with no word or emotion of hers reported by the writer. What he does give us are these few, indelible words: "And her husband went with her, weeping as he went after her, as far as Bahurim. And Abner said to him, 'Go back!' And he went back" (2 Samuel 3:16). To a sober historian, this moment might well seem superfluous. To a great imaginative writer like the author of this story, such moments are the

heart of the matter. Paltiel never even speaks in the story, but his weeping speaks volumes. He is a loving husband caught between the hard and unyielding men who wield power in the world—Abner, Saul's tough field commander, and his adversary turned ally, David, who insists on the return of the woman he has acquired with a bloody bride-price because he calculates that as Saul's daughter she will bolster his claim to be Saul's legitimate successor. The tearful Paltiel walking after the wife who is being taken from him, then driven back by the peremptory word of the strongman with whom he cannot hope to contend, is a poignant image of the human price of political power. If history, in the hackneyed aphorism, is the story told by the victors, this narrative achieves something closer to the aim that Walter Benjamin defined as the task of the historical materialist, "to brush history against the grain." Lacking all but the scantiest extrahistorical evidence, we shall probably never know precisely what happened in Jerusalem and Judah and the high country of Benjamin around the turn of the first millennium B.C.E., when the Davidic dynasty was established. What matters is that the anonymous Hebrew writer, drawing on what he knew or thought he knew of the portentous historical events, has created this most searching story of men and women in the rapid and

dangerous current of history that still speaks to us, floundering in history and the dilemmas of political life, three thousand years later.

1 Samuel

CHAPTER 1

[1]And there was a man from Ramathaim-Zophim,
from the high country of Ephraim, and his name was
Elkanah son of Jeroham son of Elihu son of Tohu son
of Zuph, an Ephraimite. [2]And he had two wives; the
name of the one was Hannah and the name of the
other, Peninnah. And Peninnah had children but
Hannah had no children. [3]And this man would go up
from his town year after year to worship and to
sacrifice to the LORD of Armies at Shiloh, and there
the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phineas, were priests
to the LORD. [4]And when the day came round,
Elkanah would sacrifice and give portions to Peninnah
his wife and to all her sons and her daughters. [5]And to
Hannah he would give one double portion, for Hannah
he loved, and the LORD had closed her womb. [6]And
her rival would torment her sorely so as to provoke her
because the LORD had closed up her womb. [7]And
thus was it done year after year—when she would go
up to the house of the LORD, the other would torment
her and she would weep and would not eat.

[8]And Elkanah her husband said to her, “Hannah, why
do you weep and why do you not eat and why is your
heart afflicted? Am I not better to you than ten sons?”
[9]And Hannah arose after the eating in Shiloh and after
the drinking, while Eli the priest was sitting in a chair
by the doorpost of the LORD’s temple. [10]And she was
deeply embittered, and she prayed to the LORD,
weeping all the while. [11]And she vowed a vow and
said, “LORD of Armies, if You really will look on
Your servant’s woe and remember me, and forget not
Your servant and give Your servant male seed, I will
give him to the LORD all the days of his life, no razor
shall touch his head.” [12]And it happened as she went on
with her prayer before the LORD, with Eli watching
her mouth, [13]as Hannah was speaking in her heart, her
lips alone moving and her voice not heard, Eli thought
she was drunk. [14]And Eli said to her,

“How long will you go on drunk?
Rid yourself of your wine!”

[15]And Hannah answered and said, “No, my lord! A
bleak-spirited woman am I. Neither wine nor strong
drink have I drunk, but I have poured out my heart to
the LORD. [16]Think not your servant a worthless girl,

for out of my great trouble and torment I have spoken till now." [17]And Eli answered and said, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant your petition which you asked of Him." [18]And she said, "May your servant but find favor in your eyes." And the woman went on her way, and she ate, and her face was no longer downcast. [19]And they rose early in the morning and bowed before the LORD and returned and came to their home in Ramah. And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife and the LORD remembered her. [20]And it happened at the turn of the year that Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, "For from the LORD I asked for him."

[21]And the man Elkanah with all his household went up to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice and his votive pledge. [22]But Hannah did not go up, for she had said to her husband, "Till the lad is weaned! Then I will bring him and we will see the LORD's presence, and he shall stay there always." [23]And Elkanah her husband said to her, "Do what is right in your eyes. Stay till you wean him, only may the LORD fulfill what your mouth has uttered." And the woman stayed and nursed her son till she weaned him. [24]And she took him up with her when she weaned him, with a three-year-old

bull and one *ephah* of flour and a jar of wine, and she brought him to the house of the LORD, and the lad was but a lad. [25]And they slaughtered the bull and they brought the lad to Eli. [26]And she said, “Please, my lord, by your life, my lord, I am the woman who was poised by you here praying to the LORD. [27]For this lad I prayed, and the LORD granted me my petition that I asked of Him. [28]And I on my part granted him for the asking to the LORD; all his days he is lent to the LORD.” And she bowed there to the LORD.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

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The story of Hannah provides an instructive illustration of the conventions of narrative exposition that govern a large number of biblical stories. First the main character or characters are identified by name, pedigree, and geographical location. The only verb used is “to be” (verses 1–2). In this instance the standard biblical story beginning, “there was a man,” is in part a false lead because the real protagonist of the story is Elkanah’s wife Hannah. Then there is a series of reported actions in the iterative tense—that is, an indication of habitually repeated actions (verses 3–7). (In all this, compare Job 1.) The narrative then zooms in to a particular moment, one of those annually repeated events of Hannah’s frustration at Shiloh, by way of Elkanah’s dialogue (verse 8), which could not plausibly be an iterative event. At this point, we have moved from prelude to story proper. The writer himself seems quite conscious of this play between recurring units of time and specific moments in time: the word *yamim*—“days,” but often as in verse 3 with the sense of “annual cycle”—is used five times, together with the singular *yom*, in an iterative sense, at the beginning of verse 4. (These

recurrences are complemented by "year after year," *shanah beshanah*, in verse 7.)

2. *And he had two wives*. The reference to two wives, one childbearing, the other childless, immediately alerts the audience to the unfolding of the familiar annunciation type-scene. The expected sequence of narrative motifs of the annunciation scene is the report of the wife's barrenness (amplified by the optional motif of the fertile co-wife less loved by the husband than is the childless wife); the promise, through oracle or divine messenger or man of God, of the birth of a son; cohabitation resulting in conception and birth. As we shall see, the middle motif is articulated in a way that is distinctive to the concerns of the Samuel story.

3. *the two sons of Eli*. The reference is initially puzzling but points forward to the focus on proper and improper heirs to the priesthood in Samuel's story.

5. *And to Hannah he would give one double portion*. The Hebrew phrase, which occurs only here, means literally "one portion [for the?] face," and has perplexed commentators. The conclusion of several modern translators that the phrase means "only a single portion" makes nonsense out of the following words that the allotment was an expression of Elkanah's special love. It seems wisest to follow a long tradition of commentators who take a cue from the doublative ending of *ʾapayim*, the word for "face" (perhaps even a textual corruption for another word meaning "double") and to construe this as a double portion to Hannah who, alas, unlike Peninnah, has no children.

7. *And thus was it done*. The Hebrew is literally "thus did he do," but the impersonal masculine active singular is often used in this kind of passive sense.

the other. The Hebrew simply says "she," but the antecedent is clearly Peninnah.

8. *Am I not better to you than ten sons?* The double-edged poignancy of these words is that they at once express Elkanah's deep and solicitous love for Hannah and his inability to understand how inconsolable she feels about her affliction of barrenness. All the annunciation stories must be understood in light of the prevalent ancient Near Eastern view that a woman's one great avenue to fulfillment in life was through the bearing of sons. It is noteworthy

that Hannah does not respond to Elkanah. When she does at last speak, it is to God.

11. *I will give him to the LORD*. Hannah's prayer exhibits a directness of style, without ornament or conventional liturgical phrasing, and an almost naïve simplicity: if you give him to me, I will give him to you. This canceling out of the two givings is reconciled by the introduction of another verb at the end of the story: Hannah "lends" to God the child He has given her.

no razor shall touch his head. As an expression of her dedication of the prayed-for child, Hannah vows that he will be a nazirite (like Samson), a person specially dedicated to God who took a vow of abstinence from certain activities. (The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "no razor will go up on his head.") The nazirites also refrained from wine, which throws an ironic backlight on Eli's subsequent accusation that Hannah is drunk. A few biblical texts link nazirite and prophet.

14. *How long will you go on drunk?* The central annunciation motif of the type-scene is purposefully distorted. Since Hannah receives no direct response from God—she prays rather than inquires of an oracle—Eli the priest should be playing the role of man of God or divine intermediary. But at first he gets it all wrong, mistaking her silent prayer for drunken mumbling, and denouncing her in a poetic line (marked by semantic and rhythmic parallelism) of quasiprophetic verse. When in verse 17 he accepts her protestation of innocent suffering, he piously prays or predicts—the Hebrew verb could be construed either way—that her petition will be granted, but he doesn't have a clue about the content of the petition. The uncomprehending Eli is thus virtually a parody of the annunciating figure of the conventional type-scene—an apt introduction to a story in which the claim to authority of the house of Eli will be rejected, and ultimately, sacerdotal guidance will be displaced by prophetic guidance in the person of Samuel, who begins as a temple acolyte but then exercises a very different kind of leadership.

15. *bleak-spirited*. The Hebrew, which occurs only here as a collocation, is literally "hard-spirited."

20. *she called his name Samuel*. There is a small puzzlement in the Hebrew because it is the name Saul, *Sha'ul*, not Samuel, *Shmu'el*, that means "asked" (or "lent"). This has led some modern scholars to speculate that a story

originally composed to explain the birth of Saul was transferred to Samuel—perhaps because Saul's eventual unworthiness to reign made it questionable that he should merit a proper annunciation scene. But it must be said that the only evidence for this speculation is the seeming slippage of names here. That could easily be explained, as by the thirteenth-century Hebrew commentator David Kimchi, if we assume Hannah is playing on two Hebrew words, *shaʾul meʾel*, "asked of God." In any case, biblical writers allowed themselves considerable license in etymologizing names.

21. *the yearly sacrifice*. The annual cycle of iterative actions invoked at the beginning is seemingly resumed, but everything is different now that Hannah has born a son, and she herself introduces a change in the repeated pattern.

votive pledge. Although this is the same Hebrew term, *neder*, that is used for Hannah's vow at the beginning of verse 11, its most likely referent here is a vowed thanksgiving offering on the part of the husband for his wife's safe delivery of a son.

22. *Till the lad is weaned*. The word for "lad," *naʿar*, is quite often a tender designation of a young son. Though it typically refers to an adolescent, or even to a young man at the height of his powers (David uses it for the usurper Absalom), it evidently can also be used for an infant. Nursing and weaning (compare the end of this verse and the beginning of the next verse) are insisted on here with a peculiar weight of repetition and literalness. This usage surely intimates the powerful biological bond between Hannah and the longed-for baby and thus points to the pain of separation she must accept, whatever the postponement, according to the terms of her own vow. In the Ark Narrative that follows, there will be a surprising recurrence of this image of nursing mothers yearning for their young. At this point, the only other indication of her feelings about the child is the term "lad" that she uses for him.

we will see the LORD's presence. Or, even more concretely, "the LORD's face." The anthropomorphism of this ancient idiom troubled the later transmitters of tradition sufficiently so that when vowel-points were added to the consonantal text, roughly a millennium after the biblical period, the verb "we will see" (*nir'eh*) was revocalized as *nirʾah* ("he will be seen"), yielding a more chastely monotheistic "he will appear in the LORD's presence."

23. *what your mouth has uttered*. The Masoretic Text has "His word." But a fragment of Samuel found in Cave 4 at Qumran reads "what your mouth has uttered," which, referring directly to Hannah's vow at Shiloh, makes much better sense since God, after all, has made no promises.

24. *a three-year-old bull*. This is again the reading of the Qumran Samuel text. The Masoretic Text has "three bulls," but only one bull is sacrificed in the next verse, and three-year-old beasts were often designated for sacrifice.

25. *they slaughtered the bull . . . they brought the lad*. The plural subject of these verbs is evidently Elkanah and Hannah. The simple parallelism of the brief clauses is eloquent: both the bull and the child are offerings to the LORD, and Samuel's dedication to the sanctuary is, surely for the parents, a kind of sacrifice. It may be relevant that the term "lad," *naʿar*, is precisely the one used for Isaac when he is on the point of being sacrificed and for Ishmael when he is on the brink of perishing in the wilderness. Perhaps that background of usage also explains the odd insistence on "the lad was but a lad" at the end of the preceding verse. Given the late weaning time in the ancient world, and given Hannah's likely impulse to postpone that difficult moment, one might imagine the child Samuel to be around the age of four or five.

26. *Please, my lord*. As in their previous encounter, Hannah's speech is full of deference and diffidence in addressing the priest—a reverence, we may already suspect, that he does not entirely deserve.

27. *For this lad I prayed*. She spells out the act of petition and its precise fulfillment, insisting twice on the root *sh-ʾ-l*, "to ask." The Hebrew is literally: "my asking that I asked of Him."

28. *granted him for the asking to the LORD; all his days he is lent to the LORD*. The English here is forced to walk around an elegant pun in the Hebrew: in the *qal* conjugation, *sh-ʾ-l* means to ask or petition; in the *hiphʿil* conjugation the same root means to lend; and the passive form of the verb, *shaʾul*, can mean either "lent" or "asked."

And she bowed. The translation again follows the reading of the Samuel fragment discovered at Qumran. The Masoretic Text reads "and he bowed" (a

difference of one initial consonant in the Hebrew), but it is Hannah, not Elkanah, who has been speaking for the last two verses.

CHAPTER 2

[1]And Hannah prayed and she said:
"My heart rejoiced through the
LORD,
my horn is raised high through
the LORD.
My mouth is wide to bolt down
my foes;
for I was gladdened by Your
rescue.
[2]There is no one holy like the
LORD,
for there is no one beside You,
and there is no bastion like our
God.
[3]Do not go on talking high and
mighty—
arrogance slips from your mouth
—
for a God all-knowing is the LORD,
and His is the measure of actions.

[4]The warriors' bow is shattered
and stumblers gird up strength.
[5]The sated are hired for bread
and the hungry cease evermore.
The barren woman bears seven
and the many-sonned woman is
bleak.
[6]The LORD deals death and grants
life,
brings down to Sheol and lifts up.
[7]The LORD impoverishes and
bestows wealth,
plunges down and also exalts.
[8]He raises the poor from the dust,
from the dung-heaps the wretched
He lifts
to seat among princes,
a throne of honor He bequeaths
them.
For the LORD's are the pillars of
earth,
upon them He founded the world.
[9]The steps of His faithful he watches,
and the wicked in darkness turn
dumb,

for not by might will a man
prevail.
[10]The LORD shatters His
adversaries,
against them in the heavens He
thunders.
The LORD judges the ends of the
earth:
may He grant strength to His king
and raise high His anointed's
horn."

[11]And Elkanah went to Ramah to his home while the lad was ministering to the LORD in the presence of Eli the priest. [12]And the sons of Eli were worthless fellows; they did not know the LORD. [13]And this was the priest's practice with the people: each man would offer his sacrifice, and the priest's lad would come when the meat was boiling, a three-pronged fork in his hand. [14]And he would thrust into the cauldron or the pot or the vat or the kettle, whatever the fork would pick up, the priest would take away with it. Thus they would do to all the Israelites who came there, to Shiloh. [15]Even before they had burned off the fat, the priest's lad would come and say to the man who was

sacrificing, “Hand over meat to roast for the priest, for he won’t take boiled meat from you, only raw.” [16]And the man would say, “Let them burn off the fat now and then take for yourself whatever you want,” and he would say, “No! For you shall hand it over now, and if not, I will take it by force.” [17]And the lads’ offense was very great before the LORD, for they scorned the LORD’s offering. [18]And Samuel was ministering in the presence of the LORD, a lad girt in linen ephod. [19]And a little cloak would his mother make him and would bring up to him year after year when she came up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. [20]And Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife and would say, “May the LORD bestow on you seed from this woman in place of the loan she has lent to the LORD,” and they would go back to their place. [21]For the LORD singled out Hannah and she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters. And the lad Samuel grew up with the LORD.

[22]And Eli was very old. And he heard of all that his sons did to all the Israelites, and that they lay with the women who flocked to the entrance of the Tent of Assembly. [23]And he said to them, “Why do you do such things of which I hear—evil things about you

from all these people? [24]No, my sons! For it is not
good, what I hear that the LORD's people are
spreading about. [25]If a man offends against man, God
may intercede for him, but if against the LORD a man
should offend, who can intercede for him?" And they
did not heed their father's voice, for the LORD wanted
to put them to death. [26]And the lad Samuel was
growing in goodness with both the LORD and with
men.

[27]And a man of God came to Eli and said to him,
"Thus says the LORD! Did I not reveal myself to your
father's house when they were in Egypt, slaves to
Pharaoh's house? [28]And did I not choose him from all
the tribes of Israel as a priest for me, to go up to My
altar, to burn incense, to carry an ephod before Me?
And I gave to your father's house all the Israelites'
burnt offerings. [29]Why do you trample on My sacrifice
and My offering which I have commanded, and you
honor your sons more than Me, to batten upon the first
portions of each offering of Israel My people?
[30]Therefore, says the LORD God of Israel, I indeed
said, 'Your house and your father's house will walk
before Me forever,' but now, says the LORD, God
forbid I should do it! For those who honor Me will I

honor, and my spurners shall be dishonored. [31]Look, a time is coming when I will cut down your seed and the seed of your father's house, and there shall be no elder in your house. [32]And you shall look with a jaundiced eye at all the bounty bestowed upon Israel, and there will be no elder in your house for all time. [33]Yet no man of you will I cut off from My altar, to make your eyes waste away and your spirit ache, and the increase of your house shall fall by the sword of men. [34]And this is the sign for you—that which comes upon your two sons, Hophni and Phineas, on a single day the two of them shall die! [35]And I will set up for Myself a stalwart priest, according to my heart and my spirit he shall act, and I will build him a stalwart house and he shall walk before My anointed for all time. [36]And it will happen that whoever remains from your house shall come to bow before him for a bit of silver and a loaf of bread, and he shall say, 'Add me on, pray, to one of the priestly details for a crust of bread to eat.'"

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

According to the standard collagelike convention of biblical narrative composition, Hannah's psalm has been set into the story at a later stage in the editorial process than the original tale, and it gives evidence of having been

taken from a familiar repertory of thanksgiving or victory psalms. The reference to the anointed king at the end of the poem assumes the institution of the monarchy, not established until two generations after the moment when Hannah is said to have pronounced this prayer. It is clearly the invocation in verse 5 of the barren woman who bears seven that encouraged the introduction here of this particular text. But the larger thematic assertion in the poem of God's power to reverse fortunes, plunging the high to the depths and exalting the lowly, is a fitting introduction to the whole Saul-David history. This psalm (verses 1–10) and David's victory psalm (2 Samuel 22) echo each other and act as formal "bookends" to the extended narrative sequence that includes the stories of Samuel, Saul, and David.

1. *my horn is raised high*. This archaic Hebrew animal imagery is worth preserving literally in English, as did Tyndale and the King James Version. The idea seems to be that the animal's horn is its glory and power, held high, perhaps in triumph after goring an enemy into submission. There is a sequence of body parts at the beginning of the first three versets of the poem, two literal and the middle one metaphorical: "my heart," "my horn," "my mouth." The raising high of the horn is crucial to the thematic unfolding of the poem, which reiterates a pattern of vertical movement, elevation and descent, that manifests God's power to reverse the fortunes of humankind. The upraised horn at the beginning returns in the envelope structure of the last line, a prayer that the LORD "raise high His anointed's horn." That final image, in turn, involves a hidden pun, because the Hebrew "horn" (*qeren*, actually one of the rare Semitic terms cognate with Indo-European—*cornu/horn*) is also the receptacle containing the oil with which the king is anointed.

My mouth is wide to bolt down my foes. The Hebrew does not express but implies "bolt down." The conventional rendering of this idiom as "gloated" is an evasion of its intimation of predatory violence.

4. *shattered*. The verb used is restricted to poetry; a noun derived from it means "rubble" or "tiny broken fragments," hence the sense seems to be more extreme than the standard term "to break."

5. *the hungry cease evermore*. The Masoretic Text is rather cryptic. This translation revocalizes the last Hebrew word of the line *ʿad* ("until," or, by a

long conjectural stretch, "prey") as *ʿod*, an adverb indicating persistence through time. The Masoretes attached the word to the beginning of the next clause, where, however, its semantic function is equally unclear.

8. *to seat among princes*. The language here might anticipate the monarchic flourish at the end of the poem. "Throne" *(kisʾei)* in the next line can mean either throne or chair. Robert Polzin has made an elaborate argument for seeing not only Hannah's prayer but all the early chapters of 1 Samuel as a grand foreshadowing of the fate of the monarchy with the old and failing Eli, who will die falling off his chair or throne, as a stand-in for the Davidic kings.

9. *the wicked in darkness turn dumb*. The verb obviously refers to death—the underworld in other psalms is sometimes called *dumah*, the realm of silence or speechlessness, a noun cognate with the verb *yidamu* used here. Those who talked high and mighty, their mouths spewing arrogance (verse 3), are now forever silenced.

10. *The* LORD *shatters His adversaries*. The Masoretic Text reads, "LORD, Your adversaries are shattered." But the Samuel fragment from Qumran has God as the subject of a verb in the singular (a difference of only one letter) with the adversaries as the object. This makes better syntactic sense, especially since it is God who is thundering against the enemies in the second half of the line. The verb "shatter" is the same one used for the warriors' bow in verse 4.

14. *the cauldron or the pot or the vat or the kettle*. This catalogue of implements is quite untypical of biblical narrative (and in fact the precise identification of the sundry cooking receptacles is unsure). The unusual specification serves a satiric purpose: Eli's sons are represented in a kind of frenzy of gluttony poking their three-pronged forks into every imaginable sort of pot and pan. This sense is then heightened in the aggressiveness of the dialogue that follows, in which Eli's sons insist on snatching the meat uncooked from the worshippers, not allowing them, as was customary, first to burn away the fat.

18. *ephod*. A short garment, chiefly of linen, worn by priests. The Hebrew term has a second meaning, a device for divination manipulated by the

officiating priests, and that is the evident sense of ephod when it recurs in verse 28.

19. *And a little cloak would his mother make him*. This is a poignant instance of the expressive reticence of biblical narrative. We have been told nothing about Hannah's feelings as a mother after her separation from the child for whom she so fervently prayed. This minimal notation of Hannah's annual gesture of making a little cloak for the son she has "lent" to the LORD beautifully intimates the love she preserves for him. The garment, fashioned as a gift of maternal love, stands in contrast to the ephod, the acolyte's official garb for his cultic office. Moreover, the robe (*meʿil*) will continue to figure importantly in Samuel's life, and even in his afterlife, as we shall have occasion to see.

year after year. The phrase takes us back to the iterative tense of the beginning of the story.

22. *and that they lay with the women*. This whole clause is missing in the Qumran scroll and in one version of the Septuagint; in fact, sexual exploitation was not mentioned in the initial narrative report of the sons' misdeeds. There is, however, a consonance between their appetitive impulse in snatching the meat and grabbing the women, perhaps reinforced by the satiric, and phallic, image of thrusting forks into bubbling pots.

flocked. The Hebrew verb might also mean "ministered."

27. *a man of God came to Eli*. This enunciation of a curse on the house of Eli, at the very beginning of the Samuel story, is introduced at precisely the corresponding place in the narrative as the denunciation and admonition of the divine messenger at the beginning of Judges (chapter 2). An analogous curse will be pronounced by Nathan the prophet on the house of David (2 Samuel 12) and will be enacted in the subsequent narrative.

slaves to Pharaoh's house. The Masoretic Text lacks "slaves to" but it is attested in the Qumran Samuel scroll, in the Septuagint, and in the Targum of Yonatan ben Uziel.

29. *My sacrifice and My offering which I have commanded*. The Masoretic Text reads "which I commanded [as a?] habitation [*maʿon*]." Since that makes no sense, and all attempts to rescue a meaning seem forced, I have assumed that *maʿon* is an excrescence, perhaps inadvertently transposed by a scribe

from verse 32, where it also occurs rather enigmatically. Several points in the curse pronounced by the man of God look textually defective.

30. *will walk before Me*. The biblical idiom suggests dedicated service of a deity.

honor . . . dishonored. The Hebrew terms mean, etymologically, "heavy" and "light" (that is, "weighty" and "worthless"). These antonyms will recur at strategic moments in the Ark Narrative and in the story of David.

32. *look with a jaundiced eye*. The received text at this point is very doubtful, yielding, literally, a nonsense chain: "you will look narrow habitation." This translation adopts an emendation that has considerable scholarly currency: *ʿayin* instead of *maʿon* (a difference of one consonant in the Hebrew). That yields the idiom *tsar-ʿayin,* "jealously" or "with a jaundiced eye." But the Qumran text and one version of the Septuagint lack the entire clause.

33. *no man of you will I cut off*. The usual understanding of these words is that God will leave them alive to witness in pain the destruction of the family. This interpretation seems a bit strained because in the next verse God promises to destroy both of Eli's sons on a single day. Perhaps the clause originally read, "every man of you will I cut off," though this phrasing is not reflected in any of the ancient versions.

fall by the sword of men. Again, both the Qumran fragment and Version B of the Septuagint confirm this reading, which seems much likelier than the Masoretic Text's cryptic "shall die [as?] men."

35. *a stalwart priest . . . a stalwart house*. The Hebrew *neʾeman* in the first instance means "faithful" or "trustworthy," in the second instance, "well-founded," "enduring." The present translation draws on an older sense of "stalwart," which can be applied to structures and inanimate objects as well as to people. The probable referent of the prophecy is the house of Zadok, which was to become the priestly line in the Davidic monarchy.

before My anointed. Like Hannah's psalm, this whole passage of prophecy appears to presuppose a historical context in which the monarchy was an established fact.

CHAPTER 3

[1]And the lad Samuel was ministering to the LORD in
Eli's presence, and the word of the LORD was rare in
those days, vision was not spread about. [2]And it
happened on that day that Eli was lying in his place,
his eyes had begun to grow bleary, he could not see.
[3]The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel
was lying in the temple of the LORD, in which was
the Ark of God. [4]And the LORD called to Samuel,
and he said, "Here I am." [5]And he ran to Eli and he
said, "Here I am, for you called me," and he said, "I
did not call. Go back, lie down." And he went and lay
down. [6]And the LORD called once again, "Samuel!"
And Samuel rose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am,
for you called me." And he said, "I did not call, my
son. Go back, lie down." [7]And Samuel did not yet
know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not
yet been revealed to him. [8]And the LORD called still
again to Samuel, a third time, and he rose and went to
Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." And Eli
understood that the LORD was calling the lad. [9]And

Eli said to Samuel, “Go lie down, and should someone call to you, say, ‘Speak, LORD, for Your servant is listening.’” And Samuel went and lay down in his place. [10]And the LORD came and stood poised and called as on each time before, “Samuel, Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for Your servant is listening.” [11]And the LORD said to Samuel, “I am about to do such a thing in Israel that whoever hears of it, both his ears will ring. [12]On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. [13]And I have told him that I was passing judgment on his house for all time because of the sin of which he knew, for his sons have been scorning God and he did not restrain them. [14]Therefore I have sworn against the house of Eli, that the sin of the house of Eli will not be atoned by sacrifice and offering for all time.” [15]And Samuel lay until morning, and he opened the doors of the house of the LORD, and Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. [16]And Eli called to Samuel and said, “Samuel, my son,” and he said, “Here I am.” [17]And he said, “What is the thing He spoke to you? Pray, do not conceal it from me. Thus and more may God do to you if you conceal from me anything of all the things He spoke to you.” [18]And Samuel told him all the things and he did not

conceal from him, and he said, “He is the LORD. What is good in His eyes let Him do.”

19 And Samuel grew up and the LORD was with him, and He let not fall to the ground any of his words. 20 And all Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, knew that Samuel was stalwart as a prophet to the LORD. 21 And the LORD continued to appear in Shiloh, for the LORD was revealed to Samuel in Shiloh through the word of the LORD, 4:1a and Samuel’s word was upon all Israel.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the word of the LORD was rare . . . vision was not spread about*. The “word of the LORD” is often a technical term referring to oracular message. Inquiring of the oracle would have been a priestly function, and so there is an intimation here of some sort of breakdown in the professional performance of the house of Eli. But the same phrase also is used to announce prophecy, and “vision” is a prophetic term: the whole episode concerns the transition from priestly to prophetic authority.

2. *he could not see*. Eli’s blindness reflects not only his decrepitude but his incapacity for vision in the sense of the previous verse. He is immersed in permanent darkness while the lad Samuel has God’s lamp burning by his bedside.

3. *The lamp of God had not yet gone out*. Since the sanctuary lamp would have burned through most of the night, this may be an indication, as Kyle McCarter Jr. has proposed, that the scene occurs close to dawn. But the symbolic overtones of the image should not be neglected: though vision has become rare, God's lamp has not yet gone out, and the young ministrant will be the one to make it burn bright again (see verses 19–21, plus **4**:1a). The actual lamp would have been a concave earthenware vessel filled with oil.

5. *he ran to Eli and he said, "Here I am."* These words make clear that the previous "Here I am" is not a direct response to God but rather the boy's calling-out from the inner chamber of the sanctuary to Eli in the outer room, thinking that it is Eli who called him. Samuel's thrice-repeated error in this regard reflects not only his youthful inexperience but, as the sixteenth-century Hebrew exegete Yosef Karo has proposed, the general fact that "the word of the LORD was rare," revelation an unfamiliar phenomenon.

6. "*Samuel!*" In an intensifying pattern, as the folktale structure of three repetitions with a final reversal unfolds, God's address is now represented more immediately in dialogue instead of indirectly as in verse 4. The third time, God will say, "Samuel, Samuel!"

I did not call, my son. Until this point, we have been told nothing about Eli's relationship with Samuel. The introduction of this single term of affection, "my son," reveals the fondness of the blind and doomed Eli for his young assistant. His own biological sons have of course utterly betrayed his trust.

9. *Speak, LORD, for Your servant is listening*. This is virtually a formula of deferential response to superior authority. When Samuel repeats these words in verse 10, he omits "Lord," perhaps, as Shimon Bar-Efrat has suggested, in diffidence about addressing God.

12. *all that I have spoken concerning his house*. This clause, and the one beginning "I have told him" in the next verse, refer back to the prophecy of doom pronounced by the man of God in chapter 2.

13. *his sons have been scorning God*. The Masoretic Text reads, "his sons have been scorning for themselves [*lahem*]," but the last Hebrew word has long been recognized as a *tiqun sofrim*, a scribal euphemism for *ʾelohim*, God—

that is, the scribes were loath to write out so sacrilegious a phrase as scorning, or cursing, God. The verb here is commonly used in the sense of "to damn" or "to express contempt." In this case, the sons' contempt would have been expressed by their snatching of choice portions from the sacrificial meat.

he did not restrain them. The Hebrew *kihah* occurs only here as a transitive verb in the *piʿel* conjugation, although it is fairly common as an intransitive verb in the *qal* conjugation, meaning "to grow weak," "to become dark," or, as with the eyes of Eli in verse 2, "bleary." The transitive sense of the verb would then be something like "to incapacitate," to prevent someone from doing something. Its unusual usage in this sentence is obviously meant to align Eli's failing in parental authority with the failing of his sight.

11–13. It is noteworthy that God's first message to Samuel is a prophecy of doom. Its content not only indicates the overthrow of the priestly authority of the house of Eli and the implicit move to a different sort of authority to be embodied by the prophet Samuel, but also adumbrates the rather dour and dire role Samuel will play as leader, in relation to both Israel and to Saul.

15. *And Samuel lay until morning*. The verb does not necessarily imply that he fell asleep again after this riveting revelation, and if in fact the whole scene takes place close to dawn, there would be little time before the first light roused him.

he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. He resumes his usual business as faithful temple ministrant, almost as though he wanted to shrug off the divine revelation that implied a more portentous role for him than that of priestly acolyte.

Samuel was afraid to tell the vision. The divine message is called a vision though it was conveyed through words rather than images. The term used here, *marʾeh*, is different from *ḥazon*, the word that occurs in verse 1, though both refer to sight, the faculty Eli lacks.

17. *Thus and more may God do to you*. This is a set idiom for abjuration: may terrible things befall you if you fail to perform what I require of you.

18. *What is good in His eyes let Him do*. Old Eli's response is pious resignation to the prophecy of doom. He of course is aware of his sons' misdeeds and of his own failure to intervene successfully.

19. *He let not fall to the ground any of his words*. The antecedent of "his" is ambiguous, but since the point of the narrative report is to confirm Samuel's prophetic authority, the more likely reading is that God did not allow any of Samuel's words to go awry but fulfilled all of His prophet's predictions.

20. *from Dan to Beersheba*. That is, from the far north, near Phoenician territory, to the Negeb in the south.

stalwart. Or, "faithful." That is, Samuel's authority as prophet was recognized by all Israel.

21. *And the* LORD *continued to appear . . . the* LORD *was revealed*. This emphatic indication is an obvious counterpoint to the first verse of the chapter: instead of being withheld, divine communication is now regular and repeated through the person of Samuel.

4:1a. Although the conventional chapter division attaches this brief clause to the next episode, it is clear that it is actually a final summary of Samuel's new authority at the end of his dedication story. The next words of the text (chapter 4:1b) in fact refer to a military initiative undertaken by the Israelites without Samuel's authorization.

CHAPTER 4

[1b]And Israel sallied forth in battle against the Philistines, and they encamped by Eben-Ezer, while the Philistines were encamped at Aphek. [2]And the Philistines drew up their lines against Israel, and the battle forces were deployed, and Israel was routed by the Philistines, and they struck down in the lines in the field about four thousand men. [3]And the troops came into the camp, and the elders of Israel said, “Why has the LORD routed us today before the Philistines? Let us take to us from Shiloh the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD, that it may come into our midst and rescue us from the hands of our enemies.” [4]And the troops sent to Shiloh and they bore from there the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD of Armies enthroned on the cherubim, and there the two sons of Eli were with the Ark of the Covenant of God—Hophni and Phineas. [5]And when the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel let out a great shout, and the earth resounded. [6]And the Philistines heard the sound of the shouting and said, “What is the sound of

this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews?" And they knew that the Ark of the LORD had come into the camp. [7]And the Philistines were afraid, for they thought, "God has come into the camp." And they said, "Woe to us! For it was never so in times gone by. [8]Woe to us! Who will save us from the hands of these mighty gods? They are the very gods who struck Egypt with every blow in the wilderness. [9]Muster strength and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they were slaves to you. Be men and do battle!" [10]And the Philistines did battle and Israel was routed, and every man fled to his tent and the blow was very great, thirty thousand foot soldiers of Israel fell. [11]And the Ark of the LORD was taken, and the two sons of Eli died—Hophni and Phineas. [12]And a man of Benjamin ran from the lines and came to Shiloh that day, his garments torn and earth on his head. [13]He came, and, look, Eli was seated in a chair by the road on the lookout, for his heart was trembling over the Ark of God, and the man had come to tell in the town and the whole town cried out, [14]and Eli heard the sound of the outcry and said, "What is this sound of uproar?" The man had hurried, and he came and told Eli. [15]And Eli was ninety-eight years old, his eyes were rigid and he could not see. [16]And the man said to Eli, "I am the one who has come from the lines, I from

the lines fled today." And he said, "What happened, my son?" [17]And the bearer of tidings answered and said, "Israel fled before the Philistines, and what's more, there was a great rout among the troops, and what's more, your two sons died—Hophni and Phineas—and the Ark of God was taken." [18]And the moment he mentioned the Ark of God, Eli fell backward from his chair through the gate and his neckbone was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy. And he had judged Israel forty years. [19]And his daughter-in-law, Phineas's wife, was big with child, and when she heard the report about the taking of the Ark, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she crouched down and gave birth, for her birth pangs overwhelmed her. [20]And as she was on the point of death, her attendant women spoke up, "Fear not, for you have born a son." And she did not answer or pay heed. [21]And she called the boy Ichabod, which is to say, "Glory is exiled from Israel"—for the taking of the Ark and for her father-in-law and her husband. [20]And she said, "Glory is exiled from Israel, for the Ark of God is taken."

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1b. *the Philistines*. The Philistines were part of the general incursion of the so-called Sea Peoples from the Aegean—the prophet Amos names Crete as their land of origin—into the eastern Mediterranean region perhaps less than a century before the early-eleventh-century setting of our story. (There is some evidence that they first migrated to Anatolia, then moved southward.) They established a powerful presence in Canaan on the coastal plain, concentrated in the region a little south of present-day Tel Aviv. They were intrepid warriors (note the martial exhortation of verse 9) and also exercised a mastery of military science and military technology. In the coastal plain, they were able to deploy iron chariots (which seem to have been lacking among the Israelites) as well as infantry. Perhaps their failure to extend their mini-kingdom of five allied cities more than a dozen or so miles eastward from the coast was related to a loss of the strategic advantage of chariots as they went up into the high country.

2. *the Philistines drew up their lines . . . and the battle forces were deployed*. Interestingly, the language of strategic deployment is attached only to the Philistines. "Battle forces" is, literally, "battle." Although the precise indications of these terms are unclear, their use elsewhere in the Bible makes it evident that they had a technical military application.

the lines. The Hebrew, *maʿarakhah,* is a singular, with the sense of "battle formation" or "front line."

3. *Let us take to us*. The addition of this seemingly superfluous personal pronoun suggests how the elders arrogate to themselves a sacred object for their own purposes, conceiving the Ark magically or fetishistically as a vehicle of power that they can manipulate for military ends.

the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD. This would have been a large case made of acacia wood, with carved cherubim on its top, containing the stone tablets of the Law given at Sinai. As the material residue of the defining encounter between God and Israel, these tablets were viewed as the most sacrosanct possession of the nation. Hence the horror at the end of this episode over the news that the Ark has been captured by the Philistines.

4. *troops*. The Hebrew has a collective noun, ʻ*am*, "people," which in military contexts refers to the ordinary soldiers.

the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD *of Armies enthroned on the cherubim*. This extravagantly full title is a kind of epic flourish reflecting the power that the elders of Israel attribute to the Ark. "Armies" ("hosts" in older translations) underscores the LORD's martial nature. The cherubim are fierce winged beasts imagined as God's celestial steeds, and so the carved cherubim on the Ark are conceived as the earthly "throne" of the invisible deity.

Hophni and Phineas. In an odd stylistic tie, each time the two sons are mentioned in this chapter, their proper names are stuck on at the very end of the sentence, as though their precise identity were being isolated for opprobrium.

6. *the camp of the Hebrews*. "Hebrews" is generally the designation of the Israelites when they are named by other peoples.

7. *God has come into the camp*. Here *ʾelohim* is the subject of a verb in the singular, but in verse 8, in proper polytheistic fashion, the Philistines use the same term but construe it grammatically as a plural, "gods."

8. *every blow*. The Hebrew *makah* also means "plague," an obviously appropriate sense here, but it is important that the writer uses the same word in verse 10, though with a military meaning, for a theological irony is intended in the pun: they feared the might of the LORD Who struck such terrible blows against Egypt, and then they themselves strike a blow against Israel, which actually does not have God in its midst, only His sacred paraphernalia. Here as elsewhere in the Bible, the national fiction is maintained that all the peoples of Canaan were intimately familiar with the Exodus story and deeply impressed by it.

9. *Muster strength and be men*. There may be a pointed antithesis in their speech between "gods" and "men." In any case, they summon stirring rhetoric to rouse themselves from their fear of a supernatural adversary and to go out to do battle.

12. *his garments torn and earth on his head*. This disheveled appearance is not because of the fighting but reflects the customary signs of mourning.

13. *Eli was seated in a chair by the road*. Similarly, in chapter 1, he was seated in a chair in the temple—in both instances a token of his infirmity, his

passivity or incapacity as leader. The Hebrew phrase behind "by the road" is textually problematic, as is the related phrase attached to the word "gate" in verse 18. Scholarly opinion differs as to whether Eli is sitting by the road, by the gate, or, like David in 2 Samuel 18, above the gate. The last of these possibilities would best explain his breaking his neck when he falls, but it is by no means the inevitable meaning of the Hebrew, and the Hebrew preposition in verse 18 actually indicates *through* the gate.

his heart was trembling over the Ark of God. Apprehension over the fate of his scurrilous sons is not mentioned.

14. *What is this sound of uproar?* Eli's question pointedly, and ironically, parallels the question asked by the Philistines in verse 6 about the jubilant uproar from the Israelite camp. At the very end of the David story (1 Kings 1), the usurper Adonijah will ask virtually the same question about an uproar that spells disaster for him and his followers.

15. *his eyes were rigid*. The idiom for Eli's blindness has a stark finality here that it does not have in 3:2. Presumably a good deal of time has elapsed since that moment of the young Samuel's dedication as prophet, and the process of blindness is now complete. It is because Eli can see nothing that he must ask with particular urgency about the reason for all the shouting.

16. *I am the one who has come from the lines, I from the lines fled today*. This odd repetition may reflect a stammer of nervousness or confusion, as Shimon Bar-Efrat has proposed.

17. The report of the battle moves from a general indication of the defeat, to the admission of a rout, to the death of Eli's two sons, and, finally, to what is assumed to be the worst catastrophe, the capture of the Ark. It should be noted that 1 and 2 Samuel are in part organized around a series of interechoing scenes in which a messenger brings ill tidings. The bearer of ill tidings to Adonijah at the very end of this long narrative also nervously repeats *wegam*, "what's more" as he recounts the catastrophe.

18. *And he had judged Israel forty years*. This notice, with its use of the formulaic forty years, is odd because Eli certainly has not been a judge, either in the military-charismatic or the juridical sense. This sentence could be an

attempt to establish a carryover from the Book of Judges, or it could be an inadvertent editorial repetition of the Judges formula.

19. *big with child*. The Hebrew says literally "was pregnant to give birth."
she crouched down. In the ancient Near East, women generally gave birth in a kneeling position, leaning on a special birthing stone—examples have been uncovered by archaeologists—called in Hebrew a *mashber*.

21. *Ichabod . . . Glory is exiled*. The Hebrew name is conventionally construed to mean "Inglorious," though Kyle McCarter Jr. has argued that the more probable meaning is "Where is glory?" or "Alas for glory!" In any case, it is a most peculiar name—the dying mother, overcome by the loss of the Ark (which affects her much more than her husband's demise), inscribing the national catastrophe in her son's name. Where one must agree unhesitatingly with McCarter is that the verb in this verse and the next should be rendered as "exiled" and not, as it is customarily translated, as "departed." Exile is what it clearly denotes, and it is surely significant that this whole large sequence of stories that will provide an account of the founding of Israel's dynasty and the crystallization of its national power begins with a refrain of glory exiled from Israel. It is also noteworthy that the term for "glory," *kavod,* is transparently cognate with *kaved,* "heavy," the adjective used to explain Eli's lethal tumble from his chair—the leader who might be supposed to represent Israel's glory exhibits only deadly heaviness.

CHAPTER 5

[1]And the Philistines had taken the Ark of God and brought it from Eben-Ezer to Ashdod. [2]And the Philistines took the Ark of God and brought it to the house of Dagon and set it up alongside Dagon. [3]And the Ashdodites arose on the next day and, look, Dagon was fallen forward to the ground before the Ark of the LORD. And they took Dagon and set him back in his place. [4]And they arose the next morning and, look, Dagon was fallen forward to the ground before the Ark of the LORD, and Dagon's head and both his hands were chopped off upon the threshold—his trunk alone remained on him. [5]Therefore the priests of Dagon, and all who enter the house of Dagon, do not tread on the threshold of the house of Dagon to this day. [6]And the hand of the LORD was heavy upon the Ashdodites and He devastated them, and He struck them with tumors, Ashdod and all its territories. [7]And the people of Ashdod saw that it was so, and they said, "Let not the Ark of the God of Israel stay among us, for His hand is hard upon us and upon Dagon our god." [8]And

they sent and gathered to them all the Philistine overlords and they said, “What shall we do with the Ark of the God of Israel?” And they said, “To Gath let the Ark of the God of Israel be brought round.” And they brought round the Ark of the God of Israel. [9]And it happened after they had brought it round that the hand of the LORD was against the town—a great panic. And He struck the people of the town, young and old, and they had tumors in their secret parts. [10]And they sent the Ark of God on to Ekron, and it happened when the Ark of God came to Ekron that the Ekronites cried out, saying, “They have brought round to me the Ark of the God of Israel to bring death to me and my people.” [11]And they sent and gathered all the Philistine overlords and they said, “Send the Ark of the God of Israel back to its place, and let it not bring death to me and my people.” For there was death panic throughout the city, the hand of God was very heavy there. [12]And the people who did not die were struck with tumors, and the town’s outcry rose to the heavens.

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

The Ark Narrative at this point leaves behind the house of Eli, Samuel, and the paramount question of Israel's leadership in order to tell a bizarre satiric story of a battle between cult objects—the potent Ark of the Covenant, which is conceived as the conduit for the cosmic power of the God of Israel, and the idol of Dagon, vainly believed to be a real deity by the Philistines. The dominant tone of the story is a kind of monotheistic triumphalism; accordingly, themes from the story of the plagues of Egypt are replayed, though in a virtually scatological key.

1. *from Eben-Ezer to Ashdod*. The Ark is carried down from Eben-Ezer, in the western part of the territory of Ephraim (roughly ten miles from the coast and just a little to the north of present-day Tel Aviv) to Ashdod, on the Mediterranean, in the heart of Philistine territory.

2. *Dagon*. This god is now generally thought to be a vegetation or fertility god, its name cognate with the Hebrew *dagan*, "grain" (and not, as was once widely imagined, with the Hebrew *dag*, "fish").

set it up alongside Dagon. Either to amplify the power of their own deity or to express the subservience of the God of Israel to Dagon.

3. *and, look, Dagon was fallen forward to the ground*. This clause and the parallel one in the next verse reflect the visual perspective of the Ashdodites when they come into the temple early in the morning and make their shocking discovery. Tyndale's translation gets into the spirit of the scene, although with a certain creative license, by rendering this as "lay grovelling upon the ground."

4. *his trunk alone remained on him*. The Masoretic Text has, cryptically, "Dagon alone remained on him," but several of the ancient translations appear to have used a version which read *geivo,* "his trunk," instead of *Dagon*. Dagon's first downfall might be attributed to a natural, accidental cause—the idol's somehow slipping from its pedestal. This second incident, in which the hands and head of the idol have been chopped off, offers to the Philistines clear proof of divine intervention. Hacking the hands and feet off war prisoners was a well-known barbaric practice in the ancient Near East, and similar acts of mutilation are attested in the Book of Judges.

5. *Therefore*. This is the introductory formula for etiological explanations. An observed Philistine practice of skipping over the sanctuary threshold, as a special measure for entering sacred space, is reinterpreted as a reminiscence of the victory of Israel's God over Dagon.

6. *the hand of the LORD was heavy upon the Ashdodites*. The word *kaved*, previously associated with Eli's corpulence and linked by root with *kavod*, "glory," recurs here in a clause that introduces the first of several echoes of the plagues against Egypt.

tumors. Many translations render this as "hemorrhoids," and there is a little confusion in the Masoretic Text: the consonantal written version (*ketiv*) has "tumors," but the tradition for reciting the text (*qeri*) indicates "hemorrhoids." This confusion is compounded because the Septuagint, seconded by Josephus, includes a plague of mice not in evidence in the Masoretic version, and the golden mice of the next chapter look very much like a response to just such a plague. The fact, moreover, that hemorrhoids are a humiliating but not lethal disorder and are not spread by epidemic, whereas the Philistines protest that they are dying, gives support to an interpretation at least as old as Rashi: the plague in question is bubonic plague, carried by rats (metamorphosed in this story into mice, and associated with the epidemic but perhaps not clearly understood as the bearers of the disease); the tumors are the *buboes* of bubonic plague, which might especially afflict the lower body, including the rectal area.

8. *overlords*. The Hebrew term *seranim* is a Philistine loanword and is applied only to Philistines as a touch of local color (like calling Spanish aristocrats "grandees"). Some scholars have linked the word with the Greek *tyrranos*. Since there is only one *seren* for each Philistine city, they are clearly more than just "lords."

Gath. The Ark is carried around to three of the five Philistine cities. The other two are Gaza and Ashkelon.

9. *the hand of the LORD was against the town—a great panic*. This apposition reflects the Hebrew syntax, which sounds a little peculiar, but there is not convincing evidence of a defective text here.

they had tumors in their secret parts. The verb *yisatru* is peculiar. This translation follows Rashi, Kimchi, and the King James Version in linking it

with *seter*, “secret place.”

12. *the town’s outcry rose to the heavens*. This clause balances on the edge of an ambiguity. “The heavens” (*hashamayim*) can be simply the sky or the abode of God. Is God, Who has been present in the story through His acts, His heavy hand—but not, as it were, in person—listening to the anguished cries of the Philistines, or is this merely an image of the shrieks of the afflicted Philistines echoing under the silent vault of the heavens?

CHAPTER 6

[1]And the Ark of the LORD was in Philistine country
seven months. [2]And the Philistines called to the priests
and the soothsayers, saying, “What shall we do with
the Ark of the LORD? Tell us, how shall we send it
back to its place.” [3]And they said, “If you are about to
send back the Ark of the God of Israel, do not send it
back empty-handed, for you must give back to Him a
guilt offering. Then you will be healed and there will
be atonement for you. Why should His hand not relent
from you?” [4]And they said, “What guilt offering should
we give back to Him?” And they said, “The number of
the Philistine overlords is five. Five golden tumors and
five golden mice. For a single plague is upon all of you
and upon your overlords. [5]And you shall make images
of your tumors and images of your mice that are
ravaging the land, and you shall give glory to the God
of Israel—perhaps He will lighten His hand from upon
you and from upon your god and your land. [6]And why
should you harden your hearts as Egypt and Pharaoh
hardened their hearts? After He made sport of them,

did they not let the Hebrews go, and off they went?
[7]And so, fetch and make one new cart, and two milch
cows that no yoke has touched, and harness the cows
to the cart, but bring their calves back inside. [8]And you
shall fetch the Ark of the LORD and set it on the cart,
and the golden objects that you give back to Him as a
guilt offering you shall place in a chest at its side, and
you shall send it away and off it will go. [9]And you will
see—if on the road to its own territory, to Beth-
Shemesh, it will go up, He it was Who did this great
evil to us, and if not, we shall know that it was not His
hand that afflicted us but chance that came upon us."
[10]And so the men did: they took two milch cows and
harnessed them to the cart, but their calves they shut
up inside. [11]And they placed the Ark of the LORD on
the cart and the chest and the golden mice and the
images of their tumors. [12]And the cows went straight
on the way, on the way to Beth-Shemesh, on a single
road they went, lowing as they went, and they veered
neither right nor left, with the Philistine overlords
walking after them to the border of Beth-Shemesh.
[13]And the men of Beth-Shemesh were harvesting the
wheat harvest in the valley, and they raised their eyes
and saw the Ark, and they rejoiced at the sight. [14]And
the cart had come to the field of Joshua the Beth-
Shemeshite and it came to rest there, and a great stone

was there, and they split the wood of the cart, and the cows they offered up as a burnt offering to the LORD.
15 And the Levites had brought down the Ark of the LORD and the chest that was with it, in which were the golden objects, and they placed them on the great stone, and the men of Beth-Shemesh offered up burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices on that day to the LORD. 16 The five Philistine overlords saw, and they returned to Ekron on that day. 17 And these are the golden tumors that the Philistines gave back as guilt offering to the LORD: for Ashdod, one; for Gaza, one; for Ashkelon, one; for Gath, one; for Ekron, one.
18 And the golden mice were the number of all the Philistine towns, from the fortified cities to the unwalled villages. And the great stone on which they set the Ark of the LORD is to this day in the field of Joshua the Beth-Shemeshite. 19 And He struck down men of Beth-Shemesh, for they had looked into the Ark of the LORD, and he struck down from the people seventy men [fifty thousand men], and the people mourned, for the LORD had struck down the people with a great blow. 20 And the people of Beth-Shemesh said, “Who can stand before this holy LORD God, and to whom will He go up away from us?”
21 And they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriath-Jearim, saying, “The Philistines have brought

back the Ark of the LORD. Come down and carry it up to you." 7:1And the men of Kiriath-Jearim came and carried up the Ark of the LORD and brought it to the house of Abinadab on the hill, and Eleazar his son they consecrated to watch over the Ark of the LORD.

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

This chapter—the episode actually ends in the first verse of chapter 7—which concludes the Ark Narrative, also brings to a climax the traits that set it off from the larger narrative of Samuel, Saul, and David in which it is placed. Instead of the sharply etched individual characters of the surrounding narrative, we have only collective speakers and agents. Instead of the political perspective with its human system of causation, the perspective is theological and the culminating events of the story are frankly miraculous. God, Who does not speak in this narrative, manifests His power over Philistines and Israelites alike through supernatural acts in the material realm, as the strange tale of the cart and the golden images vividly demonstrates.

3. *send it back*. The Hebrew *meshalḥim* is the same verb repeatedly used for Pharaoh's sending Israel out of Egypt and thus sustains the network of allusions to the Exodus story. In Exodus, the Israelites, too, were told that they would not leave Egypt "empty-handed" but would take with them golden ornaments despoiled from the Egyptians.

there will be atonement for you. The Masoretic Text has "it will become known to you" (*wenodʿa lakhem*), but the reading of both the Qumran Samuel scroll and the Septuagint, *wenikaper lakhem*, "and it will be atoned for you," makes far better sense.

5. *you shall give glory to the God of Israel—perhaps He will lighten His hand*. Once again, the writer harks back to the play of antonyms, *kavod/kaved* (glory/heavy) and *qal* (light, and in other contexts, worthless). Glory has been

exiled from Israel with the capture of the Ark: now, with the restitution of the Ark together with an indemnity payment of golden images, glory will be restored. This process helps explain the insistence on the term "give back" associated with the guilt offering.

6. *harden your hearts*. This phrase is not only an explicit link with the Exodus story, but also continues the play on glory/heaviness because the literal Hebrew idiom is "make your heart heavy" (the verb *kabed*).

let the Hebrews go. The Hebrew says "let them go," but the lack of antecedent for the pronoun would be confusing in English.

7. *one new cart*. It is to be an undefiled instrument made specifically for this ritual purpose.

that no yoke has touched. The cows, too, are uncompromised by use in ordinary labor, though the more important point is that they are entirely devoid of experience as draft animals, so that their ability to pull the cart straight to Beth-Shemesh would have to be a manifestation of God's intervention, or of the intrinsic power of the Ark.

their calves back inside. This, of course, is the crux of the test: the milking cows will have to go against nature in plodding forward into Israelite territory with their calves behind them, shut up in the manger and waiting to be fed.

8. *chest*. The Hebrew *ʾargaz* appears only here. Postbiblical Hebrew consistently understood it as "chest," though some scholars, on the basis of Semitic cognates, have argued for the meaning of "pouch." It may be more plausible that precious objects would be placed in orderly fashion in a chest rather than piled up in a pouch.

11. *the Ark of the LORD . . . and the chest and the golden mice and the images of their tumors*. This whole scene has a certain grotesquely comic and incongruous effect: Israel's most sacred cult object drawn in a cart by two cows with swollen udders, and alongside the Ark golden images of vermin and tumors.

12. *straight on the way, on the way to Beth-Shemesh, on a single road they went . . . and they veered neither right nor left*. Against the spareness and swift efficiency of normal Hebrew narrative style, the writer here lavishes synonyms

and repetitions in order to highlight the perfect geometry of the miracle: against all conceivable distractions of biology or sheer animal unknowingness, the cows pursue an arrow-straight southeast trajectory from Ekron to Beth-Shemesh.

lowing as they went. This small but vivid descriptive detail is an even more striking exception to the stringent economy that governs biblical narrative. The last thing one would expect in a biblical story, where there is scant report of the gestures of the human actors, is a specification of sounds made by draft animals. The point, however, is that the milch cows—more driven by the Ark than hauling it—are going strenuously against nature: their udders full of milk for the calves they have been forced to leave behind, they mark with maternal lowing their distress over the journey they cannot resist. There is a peculiar resonance between this episode and Hannah's story in chapter 1. There, too, a nursing mother does not want to be separated from her young, and, as we noted, special emphasis is placed on the physical acts of nursing and weaning. (The connection between the two episodes is underscored in the Hebrew, which literally calls the cows' young their "sons," not their calves.) In both stories, sacrifice is offered after mother and young are separated. Here, of course, the mothers become the objects of the sacrifice; in Hannah's story, it is a bull, and, in symbolic rather than literal fashion, the son as well. Though all these correspondences seem too pointed to be coincidental, it is unclear whether they represent the literary artifact of the redactor, or an allusion by the author of the Samuel story to the Ark Narrative.

13. *the men of Beth-Shemesh were harvesting*. The Hebrew uses an ellipsis: "Beth-Shemesh were harvesting."

14. *the cows they offered up*. One connection between the Ark Narrative, with its concern for sanctity, and the Samuel–Saul–David cycle, with its preoccupation with politics, is a kind of brooding sense of the cruel price exacted for dedication to the higher cause. The milch cows are burned on the improvised altar; Hannah and her son, Samuel, must be separated in *his* dedication to the sanctuary; and later both Saul and David will pay terrible costs in their personal lives for their adhesion to power.

17. *And these are the golden tumors*. The introductory formula suggests a kind of ritual or epic catalogue, so that we know there is in fact one golden image corresponding to each of the five Philistine towns, just as the soothsayers had stipulated.

18. *the golden mice were the number of all the Philistine towns*. This appears to contradict the explicit directions in verse 4, that there should be exactly five golden mice. Kimchi resolves the discrepancy by proposing that, in the event, as added insurance for all the villages (since the mice had overrun the fields), the Philistines went beyond their instructions and fashioned multiple images of the mice.

And the great stone. The Masoretic Text reads *ʾavel* (brook or meadow) instead of *ʾeven* (stone), but both the Septuagint and the Qumran scroll have the latter reading. The Masoretic Text also has "and to" (*weʿad*) preceding this word, but that is probably an inadvertent scribal duplication of the preposition that occurs twice before in the verse.

19. *fifty thousand men*. This figure makes no sense because Beth-Shemesh was a small agricultural village. It appears in all the ancient versions, but Josephus seems to have possessed a text in which only the much more plausible number seventy appeared. The fact that the Hebrew has no indication of "and" between "seventy" and "fifty thousand" is further evidence that the latter number is an intrusion in the text.

a great blow. As in 4:8, the Hebrew for "blow" can also mean "plague." If there is a historical kernel to this whole story, an epidemic ravaging the Philistines could have easily spread to the bordering Israelites, perhaps even through the agency of the cart and the Ark.

20. *Who can stand before this holy LORD God*. Throughout the Ark Narrative, including what may be its epilogue in 2 Samuel 7, runs an archaic sense of God's sacred objects as material precipitates of an awesome and dangerous power. This notion led Leonhard Rost, one of the earliest scholars to argue for an entirely distinct Ark Narrative, to assume that the author must have been a priest, although that is hardly an inevitable inference, as these attitudes were widely held in ancient Near Eastern cultures. The phrase "stand before" means idiomatically "to serve."

will He go up. The Hebrew could equally be construed as "will it go up," referring to the Ark. From the point of view of the terrified speakers, it may amount to the same thing.

21. *And they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriath-Jearim*. There seems to be no question of sending the Ark back to Shiloh, which has led to the scholarly inference that the Shiloh sanctuary was destroyed in the wake of the defeat at Aphek. The destruction of Shiloh is in fact attested in other sources.

CHAPTER 7

[2]And it happened from the day the Ark dwelled in
Kiriath-Jearim that the days grew many and became
twenty years, and the whole house of Israel was drawn
after the LORD. [3]And Samuel said to the whole house
of Israel, saying, “If with your whole heart you now
return to the LORD, put away the alien gods from
your midst and the Ashtaroth, and set your heart firm
for the LORD and serve Him alone, that He may
rescue you from the hand of the Philistines.” [4]And the
Israelites put away the Baalim and the Ashtaroth and
they served the LORD alone.

[5]And Samuel said, “Assemble all Israel at Mizpah that
I may intercede for you before the LORD. [6]And they
assembled at Mizpah and they drew water and spilled
it before the LORD and they fasted on that day and
there they said, “We have offended the LORD.” And
Samuel judged Israel at Mizpah. [7]And the Philistines
heard that the Israelites had assembled at Mizpah, and

the Philistine overlords came up against Israel, and the Israelites heard and were afraid of the Philistines.
[8]And the Israelites said to Samuel, “Do not hold still from crying out for us to the LORD our God, that He rescue us from the hand of the Philistines.” [9]And Samuel took one suckling lamb and offered it up whole as a burnt offering to the LORD, and Samuel cried out to the LORD on behalf of Israel, and the LORD answered him. [10]And just as Samuel was offering up the offering, the Philistines drew near to do battle with Israel, and the LORD thundered with a great sound on that day upon the Philistines and panicked them, and they were routed before Israel.
[11]And the men of Israel sallied forth from Mizpah and pursued the Philistines and struck them down as far as below Beth-Car. [12]And Samuel took a single stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen, and he called its name Eben-Ezer and he said, “As far as here has the LORD helped us.” [13]And the Philistines were brought low and they no longer came into Israelite country, and the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. [14]And the towns that the Philistines had taken from Israel were returned to Israel, from Ekron as far as Gath, and their territories Israel retrieved from the hand of the Philistines. And there was peace between Israel and the Amorite. [15]And

Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. [16]And he would go about from year to year and come round Bethel and Gilgal and Mizpah and would judge Israel in all these places. [17]And his point of return was Ramah, for there his home was, and there he judged Israel. And he built there an altar to the LORD.

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

This chapter, which offers a summary account of Israel's religious reformation and military ascendancy under Samuel's rule, serves as a bridge between the Ark Narrative and the great narrative of the founding of the monarchy that will occupy the rest of 1 and 2 Samuel and the first two chapters of 1 Kings.

2. *twenty years*. This is half the formulaic figure of forty years that recurs so frequently in the Book of Judges. The period of twenty years could refer to the time until David brings the Ark up to Jerusalem, though given the immediate narrative context, the more likely reference is the time until Samuel assembles the tribes at Mizpah. During this period, the presence of the Ark at Kiriath-Jearim inspires the people to cultic loyalty to God.

was drawn after. The Hebrew *yinahu* is anomalous. The usual meaning of this verbal root, "to weep," makes little sense here (though it was followed by the King James translators). The present translation adopts the proposal of Rashi, who may simply have been interpreting from context. The Hebrew could also be a scribal error for *yinharu*, which clearly means "to be drawn after."

3. *with your whole heart*. This phrase, and Samuel's language here in general, is notably Deuteronomistic, and the narrative line in this chapter follows the Deuteronomistic theological assumption that cultic faithfulness leads to

military success. Neither this language nor this assumption is much in evidence in the main body of the Samuel–Saul–David narrative.

Ashtaroth. The form is a feminine plural of Ashtoreth (Astarte), the Canaanite fertility goddess. The plural indicates either a plurality of goddesses or—more likely—the multiple icons of Astarte.

4. *Baalim*. This is the masculine plural of Baal, the principal Canaanite male deity.

5. *Mizpah*. Mizpah appears as a point of tribal assembly at two significant junctures in the Book of Judges. The name means "lookout" and in the Hebrew has a definite article.

6. *they drew water and spilled it before the* LORD. This act is a small puzzle because a water-drawing ritual is otherwise known only from the late Second Temple period (through Mishnaic sources), and there it is associated with fertility and the fall Festival of Succoth. The context makes clear that in this instance it must be a rite of penitence or purification. Rashi puts it succinctly: "It can only be a symbol of abnegation, that is, 'Behold we are in your presence like this water spilled forth.'"

7. *the Philistines heard that the Israelites had assembled*. Either the Philistines assumed that the assembly was a mustering of the tribes for war, which might not have been far off the mark (compare the assembly at Mizpah at the end of Judges 10), or they decided to seize this opportunity of the gathering of Israel for cultic purposes in order to attack the assembled tribes.

9. *one suckling lamb*. The Hebrew is literally "milk lamb" (*teleh ḥalav*). The choice of the sacrificial animal strikes an odd little echo with the two milch cows sacrificed at the end of the Ark Narrative and with the emphasis on nursing and weaning in Samuel's own infancy.

10. *the* LORD *thundered . . . and panicked them*. The key terms restate a recurrent pattern in 1 Samuel: God's hand, or God's voice (the thunder), comes down on the enemy, and the enemy is smitten with "panic" (*mehumah*). Compare, also, the end of Hannah's poem: "the LORD shatters His adversaries, / against them in the heavens He thunders." Essentially, it is God Who does battle, with the Israelite foot soldiers merely mopping up after

His celestial bombardment. This Deuteronomistic view will fade from the Saul and David narratives.

12. *Shen*. If the Masoretic Text is correct (the Septuagint reflects a different place-name), this name means "cliff" and, like Mizpah, it is preceded by a definite article.

Eben-Ezer. The name means "stone of help," with "help" bearing a particularly martial implication. This place may not be the same as the one where the Ark was captured. In any case, the recurring name is meant to signify the righting of old wrongs.

As far as here. The Hebrew phrase could be either temporal ("up until now") or spatial, but the placing of a stone as a marker makes the latter more likely: as far as this point the LORD granted us victory.

13. *the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel*. Since under Saul's kingship the Philistines remained a dominant military power, "all the days of Samuel" could refer only to the period of Samuel's actual leadership. In any case, there are later indications that even under Samuel the Philistines remained powerful.

14. *peace between Israel and the Amorite*. This seemingly incongruous notice actually throws light, as Shmuel Avramsky has proposed, on Israel's military-political situation. The Amorites—a designation often used loosely by the biblical writers for the indigenous Canaanite peoples—had also been dominated by the Philistine invaders, and Israel's success against the Philistines may have been facilitated by an alliance, or at least a nonaggression pact, with the Amorites.

15. *And Samuel judged Israel*. The precise nature of his leadership is left ambiguous, as befits this transitional figure in Israel's political evolution. Some of the "judging" may actually be performance of a judicial function, as the next verse indicates that Samuel operated as a kind of circuit judge, although he may well have carried out cultic or priestly duties as well (the towns at which he stopped are all cultic sites). He is also judge in the sense of "chieftain" or political leader, though he plays this role not as a warrior, according to the model of the Book of Judges, but as exhorter and intercessor. He is also, as we shall see in the Saul story, a seer and a reprover-prophet.

16. *from year to year*. This locution for iterative annual peregrination takes us back to Hannah and Elkanah at the very beginning of the Samuel story.

17. *his point of return was Ramah*. The Hebrew says literally "his return was Ramah." This is evidently the same place as Ramathaim Zofim, where his parents lived. Samuel's circuit is an uneven ellipsis roughly twenty miles across in the northern part of the territory of Benjamin (Saul's tribe) and the southern part of the territory of Ephraim, in north-central Israel. It is far from encompassing all the tribal territories.

CHAPTER 8

[1]And it happened when Samuel grew old that he set
his sons up as judges for Israel. [2]And the name of his
firstborn son was Joel and the name of his secondborn
was Abijah—judges in Beersheba. [3]But his sons did
not go in his ways and they were bent on gain and took
bribes and twisted justice.

[4]And all the elders of Israel assembled and came to
Samuel at Ramah. [5]And they said to him, “Look, you
yourself have grown old and your sons have not gone
in your ways. So now, set over us a king to rule us, like
all the nations.” [6]And the thing was evil in Samuel’s
eyes when they said, “Give us a king to rule us.” And
Samuel prayed to the LORD. [7]And the LORD said to
Samuel, “Heed the voice of the people in all that they
say to you, for it is not you they have cast aside but Me
they have cast aside from reigning over them. [8]Like all
the deeds they have done from the day I brought them
up from Egypt to this day, forsaking Me and serving

other gods, even so they do as well to you. [9]So now,
heed their voice, though you must solemnly warn them
and tell them the practice of the king that will reign
over them." [10]And Samuel said all the words of the
LORD to the people who were asking of him a king.

[11]And he said, "This will be the practice of the king
who will reign over you: Your sons he will take and set
for himself in his chariots and in his cavalry, and some
will run before his chariots. [12]He will set for himself
captains of thousands and captains of fifties, to plow
his ground and reap his harvest and to make his
implements of war and the implements of his chariots.
[13]And your daughters he will take as confectioners and
cooks and bakers. [14]And your best fields and your
vineyards and your olive trees he will take and give to
his servants. [15]And your seed crops and your vineyards
he will tithe and give to his eunuchs and to his
servants. [16]And your best male and female slaves and
your cattle and your donkeys he will take and use for
his tasks. [17]Your flocks he will tithe, and as for you,
you will become his slaves. [18]And you will cry out on
that day before your king whom you chose for
yourselves and the LORD will not answer you on that
day." [19]And the people refused to heed Samuel's voice

and they said, “No! A king there shall be over us!
20 And we, too, will be like all the nations and our king
shall rule us and sally forth before us and fight our
battles.” 21 And Samuel listened to all the words of the
people and he spoke them in the LORD’s hearing.
22 And the LORD said to Samuel, “Heed their voice
and make them a king.” And Samuel said to the men
of Israel, “Go every man to his town.”

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *he set his sons up as judges for Israel*. It is a signal expression of the ambiguity of Samuel’s role as leader that he oversteps his mandate as judge (*shofet*—both judicial authority and ad hoc political leader) by attempting to inaugurate a kind of dynastic arrangement. The two sons who betray their trust of office are a nice parallel to Eli’s two corrupt sons, who essentially were displaced by Samuel.

2. *judges in Beersheba*. It is a little puzzling that Samuel should send both his sons from north-central Israel to this city in the south. Josephus evidently was familiar with a tradition in which one son was sent to Bethel in the north and the other to Beersheba, a more plausible deployment.

3. *bent on gain . . . twisted justice*. The two verbs are different conjugations of the same root, *n-t-h*, which means to bend off from the straight and narrow.

6. *the thing was evil in Samuel’s eyes*. Samuel is ideologically opposed to the monarchy because he is committed to the old idea of the ad hoc inspired leader, *shofet*, who is a kind of direct implementation of God’s rule through the divine spirit over the unique nation of Israel. God appears to agree with

him but yields to political necessity. It is noteworthy that when the elders' words are replayed in this verse from Samuel's point of view, the very phrase rejecting covenantal status that must especially gall him, "like all the nations," is suppressed.

8. *forsaking Me and serving other gods*. Both the locutions used and the preoccupation with cultic loyalty are notably Deuteronomistic, and the coupling of the shift in style with this theme leads one to suspect a seventh-century B.C.E. interpolation here, since there has been no question of idolatry in the immediate context. The elders' expressed concern has been rather with the breakdown of the institution of the judge in Samuel's corrupt sons. The grounds for the argument for and against monarchy will shift once again in Samuel's speech (verses 11–18).

10. *asking of him a king*. The Hebrew participle *shoʾalim* takes us back to the verb of asking used in Samuel's naming and points forward to *Shaʾul*, Saul.

11. *the practice of the king*. This whole episode turns repeatedly on an untranslatable pun. *Mishpat* means "justice," the very thing that Samuel's sons have twisted by taking payoffs. *Mishpat* also means "habitual behavior," "mode of operation," or "practice." As a verb the same root means either "to judge" or "to rule": it is used (in a verbal noun) in the former sense in verses 1 and 2, in the latter sense in verses 5 and 6. The recurrent scholarly assumption that this whole attack on the encroachments of the monarchy reflects a knowledge of Solomon's reign or of later Davidic kings is by no means inevitable: all the practices enumerated—military conscription, the corvée, expropriation of lands, taxation of the agricultural output—could easily have been familiar to an early writer from observing the Canaanite city-states or the larger imperial regimes to the east and the south.

who will reign over you. The people had spoken of the king ruling/judging them (the verb *shafat*); Samuel unambiguously speaks of reigning (*malakh*, the cognate verb of *melekh*, king).

Your sons he will take. Samuel's speech is solidly constructed as a hammering piece of antimonarchic rhetoric. All the cherished possessions to be expropriated by the king are placed emphatically at the beginning of each clause, followed by the verb of which they are objects. "He will take" (one word in the Hebrew, *yiqaḥ*) is insisted on with anaphoric force. The speech

moves systematically from the expropriation of sons and daughters to land and produce to slaves and beasts of burden, ending with the climactic "you will become his slaves." A modern American reader might easily be reminded of the rhetoric of a radical libertarian inveighing against the evils of big government and the encroachments of its bureaucracies and taxation. In no part of his pragmatic argument does Samuel mention the Deuteronomistic themes of abandoning the LORD or betraying His direct kingship.

11–12. *chariots . . . cavalry . . . captains*. The first item in the indictment of monarchy is military conscription. As is clear in the response of the people (verse 20), the consolidation of national military power under the king is precisely what attracts them to monarchy. All this leads one to suspect that the domination over the Philistines was by no means so comprehensive as claimed by the narrator in chapter 7.

12. *to plow his ground and reap his harvest*. The Hebrew is literally "to plow his plowing and harvest his harvest."

to make his implements. After conscripting men to fight and men to perform agricultural service, the king will also draft the artisan class for his purpose—ironsmiths, carpenters, wheelwrights, and so forth.

his chariots. Samuel's emphasis from the start on chariots signals the political shift he envisions, for chariots were the instruments of the monarchies with which Israel contended, whereas the Israelites in this early stage did not have this sort of military technology at their disposal, at least according to the Book of Judges.

14. *give to his servants*. "Servants" in a royal context would be the functionaries of the royal bureaucracy, whose service to the king was in fact often rewarded by land grants.

16. *your cattle*. The Masoretic Text has "your young men" *(baḥureikhem*), but the reading of the Septuagint, *beqarkhem*, "your cattle," is much more likely, given the fact that the sons and daughters have already been mentioned and that the next term is "your donkeys."

18. *you will cry out . . . and he will not answer you*. The language used here in relation to the king is precisely the language used elsewhere in relation to God

(compare 7:9, where the people implore Samuel to "cry out" on their behalf to God). Cries to *this* power will not be answered by God.

19. *A king there shall be over us*. They do not say, "We will have a king" but "A king shall be over us."

20. *rule us*. Again, the people use the ambiguous key verb, *shafat*, "to rule/judge."

sally forth before us. This phrase reflects a specific military idiom—the full version of it is, literally, "to go out and come in before us," that is, to lead in battle, to execute maneuvers. The military power that can accrue to the nation through the king is what is uppermost in the minds of the people.

22. *Go every man to his town*. Though God has just instructed Samuel to comply with the people's demand for a monarchy, Samuel's immediate response instead is to send them back to their homes. His acquiescence remains grudging: he appears to be buying time, perhaps with the claim that he needs to find a suitable candidate. The reluctance will persist, and grow, after he has encountered Saul and anointed him.

CHAPTER 9

[1]And there was a man of Benjamin whose name was
Kish son of Abiel son of Zeror son of Bechorath son
of Aphiah, a Benjaminite, a man of great means. [2]And
he had a son whose name was Saul, a fine and goodly
young fellow, and no man of the Israelites was
goodlier than he, head and shoulders taller than all the
people. [3]And some asses belonging to Kish, Saul's
father, were lost, and Kish said to Saul his son, "Take,
pray, with you one of the lads, and rise, go seek the
asses." [4]And he passed through the high country of
Ephraim and he passed through the region of
Shalishah, but they did not find them. And they passed
through the region of Shaalim, and there was nothing
there, and they passed through the region of Benjamin,
but they did not find them. [5]They were just coming
into the region of Zuf when Saul said to his lad who
was with him, "Come, let us turn back, lest my father
cease worrying about the asses and worry about us."
[6]And he said to him, "Look, pray, there is a man of
God in this town, and the man is esteemed—whatever

he says will surely come to pass. Now then, let us go there. Perhaps he will tell us of our way on which we have gone." [7]And Saul said to his lad, "But look, if we are to go, what shall we bring to the man? For the bread is gone from our kits and there is no gift to bring to the man of God. What do we have?" [8]And the lad answered Saul once again and he said, "Look, I happen to have at hand a quarter of a shekel of silver that I can give to the man of God, that he may tell us our way." [9]In former times in Israel, thus would a man say when he went to inquire of God, "Come, let us go to the seer." For the prophet today was called in former times the seer. [10]And Saul said to his lad, "What you say is good. Come, let us go." And they went on to the town in which the man of God was. [11]They were just coming up the ascent to the town when they met some young women going out to draw water, and they said to them, "Is there a seer hereabouts?" [12]And they answered them and said, "There is. Look, he is straight ahead of you. Hurry now, for today he has come to town, for the people have a sacrifice today on the high place. [13]As soon as you come into town, you will find him before he goes up on the high place to eat. For the people will not eat till he comes, as he will bless the sacrifice and then the guests will eat. So go up, for today you will find him." [14]And they went up to the

town. They were just coming into the town when Samuel came out toward them to go up to the high place. [15]And the LORD had disclosed to Samuel the day before Saul's arrival, saying, [16]"At this time tomorrow I will send to you a man from the region of Benjamin and you shall anoint him prince over My people Israel and he shall rescue My people from the hand of the Philistines. For I have seen the plight of My people, yes, their outcry has reached Me." [17]And Samuel saw Saul, and the LORD answered him, "Here is that man of whom I said to you, 'This one will govern My people.'" [18]And Saul approached Samuel in the gateway and said, "Tell me, pray, where is the house of the seer?" [19]And Samuel answered Saul and said, "I am the seer. Go up before me to the high place, and you will eat with me today, and I shall send you off in the morning, and whatever is in your heart I shall tell you. [20]And as to the asses that have been lost to you now three days, pay them no heed, for they have been found. And whose is all the treasure of Israel? Is it not for you and all your father's house?" [21]And Saul answered and said, "Am I not a Benjaminite, from the smallest of the tribes of Israel, and my clan is the least of all the tribe of Benjamin? So why have you spoken to me in this fashion?" [22]And Samuel took Saul and his lad and brought them into

the hall, and he gave them a place at the head of the guests, about thirty men. [23]And Samuel said to the cook, “Bring the portion that I gave to you, about which I said, ‘Set it aside.’” [24]And the cook lifted up the thigh and put it before Saul. And Samuel said, “Here is what is left. Put it before you and eat, for it has been kept for you for the appointed time as I said to the people I invited.” And Saul ate with Samuel on that day. [25]And they came down from the high place into the town, and they made a bed for Saul on the roof, and he slept. [26]And as dawn was breaking, Samuel called out to Saul on the roof, saying, “Arise and I shall send you off.” And Saul arose, and the two of them, he and Samuel, went outside. [27]They were just going down past the edge of the town when Samuel said to Saul, “Tell the lad to pass on before us.” And he passed on. “As for you, stand now, that I may let you hear the word of God.”

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And there was a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish*. The formulaic phrasing—“there was a man,” followed by name, home region, and genealogy—signals to the audience that we are beginning a discrete new story within the larger narrative. (Compare the beginning of Hannah’s story in 1:1–2.)

2. *head and shoulders taller than all the people*. The Hebrew says literally "from his shoulders taller than all the people." Saul's looming size, together with his good looks, seems to be an outward token of his capacity for leadership, but as the story unfolds with David displacing Saul, his physical stature becomes associated with a basic human misperception of what constitutes fitness to command.

5. *They were just coming . . . when*. This relatively infrequent indication of simultaneous actions occurs four times in this single episode. The writer seems to want to highlight a crucial series of temporal intersections and concatenations as Saul moves unwitting toward his destiny as king.

Zuf. This is, of course, Samuel's home region.

Come, let us turn back. According to the general principle of biblical narrative that the first reported speech of a character is a defining moment of characterization, Saul's first utterance reveals him as a young man uncertain about pursuing his way, and quite concerned about his father. This concern, especially in light of the attention devoted to tense relations between fathers and sons in the ensuing narrative, is touching, and suggests that the young Saul is a sensitive person—an attribute that will be woefully submerged by his experience of political power. But as this first dialogue unfolds, it is Saul's uncertainty that comes to the fore because at every step he has to be prodded and directed by his own servant.

6. *there is a man of God in this town . . . whatever he says will surely come to pass*. The fact that neither Saul nor his servant seems to have heard of Samuel by name (and the town, too, is left unnamed) has led many scholars to conclude that this story comes from a different source. But, as Robert Polzin has vigorously argued, the palpable shift between chapter 8 and chapter 9 may rather reflect "the varying play of perspectives (between narrator and reader, between reader and character, and between character and character) that forms the stuff of sophisticated narrative." Saul's entire story, until the night before his death on the battlefield, is a story about the futile quest for knowledge of an inveterately ignorant man. Samuel may have been presented before as the spiritual leader of all the tribes, but this particular Benjaminite farm boy knows nothing of him, and Saul's servant, who presumably has also spent all his time on the farm, has picked up merely a local rumor of his activity but not his name. From the rural-popular perspective of both, and in

keeping with the themes of knowledge and prediction of this story, Samuel is not a judge and political leader but a "man of God" and a "seer" (compare verse 9) who can predict the future.

he will tell us of our way on which we have gone. The Hebrew verb clearly indicates some sort of past action and not, as one might expect, "on which we should go." Perhaps they feel so lost that they need the seer to tell them where they have been heading. In the event, it is toward a kingdom, not toward lost asses.

7. *But look, if we are to go, what shall we bring*. The diffident Saul is on the point of quitting before the encounter. He needs the counsel, and the provident quarter-shekel, of his servant in order to move forward and make the portentous connection with Samuel.

bread. As in general biblical usage, this is a synecdoche for food.

9. *In former times in Israel*. This terminological notice simultaneously alerts the audience to the gap between the time of the story (the eleventh century B.C.E.) and the audience's own time (at the very least, two or three generations later) and underscores the ambiguity of Samuel's transitional role as leader: he is variously called judge, man of God, seer, and prophet, and he also performs priestly functions.

to inquire of God. The idiom means to inquire of an oracle.

10. *What you say is good*. Saul the future leader follows someone else's lead —here, a slave's.

11. *they met some young women going out to draw water*. The wells would have typically been outside the walls of the city. The encounter between a young man in foreign territory with young women (*neʿarot*) drawing water seems to signal the beginning of a betrothal type-scene (compare Rebekah, Rachel, and Zipporah at their respective wells). But the betrothal scene is aborted. Instead of a betrothal feast, there will be a sacrificial feast that adumbrates a rite of coronation. The destiny of kingship to which Saul proceeds will lead to grimmer consequences than those that follow in the repeated story of a hero who finds this future bride at a well.

12–13. The reply of the young women is notable for its garrulousness. One talmudic sage sought to explain this trait with a simple misogynistic formula:

"women are talkative" (*Berakhot* 48b), whereas, more amusingly, the Midrash proposes that the young women kept repeating themselves because they were so smitten by Saul's beauty. The clues in the immediately preceding narrative context suggest a less fanciful explanation: seeing the evident signs of confusion and incomprehension in Saul's face, the women take elaborate measures to spell out where Samuel is to be found and what Saul should do in order to be sure not to miss him. In all this, it is noteworthy, as Polzin has observed, that Samuel, having agreed to find a king for Israel, has made no move whatever toward that purpose. Instead, the future king "finds" him.

the high place. The *bamah* was an elevated place, a kind of open-air natural altar, perhaps sometimes with a structure erected alongside it (see the "hall" in verse 22), where sacrifices were generally offered in the period before the centralization of the cult in Jerusalem. The kind of sacrifice involved here is one in which parts of the animal would be burned on the altar and the rest eaten in a ceremonial feast.

16. *prince*. The Hebrew *nagid* is not used to refer to leaders before this moment in Israelite history and is used only rarely after the very early years of the monarchy. It is a term that suggests the exercise of political power in a designated role of leadership rather than in the manner of the ad hoc charismatic leadership of the *shofet*, or Judge. But God, in keeping with this transitional moment and perhaps even in deference to Samuel's keen resentment of the monarchy, pointedly does not use the word "king."

he shall rescue My people. Again, the previously reported ascendancy over the Philistines seems to have vanished, and God endorses military effectiveness as the rationale for the monarchy.

the plight of My people. The Masoretic Text lacks "the plight of," though the phrase appears to have been in the version used by the Septuagint translators. It is conceivable that what we have here is not an inadvertent scribal omission but an ellipsis.

17. *And Samuel saw Saul*. The seer sees the divinely designated object of his sight, and God immediately confirms that this is the man. Or, in the light of subsequent developments, Samuel is persuaded that he has received direct instruction from God. All the knowledge is on Samuel's side rather than on Saul's.

18. *where is the house of the seer*? Addressing the very seer himself, Saul picks up no clues that Samuel is anything but an ordinary passerby. He also assumes that the seer has a house in the town, although the young women have said that the seer has come to town for the sacrifice. (The scholarly assumption that the unnamed town must be Samuel's hometown, Ramah, is not entirely compelling.)

20. *as to the asses*. It is at this point that Samuel reveals his access to supernatural knowledge: no one has told him that Saul was looking for asses, but Samuel knows both of the lost animals and where to find them.

whose is all the treasure of Israel? This is a deliberately oblique reference to kingship: if all the choice possessions of Israel are to be yours, why worry about a few asses? Although the Hebrew term *ḥemdah* can mean "desire," it more often has the sense of "desired, or valued, thing," as in the common idiom, *kley ḥemdah*, "precious objects."

21. *a Benjaminite, from the smallest of the tribes of Israel*. The young Saul is no doubt overcome by Samuel's hint of a throne, but the language is also part of an etiquette of deference. In fact, Benjamin was one of the most powerful tribes, and given Kish's affluence, his clan would scarcely have been so humble.

all the tribe of Benjamin. The Masoretic Text has "tribes" but the Septuagint reflects the more logical singular. The plural form is in all likelihood a scribal replication of the plural in "tribes of Israel" at the beginning of the verse.

22. *a place at the head of the guests*. Samuel offers no explanation to the assembled company as to why this signal honor is accorded to the strangers.

23. *Set it aside*. The Hebrew reads literally "Put it by you."

24. The text here seems clearly defective at two different points. The phrase "lifted up the thigh" is followed by an anomalously ungrammatical form of "and that which is on it" (*wehe'aleyha*). It seems best to delete this word, as does the Septuagint. The phrase "as I said to the people" is no more than an interpretive guess about an asyntactic chain of three words in the Hebrew, which literally are "saying the-people I-invited."

25. *they made a bed for Saul on the roof, and he slept*. The Masoretic Text has "he spoke with Saul on the roof and they rose early." The present translation follows the far more plausible reading of the Septuagint: the report of speech on the roof is odd because no content or explanation for it is given, and the rising early is contradicted by the fact that in the next phrase Samuel calls up to Saul on the roof in order to rouse him. Evidently, a scribe substituted the common word *wayidaber*, "he spoke," for the more unusual word *wayirbedu*, "they made a bed" (the same consonants with the order reversed). *Wayishkav*, "and he slept," differs from *wayashkimu*, "and they rose early," by one consonant in the unvocalized text.

the roof. Presumably, the encounter takes place during the warm season, and the roof would be a cool sleeping place.

27. *Tell the lad to pass on before us*. Every step that Samuel takes here in conferring the kingship on Saul is clandestine. He speaks to him only after they have reached the outskirts of the town, and he is sure first to get Saul's servant out of earshot. This course of action is rather puzzling because the people, after all, have already publicly declared to the prophet that they want him to choose a king for them. Samuel's need to proceed in secrecy may reflect his persistent sense that the monarchy is the wrong path for the people, or it might be an expression of doubt as to whether this strapping young Benjaminite is really the right man for the job, despite the unambiguous indication that the prophet has just received from God.

CHAPTER 10

[1]And Samuel took the cruse of oil and poured it over
his head and kissed him, and he said, “Has not the
LORD anointed you over His inheritance as prince?
[2]When you go away from me today you shall find two
men by Rachel’s Tomb in the region of Benjamin at
Zelzah, and they will say to you, ‘The asses that you
went off to seek have been found, and, look, your
father has put aside the matter of the asses and is
worrying about you, saying, What shall I do about my
son?’ [3]And you shall slip onward from there and you
shall come to the Terebinth of Tabor, and there three
men will find you who are going up to God at Bethel,
one bearing three kids and one bearing three loaves of
bread and one bearing a jug of wine. [4]And they will
greet you and give you two loaves of bread, and you
shall take from their hand. [5]Afterward you shall come
to Gibeath-Elohim, where the Philistine prefect is.
And as you come into town there, you shall encounter
a band of prophets coming down from the high place,
preceded by lute and drum and flute and lyre, and they

will be speaking in ecstasy. [6]And the spirit of the
LORD shall seize you, and you shall go into ecstasy
with them and you shall turn into another man. [7]And
when these signs come upon you, do what your hand
finds to do, for God is with you. [8]And you shall go
down before me to Gilgal, and, look, I shall be coming
down to you to offer burnt offerings and to sacrifice
well-being sacrifices. Seven days shall you wait until I
come to you, and I shall inform you what you must
do." [9]And it happened as he turned his back to go off
from Samuel, that God gave him another heart and all
these signs came to pass on that day.

[10]And they came there to Gibeah, and look, a band of
prophets was coming toward him, and the spirit of the
LORD seized him and he went into ecstasy in their
midst. [11]And so, whoever knew him from times gone
by, saw, and, look, with the prophets he spoke in
ecstasy, and each would say to his fellow,

"What has befallen the son of Kish?
Is Saul, too, among the prophets?"

[12]And one man from there would answer and say, "And
who is their father?" Therefore it became a proverb,

“Is Saul, too, among the prophets?” [13]And he ceased
from his ecstasy and came to the high place. [14]And
Saul’s uncle said to him and to his lad, “Where did you
go?” And he said, “To seek the asses. And we saw that
they were nowhere and we came to Samuel.” [15]And
Saul’s uncle said, “Tell me, pray, what did Samuel say
to you?” [16]And Saul said to his uncle, “He indeed told
us that the asses had been found.” But the matter of
the kingship of which Samuel had spoken he told him
not.

[17]And Samuel mustered the people to the LORD at
Mizpah. [18]And he said to the Israelites, “Thus said the
LORD God of Israel: ‘I brought Israel up out of Egypt
and I rescued you from the hand of Egypt and from
the hand of all the kingdoms that have oppressed you.’
[19]And you on your part have cast aside your God Who
rescues you from all your ills and troubles, and you
have said, ‘No! A king you shall put over us!’ And so,
stand forth before the LORD by your tribes and your
clans.” [20]And Samuel brought forward all the tribes of
Israel and the lot fell to the tribe of Benjamin. [21]And
he brought forward the tribe of Benjamin by its clans
and the lot fell to the Matrite clan, and the lot fell to
Saul son of Kish, and they sought him but he was not

to be found. [22]And they inquired again of the LORD: “Has a man come here?” And the LORD said, “Look, he is hidden among the gear.” [23]And they ran and fetched him from there, and he stood forth amidst the people, and he was head and shoulders taller than all the people. [24]And Samuel said to all the people, “Have you seen whom the LORD has chosen? For there is none like him in all the people.” And all the people shouted and said, “Long live the king!” [25]And Samuel spoke out to the people the practice of kingship and wrote it on a scroll and placed it before the LORD. And Samuel sent all the people away to their homes. [26]And Saul, too, had gone to his home in Gibeah, and the stalwart fellows whose hearts God had touched went with him. [27]And worthless fellows had said, “How will this one rescue us?” And they spurned him and brought him no tribute, but he pretended to keep his peace.

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. Anointment is the biblical ritual of conferring kingship, like coronation in the later European tradition. Samuel carries out this act secretly, on the outskirts of the town, conferring on Saul, in keeping with the term God has used, the title *nagid,* “prince,” rather than “king.”

2. *When you go away from me today*. This elaborate set of instructions and predictions is, as Robert Polzin has argued, a strategy for asserting continued control over the man Samuel has just anointed. Every predictive step manifests Samuel's superior knowledge as prophet, and all the instructions reduce the new king to Samuel's puppet.

Rachel's Tomb. The burial site of the mother of Benjamin, the eponymous founder of the tribe, underscores Saul's own tribal affiliation.

at Zelzah. This otherwise unattested name may not be a place-name but an error in transcription in the Masoretic Text.

your father has put aside the matter of the asses and is worrying about you. According to the fixed procedure of verbal recycling in biblical narrative, the predicted words of the two men are nearly identical with Saul's first words to his servant. One should note that in the scenario Samuel lays out for him, Saul has no opportunity to respond to his father's concern for his absence: on the contrary, his new regal obligations rush him onward toward a daunting rite of initiation.

3. *slip onward*. The Hebrew verb *ḥalaf* suggests passing through a medium and may well indicate the clandestine nature of Saul's movements.

the Terebinth of Tabor. Evidently, a cultic site.

three men . . . three kids . . . three loaves of bread. The triple three is a folktale pattern. It also manifests a mysterious design clearly grasped by Samuel, who annunciates this whole prediction, and into which Saul is thrust unwittingly. The three men bear meat (or animals that can be turned into meat), bread, and wine—the three symbolic staffs of life. They will offer Saul the primary of the three, bread (in counterpoint to the "worthless fellows" at the end of the episode who give the new king no tribute).

5. *Gibeath-Elohim*. The name means Hill of God, but it would seem to be the same as the Gibeah of Judges 19, in which the Benjaminites perpetrate a lethal gang-rape, and is also known as Gibeath-Benjamin and Gibeath-Saul.

the Philistine prefect. This glancing reference to a Philistine garrison deep within Benjaminite territory is still another indication of the Philistines' military ascendancy. That might be another reason for keeping the anointment secret, at least until the new king can consolidate military force around him. The Masoretic Text has a plural "prefects," but three different ancient translations reflect a singular.

a band of prophets. These are professional ecstatics who would whip themselves into a frenzy with the insistent rhythms of the musical instruments mentioned—a phenomenon familiar in enthusiastic religious sects worldwide—and then would "prophesy," become caught up in ecstatic behavior, which could involve glossolalia ("speaking in tongues"), dancing, writhing, and the like. The chief connection between these figures and the later literary prophets is the idea that both are involuntarily inhabited by an overpowering divine spirit.

lute. The Hebrew word for this instrument, *nevel*, is identical with the word for "jug" used at the end of verse 3 (the homonymity may be explained by a perceived lyre shape in the jug). It is a fairly common procedure in biblical narrative to link segments in immediate sequence by using this sort of pun as a linchpin. Here it has the effect of intimating an uncanny link between the first and second stages of the script Samuel is designing for Saul.

6. *you shall turn into another man*. The drastic nature of this process is surely meant by Samuel to be startling: nothing less will do in order to transform this diffident farmer's son into a king than to be devastated by the divine spirit, violently compelled to radical metamorphosis. This whole story of Saul among the prophets is repeated, with very significant changes, in chapter 19, near the end of his tortuous career. As we shall have occasion to see, the seeming repetition, far from being a regrettable "doublet" produced in redaction, is entirely purposeful: the same etiological tale is rotated 180 degrees to show us first Saul being invested with the spirit, and with the monarchy, and then divested of the monarchy by the spirit.

7. *do what your hand finds*. The biblical idiom means do whatever is within your power.

8. *you shall go down before me to Gilgal . . . Seven days shall you wait*. The third stage in the set of predictions/instructions that Samuel announces to Saul is in fact not carried out until much later. Saul's divergence from the prophet's script adumbrates his future failures of obedience in relation to Samuel. Polzin has made the shrewd argument that the unfulfilled prediction also reflects Samuel's failure as a prophet, and that he has actually placed Saul in a double bind by telling him that he may do whatever he wants because God is with him and yet "has paradoxically commanded strict royal

dependence upon prophetic direction." Samuel, in other words, seems to want both a king and a puppet.

9. *as he turned his back*. The Hebrew *shekhem* is also the word for "shoulder," and so reminds us of Saul's regal stature, head and shoulders above all the people.

God gave him another heart and all these signs came to pass. These words are a kind of proleptic headnote for the narrative report that follows, and it is not implied that the transformation and the signs occurred the very moment Saul turned to go.

10. *And they came there to Gibeah*. There is no report of the first of Samuel's predicted encounters, with the three men bearing kids, bread, and wine. It is unclear whether this reflects merely a narrative ellipsis or whether this, too, is an unfulfilled prophecy. The report of the meeting with the two men who announce that the asses have been found is also omitted. In any case, the transformative meeting with the band of ecstatics is obviously the chief focus of the writer's attention.

the spirit of the LORD seized him. This same phrase, or a slight variant of it, is repeatedly used in the Book of Judges to indicate the inception of the judge's enterprise as charismatic military leader. There is some overlap with Saul's taking on the kingship, which will also involve military leadership, but the report of ecstasy or "prophesying" is a new element, with its more radical implication that the new leader must become "another man."

11. *Is Saul, too, among the prophets?* This evidently proverbial question, its full origins scarcely remembered, is the perplexity that generates the etiological tale. The question seems to be proverbial of a case of extreme incongruity (like the English "bull in a china shop")—what on earth is a man like Saul doing among the prophets? The tale then comes to explain how the saying arose. But the etiological tale, together with its antithetical counterpart in chapter 19, figures significantly in the literary design of the Saul story. Even the characterizing theme of Saul's repeated exclusion from predictive knowledge is inscribed in the question "Is Saul, too, among the prophets?" The people ask their question about Saul in a line of poetry (consisting of two parallel versets). The verse form explains why Saul is first referred to as "son of Kish" because in poetry based on parallelism, it is the fixed procedure for

treating proper names to use the given name in one verset and, in lieu of a synonym, the patronymic in the other. Thus, the claim made by some scholars that "son of Kish" is derogatory has no basis.

12. *who is their father?* The reference is obscure. The least convoluted explanation makes the prophets the antecedent of "their." The meaning then would be that unlike Saul, whose father is Kish, a landholder and a man of substance, the ecstatics are a breed apart, with no father anyone can name (the leader of a band of prophets was called idiomatically their father). The prevalent attitude toward such prophets was ambivalent: they were at once viewed as vehicles of a powerful and dangerous divine spirit, and as crazies (compare Hosea 9:7).

14. *Saul's uncle*. The appearance, without introduction, of an uncle (and not Saul's father, who after his brief initial appearance is never brought into the narrative proper) is puzzling. It has been proposed that this uncle is Ner the father of Abner, who will become Saul's commander in chief, but if that is the case, why is he left unnamed here?

16. *But the matter of the kingship . . . he told him not*. Saul's studied reticence confirms the clandestine character of his anointment.

17. *And Samuel mustered the people*. This national assembly is the second of three episodes that inaugurate Saul's kingship. One should not leap too quickly to the conclusion that these are merely a stitching together of variant sources. From the writer's viewpoint, the institution of the monarchy, with Saul as first king, is both a difficult and a dubious process, and it cannot happen all at once. First there is the clandestine anointment, followed by an initiatory experience, under the nose of the Philistine prefect. Then there is a public proclamation of the king, at which time sufficient forces can be marshaled to bolster him against the Philistines.

18. *Thus said the* LORD *God of Israel*. Samuel begins his speech with the so-called messenger-formula, which is used to initiate prophetic messages. His speech is in fact a kind of prophetic denunciation of the people for having "cast aside" God in demanding a king and so is a reprise of his antimonarchic harangue in chapter 8, even as he implements the choice of a king.

20. *the lot fell*. The Hebrew verb *lakad* that is used for the drawing of lots means to be caught or trapped. As both Polzin and McCarter note, the only other biblical instances of such drawing of lots among the tribes are in order to discover a culprit, and so Samuel has chosen a mechanism associated with incrimination and punishment.

22. *Has a man come here?* This translation reads *ʿad halom* instead of the Masoretic *ʿod halom*, which would mean "again here."

Look, he is hidden among the gear. This detail is virtually a parody of the recurring motif of the prophet-leader's unwillingness to accept his mission. Saul the diffident farm boy had expressed a sense of unworthiness for the high office Samuel conferred on him. Now, confronted by the assembled tribes and "trapped" by the process of lot drawing, he tries to flee the onus of kingship, farcically hiding in the baggage.

24. *there is none like him in all the people*. Perhaps especially because Saul has been hauled out from the midst of saddle packs and sundry impedimenta, Samuel now executes a gesture of public relations: look at this strapping, handsome fellow—there is none in Israel who can match him. In the event, he proves wrong about Saul's fitness for the throne, and one may even wonder whether Samuel's proclamation that this is the one God has chosen (confirmed by the narrator's previous report) is not a misperception to justify his own (erring) choice.

Long live the king. The people's proclamation does not use *nagid* (prince) but the unambiguous *melekh* (king).

25. *the practice of kingship*. The phrase here, *mishpat hamelukhah*, is close enough to *mishpat hamelekh*, the term used in chapter 8, and so the reasonable inference is that the content of the speech is a reiteration of the dangers of encroachment of individual rights by the king that Samuel warned of in the assembly at Ramah.

26. *stalwart fellows*. The translation follows the Qumran Samuel text and the Septuagint in reading *giborey haḥayil* instead of the Masoretic *haḥayil*, "the troop." The phrase, as many commentators have noted, is an obvious antithesis to "worthless fellows" in the next sentence.

27. *How will this one rescue us?* "This one" (*zeh*) is contemptuous.

but he pretended to keep his peace. The Masoretic Text has two Hebrew words here, *wayehi kemaḥarish*, which bear this meaning and have the attraction of indicating the inception of court intrigues and calculations at the very beginning of Saul's reign—he is aware of political dissidence but chooses for the moment not to react. It must be said, however, that the Qumran Samuel fragment, supported by allied readings in the Septuagint and Josephus, has *wayehi kemeḥodesh* (the graphemes for *r* and *d* are quite similar), "And it happened after about a month," affixing these two words at the beginning of the next episode rather than at the end of this one.

CHAPTER 11

[1]And Nahash the Ammonite came up and encamped
against Jabesh-Gilead. And all the men of Jabesh said
to Nahash, “Make a pact with us, and we shall be
subject to you.” [2]And Nahash the Ammonite said to
them, “This is how I shall make a pact with you—with
the gouging out of the right eye of every one of you,
and I shall make it a disgrace for all Israel.” [3]And the
elders of Jabesh said to him, “Leave us alone for seven
days, that we may send messengers through all the
territory of Israel, and if there is none to rescue us, we
shall come out to you.” [4]And the messengers came to
Gibeath-Saul and spoke the words in the hearing of
the people, and all the people raised their voices and
wept. [5]And, look, Saul was coming in behind the oxen
from the field, and Saul said, “What is the matter with
the people that they are weeping?” And they recounted
to him the words of the men of Jabesh. [6]And the spirit
of God seized Saul when he heard these words, and he
was greatly incensed. [7]And he took a yoke of oxen and
hacked them to pieces and sent them through all the

territory of Israel by the hand of messengers, saying, “Whoever does not come out after Saul and after Samuel, thus will be done to his oxen!” And the fear of the LORD fell on the people, and they came out as one man. [8]And Saul marshaled them in Bazek, and there were three hundred thousand Israelites and thirty thousand men of Judah. [9]And he said to the messengers who had come, “Thus shall you say to the men of Jabesh-Gilead: ‘Tomorrow victory will be yours as the sun grows hot.’” And the messengers came and told the men of Jabesh and they rejoiced. [10]And the men of Jabesh said [to the Ammonites], “Tomorrow we shall come out to you and you may do to us whatever is good in your eyes.” [11]And it happened on the next day that Saul set the troops in three columns. And they came into the camp in the morning watch and struck down Ammon till the heat of the day, and so those who remained were scattered and not two of them remained together. [12]And the people said to Samuel, “Whoever said, ‘Saul shall not be king over us,’ give us these men and we shall put them to death.” [13]And Saul said, “No man shall be put to death this day, for today the LORD has wrought victory in Israel.”

[14]And Samuel said to the people, “Come, let us go to
Gilgal and we shall renew there the kingship.” [15]And
all the people went to Gilgal and they made Saul king
there before the LORD at Gilgal, and they sacrificed
their well-being sacrifices before the LORD, and Saul
rejoiced there, and all the men of Israel with him, very
greatly.

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Nahash the Ammonite*. During this period, the Ammonite kingdom, in the region to the east of the Jordan, was the second great military threat to the Israelites, after the Philistines to the west. David would later besiege the Ammonite capital, Rabbath-Ammon (near the site of present-day Amman). This episode, marking the inception of Saul’s military activity, has several details that will be echoed later in the David story.

Jabesh-Gilead. This Israelite settlement, in the tribal territory of Manasseh, was located several miles east of the Jordan and hence was exposed to Ammonite attack. In the story of the concubine at Gibeah—Saul’s hometown—the men of Jabesh-Gilead refuse to fight in the civil war against Benjamin, and so some special kinship between them and Saul’s tribe is inferable. The Samuel scroll found in Cave 4 at Qumran reports a general campaign by Nahash against the trans-Jordanian Israelites. Here are the verses from the Qumran version (brackets indicate reconstructed letters or words, where there are gaps in the scroll): “[and Na]hash king of the Ammonites oppressed the Gadites and the Reubenites mightily and gouged out the right eye of e[very] one of them and imposed fe[ar and terror] on [I]srael, and there remained not a man of the Israelites be[yond] the Jordan [who]se right eye Nah[ash king of] the Ammonites did n[ot] [gou]ge out. Only seven thousand men [fled from] the Ammonites and came to [J]abesh-

Gilead. And after about a month"—the words that follow are identical with verse 1 in the Masoretic Text.

2. *the gouging out of the right eye*. Mutilation of captives was a fairly common practice. Josephus explains that the blinding of the right eye would have impaired the ability to fight because the left eye was largely covered by the shield in battle. In any case, submitting to this ghastly mutilation was a mark of great humiliation, or "disgrace" *(ḥerpah)*.

3. *Leave us alone for seven days*. Nahash's seemingly surprising agreement to this condition is by no means a sign of generosity but must be understood from his viewpoint as an additional opportunity to humiliate the Israelites: he scarcely imagines that the disunited tribes will produce a "rescuer," and thus the impotent tribes will all be forced to witness helplessly the mutilation of their trans-Jordanian kinsmen.

4. *the messengers came to Gibeath-Saul*. The men of Jabesh-Gilead have told Nahash they would search through "all the territory of Israel." But perhaps they know something he does not—that Israel already has a tribally acclaimed ruler and military leader who resides in Gibeah, but who has not yet begun to act. The scholarly assumption that this entire story blatantly contradicts the previous account of Saul's election as king and hence must derive from an independent source is by no means necessary.

6. *the spirit of God seized Saul*. As many commentators have noted, the story here explicitly follows the model of the inception of the charismatic leader's career in Judges, when a kind of berserker spirit enters him and ignites him with eagerness to do battle. Saul's coming in from the field behind the oxen is also reminiscent of the pattern in Judges in which an agriculturalist (compare Gideon) is transformed by an access of the spirit into a warrior. Given the uncertainty about the new monarchic dispensation, it is quite possible that Saul, after having been proclaimed king at Mizpah, might have returned to his work in the field, awaiting the occasion when he would begin to act on his new royal authority. The archetypal tale of the farmer who steps forward to save the nation in time of crisis will recur in Roman tradition in the story of Cincinnatus at the plow.

7. *he took a yoke of oxen and hacked them to pieces*. This violent symbolism doubly distinguishes Saul from the model of the ad hoc warrior-leader in Judges. The dismemberment of the oxen is an explicit repetition of the dismemberment of the concubine at the end of Judges 19 after she has been gang-raped to death by the men of Gibeah (later the home of Saul). In Judges, too, the bloody members were used to assemble all the tribes of Israel to war, though the person who hacked the body to pieces was not a judge but rather a morally dubious Levite, the husband of the dead woman. The allusion here is exquisitely ambiguous. Is this an act of restitution, a setting right of the ghastly civil war caused by the atrocity at Gibeah, or does it inaugurate the narrative of Saul's public actions under the shadow of an earlier act of turpitude? Saul also differs from the judges in behaving like a king, for he prepares for war by instituting a kind of military conscription binding on all the tribes (the judges depended on volunteers and worked locally). Kings, like mafia capos, operate through coercion: Saul, in sending the hacked-up oxen parts to his fellow Israelites with the threat "Whoever does not come out . . . thus will be done to his oxen," is presenting them with an offer they cannot refuse.

after Saul and after Samuel. The medieval Hebrew commentator Kimchi offers a shrewd explanation for Saul's adding Samuel to his exhortation. "Since not all of them had accepted him as king, he said 'after Samuel.'"

the fear of the LORD. This seemingly pious phrase might also mean "a terrible fear," and it is, after all, Saul's frightening threat conveyed by the bloody oxen parts that moves the people.

8. *three hundred thousand*. As usual, the inflated figure does not reflect historical reality. The ten-to-one ratio between Israel and Judah does mirror the ratio of ten tribes to one.

10. [to the Ammonites]. The bracketed words, not in the Hebrew, are added to make clear that it is no longer the messengers who are being addressed.

Tomorrow we shall come out to you. These words are intended to lull the Ammonites into a false sense of security before Saul's surprise attack in the last hours before dawn ("the morning watch").

12. *Saul shall not be king over us*. The "not" appears in some variant manuscripts. The Masoretic Text as it stands is usually construed as a

question: “Saul will be king over us?” Robert Polzin tries to save the simple declarative sense of the Masoretic Text by proposing that after Saul has just powerfully acted like one of the old-time judges, the people, with the implicit endorsement of Saul, are inclined to retract their own insistence on monarchy and return to the institution of judgeship. This reading is ingenious, but may create more problems than it solves. The report of continuing dissidence about Saul’s claim to the throne, as at the end of the previous chapter, in fact sets the stage for much that will follow.

13. *No man shall be put to death this day*. Saul’s magnaminity, after his demonstration of coercion and military effectiveness, strikes a positive note at the beginning of his reign, though he will later prove to be utterly ruthless against subjects he suspects of disloyalty.

14. *we shall renew there the kingship*. This clause helps make sense of the triple story of Saul’s dedication as king. First there was the clandestine anointment, with no publicly visible consequences. Then there was the tribal assembly at Mizpah in which a reluctant Saul was chosen by lot and proclaimed king. After that event, however, he appears to have returned for the time being to private life. Now, following his signal success in mustering the tribes and defeating Ammon, Samuel calls for a new assembly to reconfirm Saul’s standing as king, which will then be seen in subsequent episodes manifested in the institutions and power of a regular court.

CHAPTER 12

[1]And Samuel said to all Israel, “Look, I have heeded
your voice in all that you said to me and have set a
king over you. [2]And so now the king walks before you
and I have grown old and gray, and my sons, they are
here with you, and I have walked before you from my
youth till this day. [3]Here I am! Witness against me
before the LORD and before His anointed. Whose ox
have I taken and whose donkey have I taken, whom
have I wronged and whom have I abused, and from
whose hand have I taken a bribe to avert my eyes from
him? I shall return it to you!” [4]And they said, “You
have not wronged us and you have not abused us, and
you have not taken a thing from any man.” [5]And he
said to them, “The LORD is witness against you, and
His anointed is witness this day, that you have found
not a thing in my hand.” And they said, “He is
witness.” [6]And Samuel said to the people, “Witness is
the LORD, Who appointed Moses and Aaron and
Who brought up your fathers from the land of Egypt!
[7]And now, stand forth, that I may seek judgment with

you before the LORD, and I shall tell you all the LORD'S bounties that He did for you and for your fathers. [8]When Jacob came into Egypt, and your fathers cried out to the LORD, the LORD sent Moses and Aaron, and they brought your fathers out of Egypt and settled them in this place. [9]And they forgot the LORD your God, and He delivered them into the hand of Sisera commander of Hazor, and into the hand of the Philistines, and into the hand of the king of Moab, and they fought against them. [10]And they cried out to the LORD and said, 'We have offended, for we have abandoned the LORD and served the Baalim and the Ashtaroth. And now, rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and we shall serve You.' [11]And the LORD sent Jerubaal and Bedan and Jephthah and Samuel, and He rescued you from the hand of your enemies all around, and you dwelled in safety. [12]And you saw that Nahash king of the Ammonites had come against you and you said to me, 'No! A king shall reign over us,' though the LORD your God was your king. [13]And now, here is the king you have chosen, for whom you have asked, and here the LORD has put over you a king. [14]If you fear the LORD and serve Him and heed His voice and rebel not against the LORD's words, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the LORD your God, He will rescue you. [15]But

if you heed not the voice of the LORD and you rebel against the LORD'S words, the hand of the LORD will be against you and against your king to destroy you. [16]Even now, take your stance and see this great thing that the LORD is about to do before your eyes. [17]Is it not wheat harvest today? I shall call unto the LORD and He will send thunder and rain, and mark and see, that the evil you have done is great in the eyes of the LORD, to ask for yourselves a king." [18]And Samuel called unto the LORD, and the LORD sent thunder and rain on that day, and all the people feared the LORD greatly, and they feared Samuel as well. [19]And all the people said to Samuel, "Intercede on behalf of your servants with the LORD your God, that we may not die, for we have added to our offenses an evil thing to ask for ourselves a king." [20]And Samuel said to the people, "Fear not. You have done all this evil, but swerve not from following the LORD and serve the LORD with all your heart. [21]And swerve not after mere emptiness that will not avail or rescue, for they are mere emptiness. [22]For the LORD will not desert His people for the sake of His great name, as the LORD has undertaken to make you His people. [23]I on my part, too, far be it from me to offend the LORD by ceasing to intercede on your behalf. I shall instruct you in the good and straight way. [24]Only fear the

LORD and serve Him truly with all your heart, for see the great things He has done for you. [25]And if indeed you do evil, both you and your king will be swept away."

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Samuel said to all Israel*. It is not clear whether Samuel's farewell speech takes place at Gilgal on the ceremony of "renewing the kingship" mentioned at the end of the preceding chapter, or whether this is a separate occasion. It does seem in character for Samuel that he would end up converting the coronation assembly into still another diatribe against the monarchy and an apologia for his own authority as prophet-judge.

I have heeded your voice. The phrase takes us back to the tribal convocation in chapter 8, when the grudging Samuel was enjoined by God to heed the people's voice and make them a king.

2. *the king walks before you*. As we have had occasion to note earlier, this idiom means to serve or act as a functionary.

my sons, they are here with you. This slightly odd reference to Samuel's sons is in all likelihood a final verbal gesture toward the dynasty he has failed to create: Samuel's crooked sons have already disqualified themselves from assuming his mantle, but here he appears to take a last wistful look at that prospect—my sons are here among you, but you insist instead on a king.

3. *Whose ox have I taken and whose donkey have I taken*. Samuel's profession of innocence, as Kyle McCarter Jr. has aptly noted, picks up antithetically his admonition against the "practice of the king" in chapter 8. There he warned repeatedly that the king would "take" all the people's cherished possessions. Here he proclaims that he, the prophet-judge, has taken nothing. In both instances, he shows himself a master of rhetoric.

abused. The Hebrew verb means etymologically to crush or smash.

6. *Witness is the* LORD. The Masoretic Text lacks "witness" (*ʿed*), which is supplied by the Septuagint. (The next clause also looks textually problematic because the verb rendered here as "appointed," *ʿasah*, actually means "made" and is not idiomatic.) It is noteworthy that Samuel sets up his entire speech as a legal disputation between him and the people in which all the evidence, as they are compelled to admit, stands in his favor.

7. *and I shall tell you*. The Masoretic Text lacks these words, but the next phrase, "all the LORD's bounties," preceded by the accusative particle *ʾet*, clearly requires a verb, and the appropriate verb is reflected in the Septuagint.

8. *When Jacob came into Egypt, and your fathers cried out*. The Septuagint inserts between these two clauses the words "the Egyptians oppressed them." But the Greek translators may have simply filled out a narrative ellipsis in the original Hebrew text.

10. *we have abandoned the* LORD *and served the Baalim and the Ashtaroth*. Samuel's speech seems to be an intertwining of an early story with a Deuteronomistic (seventh-century or sixth-century) editorial recasting. The vehement opposition to the monarchy would be original, perhaps even going back to the historical figure of Samuel. The Deuteronomistic school on its part was by no means antimonarchic, though it wanted to limit the monarch with the rules of the Book of God's Teaching (the Torah). On the other hand, the sin of idolatry is not an issue in the Samuel story, but it is a Deuteronomistic preoccupation. It is at this point in the speech that we encounter clusters of Deuteronomistic verbal formulas: "abandoned the LORD and served the Baalim," "delivered [literally, sold] into the hand of," "fear the LORD and serve Him and heed His voice," "serve Him truly with all your heart."

11. *Bedan*. The name of this judge is otherwise unknown, but since there is no reason to assume that the list in the Book of Judges is exhaustive, it seems prudent not to emend this into a familiar name.

and Samuel. It makes sense that Samuel would refer to himself by name rather than with the first-person pronoun because he wants to set himself as a matter of official record in the great roll call of Judges.

12. *Nahash king of the Ammonites*. Since there had been no question of Nahash in the original demand for a king in chapter 8, many scholars have inferred that the present episode reflects a different tradition, in which the call for monarchy is specifically linked with the Ammonite incursion reported in chapter 11. But Moshe Garsiel proposes an interesting political reading that preserves the unity of the text. The original request for a king stresses the need for a military leader but mentions no particular enemy, perhaps because the people fear to name the dominant Philistines. Saul would have initially been installed in the ceremony at Mizpah as a sort of vassal king (or, alternatively, leader of an underground movement), for the Philistines had garrisons in the territory of Benjamin. Now, after Saul's military success against the Ammonites, Samuel explicitly associates the call for a monarchy with Nahash's assault on Israel. This meeting at Gilgal would also have been an occasion to enlist the allegiance to Saul of the trans-Jordanian tribes.

13. *the king you have chosen, for whom you have asked*. Several times Samuel plays sardonically on "asked" (*shaʾal*) and "Saul" (*Shaʾul*). Garsiel also suggests a pun as well in "chosen" (*baḥar*) and the introductory designation of Saul as a "fine fellow" (*baḥur*, literally "chosen one"). Although the story of the institution of the monarchy indicates that God does the choosing, there is no real contradiction—Samuel, in his acute discomfort with the monarchy that has displaced his own authority, readily imputes the choosing to the people, despite his awareness that God has supposedly chosen. God on His part no more than acquiesces in the people's stubborn insistence on a king. The ambiguity of Saul's divine election will continue to be manifested in the narrative.

14. *rebel not against the LORD's words*. The Hebrew says literally "against the LORD's mouth," but the same verb (root *m-r-h*) appears elsewhere with "words" as object, and the two formulations are variants of the same idiom.

He will rescue you. The Masoretic Text lacks a clause stating what will happen if Israel remains faithful to God. These words (which would reflect a single verb with its suffix in the Hebrew) are supplied from the Septuagint.

15. *against your king to destroy you*. The Masoretic Text reads "against your fathers" (without "to destroy you"). This makes no sense because it is a prediction of future catastrophe. Some ancient and medieval interpreters

construe the word “as against your fathers,” but the Septuagint’s reading, reflected in this translation, is more likely because Samuel repeatedly brackets “you and your king” sarcastically in this speech.

17. *wheat harvest*. That is, early summer, when no rain falls in Israel.

19. *an evil thing to ask for ourselves a king*. Through the pressure of Samuel’s oration, this “renewal of the kingship” most peculiarly turns into a collective confession of the sin of having wanted a king.

21. *swerve not after mere emptiness*. “Swerve” is once again Deuteronomistic terminology—to veer off from the straight and narrow path of the LORD. The Masoretic Text inserts “that” (*ki*) after this verb, creating a small problem of syntax, but the Septuagint deletes the word. The present translation adds the adjective “mere” to “emptiness” (*tohu*) in order to convey the full pejorative sense of the noun, which in many contexts suggests futility and is associated with the emptiness of the desert (compare the *tohu wabohu*, “welter and waste,” of the beginning of Genesis).

23. *far be it from me to offend the LORD by ceasing to intercede on your behalf*. One should note how deftly Samuel upstages the king whom he has just helped the people to confirm in office. It is true, his argument runs, that you have made the sinful error of choosing yourself a king. (Samuel of course makes no allowance for God’s role in the choice, which might express grudging divine recognition of a new political necessity.) That cannot be reversed, but never fear—I will still be here to act as the intercessor you will desperately continue to need.

CHAPTER 13

[1]Saul was [] years old when he became king, and [-] two years he reigned over Israel.

[2]And Saul chose for himself three thousand from Israel, and two thousand were with Saul at Michmash and in the Bethel high country, and a thousand were with Jonathan at Gibeath-Benjamin, and the rest of the people he sent away each man to his tent.

[3]And Jonathan struck down the Philistine prefect who was in Gibeah and the Philistines heard of it. And Saul blew the ram's horn throughout the land, saying, "Let the Hebrews hear!" [4]And all Israel heard, saying, "Saul has struck down the Philistine prefect, and, indeed, Israel has become repugnant to the Philistines." And the people rallied round Saul at Gilgal. [5]And the Philistines had assembled to do battle against Israel—thirty thousand chariots and six thousand horsemen and troops multitudinous as the sand on the shore of

the sea. And they came up and encamped at
Michmash, east of Beth-Aven. [6]And the men of Israel
saw that they were in straits, for the troops were hard-
pressed, and the troops hid in caves and among thorns
and among rocks and in dugouts and in pits. [7]And
Hebrews had crossed the Jordan into the territory of
Gad and Gilead, while Saul was still at Gilgal, and all
the troops were trembling behind him. [8]And he waited
seven days for the fixed time Samuel had set, and
Samuel did not come, and the troops began to slip
away from him. [9]And Saul said, “Bring forth to me the
burnt offering and the well-being sacrifice,” and he
offered up the burnt offering. [10]And it happened as he
finished offering the burnt offering that, look, Samuel
was coming, and Saul went out toward him to greet
him. [11]And Samuel said, “What have you done?” And
Saul said, “For I saw that the troops were slipping
away from me, and you on your part had not come at
the fixed time, and the Philistines were assembling at
Michmash. [12]And I thought, ‘Now the Philistines will
come down on me at Gilgal, without my having
entreated the LORD’s favor.’ And I took hold of
myself and offered up the burnt offering.” [13]And
Samuel said to Saul, “You have played the fool! Had
you but kept the command of the LORD your God
that He commanded you, now the LORD would have

made your kingdom over Israel unshaken forever. [14]But
now, your kingdom shall not stand. The LORD has
already sought out for Himself a man after His own
heart, and the LORD has appointed him prince to His
people, for you have not kept what the LORD
commanded you." [15]And Samuel arose and went up
from Gilgal to Gibeath-Benjamin. And Saul mustered
the troops remaining with him, about six hundred
men. [16]And Saul and Jonathan his son and the troops
remaining with them were staying at Gibeath-
Benjamin, and the Philistines had encamped at
Michmash. [17]And a raiding party sallied forth from the
Philistine camp in three columns—one column turned
toward the road to Ophrah, to the Shual region, [18]and
one column turned toward the road to Beth-Horon,
and one column turned toward the border road that
looks out over the Zeboim Valley, toward the desert.
[19]And no smith could be found in all the land of Israel,
for the Philistines had said, "Lest the Hebrews make
sword or spear!" [20]And all Israel would go down to the
Philistines for every man to put an edge on his
plowshare and his mattock and his ax and his sickle.
[21]And the price of the sharpening was a *pim* for the
plowshares and the mattocks and the three-pronged
forks and the axes, and for setting the goads. [22]And so
it was, on the day of battle, that no sword nor spear

was found in the hands of all the troops who were with Saul and Jonathan, but in the hands of Saul and Jonathan his son. [23]And the Philistine garrison sallied forth to the pass of Michmash.

CHAPTER 13 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Saul was [ ] years old . . . and [-] two years he reigned*. The Masoretic Text, notoriously defective at this point, says "Saul was a year old . . . and two years he reigned." This whole sentence is absent from the Septuagint, leading one to suspect that the redactor here stitched into the narrative a textual fragment in which there were lacunae in the numbers that he did not presume to fill in.

3. *Jonathan struck down the Philistine prefect*. Though the Hebrew uses the standard idiom for killing someone in battle, the context of Israel's subservience to the Philistines suggests that this was an act of assassination, intended to trigger general rebellion. Jonathan enters the narrative without introduction. The neophyte king had himself seemed a rather young man, but with the casualness about chronology characteristic of the biblical storyteller, Saul now has a grown son.

in Gibeah. The text reads "Geba," but the two names, which continue to alternate, appear to be variants of the same name.

Saul blew the ram's horn . . . saying, "Let the Hebrews hear!" The ram's horn, which produces shrill, piercing sounds, was often used for a call to arms. The "hearing" of the Israelites is counterpointed to the just reported "hearing" of the Philistines. "Hebrews" is usually the term used by foreigners for the Israelites. As J. P. Fokkelman has observed, Saul invokes "a name used in contempt by enemies such as Pharaoh and the Philistines . . . in order to arouse his people's pride and fortify their will to resist."

4. *Saul has struck down*. Though Jonathan was the assassin, Saul, as political leader of the rebel forces, is credited with responsibility for the act.

Israel has become repugnant. The literal meaning of the Hebrew idiom is very much like "to be in bad odor with," but that antiquated English idiom has a certain Victorian fussiness not suitable to this narrator.

5. *thirty thousand chariots*. This inflated figure is reduced to three thousand in the Septuagint.

6. *in dugouts*. The Hebrew term *tsariaḥ* appears only here and in Judges 9:46. Although the context in Judges has led some interpreters to construe it as a tower, extrabiblical evidence from Late Antiquity argues for a chamber, or sepulcher, hewn out of rock.

7. *And Hebrews had crossed*. Here the narrator's use of "Hebrews" may have been encouraged by the attraction of a folk-etymological pun: *ʿivrim* (Hebrews) *ʿavru* (had crossed).

Saul was still at Gilgal. This cultic site is, according to a common identification, near Jericho in the Jordan Valley. The "Hebrews"—perhaps the general population and not the army—who cross the Jordan appear to be fleeing the Philistines to the relative safety of the territory of Gad and Gilead to the northeast.

8. *the fixed time Samuel had set*. The words "had set" (one word in the Hebrew) are lacking in the Masoretic Text but are supplied by two of the ancient versions. The fact that the Hebrew word in question, *sam*, has the same consonants as the first two consonants of Samuel's name may have led to the scribal error. The entire story of Samuel's fixing a period of seven days for Saul to await him at Gilgal before the offering of sacrifices goes back to 10:8. The fulfillment of that initial instruction to the new king has been interrupted by the election of Saul by lottery, his campaign against the Ammonites, and the renewal of the kingship at Gilgal. One must assume either that the order to await Samuel at Gilgal was for an eventual meeting at an unspecified future time or that one literary strand of the Saul story has been interrupted by the splicing in of other strands (chapters 11–12).

the troops began to slip away from him. Battle could not be engaged without first entreating the favorable disposition of the deity through sacrifice (compare Saul's words of explanation in verse 12). Saul's men are beginning to give up hope and to desert; so he feels, with good reason, that he can afford to wait no longer.

10. *as he finished offering the burnt offering that, look, Samuel was coming*. The timing gives the distinct appearance of a cat-and-mouse game played by Samuel. He is not absolutely late, but he has waited until the last possible moment—sometime well into the seventh day (or it might even be the eighth day), by which time Saul has been obliged to take matters into his own hands.

12. *I took hold of myself*. The Hebrew verb *hit'apeq* means to force yourself to do, or to refrain from doing, something. The same verb is used when the tearful Joseph "could no longer hold himself in check" in the presence of his brothers (Genesis 45:1).

13. *Had you but kept the command of the* LORD. The Masoretic Text has a declarative, "you have not kept," but the structure of the whole sentence argues strongly for emending *lo'* ("not") to *lu* ("if" introducing a clause contrary to fact). Samuel flatly assumes that his own commands and the commandments of the LORD are entirely equivalent. In fact, it is he, not God, who has given Saul the elaborate instructions about waiting seven days at Gilgal. In a kind of prophet's tantrum, Samuel insists again and again in this speech on the words "commanded" and "command." (In verse 14, "appointed him prince" is literally "commanded him prince.")

made your kingdom . . . unshaken forever. The Hebrew verb *hekhin* means both to establish and to keep on a firm foundation (*makhon*), and so it is misleading to translate it only as the initiating "to establish."

14. *your kingdom shall not stand*. Samuel's rage over the fact that Saul has offered the sacrifice derives from his construing that act as a usurpation of his own prerogatives as master of the cult (though there are other biblical instances of kings who offer sacrifices). One suspects that Samuel has set up Saul for this "failure," and that he would have been content only with a puppet king.

The LORD *has already sought out for Himself a man after His own heart*. Although this would have to be a veiled prediction of the advent of David, in naturalistic terms, the incensed Samuel is in a way bluffing: fed up with Saul, he announces to the king that God has already chosen a successor—about whom Samuel himself as yet knows nothing whatever, nor has he even had time for a communication from God that there will be a successor.

appointed him prince to His people. As Polzin shrewdly notes, David will later use these very words (2 Samuel 6:21) when he angrily tells Saul's daughter Michal that it is he who has been divinely elected to replace her father.

15. *to Gibeath-Benjamin*. It looks improbable that Samuel would now go off after this confrontation to Gibeah, which is Saul's hometown. The text at this point in the Septuagint has him going "on the way," leaving the more likely outcome that he abandons Saul and his small handful of men at Gibeah to tackle the Philistines.

about six hundred men. By this point, 1400 have "slipped away."

17. *the Shual region*. The name literally means "Foxland."

18. *Zeboim Valley*. Or, Jackal Valley.

19. *no smith could be found in all the land of Israel*. This bit of background notation vividly reflects the abject status of the Israelites under Philistine domination. Ironsmiths are banned among them to prevent their developing the weaponry needed for rebellion.

20. *his sickle*. The reading used here is, as in the Septuagint, *ḥermesho*, instead of the Masoretic *maḥareshato*, "his plowshare," which repeats the first term in the list.

21. *the price of the sharpening was a* pim. The italicized term occurs only here in the Bible, but the archaeologists have found stone weights marked *pim*, which is two-thirds of a shekel (here, evidently, a silver shekel). The Philistines, then, not only deprive the Israelites of the technology for making weapons but also reap a profit from their smithless vassals for the maintenance of the agricultural tools they need for their livelihood.

the three-pronged forks. A commonly proposed emendation yields "a third of a shekel for the forks and the axes and for the setting of the goads." This change would make sense if in fact the sharpening of these implements were half the work of sharpening plowshares and mattocks, but that is not entirely clear.

CHAPTER 14

[1]And when the day came round, Jonathan son of Saul
said to the lad bearing his armor, “Come, let us cross
over to the Philistine garrison which is on the other
side there,” but his father he did not tell. [2]And Saul
was sitting at the outskirts of Gibeah under the
pomegranate tree which is at Migron, and the troops
that were with him were about six hundred men. [3]And
Ahijah son of Ahitub brother of Ichabod son of
Phineas son of Eli priest of the LORD at Shiloh was
bearer of the ephod, and the troops did not know that
Jonathan had gone. [4]And in the pass through which
Jonathan sought to cross over to the Philistine garrison
there was a rocky crag on one side and on the other
side, and the name of the one was Bozez and the name
of the other Seneh. [5]The one crag loomed to the north
facing Michmash and the other to the south facing
Gibeah. [6]And Jonathan said to the lad bearing his
armor, “Come, let us cross over to the garrison of
these uncircumcised! Perhaps the LORD will act for
us, for nothing holds the LORD back from rescue,

whether by many or by few.” [7]And his armor bearer
said to him, “Do you whatever your heart inclines—
here I am with you, my heart as yours.” [8]And Jonathan
said, “Look, we are about to cross over to the men and
we shall be exposed to them. [9]If thus they say, ‘Stand
still until we get to you,’ we shall stand where we are
and not go up to them. [10]And if thus they say, ‘Come
up to us,’ we shall go up, for the LORD will have given
them in our hand, and that will be the sign for us.”
[11]And the two of them were exposed to the Philistine
garrison, and the Philistines said, “Look, Hebrews are
coming out of the holes where they’ve been hiding.”
[12]And the men of the garrison spoke out to Jonathan
and his armor bearer and said, “Come up to us, and
we’ll teach you something!” And Jonathan said to his
armor bearer, “Come up behind me, for the LORD
has given them into the hand of Israel.” [13]And
Jonathan climbed up on his hands and knees with his
armor bearer behind him, and they fell before
Jonathan with his armor bearer finishing them off
behind him. [14]And the first toll of dead that Jonathan
with his armor bearer struck down was about twenty
men, with arrows and rocks of the field. [15]And terror
shook the camp in the field and all the troops. The
garrison and the raiding party were also shaken, and
the earth trembled, and it became dire terror. [16]And

the lookouts attached to Saul at Gibeath-Benjamin saw
and, look, the multitude was melting away and going
off yonder. [17]And Saul said to the troops who were
with him, “Call the roll, pray, and see who has gone
from us,” and they called the roll and, look, Jonathan
and his armor bearer were absent. [18]And Saul said to
Ahijah, “Bring forth the ephod.” For on that day he
was bearing the ephod before the Israelites. [19]And it
happened that as Saul was speaking to the priest, the
tumult in the Philistine camp was growing greater and
greater. And Saul said to the priest, “Pull back your
hand.” [20]And Saul and all the troops who were with
him rallied and entered into the fighting, and, look,
every man’s sword was against his fellow—a very great
panic. [21]And there were Hebrews who were previously
with the Philistines, who had come up with them into
the camp, and they, too, turned round to be with Israel
under Saul and Jonathan. [22]And all the men of Israel
who were hiding out in the high country of Ephraim
had heard that the Philistines were fleeing, and they,
too, gave chase after them in the fighting. [23a]And the
LORD delivered Israel on that day.

[23b]And the fighting moved on past Beth-Aven. [24]And
the men of Israel were hard-pressed on that day. And

Saul made the troops take an oath, saying, “Cursed be the man who eats food until evening, until I take vengeance upon my enemies!” And all the troops tasted no food. [25]And the whole country came into the forest, and there was honey on the ground. [26]And the troops entered the forest and, look, there was a flow of honey, but none touched his hand to his mouth, for the troops feared the vow. [27]But Jonathan had not heard when his father made the troops swear, and he reached with the tip of the staff that was in his hand and dipped it into the honeycomb and brought his hand back to his mouth, and his eyes lit up. [28]And a man from the troops spoke up and said, “Your father made the troops solemnly swear, saying, ‘Cursed be the man who eats food today.’ And so the troops were famished.” [29]And Jonathan said, “My father has stirred up trouble for the land. See, pray, that my eyes have lit up because I tasted a bit of this honey. [30]How much better still if the troops had really eaten today from the booty of their enemies that they found, for then the toll of Philistines would have been all the greater.” [31]And they struck down the Philistines on that day from Michmash to Ajalon, and the troops were very famished. [32]And the troops pounced on the booty and took sheep and cattle and calves and slaughtered them on the ground, and the troops ate them together with

the blood. [33]And they told Saul, saying, “Look, the troops are offending the LORD by eating together with the blood!” And he said, “You have acted treacherously. Roll a big stone over to me now.” [34]And Saul said, “Spread out among the troops, and say to them, ‘Every man bring forth to me his ox and his sheep and slaughter them here and eat, and you shall not offend the LORD by eating together with the blood.’” And all the troops brought forth each man what he had in hand that night and they slaughtered it there. [35]And Saul built an altar to the LORD, it was the first altar he built to the LORD.

[36]And Saul said, “Let us go down after the Philistines by night and despoil them till daybreak, and we shall not leave a man among them.” And they said, “Whatever is good in your eyes, do.” And the priest said, “Let us approach God yonder.” [37]And Saul inquired of God, “Shall I go down after the Philistines? Will You give them in the hand of Israel?” And He did not answer him on that day. [38]And Saul said, “Draw near, all you chiefs of the troops, mark and see, wherein is this offense today? [39]For as the LORD lives Who delivers Israel, were it in Jonathan my son, he would be doomed to die!” And none

answered him from all the troops. [40]And he said to all Israel, “You will be on one side and I and Jonathan my son on the other side.” And the troops said to Saul, “What is good in your eyes, do.” [41]And Saul said, “LORD, God of Israel! Why did You not answer Your servant today? If there is guilt in me or in Jonathan my son, O LORD God of Israel, show Urim, and if it is in Your people Israel, show Thummim.” And the lot fell on Jonathan and Saul, and the troops came out clear. [42]And Saul said, “Cast between me and Jonathan my son.” And the lot fell on Jonathan. [43]And Saul said, “Tell me, what have you done?” And Jonathan told him and said, “I indeed tasted from the tip of the staff that was in my hand a bit of honey. Here I am, ready to die!” [44]And Saul said, “So may God do to me, and even more, for Jonathan is doomed to die!” [45]And the troops said to Saul, “Will Jonathan die, who has performed this great rescue in Israel? Heaven forbid, as the LORD lives, that a single hair of his head should fall to the ground! For with God has he wrought this day.” And the troops saved Jonathan, and he did not die. [46]And Saul went away from pursuing the Philistines and the Philistines went back to their place.

47 And Saul had taken hold of the kingship over Israel,
and he did battle round about with all his enemies,
with Moab and with the Ammonites and with Edom
and with the kings of Zobah and with the Philistines,
and wherever he turned he would inflict punishment.
48 And he triumphed and struck down Amalek and
rescued Israel from the hand of its plunderers.

49 And Saul's sons were Jonathan and Ishvi and
Malkishua, and the names of his two daughters were
Merab the firstborn and Michal the younger. 50 And the
name of Saul's wife was Ahinoam daughter of
Ahimaaz. And the name of his commander was
Abiner son of Ner, Saul's uncle. 51 And Kish, Saul's
father, and Ner, Abner's father, were sons of Abiel.
52 And the fighting against the Philistines was fierce all
the days of Saul, and when Saul saw any warrior or
valiant fellow, he would gather him to himself.

CHAPTER 14 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *but his father he did not tell*. One assumes that his father would have forbidden him to go out on so dangerous a mission, but there is also an implicit contrast between Saul, sitting under the pomegranate tree, hesitant to

act in the face of the superior forces of the enemy, and Jonathan, prepared to execute a daring commando raid.

3. *Ahijah son of Ahitub brother of Ichabod*. The genealogy here casts a certain suspect light on Saul: the priest who accompanies him to the battlefield, and on whose prognostication he relies, belongs to the blighted—and rejected—house of Eli.

bearer of the ephod. The title, *noseʾ ephod*, is formally parallel to "armor bearer," *noseʾ kelim*, and so suggests a contrast between Saul, who relies on divination, and Jonathan, who relies on his weapons.

4. *the pass through which Jonathan sought to cross over*. The Philistines and the Israelites are encamped on the tops of two steep hills facing each other, with a deep gully, or wadi, running between them. Jonathan and his armor bearer are able to make their way down the slope unseen by taking cover among the crags and under overhangs. But Jonathan realizes that there will be a moment of truth in this tactic, for when they reach the floor of the gully, they will be "exposed" (verse 8) to the Philistine outpost.

5. *loomed*. The Hebrew *mutsaq* means literally "column." It might conceivably be a scrambled scribal repetition of the next Hebrew word in the text, *mitsafon*, "from the north."

6. *these uncircumcised*. This designation for the Philistines is of course contemptuous. Its spirit is precisely reflected, from the other side of the ethnic barrier, in Othello's reference to a Turk he killed in battle as a "circumcised dog."

7. *Do whatever your heart inclines—here I am with you, my heart as yours*. The translation follows the reading of the Septuagint. The Masoretic Text conveys the same general idea, though a bit less coherently: "Do whatever is in your heart, incline you—here I am with you as your heart."

10. *that will be the sign for us*. Readers from the Talmud to our own times have construed this as a kind of divination. It is far more likely that a further contrast is implied between Saul, who depends on divination, and Jonathan, who is thinking in pragmatic military terms: if they invite us to come up to

them, that will be our great opportunity; if they order us to await their descent, we may have no recourse (except, perhaps, flight at the last moment).

11. *Look, Hebrews are coming out of the holes where they've been hiding*. These words accord perfectly with the report in 13:6 of the Israelites hiding in every nook and cranny, and also vividly express the contempt of the Philistines for the Hebrews, whom they depict as so many vermin. The contempt is extended in the taunting challenge to Jonathan and his lad in the next verse.

13. *Jonathan climbed up on his hands and knees*. Although it is not easy to reconstruct the exact tactic of surprise, this notation makes clear that instead of walking up the slope directly to the Philistine outpost, Jonathan and his armor bearer manage to slip off to one side and make their way up the slope by a circuitous route, crouching and crawling in order to take shelter among the rocks, and thus come upon the outpost undetected.

14. *the first toll of dead*. The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "the first blow."
with arrows and rocks of the field. The translation adopts the reading of the Septuagint. The Masoretic Text has here "within about half a furrow long, an acre [?] of field," but that sequence of Hebrew words looks scrambled.

15. *terror shook*. The Hebrew *ḥaradah* means both terror and shaking.
dire terror. The Hebrew is literally "terror of God," but the latter word, *'elohim*, serves as an intensifier. In any case, the idiom functions as a kind of pun—dire terror is terror caused by God.

16. *going off yonder*. The translation presupposes *halom* ("yonder"), a repeated word in this episode, instead of the Masoretic *wahalom*, which could mean either, asyntactically, "and yonder" or "and hitting" (that is, the Philistines were going on, hitting each other).

18. *Bring forth the ephod*. The Masoretic Text, both in this clause and the next, has "Ark of God" instead of "ephod," but the reading of the Septuagint, *ephod*, is compelling on several grounds. We have been informed earlier that the Ark of God was left, not to be moved for the foreseeable future, at Kiriath-Jearim. The Ark was not an instrument of divination, like the ephod, and what Saul wants Ahijah to do here is to divine. It is possible that Ahijah's

lineal connection with the keepers of the Ark at Shiloh led some early transmitter of the text to align this episode with the earlier story in which the Ark—quite misguidedly—was brought out from Shiloh to the battlefield. The Masoretic Text also reads, asyntactically, "for the Ark of God on that day was, and the Israelites," whereas the Septuagint, far more coherently, has "for on that day he was bearing the ephod before the Israelites."

19. *Pull back your hand*. That is, desist from the act of divination you have begun—it is no longer necessary, for the auditory evidence of the Philistine rout has reached our ears.

20. *and, look, every man's sword was against his fellow*. This spectacle of total, self-mutilating panic (*mehumah*) in the camp of the enemy is a recurrent motif that goes back to Judges (compare the effect of Gideon's surprise attack on the Midianite camp), and is a kind of narrative realization of God's direct intervention in battle to grant victory to Israel. The foundational instance of this motif is the victory at the Sea of Reeds in Exodus.

21. *Hebrews who were previously with the Philistines*. Given the subject status of the Israelites, it is not surprising that some of them would have been conscripted by the Philistines, either as soldiers or to perform menial tasks for the troops. They are referred to here as "Hebrews" because that is how their Philistine masters would have referred to them.

24. *And the men of Israel were hard-pressed*. The explanation for being hard-pressed is not certain. The Hebrew term, *nigas*, most naturally refers to being at a military disadvantage, but here the Israelites appear to have the upper hand. The other possibility is that the men are weak from hunger, not having had the opportunity to eat in their hot pursuit of the Philistines. The oath Saul exacts would then compound this predicament. It should be said that the Septuagint reflects a different text for this entire clause: "And Saul committed a great blunder on that day."

Cursed be the man who eats food. As we shall have occasion to see later in the David narrative, it was a fairly common practice (though by no means an automatic one) for fighting men to take on themselves a vow of abstinence from food, in order to enter the battle in what amounted to a state of dedicated ritual purity. But Saul in this instance makes a miscalculation,

imposing a fast on hungry men, in an effort to force the hand of divinity. (Thus the Septuagint's version of the first clause of this verse might be regarded as an interpretive gloss on the lapidary formulation of the received text.)

25. *And the whole country came into the forest*. This sounds as odd in the Hebrew as in translation because "country" (*haʾarets*) is not an idiomatic term for "people." Extensive textual surgery yields this conjectural reconstruction of an original clause: "and there was honeycomb on the ground." An additional difficulty in this passage is that the common Hebrew term *yaʿar*, "forest," has a rare homonym that means honeycomb. (In verse 27, the term that occurs is *yaʿarah*, which is unambiguous both because with the feminine suffix it can refer only to honeycomb and because it is joined with *devash*, "honey.") But the received text in our verse has the preposition "into" (*bᵉ*), which presumes that *yaʿar* means "forest" and not "honeycomb."

27. *his eyes lit up*. The idiom used for the refreshing effect of a taste of food is a pointed one because, as Shimon Bar-Efrat has noted, the verb "to light up" (the Hebrew verb *ʾor*) plays antithetically on Saul's "cursed (*ʾarur*) be the man."

29. *My father has stirred up trouble*. The verb *ʿakhar* that is used here is doubly important. Etymologically, it means "to muddy," as in stirring up muck in a pond. Thus, it is an antithesis to the lighting up of the eyes Jonathan has just experienced through partaking of food. It is also the verb Jephthah invokes when he sees it is his daughter who has come out to greet him: "and you have joined ranks with my troublers" (Judges 11:35). The echo sets up a network of intertextual links with the Jephthah story: here, too, a father who is a military leader seeks to influence the outcome of the battle by a rash vow that is an unwitting death sentence on his own child.

31. *And they struck down the Philistines*. Although the form of the two verbs does not indicate it, the narrative logic of the scene compels us to construe this sentence as a pluperfect summary of the day's action, responding to Jonathan's reference to the "toll" (literally, "blow") exacted from the Philistines.

32. *the troops pounced on the booty . . . ate them together with the blood*. The first verb here has pejorative force, being generally used for birds of prey descending on their victims. Biblical law repeatedly prohibits the consumption of meat together with the blood because the blood is regarded as the sacred stuff of life. The slaughtering on the ground here would make it more difficult to allow the blood to drain off, as would have been done in slaughtering on a stone platform or altar. (Note Saul's correction of the practice in verses 33–34.) Jonathan's tasting a bit of honey thus leads to an orgy of gluttonous consumption of meat with blood. This consequence attaches an association of violation of sacred law to Jonathan's act, but the ultimate fault lies with Saul, who by imposing a fast on already famished men has set them up to abandon all restraint the moment the taboo against eating is broken.

34. *what he had in hand*. This accords with the Septuagint, *ʾasher beyado*, against the Masoretic, "his bull in his hand," *shoro beyado*.

37. *And Saul inquired of God . . . And He did not answer him*. Although it was extremely common for military leaders everywhere in the ancient Near East to consult an oracle before going into battle, Saul's failed inquiry here participates in a larger pattern in his story: he is constantly seeking knowledge of what is about to happen (as in his quest for a seer to help him locate the asses at the very beginning), but this knowledge is repeatedly withheld from him.

38. *wherein is this offense*. Saul assumes that the oracle did not respond because someone among his troops committed some "offense." The narrator does not necessarily endorse this assumption.

39. *were it in Jonathan my son*. "It" refers to the just mentioned "offense." Is this a flourish of rhetorical emphasis, or, as J. P. Fokkelman has suggested, does it open the possibility that Saul has Jonathan in mind? In the immediately preceding episode, after all, Jonathan has gone out on a military operation without permission. Jonathan now is brought forth as the possible perpetrator of some further, not yet specified offense, which will prove to be the tasting of the honey. In any case, there seems to be some deep ambivalence between father and son well before the appearance of David at court.

41. *LORD, God of Israel! Why did You not answer Your servant today? If there is guilt in me or in Jonathan my son . . . show Urim, and if it is in Your people Israel, show Thummim*. This version comes from the Septuagint. The Masoretic Text here has the short and cryptic "Show Thammim [sic]." Saul's frustrated reference to his failure to receive an answer from the oracle makes a great deal of narrative sense (see the comment on verse 37). The Septuagint version also makes intelligible the process of oracular lottery. The Urim and Thummim were two divinatory objects attached to the ephod, probably in a special compartment. They may have been in the form of stones or tokens with lettering on them. They provided indication of binary oppositions: thus the question addressed to the oracle had to take the form of yes or no, *x* or *y*. The opposition may have been underscored by the fact that Urim and Thummim begin, respectively, with the first and last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. More speculatively, Urim might be linked with *ʾaror*, "to curse," and Thummim with the root *t-m-m*, whole or innocent.

the lot fell on Jonathan and Saul. The same idiom of being "caught" by the lot that was used for Saul's election recurs here in the devolution of the curse on Jonathan.

42. *Cast between me and Jonathan*. Since the Urim and Thummim can provide only binary responses, it is necessary to divide again into two alternatives in order to get an answer.

43. *indeed tasted . . . a bit of honey*. Jonathan begins by clearly and emphatically admitting responsibility, using the infinitive absolute followed by the verb (literally, "taste I have tasted"). But he chooses, with precision, the minimal verb "taste" rather than "eat" and holds back its minimal object, "a bit of honey," for the very end of the sentence.

45. *And the troops said to Saul, "Will Jonathan die."* As several commentators have observed, this is a precise reversal of the incident after Saul's victory over Nahash, in which the troops sought to kill dissidents and Saul saved their lives. Now he has become the severe autocrat, and his son's well-earned popularity with the troops saves the prince.

47. *Saul had taken hold of the kingship*. The verb used, *lakad*, is the same one just invoked for the process of being caught, trapped, taken hold of, in the divine lottery. Saul himself was "caught" for kingship. Now, through

conquest, he catches, or secures, the kingship. There is thus surely an undertone of ambiguity in this report of his success as monarch.

he would inflict punishment. The Hebrew *yarshiʿa* usually means to condemn someone as guilty in a court of justice. But a related idiom, "to do justice," *ʿasot shephatim*, also means to carry out punitive acts against an enemy. The Masoretic version is to be preferred to the Septuagint's *yoshiʿa*, "he would rescue," because in this narrative, God, not Saul, is represented as the rescuer. Apparently, the implication is that he carried out punishing expeditions against Israel's enemies to the east of the Jordan without actually conquering them, as David was to do.

49. *And Saul's sons*. This entire notice of Saul's family and of his conquests is placed as a formal marker of conclusion to the body of the Saul story. What follows is the episode that will definitively disqualify him for the throne in Samuel's eyes, and then David will enter the scene. The episode in which Saul pronounces a death sentence on his son and heir heralds the climactic encounter with Samuel over Amalek in which the prophet will pronounce the end of Saul's incipient dynasty. Eventually, Saul and Jonathan, the parties jointly indicated by the first cast of the Urim, will perish in battle on the same day.

50. *Abiner*. A variant vocalization of Abner.

52. *And the fighting against the Philistines*. Saul has greater success on the eastern front, but he is unable to subdue the Philistines. In the end, they will destroy him in their victory at Gilboa.

when Saul saw any warrior . . . he would gather him to himself. This report of constant military conscription indicates the institutionalization of the monarchy and also accords with Samuel's warning about the burden of conscription that the king would impose.

CHAPTER 15

[1]And Samuel said to Saul, “Me has the LORD sent to
anoint you as king over His people Israel. And now,
heed the voice of the words of the LORD. [2]Thus says
the LORD of Armies, ‘I have made reckoning of what
Amalek did to Israel, that he set against him on the
way as he was coming up from Egypt. [3]Now, go and
strike down Amalek, and put under the ban everything
that he has, you shall not spare him, and you shall put
to death man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and
sheep, camel and donkey.’”

[4]And Saul summoned the troops and assembled them
at Telaim, two hundred thousand foot soldiers and ten
thousand men of Judah. [5]And Saul came up to the city
of Amalek and lay in wait in the ravine. [6]And Saul said
to the Kenite, “Go, turn away, come down from amidst
the Amalekite, lest I sweep you away together with
him, for you did kindness to all the Israelites when
they came up from Egypt.” And the Kenite turned

away from the midst of Amalek. [7]And Saul struck down Amalek from Havilah till you come to Shur, which is before Egypt. [8]And he caught Agag king of Amalek alive, and all the people he put under the ban with the edge of the sword. [9]And Saul, and the troops with him, spared Agag and the best of the sheep and the cattle, the fat ones and the young ones, everything good, and they did not want to put them under the ban. But all the vile and worthless possessions, these they put under the ban.

[10]And the word of the LORD came to Samuel, saying, [11]"I repent that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from Me, and My words he has not fulfilled." And Samuel was incensed and he cried out to the LORD all night long. [12]And Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul, and it was told to Samuel, saying, "Saul has gone to Carmel and, look, he has put up a monument for himself, and has turned about and passed onward, and gone down to Gilgal." [13]And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, "Blessed be you to the LORD! I have fulfilled the word of the LORD." [14]And Samuel said, "And what is this sound of sheep in my ears, and the sound of cattle that I hear?" [15]And Saul said, "From the Amalekite they

have brought them, for the troops spared the best of the sheep and the cattle in order to sacrifice to the LORD your God, and the rest we put under the ban.” [16]And Samuel said, “Hold off, that I may tell you what the LORD spoke to me this night.” And he said, “Speak.” [17]And Samuel said, “Though you may be small in your own eyes, you are the head of the tribes of Israel, and the LORD has anointed you king over Israel. [18]And the LORD sent you on a mission and said to you, ‘You shall put under the ban the offenders, Amalek, and do battle against them till you destroy them all.’

[19]And why did you not heed the voice of the LORD, for you pounced on the booty and did evil in the eyes of the LORD?” [20]And Saul said to Samuel, “But I heeded the voice of the LORD and went on the way the LORD sent me, and I brought back Agag king of Amalek, but Amalek I put under the ban. [21]And the troops took from the booty sheep and cattle, the pick of the banned things, to sacrifice to the LORD your God at Gilgal.” [22]And Samuel said,

“Does the LORD take delight in
burnt offerings and sacrifices

as in heeding the voice of the
LORD?
For heeding is better than sacrifice,
hearkening, than the fat of rams.
[23]For the diviner's offense is
rebellion,
the transgression of idols—
defiance.
Since you have cast off the word of
the LORD,
He has cast you aside as king."

[24]And Saul said to Samuel, "I have offended, for I have transgressed the utterance of the LORD, and your word, for I feared the troops and listened to their voice. [25]Now then, forgive, pray, my offense, and turn back with me, that I may bow down before the LORD." [26]And Samuel said to Saul, "I will not turn back with you, for you have cast aside the word of the LORD and He has cast you aside from being king over Israel." [27]And Samuel turned round to go, and Saul grasped the skirt of his cloak, and it tore. [28]And Samuel said to him, "The LORD has torn away the kingship of Israel from you this day and given it to your fellow man who is better than you. [29]And, what's

more, Israel's Eternal does not deceive and does not repent, for He is no human to repent." [30]And Saul said, "I have offended. Now show me honor, pray, before the elders of my people and before Israel, and turn back with me, that I may bow to the LORD your God. [31]And Samuel turned back from Saul, and Saul bowed to the LORD. [32]And Samuel said, "Bring forth to me Agag king of Amalek!" And Agag went to him with mincing steps, and he thought, "Ah, death's bitterness is turned away!" [33]And Samuel said,

"As your sword has bereaved
women,
more bereaved than all women
your mother!"

And Samuel cut him apart before the LORD at Gilgal. [34]And Samuel went to Ramah, while Saul went up to his home in Gibeath-Saul.

[35]And Samuel saw Saul no more till his dying day, for Samuel was grieved about Saul, and the LORD had repented making Saul king over Israel.

CHAPTER 15 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Me has the LORD sent*. Samuel, by placing the accusative first-person pronoun at the beginning of his speech (normal Hebrew usage would simply attach an accusative suffix to the verb), once again highlights his own centrality to this whole process: it is only because he, as God's unique delegate, has anointed Saul that Saul can claim to be king. In this way, Samuel sets the stage rhetorically for the prerogative of canceling Saul's kingship that he will exercise later in this episode.

heed the voice of the words of the LORD. This redundant phrasing is a little odd, but it is dictated by the pressure of the thematically fraught key phrase, "heed [or listen to] the voice," that defines the entire episode. Saul fails to listen as he fails to see.

2. *reckoning of what Amalek did to Israel*. After Amalek massacred the Israelite stragglers (see Deuteronomy 25:18), Israel was commanded to destroy all remnants of the Amalekites.

set against him. This phrase may be an ellipsis for "set ambushes against him."

3. *put under the ban everything that he has*. The verb here is in the plural, evidently including the troops together with Saul, though the subsequent verbs in this verse are in the singular. The "ban" (*ḥerem*), one of the cruelest practices of ancient Near Eastern warfare, is an injunction of total destruction —of all living things—of the enemy. Amalek is, of course, the archetypal implacable enemy of Israel, but it should be said that here, as throughout the Samuel story, there is at least some margin of ambiguity as to whether the real source of this ferocious imperative is God or the prophet who claims to speak on His behalf.

you shall not spare him. The Hebrew verb *ḥamal* straddles two senses, to feel mercy for and to allow to survive, and the ambiguity between the emotional and the pragmatic sense is exploited throughout the story.

4. *summoned the troops*. The word for "summoned" (there are several more common terms for mustering troops in the Bible) is quite rare, and literally means "made them listen." The same verb as "to listen" in a different

conjugation, it continues to call attention to this thematically weighted activity.

two hundred thousand foot soldiers and ten thousand men of Judah. The troops from Judah are presumably also foot soldiers, and so an ellipsis is probable: "and another ten thousand foot soldiers from the men of Judah."

6. *Go, turn away, come down from amidst*. These overlapping imperative verbs are obviously meant to underscore the urgency of the command. The Kenites appear to have been a tribe of migratory metalsmiths (the meaning of their name) somehow allied with Israel (compare Judges 4–5), although the nature of the "kindness" they did for Israel is not known.

9. *And Saul, and the troops with him, spared Agag*. The Hebrew says simply "Saul and the troops spared Agag," but because a singular verb is used with the plural subject, it signals to the audience that Saul is the principal actor and the troops only accessories. (This highlighting of the first-mentioned agent through a singular verb for a plural subject is a general feature of biblical usage.) When confronted by Samuel, Saul will turn the responsibility for the action on its head. "Spared" momentarily sounds as though it could mean "had mercy on," but then it is also attached to cattle and sheep. There is a morally scandalous pairing in the selective massacre Saul and his troops perpetrate: they kill all the defective animals and every man, woman, child, and infant, while sparing the good, edible animals and the king (perhaps with the idea that some further profit can be extracted from him).

the fat ones. The Masoretic Text has *mishnim* (two-year-olds?), but, in a reversal of consonants, the Syriac and the Targum reflect *shmenim*, fat ones.

11. *Samuel was incensed*. The reasons for his rage are wonderfully unspecified, or perhaps overdetermined. He may well be incensed with Saul, or with the people who coerced him into this whole distasteful monarchic business in the first place, or even with God for making him heed the people.

12. *Carmel*. This is not the Carmel near Haifa but a town in the tribal territory of Judah, in the general vicinity of Hebron.

he has put up a monument for himself. This would be a victory marker, probably in the form of a stele.

14. *this sound of sheep . . . and the sound of cattle*. "Sound" and "voice" are the same word in Hebrew (*qol*), and so the thematic key word of the episode comes to the fore: Saul had been enjoined to listen to the voice of the LORD; now Samuel tells him that all that can be heard (the same verb as "listen" in Hebrew) is the bleating and mooing "voice" of the very flocks which, according to God's word, should have been destroyed.

15. *they have brought them*. Saul first uses a vague third-person plural, entirely shifting the responsibility to unnamed others who have done the bringing.

the troops spared the best of the sheep and the cattle. In verse 9, of course, it was expressly reported that Saul, with the troops as accessories, spared the flocks.

in order to sacrifice to the LORD your God. This pious justification for the act was nowhere in evidence in the narrator's initial account of it (verses 8–9). Although it is common enough in biblical usage when addressing a holy man to say "the LORD your God," that locution, invoked twice in this story by Saul, stresses the distance between him and God and his sense that it is Samuel who has proprietary claims on the divinity.

17. *Though you may be small in your own eyes*. Samuel is obviously harking back to Saul's initial expression of unworthiness for the throne ("from the smallest of the tribes of Israel," 9:21), as if to say, Well, you may not really amount to much, as you yourself said at the outset, but you nevertheless have taken upon yourself the solemn responsibility of king.

18. *mission*. Literally, "a way."

till you destroy them all. The Masoretic Text, illogically, has "till they destroy them all," but the second-person suffix is supplied in some of the ancient versions.

19. *why did you not heed the voice of the LORD*. Samuel hammers home the thematic point of the whole confrontation: Saul, actually the initiator, proclaims he has listened to the voice of the people (verse 24)—as, ironically, Samuel himself was enjoined by God to do in chapter 8—instead of to the voice of God. This antithesis is more pointed in the Hebrew because the more general meaning of the word for "troops," *ʿam*, is "people."

you pounced on the booty. Samuel uses the same verb for greedy predation that was used to describe the orgy of meat eating after the breaking

of the vow of fasting in chapter 14.

21. *the troops took*. Once again, Saul shifts the responsibility for the act from himself to his troops.

22. *Does the LORD take delight in burnt offerings*. Samuel caps his prophetic denunciation with the declamation of a prophetic poem. The theme that God requires obedience, not rote performance of the cult, is a common one among the later "literary" prophets, though in their poetry obedience to God means refraining from acts of exploitation rather than carrying out a program of extermination.

heeding the voice of the LORD. The thematic phrase is now placed in the foreground of the prophetic poem, reinforced by "heeding [or listening] is better than sacrifice" and "hearkening" in the next lines.

23. *the diviner's offense is rebellion*. That is, rebellion is as great a sin as divination or sorcery. The choice of the comparison is not accidental, considering Saul's repeated futile attempts to divine the future.

the transgression of idols—defiance. The first phrase in the Hebrew is literally "transgression and idols," but is readily construed as a hendiadys (two words for a single concept) without emending the text. The gist of this parallel verset: defiance is as great a sin as the worship of idols (*teraphim*).

24. *I have transgressed the utterance of the LORD, and your word*. The Hebrew is literally "the mouth of the LORD." There is a kind of hesitation in Saul's words: I have violated God's command, and yours as well. Is there a difference between the two? Though there may well be, Saul is in no position to argue that Samuel's words are not God's.

25. *turn back with me, that I may bow down*. It would have been Samuel's function to offer the sacrifice. For Samuel not to accompany Saul to the altar would be a manifest public humiliation, a gesture of abandonment.

27. *Saul grasped the skirt of his cloak, and it tore*. The "little cloak" that Hannah would bring each year for the child Samuel has now become the prophet's flowing robe. Samuel, who never misses a cue to express his implacability toward Saul, immediately converts the tearing of the cloak into

a dramatic symbol of Saul's lost kingdom. The Saul story, as we shall see, will return to cloaks and to their torn or cut skirts.

29. *Israel's Eternal does not deceive and does not repent*. Samuel's use of the verb "repent" strikes a peculiar dissonance. We in fact have been told that God repented that He made Saul king. What Samuel says here is that God will not change His mind about changing His mind. But might not this verbal contradiction cast some doubt on Samuel's reliability as a source for what God does and doesn't want? There even remains a shadow of a doubt as to whether the election of Saul in the first place was God's, or whether it was merely Samuel's all-too-human mistake.

30. *show me honor*. Saul reverts to the recurrent term *kabed*—"honor" or "glory" (as in "glory is exiled from Israel"). Knowing that Samuel has rejected him, he implores the prophet at least to help him save face in offering the sacrifice.

31. *Samuel turned back from Saul*. All English versions render this, erroneously, to indicate that Samuel nevertheless accompanied Saul to the sacrifice. But the expression "turn back with" (*shuv ʿim*), as in verse 30, and "turn back from [literally, after]" (*shuv ʾaḥarei)* are antonyms, the latter meaning unambiguously "to abandon." (It is precisely the latter idiom that we see in God's condemnation of Saul in verse 11.) Samuel is completing his rejection of Saul here by refusing to accompany him in the cult, shaming him by forcing him to offer the sacrifice without the officiating of the man of God.

32. *with mincing steps*. The Hebrew adverbial term *maʿadanot* is much disputed. Some interpret it as "stumbling," others, by a reversal of consonants, read it as "in fetters." But the root of the word seems to point with the least strain to *ʿ-d-n*—"pleasure," "delicate thing." That makes sense if one construes Agag's words (the meaning of which is also in dispute) as the expression of a last illusion: I have been spared in the general massacre, and now I am brought to parlay with the chief holy man of the Hebrews for some important purpose; so surely they will not kill me.

33. *Samuel cut him apart before the* LORD. There is a long-standing consensus that the unique verb used here means something to this effect. The ghastly idea seems to be a kind of ritual butchering.

34. *Ramah . . . Gibeath-Saul*. Each returns to his hometown. Their relationship is to all intents and purposes finished.

35. *Samuel was grieved about Saul*. Or is it over the fact that he made the mistake of first choosing Saul? As J. P. Fokkelman notes, this sentence includes both death (*mot*) and grieving or mourning (*ʾabel*), even though Saul is still alive: "we realize that Saul as king is dead; no stronger expression of the termination of his monarchy can be imagined."

CHAPTER 16

[1]And the LORD said to Samuel, “How long are you
going to grieve about Saul when I have cast him aside
from reigning over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and
go. I am sending you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I
have seen Me among his sons a king.” [2]And Samuel
said, “How can I go? For should Saul hear, he will kill
me.” And the LORD said, “Take a heifer with you,
and you will say, ‘To sacrifice to the LORD I have
come.’ [3]And you will invite Jesse to the sacrifice. And
I Myself shall let you know what you must do, and you
will anoint for Me the one that I say to you.” [4]And
Samuel did what the LORD had spoken, and he came
to Bethlehem, and the elders of the town came
trembling to meet him and they said, “Do you come in
peace?” [5]And he said, “In peace! To sacrifice to the
LORD I have come. Sanctify yourselves and come
with me to the sacrifice.” And Jesse sanctiified his sons
and invited them to the sacrifice. [6]And it happened
when they came that he saw Eliab and he said, “Ah
yes! Before the LORD stands His anointed.” [7]And the

LORD said to Samuel, “Look not to his appearance and to his lofty stature, for I have cast him aside. For not as man sees does God see. For man sees with the eyes and the LORD sees with the heart.” [8]And Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel, and he said, “This one, too, the LORD has not chosen.” [9]And Jesse made Shammah pass by, and he said, “This one, too, the LORD has not chosen.” [10]And Jesse made his seven sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, “The LORD has not chosen these.” [11]And Samuel said to Jesse, “Are there no more lads?” And he said, “The youngest still is left, and, look, he is tending the flock.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and fetch him, for we shall not sit to eat until he comes here.” [12]And he sent and brought him. And he was ruddy, with fine eyes and goodly to look on. And the LORD said, “Arise, anoint him, for this is the one.” [13]And Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers. And the spirit of the LORD gripped David from that day onward. And Samuel rose and went to Ramah.

[14]And the spirit of the LORD had turned away from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD had struck terror in him. [15]And Saul’s servants said to him, “Look,

pray, an evil spirit from God has stricken terror in you.
16 Let our lord, pray, speak. Your servants are before
you—we shall seek out a man skilled in playing the
lyre, and so, when the evil spirit of God is upon you,
he will play and it will be well with you.” 17 And Saul
said to his servants, “See for me, pray, a man who
plays well, and bring him to me.” 18 And one of the lads
answered and said, “Look, I have seen a son of Jesse
the Bethlehemite, skilled in playing, a valiant fellow, a
warrior, prudent in speech, a good-looking man, and
the LORD is with him.” 19 And Saul sent messengers to
Jesse and said, “Send me David your son, who is with
the flock.” 20 And Jesse took a donkey laden with bread
and a skin of wine, and a kid, and he sent them by the
hand of David his son to Saul. 21 And David came to
Saul and stood in his presence, and Saul loved him
greatly, and he became his armor bearer. 22 And Saul
sent to Jesse, saying, “Let him stand, pray, in my
presence, for he has found favor in my eyes.” 23 And so,
when the spirit of God was upon Saul, David would
take up the lyre and play, and Saul would find relief,
and it would be well with him, and the evil spirit would
turn away from him.

CHAPTER 16 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And the LORD said to Samuel*. In the preceding episodes, the typical form of divine communication was Samuel's report of what God had said, although at Samuel's first sighting of Saul, a brief direct message from God is offered. As we have observed, these reports open up a certain margin of doubt as to whether the purported divine injunctions are really God's or Samuel's. The present episode unfolds systematically through repeated dialogue between God and Samuel, and so God's judgments are rendered with perfect, authoritative transparency. Evidently, the writer (or redactor) felt that the initial election of David had to be entirely unambiguous. As the story continues, God will no longer play this role of direct intervention.

I have seen Me among his sons a king. The verb "to see" (*raʾah*) followed by the preposition *l*^{e} has the idiomatic sense of "to provide," but it is essential to preserve the literal meaning because this entire episode is built on the repetition of the thematically weighted word "to see," just as the previous episode turned on "to listen."

2. *For should Saul hear, he will kill me*. Suddenly, a whole new political perspective is thrown on the estrangement between Samuel and Saul. The prophet may claim the higher ground of divine authority, but it is the king who has the armed divisions, and who might be ready to use them if Samuel should take any active steps to replace him. At this point, Samuel's "grieving" over Saul begins to look like grieving over the mistake he made in first choosing him. God, understanding Samuel's political predicament, suggests to him a cover story for his trip from Ramah to Bethlehem, in the tribal territory of Judah.

3. *invite Jesse to the sacrifice*. The kind of sacrifice in question, *zevaḥ*, involves both the ritual act and a feast made of the substantial parts of the animal not burned on the altar.

4. *came trembling*. Their reaction is another reflection of the dangerous political situation: the estrangement between Samuel and Saul appears to be generally known, and the elders are terrified at the idea that Samuel may have come to designate a new king, or otherwise subvert the reigning monarch, which could bring royal retribution down on Bethlehem.

and they said, "Do you come in peace?" The Masoretic Text has "he said," but both the Septuagint and the Qumran Samuel scroll show the plural. Both also add "O seer" to the question of the elders.

6. *he saw Eliab*. Nothing could illustrate more vividly Samuel's persistent unreliability as seer (*ro'eh*). Having made a fatal mistake by electing Saul, "head and shoulders taller than all the people," convinced he was directed by God, Samuel is poised to repeat his error in being impressed by the "appearance" and "lofty stature" of Jesse's firstborn. This whole story is also a heightened and stylized playing out of the theme of the reversal of primogeniture that dominates Genesis. Instead of an elder and a younger son, Jesse has the formulaic seven sons, plus an eighth, the youngest of all, who will be chosen.

7. *for I have cast him aside*. The language of rejection links the strapping Eliab with the lofty Saul.

does God see. These words, absent from the Masoretic Text, are supplied by the Septuagint.

the LORD *sees with the heart*. Some construe this as "into the heart." In any case, the heart is the seat of understanding, or insight, in biblical physiology.

8–9. The verbatim repetition reflects the stylization of the episode, which is set off from the surrounding narrative by its formal symmetries. After the first three named sons, the rest pass by in summary by invocation of a narrative "et cetera" principle, with the formulaic wrap-up at the end of verse 10, "the LORD has not chosen these."

11. *he is tending the flock*. By his sheer youth, he has been excluded from consideration, as a kind of male Cinderella left to his domestic chores instead of being invited to the party. But the tending of flocks will have a symbolic implication for the future leader of Israel, and, in the Goliath story, it will also prove to have provided him with skills useful in combat.

12. *he was ruddy, with fine eyes and goodly to look on*. David's good looks will play a crucial role in the magnetic effect he is to have on women and men. But he is not big, like his brother Eliab, and Samuel has no opportunity to make a judgment on his appearance, for David is brought from the flock sight unseen, and then God immediately informs Samuel, "this is the one."

13. *anointed him in the midst of his brothers*. The anointment takes place within the family circle and is a clandestine act.

14. *And the spirit of the LORD had turned away from Saul*. In the transfer of election of monarchs, one gets the picture of a kind of spiritual seesaw. As the spirit of the LORD descends on and seizes David, it departs from Saul. That vacuum is promptly filled by "an evil spirit from the LORD." In the theopsychology of ancient Israel, extraordinary states were explained as investments by a divine spirit. The charisma of leadership, now passed to David, was a descent of the spirit. Saul's psychosis—evidently, fits of depression later manifested as paranoia—is possession by another kind of spirit from the LORD.

15. *Saul's servants*. These would be his court officials or attendants.

16. *we shall seek out a man*. The Hebrew is literally "they will seek out a man."

a man skilled in playing the lyre. In modern terms, what they have in mind is a kind of music therapist. But David's mastery of the lyre evinces both his power over the realm of the spirit (or of spirits) and his future association with song and poetry.

17–18. *See for me . . . I have seen*. The insistence on this verb picks up the key word of the preceding episode. Saul first uses it in the sense God did in verse 1, "provide."

18. *Look, I have seen a son of Jesse*. This volunteered information is a bit peculiar because, before any real search is undertaken, one of the young men in court already has a candidate, and from a different tribal region. Is it possible that word of David's clandestine anointment has circulated among limited groups, and that the anonymous "lad" may be a kind of pro-David mole in the court of Saul? It is also noteworthy that, just as at the beginning of his story, in his quest for the lost asses, Saul did not know what to do and was dependent on the counsel of his "lad" (*naʿar*); here one of his lads (*neʿarim*) offers the needed advice for dealing with his melancholia.

a valiant fellow, a warrior. These details of the characterization are surprising, for all that should be known about David is that he is a handsome shepherd boy with musical skills. The influence of the subsequent narrative

has clearly made itself felt here, and these epithets may even be an editorial maneuver to harmonize this episode with the next one, in which David makes his debut before Saul not as a lyre player but as a military hero.

20. *a donkey laden with bread*. The Hebrew uses what appears to be an ellipsis "a donkey of bread."

bread . . . a skin of wine . . . a kid. As Robert Polzin has shrewdly observed, these items replicate the items that Samuel told Saul would be carried by the three men he was to encounter (10:3). David, then, is beginning anew the process on which Saul launched.

21. *and Saul loved him greatly*. As Fokkelman has noted, Saul is the first of many people in this narrative reported to love David—the very man he will come to think of as his bitter enemy.

he became his armor bearer. This is not the position proposed by Saul's courtiers. Perhaps there was no set position of court lyre player, and so Saul gives David an appointment that will ensure his constant proximity.

22. *Let him stand . . . in my presence*. The Hebrew idiom means to be in someone's service, though it also can suggest being presented to a dignitary, its evident meaning in verse 21.

23. *would find relief*. The Hebrew employs an untranslatable pun: the verb "would find relief," *rawaḥ*, is a transparent cognate of *ruaḥ*, "spirit."

the evil spirit would turn away from him. In an elegant verbal symmetry the episode that began with the (good) spirit of the LORD turning away from Saul concludes with the evil spirit turning away from him, thanks to David's musical mastery over the domain of spirits.

CHAPTER 17

[1]And the Philistines gathered their camps for battle,
and they gathered at Socoh, which is in Judah, and
they encamped between Socoh and Azekah, at Ephes-
Dammim. [2]And Saul and the men of Israel had
gathered and encamped in the Valley of the Terebinth
and they deployed to do battle against the Philistines.
[3]The Philistines took their stand on the hill on one side
and Israel took its stand on the hill on the other side,
with the ravine between them. [4]And the champion
sallied forth from the Philistine camps, Goliath was his
name, from Gath, his height was six cubits and a span.
[5]A bronze helmet he had on his head, and in armor of
mail he was dressed, and the weight of the armor was
five thousand bronze shekels. [6]And greaves of bronze
were on his legs and a spear of bronze between his
shoulder blades. [7]The shaft of his spear like a weaver's
beam, and the blade of his spear six hundred iron
shekels. And his shield bearer went before him. [8]And
he stood and called out to the Israelite lines and said to
them, "Why should you come forth to deploy for

battle? Am I not the Philistine, and you are slaves to Saul? Choose you a man and let him come down to me! [9]If he prevail in battle against me and strike me down, we shall be slaves to you, but if I prevail and strike him down, you will be slaves to us and serve us." [10]And the Philistine said, "I am the one who has insulted the Israelite lines this day! Give me a man and let us do battle together!" [11]And Saul heard, and all Israel with him, these words of the Philistine, and they were dismayed and very frightened.

[12]And David was the son of this Ephrathite man from Bethlehem in Judah named Jesse, and he had eight sons, and the man in the days of Saul was old, advanced in years. [13]And the three oldest sons of Jesse went after Saul to the war. And the names of his three sons who went to the war were Eliab the firstborn and the second-born Abinadab and the third Shammah. [14]As for David, he was the youngest, and the three oldest had gone after Saul. [15]And David would go back and forth from Saul's side to tend his father's flock in Bethlehem. [16]And the Philistine came forward morning and evening and took his stand, forty days. [17]And Jesse said to David his son, "Take, pray, to your brothers this *ephah* of parched grain and these ten

loaves of bread and rush them to the camp to your brothers. [18]And these ten wedges of cheese you shall bring to the captain of the thousand and you shall see if your brothers are well, and you shall take their token. [19]And Saul and they and all the men of Israel are in the Valley of the Terebinth fighting with the Philistines." [20]And David rose early in the morning and left the flock with a keeper and bore [the provisions] and went off as Jesse had charged him. And when he came to the staging ground, the army going out to the lines was shouting the battle cry. [21]And Israel and the Philistines deployed line against line. [22]And David left the gear that was on him with the keeper of the gear and he ran to the lines and came and asked his brothers if they were well. [23]As he was speaking to them, look, the champion was coming up from the Philistine lines, Goliath the Philistine from Gath was his name, and he spoke words to the same effect, and David heard. [24]And all the men of Israel, when they saw the man, fled from him and were very frightened. [25]And a man of Israel said, "Have you seen this man coming up? Why, to insult Israel he comes up! And the man who strikes him down the king will enrich with a great fortune, and his daughter he will give him, and his father's household he will make free of levies in Israel." [26]And David said to the men who were

standing with him, “What will be done for the man who strikes down yonder Philistine and takes away insult from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should insult the battle lines of the living God?” [27]And the troops said to him to the same effect, “Thus will be done for the man who strikes him down.” [28]And Eliab his oldest brother heard when he spoke with the men, and Eliab was incensed with David and he said, “Why is it you have come down, and with whom have you left that bit of flock in the wilderness? I’m the one who knows your impudence and your wicked impulses, for it’s to see the battle that you’ve come.” [29]And David said, “What now have I done? It was only talk.” [30]And he turned away from him toward someone else, and he spoke to the same effect, and the troops answered him with words like the ones before. [31]And the words David had spoken were heard, and they told them to Saul, and he fetched him. [32]And David said to Saul, “Let no man’s heart fail him! Your servant will go and do battle with this Philistine.” [33]And Saul said to David, “You cannot go against this Philistine to do battle with him, for you are a lad and he is a man of war from his youth.” [34]And David said to Saul, “A shepherd has your servant been for his father with the flock. When the lion or the bear would come and carry off a sheep from the herd, [35]I

would go out after him and strike him down and rescue it from his clutches. And if he would rise against me, I would seize his beard and strike him and kill him. [36]Both lion and bear your servant has struck down, and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, for he has insulted the battle lines of the living God." [37]And David said, "The LORD Who has rescued me from the lion and the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine." And Saul said to David, "Go, and may the LORD be with you." [38]And Saul clothed David in his own battle garb and put a bronze helmet on his head and clothed him in armor. [39]And David girded his sword over his garments, but he was unable to walk, for he was unused to it, and David said to Saul, "I cannot walk in these, for I am unused to it." And David removed them. [40]And he took his stick in his hand and chose five smooth stones from the creek and put them in the shepherd's pouch he had, in the satchel, and his slingshot was in his hand, and he came forward toward the Philistine. [41]And the Philistine was drawing near to David, the man bearing the shield before him. [42]And the Philistine looked and saw David, and he despised him, for he was a lad, and ruddy, with good looks. [43]And the Philistine said to David, "Am I a dog that you should come to me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed

David by his gods. [44]And the Philistine said, “Come to
me, that I may give your flesh to the fowl of the
heavens and the beasts of the field!” [45]And David said
to the Philistine, “You come to me with sword and
spear and javelin, and I come to you with the name of
the LORD of Armies, God of the battle lines of Israel
that you have insulted. [46]This day shall the LORD give
you over into my hand and I will strike you down and
take off your head, and I will give your corpse and the
corpses of the Philistine camp this day to the fowl of
the heavens and the beasts of the earth, and all the
earth shall know that Israel has a God! [47]And all this
assembly shall know that not by sword nor by spear
does the LORD rescue, for the LORD’s is the battle
and he shall give you into our hand!” [48]And it
happened as the Philistine arose and was drawing near
David that David hastened and ran out from the lines
toward the Philistine. [49]And he reached his hand into
the pouch and took from there a stone and slung it and
struck the Philistine in his forehead, and the stone
sank into his forehead and he fell on his face to the
ground. [50]And David bested the Philistine with sling
and stone, and he struck down the Philistine and killed
him, and no sword was in David’s hand. [51]And David
ran up and stood over the Philistine and took the
sword from him and pulled it out of its sheath and

finished him off and cut off his head with it. And the Philistines saw that their warrior was dead, and they fled. [52]And the men of Israel and Judah rose and shouted and gave chase to the Philistines until you come to the ravine and until the gates of Ekron, and the Philistine dead fell on the way to Shaaraim and as far as Gath and Ekron. [53]And the Israelites came back from pursuing the Philistines and looted their camps. [54]And David took the Philistine's head and brought it to Jerusalem, but his weapons he put in his tent.

[55]And when Saul saw David sallying forth toward the Philistine, he said to Abner the commander, "Whose son is the lad, Abner?" And Abner said, "By your life, king, I do not know." [56]And the king said, "Ask you, pray, whose son is the youth?" [57]And when David returned from striking down the Philistine, Abner took him and brought him before Saul, the Philistine's head in his hand. [58]And Saul said, "Whose son are you, lad?" And David said, "The son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite."

CHAPTER 17 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *the hill on one side . . . the hill on the other . . . the ravine between them*. As we have seen before, this positioning of the opposing armies on opposite hilltops was a characteristic procedure of warfare in the hilly terrain of central Israel. But the opening verses also set up the strong spatial perspective through which this episode is organized. The perspective of the previous story was implicitly vertical: from God above to Samuel below, in the household of Jesse in Bethlehem. Here, by contrast, is a richly elaborated horizontal deployment of troops and individuals. God is out of the picture, except for the invocation through David's words.

4. *the champion*. The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "the man between"—that is, the man who goes out between the opposed battle lines to fight a counterpart. That particular Hebrew term thus reinforces the spatial definition of the story.

six cubits and a span. This would make him over eight feet tall.

5–6. *A bronze helmet . . . armor of mail . . . greaves of bronze . . . a spear of bronze*. This "Homeric" enumeration of armor and weapons is quite untypical of the Hebrew Bible. The thematic effect is clear: Goliath is represented as a hulking man of material military impedimenta—everything is given gargantuan size or weight, again with untypical specification. All this will be counterposed to David's declaration on the battlefield that "not by sword nor spear does the LORD deliver."

five thousand bronze shekels. The armor alone is about 125 pounds.

7. *his shield bearer went before him*. For this reason the shield is not included in the catalogue of Goliath's armor. The gargantuan proportions of his dependence on the material implements of warfare are reinforced by the fact that he enters the battlefield with a man walking before him carrying his (presumably massive) shield.

8. *Am I not the Philistine*. Most often in the body of the story he is referred to as "the Philistine" and not by the name Goliath. This has led many scholars to infer that a tradition about Goliath was superimposed on an original story featuring an archetypal "Philistine."

9. *we shall be slaves to you*. In the event, this condition is not fulfilled: the Philistines retreat in disarray, but will later regroup to continue their war

against the Israelites.

10. *I am the one who has insulted the Israelite lines*. Nearly all the English versions render the verb here as "defied," which is one end of the semantic range of the Hebrew *ḥeref*. But the verb is transparently linked with the noun *ḥerpah*—insult, disgrace, shame. By his taunting words, Goliath has laid an insult on Israel that only a victorious champion can "take away" (see verse 26).

11. *And Saul heard . . . and they were dismayed*. Saul, as the man head and shoulders taller than all the people, might be thought to be the one Israelite fighter who stands a chance against Goliath. Instead, he leads his own troops in fearfulness: the stage is set for his deplacement by David.

12. *David was the son of this Ephrathite man*. The use of the demonstrative pronoun "this" is peculiar. It seems to be the first of several attempts (presumably, by the redactor) to harmonize this account of David's debut in Saul's court with the previous one, by referring to Jesse as someone already mentioned. Polzin has noted that demonstrative pronouns are unusually prominent in this whole episode: in many instances, they express contempt ("this Philistine"), but they are also sometimes necessary pointers in the emphatically spatial organization of the story.

15. *And David would go back and forth from Saul's side*. The last phrase has a sense close to "from Saul's presence" and is another strategem for harmonizing the two episodes. It invites us to suppose that David divided his time between playing the lyre for Saul and tending his father's flocks. The implicit assumption, however, of the story that unfolds is that David is unknown in the court of Saul, and that any to-and-fro movement between Bethlehem and the front would be to bring provisions to his older brothers.

17. *Take, pray, to your brothers*. If Saul has organized a standing army, it seems that his quartermaster corps still leaves something to be desired, and whatever rations may be provided for the troops need to be supplemented. In the same connection of skimpy provisions, Jesse sends a gift of ten wedges of cheese to his sons' commander.

18. *take their token*. Jesse expects his sons to send back some object with David as assurance that they are alive and well.

20. *the staging ground*. The Hebrew is literally "the circle," but the context (and a few allied ones elsewhere in the Bible) suggests a technical military sense.

22. *David left the gear that was on him with the keeper*. The phrase used precisely echoes his leaving the flock with a keeper. The narrative invokes a series of divestments by David of impediments for which he has been made responsible—flock, provisions, and then Saul's armor.

25. *the man who strikes him down the king will enrich . . . and his daughter he will give him*. It is at this point that the folkloric background of the second story of David's debut becomes particularly clear. The folktale pattern is one that is very familiar from later European tradition: a community is threatened by a giant, ogre, or dragon that nobody can face. The king offers great wealth, and the hand of his daughter, to the man who can slay the giant. A young man from the provinces then appears on the scene, who in his youth and slight stature seems quite unfit for the daunting challenge, but by wit and resourcefulness, using unexpected means, he conquers the ogre. The appeal of this archetypal folktale no doubt made it attractive for inclusion in the David narrative. What must be emphasized, however, is that the folkloric materials have been historicized and even to an extent psychologized. The slaying of the giant becomes an emblem for Israel's prevailing over the numerically superior forces all around it as well as for the resourcefulness of its first dynastic king in securing power. The dialogue between David and his oldest brother vividly evokes a thick background of sibling jealousies. And David appears here—in the first scene in which he is assigned speech in the narrative—as a poised master of rhetoric, who knows how to use publicly enunciated words to achieve political ends.

26. *And David said . . . , "What will be done for the man."* These are David's first recorded words in the narrative—usually, in biblical narrative convention, a defining moment of characterization. His first words express his wanting to know what will be gained—implicitly, in political terms—by the man who defeats Goliath. The inquiry about personal profit is then immediately balanced (or covered up) by the patriotic pronouncement "who is this

uncircumcised Philistine that he should insult the battle lines of the living God?" David has, of course, just heard one of the troops stipulate the reward for vanquishing the Philistine, but he wants to be perfectly sure before he makes his move, and so he asks for the details to be repeated. One sees how the folktale has been artfully historicized, subtly drawn into the realm of politics and individualized character.

28. *that bit of flock*. Eliab prefixes a term of diminution, *meʿat*, to "flock" to express his contempt for David. The demonstrative pronoun, as elsewhere in the chapter, is also contemptuous, even as it points to the spatial distance between the battlefield and the pastureland around Bethlehem.

I'm the one who knows. The relative clause here reflects the special emphasis of the Hebrew first-person pronoun *ʾani*, which ordinarily would not be used because the verb that follows it, *yadʿati*, has a first-person ending. The same structure occurs in Goliath's boasting speech in verse 10.

your wicked impulses. The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "the wickedness of your heart," the heart being in biblical language the seat of understanding and the place where plans or desires are shaped.

29. *It was only talk*. The translation follows an interpretation that goes back to the Aramaic Targum of Late Antiquity and to Rashi in the Middle Ages. But the Hebrew—literally, "Is it not a word?"—is gnomic. The ambiguity is compounded because *davar* can mean "word," "message," "matter," "thing," "mission," and more.

30. *And he turned away from him toward someone else*. Ignoring his brother's rebuke, David wants to hear the details of the reward a third time.

32. *Let no man's heart fail him*. The Septuagint has "Let not my lord's heart fail him," but this could easily be an explanatory gloss. David uses a generalizing phrase because he doesn't want to come out and say directly what all can see, that the king's heart is failing him (literally, "falling").

34. *A shepherd has your servant been*. David's carefully contrived speech proclaims his tested courage and strength but, interestingly, is silent about the shepherd's weapon—the slingshot—that he intends to use against Goliath.

35. *from his clutches*. The Hebrew says literally, "from his mouth."

I would seize his beard. This of course refers only to the lion, not to the bear, but this sort of focusing of the narrative report on one of its two instances is perfectly natural in biblical usage, and no emendation of the word for "beard" is called for.

37. *And David said*. This is a particularly striking instance of the biblical convention that can be schematized as: And X said to Y; (no response from Y); and X said to Y, with the intervening silence being dramatically significant. Saul is nonplussed by these extravagant claims on the part of the young shepherd from Bethlehem, and he doesn't know what to say. David, observing the skepticism of his interlocutor, now invokes God by way of explanation ("The LORD who has rescued me from the lion and the bear"). This theological argument persuades Saul. For another instance of the X said to Y, X said to Y convention, compare Goliath's boast and Israel's silence in verses 8–10.

38. *his own battle garb*. The Hebrew *madim* is not the ordinary term for "garment" but is most often used for the special garments worn either by men in battle or by priests in the cult (hence the present translation adds "battle"). The fact that this word is related etymologically to *midah*, proportion or measure, is relevant to the incident as it unfolds, since David is clothed in battle gear too big for him.

39. *he was unable to walk*. The translation, with the Septuagint, reads *wayilʾe*, instead of the Masoretic *wayoʾel* (a simple reversal of letters in the consonantal text), which would yield "he undertook to walk."

I cannot walk in these, for I am unused to it. David states the obvious fact that, as a shepherd boy, he is not used to marching about in heavy armor, with a big sword. What he chooses not to mention is that since this is the armor of the hulking Saul, it is in any case far too big for him. Thematically, heroic fitness will be seen to reside in something other than being head and shoulders taller than all the people, or six cubits tall, like Goliath.

40. *he took his stick*. That is, his shepherd's staff, which he is used to carrying. David evidently does this as a decoy, encouraging Goliath to imagine he will use cudgel against sword (compare verse 43) and thus camouflaging the lethal slingshot.

40–41. *he came forward toward the Philistine . . . the Philistine was drawing near*. The spatial realization of the whole episode is nearing its climax: on the two hilltops, the opposing camps; in front of them, the battle lines; between the hostile lines, David and the Philistine "man between" approaching each other. In a moment, they will be close enough to exchange insults. Goliath will invite David to take the last few steps forward so that they can engage in hand-to-hand combat—"Come to me, that I may give your flesh to the fowl of the heavens" (verse 44). Instead of traversing this final interval of space, David will surprise his adversary by taking him down with a slung stone, accurately aimed at the exposed forehead beneath his huge bronze helmet.

45. *You come to me with sword and spear and javelin*. This short list of weapons harks back to the epic catalogue of weapons and armor that introduced Goliath to the story. David's rejoinder to the Philistine is couched in impeccable terms of standard Israelite belief: as in the Psalms, it is not sword or might that gives victory but the LORD. David speaks almost as though he expects to prevail through a miracle of divine intervention ("all the earth shall know that Israel has a God!"), but in fact his victory depends on his resourcefulness in exploiting an unconventional weapon, one which he would have learned to use skillfully as a shepherd.

46. *Your corpse and the corpses*. This is the reading of the Septuagint. The Masoretic Text lacks "your corpse."

48. *David hastened and ran out from the lines toward the Philistine*. This last gesture would encourage the Philistine to think David was rushing up for the awaited hand-to-hand combat. In fact, David is darting in close enough to get a good shot with his sling. To do this (verse 49), he will break his charge, stop, and let fly with the sling.

51. *took the sword . . . and finished him off*. The gigantic Philistine is stunned but perhaps not dead, and so David completes his kill with the sword he takes from the prostrate Goliath.

52. *to the ravine*. The Septuagint corrects *gayʿ* to *Gath*, with the end of this verse in mind. But there is a ravine between the two hills on which the armies are encamped, and what the narrator may be saying is that the Philistines fled westward by way of the ravine to their own territory.

54. *brought it to Jerusalem*. This notation is problematic because Jerusalem at this point is still a Jebusite city. The report is either proleptic or simply out of place chronologically. David's bringing the sword into his tent may also be questionable because, as someone who has not been a member of the army, he would have no tent. Some scholars, influenced by the fact that Goliath's sword later appears in the sanctuary at Nob, have proposed reading here "in the tent of the LORD."

55. *Whose son is the lad, Abner?* It is at this point that the evident contradiction between the two stories of David's debut is most striking. If David had been attending Saul in court as his personal music therapist, with Saul having explicitly sent a communication to Jesse regarding David's entering his service, how could he, and Abner as well, now be ignorant of David's identity? Efforts to harmonize the two stories in terms of the logic of later conventions of realism seem unconvincing (for example, amnesia has been proposed as a symptom of Saul's mental illness, and Abner pretends not to recognize David in deference to the ailing king). The prevalent scholarly view that chapters 16 and 17 represent two different traditions about David's beginnings is persuasive. (To complicate matters, most scholars detect two different strands in chapter 17.) What we need to ask, however, is why the redactor set these two stories in immediate sequence, despite the contradictions that must have been as evident to him as to us. A reasonable conclusion is that for the ancient audience, and for the redactor, these contradictions would have been inconsequential in comparison with the advantage gained in providing a double perspective on David. In the Greek tradition, there were competing versions of the same myths, but never in a single text. Modern Western narrative generally insists on verisimilar consistency. In the Bible, however, the variants of a single story are sometimes placed in a kind of implicit dialogue with one another (compare the two accounts of creation at the beginning of Genesis). Here, in the first, vertically oriented story, with its explicit instructions from God to man, David is emphatically elected by God, is associated with the spirit and with song, and gains entrée in the court of Saul by using song to master the spirit. In the second story, with its horizontal deployment in space, David makes his way into Saul's presence through martial prowess, exhibiting shrewdness, calculation, and rhetorical skill. Interestingly, it is this folktale version of David's debut rather than the theological one that will lead directly into the

historical (or at least, history-like) narrative of David's rise and David's reign. But the redactor must surely have felt that both the "spiritual" and the political-military sides of the figure of David had to be represented in the account of his origins. It is also noteworthy that this whole episode, which launches David on his trajectory to the throne, ends with Saul once more in a state of ignorance, compelled to ask twice about David's identity, and getting no answer until David himself speaks out.

CHAPTER 18

[1]And it happened as he finished speaking with Saul,
that Jonathan's very self became bound up with
David's, and Jonathan loved him as himself. [2]And Saul
took him on that day and did not let him go back to his
father's house. [3]And Jonathan, and David with him,
sealed a pact because he loved him like himself. [4]And
Jonathan took off the cloak that was on him and gave
it to David, and his battle garb, and even his sword and
his bow and his belt. [5]And David would sally forth,
wherever Saul sent him he would succeed. And Saul
set him over the men of war, and it was good in the
eyes of the troops and also in the eyes of Saul's
servants. [6]And it happened when they came, when
David returned from striking down the Philistine, that
the women came out from all the towns of Israel in
song and dance, to greet Saul the king with timbrels
and jubilation and lutes. [7]And the celebrant women
called out and said,

"Saul has struck down his thousands
and David his tens of thousands!"

[8]And Saul was very incensed, and this thing was evil in his eyes, and he said, "To David they have given tens of thousands and to me they have given the thousands. The next thing he'll have is the kingship." [9]And Saul kept a suspicious eye on David from that day hence. [10]And on the next day, an evil spirit of God seized Saul and he went into a frenzy within the house when David was playing as he was wont to, and the spear was in Saul's hand. [11]And Saul cast the spear, thinking, "Let me strike through David into the wall." And David eluded him twice. [12]And Saul was afraid of David, for the LORD was with him, but from Saul He had turned away. [13]And Saul removed him from his presence and set him as captain of a thousand, and he led the troops into the fray. [14]And David succeeded in all his ways, and the LORD was with him. [15]And Saul saw that he was very successful, and he dreaded him. [16]But all Israel and Judah loved David, for he led them into the fray.

[17]And Saul said to David, "Here is my eldest daughter, Merab. Her shall I give you as wife, only be a valiant

fellow for me and fight the battles of the LORD." And Saul had thought, "Let not my hand be against him but let the hand of the Philistines be against him." [18]And David said to Saul, "Who am I and who are my kin, my father's clan in Israel, that I should be the king's son-in-law?" [19]And it happened at the time for giving Merab the daughter of Saul to David, that she was given to Adriel the Meholathite as wife. [20]And Michal the daughter of Saul loved David, and they told Saul, and the thing was pleasing in his eyes. [21]And Saul thought, "I shall give her to him, that she may be a snare to him, and that the hand of the Philistines may be against him." And Saul said to David, "Through the second one you can be my son-in-law now." [22]And Saul charged his servants: "Speak to David discreetly, saying, 'Look, the king desires you, and all his servants love you, and now, then, become son-in-law to the king.'" [23]And Saul's servants spoke these words in David's hearing and David said, "Is it a light thing in your eyes to become son-in-law to the king, and I am a poor man, and lightly esteemed?" [24]And Saul's servants told him, saying, "Words of this sort David has spoken." [25]And Saul said, "Thus shall you say to David: 'The king has no desire for any bride-price except a hundred Philistine foreskins, to take vengeance against the king's enemies.'" And Saul had devised to make

David fall by the hand of the Philistines. [26]And Saul's servants told these words to David, and the thing was pleasing in David's eyes, to become son-in-law to the king. And the time was not done, [27]when David arose and went, he and his men, and he struck down among the Philistines two hundred men, and David brought their foreskins and made a full count to the king, to become son-in-law to the king, and Saul gave him Michal his daughter as wife. [28]And Saul saw and marked that the LORD was with David, and Michal the daughter of Saul loved him. [29]And Saul was all the more afraid of David, and Saul became David's constant enemy. [30]And the Philistine captains sallied forth, and whenever they sallied forth, David succeeded more than all Saul's servants, and his name became greatly esteemed.

CHAPTER 18 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *as he finished speaking with Saul*. The speech referred to is the exchange between David and Saul after the vanquishing of Goliath. This is a clear instance in which the (late medieval) chapter division actually interrupts a narrative unit.

Jonathan loved him as himself. No reason is given, so one may infer that Jonathan was smitten by David's personal charm and perhaps by the sheer glamour of his victory, which exceeded even Jonathan's own military exploits.

It is noteworthy that throughout this narrative David is repeatedly the object but never the subject of the verb "to love"—in this chapter, Jonathan, the people, and Michal are all said to love David.

3. *And Jonathan, and David with him, sealed a pact*. This is one of the most significant instances of the expressive grammatical pattern in which there is a plural subject with a singular verb, making the first member of the plural subject the principal agent: the initiative for the pact of friendship is Jonathan's, and David goes along with it.

4. *Jonathan took off the cloak*. This gesture strongly invites comparison with Saul's failed effort to dress David in his battle gear in the previous episode. This time David accepts the proffered garments and weapons: practically, they are presumably his own size, but he also is now ready to assume a regular role in the army. The first item Jonathan offers is his cloak, *me'il,* the very piece of clothing Samuel associated symbolically with kingship. Bearing that in mind, J. P. Fokkelman has proposed that "with his cloak Jonathan is conveying to David the crown prince's rights and claims to the throne." Perhaps one should say that he is conveying these subliminally or proleptically rather than as a fully conscious act.

5. *Saul set him over the men of war*. The designation for fighting men is also the one Saul uses for Goliath. Moshe Garsiel has suggested that this may be a term for elite troops, and that later, when Saul appoints David captain of a thousand (verse 13), he is in effect transferring him to the position of an ordinary officer.

6. *lutes*. As is often the case with ancient musical instruments, the precise identification of the term is in doubt. The Hebrew *shalishim* derives from *sheloshah*, "three," but it could refer either to a three-stringed lute, which was fairly common in the ancient Near East, or perhaps to a triangle.

8. *To David . . . tens of thousands and to me . . . the thousands*. It is a fixed rule in biblical poetry that when a number occurs in the first verset, it must be increased in the parallel verset, often, as here, by going up one decimal place. Saul shows himself a good reader of biblical poetry: he understands perfectly well that the convention is a vehicle of meaning, and that the intensification or magnification characteristic of the second verset is used to set David's

triumphs above his own. Saul, who earlier had made the mistake of listening to the voice of the people, now is enraged by the people's words.

10. *went into a frenzy*. The verb here is the same one that refers to "speaking in ecstasy" or "prophesying" in the episode of Saul among the prophets, but in the present context only the connotation of raving and not that of revelation is relevant.

when David was playing as he was wont to. The present version of the story at this point seeks to integrate the account of David as victor over Goliath with the preceding report of David as Saul's personal lyre player. Evidently, when he is not playing the lyre, he is sent out intermittently at the head of the elite troops. After this incident, Saul removes him entirely from the court by making him a regular commander. The one thing Saul cannot afford to do is to dispense with David's brilliant services as a military leader. In the Hebrew, "was playing" is literally "was playing with his hand," which sets up a neat antithesis to the spear in Saul's hand ("with" and "in" are represented by the same particle, b^e in Hebrew).

11. *Let me strike through David*. Saul picks up the verb of striking from the song of the celebrant women that so galled him.

12. *for the LORD was with him*. This emphatic refrainlike phrase recalls the Joseph story (see especially Genesis 39), another tale of a handsome shepherd boy who ascends to regal grandeur. Like Joseph, David is repeatedly said to "succeed" (though different verbs are used in the two stories.) Allusions to the Joseph story will turn from this initial consonance to ironic dissonance.

15. *Saul saw . . . and he dreaded him*. Throughout this pivotal episode, Saul's feelings and motives remain perfectly transparent—here, through the narrator's report of his emotions, and in the next scene, through interior monologue. At the same time, David is pointedly left opaque. No word of his is reported when Jonathan gives him his cloak and battle gear. We know that Saul is afraid of David but not whether David is afraid of Saul, who, after all, has tried to kill him. And when David speaks in the next scene, it will be manifestly a speech framed for a public occasion, which leaves his real motives uncertain.

16. *led them into the fray*. The Hebrew says literally, "was going out and coming in before them," an idiom that means to lead in battle.

17. *Here is my eldest daughter, Merab*. Only now is the promise of the hand of the king's daughter for the vanquisher of Goliath implemented. But the fulfillment of that promise, as it turns out, is part of a plan to destroy David.

Let not my hand be against him. The interior monologue leaves no doubt about Saul's intentions. Could it be that his very transparency as a political schemer, manifested in the means of narrative presentation, is a reflection of his incapacity in the harsh realm of politics? David, by contrast, knows how to veil his motives and intentions—a veiling replicated in the narrative strategies used to present him.

18. *Who am I and who are my kin*. The translation adopts a scholarly proposal of considerable currency to revocalize the Masoretic *ḥayai*, "my life" as *ḥayi*, "my kin," a conjectured term based on the Arabic. David's protestation of unworthiness recalls Saul's when Samuel hinted he was going to confer the kingship on him. Perhaps these words are dictated by court etiquette, the commoner obliged to profess unworthiness when offered the honor of a royal connection. Perhaps the young David may actually feel unworthy of the honor. But it is also clearly in his interest to conceal from the jealous king any desire he may harbor to marry the king's daughter, for such an alliance could be converted into an implicit claim to be successor to the throne.

20. *And Michal the daughter of Saul loved David*. Not only is she the third party in this chapter said to love David, but she is also the only woman in the entire Hebrew Bible explicitly reported to love a man. Nothing is said, by contrast, about what David feels toward Michal, and as the story of their relationship sinuously unfolds, his feelings toward her will continue to be left in question.

21. *Through the second one*. The Hebrew is quite cryptic, and the text might be defective here. Literally, it says, "through two" (*bishtayim*). This has variously been interpreted to mean: through two daughters (if not one, then the other); through two conditions (vanquishing the Philistines and bringing back their foreskins?); for two reasons (perhaps, "the king desires you" and "all his servants love you").

22. *discreetly*. The root of the Hebrew adverb refers to covering up, but the usual translation of "secretly" is misleading. This is not a clandestine communication but one in which the servants—that is, Saul's court attendants—must be careful to cover up their master's real intentions.

24. *Words of this sort David has spoken*. Saul may well have counted on the fact that David would initially demur, perhaps because he was the youngest son of eight and thus lacked a suitable bride-price for a princess. This refusal would then set the stage for Saul's extravagant proposal, which he assumed would be a fatal one, of a hundred dead Philistines.

25. *The king has no desire for any bride-price except a hundred Philistine foreskins*. The language Saul directs to David through his attendants—note that he now has begun to communicate with David only through intermediaries—makes it sound as though this were a small thing instead of an enormous thing. Beyond this story, there is no indication that the Israelites had a custom of collecting the foreskins of the uncircumcised Philistines like scalps. Fokkelman shrewdly notes that the foreskins are associated with (impure) sexuality and conjectures that "by this condition Saul really wants to contaminate David"—just as Saul is using his own daughter's sexuality as a lure to destroy David. "He thinks," Fokkelman goes on to observe, "that this rival has outdone him amongst the women and now uses woman as a trap."

Saul had devised to make David fall. The narrator continues his systematic effort to make Saul's intentions transparent.

26. *And the time was not done*. Literally, "the days were not filled." The presumable reference is to a period fixed by Saul during which David was to go out and bring back the grisly trophies. Garsiel has interestingly proposed that the idiom here deliberately echoes a phrase used in the Jacob story (Genesis 29:21) and signals a whole network of allusions to the Jacob narrative: in both stories the young man is a candidate to marry two sisters and gets the one not at first intended; in both stories he must provide a bride-price he cannot pay for from material resources; in both stories he must "count out" (literally "fill") payment to a devious father-in-law; eventually each man flees his father-in-law, aided and abetted by his wife; and in each instance, as we shall see, household idols (*teraphim*) are involved. Later in the David story, other kinds of parallels with Jacob will be invoked.

28–30. These verses constitute a formal concluding frame to the whole episode, much like the concluding verses in Genesis 39, which mirror the opening ones. Once again, in a pointed repetition of phrases, the following is brought to our attention: David's success, the fact that the LORD is with him, Saul's fear of David, Michal's love of David, and David's great reputation. The concluding words of the chapter, "his name became greatly esteemed," are a pointed antithesis to his protestation of unworthiness, "I am a poor man, and lightly esteemed."

CHAPTER 19

[1]And Saul spoke to Jonathan his son and to all his
servants to put David to death, [2]but Jonathan the son
of Saul was very fond of David, and Jonathan told
David, saying, “Saul my father seeks to put you to
death, and so now, be on the watch, pray, in the
morning, and stay in a secret place and hide. [3]And I on
my part shall come out and stand by my father in the
field where you are, and I shall speak of you to my
father. And if I see something, I shall tell you.” [4]And
Jonathan spoke well of David to Saul his father and
said to him, “Let not the king offend against his
servant David, for he has not offended you, and his
deeds have been very good toward you. [5]He took his
life in his hands and struck down the Philistine, and
the LORD made a great victory for all Israel. You saw
and rejoiced, and why should you offend with innocent
blood to put David to death for no cause?” [6]And Saul
heeded Jonathan’s voice, and Saul swore, “As the
LORD lives, he shall not be put to death.” [7]And
Jonathan called to David, and Jonathan told him all

these things. And Jonathan brought David to Saul, and he served him as in times gone by.

[8]And there was still more fighting, and David sallied forth and did battle with the Philistines and struck a great blow against them, and they fled before him. [9]And an evil spirit of the LORD came upon Saul as he was sitting in his house, his spear in his hand and David playing. [10]And Saul sought to strike the spear through David into the wall, but he slipped away from Saul, and Saul struck the spear into the wall. Then David fled and escaped on that night. [11]And Saul sent messengers to David's house to keep watch over him and to put him to death in the morning. And Michal his wife told David, saying, "If you do not get yourself away tonight, tomorrow you'll be dead." [12]And Michal let David down from the window, and he went off and fled and got away. [13]And Michal took the household gods and put them in the bed, and the twist of goat's hair she put at its head, and covered them with a cloth. [14]And Saul sent messengers to take David, and she said, "He is ill." [15]And Saul sent messengers to see David, saying, "Bring him up to me in the bed, that he may be put to death." [16]And the messengers came, and, look, the household gods were in the bed and the

twist of goat's hair at its head! [17]And Saul said to Michal, "Why have you thus deceived me, and let my enemy go, and he got away?" And Michal said to Saul, "He said to me: 'Let me go. Why should I kill you?'"

[18]And David had fled and gotten away and had come to Samuel at Ramah and told him all that Saul had done to him. And he, and Samuel with him, went and stayed at Naioth. [19]And it was told to Saul, saying, "Look, David is at Naioth in Ramah." [20]And Saul sent messengers to take David, and they saw a band of prophets in ecstasy with Samuel standing poised over them, and the spirit of God came upon Saul's messengers and they, too, went into ecstasy. [21]And they told Saul, and he sent other messengers, and they, too, went into ecstasy. And Saul still again sent a third set of messengers, and they, too, went into ecstasy. [22]And he himself went to Ramah, and he came as far as the great cistern which is in Secu, and he asked and said, "Where are Samuel and David?" And someone said, "Here, at Naioth in Ramah." [23]And he went there, to Naioth in Ramah, and the spirit of God came upon him, too, and he walked along speaking in ecstasy until he came to Naioth in Ramah. [24]And he, too, stripped off his clothes, and he, too, went into ecstasy before

Samuel and lay naked all that day and all that night. Therefore do they say, “Is Saul, too, among the prophets?”

CHAPTER 19 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1–2. *Jonathan his son . . . Jonathan the son of Saul*. In keeping with the biblical practice of using relational epithets to underscore a thematic point, Jonathan is identified as Saul’s son at the very moment when he takes David’s part against his father.

4. *Let not the king offend*. Saul’s royal power is palpable in the dialogue, for his own son is careful to address him by title in the deferential third person.

6. *Saul heeded Jonathan’s voice, and . . . swore*. Saul’s paranoia and uncontrolled outbursts manifest themselves in an intermittent cycle. He is amenable to the voice of reason and conscience, and vows in presumably good faith not to harm David, but further evidence of David’s military brilliance will unleash another round of violent impulses. In consequence, through this sequence of the narrative David oscillates between being a proscribed person and someone Saul expects to be a faithful member of his court.

9. *his spear in his hand and David playing*. As in the previous incident of the spear cast at David, the Hebrew exhibits the pointed antithesis of “his spear in his hand [*beyado*]” and David “playing by hand [*beyad*].” Conventional biblical scholarship explains the repetition of incident, and the other doublets in this narrative, as an inclusion of two versions of the same event from different sources. It is at least as plausible to assume that the author of the Saul and David narrative had a fondness for paired incidents that could be used to good literary effect. Saul’s mental disturbance involves compulsive repetition. He does his best to be reconciled with David, his soothing lyre player and indispensable military leader, but the recurrent flashes of jealousy

drive him again to the same lethal action. After the second occurrence of spear throwing, David realizes he must flee the court, but he does not imagine that Saul will send assassins to surround his house.

10. *Saul struck . . . David fled*. As several interpreters have noted, these are the very two verbs used in verse 8 to report David's military triumph over the Philistines: as David battles Israel's enemies, the distraught king battles David.

11. *Michal his wife*. This is another pointed familial identification. Previously, she was referred to as Saul's daughter.

If you do not get yourself away tonight, tomorrow you'll be dead. It is striking that we are given Michal's urgent dialogue here but not a word of response from David, only the chain of his rapid actions after she lets him down (by an improvised rope?) from the window—"he went off and fled and got away." Perhaps this asymmetrical presentation of the two characters is meant to suggest David's breathless flight, with no time for conversation. In any case, it continues the pattern of occluding David's inner responses that we observed in chapter 18. Michal is risking a great deal in order to save David. We have no idea about his feelings toward her as she does this.

13. *Michal took the household gods . . . and the twist of goat's hair . . . and covered them with a cloth*. She adopts the familiar trick used by prisoners round the world of concocting a dummy to mask an escape. But the means she chooses introduce another elaborate allusion to the Jacob story. The household gods (*teraphim*) are what Rachel stole and hid from her father when Jacob fled from him. Like Rachel, who pleads her period and does not get up from the cushions under which the *teraphim* are hidden, Michal also invokes illness (verse 14) to put off the searchers. Both stories feature a daughter loyal to her husband and rebelling against a hostile father. Michal puts goat's hair at the head of the bed because, being black or dark brown, it would look like a man's hair, but goats (and the color of their hair) are also prominent in the Jacob story. Finally, the cloth or garment (*beged*) used to cover the dummy recalls the repeated association of garments with deception in the Jacob story. Laban, of course, never finds his *teraphim*, whereas Saul's emissaries, to their chagrin, find the *teraphim* instead of the man they are looking for.

15. *Bring him up to me in the bed*. If Michal claims David is ill, Saul will have him brought up bed and all.

17. *Why have you thus deceived me*. These words are close to the ones spoken by the outraged Laban to Jacob (Genesis 31:26).

Why should I kill you? This purported death threat by David is of course pure invention by Michal in order to make it seem that she was forced to help David flee.

18. *David had fled and gotten away and had come to Samuel*. The twice-repeated verbs of safe flight are reiterated once more. David takes refuge with the man who anointed him, although it is not entirely clear whether the prophet's authority will really protect him, or the prophet.

Naioth. Some have claimed this is not a place-name but a common noun, *nawot*, "oases" (according to one suggestion, a collection of huts where the prophets resided). But then one would expect a definite article, which does not occur. Naioth is most plausibly construed as a little village or place of temporary residence in the vicinity of the town of Ramah.

20. *Samuel standing poised over them*. The image is implicitly military: the term for "poised" (*nitsav*) is cognate with the terms for garrison and prefect. Samuel, like the pope, commands no divisions, but the band of ecstatics are his troops, and the infectious spirit of God that inhabits them and devastates Saul's emissaries acts as a defensive perimeter.

22. *And he himself went*. Again, we have the folktale symmetry of three identical repetitions, then a fourth repetition with a crucial change.

Where are Samuel and David? Once more, Saul (*Shaʾul*) has to ask (*shaʾal*). This particular question recalls his initial question in chapter 9 about where the seer was.

24. *he . . . stripped off his clothes . . . and lay naked*. In the clash between Saul and Samuel that marked their final estrangement, Samuel had explicitly associated garment with kingship. Now the frenzy that seizes Saul drives him to strip off his garments—implicitly, to divest himself of the kingship, just as the first episode of Saul among the prophets was an investment with kingship. Robert Polzin brilliantly links this moment with Michal's use of a garment and the contrasting narrative presentations of David and Saul: "Whereas

Michal covers David's bed with his clothes (verse 13) Saul strips off his clothes and lies naked all day and night (verse 24)—a graphic picture of how the narrator hides David and bares Saul throughout the last two chapters."

Therefore do they say, "Is Saul, too, among the prophets?" This is the same etiological tag as at the end of the first story of Saul among the prophets in chapter 10. The doublet, far from being a stammer of transmission or inept or automatically inclusive redaction, is vividly purposeful, providing a strong frame for Saul's painful story. Fokkelman states the effect nicely: "The same faculty for the numinous and the same sensitivity for suddenly being lifted into a higher state of consciousness which occurred there [in chapter 10] under the positive sign of election, appear here under the negative sign of being rejected, and now bring Saul into a lower state of consciousness, a kind of delirium." The conventions of verisimilitude of a later literary tradition would lead one to conclude that this encounter would have to have occurred either at the beginning of Saul's career or at the end, but not twice. To the ancient audience, however, the recurrence would not have seemed a contradiction, and the conflicting valences given to the explanation of the proverbial saying add to the richness of the portrait of Saul, formally framing it at beginning and end.

CHAPTER 20

[1]And David fled from Naioth in Ramah and came and said before Jonathan: “What have I done? What is my crime and what my offense before your father that he should seek my life?” [2]And he said to him, “Heaven forbid! You shall not die! Look, my father will do nothing, whether great or small, without revealing it to me, and why should my father hide this thing from me? It cannot be!” [3]And David swore again and said, “Your father surely knows that I have found favor in your eyes, and he will think, ‘Let not Jonathan know this, lest he be pained.’ And indeed, as the LORD lives and as you live, there is but a step between me and death.” [4]And Jonathan said, “Whatever you desire, I shall do for you.” [5]And David said to Jonathan, “Look, it is the new moon tomorrow, and I am supposed to sit with the king to eat. Let me go and I shall hide in the field till the evening of the day after tomorrow. [6]Should your father in fact mark my absence, you shall say, ‘David has urgently asked of me that he run to Bethlehem his town, for the seasonal sacrifice is to

take place there for the whole clan.' [7]If thus he says, 'Good!,' it is well with your servant. But if in fact he is incensed, know that the evil has been resolved by him. [8]And you shall keep faith with your servant, for into a pact of the LORD you have brought your servant with you. And if there be any crime in me, put me to death yourself, for why should you bring me to your father?" [9]And Jonathan said, "Heaven forbid you say it! If in fact I learn that the evil has been resolved by my father, would I not tell it to you?" [10]And David said to Jonathan, "Who will tell me if your father answers you harshly?" [11]And Jonathan said, "Come, let us go out to the field." And the two of them went out to the field. [12]And Jonathan said to David, "Witness the LORD God of Israel, that I will sound out my father at this hour tomorrow, [or] the day after, and whether he is well disposed to David or not, I will send to you and reveal to you. [13]Thus may the LORD do to Jonathan, and even more, if it seems good to my father [to bring] the evil upon you, I will reveal it to you and I will send you off and you shall go safely and the LORD shall be with you as He was with my father. [14]Would that while I am still alive you may keep the LORD's faith with me, that I not die, [15]and that you do not cut off your faithfulness from my house for all time, not even when the LORD cuts off all David's enemies from the face

of the earth. [16]For Jonathan has sealed a pact with the
house of David and the LORD shall requite it from the
hand of David." [17]And Jonathan once again swore to
David in his love for him, for he loved him as he loved
himself. [18]And Jonathan said to him, "Tomorrow is the
new moon, and your absence will be marked because
your place will be vacant. [19]The day after tomorrow
you will go all the way down and come to the place
where you hid on the day of the deed and stay by the
Ezel stone. [20]As for me, I shall shoot three arrows to
the side of it, as though I were aiming at a target.
[21]And look, I shall send the lad, 'Go, find the arrows!'
If I expressly say to the lad, 'Look, the arrows are on
this side of you, fetch them,' come, for it will be well
with you, and nothing will be the matter, as the LORD
lives. [22]But if thus I say to the youth, 'Look, the arrows
are on the far side of you,' go, for the LORD will have
sent you away. [23]And as for the matter of which you
and I have spoken, look, the LORD is witness between
you and me for all time."

[24]And David hid in the field, and it was the new moon,
and the king sat down to table to eat. [25]And the king
sat in his place as he was wont to do, in the seat by the
wall, and Jonathan preceded him, and Abner sat by

Saul's side, and David's place was vacant. [26]And Saul spoke no word on that day, for he thought, "It is a mischance. He is unclean and has not been cleansed." [27]And it happened on the day after the new moon, the second day, that David's place was still vacant. And Saul said to Jonathan his son, "Why has not the son of Jesse come to the feast either yesterday or today?" [28]And Jonathan said to Saul, "David has urgently asked of me to go to Bethlehem. [29]And he said to me, 'Let me go, pray, for we have a clan sacrifice in the town, and my brother has summoned me to it. And so, if I have found favor in your eyes, let me, pray, get away that I may see my brothers.' Therefore has he not come to the king's table." [30]And Saul was incensed with Jonathan and he said to him, "O, son of a perverse wayward woman! Don't I know you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame and the shame of your mother's nakedness? [31]For as long as the son of Jesse lives on the earth, you and your kingship will not be unshaken! And now, send and fetch him to me, for he is a dead man!" [32]And Jonathan answered Saul his father and said to him, "Why should he be put to death? What has he done?" [33]And Saul cast the spear at him to strike him down, and Jonathan knew that it was resolved by his father to put David to death. [34]And Jonathan rose from the table

in burning anger, and he ate no food on the second day of the new moon because he was pained for David and because his father had humiliated him.

[35]And it happened in the morning that Jonathan went out to the field for the fixed meeting with David, and a young lad was with him. [36]And he said to his lad, “Run, find, pray, the arrows that I shoot.” The lad ran, and he shot the arrow beyond him. [37]And the lad came to the place of the arrow that Jonathan had shot, and Jonathan called after the lad and said, “Look, the arrow is on the far side of you.” [38]And Jonathan called after the lad, “Quick, hurry, don’t stand still!” And Jonathan’s lad gathered up the arrows and came to his master. [39]And the lad knew nothing, but Jonathan and David knew the matter. [40]And Jonathan gave his gear to his lad and said to him, “Go, bring them to town.” [41]Just as the lad came, David arose from by the mound and fell on his face to the ground and bowed three times, and each man kissed the other and each wept for the other, though David the longer. [42]And Jonathan said to David, “Go in peace, for the two of us have sworn in the name of the LORD, saying, ‘The LORD is witness between me and you, and between my seed

and your seed, for all time.’” 21:1And Jonathan arose and came to the town.

CHAPTER 20 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *David . . . said before Jonathan*. The seeming awkwardness of the preposition is actually strategically calculated. The normal usage would be “said *to*” (*ʾel*). “Before” (*lifney*) is a preposition that commonly designates approach to the presence of regal or seigniorial authority. (Compare its occurrence in David’s words, “what my offense *before* your father.”) This speech is a remarkable instance of the pattern of occluding the personal side of David that we have been following. Quite strikingly, these are David’s first reported words to Jonathan, though Jonathan’s devotion to David and one speech to David (19:2–3) have been duly recorded. It is noteworthy that this is not a personal communication to Jonathan but a kind of political statement —a protestation of innocence cast in patently rhetorical language (“What have I done? What is my crime . . .?”). David speaks to Jonathan less as an intimate friend than as a courtier, later in the dialogue even invoking the deferential self-reference of “your servant.”

2. *why should my father hide this thing from me?* If one considers Saul’s previous behavior and his relationship with Jonathan, this faith in his father’s openness with him seems singularly misplaced. Throughout, Jonathan remains well meaning and naïve, against the wary, calculating David.

3. *David swore again*. It is ill advised to emend the verb here, as some scholars have proposed. In fact, David’s first speech (“before” Jonathan) was a kind of oath of innocence, and now he continues to swear, rather than simply speaking.

there is but a step between me and death. This vivid image surely is meant to recall the quick dodging step that twice enabled David to elude Saul’s hurled spear.

5. *the new moon*. In early biblical times, this was an important festival. Sacrifices were offered, ceremonial feasts were held, and ordinary business was not transacted.

the day after tomorrow. The Masoretic Text has "the third evening," treating *hashelishit* as an adjective modifying "evening," although it has the wrong gender suffix. It is more likely a noun meaning the day after tomorrow (the day on which one speaks being day one in the sequence of three). One should then read *ʿerev hashelishit* instead of the Masoretic *haʿerev hashelishit*. In any case, the number three will play an important role as the episode develops.

7. *If thus he says, "Good!," it is well with your servant*. After Saul's attempts on David's life by the "hand of the Philistines," by the spear in his own hand, and by a team of assassins, can David really believe that any statement by the king of favorable disposition means it will be well with him? Polzin has shrewdly suggested that David's real intention is "to provoke Saul to an angry outburst that would remove Jonathan's misconceptions, not his own."

8. *faith*. The two parties to a pact, contract, or other binding agreement owe each other *ḥesed*, faithful performance of their covenantal obligations.

into a pact of the LORD you have brought your servant with you. David's formulation of the arrangement is pointed and quite accurate: it was Jonathan who initiated the pledge of mutual fealty out of his love for David, and who drew David into the commitment.

9. *Heaven forbid you say it*. The Hebrew has, elliptically, "Heaven forbid you."

10. *Who will tell me*. David is not questioning Jonathan's good faith but registering a practical difficulty: if Saul is in fact determined to kill him, how will Jonathan be able to get word to him?

12. *Witness the LORD*. The word "witness" (*ʿed*) is absent in the Masoretic Text but is reflected in Josephus and the Peshitta.

tomorrow, [or] the day after. Again, the time reference in the Hebrew is somewhat confusing. The text reads literally "tomorrow the third day" or even "the morrow of the third day."

13. *if it seems good to my father [to bring] the evil*. The ironic antithesis of good and evil is patent. All ancient versions lack "to bring," which seems required by the context. The word may have been inadvertently deleted by a scribe because it closely resembles the preceding word in the text— *ʾavi* (my father), *lehavi'* (to bring).

the LORD shall be with you as He was with my father. Here Jonathan explicitly recognizes that the persecuted David is to displace Saul, his father.

14. *Would that*. This translation treats the Hebrew consonants as *welu* instead of the Masoretic *welo'* ("and not").

16. *Jonathan has sealed a pact*. The Hebrew idiom is literally "cut" (with "pact" implied) and so picks up the play of the two different occurrences of "cut off" in the previous sentence (the same verb in a different conjugation). Jonathan's insistence that David not cut off Jonathan's descendants once he gains power will have prominent ramifications later in the story.

requite it from the hand of David. The Masoretic Text has "from the hand of the enemies of David," but the substitution of a person's "enemies" for the person himself is a common Hebrew scribal euphemism (here, so as not to say something negative about David), as both Rashi and David Kimchi recognized in the Middle Ages.

19. *The day after tomorrow*. The Masoretic vocalization *weshilashta* treats this as a verb (to do something a third time or in a third instance), but it is more plausible to vocalize it as a noun, *ushelishit,* "and on the third day." (See the second comment on verse 5.)

you will go all the way down. The Hebrew, literally "you will go down very much" (or, "you will wander very much"), is problematic.

the place where you hid on the day of the deed. The meaning has been disputed, but the most likely reference is to David's hiding, and Jonathan's speaking in his defense, in 19:1–7.

23. *the LORD is witness*. Again, "witness" is absent from the Masoretic Text but supplied by the Septuagint.

24. *to table*. The Hebrew is literally "to the bread."

25. *Jonathan preceded him*. This translation reads *weyiqdam* instead of the Masoretic *wayaqom* ("and he rose"). The seating arrangement remains a little obscure, but the verb *qadam* cannot mean "to sit opposite," as some scholars have claimed.

26. *He is unclean*. Since on the new moon celebrants partook of a sacrificial feast, they would have to be in a state of ritual purity. (A seminal emission, for example, which might be hinted at in the Hebrew term for "mischance," would render a person impure until the evening of the day on which he cleansed himself by ablution.)

27. *the son of Jesse*. At the end of the Goliath episode, Saul wanted to know whose son David was. Now he refers to him repeatedly only by patronymic, which is dismissive, rather like our using a person's last name only. David's status in Saul's eyes is a constant reflex of Saul's acute ambivalence: the king wants him at court as a royal intimate, or, alternately, as someone under surveillance; yet he makes him flee the court as persona non grata.

29. *my brother has summoned me*. Jonathan, in playing out the scenario David has dictated to him, improvises one element—that David has gone off to his hometown at the express urging of his brother, and in order to be with his brothers. His evident intention is to provide a palliative to David's absence: he had to go to Bethlehem because of family pressure. But Saul's outraged response suggests that Jonathan's invention has the opposite effect. Saul concludes that David's loyalty to his clan takes precedence over his loyalty to his king, and he may even suspect that David means to use his clan as a power base to challenge the throne.

let me . . . get away. Jonathan inadvertently substitutes for "run" in David's instructions the very verb of escape repeatedly used when David fled Saul's assassins.

30. *O, son of a perverse wayward woman*. All English translations have treated the last Hebrew term here, *mardut*, as "rebellion," deriving it from the root *m-r-d*, "to rebel." But this form (with the *ut* suffix of abstraction) would be anomalous in the Hebrew, whereas the vocalization in the received text yields a Hebrew word well known in rabbinic Hebrew and meaning "discipline." (The verbal root is *r-d-h*, "to rule sternly.") She is "perverse against discipline"—hence "wayward" in this translation.

the shame of your mother's nakedness. This is quite violent. "Nakedness" refers to the sexual part (as in the idiom for taboo intercourse, "uncovering the nakedness of"), and so, it has virtually the force of "your mother's cunt," though the language is not obscene.

31. *he is a dead man*. The Hebrew is literally "son of death," thus playing back on "son of Jesse."

32. *Why should he be put to death? What has he done?* These two questions are four compact words in the Hebrew.

33. *Saul cast the spear at him to strike him down*. Saul's madness is vividly reflected in his attempt to kill his own son in the same way that he tried to kill David—just after he has been urging Jonathan to protect the security of his own future kingship. The act thus expresses his blind destructive impulse toward his own dynasty.

34. *because he was pained for David and because his father had humiliated him*. The Hebrew text does not have "and" but it is clearly implied.

35. *And it happened in the morning*. On the third day there are three figures in the field and three arrows will be shot. The triangle of two knowing persons and one ignorant one is an ironic replication of the David–Jonathan–Saul triangle. The lad's running after the arrows may also pick up David's (fictitious) "running" to Bethlehem.

36. *the arrow*. Some scholars, bothered by the switch from three arrows to one, have emended the text to reduce all plurals of arrow to a singular. The maneuver is misconceived because, as we have seen before, Hebrew narrative readily switches from multiple instances to a particular case.

37. *Jonathan called after the lad*. Again, the use of the preposition is quite precise because the lad has run on ahead of Jonathan.

38. *gathered up the arrows*. The Masoretic Text has "arrow" in the singular at this point, but the verb "to gather up" (*laqet*) accords much better with collecting several objects, and Jonathan's having shot all three of the arrows

earlier mentioned would require more time on the part of the lad and hence would give Jonathan and David more of an opportunity to talk in confidence.

40. *Jonathan gave his gear to his lad*. Fokkelman reminds us that Jonathan earlier gave his armor and weapons to David, and now "the successor to the throne indicated by Saul . . . devotes himself defenselessly to the intimate contact with the man who, according to his father, is his rival."

41. *arose from by the mound*. This follows the Septuagint. The Masoretic Text has "arose from the south."

42. *The LORD is witness*. As in the previous occurrences in Samuel of this formula of vow taking, the Masoretic Text lacks "witness," but that word is reflected in the Septuagint. It may well be an idiomatic ellipsis in the original Hebrew version, but the problem with leaving it that way in the English is that it could sound as though Jonathan were saying that the LORD will intervene between him and David ("the LORD will be between me and you"). Polzin contends that the double meaning is intended, but that reading seems a little strained.

CHAPTER 21

[2]And David came to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest,
and Ahimelech trembled to meet David and said to
him, “Why are you alone and no one is with you?”
[3]And David said to Ahimelech the priest, “The king
has charged me with a mission, and said to me, ‘Let no
one know a thing of the mission on which I send you
and with which I charge you.’ And the lads I have
directed to such-and-such a place. [4]And now, what do
you have at hand, five loaves of bread? Give them to
me, or whatever there is.” [5]And the priest answered
David and said, “I have no common bread at hand,
solely consecrated bread, if only the lads have kept
themselves from women.” [6]And David answered the
priest and said to him, “Why, women were taboo to us
as in times gone by when I sallied forth, and the lads’
gear was consecrated, even if it was a common
journey, and how much more so now the gear should
be consecrated.” [7]And the priest gave him what was
consecrated, for there was no bread there except the
Bread of the Presence that had been removed from

before the LORD to be replaced with warm bread when it was taken away. [8]And there a man of Saul's servants that day was detained before the LORD, and his name was Doeg the Edomite, chief of the herdsmen who were Saul's. [9]And David said to Ahimelech, "Don't you have here at hand a spear or a sword? For neither my sword nor my gear have I taken with me, for the king's mission was urgent." [10]And the priest said, "The sword of Goliath the Philistine whom you struck down in the Valley of the Terebinth, here it is, wrapped in a cloak behind the ephod. If this you would take for yourself, take it, for there is none other but it hereabouts." And David said, "There's none like it. Give it to me."

[11]And David rose on that day and fled from Saul and he came to Achish king of Gath. [12]And the servants of Achish said to him, "Is not this David king of the land? Is it not he for whom they call out in dance, saying,

'Saul has struck down his thousands
and David his tens of thousands.'"

[13]And David took these words to heart, and he was very afraid of Achish king of Gath. [14]And he altered his good sense in their eyes and played the lunatic before them, and he scrabbled on the doors of the gate and drooled onto his beard. [15]And Achish said to his servants, “Look, do you see this man is raving mad! Why would you bring him to me? [16]Do I lack madmen that you should bring this one to rave for me? Should this one come into my house?”

CHAPTER 21 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Nob*. This is the very beginning of David’s flight after the exchange with Jonathan in the field, and Nob is less than three miles south of Gibeah, his approximate point of departure.

Why are you alone and no one is with you? The doubling of the question (in a pattern that is reminiscent of the parallelism of verse) reflects Ahimelech’s astonishment: a prominent commander in Saul’s army would not ordinarily go about without his retinue. From his first sight of David, Ahimelech suspects that he may be a fugitive, which is why he “trembles” to meet him—fear of the powerful king’s retribution stalks the land.

4. *five loaves of bread*. The number five is sometimes used idiomatically in biblical Hebrew to mean “a few.”

5. *if only the lads have kept themselves from women*. Ordinarily, consecrated bread would be eaten only by the priests. Ahimelech is willing to stretch the point if David’s “lads”—his fighting men—are not in a state of ritual impurity through sexual intercourse.

6. *women were taboo to us*. This is the second reference in this narrative to a general practice of refraining from sexual activity during periods of combat.

the lads' gear was consecrated. The term for "gear," the all-purpose *kelim*, could equally refer to weapons, clothing, and vessels for containing food. There are no grounds for restricting the meaning here to the last of these three items, as some interpreters have done.

7. *the Bread of the Presence*. This would be twelve loaves laid out in display on a table in the sanctuary. When they were replaced with fresh loaves, the old loaves could be eaten by the priests. Robert Polzin proposes a link between the eating of forbidden food here and in the story of Jonathan and the honey. Death will ensue, although not for the eater.

8. *And there a man of Saul's servants*. This seemingly intrusive notation is a piece of ominous foreshadowing. For the moment, all we can pick up is a certain dissonance in the presence of a foreigner in the sanctuary and the nearness of a high official of Saul's to the fugitive David. The ghastly consequences of David's visit to Nob (chapter 22) will pivot on Doeg's fatal presence. His identity as Edomite reflects the enlistment of foreign mercenaries in the new royal bureaucracy. It also marks him as a man who will have no inhibitions in what he does to Israelites, even Israelite priests.

detained before the LORD. The verb is derived from the same root (*ʿ-ts-r*) as the one used for "taboo" in verse 6, but it is unclear whether the reference is to being detained at the sanctuary for some unspecified reason or being detained from participation in the cult.

9. *For neither my sword nor my gear have I taken*. David, of course, has fled weaponless from his encounter with Jonathan in the field. Now he uses the supposed urgency of his royal mission to explain his lack of arms and to ask for a weapon.

10. *If this you would take for yourself, take it, for there is none other but it hereabouts*. The last exchange between Ahimelech and David is a vivid instance of the biblical use of contrastive dialogue. The priest's language is a wordy hesitation dance of repetitions and synonymous expressions. David responds with the most imperative succinctness (just four words in the Hebrew): "There's none like it. Give it to me." The fact that this huge sword might be too big for David is submerged by the symbolic notion that it is the

weapon of the Philistine champion he vanquished which he now takes up. In any case, David is no longer a raw shepherd lad but a battle-hardened warrior.

11. *he came to Achish king of Gath*. David flees to the southwest to the one place where he imagines he will be safe from Saul's pursuit—enemy territory. Such a crossing over to the enemy is a familiar enough move on the part of political refugees. Gath was the hometown of Goliath, and so one must assume that David planned to enter the city incognito, as an anonymous Hebrew fugitive. He would clearly have had to hide the telltale sword before coming into town.

12. *David king of the land*. The Philistine courtiers, unfortunately, immediately identify David and can even quote the song sung by the Israelite women after his victories. Their characterization of him as "king of the land" is no doubt a tribute to his preeminence on the battlefield but also is an inadvertent confirmation of his clandestine election, of his displacing Saul. Appropriately, though, as J. P. Fokkelman notes, they use a somewhat vague designation instead of the more official "king of Israel."

13. *he was very afraid of Achish*. He has come unarmed and, evidently, alone, and now he realizes he has been recognized.

16. *Do I lack madmen that you should bring this one to rave for me?* Achish's words are a mirror of outrage and disgust. As Shimon Bar-Efrat has nicely observed, Achish three times uses the root for raving mad (*meshugaʿ*), three times the first-person pronoun, and three times the root *b-w-*' ("to bring" or "to come"). Thus David has succeeded in making himself so revolting that he arouses in Achish a primitive revulsion from the spectacle of the insane, so that the king simply wants to get David out of sight rather than have him killed. This is an extraordinary moment in the story of the founding king of Israel: David, the glamorous young hero of the preceding episodes, is prepared to do whatever is necessary in order to survive, even if it means making himself appear to be the most repulsive of humankind. It is an even lowlier disguise than Odysseus's as beggar, and it is also not the last experience of humiliation into which David in adversity will willingly plunge. It is noteworthy that David feigns madness in order to survive and eventually become king, in contrast to Saul, whose genuine madness reflects his loss of control over the kingdom.

CHAPTER 22

[1]And David went from there and got away to the Cave of Adullam, and his brothers heard, as well as all his father's household, and they came down to him there. [2]And every man in straits and every man in debt and every man who was embittered gathered round him, and he became their captain, and there were about four hundred men with him. [3]And David went from there to Mizpeh of Moab. And he said to the king of Moab, "Pray, let my father and my mother come out with you until I know what God will do with me." [4]And he led them into the presence of the king of Moab and they stayed with him all the time that David was in the stronghold. [5]And Gad the prophet said to David, "You must not stay in the stronghold. Go, and come you to the territory of Judah." And David went and came to the forest of Hereth.

[6]And Saul heard that David was discovered, and the men who were with him, and Saul was sitting in

Gibeah under the tamarisk on the height, his spear in
his hand and all his servants poised in attendance upon
him. [7]And Saul said to his servants poised in
attendance upon him, “Listen, pray, you Benjaminites:
will the son of Jesse give every one of you fields and
vineyards, will he make every one of you captains of
thousands and captains of hundreds, [8]that all of you
should have conspired against me and none revealed to
me when my son made a pact with the son of Jesse,
and none of you was troubled for my sake to reveal to
me that my son has set up my servant to lie in wait
against me as on this very day?” [9]And Doeg the
Edomite, who was poised in attendance with Saul’s
servants, spoke out and said, “I saw the son of Jesse
coming to Nob to Ahimelech the son of Ahitub. [10]And
he inquired of the LORD, and provisions he gave him,
and the sword of Goliath the Philistine he gave him.”
[11]And the king sent to summon Ahimelech the son of
Ahitub and all his father’s household, the priests who
were in Nob, and they all came to the king. [12]And Saul
said, “Listen, pray, son of Ahitub.” And he said, “Here
I am, my lord.” [13]And Saul said, “Why did you
conspire against me, you and the son of Jesse, giving
him bread and sword and inquiring of God for him, so
that he set up to lie in wait against me on this very
day?” [14]And Ahimelech answered the king and said,

“And who of all your servants is like David, loyal and
the king’s son-in-law and captain of your palace guard
and honored in your house? 15Did I this day for the
first time inquire for him of God? Far be it from me!
Let not the king impute anything to his servant or to
all my father’s house, for your servant knew nothing of
all this, neither great nor small.” 16And the king said,
“You are doomed to die, Ahimelech, you and all your
father’s house!” 17And the king said to the sentries
poised in attendance on him, “Turn round and put to
death the priests of the LORD, for their hand, too, is
with David, for they knew he was fleeing and did not
reveal it to me!” And the king’s servants did not want
to reach out their hand to stab the priests of the
LORD. 18And the king said to Doeg, “You, then, turn
round and stab the priests,” and Doeg the Edomite
turned round and he it was who stabbed the priests and
he put to death on that day eighty-five men who wore
the linen ephod. 19And he struck down Nob the priests’
town with the edge of the sword, man and woman,
infant and suckling, ox and donkey and sheep, all by
the edge of the sword.

20And one son of Ahimelech the son of Ahitub got
away, and his name was Abiathar, and he fled after

David. [21]And Abiathar told David that Saul had killed the priests of the LORD. [22]And David said to Abiathar, “I knew on that day that Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul. I am the one who caused the loss of all the lives of your father’s house. [23]Stay with me. Do not fear, for whoever seeks my life seeks your life, so you are under my guard.”

CHAPTER 22 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Adullam*. The location is in the hilly terrain at the western edge of the tribal territory of Judah, near the Philistine region.

his brothers . . . all his father’s household. Saul’s rage over the notion that David would have neglected the new moon festivity at the palace to join his brothers in Bethlehem is given an after-the-fact political confirmation here: David’s brothers and clansmen rally round him, forming a kind of family militia. But there is a push as well as a pull in their going out to David in the badlands: if they remained in Bethlehem, they would be subject to retribution by Saul’s soldiery. David’s decision to move his parents across the border to Moab (verse 3) is another reflection of fear of royal vengeance against the family. Jesse, earlier characterized as very aged, would have been too old to join the fighting men.

2. *every man in straits . . . in debt . . . embittered*. David’s guerilla band has a core drawn from his clan and a rank and file of the dispossessed and malcontent—men with nothing to lose who have been oppressed by the established order. David’s social base as guerilla chieftain is strongly reminiscent of Jephthah’s (Judges 11).

3. *Mizpeh of Moab*. The word *mizpeh* (or in some places, *mizpah*) means “outlook” or “vista,” and so this particular Mizpeh must be identified as the

one in Moab, east of the Jordan. If the Book of Ruth provides reliable genealogy, David's great-grandmother Ruth was a Moabite, and so David here may be calling on a family connection in requesting asylum for his parents.

4. *all the time that David was in the stronghold*. The identity of the stronghold has puzzled interpreters, especially because David is said to have set up headquarters in a cave. Some have argued that the two terms refer to the same place, but the Hebrew for "stronghold," *metsudah*, usually refers to a height. Others read "cave," *meʿarah*, for *metsudah*. That proposal is problematic because Adullam is in the territory of Judah, and in verse 5 David is enjoined to leave the stronghold and head for the territory of Judah. The most reasonable inference is that after the parlay with the king of Moab, David moves his fighting men from Adullam at the western border of the territory of Judah to an unspecified stronghold, probably in the craggy border region between Moab and Israel.

5. *Gad the prophet*. This figure appears in the story without introduction or explanation. What is important is that we see David with an open line of communication with the divinity, in sharp contrast to Saul.

6. *Saul heard that David was discovered*. From this point onward, the narrative will switch back and forth deftly between David and Saul. It now turns to an ominous piece of unfinished business—Saul's response to the priest of Nob who helped David in his flight. The specific reference of Saul's hearing "that David was discovered" could well be intelligence that places David's hideout at the stronghold. That would explain why Gad urges David to move on from the stronghold to a forest in Judahite territory.

his spear in his hand. The same spear in hand with which he sought to kill David, and then Jonathan. This small detail thus foreshadows the massacre of an entire town that Saul will order.

7. *you Benjaminites*. Evidently, the inner circle at the court is enlisted from his own tribe. The tribal affiliation helps explain the sarcasm of his rhetorical questions: could they really expect someone from the tribe of Judah to bestow all these bounties on them?

fields . . . vineyards . . . captains. As Moshe Garsiel has aptly noted, Saul's paranoid outburst picks up key terms from Samuel's warning about the

"practice of the king" in chapter 8. It is also noteworthy that Saul's distraught speech takes the form of one lone onrushing sentence (all the way to the end of verse 8). Once again, Saul refers to David contemptuously solely by patronymic, as "the son of Jesse."

8. *none revealed to me*. Once again, Saul's problem, which is also the symptom of his paranoia, is that he feels essential knowledge is denied him.

10. *he inquired of the* LORD. There was no report in chapter 21 of Ahimelech's inquiring of the oracle for David, and it seems unlikely that so essential a fact would have been simply elided by the narrator. The first item, then, in Doeg's denunciation of Ahimelech looks like a fabrication—and one that would especially enrage Saul, who has repeatedly had access to divine knowledge blocked.

12. *son of Ahitub*. It is a shocking piece of rudeness for Saul to address someone invested with the authority of priesthood merely by patronymic.

14. *who of all your servants is like David*. Ahimelech may still be laboring under the delusion that the fugitive David was embarked on a special secret mission for Saul. His testimony to David's loyalty and eminence will of course stoke Saul's already blazing anger.

15. *Did I this day for the first time inquire for him of God?* Some interpreters read this as a declarative sentence, but the context compels one to construe it as a question: I never previously consulted the oracle for David, and why on earth would I do it now? (Perhaps he is suggesting that consultation of the oracle is a service to be offered only to the king.) He is silent, however, about providing bread and sword, which in fact he has done.

16. *you and all your father's house*. Ahimelech is the great-grandson of Eli. The slaughter of the entire clan of priests here is the grim fulfillment of the curse on the house of Eli first enunciated by the man of God in 2:27–36.

17. *for their hand, too, is with David*. The Hebrew adverb *gam*, often a general term of emphasis, surely has the force of "too" here: the paranoid Saul sees conspirators on all sides—his son, his Benjaminite court attendants, and now the priests of Nob.

the king's servants did not want to reach out. Beyond any moral considerations and any concern for the king's sanity, it would be a violation of a taboo to murder the priests of the LORD.

to stab. The core meaning of the Hebrew verb *pagaʿ* is the meeting or intersection of two material bodies or human agencies. It can mean "to encounter," "to accost," and, by extension, "to entreat," but in contexts of violent action, it refers to the "encounter" between forged blade and flesh. The verb "to strike down" (*hikah*, as in verse 19) indicates the consummated act of killing. In verse 21, the narrator uses *harag*, the unadorned verb that means "to kill."

18. *You, then*. Saul emphatically adds the second-person pronoun *ʾatah* to the imperative verb: if none of my Israelite subjects will kill the priests, you, then, as an Edomite, may carry out my orders.

who wore the linen ephod. This is a kind of epic epithet for priests.

19. *man and woman, infant and suckling*. Saul, with the Edomite Doeg as his cat's-paw, flings himself into an orgy of mass murder, killing not only the adult priests but every living creature in Nob. Now he is carrying out the ban he executed only imperfectly against Amalek (the terms used are virtually identical), but the massacre is directed at his own innocent people. Saul's madness has become sinister and lethal, like that of Macbeth, who also becomes a murderer of children—the well-meaning farmer's son who became king has turned into a bloody tyrant.

all by the edge of the sword. "All" catches the force of the Hebrew preposition *ʿad* ("even" or "as far as") reiterated before each term in the catalogue of the massacre.

20. *And one son of Ahimelech . . . got away*. This sole survivor (his name means "my father remains") will then be able to provide David with priestly services, including access to the oracle.

22. *I am the one who caused the loss of all the lives*. The Hebrew uses an ellipsis, "caused all the lives," but the sense is clearly loss of life.

CHAPTER 23

[1]And they told David, saying, “Look, the Philistines
are fighting against Keilah and they are looting the
threshing floors.” [2]And David inquired of the LORD,
saying, “Shall I go and strike down these Philistines?”
And the LORD said to David, “Go and strike down
the Philistines and rescue Keilah.” [3]And David’s men
said to him, “Look, we’re afraid here in Judah, and
how much more so if we go to Keilah against the
Philistine lines!” [4]And David again inquired of the
LORD, and the LORD answered him and said, “Rise,
go down to Keilah, for I am about to give the
Philistines into your hand.” [5]And David, and his men
with him, went to Keilah and did battle with the
Philistines, and he drove off their cattle and struck
them a great blow, and David rescued the inhabitants
of Keilah. [6]And it happened when Abiathar the son of
Ahimelech fled to David at Keilah, that the ephod
came down in his hand.

[7]And it was told to Saul that David had come to
Keilah, and Saul said, “God has given him in my hand,
for he is closed inside a town with double gate and
bolt.” [8]And Saul summoned all the troops for battle to
go down to Keilah to lay seige against David and his
men. [9]And David knew that Saul was scheming evil
against him and he said to Abiathar the priest, “Bring
forth the ephod.” [10]And David said, “LORD, God of
Israel, Your servant has indeed heard that Saul seeks to
come to Keilah to destroy the town on my count.
[11]Will the notables of Keilah hand me over to him?
Will Saul come down, as Your servant has heard?
LORD, God of Israel, tell, pray, Your servant.” And
the LORD said, “He will come down.” [12]And David
said, “Will the notables of Keilah hand me over, and
my men, to Saul?” And the LORD said, “They will
hand you over.” [13]And David arose, and his men with
him, about six hundred men, and they came out from
Keilah and moved about wherever they could, and to
Saul it was told that David had gotten away from
Keilah, and he ceased going out.

[14]And David stayed in the wilderness in strongholds,
and he stayed in the high country in the wilderness of
Ziph. And Saul sought him all the while but God did

not give him into his hand. [15]And David saw that Saul had come out to seek his life, and David was in the wilderness of Ziph in the forest. [16]And Jonathan the son of Saul arose and went to David in the forest and bade him take heart in the LORD. [17]And he said to him, “Do not fear, for the hand of Saul my father shall not find you, and it is you who shall be king over Israel, and I on my part will be your viceroy, and even Saul my father knows it.” [18]And the two of them sealed a pact before the LORD, and David stayed in the forest but Jonathan went to his house.

[19]And Ziphites came up to Saul at Gibeah, saying, “Is not David hiding out among us in the strongholds in the forest on the hill of Hachilah to the south of the wasteland? [20]And so whenever you may desire, O king, to come down, come down, and ours is the part to deliver him into the hand of the king.” [21]And Saul said, “Blessed are you to the LORD, for you have shown pity on me. [22]Go, pray, make certain, and mark and see the place where his foot treads, and who has seen him there, for it has been said to me that he is very cunning. [23]See and mark all the hideouts where he may take cover there and come back to me when you are certain and I shall go with you. And if indeed he is in

the land, I shall search for him among all the clans of Judah.” [24]And they arose and went to Ziph ahead of Saul, and David and his men were in the wilderness of Maon in the desert south of the wasteland. [25]And Saul went, and his men with him, to seek David. And it was told to David, and he went down to the crag and stayed in the wilderness of Maon, and Saul heard, and pursued David into the wilderness of Maon. [26]And Saul went on one side of the mountain and David and his men on the other side of the mountain, and David made haste to go off from before Saul, while Saul and his men were circling the mountain after David and his men to catch them. [27]Just then a messenger came to Saul, saying, “Hurry, and go, for the Philistines have invaded the land!” [28]And Saul turned back from pursuing David and went to meet the Philistines. Therefore do they call that place the Crag of the Divide.

[24:1]And David went up from there and stayed in the strongholds of Ein-Gedi.

CHAPTER 23 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Keilah*. Keilah is a town on the western perimeter of the territory of Judah, facing the Philistine border. Its vulnerability to Philistine incursions is thus understandable. David's men (verse 3) speak as though Keilah were not part of Judah because as a border town it seems to them much more dangerous than their location deep within their own tribal territory. Some scholars have speculated that Keilah was an independent town without tribal affiliation.

2. *David inquired of the* LORD. The means of inquiry are not specified, but since his questions invite the usual yes-or-no response, it seems likely he is using the ephod and not, as some interpreters have claimed, a more immediate mode of communication with God. The information, then, in verse 6 that the fugitive priest Abiathar has arrived from Nob with the ephod is probably retrospective. The phrase "at Keilah" (one word in Hebrew) in that verse perhaps should be deleted as an inadvertent scribal duplication of "Keilah" at the end of the preceding verse—by the testimony of chapter 22, Abiathar fled to David when David was in the forest of Hereth in Judah, before he undertook the rescue mission to Keilah.

6. *the ephod came down in his hand*. From the viewpoint of the ancient audience, the ephod would have been indispensable as an instrument of what we would call military intelligence. An ephod, we should recall, is also a priestly garment. At Nob, Saul slaughtered eighty-five priests "who wore the linen ephod." Fokkelman perceptively describes the appearance of the oracular ephod in David's camp as a "countermove by God"—"Saul may bloody the 85 linen priestly garments called the ephod, but the one ephod which acts as a medium for the decisive word of God turns up at the place of the alternative anointed one."

7. *given him in my hand*. The Masoretic Text has *nikar*, "made a stranger," but the Septuagint reflects a verb meaning "sold" or "handed over."

11. *Will the notables . . . hand me over . . .? Will Saul come down*. Since the binary device of the ephod can give only one answer of yes or no, David receives an answer only to the second question and then is obliged to repeat the first question (verse 12) in order to get a response to it.

12. *They will hand you over*. It may seem base ingratitude on the part of the Keilah notables to betray the man who has just rescued their town from the

Philistines. But they must fear Saul's retribution should they collaborate with David at least as much as they fear the Philistines. The political paradox of the situation that has evolved is evident: David has achieved a victory against Israel's principal enemy; Saul now moves to destroy that victor, enlisting the aid of the people David saved.

14. *in the wilderness in strongholds*. Since the Hebrew term for strongholds (*metsadah* or *metsudah*—attempts to distinguish the two being questionable) generally occurs in wilderness settings, it seems likely that these are not built-up structures but rather natural formations that afforded effective defensive positions, such as promontories surrounded by outcroppings of rock.

in the wilderness of Ziph. The location is in the tribal territory of Judah, about five miles southeast of Hebron and about ten miles southeast of Keilah, where David has just fought the Philistines.

16. *bade him take heart in the* LORD. The literal meaning of the Hebrew idiom used is "strengthened his hand in the LORD." The Hebrew thus is able to pick up the word "hand" at the beginning of Jonathan's speech, "the hand of my father Saul shall not find you."

17. *I on my part will be your viceroy*. For the second time, Jonathan makes a pact with David in which he concedes that it is David who will inherit the throne. There is a pattern of incremental repetition here: only now does Jonathan specify that he will be David's viceroy (literally "second," *mishneh*, but this is an ellipses for *mishneh lamelekh*, "second to the king"). The faithful Jonathan persists in his naïveté, imagining that he will be able to serve as viceroy to his dear friend, who is also the man destined to displace the dynasty Saul would have established. As an alleged doublet, this episode has narrative plausibility: Jonathan first confirmed a pact with David when he told him he must flee from Saul; now, no doubt at some risk to himself, he is impelled to seek out the fugitive and beleaguered David in order to assure him of his continuing loyalty and encourage him in his adversity. Once again, characteristically, David's response to Jonathan is not reported.

19. *Ziphites*. Since no definite article is used, this appears to be one group of Ziphites and not a delegation representing the entire clan. The motive for betraying David could equally be desire for a reward and fear of retribution should Saul discover that they had allowed David to hide out in their territory:

the ruthless massacre at Nob would have been a grim object lesson duly noted throughout the Israelite populace.

in the strongholds in the forest on the hill of Hachilah to the south of the wasteland. The Ziphite informers want to make their identification of David's whereabouts as precise as possible, hence the unusual string of geographical indications. As it emerges, the intelligence they provide is still not precise enough for the frustrated Saul, as his response ("make certain . . . when you are certain") clearly shows. It should be said that most translators have treated the last geographical term used by the Ziphites, "the wasteland," as a proper noun (*yeshimon*), but because it bears a definite article, and because *yeshimon* is a well-attested common noun, it is preferable not to construe it as a place-name. This episode uses three different terms for uninhabited terrain—wilderness, wasteland, and desert (or four, if one adds forest)—which has the cumulative effect of emphasizing how David is constrained to take refuge beyond the populated areas of Israel.

21. *you have shown pity on me*. Saul uses the same verb for pity or "sparing" that was prominently deployed in the Amalek story. The idea that the poor king, thwarted by a cunning and malicious David, needs to be shown pity is surely another manifestation of his paranoia—we might say, of its maudlin side.

22. *where his foot treads*. The Hebrew says literally "where his foot is." The focus on David's foot reflects the eye of the pursuer on the track of his elusive prey.

for it has been said to me. The Hebrew reads literally, "for he has said to me," but there is no need to emend the text because biblical Hebrew sometimes uses a third-person masculine singular verb with no specified grammatical subject to perform the function of the passive. Notice that Saul claims someone has told him David is very cunning—not, which is the case, that Saul himself has decided that his "enemy" is cunning.

24. *Maon*. This would be roughly three miles due south of the wilderness of Ziph.

26. *Saul and his men were circling the mountain*. Kyle McCarter Jr. has made the plausible suggestion that what is indicated in this language is a pincer movement: Saul's forces are moving around the circumference of the

mountain on two sides in order to trap David between them, who is on the far side of the mountain. He, evidently realizing the nature of Saul's maneuver, scrambles to flee—"David made haste to go off from before Saul"—before the pincer snaps shut.

27. *Hurry, and go, for the Philistines have invaded the land*. This last-minute diversion of course has the effect of rescuing David from Saul, but it also points up the madness of his obsessive pursuit of David: at a time when Israel's major national enemy is repeatedly sending troops against the territory Saul is supposed to be governing and protecting, he is devoting his attention, and his troops, to the pursuit of David.

28. *the Crag of the Divide*. This etiological notice explains the place-name, *sela' hamaḥleqot*, as deriving from the "divide" between Saul's forces, which went one way, and David's, which went another. Several commentators have proposed that the name derived not from *maḥloqet*, "division," but from *ḥalaq*, "smooth," and so the original meaning would have been Slippery Crag, or Unforested Crag.

24:1. *the strongholds of Ein-Gedi*. David now flees eastward from the forest area of Ziph, south of Hebron in the central region of Judah's territory, to Ein-Gedi, in the rocky heights overlooking the Dead Sea. He would have felt safer in this remote region with its forbidding terrain. But Ein-Gedi is an oasis, which would have provided a water supply and vegetation for him and his troops

CHAPTER 24

[2]And it happened when Saul turned back from the
Philistines that they told him, saying, “Look, David is
in the wilderness of Ein-Gedi.” [3]And Saul took three
thousand picked men from all Israel and he went to
seek David over the rocks of the wild goats. [4]And he
came to the sheepfolds along the way, and there was a
cave there, and Saul went in to relieve himself, while
David and his men were sitting in the far end of the
cave. [5]And David’s men said to him, “Here is the day
that the LORD said to you, ‘Look, I am about to give
your enemy into your hands, and you may do to him
whatever seems good in your eyes.’” And David rose
and stealthily cut off the skirt of the cloak that was
Saul’s. [6]And it happened then that David was smitten
with remorse because he had cut off the skirt of the
cloak that was Saul’s. [7]And he said to his men, “The
LORD forbid me, that I should have done this thing to
my master, the LORD’s anointed, to reach out my
hand against him, for he is the LORD’s anointed.”
[8]And David held back his men with words and did not

let them rise against Saul, and Saul rose from the cave
and went on the way. [9]And David then rose and came
out of the cave and called after Saul, saying, “My lord
the king!” And Saul looked behind him, and David
knelt, his face to the ground, and bowed down. [10]And
David said to Saul, “Why should you listen to people’s
words, saying, ‘Look, David seeks to harm you’?
[11]Look, this day your eyes have seen that the LORD
has given you into my hand in the cave, and they
meant to kill you, and I had pity for you and said, ‘I
will not reach out my hand against my master, for he is
the LORD’s anointed.’ [12]And, my father, see, yes, see
the skirt of your cloak in my hand, for when I cut off
the skirt of your cloak and did not kill you, mark and
see that there was no evil or crime in my hand and I
did not offend you, yet you stalk me to take my life.
[13]Let the LORD judge between me and you, and the
LORD will avenge me of you, but my hand will not be
against you. [14]As the proverb of the ancients says,
‘From wicked men does wickedness come forth,’ but
my hand will not be against you. [15]After whom has the
king of Israel come forth, after whom are you chasing?
After a dead dog, after a single flea? [16]The LORD will
be arbiter and judge between me and you, that He may
see and plead my case and judge me against you.”
[17]And it happened when David had finished speaking

these words to Saul, that Saul said, “Is this your voice, my son, David?” And Saul raised his voice and wept.
18 And he said to David, “You are more in the right
than I, for it is you who requited me good whereas I
requited you evil. 19 And you told today how you
wrought good with me, when the LORD delivered me
into your hand and you did not kill me. 20 For if a man
finds his enemy, does he send him off on a good way?
The LORD will repay you with good for what you
have done for me this day. 21 And so, look, I know that
you will surely be king and that the kingship of Israel
will stay in your hands. 22 And now, swear to me by the
LORD that you shall not cut off my seed after me and
that you shall not blot out my name from my father’s
house.” 23 And David swore to Saul, and Saul went
home while David and his men went up to the
stronghold.

CHAPTER 24 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *three thousand picked men*. David, it should be recalled, commands a guerilla band of about six hundred men; so he is outnumbered five to one and is facing elite troops.

4. *Saul went in to relieve himself . . . David and his men . . . in the far end of the cave*. The topography is quite realistic, for the cliffs overlooking the Dead

Sea in the region of Ein-Gedi are honeycombed with caves. Power and powerlessness are precariously balanced in this episode. David and his men are in all likelihood hiding in the far end of the cave from Saul's search party. Had a contingent of soldiers entered the cave, they would have been trapped. Instead, Saul comes in alone, and he is in a double sense exposed to David and his men.

5. *Here is the day that the LORD said to you*. David's eager men exhibit a certain theological presumptuousness. They surely know that their leader has been secretly anointed to be king, but nothing in the preceding narrative indicates a divine promise that God would deliver Saul into David's hands.

do to him whatever seems good in your eyes. They carefully avoid the plain word "kill."

6. *David was smitten with remorse*. The Hebrew is literally "David's heart smote him."

he had cut off the skirt of the cloak that was Saul's. Clearly, what David feels is that he has perpetrated a kind of symbolic mutilation of the king by cutting off the corner of his garment—not with anything like a scissors, of course, but surely with his sword, his instrument for killing his enemies. The cloak (*me'il*) has already been linked emblematically with kingship in the final estrangement between Samuel and Saul, and so David is in symbolic effect "cutting away" Saul's kingship. For all the remorse he feels, he will continue to make double use of the corner of the cloak, as we shall see.

7. *that I should have done this thing to my master, the LORD's anointed*. Some interpreters have read this whole episode as an apology for David's innocence and piety in relation to Saul. But the very gesture of piety is also self-interested—David, after all, is conscious that he, too, is the LORD's anointed, and it is surely in his long-term interest that the reigning king's person should be held sacred by all his subjects.

8. *David held back his men*. The meaning of the verb *shisa'* is disputed, but it is most plausibly linked with the noun *shesa'*, a split or cleft. The sense here would then be: he "split off" his men from Saul, using his words to interpose a kind of barrier between them and the king. In any case, the first clause of this verse appears to respond to the men's initial inclination to kill Saul (verse 5)

rather than following from David's remorse over the cutting of the garment—a chronological displacement noted as early as Rashi.

9. *David . . . came out of the cave and called after Saul*. David is taking a calculated risk. Saul could, after all, order his troops to attack David and the men behind him in the cave. David first throws Saul off his guard by paying obeisance to him as king and prostrating himself—hardly what one would expect of a fugitive or rebel. He then counts on the persuasive power of his own rhetoric, and on the telltale scrap of the king's cloak that he clutches, to deflect Saul from his lethal intentions. David is cannily self-protective but he is also a gambler.

10–11. *Why should you listen to people's words . . . this day your eyes have seen*. Instead of rumor heard about David's harmful intentions, here is ocular evidence of his innocence—and of God's having devised to give David the upper hand over Saul.

11. *and they meant to kill you*. The Masoretic Text has "he meant," which may be either corrected to a plural, as some of the ancient versions do, or construed as "someone said."

12. *my father see, yes, see the skirt of your cloak in my hand*. It is, appropriately, ambiguous whether "my father" is a form of respectful address to an authority or an attempt to reach back to the moment of affectionate intimacy in their relationship. We may note that David, for all the remorse he felt over having cut off the skirt of Saul's garment, makes great display of it now as evidence of having had Saul entirely at his mercy. The proof of his innocence is thus inseparable from the reminder of the power he had over his rival.

13. *Let the LORD judge between me and you . . . the LORD will avenge me of you*. David's great protestation of innocence and his purported gesture of reconciliation move toward a barely veiled threat: you are the one who has wronged me, and vengeance will be exacted, but by God, not by me.

14. *the proverb of the ancients*. The Masoretic Text has "ancient," in the singular, but the Qumran Samuel scroll, more plausibly, shows the plural form.

From wicked men does wickedness come forth. The gnomic saying—only three words in the Hebrew!—that David chooses to cite is archly double-edged: Wicked acts are perpetrated only by the wicked, so I won't be the one to touch you. But there is also the distinct hint that the wicked person in question could be Saul himself. Though David cannot know this, Saul will die by his own hand.

but my hand will not be against you. The words that the writer attributes to David ironically echo the words of Saul's first murderous plot against David, conveyed in interior monologue, when Saul said, "Let not my hand be against him but let the hand of the Philistines be against him" (18:17).

15. *has the king of Israel come forth*. The very verb attached to the wicked in the proverb!

After a dead dog, after a single flea? In his peroration, David outdoes himself in professing his humble station. A dead dog was proverbial in ancient Israel as a contemptible, worthless thing, but David goes the idiom one better by saying he is scarcely more important than a single flea on the dead dog's carcass, a brilliant adaptation to prose of the logic of intensification of biblical poetry, in which a term introduced in the first part of the line is raised to the second power semantically in the parallel second half.

16. *judge me against you*. The Hebrew is literally "judge me from your hand," that is, judge me favorably and rescue me from your hand. The term thus picks up the insistence on "hand" throughout David's speech.

17. *Is this your voice, my son, David?* These first words of Saul's response to David are one of the most breathtaking instances of the biblical technique of contrastive dialogue. David's speech had been, by biblical standards, quite lengthy, and very much a speech—a beautifully crafted piece of rhetoric, with complex political aims in mind. Saul responds with four choked Hebrew words, *haqolkha zeh beni Dawid?* His designation of David as "my son" is free of the ambiguity attached to David's calling him "my father." This is one of those extraordinary reversals that make biblical narrative such a probing representation of the oscillations and the unpredictability of human nature: David's words have cut to the quick of the king's conscience, and suddenly the obsessive pursuer feels an access of paternal affection, intertwined with

remorse, for his imagined enemy. Saul asks his question because he has to shake himself to believe his enemy is his friend, because he stands at a certain distance from David (who has called out "after" Saul), and also because his eyes are blinded with tears. He is thus reminiscent of the blind father Isaac, who was able to make out the voice, but not the identity, of his son Jacob, and from whom a blessing was wrested.

18. *You are more in the right than I*. These words echo the ones pronounced by Judah, referring to his vindicated daughter-in-law Tamar, who will become the progenitrix of David's line.

you who requited me good . . . I requited you evil. The antithesis of good and evil is played on through the next three verses and should not be sacrificed in the English for the sake of imagined idiomatic fluency.

21. *I know that you will surely be king*. This marks Saul's first open admission that David is the "fellow man who is better than you" of whom Samuel spoke (15:28). He has been doubly convinced—by God's having put him at David's mercy and by David's refusal to harm him, a kingly act and not the act of a rebel and usurper.

CHAPTER 25

[1]And Samuel died, and all Israel gathered and
mourned him, and they buried him at his home in
Ramah. And David arose and went down to the
wilderness of Paran.

[2]And there was a man in Maon, whose stock was in
Carmel, and the man was very great; he had three
thousand sheep and a thousand goats. And it happened
when he was shearing his sheep in Carmel—[3]and the
man's name was Nabal and his wife's name was
Abigail, and the woman had a good mind and lovely
looks, but the man was hard and evil in deeds, and a
Calebite—[4]David heard in the wilderness that Nabal
was shearing his sheep. [5]And David sent ten lads, and
David said to the lads, "Go up to Carmel, and come to
Nabal and ask him in my name how he fares. [6]And
say, 'Thus may it be this time next year, that you fare
well, and your house fare well, and all that is yours fare
well. [7]And so, I have heard that they are doing your

shearing. Now, the shepherds who belong to you were with us—we did not humiliate them and nothing of theirs was missing the whole time they were at Carmel. [8]Ask your lads and they will tell you! And may our lads find favor in your eyes, for we have come on a festive day. Give, pray, whatever you can to your servants and to your son, to David.'" [9]And David's lads came and spoke to Nabal all these words in David's name, and they paused. [10]And Nabal answered David's servants and said, "Who is David and who is the son of Jesse? These days many are the slaves breaking away from their masters. [11]And shall I take my bread and my water and my meat that I slaughtered for my shearers and give it to men who come from I know not where?" [12]And David's lads whirled round on their way and went back and told him all these words. [13]And David said to his men, "Every man, gird his sword!" And every man girded his sword, and David, too, girded his sword. And about four hundred men went up after David, while two hundred stayed with the gear.

[14]And to Abigail the wife of Nabal one of the lads told, saying, "Look, David sent messengers from the wilderness to greet our master, and he pounced on them. [15]And the men have been very good to us and

we were not humiliated and we missed nothing the whole time we went about with them when we were out in the field. [16]They were a wall around us both night and day the whole time we were with them tending the sheep. [17]And now, mark and see what you must do, for the evil is resolved against our master and against all his house, and he is such a scoundrel no one can speak to him." [18]And Abigail hurried and fetched two hundred loaves of bread and two jugs of wine and five dressed sheep and five seahs of parched grain and a hundred raisin cakes and two hundred fig cakes, and she put them on the donkeys. [19]And she said to her lads, "Pass on ahead of me and I'll be coming right after you." But her husband she did not tell. [20]And so she was riding on the donkey coming down under the cover of the mountain and, look, David and his men were coming down toward her, and she met them. [21]And David had said, "All in vain did I guard everything that belonged to this fellow in the wilderness, and nothing was missing from all that was his, and he paid me back evil for good! [22]Thus may God do to David and even more, if I leave from all that is his until morning a single pisser against the wall!" [23]And Abigail saw David and hurried and got down from the donkey and flung herself on her face before David and bowed to the ground. [24]And she flung

herself at his feet and said, “Mine, my lord, is the
blame! But let your servant speak in your ears, and
hear the words of your servant. [25]Pray, let not my lord
pay mind to this scoundrel of a man, to Nabal, for just
like his name he is, his name means Base and baseness
is with him. And as for me, your servant, I never saw
my lord’s lads whom you sent. [26]And now, my lord, as
the LORD lives and as you live—the LORD Who kept
you from coming into bloodguilt with your own hand
rescuing you—and now, like Nabal may your enemies
be who seek evil against my lord. [27]And now, this
blessing that your servant has brought to my lord, let it
be given to the lads who go about in the footsteps of
my lord. [28]Forgive, pray, the crime of your servant, for
the LORD will surely make for my lord a stalwart
house, for my lord fights the battles of the LORD and
no evil will be found in you all your days. [29]And when
a person rises to pursue you, to seek your life, my
lord’s life will be bound in the bundle of the living
with the LORD your God, and the lives of your
enemies He will sling from the hollow of the sling.
[30]And so, when the LORD does for my lord all the
good that He has spoken about you and He appoints
you prince over Israel, [31]this will not be a stumbling
and a trepidation of the heart to my lord, to have shed
blood for no cause and for my lord to have carried out

his own rescue, then will the LORD do well with my lord, and you will remember your servant.” [32]And David said to Abigail, “Blessed is the LORD, God of Israel, Who has sent you this day to meet me. [33]And blessed is your good sense and blessed are you, for this day you held me back from coming into bloodguilt with my own hand rescuing me. [34]And yet, as the LORD, God of Israel, lives, Who kept me from harming you, had you not hurried and come to meet me, there would not have been left to Nabal by morning’s light a single pisser against the wall!” [35]And David took from her hand what she had brought him, and to her he said, “Go up in peace to your house. See, I have heeded your voice and granted your petition.”

[36]And Abigail came to Nabal, and, look, he was having himself a feast in his house like a king’s feast, and Nabal’s heart was of good cheer, and he was exceedingly drunk. And she told him nothing, neither great nor small. [37]And it happened in the morning when the wine was gone out of Nabal that his wife told him these things and his heart died within him and he became like a stone. [38]And it happened after about ten days that the LORD smote Nabal and he died.

[39]And David heard that Nabal had died, and he said, “Blessed is the LORD Who has taken up my cause of insult against Nabal, and His servant He has withheld from evil, and Nabal’s evil the LORD has brought down on his own head.” And David sent and spoke out for Abigail to take her as wife. [40]And David’s servants came to Abigail at Carmel and spoke to her, saying, “David sent us to you to take you to him as wife.” [41]And she arose and bowed, her face to the ground, and said, “Look, your servant is but a slavegirl to wash the feet of my lord’s servants.” [42]And Abigail hurried and rose and rode on the donkey, her five young women walking behind her, and she went after David’s messengers, and she became his wife. [43]And Ahinoam David had taken from Jezreel, and both of them became his wives. [44]And Saul had given Michal his daughter, David’s wife, to Palti son of Laish, who was from Gallim.

CHAPTER 25 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the wilderness of Paran*. This geographical indication is puzzling because, unless there is some other place called Paran, it would refer to the Sinai desert, where it would make no sense for David to go and where he could scarcely be if he and his men are engaged with Nabal’s shepherds in Judah. The Septuagint reads “wilderness of Maon.”

2. *Maon . . . Carmel*. Both places are in the tribal territory of Judah, in the vicinity of Hebron, and just a few miles apart.

3. *the man's name was Nabal*. On the face of it, this is an improbable name because *nabal* in Hebrew plainly means "base fellow," "churl," or "fool," as Abigail (verse 25) will point out. It is at least conceivable that the name is not originally Hebrew, and various meanings drawn from other ancient Near Eastern languages have been proposed for it, such as "archer" and "chosen one of the god."

a good mind and lovely looks. As yet, we do not know why this characterization will be important. Her shrewd intelligence will be vividly demonstrated in her brilliant speech to David, and her physical attractiveness will stir his matrimonial interest in her.

and a Calebite. The Calebites were non-Israelites who in effect joined the tribe of Judah. Several medieval Hebrew commentators detected a double meaning because *kalibi* could also be construed as "doglike."

6. *Thus may it be this time next year*. The compact Hebrew phrase *koh leḥay* occurs only here, and its meaning has been disputed. This translation adopts an interpretation that goes back to Rashi, which is based on the similarity to a well-known idiom, *ka'et ḥayah*. That would make sense in terms of the narrative situation: the prosperous Nabal is obviously "faring well" at the moment, and David's greeting of peace (to fare well in the Hebrew idiom is to possess *shalom*) contains a veiled threat—let us hope that you continue to fare well a year from now.

7. *we did not humiliate them*. This is the same verb used for Jonathan's sense of his father's treatment of him (20:34), although here it has the meaning of "molest."

nothing of theirs was missing. The message is that David's men did not permit themselves to take any of Nabal's flock, and perhaps also that as armed men they defended Nabal's people against marauders (compare verse 16, "They were a wall around us both night and day"). But there is a certain ambiguity as to whether David was providing protection out of sheer goodwill or conducting a protection racket in order to get the necessary provisions for his guerilla band.

8. *our lads*. The Hebrew says "the lads"—"our" is added for the sake of clarity, to distinguish David's retainers from Nabal's.

for we have come on a festive day. The time of sheepshearing was a sort of holiday, with feasting and drinking. Nabal's own feast back home at Maon (verse 36) may have been encouraged by the festivities in which he joined with his shearers out in the field.

Give, pray, whatever you can to your servants. The request for a payoff is politely worded, and no quantities are specified.

to your son, to David. This is an expression of deference or humility to the powerful and presumably older Nabal. It also strikes an ironic note of correspondence with the language of David's encounter with Saul at the cave near Ein-Gedi in the previous episode. There, David addressed Saul as "my father," and the king, in an access of feeling, called David "my son."

10. *Who is David and who is the son of Jesse?* This sarcastic question, in verse-like parallelism, picks up another ironic correspondence with Saul, who after the vanquishing of Goliath asked whose son this was. In Nabal's case, of course, the question expresses the contempt of a rich landowner for David and his ragtag band of dispossessed men and malcontents ("men who come from I know not where").

many are the slaves breaking away from their masters. On the surface, these words reflect the disdain of a propertied man (who would also be a slaveholder) for all landless rebels who threaten the established social hierarchy. But there is also a barbed hint that David himself is a slave or subject (the same word in Hebrew) who has rebelled against his master, Saul.

11. *shall I take my bread and my water*. The Septuagint has "wine" instead of "water." In any case, Nabal's harsh and contemptuous response to David's men vividly illustrates that he is a "hard" man, and a churlish one. His outrage over the notion of parting with any of his possessions is nicely indicated, as Shimon Bar-Efrat has noted, by the fact that there are eight grammatical expressions of the first-person singular in this one sentence.

12. *Every man, gird his sword*. The angry David wastes no words: he merely gives the urgent command to take up weapons and move out for the kill.

15. *And the men have been very good to us*. In keeping with the general practice of biblical dialogue, the servant recycles the language of David's

message to Nabal—"we were not humiliated and we missed nothing the whole time"—but amplifies it by adding this clause as well as the image in the next verse, "They were a wall around us both night and day." He thus makes emphatically clear that David's men really provided protection faithfully, whether in the simple sense or in the racketeering sense.

17. *And now, mark and see what you must do*. Unlike the "lads" who address Saul, this one offers no specific advice to Abigail, for she is more than clever enough to figure out what steps she must immediately take.

20. *And so she was riding on the donkey coming down under the cover of the mountain and, look, David and his men were coming*. The two parties moving toward each other introduce a moment of suspense, for David, after all, as the next verse (with a pluperfect verb) makes utterly clear, is armed and angry. The "look" (*hineh*) is used in characteristic fashion to indicate Abigail's visual perspective: he at first doesn't see her because she is coming down the sheltered slope of the mountain, but she sees him and his men with their swords girded ready for battle.

22. *a single pisser against the wall*. The literal meaning of the Hebrew is properly followed in the King James Version, as it is in this translation. The phrase, of course, is a rough and vivid epithet for "male," and one that occurs only in curses. Its edge of vulgarity seems perfectly right for David's anger.

23–24. *flung herself on her face . . . bowed to the ground . . . flung herself at his feet*. In a world where an angry king could massacre every man, woman, and child in Nob, Abigail has no way of knowing whether David will have an impulse to kill her on the spot. (She has not heard the words that limit the threat of slaughter to the males.) Thus, her first move in this highly dangerous situation, before she speaks a word, is to demonstrate her absolute submission to David through these extravagant gestures of obeisance.

24. *Mine*. The shrewdness of her extraordinary speech begins with the very first syllable she utters. She immediately takes all the blame on herself, though in the next breath she will be sure to transfer it heartily to her contemptible husband. At the same time, she exploits a momentary pun, for the word *bi* ("mine," "in me") in other contexts can mean "I beseech you," so she initiates her address to David with what sounds like a term of imploring.

25. *this scoundrel of a man . . . his name means Base . . . And as for me*. It is hard to think of another instance in literature in which a wife so quickly and so devastatingly interposes distance between herself and her husband. She rapidly denounces her spouse and then counterposes herself ("And as for me," *waʾani*) as a person who had no part in the rude rejection of David's emissaries. Abigail of course wants to save her own neck, but she clearly has been chafing over her marriage with a boorish, unpleasant, and probably older man, and she sees an opportunity here.

26. *Who kept you from coming into bloodguilt*. Abigail is no doubt speaking in general, but the reader can scarcely forget the immediately preceding episode, in which David refused to harm Saul when he had him in his power.

27. *this blessing that your servant has brought*. The obvious sense of "blessing" (*berakhah*) in context is "gift," but the primary meaning of the word is worth preserving for two reasons. First, it is clearly intended to answer to David's reiterated use of "blessed" in his response to Abigail. Then, as Moshe Garsiel has aptly observed, it is a key term in a network of allusions to the moment in Genesis 33 when Jacob is reunited with his brother Esau: Esau, too, approaches dauntingly with four hundred armed men; Jacob, like Abigail, prostrates himself before the figure he fears; and he, too, has brought with him generous tribute to be offered in conciliation, which he refers to not as a "gift" (*minhaḥ*) but as a "blessing." And in Genesis 33, that term plays back against the fraught meanings of "blessing" in the larger Jacob–Esau narrative.

28. *Forgive, pray, the crime of your servant*. "Servant" is in the feminine, but the conventional "handmaiden" sounds too fussy. By way of deference, Abigail once again speaks as though the fault were hers, though she has made it quite clear that her husband alone is the guilty one.

a stalwart house. A stalwart, or enduring, house is precisely what was promised the priestly line that was to replace the house of Eli (2:35).

no evil will be found in you all your days. Abigail exploits the temporal ambiguity of the Hebrew imperfective verb to make a statement that is both descriptive of the way David has conducted himself and predictive of the way he will, or should, conduct himself.

29. *when a person rises to pursue you*. The generality of "a person" (*ʾadam*) picks up David's use of the same word in the preceding episode when he addresses Saul ("Why should you listen to people's words" [*divrey ʾadam*]), and, even more pointedly, recalls his very first speech to Saul in 17:32, "Let no man's heart [*levʾ adam*] fail him," where the term seems to refer to Saul himself, who may be the hidden referent here.

bound in the bundle of the living. Although Kyle McCarter Jr., following Tur-Sinai, has claimed that "bundle" (*tsror*) actually means document or book, a more plausible identification is the pouch in which little stones keeping a tally of live sheep were placed. Thus both this positive image and the negative one of the slingshot would be associated with sheepherding. And as Shimon Bar-Efrat had nicely observed, *tsror* in biblical Hebrew also means "stone," the object that would normally be placed in the hollow of the sling; so there is a punning cross-link between the two images.

will sling from the hollow of the sling. Instead of being bound up and safely kept, their lives will be flung out into the void of extinction. (The literal sense of the preposition attached to "hollow" in the Hebrew is "in.") Abigail has chosen her metaphor shrewdly because it would be general knowledge that David used his sling to destroy a formidable enemy.

30–31. *when the* LORD *. . . appoints you prince over Israel, this will not be a stumbling and a trepidation of the heart to my lord*. Abigail deftly pitches her argument to David's political self-interest. Once he makes the move from guerilla chieftain to monarch, he will not want his record stained by blood he has spilled. It is therefore more prudent to let God take care of his enemies —"the LORD" in biblical parlance being the piously proper way to talk about the course of events, but its pragmatic equivalent being "other people" or "circumstances."

31. *and you will remember your servant*. These final words of Abigail's lengthy and carefully calculated speech are strategically chosen, and discreet. What, in fact, does she have in mind? The Israeli novelist Meir Shalev, in a perceptive and lively essay on this story, makes a bold and, to my mind, persuasive proposal. Abigail has matrimony in view, once her cantankerous old husband is out of the way, but why does she think she will deserve so signal an honor, or reward, from David? Shalev argues that when Abigail dissuades David from killing Nabal, repeatedly assuring him that the LORD

will pay off David's scores against him, she is really suggesting herself as the agency for "the LORD." She is, in other words, proposing to David that she carry out a kind of contract killing of her husband, with the payoff that she will become the wife of the handsome young warrior and future king.

32–34. David, though persuaded by Abigail's prudent advice, cannot resist one last reminder that he was indeed about to cut down every pisser against the wall in the house of Nabal.

36. *And she told him nothing*. Abigail again makes a careful calculation: she does not want to convey the scary news to him while he is enveloped in an alcoholic haze.

37. *in the morning when the wine was gone out of Nabal*. She catches him cold sober, and perhaps even with a painful hangover.

his heart died within him and he became like a stone. The terrifying information that David had been on his way—or did she say, was still on his way?—with four hundred armed men intent on mayhem triggers a paralyzing heart attack or, perhaps, a stroke (the biblical understanding of physiology not being ours). Abigail gives the distinct appearance of counting on her husband's cowardice and on a bad heart she might have been aware of from previous manifestations of ill health. If this assumption is correct, she would be using her knowledge of his physical frailty to carry out the tacit contract on his life—bloodlessly, with God Himself left to do the deed (compare the end of verse 38). Robert Polzin perceptively notes that the figurative use of the stone for paralysis cinches a circle of images: the enemies flung from the hollow of the sling and the smooth stone with which David killed Goliath.

39. *David . . . spoke out for Abigail*. In biblical idiom, the verb "to speak" followed by the preposition *b*^{e} instead of the usual *ʾel* ("to") means to enter into discussion about a betrothal. David, losing no time, has certainly grasped the veiled implication of Abigail's last words to him.

41. *your servant is but a slavegirl to wash the feet of my lord's servants*. In one last flourish of the etiquette of humility, she professes herself unworthy of so great an honor as to become David's wife. But perhaps this is just what she has been aiming to become, and so, once again "hurrying," she sets off to join her new husband. She then vanishes from the subsequent narrative.

44. *And Saul had given Michal his daughter, David's wife, to Palti*. The legality of this act is questionable. David's having taken two wives—of Ahinoam all we know is her place of origin—while hiding out from Saul is no justification because, given the practice of polygamy, he could have done that even if he were living under the same roof with Michal. Saul's motive is political, to deprive David of one claim to the throne by removing the connection through marriage with the royal family. But that connection has already been established, as the narrator's identification of Michal as "David's wife" is meant to remind us. We can only guess what Michal, who we know loved David, feels about being passed around in this fashion, or what she feels about the man her father has imposed on her. Later, we will be accorded a brief but unforgettable glimpse into Palti's feelings for Michal.

CHAPTER 26

[1]And the Ziphites came to Saul at Gibeah, saying, “Is
not David hiding out at the hill of Hachilah facing the
wasteland?” [2]And Saul arose and went down to the
wilderness of Ziph, and with him three thousand
picked men of Israel, to seek David in the wilderness
of Ziph. [3]And Saul camped at the hill of Hachilah
which is facing the wasteland, along the way; and
David was staying in the wilderness, and he saw that
Saul had come after him into the wilderness. [4]And
David sent spies and he knew with certainty that Saul
had come. [5]And David arose and came to the place
where Saul had camped. And David saw the place
where Saul lay, and Abner son of Ner and Saul were
lying within the staging ground, and the troops were
encamped around him. [6]And David spoke up and said
to Ahimelech the Hittite and to Abishai son of
Zeruiah, saying, “Who will come down with me to
Saul, to the camp?” And Abishai said, “I on my part
shall go down with you.” [7]And David came, and
Abishai, to the troops by night, and, look, Saul was

lying asleep within the staging ground, his spear thrust into the ground at his head, and Abner and the troops were lying around him. [8]And Abishai said to David, “God has this day delivered your enemy into your hand, and now, let me, pray, strike him through with the spear into the ground just once, I will need no second blow.” [9]And David said to Abishai, “Do no violence to him! For who can reach out his hand against the LORD’S anointed and be guiltless?” [10]And David said, “As the LORD lives, the LORD will smite him, or his day will come and he will die, or in battle he will go down and perish. [11]The LORD forbid that I should reach out my hand against the LORD’S anointed! And so now, take, pray, the spear which is at his head and the water jug and let us go off.” [12]And David took the spear and the water jug at Saul’s head, and they went off, with no one seeing and no one knowing and no one waking, for they were all asleep, for the LORD’S deep slumber had fallen upon them. [13]And David crossed over to the opposite slope and stood on the mountaintop from afar, great was the distance between them. [14]And David called out to the troops and to Abner son of Ner, saying, “Will you not answer, Abner?” And Abner answered and said, “Who are you, that you have called out to the king?” [15]And David said to Abner, “Are you not a man, and who is

like you in Israel, and why have you not guarded your lord the king? For one of the troops has come to do violence to the king your lord. [16]It is not good, this thing that you have done, as the LORD lives, for you all deserve death, because you did not guard your master, the LORD's anointed. And now, see, where are the king's spear and the water jug that were at his head?" [17]And Saul recognized David's voice and he said, "Is this your voice, my son, David?" And David said, "It is my voice, my lord the king." [18]And he said, "Why is it that my lord chases after his servant, for what have I done, and what evil is in my hand? [19]And now, let my lord the king hear, pray, the words of his servant. If the LORD has incited you against me, let Him be appeased by an offering, and if it be men, cursed are they before the LORD, for they have banished me today from joining the LORD's inheritance, saying, 'Go, serve other gods.' [20]And now, let not my blood fall to the ground away from the LORD'S presence, for the king of Israel has come forth to seek a single flea, as he would chase a partridge in the mountains." [21]And Saul said, "I have offended. Come back, my son, David, for I will not harm you again inasmuch as my life was precious in your eyes this day. I have played the fool and have erred gravely." [22]And David answered and said, "Here

is the king's spear. Let one of the lads cross over and take it. [23]And the LORD will pay back to a man his right actions and his loyalty, for the LORD gave you today into my hand and I did not want to reach out my hand against the LORD'S anointed. [24]And, look, just as I valued your life highly today, may the LORD value my life highly and may He save me from every strait." [25]And Saul said to David, "Blessed are you, my son, David. You shall surely do much and you shall surely win out." And David went on his way, but Saul returned to his place.

CHAPTER 26 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And the Ziphites came to Saul at Gibeah*. This verse, echoing much of the language of 23:19, announces the beginning of the last of the elaborately paired episodes that structure the story of David and Saul. Scholarly consensus assumes that these doublets reflect different sources or traditions bearing on the same events, although the possibility cannot be rejected out of hand that the original writer may have deliberately composed his story with paired incidents. In any case, the pairings need to be read as part of the purposeful compositional design of the redacted version of the narrative that we have. As the Russian formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky observed long ago, every parallelism in a literary text serves to point up a certain semantic difference. Here, we note at the outset that the elaborately detailed intelligence about David's whereabouts provided by the Ziphites in 23:19 is largely absent from this briefer account: this story will prove to be an *inversion* of the earlier one, David discovering Saul instead of the other way around. Another indication that the doublet is manipulated as an element of

purposeful design is the fact that this episode simultaneously repeats *two different* previous episodes—not only the earlier story of Saul's pursuit of David into the wilderness of Ziph but also the encounter between David and Saul at the cave near Ein-Gedi (chapter 24). There, just as here, David refused to kill Saul when he, or one of his men, could have done so, and there he professed his innocence to a remorseful Saul who called him as he does here, "my son, David."

3. *he saw that Saul had come after him*. The placement of this second account of pursuit in the wilderness of Ziph after Saul's solemn pledge in chapter 24 not to harm David underlines the compulsive character of his obsession with David. Whatever his avowed good intentions, Saul cannot restrain his impulse to destroy his rival. There is thus strong narrative logic in the recurrence: after this last encounter with Saul, David will sensibly conclude that he can no longer trust the king's professions of good faith, and he will take flight beyond the borders of Israel.

4. *David sent spies and he knew with certainty*. In contrast to the episode in chapter 23, it is David here who commands military intelligence. The writer makes this point neatly by using the same (relatively unusual) phrase, *ʾel nakhon*, "with certainty," which in chapter 23 was spoken by Saul, referring to the information about David he expected to get from the Ziphites.

6. *Ahimelech the Hittite*. In biblical usage, "Hittite" is a loose designation for Canaanite peoples and does not necessarily refer to the Indo-European group that originated in Anatolia. The presence of a foreigner in David's inner circle of warriors suggests an openness of his band of disaffected men to adventure seekers, freebooters, and other mobile types in the Canaanite population. Ahimelech is nowhere else mentioned in the biblical record, which has led some scholars to infer that the mention of this foreigner may be an authentic early notice of a historical personage. The name itself is Hebrew.

Abishai son of Zeruiah. If the report in Chronicles is reliable, Zeruiah was David's sister—hence the unusual matronymic instead of a patronymic. David the warrior-chieftain is surrounded by his three nephews, the three bloody-minded sons of Zeruiah: two of them impetuous (Abishai and Asahel), the third, who is David's commander, ruthlessly calculating (Joab).

8. *God has this day delivered your enemy into your hand*. These words explicitly echo the words of David's men when they discover Saul unawares in the cave.

strike him through with the spear . . . just once, I will need no second blow. This bit of warrior's bravado helps us make an important connection, as J. P. Fokkelman has nicely observed: twice Saul hurled this same spear at David, who eluded him. Abishai on his part vows he will deliver one swift, lethal blow.

9. *And David said*. Abishai, dumbfounded, offers no response to David's forbidding him to harm this archenemy, and so David has to explain that God will settle accounts with Saul in His own good time.

Do no violence to him. Instead of one of three expected verbs, "to strike down," "to kill," "to put to death," David uses the verb *hishḥit*, which basically means "to destroy," but which can carry the association, as Kyle McCarter Jr. rightly observes, of mutilation or defacement, the taboo acts that should not be perpetrated on the person of the king.

11. *take . . . the spear*. In the episode at the cave, David carried away the cut-off corner of Saul's garment, which had been symbolically linked with kingship. The spear is an alternative image of kingship, obviously more directly associated with martial potency, and so this version conveys a greater sense that David is depriving Saul of something essential in the token of kingship he bears off. Again, the placement of this version of the paired episodes is telling, for the next time we see Saul in the narrative he will be undone on the battlefield by the Philistines and will turn his own weapon against himself.

and the water jug. The spear protects life by destroying; the water jug sustains life for the warrior in battle under the hot sun.

12. *And David took the spear and the water jug*. David takes them himself, after having ordered Abishai to do it. The medieval Hebrew exegete David Kimchi offers a shrewd explanation: "He changed his mind and didn't want Abishai to approach the king, lest he prove unable to restrain himself and kill Saul."

14. *Who are you, that you have called out to the king?* Some ancient versions omit "to the king" because David has called out to Abner, not to Saul. David's

shouting from the prominence, however, occurs in the middle of the night, and it clearly has awakened Saul, which seems to be what is bothering Abner. David has chosen Saul's commander as his first interlocutor in order to stress the sacred responsibility of those around the king to protect his person. His noble words are not devoid of self-interest because David is clearly conscious of the fact that he is the future king.

15. *one of the troops has come to do violence to the king*. Although this could refer to Abishai, the essential referent is David himself—something he does not want to say in so many words.

16. *you all deserve death*. "All" is supplied in the translation in order to convey the fact that here the pronoun "you" is a plural in the Hebrew. This death sentence pronounced on Saul's entire entourage is extravagant, but Abner at least will die a violent death.

17. *Is this your voice, my son, David?* These are the identical words he pronounces outside the cave near Ein-Gedi. Here, he "recognizes" the voice —as, symbolically, in this remission of his madness, he recognizes his paternal bond with David—but he is not entirely sure because of the darkness, and so he asks.

18. *what evil is in my hand?* As elsewhere, "hand" and "in my hand" have multiple valences. What David literally has in his hand as he speaks is the king's spear!

19. *If the* LORD *has incited . . . if it be men*. These two alternatives are a kind of diplomatic maneuver. David doesn't want to put the blame squarely on Saul, so he proposes that the king was "incited" either by God for some mysterious reason or by malicious people.

let Him be appeased by an offering. The Hebrew says literally, "let Him smell [the fragrant odor of] an offering."

banished me . . . from . . . the LORD*'s inheritance*. The LORD'S inheritance clearly refers to the Land of Israel. Since every national region had its own cult, David is saying that to be excluded from his own national borders is tantamount to being obliged to worship other gods. In fact, his flight from Saul has been mostly within Israelite territory, but he seems to be anticipating that his next move, for his own safety, will have to be into Philistine country.

20. *to seek a single flea, as he would chase a partridge in the mountains*. The language of the entire clause recycles the words David used to conclude his speech outside the cave. But the dead dog has been deleted and a partridge has been introduced instead. This image is less forceful, but its attraction in the Hebrew, as several commentators have noted, is a witty pun: partridge (*qore'*) is a homonym for "he who calls out." David (verse 14) was identified by Abner as the one who called out to the king—a caller out on the mountain, a partridge pursued on the mountains.

22. *And David answered and said, "Here is the king's spear."* It is noteworthy that David does not immediately respond to Saul's renewed profession of regret and good faith. (The Masoretic consonantal text, the *ketiv*, tries to rescue this lapse by representing these words as a vocative, "Here is the spear, king," but the *qeri*, or pronounced Masoretic version, properly renders it as *ḥanit hamelekh*, "the king's spear.") In the encounter at the cave, David vowed he would not harm Saul's descendants, though his actual words were not reported. Here, he first gives an impersonal order to have the spear brought back to Saul. It is only when he goes on to recapitulate his profession of innocence that he again addresses Saul. By this point, he no longer trusts any promises Saul may make not to harm him but hopes that God will note his own proper conduct and therefore protect him (verse 24).

24. *I valued your life highly*. The literal Hebrew idiom is "your life was great in my eyes."

25. *Blessed are you, my son, David*. These words of fatherly blessing are the last ones Saul speaks to David: the two never meet again. It is notable that in their previous encounter, Saul explicitly conceded that David would replace him as king, whereas here he merely says in general language, "You shall surely do much and you shall surely win out."

David went on his way, but Saul returned to his place. This is a biblical formula for marking the end of a narrative unit, but it also nicely distinguishes between the two men: David continues on the move while Saul goes back to his set place of residence.

CHAPTER 27

[1]And David said in his heart, “Now, I shall perish one
day by the hand of Saul. There is nothing better for me
than to make certain I get away to Philistine country.
Then Saul will despair of seeking me anymore through
all the territory of Israel, and I shall get away from
him.” [2]And David arose, and he crossed over, he and
the six hundred men who were with him, to Achish
son of Maoch, king of Gath. [3]And David stayed with
Achish in Gath, he and his men, each man with his
household, David with his two wives, Ahinoam the
Jezreelite and Abigail wife of Nabal the Carmelite.
[4]And it was told to Saul that David had fled to Gath,
and he no longer sought after him. [5]And David said to
Achish, “If, pray, I have found favor in your eyes, let
them give me a place in one of the outlying towns that
I may dwell there. For why should your servant dwell
in the royal town with you?” [6]And Achish gave him
Ziklag on that day. Therefore has Ziklag belonged to
the kings of Judah until this day. [7]And the span of
time that David dwelled in Philistine country was a

year and four months. [8]And David went up, and his men with him, and they raided the Geshurite and the Gerizite and the Amalekite, for they were the inhabitants of the land of old, till you come to Shur and to the land of Egypt. [9]And David struck the land, and he left not a man or woman alive, and he took sheep and cattle and donkeys and camels and clothes, and he returned and came to Achish. [10]And Achish said, “Where were you raiding now?” And David said, “The Negeb of Judah and the Negeb of the Jerahmeelite and the Negeb of the Kenite.” [11]And neither man nor woman did David leave alive to bring to Gath, thinking, “Lest they tell about us, saying, ‘Thus did David do.’” And such was his practice all the time he dwelled in Philistine country. [12]And Achish trusted David, saying, “He has surely become repugnant to Israel and he will be my perpetual vassal.”

[28:1]And it happened at that time that the Philistines had gathered their ranks for the army to do battle with Israel, and Achish said to David, “You surely know that with me you must sally forth in the ranks, both you and your men.” [2]And David said, “Then you yourself know what your servant will do.” And Achish

said to David, “Then I shall make you my bodyguard for life.”

CHAPTER 27 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And David said in his heart*. This is the first actual interior monologue given for David. The decision to “cross over” (verse 2) to the enemy is a momentous one, and the writer wants to make it perfectly clear that David had definitively realized Saul was bound to kill him sooner or later (“I shall perish one day by the hand of Saul”) unless he moved to the safety of enemy territory.

2. *he crossed over . . . to Achish . . . king of Gath*. For those scholars who have argued that David is no more a historical figure than King Arthur, this whole episode constitutes a problem: why would a much later, legendary, and supposedly glorifying tradition attribute this act of national treachery to David? (It would be rather like the invention of a story that Winston Churchill spent 1914–1918 in Berlin, currying the favor of the kaiser.) The compelling inference is that the writer had authentic knowledge of a period when David collaborated with the Philistines; he was unwilling to omit this uncomfortable information, though he did try to mitigate it.

3. *David stayed with Achish in Gath . . . each man with his household*. The circumstances have changed drastically since David arrived in Gath alone and was obliged to play the madman. Now he comes with six hundred men under his command, a fighting unit that could be of great use to Achish, and essentially offers to become Achish’s vassal. The notice about the households sets the stage for the Amalekite raid on Ziklag in chapter 29, for we now become aware that David’s guerilla band carries in its train a sizable group of wives and children.

5. *For why should your servant dwell in the royal town with you?* On his part, David would like to establish his own headquarters and enjoy much greater

freedom of movement. But given that his six hundred men with multiple wives and children could easily have made up a group of two or three thousand people, they would have in fact been a rather burdensome presence in a modest-sized Philistine city.

6. *Ziklag*. The best archaeological guess is that this is a site a few miles to the northwest of Beersheba, in an area under Philistine jurisdiction but facing the border with Israel.

Therefore has Ziklag belonged to the kings of Judah. This seemingly technical geopolitical notice serves a function of historical foreshadowing, as Fokkelman observes: David, the Philistine vassal and fugitive from Saul, is destined to found a lasting dynasty, "the kings of Judah."

8. *for they were the inhabitants of the land of old, till you come to Shur*. There might be a textual distortion here: several versions of the Septuagint read "the inhabited land from Telem to Shur." But the Masoretic version has a certain logic: what David sets out to do is to attack the age-old inhabitants of the land, who are Israel's staunch enemies, throughout this southern region. In doing this, he is also serving Achish's purposes, for these peoples are equally hostile to the Philistines (like the Israelites, latecomer interlopers in Canaan).

9. *he left not a man or woman alive*. The narrator offers no indication of whether he thinks these massacres are morally objectionable or merely what Israel's traditional enemies deserve. A pragmatic reason for the butchery will be given in verse 11. It should be noted that David is not carrying out a total "ban" (*ḥerem*) against these groups because he keeps all the livestock as booty, thus palpably building up a base of wealth for himself and his followers.

10. *Where were you raiding now?* Achish of course wants to know about the military activities of his vassal. David answers with a flat lie, claiming he has been conducting raids against his own tribe, Judah, and against two ethnic groups more or less attached to Judah. In fact, he has been attacking only non-Israelite groups.

The Negeb. The term Negeb means "dry land" and refers to the desert stretching across southern Israel from near the Dead Sea to near the coastal plain. Its subregions are then identified by the tribe or ethnic group that inhabits each.

11. *Lest they tell about us, saying, "Thus did David do."* David wipes out all these populations because he wants no one surviving to bring word back to Gath that he has restricted his attacks entirely to Canaanite and related peoples, and also that he has been enriching himself with more booty than he has been sharing with Achish his overlord by way of tribute. David is clearly a man who will do anything to survive. His words here will come back in a surprising new context in his elegy for Saul and Jonathan, when he says, "Tell it not in Gath."

12. *Achish trusted David*. He believes the lie, or so it seems.

my perpetual vassal. The Hebrew *'eved* has the general meaning of "slave" or "servant," but the present episode makes the sense of "vassal" compelling.

28:1. *You surely know that with me you must sally forth*. Despite the just reported "trust" in David, Achish appears to harbor a lingering doubt (hence the coercive edge of "you surely know") as to whether David will actually fight against his fellow Israelites, something that, to Achish's knowledge, David has only claimed to do (27:10).

2. *you yourself know what your servant will do*. This is an artful dodge: it could be construed, as David means it to be construed, as "yes, of course, I'll do it," but the language evasively does not repeat Achish's words about sallying forth (against Israel).

I shall make you my bodyguard for life. As befits a ruler addressing a former enemy with whom he is in uneasy alliance, Achish's gesture is a studied ambiguity—either he is rewarding David for his loyalty by making him a permanent bodyguard, or he is seeking to maintain surveillance over David by an appointment that would keep him close to the court.

CHAPTER 28

[3]And Samuel had died, and all Israel mourned him, and they buried him in Ramah, in his town. And Saul had taken away the ghosts and the familiar spirits from the land.

[4]And the Philistines gathered and came and camped at Shunem. And Saul gathered all Israel and they camped at Gilboa. [5]And Saul saw the Philistine camp, and he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. [6]And Saul inquired of the LORD, and the LORD did not answer him, neither by dreams nor by the Urim nor by prophets. [7]And Saul said to his servants, “Seek me out a ghostwife, that I may go to her and inquire through her.” And his servants said to him, “There is a ghostwife at Ein-Dor.” [8]And Saul disguised himself and put on different clothes, and he went—he together with two men—and they came to the woman by night, and he said, “Conjure me, pray, a ghost, and summon up the one I say to you.” [9]And the woman said to him,

“Look, you yourself know what Saul did, that he cut
off the ghosts and the familiar spirits from the land,
and why do you entrap me to have me put to death?”
10 And Saul swore to her by the LORD, saying, “As the
LORD lives, no blame will befall you through this
thing.” 11 And the woman said, “Whom shall I summon
up for you?” And he said, “Samuel summon up for
me.” 12 And the woman saw Samuel and she screamed
in a loud voice, and the woman said to Saul, “Why did
you deceive me, when you are Saul?” 13 And the king
said to her, “Do not fear. But what do you see?” And
the woman said to Saul, “A god do I see rising up from
the earth.” 14 And he said to her, “What does he look
like?” And she said, “An old man rises up, and he is
wrapped in a cloak.” And Saul knew that it was
Samuel, and he bowed to the ground and did
obeisance. 15 And Samuel said, “Why have you troubled
me to summon me up?” And Saul said, “I am in dire
straits, and the Philistines are fighting against me and
God has turned away from me and no longer answers
me, neither through prophets nor dreams, and I called
to you to let me know what I should do.” 16 And Samuel
said, “And why do you ask me, when the LORD has
turned away from you and become your foe? 17 And the
LORD has done to you as He spoke through me, and
the LORD has torn the kingship from your hand and

given it to your fellow man, to David. [18]In as much as
you did not heed the voice of the LORD and you did
not carry out His burning wrath against Amalek,
therefore has the LORD done this thing to you this
day! [19]And the LORD shall give Israel, too, together
with you, into the hands of the Philistines. And
tomorrow—you and your sons are with me. The camp
of Israel, too, shall the LORD give into the hand of the
Philistines." [20]And Saul hastened and flung himself full
length on the ground and was very frightened by
Samuel's words. Neither did he have strength, for he
had eaten no food all day and all night. [21]And the
woman came to Saul and saw that he was very
distraught, and she said to him, "Look, your servant
has heeded your voice, and I took my life in my hands
and heeded your words that you spoke to me. [22]And
now, you on your part, pray heed the voice of your
servant, and I shall put before you a morsel of bread,
and eat, that you may have strength when you go on
the way." [23]And he refused and said, "I will not eat."
And his servants pressed him, and the woman as well,
and he heeded their voice and arose from the ground
and sat upon the couch. [24]And the woman had a stall-
fed calf in the house. And she hastened and butchered
it and took flour and kneaded it and baked it into
flatbread, [25]and set it before Saul and before his

servants, and they ate, and they arose and went off on that night.

CHAPTER 28 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *And Samuel had died*. This second obituary notice for Samuel, with a pluperfect verb, is introduced in order to set the stage for the conjuration of Samuel's ghost.

Saul had taken away the ghosts and the familiar spirits from the land. The two Hebrew terms, *ʾovot* and *yidʿonim*, are generally paired, and both refer to the spirits of the dead. (The latter is derived from the verbal root *y-d-ʿ* "to know," and so prepares the way for the reappearance of the theme of [withheld] knowledge that has been stalking Saul from the beginning of his story.) The ghosts and familiar spirits are linked metonymically with the necromancers who call them up—it is the latter who of course would have been the actual object of Saul's purge—but the terms themselves primarily designate the spirits. Biblical views about postmortem existence tend to fluctuate. Often, the dead are thought to be swallowed up in "the Pit" (*sheʾol*) where they are simply silenced, extinguished forever. Sometimes, the dead are imagined as continuing a kind of shadowy afterlife in the underworld, rather like the spirits of the dead in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*. Following on this latter view, necromancy in the ancient Hebrew world is conceived not as mere hocus-pocus but as a potentially efficacious technology of the realm of spirits, which, however, has been prohibited by God, Who wants no human experts interfering in this realm. Saul, then, has been properly upholding monotheistic law—reflected in Leviticus—in proscribing necromancy, but in his desperation, he is now about to violate his own prohibition.

6. *the LORD did not answer*. One last time, Saul is excluded from divine knowledge, all the accepted channels for its conveyance, being enumerated here—dream interpretation, oracular device, prophecy.

8. *Saul disguised himself and put on different clothes*. The narrative motivation is obvious: as the very ruler who has made necromancy a capital crime (see verse 9), Saul can scarcely come to engage the services of a necromancer unless he is disguised as a commoner. But his disguise also is the penultimate instance of the motif of royal divestment. As we have seen, clothing is associated with Saul's kingship—the torn or cut garment is the tearing of his kingship, and among the ecstatics surrounding Samuel, Saul stripped himself naked. Now, in an unwitting symbolic gesture, he divests himself of his royal garments before going to learn of his own impending death.

9. *you yourself know*. An ironically emphatic use of "to know" to the man who never knows what he needs to.

he cut off the ghosts. In place of the more abstract term, "to take away," used by the narrator in verse 3, she, from her perspective as a threatened practitioner, chooses the violent verb "to cut off."

why do you entrap me. She uses the verb of entrapment with neat precision, for she fears that the stranger who has come to her may be an undercover agent for Saul's necromancy enforcement authority.

10. *Saul swore to her by the* LORD. The irony of Saul's doing this in a negotiation with a conjurer of spirits is vividly caught by the Midrash: "Whom did Saul resemble at that moment? A woman who is with her lover and swears by the life of her husband" (Yalkut Shimoni 2:247:139).

12. *the woman saw Samuel and she screamed in a loud voice*. What terrifies her is not the apparition of Samuel but the sudden realization of the identity of her nocturnal visitor. How does she know it is Saul? The most persuasive explanation has been offered by Moshe Garsiel. As other biblical references to conjuration of the dead suggest, the usual method would be for the necromancer to listen to and interpret the supposed "chirping" (*tsiftsuf*) or murmuring sounds made by shadows or wispy wraiths believed to be the presences of the dead. (There is scant biblical evidence for the claim that the necromancer was a medium from whose throat the ghost spoke.) In this case, however, the spirit appears not as a murmuring wisp or shadow but as the distinctly defined image of Samuel, in his prophet's cloak (see verses 13–14), and the woman of Ein-Dor immediately realizes that it is only for the king that the prophet Samuel would have thus risen from the underworld in full-

body image. It is noteworthy that the narrator is discreetly silent about the actual mechanics of the conjuration procedure, perhaps out of a kind of monotheistic reticence.

13. *Do not fear. But what do you see?* Saul assures her that even though he is the very king who prohibited necromancy, he will stand by his vow that no blame will be attached to her. What he urgently wants to know is the identity of the conjured presences—she can see the spirit, but he cannot, so once more Saul needs some mediation for the knowledge he seeks.

A god do I see rising up from the earth. The Hebrew balances precariously on a linguistic ambiguity that has no happy English equivalent. The word for "god" here is *ʾelohim*, which when treated grammatically as a singular (it has a plural ending) usually means God. In the plural, it often refers to "gods" in the polytheistic sense. It also occasionally means "angel" or "divine being," and some have argued, unconvincingly, that it sometimes means "judge." A further complication here is that the ghostwife uses *ʾelohim* with a plural participle (and hence the King James Version renders it as "gods"). It seems likely that the grammatical crossover we have just reviewed encouraged a fluidity of usage in which the plural might sometimes be employed with a singular sense, even when the referent was not the one God. In the immediately following question and response between Saul and the woman, it is presupposed that she has seen only one male figure, and the narrator has already told us she has seen Samuel. When she says she sees *ʾelohim* rising up, she probably means an imposing figure like unto a god or an angel, or perhaps she is using it as a term for "spirit."

14. *wrapped in a cloak*. It is the cloak, *meʿil*, that clinches the identification for Saul—the same prophet's cloak that he clung to and tore. From childhood, when Samuel's mother would make him a new *meʿil* each year, to the grave, Samuel is associated with this garment.

15. *Why have you troubled me*. In perfect character, Samuel begins by addressing an angry question to Saul, using a verb that refers to disturbing a person from sleep, or from the sleep of death. In divergence from the usual necromantic procedure, the ghost of Samuel speaks directly to Saul, who in turn questions Samuel himself. In fact, the ghostwife appears to have absented herself at this point, for the indication in verse 21, "And the woman

came to Saul and saw that he was very distraught," is that she is returning to the room after having left it.

I am in dire straits, and the Philistines are fighting . . . and God has turned away . . . and I called to you. The desperate Saul spills out all the causes for his desperation in one breathless run-on sentence, which this translation tries to reproduce.

neither through prophets nor dreams. Addressing a prophet, Saul makes prophecy the first item. He deletes the Urim—perhaps, it has been suggested, because of his guilty recollection of his massacre of the priests at Nob.

16. *why do you ask me*. Once again, in this case sardonically, there is a play on Saul's name (*Shaʾul*) and the verb "to ask" (*shaʾal*).

17. *the LORD has torn the kingship from your hand*. As this particular clause highlights, Samuel's entire speech is a recapitulation of the denunciatory speech he made to Saul at the end of the Amalek episode (chapter 15). The tearing of the kingship "from your hand" visually recalls Saul's hand grasping the torn skirt of Samuel's cloak. There, Samuel had said God would give the throne to "your fellow man who is better than you." Now, of course, he can spell out the name David.

18. *you did not heed the voice of the LORD*. The phrasal motif of "heeding the voice" from chapter 15 is again invoked. After Samuel's return to the underworld, the woman of Ein-Dor, on a purely mundane plane, will speak twice about heeding voices (verses 21–22).

19. *And tomorrow—you and your sons are with me*. Saul, having come to seek advice on the eve of a great battle, is given a denunciation concluding with a death sentence, conveyed in these words with spooky immediacy, as the ghost of Samuel beckons Saul and his sons down into the underworld. This entire scene is conceivably one of the inspirations for Macbeth's encounter with the three witches, though the biblical writer, in contrast to Shakespeare, places it at the penultimate moment of his doomed king's story.

The camp of Israel, too. There is no need to perform textual surgery on this sentence simply because it repeats the burden of the first sentence of the verse. It would be perfectly in character for Samuel to rub in the news of the imminent catastrophe: not only will you and your sons perish, but, as I have

said, all your forces will be defeated by the Philistines, your kingship ending in wholesale failure.

20. *Saul hastened and flung himself full length on the ground*. Most translators have interpreted the second verb here as an involuntary one ("fell"). But the verb "to hasten" (*miher*) is generally part of a sequence of voluntary actions, as its use in verse 24 ("and she hastened and butchered it and took") neatly illustrates. Saul, in his terror and despair, flings himself to the ground, and then scarcely has the strength to get up. The Hebrew for "full length" includes the component *qomah*, "stature," and so is a reminder that the man of majestic stature is now cast to the ground in final defeat.

for he had eaten no food. There is no convincing evidence to support the claim of some scholars that a person had to fast before seeing a necromancer. Perhaps Saul's fasting is a reflex of his distraught condition, but he may well be fasting because he is about to enter into battle. (It appears that his two bodyguards have also not eaten.) This would invite a connection, which has been made by both Fokkelman and Garsiel, with the vow of abstinence from food that Saul earlier imposed on his troops (chapter 15). There, he was ready to put Jonathan to death for having tasted a bit of honey; here, he will end by partaking of a feast.

22. *a morsel of bread*. She says this to play down what she will serve him, which is a hearty dinner, with a main course of veal.

24. *the woman had a stall-fed calf*. It would have taken several hours to accomplish this slaughtering and cooking and baking. One must imagine Saul sitting in the house at Ein-Dor, brooding or darkly baffled or perhaps a little catatonic. It is an odd and eerie juncture of the story. David has already twice been saved, from death and then from bloodguilt, by women. Saul is now given sustaining nurture by a woman—but only to regain the strength needed to go out to the battlefield where he will die.

CHAPTER 29

[1]And the Philistines gathered all their camps at
Aphek, while Israel was encamped by the spring in
Jezreel. [2]And the Philistine overlords were advancing
with hundreds and with thousands, and David and his
men were advancing at the rear with Achish. [3]And the
Philistine captains said, “Who are these Hebrews?”
And Achish said to the Philistine captains, “Is this not
David, servant of Saul king of Israel, who has been
with me these many days or years, and I have found
nothing amiss in him from the day he fell in with me
until this day?” [4]And the Philistine captains were
furious with him, and the Philistine captains said to
him, “Send the man back and let him go back to his
place that you set aside for him there, and let him not
come down with us into battle, so that he become not
our adversary in battle. For how would this fellow be
reconciled with his master—would it not be with the
heads of our men? [5]Is this not David for whom they
sing out in the dances, saying,

‘Saul has struck down his thousands
and David his tens of thousands’?”

6 And Achish called to David and said to him, “As the
LORD lives, you are upright, and your going into the
fray with the camp has been good in my eyes, for I
have found no evil in you from the day you came to
me until this day. But in the eyes of the Philistine
overlords you are not good. 7 And so now, return, and
go in peace, and you shall do no evil in the eyes of the
Philistine overlords.” 8 And David said to Achish, “But
what have I done, and what have you found in your
servant from the day I appeared in your presence until
this day, that I should not come and do battle with the
enemies of my lord the king?” 9 And Achish answered
and said to David, “I know that you are as good in my
eyes as a messenger of God. But the Philistine
captains have said, ‘He shall not go up with us to
battle.’ 10 And so now, rise early in the morning, you
and the servants of your lord who have come with you,
and rise early in the morning when it is just
brightening for you, and go.” 11 And David rose early,
he and his men, to go in the morning to return to
Philistine country, while the Philistines went up to
Jezreel.

CHAPTER 29 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the Philistines gathered all their camps at Aphek*. The "all" stresses that this is a massing of the entire Philistine army, not merely a division or two, for a decisive confrontation with the Israelites. As Robert Polzin notes, the first major clash with the Philistines in 1 Samuel began with the Philistines' camping at Aphek (4:1b), so the mention of their encampment here at the same site creates a kind of symmetrical frame for the book. Aphek is roughly forty miles south of Jezreel, not far from Philistine territory, and would have served as a general staging ground. The Philistine army then advances northward to camp at Shunem (28:4), just opposite Saul's forces at the spring of Jezreel and near Mount Gilboa.

2. *David and his men were advancing at the rear with Achish*. Given David's double role as Achish's vassal and as his special bodyguard, his position in battle should have been alongside Achish. Until this mention of David, we might have imagined that the report of the deployment of forces was a direct continuation of the account of Saul's seance at Ein-Dor on the night before the battle. Now it rapidly becomes clear that the narrative has again switched tracks from Saul to David, suspending the fulfillment of Saul's dire fate in order to follow the movement of his successor, who approaches the very same battlefield as part of the enemy forces, only to be turned away. The switch in narrative focus also involves backtracking in time: we left Saul in the dark of the night (also a symbolic darkness for him); the deployment of armies and the Philistine dialogues take place on the previous day; David's early departure, "just when it is brightening" (an antithesis to Saul in the dark, as J. P. Fokkelman notes), will be on the morning of the battle.

3. *the Philistine captains*. These are the military commanders, *sarim*, and they should not be thought of as synonymous with the overlords (*seranim*) of the five Philistine cities. It is the military men who, understandably, fear a serious security risk in the presence of a Hebrew contingent in their ranks.

Who are these Hebrews? The Hebrew is literally "What are these Hebrews?," which many translations interpret as "What are these Hebrews

doing here?" Again, "Hebrews" is the term used by foreigners for the Israelites.

David, servant of Saul king of Israel. Achish means to stress that Saul's former courtier and commander has defected to the Philistine side, but his choice of words inadvertently reminds the Philistine captains that David may still be loyal to Saul.

these many days or years. Some scholars suspect that these two terms reflect a conflated text, and that one should simply read "these many days." It could, however, make sense for Achish to be a little vague about the time and to exaggerate it in order to emphasize David's loyalty—in fact, David has been with him one year and two months.

fell in with me. Kyle McCarter Jr. proposes that the verb has the sense of "to defect."

4. *would it not be with the heads of our men?* They actually use a euphemism, "the heads of these men," in order to avoid pronouncing a terrible fate on themselves. Perhaps another euphemism is involved, through upward displacement, since in chapter 18 it was a different part of the anatomy of the slain Philistines that David brought back to Saul.

6. *As the LORD lives*. It is curious that a Philistine should be swearing by the LORD, unless, as has been argued, he is leaning over backward to adopt David's perspective.

you are upright. In fact, David has been lying to Achish about the object of his raids (27:8–11).

good in my eyes . . . I have found no evil in you. This entire exchange turns on the neat antithesis between good and evil, rather like the exchange between Saul and David outside the cave near Ein-Gedi. Achish will go on to say, quite extravagantly, that David is "as good in my eyes as a messenger of God" (verse 9). The reader, however, may well wonder whether David is in fact so unambiguously good.

in the eyes of the Philistine overlords you are not good. Some scholars, following the Septuagint, read here "you are good," contending that Achish claims a difference of opinion between the overlords and the captains. It makes better sense simply to assume that he is referring the negative view of David to the highest echelon of authority, though in fact the complaint came from the field commanders.

8. *what have I done . . . that I should not . . . do battle with the enemies of my lord the king?* Continuing to play the role of the perfect Philistine vassal, David protests his eagerness to fight the Israelites, although in point of fact he must be immensely relieved to escape from the intolerable position of battling against his own people. As several interpreters have noticed, the words he archly chooses have a double edge because "my lord the king" could be a covert reference to Saul, in which case the "enemies" would be the armies of Achish and his confederates. Whether David, lacking this providential way out, would really have pitted himself against his own people is another imponderable in the character of this elusive figure.

from the day I appeared in your presence. The idiomatic force of the phrase is "from the day I entered your service." Achish had simply said, "from the day you came to me."

10. *you and the servants of your lord*. The translation follows the reading in the Septuagint. The Masoretic Text, a little less coherently, lacks "you."

11. *to Philistine country*. They are in fact headed to the place Achish has "set aside" for them at the eastern border of Philistine country—the town of Ziklag. Disaster awaits them there.

CHAPTER 30

[1]And it happened when David and his men came to
Ziklag on the third day that the Amalekites had raided
the Negeb, and Ziklag, and they had struck Ziklag and
burned it in fire. [2]And they had taken the women
captive, from the youngest to the oldest, they put no
one to death. And they drove them off and went on
their way. [3]And David, and his men with him, came to
the town, and, look, it was burned in fire, and their
wives and their sons and their daughters were taken
captive. [4]And David, and the troops who were with
him, raised their voices and wept until there was no
strength left in them to weep. [5]And David's two wives
were taken captive, Ahinoam the Jezreelite and
Abigail wife of Nabal the Carmelite. [6]And David was
in dire straits, for the troops thought to stone him, for
all the troops were embittered, every man over his sons
and his daughters. And David took strength in the
LORD his God. [7]And David said to Abiathar the
priest, son of Ahimelech, "Bring forth, pray, the
ephod." And Abiathar brought forth the ephod to

David. [8]And David inquired of the LORD, saying, “Shall I pursue this raiding party? Shall I overtake it?” And He said, “Pursue, for you will surely overtake it, and you will surely rescue.” [9]And David went, he and the six hundred men who were with him, and they came to the Wadi Besor, and those to be left stayed behind. [10]And David continued the pursuit, he and four hundred men, and the two hundred men who were too exhausted to cross the Wadi Besor stayed behind. [11]And they found an Egyptian man in the field and took him to David, and they gave him bread and he ate, and they gave him water. [12]And they gave him a slice of pressed figs and two raisin cakes. And he ate, and his spirits revived, for he had eaten no bread and drunk no water three days and three nights. [13]And David said to him, “To whom do you belong, and where are you from?” And he said, “I am an Egyptian lad, the slave of an Amalekite man, and my master abandoned me, for I have been sick now three days. [14]We on our part had raided the Negeb of the Cherithites and that of Judah and the Negeb of Caleb, and Ziklag we burned in fire.” [15]And David said to him, “Will you lead me down to this raiding party?” And he said, “Swear to me by God that you will not put me to death and that you will not hand me over to my master. Then I shall lead you down to this raiding

party.” [16]And he led him down, and, look, they were
sprawled out all over the ground eating and drinking
and reveling with all the vast booty they had taken
from the land of the Philistines and the land of Judah.
[17]And David struck them from daybreak till the
evening of the next day, and not a man of them got
away except for four hundred lads who rode off on
camels and fled. [18]And David rescued all that the
Amalekites had taken, and his own two wives David
rescued. [19]And nothing of theirs was missing, from the
youngest to the oldest, from sons to daughters to
booty, all that they had taken for themselves, David
restored it all. [20]And David took all the sheep and the
cattle. They drove before them that livestock and said,
“This is David’s booty.”

[21]And David came to the two hundred men who had
been too exhausted to go with David, so he had them
stay at the Wadi Besor. And they came out to greet
David and to greet the troops who were with him, and
David approached with the troops and asked how they
fared. [22]And every wicked and worthless man of the
men who had gone with David spoke up and said,
“Inasmuch as they did not go with us, we will give
them nothing from the booty that we rescued, only

each man his wife and his children, that they may drive them off and go.” [23]And David said, “You must not do so, my brothers, with what the LORD has given us. For He has guarded us and has given into our hands the raiding party that came against us. [24]And who would listen to you in this matter? Rather, as the share of him who goes down into battle is the share of him who stays with the gear, together shall they share.” [25]And so from that day hence it became a set practice in Israel until this day. [26]And David came to Ziklag and he sent from the booty to the elders of Judah, to his friends, saying, “Here is a gift for you from the booty of the LORD’s enemies,” [27]to those in Bethel, and to those in Ramoth-Negeb, [28]and to those in Jattir, and to those in Aroer, and to those in Siphmoth, and to those in Eshtamoa, [29]and to those in Racal, and to those in the towns of the Jerahmeelite, and to those in the towns of the Kenite, [30]and to those in Hormah, and to those in Bor-Ashan, and to those in Athach, [31]and to those in Hebron and in all the places where David, with his men, had moved about.

CHAPTER 30 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *on the third day*. If, as seems plausible, David and his men were sent away from the Philistine ranks just before the engagement with the Israelites, the battle, ending in the catastrophic defeat of Saul's forces, took place while David was traveling southward. The writer, it seems, wants to get David as far away as he can from the battlefield in the Valley of Jezreel, perhaps to remove him from any possible implication in Saul's death. But an indirect question lurks in the margin of the narrative, for we are left to wonder what would have been the outcome of the battle had David turned against his Philistine allies, as their field commanders feared he would.

the Amalekites had raided the Negeb, and Ziklag. David must initially confront a military disaster on his own home front that mirrors the disaster which, unknown to him, has unfolded in the north. His habitual enemies, the Amalekites, have of course exploited the absence of the fighting men at Ziklag.

burned it in fire. It is possible, although not entirely certain, that the idiomatic force of this seemingly redundant idiom, which occurs frequently, is "utterly consumed," "burned to the ground."

2. *they put no one to death*. At first blush this notice casts a favorable light on the Amalekites in comparison to David, whose practice as a raider has been general massacre of the conquered population. What becomes clear, however, is that the Amalekites (who do not have David's motive of secrecy) consider the women and children to be part of the booty and have carried them off in order to exploit them as slaves. The appearance of the Egyptian man (verse 11) serves as a reminder of the Amalekites' role as slaveholders, and of how inhumanely they treat their slaves.

they drove them off. This rather brutal verb is typically used for driving animals as in verse 20, and so highlights the rapaciousness of the Amalekites.

6. *And David was in dire straits, for the troops thought to stone him*. The initial phrase might momentarily be construed as referring to David's feelings ("and he felt very distressed"), but it is immediately made clear that the reference is to the practical predicament in which he suddenly finds himself in relation to his men. As before, David's real emotions remain opaque—we know only of his participation in the public orgy of weeping. This moment is also a vivid reminder, as are others in the Saul–David story, of how precarious political power is: David, the charismatic and brilliant commander who has led his

men through a host of dangers, suddenly discovers that these hard-bitten warriors are ready to kill him because of the disastrous turn of events. It was he, after all, who drew them to the north with the Philistine army, leaving Ziklag exposed.

David took strength in the Lord his God. He finds encouragement in the face of mortal despair—specifically, as the next verse explains, by calling for the oracle. In this fashion, he staves off the assault his men are contemplating by dramatically showing that they still have means of redress against the Amalekites, and that he has a special channel of communication with God.

7. *Bring forth, pray, the ephod*. As several interpreters have observed, there is an antithetical contrast here between David, who has priest and ephod to convey to him God's oracular counsel, and Saul, who, frustrated in all his attempts to discover God's intentions, resorts to forbidden necromancy.

8. *you will surely rescue*. The ephod, as we have noted before, can yield only a binary yes-or-no answer, so the gist of the oracle is that David should pursue the raiding party. But rescuing the captives, which is surely paramount in the minds of the embittered guerilla fighters, was not an explicit part of David's inquiry of the oracle—perhaps because he was afraid to presume so much. The "yes" from the oracle is now taken to imply that David and his men will both overtake the raiders and rescue their dear ones.

9. *those to be left stayed behind*. The first phrase (literally, "the ones being left") has bothered some commentators, but it is in keeping with occasional biblical usage to introduce this sort of proleptic reference, creating what from a modern point of view is a redundancy between the first and second phrases.

10. *were . . . exhausted*. The verb *piger* may be related to the noun *peger*, "corpse," and so would have the sense of "dead tired." It should be kept in mind that David and his men had been traveling three days from the Philistine camp, and now they have had to continue on into the desert at top speed in order to overtake the raiding party.

11. *they found an Egyptian man in the field*. This is the first of three memorable instances in the David story in which a foreigner brings intelligence of a dire event, although in this case the subject of the intelligence is not the event itself but the whereabouts of the perpetrators.

12. *for he had eaten no bread and drunk no water*. The act of abandoning a sick slave in the desert to perish of thirst and hunger dispels any illusions we may have harbored about the humanity of the Amalekites. Fokkelman has proposed a correspondence (in his calculation, also a synchronicity) between the starving Egyptian and the fasting Saul at Ein-Dor.

13. *I am an Egyptian lad*. The term "lad" (*naʿar*) does not necessarily indicate chronological age here but rather subservient status, a decorous synonym for "slave," which the Egyptian proceeds to use.

16. *and, look, they were sprawled out*. The presentative "look" (*hineh*) as an indicator of transition from the narrator's overview to the character's point of view has particular tactical importance here. The Amalekites, as we can infer from the fact that four hundred escape the general slaughter, must number well over a thousand. David arrives with only four hundred men. But he finds the raiders entirely vulnerable to a surprise attack—drunk, sated, and sleeping (rather like the Hessian mercenaries whom Washington caught unawares by the Delaware after their Christmas feast). The term rendered as "sprawled out" (*netushim*) derives from a verbal root that means to abandon or cast away, and so in this context suggests some kind of dissipation. The people who left the Egyptian to starve to death in the desert are now exposed to destruction through their unrestrained indulgence in food and drink.

17. *four hundred lads*. Again, the versatile *naʿar* is not an indication of chronological age but is used in its military sense, which appears to be something like "elite troops," or perhaps simply "fighting men."

20. *They drove before them that livestock*. The Masoretic Text has the syntactically problematic "before that livestock" (*lifney hamiqneh hahuʾ*). This translation is based on a small emendation, *lifneyhem* ("before them"), assuming a haplography—an inadvertent scribal deletion of repeated letters, since the last two letters of *lifneyhem* (*heh* and *mem*) are also the first two letters of *hamiqneh*.

This is David's booty. Since the Amalekites had been raiding throughout the Negeb, both in Judahite and Philistine territory, they would have assembled a very large collection of plundered flocks. Thus David has abundant livestock to distribute as "gifts"—the word also means "blessing" or "greeting"—to the sundry elders of Judah.

21. *he had them stay*. The Masoretic Text has "they had them stay" (a difference of one vowel). The Septuagint has the singular subject.

22. *that they may drive them off*. The coarseness of the ill-spirited men is reflected in the verb they use for taking away the wives and children, *nahag*, which, as we have noted, usually means to drive cattle. (Compare the irate Laban's use of the same verb in reference to Jacob's treatment of Rachel and Leah, Genesis 31:26.)

23. *with what the LORD has given us*. The syntactical link of this clause with what precedes is not entirely clear. Given the ideology of victory that David assumes—all triumph and all spoils of war come from God—it is best to construe the particle *ʾet* that introduces the clause not as a sign of the accusative but as "with."

24. *who stays with the gear*. There is an implicit rationale for giving an equal share to those who remain behind—beyond the consideration of exhaustion, they have played a role in guarding the gear, thus enabling the other fighting men to proceed to battle with a lightened load. It is for this reason that David "had them stay" (or "posted them") at the ford of the wadi. In all respects, this episode is meant to demonstrate David's attributes as leader: he finds strength in the face of disaster, consults God's oracle, intrepidly leads his troops in a counterattack, and now makes the most equitable arrangement for the division of spoils.

26. *he sent from the booty to the elders of Judah, to his friends*. This act shows David the consummate political man, shoring up support among the sundry leaders of his home tribe of Judah (hence the catalogue of place-names), and preparing for himself a base in Hebron (at the end of the catalogue), the principal town of Judah, where he will soon be proclaimed king. Some scholars have been troubled by "to his friends" (*lereiʿeihu*, which would normally mean "to his friend") and have sought to emend it. David Kimchi, however, persuasively argues that the ostensibly singular noun can be legitimately read as a plural on the basis of other biblical precedents, and that the reference to "friends" makes good political sense: these are the same elders of Judah who provided cover for David during the period when he was hiding out from Saul in his own tribal territory. The verb "move about" (*hithalekh*) in the wrap-up verse of this section is an allusion to precisely this

period, for it recalls David's flight with his men from Saul at Keilah in 23:13 —"and [they] moved about wherever they could."

CHAPTER 31

[1]And meanwhile the Philistines were battling against
Israel, and the men of Israel fled before the Philistines,
and they fell slain on Mount Gilboa. [2]And the
Philistines followed hard upon Saul and his sons, and
the Philistines struck down Jonathan and Abinadab
and Malkishua, the sons of Saul. [3]And the battle went
heavy against Saul, and the archers, the bowmen,
found him, and he quaked with fear of the archers.
[4]And Saul said to his armor bearer, “Draw your sword
and run me through with it, lest these uncircumcised
come and run me through and abuse me.” But the
armor bearer did not want to do it because he was very
frightened, and Saul took the sword and fell upon it.
[5]And the armor bearer saw that Saul was dead, and he,
too, fell upon his sword, and he died with him. [6]And
Saul died, and his three sons and his armor bearer, and
all his men as well, together on that day. [7]And the men
of Israel who were on the other side of the valley and
on the other side of the Jordan saw that the men of
Israel had fled and that Saul and his sons were dead,

and they abandoned the towns and fled, and the Philistines came and occupied them.

[8]And it happened the next day that the Philistines came to strip the slain, and they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. [9]And they cut off his head and stripped him of his armor, and they sent throughout the Philistine country to bring the tidings to the temples of their idols and to the people. [10]And they put his armor in the temple of Ashtaroth, and his body they impaled on the wall of Beth-Shan. [11]And the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul. [12]And every valiant fellow arose, and they went all night long, and they took Saul's corpse, and the corpses of his sons from the wall of Beth-Shan, and they came back to Jabesh and burned them there. [13]And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk in Jabesh, and they fasted seven days.

CHAPTER 31 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And meanwhile the Philistines were battling*. The Hebrew does not explicitly say "meanwhile," but it is implied by the unusual use of the participial form of the verb (literally, "are battling") to begin the narrative unit. Rashi neatly

catches the effect: “As when a person says, ‘Let us return to the previous subject.’”

3. *the archers, the bowmen*. It has been argued that the duplication reflects a conflation of two textual variants, but it may be that the writer intended to highlight the use of the bow, in contrast to other weapons. In characteristic biblical fashion, the narrative offers no details of the battle, but the following broad outline can be reconstructed: The major engagement of forces takes place in the Jezreel Valley, to the northwest of Mount Gilboa. The level ground of the valley would have given the Philistines the opportunity to deploy their iron chariots, one of their great strategic advantages over the Israelites. In the rout of the Israelites that ensues, Saul’s forces retreat to the high ground of Mount Gilboa, where the Philistine chariots would have greater difficulty maneuvering. But the Philistines send contingents of archers —the bow being the ideal weapon to use against an army in flight—who exact heavy casualties from the Israelite forces.

he quaked with fear. A revocalization of the verb favored by many scholars yields “he was badly wounded.” But there is much to be said for the Masoretic vocalization: Saul’s fear has been a recurring theme in the narrative; here it would be matched by the armor bearer’s great fear of violating the king; and it is far from clear that Saul is seriously wounded when he decides to commit suicide (if he were, would he have the strength to fling himself on his sword?).

4. *and abuse me*. Like the urgent request of the dying Abimelech in Judges 9, with whom the dying Saul has sometimes been compared, Saul’s last wish will be denied him—the Philistines, though deprived of the opportunity to kill him, will decapitate his body and defile it by hammering it up on the wall of Beth-Shan.

6. *and all his men as well*. The parallel texts in both 1 Chronicles 10 and in the Septuagint lack this phrase. The argument for it is that it reinforces the image of martial solidarity in defeat: Saul, his sons, his armor bearer, his men, all perish “together” (*yaḥdaw*).

7. *they abandoned the towns . . . and the Philistines came and occupied them*. After this major victory, the Philistines manage to cut the Israelite settlement in two by establishing a sedentary presence across the lower Galilee from the

coastal plain to the Jordan, separating the tribes in the far north from Benjamin and Judah to the south.

9. *they cut off his head and stripped him of his armor*. Saul's successor, David, had marked his entry on the scene by cutting off the head of a Philistine; now they cut off Saul's head. The stripping of the armor—and the all-purpose Hebrew *kelim* could also include his clothing—is the final divestment of Saul, who is stripped before the prophets, stripped of his royal garments at Ein-Dor, and now lies naked on the battlefield in ultimate defeat.

they sent throughout the Philistine country. There is some grammatical ambiguity as to whether they simply sent tidings, or Saul's armor as visible token of the victory. The parallel verse in Chronicles lacks "temples of."

10. *his body they impaled on the wall of Beth-Shan*. Throughout the ancient Mediterranean world, there was a horror about leaving a corpse unburied (compare, for example, the potency of this question in Sophocles's *Antigone*). Saul's corpse, moreover, is disfigured through decapitation. Beth-Shan (or, Beth-Sheʾan) is a town about eleven miles to the southwest of Mount Gilboa, near the Jordan.

11. *the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead*. This settlement is roughly another twelve miles to the southeast of Beth-Shan, on the eastern side of the Jordan, and hence just beyond the perimeter of the new Philistine occupation. It was Jabesh-Gilead that Saul rescued from Nahash the Ammonite (chapter 11) to inaugurate his career as king and general, and there are kinship bonds between Jabesh-Gilead and Saul's tribe of Benjamin.

12. *every valiant fellow arose*. It would have been a very dangerous exploit to sneak into the territory now controlled by the Philistines and, under the cover of night, to make off with the corpses.

the corpses of his sons. This is an amplification of the Philistine atrocity, since we were not previously informed that the bodies of the sons were impaled along with Saul's.

and burned them there. Cremation was not the usual Israelite practice, but it may be, as Kimchi has proposed, that in this case the bodies were burned because the flesh had already begun to rot.

13. *and they fasted seven days*. This, too, is an unusual practice as a mourning rite. Perhaps it merely reflects the grievousness of the loss that the men of Jabesh-Gilead have experienced, though Fokkelman makes the interesting proposal that the seven days of fasting are a counterpart to the seven days Nahash the Ammonite allowed Jabesh-Gilead for a deliverer (who turned out to be Saul) to appear.

2 Samuel

CHAPTER 1

[1]And it happened after the death of Saul, when David had returned from striking down Amalek, that David stayed in Ziklag two days. [2]And it happened on the third day that, look, a man was coming from the camp, from Saul, his garments torn and earth on his head. And it happened when he came to David, that he fell to the ground and did obeisance. [3]And David said to him, “From where do you come?” And he said, “From the camp of Israel I have gotten away.” [4]And David said to him “What has happened? Pray, tell me.” And he said, “The troops fled from the battle, and also many of the troops have fallen and died, and also Saul and Jonathan his son died.” [5]And David said to the lad who was telling him, “How do you know that Saul died, and Jonathan his son?” [6]And the lad who was telling him said, “I just chanced to be on Mount Gilboa, and, look, Saul was leaning on his spear, and, look, chariots and horsemen had overtaken him. [7]And he turned round behind him and saw me and called to me, and I said, ‘Here I am.’ [8]And he said to me, ‘Who

are you?' And I said to him, 'I am an Amalekite.' [9]And he said to me, 'Pray, stand over me and finish me off, for the fainting spell has seized me, for while life is still within me. . . .' [10]And I stood over him and finished him off, for I knew that he could not live after having fallen. And I took the diadem that was on his head and the band that was on his arm, and I have brought them here to my lord." [11]And David took hold of his garments and tore them, and all the men who were with him did so, too. [12]And they keened and they wept and they fasted till evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son and for the LORD'S people and for the house of Israel because they had fallen by the sword. [13]And David said to the lad who had told him, "From where are you?" And he said, "The son of an Amalekite sojourner am I." [14]And David said to him, "How were you not afraid to reach out your hand to do violence to the LORD's anointed?" [15]And David called to one of the lads and said, "Come forward, stab him." And he struck him down, and he died. [16]And David said to him, "Your blood is on your own head, for your mouth bore witness against you, saying, 'I was the one who finished off the LORD's anointed.'" [17]And David sang this lament for Saul and for Jonathan, [18]and he said to teach hard things to the sons of Judah—look, it is written down in the Book of Jashar:

19 “The splendor, O Israel, on your
heights lies slain,
how have the warriors fallen!
20 Tell it not in Gath,
proclaim not in Ashkelon’s streets.
Lest the Philistine daughters rejoice,
lest the daughters of the
uncircumcised gloat.
21 O hills of Gilboa—no dew!
and no rain upon you, O lofty
fields.
For there the warriors’ shield was
besmirched,
the shield of Saul unburnished
with oil.
22 From the blood of the slain,
from the warriors’ fat—
Jonathan’s bow did not retreat,
and the sword of Saul never
turned away empty.
23 Saul and Jonathan, beloved and
dear,
in their life and their death they
were not parted.
They were swifter than eagles,
and stronger than lions.

[24]O daughters of Israel, weep over
Saul,
who clothed you in scarlet and
bangles,
who studded your garments
with jewelry of gold.
[25]How have the warriors fallen
in the midst of the battle.
Jonathan, upon your heights slain!
[26]I grieve for you, my brother,
Jonathan.
Very dear you were to me.
More wondrous your love to me
than the love of women.
[27]How have the warriors fallen,
and the gear of battle is lost.”

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *after the death of Saul . . . David had returned from striking down Amalek*. As the story unfolds, an odd symmetry emerges: David has just struck down Amalek; an Amalekite says he has struck down Saul; David has this Amalekite put to death.

2. *look, a man was coming . . . his garments torn and earth on his head*. The “look” signals the visual perspective of David and his entourage: what they see is a man who has adopted the most visible signs of conventional

mourning. The Amalekite wants to make it clear that he regards Saul's death, and the defeat, as a catastrophe, though, as we shall see, he really has another purpose in mind.

4. *What has happened?* The words he uses, *meh hayah hadavar,* are identical with those spoken to the messenger who brings the news of the disastrous defeat to Eli in 1 Samuel 4:16. There are several other echoes here of that earlier scene.

5. *the lad who was telling him*. The repetition of this phrase (see next verse), as J. P. Fokkelman has noted, calls attention to the act of telling and by underlining that act may make us wonder whether this is an authentic report or a fabrication.

6. *I just chanced to be on Mount Gilboa*. Does one accidentally stumble onto a battlefield while the killing is still going on? A more likely scenario is that the Amalekite came onto the battlefield immediately after the fighting as a scavenger, found Saul's corpse before the Philistines did, and removed the regalia.

Saul was leaning on his spear. From Saul's words in verse 9, what this means is not that he was resting but that he was entirely spent, barely able to stand.

8. *I am an Amalekite*. Only now, in the middle of the story, is the national identity of the messenger revealed. The fact that he was an Amalekite means he would have felt no recoil of taboo about doing violence to the king of Israel—something Saul appears to grasp at once. (Compare Doeg the Edomite's slaughter of the priests of Nob in 1 Samuel 22.) But there is also dramatic irony here: Saul lost his hold on the kingship when he failed to kill the Amalekite king; now he begs an Amalekite to kill him, the king of Israel.

9. *Pray, stand over me and finish me off*. "Stand over" suggests that Saul himself is barely standing, that he is collapsed against the support of his spear —the very spear that has been associated with his kingship and with his outbursts of rage. "Finish me off" is somewhat inelegant as English diction, but the nuance of the Hebrew (the *polel* conjugation of the verbal stem that means "to die") is essential to the story: Saul feels he is dying, and he asks the Amalekite lad not to kill him but to finish him off before the Philistines can

get to him. The Amalekite and David concur in this indication of what the Amalekite does to Saul.

the fainting spell. The Hebrew noun appears only here. It may be related to a root that suggests "confusion," or, alternately, "weakness."

for while life is still within me. This clause, which has vexed some critics and has led to emendations, is most simply construed as a broken-off sentence that the failing Saul does not have the strength to complete.

10. *I stood over him and finished him off*. This whole story obviously contradicts the account of Saul's death by his own hand in 1 Samuel 31. Predictably, this has led many critics to imagine two conflicting "sources." It is reassuring that more recent scholarly consensus has come to the sensible conclusion that the Amalekite lad is lying. Having come upon Saul's body, he sees a great opportunity for himself: he will bring Saul's regalia to David, claim personally to have finished off the man known to be David's archenemy and rival, and thereby overcome his marginality as resident alien ("sojourner," *ger*) by receiving a benefaction from the new king—perhaps a portion of land at David's disposal. Fokkelman shrewdly notes that the Amalekite, instead of removing the diadem and armband from Saul's body, might better have buried the body or dragged it off and so saved it from desecration by the Philistines.

for I knew that he could not live after having fallen. The Amalekite sees Saul's condition "leaning" on his spear to be equivalent to having fallen ("for the fainting spell has seized me") and assumes, as does Saul himself in this account, that in any case the king will not survive.

14. *How were you not afraid . . . to do violence to the* LORD'S *anointed?* Although the Israelite piety of David's statement is noteworthy, his words, as in the previous episodes in which he warned against harming Saul, are also politically self-interested because he, too, is the LORD'S anointed. In fact, now with Saul's death, he alone is the LORD'S anointed.

16. *your mouth bore witness against you*. There is no way of knowing whether David actually believes the Amalekite's story, but it is certainly convenient for him to be able to point an accusing finger at someone with whom he has had nothing to do as the person responsible for Saul's death, and then to order immediate punishment.

the LORD's anointed. At the end of the episode, David makes a point of using the epithet of divinely grounded royal status instead of simply calling his predecessor "Saul," as the Amalekite (who never even refers to him as "king") had done.

17. *And David sang this lament*. We have been aware since 1 Samuel 16 of David's gift as a lyre player and (presumably) as a singer. Only now do we hear him in action as a singer-poet. This grandly resonant lament, cast in archaic epic diction, marks a great moment of transition in the larger narrative, as the David–Saul story becomes the David story. It is also another public utterance of David's that beautifully serves his political purposes, celebrating his dead rival as it mourns his loss and thus testifying that David could never have desired Saul's death.

18. *to teach hard things*. The Masoretic Text has "to teach the bow"—a problematic reading because the lament scarcely provides instruction in the arts of war. Some critics delete "bow" (*qeshet*), following the Septuagint. The present translation revocalizes *qeshet* as *qashot*, with Fokkelman.

look, it is written down in the Book of Jashar. This lost work, mentioned elsewhere in the Bible, was obviously familiar to the ancient audience. The title probably means "Book of the Upright," though another reading of *yashar*, as a verb rather than as a noun, yields "Book of Songs." (This, however, requires revocalizing the word.) It might have been an anthology of archaic Hebrew poems.

20. *Tell it not in Gath*. There is an ironic echo here of the account of David's activities as vassal to the king of Gath, activities that he did not want told in Gath (see 1 Samuel 27:11).

Lest the Philistine daughters rejoice. In this martial culture, the young women had the role of celebrating the victors ("Saul has struck down his thousands. . . ."), gloating over the defeated enemy, and enjoying the spoils the men brought back from their conquest (compare verse 24).

21. *O hills of Gilboa*. As Shimon Bar-Efrat has observed, apostrophe is the dominant form of address throughout the elegy. David first turns, in a plural verb, to Israel at large ("Tell it not in Gath"), then to the hills of Gilboa, then to Saul and Jonathan, then to the daughters of Israel, then to Jonathan alone.

The apostrophe is a form of address that underscores the actual absence of the person or object addressed and so is especially apt for an elegy.

lofty fields. The Hebrew *usedeh terumot* is a little obscure. The simplest solution is to treat the initial particle *u* as an excrescence and to read the phrase as a poetic inversion of the similar *meromey sadeh* in Judges 5:18. In the parallelism here, "lofty fields" would be an epithet for "hills of Gilboa."

unburnished with oil. The shields were made of leather, often studded with metal plates. Rubbing them with oil before battle would have made their outer surface slippery and thus would have enhanced their effectiveness in deflecting weapons. But the Hebrew for "unburnished," *beli mashiaḥ*, is a pun —it means "unanointed" or "messiah-less," a haunting intimation that the LORD'S anointed is no more. Clearly, the image of the royal shield lying befouled in the dust is a powerful metonymy for Saul himself.

22. *Jonathan's bow . . . the sword of Saul*. After the image of the implement of defense, the shield, lying cast aside, we get a retrospective picture of these two offensive weapons destroying the enemy. The idea of the sword or the bow consuming flesh and blood is conventional in ancient Near Eastern martial poetry.

23. *in their life and their death they were not parted*. This is, of course, an extravagant idealization on the part of the elegist since father and son were almost estranged and twice Saul was on the point of killing Jonathan.

24. *O daughters of Israel, weep*. The invocation of the daughters of Israel to weep over the king who brought them precious booty is a symmetrical antithesis to the initial warning to keep the news away from the daughters of the Philistines, who would rejoice.

26. *I grieve for you, my brother, Jonathan*. Jonathan several times proclaimed his love for David. It is only in Jonathan's death, and at the distance of apostrophe, that David calls him "my brother" and says that Jonathan was dear to him.

More wondrous . . . than the love of women. Repeated, unconvincing attempts have been made to read a homoerotic implication into these words. The reported details of the David story suggest that his various attachments to women are motivated by pragmatic rather than emotional concerns—and in one instance, by lust. This disposition, however, tells us little about David's

sexual orientation. The bond between men in this warrior culture could easily be stronger than the bond between men and women.

27. *How have the warriors fallen, / and the gear of battle is lost.* The first clause here echoes the second verset of the opening line of the poem and so closes the elegy in a ringing envelope structure. The second clause beautifully picks up the image of the cast-off shield lying in the dust, and of the relentless bow and sword that will never more be borne into battle. It is misguided to render the verb at the end as "perished" (King James Version, New Jewish Publication Society) because that presupposes that "gear of battle" is actually an epithet for Saul and Jonathan. Far more effectively, the lament concludes with a concrete image of shield and sword and bow abandoned, and by a simple process of metonymy we vividly understand the fate of the two men who once wielded them.

CHAPTER 2

[1]And it happened afterward that David inquired of the LORD, saying, “Shall I go up into one of the towns of Judah?” And the LORD said to him, “Go up.” And David said, “Where shall I go up?” And He said, “To Hebron.” [2]And David went up there, and his two wives as well, Ahinoam the Jezreelite and Abigail wife of Nabal the Carmelite. [3]And his men who were with him David brought up, each man and his household, and they settled in Hebron. [4a]And the men of Judah came and anointed David there as king over the house of Judah.

[4b]And they told David, saying, “It was the men of Jabesh-Gilead who buried Saul.” [5]And David sent messengers to the men of Jabesh-Gilead and said to them, “Blessed are you to the LORD, that you have done this kindness with your lord, with Saul, and have buried him. [6]And now, may the LORD show faithful kindness to you, and I on my part as well shall do this

bounty for you because you have done this thing. [7]And
now, may your hands be strengthened and be you men
of valor, for your lord Saul is dead, and it is I whom
the house of Judah has anointed as king over them."

[8]And Abner son of Ner commander of Saul's army had
taken Ish-Bosheth son of Saul and brought him over to
Mahanaim [9]and made him king over Gilead and over
the Asherite and over Jezreel and over Ephraim and
over Benjamin and over Israel altogether. [10]Forty years
old was Ish-Bosheth when he became king over Israel,
and two years did he reign. But the house of Judah
followed David. [11]And the span of time that David was
king in Hebron over the house of Judah was seven
years and six months.

[12]And Abner son of Ner with the servants of Ish-
Bosheth sallied forth from Mahanaim to Gibeon.
[13]And Joab son of Zeruiah and the servants of David
had sallied forth, and they met each other by the pool
of Gibeon, and they took up their positions on either
side of the pool. [14]And Abner said to Joab, "Pray, let
the lads arise and play before us." And Joab said, "Let
them arise." [15]And they arose and crossed over—
twelve in number for Benjamin and for Ish-Bosheth

son of Saul and twelve from the servants of David.
16 And each man grasped the head of the other with his
sword at the side of the other, and they fell together.
And they called that place the Field of Flints, which is
in Gibeon. 17 And the fighting was very fierce on that
day, and Abner with the men of Israel were routed by
the servants of David. 18 And the three sons of Zeruiah
were there, Joab and Abishai and Asahel. And Asahel
was as swift-footed as one of the gazelles of the open
field. 19 And Asahel chased after Abner, and he swerved
not to the right or left in going after Abner. 20 And
Abner turned round and said, “Are you Asahel?” And
he said, “I am.” 21 And Abner said to him, “Swerve you
to your right or your left and seize for yourself one of
the lads, and take you his armor.” But Asahel did not
want to turn away from him. 22 And Abner once more
said to Asahel, “Turn you away from me. Why should
I strike you to the ground, and how would I show my
face to Joab your brother?” 23 And he refused to turn
aside, and Abner struck him in the belly with the butt
of the spear and the spear came out behind him, and
he fell there and died on the spot. And it happened
that whoever came to the place where Asahel fell and
died, stood still. 24 And Joab and Abishai chased after
Abner, and as the sun was setting, they had come to
the hill of Ammah, which faces Giah on the way to the

wilderness of Gibeon. [25]And the Benjaminites gathered behind Abner and formed a single band, and they took a stance on the top of a certain hill. [26]And Abner called out to Joab and said, “Must the sword devour forever? You surely know that it will be bitterness in the end. And how long will you not say to the troops to turn back from their brothers?” [27]And Joab said, “As God lives, had you but spoken, from this morning the troops would have given up pursuit of their brothers.” [28]And Joab sounded the ram’s horn, and all the troops halted, and they no longer chased after Israel, and they fought no more. [29]And Abner and his men went all that night through the Arabah, and they crossed the Jordan and went all the way through the ravine and came to Mahanaim. [30]And Joab had turned back from pursuing Abner, and he gathered together all the troops, and nineteen of David’s servants were missing, and Asahel. [31]And David’s servants had struck down from Benjamin and from Abner’s men three hundred and sixty men. [32]And they bore off Asahel and buried him in his father’s grave, which is in Bethlehem, and Joab and his men went all night long, and day brightened for them in Hebron.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *David inquired of the LORD*. In keeping with the repeated emphasis of the preceding narrative, David, at each crucial juncture, solicits guidance from God's oracle before he makes his move.

go up into one of the towns of Judah. The preposition is used with precision: David does not want to "go up to one of the towns" but "into one of the towns"—that is, to set up headquarters in the town, leaving Ziklag at the edge of Philistine territory.

Where shall I go up? Given the binary character of the oracle's response, the actual form of the question would have been "Shall I go up to Hebron?" But the question is recast in its present form to emphasize that God has picked out Hebron from all the towns of Judah.

4a. *king over the house of Judah*. It is a little odd for a single tribe to have a "king," but the act is deliberately presumptive on David's part—first the king of Judah, eventually of all the tribes. Saul's son Ish-Bosheth, by contrast, becomes king of an alliance of northern tribes. The text is silent on the Philistines' view of David's move to kingship in Hebron, but one can assume they countenanced it as a reasonable act on the part of their vassal opposing the house of Saul.

5. *David sent messengers to the men of Jabesh-Gilead*. This is another shrewd political maneuver. The men of Jabesh-Gilead had been closely allied with Saul. David, seizing the occasion of their act of bravery, summons them, praises their burying of Saul, and offers them an unspecified "bounty" (or "benefice"—literally, "good thing").

7. *for your lord Saul is dead, and it is I whom the house of Judah has anointed as king over them*. David finesses Saul's hostility toward him and presents himself as the legitimate successor: just as the men of Jabesh-Gilead have been valorous in burying Saul, they should now show valor in following the newly anointed David.

8. *Abner . . . had taken Ish-Bosheth*. Abner the commander in chief is clearly the real power here, and this surviving son of Saul is little more than a puppet king. The original name (reflected in Chronicles) was Ish-Baal, with the

"baal" component being a general epithet for God (or god), not necessarily referring to the Canaanite deity. But because of its pagan associations, the sternly monotheistic later editors systematically substituted *boshet* for *baʿal, boshet* meaning "shame."

Mahanaim. The location is to the east of the Jordan and hence outside the new area of Philistine conquest.

9. *Asherite*. The Masoretic Text reads "Ashurite," which would be, implausibly, a non-Israelite people. Some critics emend to "Geshurite," but that is a Canaanite group, and so the emendation perpetuates the problem. It is simplest to read this word as a reference to the northern tribe of Asher.

and over Israel altogether. Shimon Bar-Efrat has made the plausible proposal that this final phrase is not a summary of the preceding list but the last stage in a chronological process: Ish-Bosheth extended his rule gradually, beginning with Gilead in trans-Jordan and moving westward into the territory the Philistines had conquered. It was only after a time that he actually ruled "over Israel altogether."

10. *two years did he reign*. At first thought, his reign should have been nearly as long as David's seven and a half years in Hebron. But if it took him five years to consolidate his control over the northern tribes, the reign of two years would make perfect sense.

12. *Abner . . . sallied forth from Mahanaim to Gibeon*. The reason for this expedition may have been David's attaching the men of Jabesh-Gilead, who had clearly been in Saul's camp, to himself. Gibeon is in the territory of Benjamin, just a few miles northwest of Jerusalem.

14. *let the lads arise and play before us*. The "lads" (*neʿarim*) are elite warriors. The verb "play" clearly indicates gladiatorial, or representative, combat. (Goliath calling for an Israelite champion to fight him is another instance of combat through designated representative.) It is, however, deadly combat and not just a form of jousting, as the details of the fighting make clear.

15. *twelve in number*. Throughout this strange episode, as Robert Polzin has aptly observed, there is an "extended ritualization of action as it is described through extensive stylization of language." The ritual combat is virtually an

allegory of the civil war that it inaugurates. (Polzin reads it as an allegory of Israelite monarchy.) The twelve champions on each side recall the twelve tribes of Israel—an image of a nation destructively divided against itself. (The number of fallen soldiers on Abner's side will be 360—30 times 12—and on Joab's side 20, an eighteenth part of the other side's casualties.) The implausibility of the account of combat, then, would have been overridden for the writer by the neatness of its symbolic function.

16. *each man grasped the head of the other with his sword at the side of the other*. The evidence of artifacts from the ancient world suggests that precisely this mode of ritualized combat was quite widespread. A bas-relief found in Syria, roughly contemporaneous with our story, an Egyptian carving, archaic Greek vase paintings, and a Roman sculpture all show warriors in precisely this posture.

they fell together. All twenty-four warriors were killed—hardly a surprising outcome if each man was free to wield a sword against his adversary's side. Because there can be no decisive outcome in this encompassing mutual slaughter, general fighting then breaks out.

the Field of Flints. It is not clear whether they were fighting with flint weapons (perhaps because these were archaic and part of the ritualized combat), or whether the old term had become a general designation for knives or swords.

17. *Abner with the men of Israel were routed*. Given the relatively low number of casualties, it seems likely that fewer than a thousand on each side were engaged. In such limited combat, the veterans of David's battle-hardened guerilla band of six hundred might have had a distinct advantage.

20. *Are you Asahel?* Abner, who surely would not have had any compunction about killing some other Judahite, realizes, quite accurately, that it will mean trouble for him to kill one of the sons of Zeruiah. Asahel, the ace sprinter, sounds very much like the youngest of the three, although we are not told specifically about the order of their birth.

21. *his armor*. This noun, *ḥalitsah*, appears only here and in the Samson story. It is rendered in modern translations, erroneously, as "tunic," "garment," or even "belt," but as we know from the *Iliad*, it is rather armor that a warrior takes from a slain foe on the battlefield. (The King James Version actually

gets it right here but not in the Samson story.) The word is related to *ḥaluts*, "vanguard," and the vanguard fighters would surely have worn armor.

22. *Why should I strike you to the ground.* Abner, the seasoned warrior, is coolly confident that if necessary he has the skill and the combat experience to kill this impetuous young man.

how would I show my face to Joab your brother? The literal wording of the Hebrew is "lift up my face." What is at stake here is not merely a question of diplomatic relations with the opposing commander but vendetta justice (Hebrew, *geʾulat hadam*, "redemption of the blood"): if Abner sheds the blood of Joab's brother, Joab will feel honor-bound to shed the blood of the killer in return.

23. *struck him in the belly with the butt of the spear*. Asahel is pursuing Abner at top speed. Abner, to save his own life, uses an old soldier's trick: he suddenly stops short and thrusts his spear backward, under his pursuer's shield (if Asahel is carrying one) and into the soft belly. The momentum of Asahel's rapid running would have contributed to the penetrating force of the spear's butt.

24. *Ammah . . . Giah*. The first name means "conduit," the second "gushing," and so both may be related to an aqueduct system linked to the pool at Gibeon.

26. *You surely know that it will be bitterness in the end*. This grim prognostication hovers over not only the continuing civil war but the entire David story. In the previous verse, Abner's forces were reported regrouping and taking up a defensive position on the hilltop, so they are now, after the rout, in a state to inflict serious casualties on their adversaries if Joab persists. Therefore he agrees to the truce, though he surely has vendetta on his mind.

27. *had you but spoken*. The Masoretic Text has "had you not spoken." This has led some interpreters to construe "morning" as "tomorrow morning" (that is, the troops would have gone on pursuing you all night long had you not spoken up now). But this is strained because the Hebrew *ʾaz mehaboker* (literally, "then from the morning") idiomatically refers to the morning of the day on which one is speaking. One should either emend "had not" (*lulei*ʾ) to

"had" (*lu*) or, as Rashi proposed long ago, construe the former in the sense of the latter.

29. *the Arabah*. This is a north-south depression running from the Sea of Galilee all the way to the Gulf of Aqabah.

the ravine. The Hebrew term *bitron* might conceivably be a place-name. The root means to cleave or split and occurs in the Song of Songs collocated with "mountains," yielding something like "mountains of the divide." The scholarly proposal that this word means "middle of the morning" has no warrant in ancient Hebrew usage.

32. *all night long*. Perhaps the reason for this forced march through the night is that Joab's troops want to get safely out of Benjaminite territory, not entirely trusting the truce.

CHAPTER 3

[1]And the fighting between the house of Saul and the
house of David went on a long time, and David grew
stronger and the house of Saul weaker and weaker.

[2]And sons were born to David in Hebron. And his
firstborn was Amnon, by Ahinoam the Jezreelite. [3]And
the second was Chileab, by Abigail wife of Nabal the
Carmelite. And the third was Absalom son of
Maachah daughter of Talmai king of Geshur. [4]And the
fourth was Adonijah son of Haggith. And the fifth was
Shephatiah son of Abital. [5]And the sixth was Ithream,
by Eglah wife of David. These were born to David in
Hebron.

[6]And it happened during the fighting between the
house of Saul and the house of David that Abner kept
growing in strength in the house of Saul. And Saul had
a concubine named Rizpah daughter of Aiah. [7]And
Ish-Bosheth said to Abner, “Why did you come to bed

with my father's concubine?" [8]And Abner was very incensed over the words of Ish-Bosheth, and he said, "Am I a dog's head attached to Judah? Today I have kept faith with the house of Saul your father, with his kinsmen and his companions, in not handing you over to David, and you dare reproach me with guilt over the woman today? [9]Thus may God do to Abner, and even more, for as the LORD has sworn to David, just so will I do for him—[10]to transfer the kingship from the house of Saul and to set up the throne of David over Israel and over Judah from Dan to Beersheba!" [11]And he could say back not a word more to Abner in his fear of him.

[12]And Abner sent messengers to David in his stead, saying, "To whom should the land belong? Make a pact with me and, look, my hand will be with you to bring round to you all Israel." [13]And he said, "Good. I shall make a pact with you. But one thing do I ask of you, namely, you shall not see my face until you bring Michal daughter of Saul when you come to see my face." [14]And David sent messengers to Ish-Bosheth son of Saul, saying, "Give back my wife Michal, whom I betrothed with a hundred Philistine foreskins." [15]And Ish-Bosheth sent and took her from her husband, from

Paltiel son of Laish. [16]And her husband went with her, weeping as he went after her, as far as Bahurim. And Abner said to him, “Go back!” And he went back.

[17]And Abner parlayed with the elders of Israel, saying, “Time and again in the past you sought to have David become king over you. [18]And now, act, for the LORD has said, ‘By the hand of David My servant will I rescue My people Israel from the hand of the Philistines and from the hand of all their enemies.’” [19]And Abner spoke as well in the hearing of Benjamin, and Abner went as well to speak in David’s hearing in Hebron all that was good in the eyes of Israel and in the eyes of Benjamin. [20]And Abner came to David in Hebron, and with him were twenty men. And David made a feast for Abner and for the men who were with him. [21]And Abner said to David, “Let me rise and go and gather to my lord the king all Israel, that they may make a pact with you, and you shall reign over all your heart desires.” And David sent Abner off, and he went in peace. [22]And look, David’s servants and Joab had come from a raid, and abundant booty they brought with them, and Abner was not with David in Hebron, for he had sent him off, and he went in peace. [23]And Joab and all the force that was with him had come,

and they told Joab, saying, “Abner son of Ner has
come to the king, and he sent him off, and he went in
peace.” [24]And Joab came to the king and said, “What
have you done? Look, Abner has come to you! Why
did you send him off, and he went, going off? [25]You
know that Abner son of Ner to dupe you has come and
to learn your comings and goings and to learn all that
you do.” [26]And Joab went out from David’s presence
and sent messengers after Abner, and they brought
him back from the cistern of Sirah, and David did not
know. [27]And Abner came back to Hebron, and Joab
drew him aside into the gate to speak with him
deceptively, and he struck him there in the belly, and
he died for the blood of Asahel, Joab’s brother. [28]And
David heard afterward and said, “Innocent am I, and
my kingship, before the LORD for all time of the
blood of Abner son of Ner! [29]May the bloodguilt come
down on the head of Joab and all his father’s house,
and may there never lack in the house of Joab a
sufferer of discharge from his member and running
sores on his skin and a man clutching the woman’s
spindle, and one falling by the sword and one wanting
for bread!” [30]And Joab and Abishai his brother had
lain in wait for Abner because he put to death Asahel
their brother in Gibeon in the fighting. [31]And David
said to Joab and to all the troops who were with him,

“Tear your garments and gird on sackcloth and keen
for Abner.” And King David was walking behind the
bier. 32And they buried Abner in Hebron. And the king
raised his voice and wept over the grave of Abner, and
all the people wept. 33And the king lamented over
Abner and said,

“Like the death of the base
should Abner have died?
34Your hands—never bound,
your feet never placed in fetters!
As one falls before scoundrels
you fell.”

35And all the people continued to weep over him. And
all the people came to give David bread to eat while it
was still day, and David swore, saying, “Thus and
more may God do to me, if before the sun sets I taste
bread or anything at all.” 36And all the people took
note and it was good in their eyes, all that the king had
done was good in the eyes of the people. 37And all the
people and all Israel knew on that day that it had not
been from the king to put to death Abner son of Ner.
38And the king said to his servants, “You must know
that a commander and a great man has fallen this day

in Israel. [39]And I am gentle, and just anointed king,
and these sons of Zeruiah are too hard for me. May
the LORD pay back the evildoer according to his
evil!”

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And the fighting*. This summary notice at the head of the chapter follows directly from the story of the battle at Gibeon that precedes it: the truce on that day is only temporary, and a drawn-out civil war ensues.

2. *And sons were born to David*. The insertion of this genealogical list here may be motivated by the fact that the northern tribes, brought round by Abner, are about to cast their lot with David, making him monarch of the entire nation and thus a properly dynastic king. But succession to the throne is not simple, and the list bristles with future disasters: Amnon, who will rape his half sister and will be murdered by her brother; Absalom, who will usurp the throne; Adonijah, who will proclaim himself king while the infirm, aged David lies in bed unawares.

3. *Chileab*. The Septuagint and the Qumran Samuel fragment have a different name, Daluiah. In any case, this son plays no role in the ensuing narrative, nor do Shephatiah and Ithream.

Maachah daughter of Talmai king of Geshur. Geshur is a small trans-Jordanian kingdom at the foot of the Golan. The marriage is clearly a political act through which David establishes an alliance in the north, outflanking the house of Saul. It is conceivable that Absalom’s later aspiration to the throne may be influenced by his awareness that, alone of David’s sons, he is grandson of a king. After the killing of Amnon, he will take refuge in Geshur.

5. *Eglah wife of David*. It is a little odd that only she is so designated. This might be because she stands at the end of the list, or because there was knowledge of another Eglah who was not David's wife. In all this, one notes that David the guerilla leader with his two wives has now become David the king with a whole royal harem.

6. *Abner kept growing in strength*. This is the same verb, in a different conjugation, as in the opening verse of the chapter, which reported David's growing strength and the weakening of the house of Saul. As the Saulide forces are progressively harder pressed in the continuing war, the nominal king becomes more and more dependent on his military commander; and Abner, while not actually pretending to the throne, arrogates more and more power to himself.

7. *Why did you come to bed with my father's concubine?* This crucial act is elided in the narrative report and revealed only in Ish-Bosheth's indignant question. To take sexual possession of a king's consort was to make an implicit claim to the power he exercised, as we shall see again when Absalom publicly cohabits with David's concubines. "To come to bed with"—literally, "to come into"—is an idiom for sexual intercourse that generally indicates sexual possession of a woman with whom a man has not been previously intimate. (I explain the semantic logic of the idiom in the second comment on Genesis 6:14.)

8. *Am I a dog's head attached to Judah?* The dog in biblical idiom regularly figures as a contemptible beast—the antonym of the fierce and regal lion. The phrase "attached to Judah" is lacking in the Septuagint, and some critics have inferred that it is a scribal interpolation. It might make sense, however, as a compounding of the insult because Judah is the despised enemy of Benjamin, the tribe of Saul.

you dare reproach me with guilt over the woman. Abner's angry protest has a nice double edge. You are entirely dependent on my loyal support, he tells Ish-Bosheth, so how could you dare object to so trivial a thing as my taking a particular woman as sexual partner? Alternately, the implication could be: you are entirely dependent on me, so how could you object to my taking possession of this sexual symbol of political power? You should have been content that I left you nominally on the throne.

9. *for as the LORD has sworn to David*. Ish-Bosheth's protest about Rizpah drives Abner, David's military adversary, to embrace the notion that God has promised the throne to David. Rather than continue to serve a carping, pusillanimous man like Ish-Bosheth, who neither fully accepts Abner's power nor knows how to exercise power on his own, Abner now is ready to throw his weight with a truly kingly leader and to help him become king over all the nation's tribes (verse 10).

11. *he could say back not a word*. The contrast between the angry Abner and the quaking Ish-Bosheth is all the stronger because the puppet king's fearful silence is set against what is by biblical standards a rather long speech—one continuous outburst.

13. *see my face*. An idiom used for coming into the presence of royalty.

Michal daughter of Saul. The first marriage buttresses David's claim to reign over all Israel, including the tribe of Benjamin. That is why he identifies Michal to Abner as Saul's daughter. There is no indication that he has a personal motive of affection as well as a political one in wanting Michal back.

14. *sent messengers to Ish-Bosheth*. It is to be inferred that Abner has made clear to Ish-Bosheth that he must accede to this demand.

my wife Michal, whom I betrothed with a hundred Philistine foreskins. In turning to the man who has jurisdiction over Michal (and her second husband), David makes clear now that she is his wife, whom he legitimately acquired by providing the bride-price of a hundred Philistine foreskins stipulated by her father, Saul.

15. *from her husband*. The Masoretic Text has "a husband" (or, "a man"), but the possessive pronoun is supplied in the Septuagint and the Vulgate as well as in at least two Hebrew manuscripts.

16. *weeping as he went*. There is scarcely a more striking instance of the evocative compactness of biblical narrative. We know almost nothing about Paltiel. He speaks not a word of dialogue. Yet his walking after Michal, weeping all the while, intimates a devoted love that stands in contrast to David's relationship with her. Paltiel is a man whose fate is imposed on him. Michal was given to him by Saul, evidently without his initiative. He came to

love her. Now he must give her up, and confronted by Saul's strongman with the peremptory order to go back, he has no choice but to go back.

17. *Time and again in the past*. The idiom for "times gone by," *temol shilshom* (literally, "yesterday and the day before"), is reinforced by the emphatic adverb *gam*, repeated before each of the two components of the idiom, probably as an indication of repeated acts in times past. Most commentators refer the idea of Israel's wanting David as king to his immense popularity during his early military successes (1 Samuel 18). But there was no intimation then that the people wanted to replace Saul with David on the throne. The suggestion of repeated popular support for David's claims might well point to an otherwise unreported undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the house of Saul and an interest in going over to David as a result of the losing civil war, if it is not Abner's own diplomatic invention.

21. *And David sent Abner off, and he went in peace*. The going in peace befits the feast of reconciliation and the agreed-on pact. The writer contrives to repeat this sentence verbatim three times (here, verse 22, verse 23). But when Joab refers to this very same departure of Abner from Hebron in verse 24, he substitutes for "in peace" (*beshalom*) the emphatic infinitive *halokh* ("going off"). This ominous substitution, as I put it in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, "falls like the clatter of a dagger after the ringing of bells"—especially because "to go" sometimes occurs in the Bible as a euphemism for dying (see Job 27:21 and Jeremiah 22:10). Polzin has noted that this entire episode is a crowded juncture of comings and goings. The least complicated inference to be drawn from that fact is that this is a crucial moment of transition in the David story: the house of Saul comes to treat with the house of David; the long conflict with Saul, culminating in civil war, comes to an end; David is about to become king of the whole Israelite nation; a new line of division now emerges between David and his chief henchman, Joab. All this flurry of transition and realignment is nicely caught in the multiple comings and goings of Abner and Joab and the troops.

24. *Look, Abner has come to you*. The simple idiom for arrival (*baʾ ʾel*) ironically echoes Ish-Bosheth's use of the very same idiom in its sexual sense ("come into," "come to bed with") in his complaint to Abner. The sexual

undertone is sustained in the next verse because the prominent verb "to dupe" (*pitah*) has the primary meaning of "seduce."

26. *the cistern of Sirah*. The actual location has not been identified, but it would have to be in the general vicinity of Hebron.

and David did not know. The narrator takes pains to underscore David's innocence of involvement in Joab's scheme of murder. David on his part will take extravagant steps to declare his innocence.

27. *deceptively*. The Hebrew adverb *basheli* occurs only here. It derives either from the root *sh-l-h*, "to delude," or from the root *sh-l-w*, "to be quiet." Those who favor the latter root render it, with a small leap of semantic inference, as "privately."

he struck him there in the belly. Although this is the same part of the body in which the now avenged Asahel received his fatal wound from Abner, there is a world of difference between the two killings. Abner struck down Asahel in a deft maneuver as Asahel was pursuing him on the battlefield with intent to kill. Joab draws Abner aside into the gate under the pretence of speaking confidentially with him, and, catching him unawares, stabs him in the belly.

for the blood of Asahel. Joab's vendetta is accomplished. But it has not escaped notice that he is also eliminating a rival for the position of commander in the new united monarchy.

28. *Innocent am I*. David's first eminently political reflex is to dissociate himself categorically from the killing.

of the blood of Abner son of Ner. The Qumran Samuel text puts a full stop after "before the LORD for all time," then makes this phrase the subject of the next clause: "May the blood of Abner son of Ner come down on the head of Joab." The Masoretic Text has simply "May it come down on the head of Joab," and this translation supplies "blood guilt" (plural of *dam*, "blood") for the sake of clarity.

29. *discharge from his member*. The single Hebrew word *zav* refers to a man suffering from diseased discharge from the male organ.

running sores on his skin. This is again one word in the Hebrew, *metsorʿa*, rendered as "leper" in the older translations but now generally thought to indicate a different skin disease.

a man clutching the woman's spindle. Some prefer to interpret the Hebrew term as "crutch," thus linking it with the two preceding images of disease. This noun, *pelekh*, occurs quite infrequently, but there is scant indication in the biblical corpus that as a wooden implement it meant anything but "spindle." The word "woman's" is added in the translation to catch the nuance of scorn in a man's being reduced to woman's work. All in all, David puts together a first-class curse to emphasize the distance between him and Abner's killer. This bloodguilt, many times compounded, will indeed come down on Joab's head, but not until the end of David's life.

30. *had lain in wait for Abner*. The Masoretic Text reads "had killed Abner" *(hargu le'avner)*. There are two problems with that reading. It is a flat repetition of what has already been reported more vividly (only adding the information that Abishai was complicit in the act), and the use of the particle *le* (as a preposition, it means "to" or "for") to indicate the direct object of a verb is an Aramaicism generally restricted to Late Biblical Hebrew. The Qumran Samuel scroll has a different verb, evidently (the first consonant is not visible on the parchment) *tsafnu*, "to lie in wait," "to hide."

33. *lamented*. This is David's second poetic lament (*qinah*) in quick sequence in the text. It is much briefer than the lament over Jonathan and Saul and derives its power from the lapidary character of its language.

the death of the base. The term for "base fellow," *naval*, is the one encountered in 1 Samuel 25 as an explanation for the name of Nabal, Abigail's husband. A *naval* is someone who, as Kyle McCarter Jr. rightly observes, perpetrates *nevalah*, a contemptible or scandalous act. It is an outrage, David says, that a noble figure such as Abner should have been cut down in stealth as some scoundrel might perish at the hands of hired assassins.

34. *Your hands—never bound, / your feet never placed in fetters.* The elliptical nature of the language has led to some dispute over interpretation. It is most plausibly understood as a brief retrospection on Abner's glory days as a martial hero: no one ever succeeded in taking him captive, in putting him in a prisoner's humiliating fetters.

As one falls before scoundrels you fell. But now the noble Abner has been undone by treachery. In all the grandeur of the poetry, the sharp rebuke to the

sons of Zeruiah, who figure as vulgar cutthroats, is clear.

37–38. The vehemence with which David here is repeatedly dissociated from the killing of Abner leads one to suspect that, beyond his desire to exculpate himself on the spot, there may have been a lingering shadow of suspicion that he ordered the killing, a suspicion that the writer takes pains to dispel.

39. *I am gentle, and just anointed king*. David's plight as a self-proclaimed "gentle" or "tender" man (*rakh*) vis-à-vis the "hard" sons of Zeruiah will continue to play a crucial role in the story. But though he dissociates himself from Joab and Abishai and goes so far as to pronounce a scathing curse on them and their descendants, he makes no move to get rid of them, and continues to depend on their activity as strongmen. And what of Joab's reaction to all this bitter denunciation? Is it possible that he prudently understands it is politic for the king to dissociate himself from the killing by denouncing the killers in poetry and prose? There is also a question here about the relation between the two phrases David uses. Many translations explain the link as "though anointed king." That construction is possible, although it would be an unusual use of the Hebrew particle *we* ("and"). The present translation adds "just," on the assumption that David is dramatizing his predicament as a gentle person on whom the kingship has been newly thrust and who must contend with these hard sons of Zeruiah. In point of fact, he was anointed in Hebron several years earlier, but this might be either rhetorical exaggeration or a reference to his brand-new condition of king of the nation, not just of the tribe of Judah.

CHAPTER 4

[1]And the son of Saul heard that Abner had died in
Hebron, and he was utterly shaken, and all Israel was
dismayed. [2]And the son of Saul had two men,
commanders of raiding parties, the name of the one
was Baanah and of the other Rechab, sons of Rimmon
the Beerothite, who was of the Benjaminites, for
Beeroth, too, was reckoned with Benjamin. [3]And the
Beerothites fled to Gittaim and have been sojourners
there till this day.

[4]And Jonathan son of Saul had a lame son, five years
old he was when the news of Saul and Jonathan came
from Jezreel. And his nurse bore him off and fled, and
it happened in her haste to flee that he fell and was
crippled. And his name was Mephibosheth. [5]And the
sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, Rechab and Baanah
went and came in the heat of the day to the house of
Ish-Bosheth as he was taking his midday rest. [6]And,
look, the woman who kept the gate had been gleaning

wheat, and nodded and fell asleep. [7]Andthey came into the house as he was lying in his bed in his bedchamber, and they struck him and killed him and cut off his head and took his head and went off through the Arabah all night long. [8]And they brought Ish-Bosheth's head to David in Hebron and said to the king, "Here is the head of Ish-Bosheth son of Saul your enemy, who sought your life. The LORD has granted my lord the king vengeance this day against Saul and his seed." [9]And David answered Rechab and Baanah his brother, the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, and he said to them, "As the LORD lives, Who saved my life from every strait, [10]he who told me, saying 'Look, Saul is dead,' and thought he was a bearer of good tidings, I seized him and killed him in Ziklag instead of giving him something for his tidings. [11]How much more so when wicked men have killed an innocent man in his bed in his house, and so, will I not requite his blood from you and rid the land of you?" [12]And David commanded the lads, and they killed them and chopped off their hands and feet and hung them by the pool in Hebron. And Ish-Bosheth's head they took and buried in the grave of Abner in Hebron.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the son of Saul*. The son in question is Ish-Bosheth. Both the Septuagint and the Qumran Samuel scroll read, erroneously, "Mephibosheth." It has been surmised that scribes deleted the mistaken name without replacing it with the correct one.

was utterly shaken. The Hebrew says literally "his hands grew weak," the hands being an idiomatic token of strength or courage. The force of the idiom is a little like the colloquial English "lost his grip."

2. *sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, who was of the Benjaminites*. The Beerothites are an originally non-Israelite group who have become what we might call naturalized Benjaminites. The two brothers are considered sufficiently Benjaminite to have been entrusted with positions as the commanders of raiding parties—also making them experienced killers—and so we are meant to understand that the pusillanimous Ish-Bosheth is betrayed by his own tribesmen. At the same time, the foreign origin of Baanah and Rechab participates in the recurring pattern of the foreign messenger bringing news of a disaster to David. Finally, the treacherous killing of the king by two brothers echoes the immediately preceding episode, in which two brothers, Joab and Abishai, are said to lie in wait for and kill Abner.

4. *Jonathan . . . had a lame son*. The notice is inserted here to make clear that after the murder of Ish-Bosheth, there will be no fit heir left from the house of Saul, for Saul's one surviving grandson is crippled.

Mephibosheth. As with Ish-Bosheth/Ish-Baal, the original form of the name was Mephibaal, a component meaning "shame" substituted for the theophoric *ba'al* with its pagan associations.

6. *And, look, the woman who kept the gate*. The translation of this entire verse follows the text reflected in the Septuagint, out of a sense that the received text at this point is simply not viable. The Masoretic Text is problematic as idiomatic Hebrew usage, includes one entirely unintelligible phrase, and is redundant with the narrative report of the next verse. It reads: "and they [feminine pronoun!] came into the midst of the house, taking wheat [?], and they struck him in the belly, and Rechab and Baanah his brother got away."

gleaning wheat. This odd little domestic detail suggests that Ish-Bosheth does not inhabit a grand palace with royal guards but lives in modest homey circumstances.

nodded and fell asleep. Both the king and the gatekeeper are asleep when the assassins arrive, so they can slip by her and easily dispatch him.

7. *as he was lying in his bed in his bedchamber*. This twice-asserted detail underlines the scurrilousness of the act of assassination. The next time we encounter a king taking his siesta, it will be David before he rises to behold Bathsheba. Again, murder will ensue, although the king himself will be the perpetrator.

8. *Ish-Bosheth son of Saul your enemy, who sought your life*. The two sons of Rimmon make exactly the same misguided calculation as the Amalekite messenger in chapter 1, imagining that David will be delighted to hear of the destruction of anyone associated with Saul and will reward the bearers of the news.

11. *when wicked men have killed an innocent man in his bed in his house*. Either this detail has been elided in the dialogue reported for Baanah and Rechab when they come before David, or he has received advance word of the killing and its circumstances from another source. In all this, the common scholarly view is that the narrative is framed as an apology for David, taking pains to clear him of any complicity in the deaths, first of Saul, then of Abner, and now of Ish-Bosheth. But it is still more plausible that the writer is continuing his representation of David as the consummately politic man: whether he really feels moral revulsion against these assassins we have no way of knowing, but he surely is aware, as he was after the murder of Abner, that it is in his political interest to put the greatest possible distance between himself and the killers of Saul's son, and what better way to do this than to have them executed on the spot? David is nevertheless a beneficiary of the murder, for now there is no claimant to the throne whom the northern tribes might follow instead of him.

12. *chopped off their hands and feet*. The dismembering of malefactors or prisoners was a common ancient Near Eastern practice, as we have seen before (and compare the first chapter of Judges). Here the corpses are defiled by cutting off the hands that did the killing and the feet that carried the killers

into the victim's bedchamber. The whole episode ends in a strange image cluster of detached body parts: the hands and feet of the two executed assassins and the head of their victim. Even as David is about to assume control of a united monarchy, we have an intimation of mayhem and dismemberment that is an apt thematic prelude to the story of David's reign.

CHAPTER 5

[1]And all the tribes of Israel came to David in Hebron,
and they said, “Here we are, your bone and your flesh
are we. [2]Time and again in the past when Saul was
king over us you were the one who led Israel into the
fray, and the LORD said to you,

‘It is you who will shepherd My
people Israel
and it is you who will be prince
over Israel.’”

[3]And all the elders of Israel came to the king in
Hebron, and King David made a pact with them in
Hebron before the LORD and they anointed David as
king over Israel. [4]Thirty years old was David when he
became king, forty years he was king. [5]In Hebron he
was king over Judah seven years and six months, and
in Jerusalem he was king thirty-three years over all
Israel and Judah.

[6]And the king went, and his men with him, to
Jerusalem, to the Jebusite, the inhabitant of the land,
and he said to David, saying, “You shall not enter here
unless you can remove the blind and the lame,” which
is to say, “David shall not enter here!” [7]And David
captured the stronghold of Zion, which is the City of
David. [8]And David said on that day, “Whoever strikes
down the Jebusite and reaches the conduit and the
lame and the blind utterly despised by David . . .”
Therefore do they say, “No blind man nor lame shall
enter the House.” [9]And David stayed in the stronghold
and called it the City of David, and David built round
the rampart and within. [10]And David grew greater and
greater, and the LORD God of Armies was with him.

[11]And Hiram king of Tyre sent messengers to David
with cedarwood and carpenters and stonemasons, and
they built a house for David. [12]And David knew that
the LORD had set him up unshaken as king over Israel
and had exalted his kingship for the sake of His people
Israel.

[13]And David took other concubines and wives from
Jerusalem after coming from Hebron, and other sons
and daughters were born to David. [14]And these are the

names of those born to him in Jerusalem: Shammua and Shobab and Nathan and Solomon, [15]and Ibhar and Elishua and Nepheg and Japhia, [16]and Elishama and Eliada and Eliphelet.

[17]And the Philistines heard that David had been anointed as king over Israel, and all the Philistines came up to seek David. And David heard and went down to the stronghold. [18]The Philistines had come and deployed in the Valley of Rephaim. [19]And David inquired of the LORD, saying, “Shall I go up against the Philistines? Will You give them into my hand?” And the LORD said, “Go up, for I will surely give the Philistines into your hand.” [20]And David came into Baal-Perazim, and David struck them down there, and he said, “The LORD has burst through my enemies before me like a bursting of water!” Therefore did he call the name of that place Baal-Perazim. [21]And they abandoned their idols there, and David with his men bore them off. [22]And once more the Philistines came up and deployed in the Valley of Rephaim. [23]And David inquired of the LORD, and He said, “You shall not go up. Turn around behind them and come at them from opposite the willows. [24]And as soon as you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the willows, then

you must move boldly, for then shall the LORD go out
before you to strike down the camp of the Philistines."
[25]And David did just as the LORD had commanded
him, and he struck down the Philistines from Geba till
you come to Gezer.

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *all the tribes of Israel came to David*. "The tribes of Israel," in keeping with the consistent usage of the preceding narrative, refers to the northern tribes that had been loyal to the house of Saul. With the assassination of Abner and then of Ish-Bosheth, they understandably now turn to David.

2. *you were the one . . . It is you*. The language of the tribal representatives puts considerable emphasis on the second-person pronoun: you are the one that we, and God, have chosen. The divine declaration of David's legitimacy as ruler, quoted by the tribal spokesmen, is appropriately given the elevated status of poetry.

3. *all the elders of Israel came to the king*. This is not a duplication of the report in verse 1 from another source, as is often claimed. The convention used here is the well-attested one of "resumptive repetition": when an interrupted narrative strand is resumed, a phrase from the point of interruption is repeated verbatim to mark the return to the main line. Here, the move to confirm David as king of Israel, with which the episode began, after the insertion of the tribes' dialogue (verses 1–2), is carried forward. It is the role of the tribal rank and file to proclaim fealty, but of the elders to sign a pact and anoint David, and so "elders" is now strategically substituted for "tribes" of the first verse. One should note that the tribes come "to David" whereas the elders come "to the king," for they are about to consummate the official business of kingmaking.

4. *forty years he was king*. In biblical usage, this is a formulaic number—in Judges often used to indicate a full term of governing. But the specificity of "seven years and six months" in Hebron has the look of a real number, whether or not it is historically precise.

6. *the king went . . . to Jerusalem*. The chronological link between this action and what precedes, as well as the chronology of the subsequent events in the chapter, is not clear. The principle of organization appears to be thematic or ideological rather than temporal. What we have here is a catalogue of salient actions by which David consolidates his new monarchy: the conquest of a capital city in the center of the north-south axis of the country that does not belong to any tribal territory (the same logic that led to the creation of Washington as capital in the District of Columbia, not part of any state); the construction of a palace with the assistance of a Phoenician alliance; the begetting of many offspring, including the future heir to the throne, Solomon; the defeat of the Philistines. The birth of Solomon is the clearest indication that these notices do not follow the chronology of the preceding narrative.

the blind and the lame. This puzzling phrase, together with its even more enigmatic occurrence in verse 8, is a notorious crux. The most disparate theories have been proposed for how to read the words of the text and how to reconstruct what is said to go on in the conquest of the city. The Qumran Samuel scroll for this verse reads: "You shall not enter here, for the blind and the lame have incited [*hesitu* for Masoretic *hesirkha*], saying, 'David shall not enter here.'" This variant has the advantage of fluency, but one suspects it may have been invented to make a difficult traditional text more intelligible. The explanation proposed by Yigal Yadin is probably the most plausible: he points to a Hittite text for the swearing in of troops in which a blind woman and a lame man are set before the men with the monitory imprecation that their fate will be like that of those wretches if they fail in their duty. The Jebusites, then, might have displayed the lame and the blind on the ramparts with an analogous curse against those who would presume to attack the city. This taunting curse would explain why these maimed figures are "despised by David."

8. *Whoever strikes down the Jebusite and reaches the conduit*. These words are the other salient element of the crux, with debate still raging over the meaning of "conduit" (*tsinor*). Some scholars have claimed it refers here to

the windpipe, or a lower part of the anatomy, of the Jebusites who are to be struck down, but there is no Hebrew evidence for *tsinor* as anything but a water channel or tube, and the argument from the analogy of shape is a weak one. Moreover, the verb used here, *naga'*, means primarily "to touch," and in some biblical contexts, "to reach" or "take charge of" but not "to strike." The most likely reference, then, is to a daring route of surprise access into the city. A frequently proposed candidate is Warren's Shaft, discovered in 1867, an underground tunnel feeding in from the Gihon Spring on a slope outside the wall to the east. Though everything about this report remains uncertain, David may be saying that whoever manages to crawl through the tunnel, make his way up the vertical shaft that transects it, and cut down the Jebusites within the town together with their loathsome display of lame and blind will be given a great reward. (The reward clause is missing; one is supplied in the parallel verse in Chronicles—"will become a chief and commander.")

No blind man nor lame shall enter the House. The story is thus given an etiological turn as an explanation for a known taboo, evidently pertaining to the temple but perhaps to David's "house" (that is, the palace). One wonders whether there is an invitation here to think of Jonathan's lame son—which would be another gesture for denying the Saulides all future claim to the throne.

11. *Hiram king of Tyre*. Hiram as a provider of timber and artisans points forward to Solomon's construction of the Temple. If this is the Hiram with whom Solomon had dealings, David's palace building would have been undertaken rather late in his own reign in order to coincide with Hiram's regnal span.

13. *from Jerusalem*. Some Septuagint versions read "in Jerusalem."

17. *the Philistines heard*. David's assumption of the throne of all the tribes of Israel means that he has decisively cast aside his vassal status, and so the Philistines, who all along have been warring with the northern tribes, assemble their united forces ("all the Philistines") to suppress the new monarchy.

the stronghold. The claim often made that this refers to the stronghold at Adullam (compare 1 Samuel 22) is unlikely because the battle here is entirely in the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem. This would have to be the stronghold

within the city, referred to in verse 9. David can "go down" to it because his residence in Jerusalem could be topographically above the stronghold.

18. *the Valley of Rephaim*. The location is outside the walls of the Jebusite city, a couple of miles to the west.

20. *burst through my enemies . . . like a bursting of water*. The existing place-name is etiologically reinscribed to fit the military victory. Baal-Perazim may mean "god of earthquakes." The image of bursting through—the Hebrew term means "breach"—could suggest that David's forces have succeeded in punching a hole in the Philistine lines rather than in producing a general rout.

23. *opposite the willows*. The Hebrew *bekha'im* resists botanic identification—mulberry tree, pear tree, mastic bush, and others have been proposed. Some think it is a place-name, but the next verse makes that unlikely.

24. *the sound of marching in the tops of the willows*. Presumably, this is the wind. But it gives a sense that mysterious unseen agents of the LORD are advancing against the Philistines. More practically, some interpreters have proposed that the sound of the wind in the branches provided a cover for the sound of David's troops stealthily advancing for their surprise attack from the rear.

25. *from Geba till you come to Gezer*. Unlike the first victory, David now inflicts a general defeat on the Philistine forces, driving them back from the territory in central Canaan that they had occupied after triumphing over Saul at Gilboa. David has now completed the consolidation of his rule over all the land, and his real troubles are about to begin.

CHAPTER 6

[1]And David gathered again all the picked men of
Israel, thirty thousand. [2]And David arose and went,
and all the troops who were with him, to Baalah in
Judah to bring up from there the Ark of God, over
which the name of the LORD of Armies enthroned on
the cherubim is called. [3]And they mounted the Ark of
God on a new cart and carried it off from the house of
Abinadab, which is on the Hill, and Uzza and Ahio,
the sons of Abinadab, were driving the cart, [4]and Ahio
was walking before the Ark. [5]And David and the
whole house of Israel were playing before the LORD
with all their might in song on lyres and tambourines
and castanets and cymbals. [6]And they came to the
threshing floor of Nacon, and Uzza reached out to the
Ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen had
slipped. [7]And the LORD's wrath flared up against
Uzza, and God struck him down there for reaching out
his hand to the Ark, and he died there by the Ark of
God. [8]And David was incensed because the LORD
had burst out against Uzza. And that place has been

called Perez-Uzza to this day. [9]And David was afraid of the LORD on that day and he said, “How can the Ark of the LORD come to me?” [10]And David did not want to remove the Ark of the LORD to himself in the City of David, and David had it turned aside to the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite. [11]And the Ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obed-Edom three months and the LORD blessed Obed-Edom and all his house. [12]And it was told to King David, saying, “The LORD has blessed the house of Obed-Edom and all that he has on account of the Ark of God.” And David went and brought up the Ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with rejoicing.

[13]And it happened when the bearers of the Ark of the LORD had taken six steps that he sacrificed a fatted bull. [14]And David was whirling with all his might before the LORD, girt in a linen ephod. [15]And David and the whole house of Israel were bringing up the Ark of the LORD in shouts and with the sound of the ram’s horn. [16]And as the Ark of the LORD came into the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out through the window and saw King David leaping and whirling before the LORD, and she scorned him in her heart. [17]And they brought the Ark of the LORD and

set it up in its place within the tent that David had pitched for it, and David offered up burnt offerings before the LORD and well-being sacrifices. [18]And David finished offering up the burnt offerings and the well-being sacrifices, and he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of Hosts. [19]And he shared out to all the people, to all the multitude of Israel, every man and woman, one loaf of bread and one date cake and one raisin cake, and every one of the people went to his home.

[20]And David turned back to bless his house. And Michal daughter of Saul came out to meet David, and she said, “How honored today is the king of Israel who has exposed himself today to the eyes of his servants’ slavegirls as some scurrilous fellow would expose himself!” [21]And David said to Michal, “Before the LORD, Who chose me instead of your father and instead of all his house, to appoint me prince over the LORD’S people, over Israel, I will play before the LORD! [22]And I will be dishonored still more than this and will be debased in my own eyes! But with the slavegirls about whom you spoke, with them let me be honored!” [23]And Michal daughter of Saul had no child till her dying day.

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *thirty thousand*. Some modern commentators understand *ʾalafim*, "thousands," as "military contingents," and thus reduce the number of troops to a few hundred elite soldiers. But *ʾalafim* in a non-numerical sense refers to clans, not military units; and as we have abundantly seen, exaggerated numbers are common in these stories. Polzin, moreover, has aptly observed that thirty thousand is precisely the number of Israelites slain when the Ark was captured by the Philistines (1 Samuel 4).

2. *to Baalah in Judah*. This place-name is a synonym for the Kiriath-Jearim of 1 Samuel 7:1—see, for example, Joshua 15:9. The Qumran Samuel scroll in fact reads here: "Baalah, which is Kiriath-Jearim in Judah." The Masoretic Text reads *baʿaley yehudah*. Because this erroneous phrase was construed to mean "the notables of Judah," a *mem* prefix ("from") was added to it to yield "from the notables of Judah." But David is clearly going *to* the place Baalah.

3. *a new cart*. The new cart is a vehicle unpolluted by any previous secular use.

4. The Masoretic Text begins this verse with a whole clause that is a scribal duplication (dittography) of the first half of verse 3: "And they carried it off from the house of Abinadab which is on the Hill." This clause is not present in the Qumran Samuel, in the Septuagint, or in the parallel verse in 1 Chronicles 13:7. The Masoretic Text also repeats the adjective "new" (*ḥadashah*) at the end of verse 3, a repetition not reflected in the other ancient versions.

5. *with all their might in song*. The translation reads here *bekhol ʿoz uveshirim* with 1 Chronicles 13:8. The Masoretic Text has *bekhol ʿatsey beroshim*, "with all cypress woods," which only by a long interpretive stretch has been made to refer to percussion instruments.

6. *the threshing floor of Nacon*. The proper name here is in question. The Qumran Samuel reads "Nadon."

7. *the LORD's wrath flared up . . . and God struck him down*. This is an archaic story that defies later ethical categories: the Ark, as God's terrestrial throne, is invested with awesome divine power (compare 1 Samuel 6). To touch it, even in an effort to keep it from slipping off the cart, is to risk being consumed by its indwelling mana, as when one comes in contact with a high-voltage electric core. God's wrath against Uzza triggers an answering wrath (the same verb in the Hebrew) on the part of David, frustrated in his purposes and now wondering whether he will ever manage to bring this symbol and earthly focus of God's power to his newly conquered capital.

for reaching out his hand to the Ark. The translation follows the parallel version in 1 Chronicles 13:10. The Masoretic Text here has a single incomprehensible word, *shal*, which might be simply two consonants from the initial words of the lost clause recorded in Chronicles.

8. *Perez-Uzza*. The Hebrew is construed to mean "bursting out against Uzza." The naming story forms an antithetical symmetry with the story in 2 Samuel 5 of Baal-Perazim, there associated with God's "bursting through" the Philistine ranks.

11. *Obed-Edom the Gittite*. He is a foreigner, perhaps (though this is not certain) from Philistine Gath—conceivably someone who had attached himself to David during his sojourn there.

13. *when the bearers of the Ark of the LORD had taken six steps*. Some construe this as an imperfect verb: with every six steps David would sacrifice a bull. Apart from the difficulty that these constant sacrifices would make the procession interminable and require scores of thousands of bulls, the imperfect would require the verb "to be" at the beginning of the sentence to appear in the suffix conjugation *wehayah*, instead of the way it is, in the prefix conjugation, *wayehi*, which implies a singulative, not an iterative, tense for the verb.

14. *girt in a linen ephod*. The wearing of the ephod surely underscores the fact that in the procession of the Ark into Jerusalem, David is playing the roles of both priest and king—a double service not unknown in the ancient Near East

(compare Melchizedek in Genesis 14:18). The ephod was probably a short garment tied around the hips or waist, and so David whirling and leaping might easily have exposed himself, as Michal will bitterly observe.

16. *Michal daughter of Saul looked out through the window and saw King David*. The preceding verse reports the shouts of jubilation and the shrill blasts of the ram's horn: first she hears the procession approaching from the distance, then she looks out and sees David dancing. Strategically, her repeated epithet in this episode of final estrangement is "daughter of Saul," not "wife of David," and the figure she sees is not "David her husband" but "King David." Shimon Bar-Efrat neatly observes that at the beginning of their story a loving Michal helped David escape "through the window" from her father's henchmen while now she looks at him from a distance "through the window," in seething contempt.

17–20. Instead of proceeding directly to the confrontation between Michal and David, as we might expect, the narrative lingers for a long moment over David's cultic ministrations and royal benefactions to the people. One can imagine that Michal continues to watch David from the window, performing his role as the people's darling, and that she continues to simmer.

19. *date cake*. The Hebrew *ʾeshpar* appears nowhere else and so it is only a guess as to what sort of delicacy it might be. Some traditional commentators construe it as a portion of meat.

20. *How honored today is the king of Israel*. Astoundingly, until this climactic moment, there has been no dialogue between Michal and David—only her urgent instructions for him to flee in 1 Samuel 19 and his silent flight. We can only guess what she may have felt all those years he was away from her, acquiring power and wives, or during the civil war with her father's family. We are equally ignorant of her feelings toward her devoted second husband, Paltiel son of Laish. Now the royal couple are finally represented meeting, and when Michal speaks out, it is in an explosion of angry sarcasm. Her first significant word "honored" (balanced in David's rejoinder by two antonyms, "dishonored" and "debased") is a complex satellite to the story of the grand entry of the Ark with which it is linked. When the Ark was lost to the Philistines (1 Samuel 4), the great cry was that "glory [or honor, *kavod*—the same verbal root Michal uses here] is exiled from Israel." Now glory/honor

splendidly returns to Israel, but the actual invocation of the term is a sarcastic one, bitterly directed at David, who will then hurl back two antonyms and try to redefine both honor and dishonor to his wife. The logic of the larger story's moral and historical realism requires that no triumph should be simple and unambiguous, that strife and accusation pursue even the fulfillment of national destiny. One should also note here that Michal speaks to her husband in the third person, not deferentially but angrily, and refers to him by public title, not in any personal relation to her.

who has exposed himself today to the eyes of his servants' slavegirls. The verb "to expose" is clearly used in the sexual sense. The proud Michal's reference to the lowly slavegirls' enjoying the sight of David's nakedness probably suggests an edge of sexual jealousy as well as political resentment in her rage against him. He has, after all, assembled a harem during their years apart, and there is no indication that he has resumed sexual relations with her after having her brought back to him forcibly for obviously political motives.

as some scurrilous fellow would expose himself. The social thrust of the comparison is evident: she is a king's daughter, whereas he has now demonstrated that he is no more than riffraff.

21. *Before the* LORD. Isaac Abravanel, the Hebrew commentator who was also Ferdinand and Isabella's financial advisor until the expulsion of 1492, aptly explains this: "Had he danced before some person to honor him, it would have been a contemptible act, for his status was higher than any other person's. But in his leaping before the LORD there is no cause for contempt." Thus David can go on to say that he will perform ostensibly debasing acts, even debasing in his own eyes (emending this to "His eyes" only clouds matters), acts that in paradoxical fact are the opposite of debasement.

22. *with the slavegirls . . . with them let me be honored*. David flings back Michal's sarcastic "how honored," suggesting that, unlike Michal, the simple slavegirls will understand that his gyrations before the Ark are an act of reverence and will honor him for it. And there may also be a sexual edge in his rejoinder: I will display myself to whomever I please, and it is I who will decide whether it is honorable or not.

23. *And Michal daughter of Saul had no child till her dying day*. The whole story of David and Michal concludes on a poised ambiguity through the

suppression of causal explanation: Is this a punishment from God, or simply a refusal by David to share her bed, or is the latter to be understood as the agency for the former?

CHAPTER 7

[1]And it happened when the king was dwelling in his house and the LORD had granted him respite all around from his enemies, [2]that the king said to Nathan the prophet, “See, pray, I dwell in a cedarwood house while the Ark of God dwells within curtains.” [3]And Nathan said to the king, “Whatever is in your heart, go, do, for the LORD is with you.” [4]And it happened on that night, that the word of the LORD came to Nathan, saying, [5]“Go, say to My servant, to David, ‘Thus says the LORD: Is it you who would build Me a house for Me to dwell in? [6]For I have dwelled in no house from the day I brought up the Israelites out of Egypt until this day, but I have gone about in tent and tabernacle. [7]Wherever I went about among all the Israelites, did I speak a word with any of the tribal chiefs of Israel whom I charged to shepherd My people Israel, saying, Why did you not build me a cedarwood house? [8]And now, thus shall you say to My servant, to David, Thus says the LORD of Hosts: I Myself took you from the pasture, from following the

flocks, to be prince over My people, over Israel. [9]And I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut down your enemies before you. And I will make you a great name, like the name of the great of the earth. [10]And I will set aside a place for My people, for Israel, and plant them, and they shall abide there and no longer quake, and the wicked shall no more afflict them as before, [11]from the day that I appointed judges over My people Israel. And I will grant you respite from all your enemies, and the LORD declares that it is He Who will make you a house. [12]When your days are full and you lie with your fathers, I will raise up your seed after you, who will issue from your loins, and I will make his kingship unshaken. [13]He it is who will build a house for My name, and I will make the throne of his kingship unshaken forever. [14]I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me, so should he do wrong, I will chastise him with the rod men use and with the afflictions of humankind. [15]But My loyalty shall not swerve from him as I made it swerve from Saul whom I removed from before you. [16]And your house and your kingship shall be steadfast forever, your throne unshaken forever.'" [17]In accordance with all these words and in accordance with all this vision, so did Nathan speak to David.

[18]And King David came and sat before the LORD and said, “Who am I, LORD God, and what is my house, that you have brought me this far? [19]And even this is too little in Your eyes, LORD God, for You have also spoken of Your servant’s house in distant time, and this is a man’s instruction, LORD God. [20]And how can David speak more to You, when You know Your servant, LORD God? [21]For the sake of Your word, and according to Your heart You have done all these great things, to make known to Your servant. [22]Therefore are You great, O LORD God, for there is none like You and there is no god beside You, in all we have heard with our own ears. [23]And who is like Your people Israel, a unique nation upon earth, whom a god has gone out to redeem as a people to make Him a name and to do great and awesome things for them, to drive out from before Your people whom You redeemed from Egypt nations with their gods? [24]And You made Your own people Israel unshaken forever, and You, O LORD, became their God. [25]And now LORD God, the word that You have spoken to Your servant concerning his house—make it stand forever and do as You have spoken. [26]And may Your name be great forever, so it be said, ‘The LORD of Armies is God over Israel, and the house of David Your servant shall be unshaken before You.’ [27]For You, O LORD of Armies, God of

Israel, have revealed to Your servant, saying, ‘A house will I build you.’ Therefore has Your servant found the heart to pray to you this prayer. [28]And now, O LORD God, You are God and Your words must be truth, You have spoken of this bounty to Your servant. [29]And now, have the goodness to bless the house of Your servant to be before You forever, for it is You, LORD God, Who have spoken, and with Your blessings may Your servant’s house be blessed forever.”

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And it happened when the king was dwelling in his house*. This transitional note establishes a link with the previous episode, in which David brought the Ark into Jerusalem and had his final confrontation with Michal, which in a sense was the final blow to the house of Saul. What follows is a major caesura in the David story—a long pause marked by ideological reflections on the future, before David must deal once again with external enemies and then be engulfed by internecine strife in his court. The language of both Nathan’s night-vision and David’s prayer is strikingly different from that of the surrounding narrative—more hortatory, more formulaic, more reminiscent of the Deuteronomistic school that would come to dominate Israel’s national literature nearly four centuries after the reign of David. The literary archaeology that has been performed on these two long passages remains in contention, some scholars claiming these are late compositions of a Deuteronomistic writer, others arguing that two or more authentically old literary strata have been joined together and framed by a later editor. These are not issues that it will be useful to attempt to resolve here. What is worth noting is the deliberate structural separation effected by these two passages

between everything that precedes the ensconcing of throne and Ark in Jerusalem and everything that follows.

respite . . . from his enemies. The respite is partial, and temporary, because the subsequent chapters report further military campaigns.

2. *Nathan the prophet*. Not previously mentioned, and of unspecified background, he will play an important role in what follows.

a cedarwood house. The palace would have been a stone structure with cedar paneling within. Cedar was an expensive import item brought from Lebanon (see 5:11).

curtains. The term is an obvious synecdoche for tent (compare 6:17).

3. *Whatever is in your heart, go, do*. Nathan's response to the brilliantly successful king, who has demonstrated through his triumphs that God is with him, is perfectly reasonable. But in the night-vision God will give different directions.

5. *Thus says the* LORD. The "messenger-formula" signals the beginning of explicit prophetic discourse. God's address to Nathan as a whole emphasizes the act of speech, being constructed as an elaborate nesting of quoted speech within quoted speech.

6. *I have dwelled in no house*. This is not, as some interpreters have claimed, the expression of a pre-Solomonic anti-temple ideology. The author of this episode is faced with the difficulty of explaining a historical fact, that David did not build the Temple, as we might have expected, but rather it was his son Solomon who carried out the construction. The probable historical reason was that David was too preoccupied with the struggles within his own court and family. In Chronicles, the reason given is that he had shed blood. Here, the argument God makes is that it is an act of presumption for a mere mortal to build a temple for the unhoused God of Israelite history. But this line of reasoning actually enhances the theological importance of Solomon's temple, for it suggests that God Himself will build a house when He is good and ready, using the human agency He chooses. Thus the Temple that is to be raised up by David's seed will have a more than human importance, being at once a token of God's indwelling among His people Israel and a divine underwriting of the Davidic dynasty.

in tent and tabernacle. The latter was a portable shrine made of boards and curtains. Presumably, local sanctuaries such as the one at Shiloh are assimilated into the archetype of tabernacle, being neither cultic centers for the entire nation nor grand edifices like the Solomonic temple.

10–11. *no more afflict them as before, from the day that I appointed judges*. Although the Judges succeeded in temporarily driving off Israel's sundry oppressors, the period as a whole was one of instability and recurrent harassment by enemy peoples.

11. *it is He Who will make you a house*. Both in this prophecy and in David's prayer the double meaning of "house" is repeatedly exploited. God will grant David a house—that is, a continuing dynasty, and then will have David's son build Him a house—that is, a temple. The house in which David dwells in the opening verse of this chapter is of course his palace in Jerusalem.

14. *the rod men use . . . the afflictions of humankind*. God will discipline the future king as a father disciplines his son, and with familiar human tribulations, not with supernatural bolts from the heavens.

15. *My loyalty*. The Hebrew *ḥesed* is the faithfulness and goodwill that one party of a pact owes to the other.

whom I removed. The Hebrew uses the same verb that is rendered here in the immediately preceding phrase as "made it swerve."

18. *David came and sat before the* LORD. David comes into the tent in which the Ark has been placed. The verb "sat," *yashav*, is identical with the verb at the beginning of the chapter that also means "dwell," and thus establishes a structural parallel between the passage on the postponed building of the Temple and David's prayer.

19. *You have also spoken of Your servant's house in distant time*. These words refer directly to the prophecy conveyed to Nathan in verses 12–16, and thus undermine the claim of some scholars that David's prayer was originally part of the story of the introduction of the Ark to Jerusalem (chapter 6), from which it was supposedly separated by the insertion of Nathan's prophecy.

this is a man's instruction. That is, he would scarcely think himself worthy of all this divine bounty about which God has just instructed him. But this is

no more than an interpretive guess, because the meaning of the Hebrew—*zoʾt torat haʾadam*—is obscure.

22. *Therefore are You great, O LORD God*. Although the thread of piety in David's complex and contradictory character could be perfectly authentic, he does not elsewhere speak in this elevated, liturgical, celebratory style, and so the inference of the presence of another writer in this passage is plausible. Yet it is at least conceivable that the original writer has introduced this celebratory rhetoric to punctuate David's moment of respite in the story.

23. *for them*. The Masoretic Text, at several points in these verses problematic, has "for you" (plural). The Qumran Samuel and the Septuagint have no pronoun.

to drive out. The Masoretic Text is syntactically odd and semantically obscure. The parallel verse in Chronicles omits "for your land" and adds "to drive out," as does this translation.

25. *the word that You have spoken to Your servant concerning his house*. This word has just been conveyed to David through Nathan as God's intermediary. It is humanly understandable that David should now fervently pray to God that the grand promise of the night-vision be fulfilled in time to come.

29. *it is You, LORD God, Who have spoken, and with Your blessings may Your servant's house be blessed forever*. The fondness of biblical prose for thematic key words is especially prominent in the grand theological performance that is David's prayer, in which the key words function as formal rhetorical motifs. The salient repeated terms are "speak" (the act of God's promise and continuing revelation), "house" (dynasty and palace but, in this speech, not temple), "blessing" (in the final sentence it occurs three times in three different forms), and "forever" (the adverbial index of the permanence of God's promise).

CHAPTER 8

[1]And it happened thereafter that David struck down
the Philistines and subjugated them, and David took
Metheg-Ammah from the hand of the Philistines.
[2]And he struck down Moab, and measured them out
with a line, making them lie on the ground, and he
measured two lengths of a line to put to death and one
full length to keep alive. And Moab became tribute-
bearing vassals to David. [3]And David struck down
Hadadezer son of Rehob, king of Zobah as he went to
restore his monument by the Euphrates River. [4]And
David captured from him one thousand seven hundred
horsemen and twenty thousand foot soldiers, and
David hamstrung all the chariot horses, leaving aside a
hundred of them. [5]And the Arameans of Damascus
came to aid Hadadezer, king of Zobah, and David
struck down twenty-two thousand men from among
the Arameans. [6]And David set up prefects in Aram-
Damascus, and the Arameans became tribute-bearing
vassals to David, and the LORD made David
victorious wherever he went. [7]And David took the

golden quivers that had belonged to the servants of Hadadezer and brought them to Jerusalem. [8]And from Betah and from Berothai, the towns of Hadadezer, King David took a great abundance of bronze.

[9]And Toi king of Hamath heard that David had struck down all the forces of Hadadezer. [10]And Toi sent Joram his son to King David to ask after his well-being and to salute him for having done battle with Hadadezer and for striking him down, as Hadadezer was Toi's adversary. And in Joram's hand there were vessels of silver and vessels of gold and vessels of bronze. [11]These, too, did King David consecrate to the LORD, together with the silver and the gold that he consecrated from all the nations he had conquered: [12]from Edom and from Moab and from the Ammonites and from the Philistines and from Amalek and from the plunder of Hadadezer son of Rehob, king of Zobah. [13]And David made a name when he came back from striking down the Edomites in the Valley of Salt —eighteen thousand of them. [14]And he set up prefects in Edom, throughout Edom he set up prefects, and all Edom became vassals to David, and the LORD made David victorious wherever he went.

15 And David was king over all Israel, and it was
David's practice to mete out true justice to all his
people. 16 And Joab son of Zeruiah was over the army,
and Jehoshaphat son of Ahilud was recorder. 17 And
Zadok son of Ahitub and Abiathar son of Ahimelech
were priests, and Seraiah was scribe. 18 And Benaiah
son of Jehoida was over the Cherithites and the
Pelethites, and David's sons served as priests.

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And it happened thereafter*. This characteristically vague temporal reference actually reflects the achronological arrangement of the narrative material at this point. Chapter 7 was a long pause in the progress of the larger story that was devoted to the theological grounds for the postponement of building a temple and to the promise of a perpetual Davidic dynasty. Chapter 8 offers a summary of David's conquests (which in historical fact would have spanned at least several years) resulting in the establishment of a small empire. We then revert to the intimate story of David.

David struck down the Philistines and subjugated them. Neither the Hebrew terms of the text nor the scant extrabiblical evidence allows one to conclude whether David actually occupied the Philistine cities on the coastal plain or merely reduced them to vassal status. In any case, he put an end to the Philistine military threat and was free to turn his attention to adversaries east of the Jordan.

Metheg-Ammah. There are differences of opinion as to whether this is an otherwise unknown place-name or the designation of some precious trophy (*meteg* is an equestrian bit, *ʾamah* is a watercourse) taken from the Philistines.

2. *Moab*. It should be recalled that Moab, with whom David is linked by ancestry, provided refuge for his parents from Saul. Perhaps now that David has consolidated an Israelite monarchy, each side views the other as a threat. Or perhaps Moab has been compelled by proximity to join forces with the anti-Israelite kingdoms east of the Jordan.

and measured them out with a line. This procedure is not otherwise known.

3. *Zobah*. Aram Zobah was at this point the large dominant kingdom of Mesopotamia, to the north and east of biblical Israel.

as he went to restore his monument. Presumably, the absence of the king from the Aramean heartland exposed it to David's attack. The term *yad* here (usually "hand") is construed in its occasional sense of "monument" or "stele," though the idiom *heshiv yad* (literally, "to bring back the hand") also has the sense of "strike." Were that the case here, however, one would probably expect an object to the striking ("brought his hand back against X.").

4. *one thousand seven hundred horsemen*. The numbers reflected in Chronicles and in the Septuagint as well as in the Qumran Samuel scroll are "one thousand chariots and seven thousand horsemen."

David hamstrung all the chariot horses. The most likely explanation for this cruel act is that the Israelites, who initially fought on mountainous terrain, as yet made no significant use of cavalry, and so David's only concern would be to disable the horses in order that they could not be used against him in the future. The hundred horses left unmaimed might perhaps be for use as a small experiment with cavalry, or as draft animals.

7. *the golden quivers*. The relatively rare Hebrew term *shelatim* has often been understood as "shields," but most of the other biblical occurrences encourage the notion of something that contains arrows, as Rashi observed, and this sense is supported by cognates in Babylonian and Aramaic.

9. *Toi king of Hamath*. Hamath lay to the northwest of the kingdom of Aram Zobah, in present-day Syria. It was a neo-Hittite state.

10. *And Toi sent Joram his son to King David*. Sending the prince as emissary is a token of the importance that the king attaches to the mission. The vessels of precious metals are a peace offering to David or, from another perspective,

an advance payment of tribute. Toi, as a king who has been threatened by the Arameans, has good reason to pledge fealty to David, but he surely also wants to ward off any possible military thrust of the expansionist Israelites against his own kingdom.

12. *from Edom*. The Masoretic Text has "from Aram," but Chronicles, the Septuagint, and the Peshitta all have Edom, a kingdom contiguous with Moab, which immediately follows. Aram (Zobah) is mentioned at the end of the verse.

13. *from striking down the Edomites*. Again, the Masoretic Text has "Aram" in contradiction to several other ancient versions. Since the Valley of Salt was most probably in the vicinity of the Dead Sea, it would have been Edomite, not Aramean, territory.

15. *And David was king over all Israel*. The chronicle of David's conquests is followed by a kind of epilogue—a notice of the royal bureaucracy.

16. *recorder*. The Hebrew term *mazkir* could also be represented as "remembrancer." It is not entirely clear what his duties were, although they obviously went far beyond being a mere clerk. He may have been in control of the royal archives. It has been proposed that he was also chief of protocol in the palace.

17. *Abiathar son of Ahimelech*. The Masoretic Text makes Ahimelech the son and Abiathar the father, in flat contradiction to the occurrences of these two figures both earlier and later in the narrative.

scribe. As with "recorder," the responsibilities were more than those of an amanuensis. They might have included diplomatic translation and even counseling in affairs of state.

18. *the Cherithites and the Pelethites*. There is debate over the national identity of the latter, but the consensus is that the former are people of Cretan origins, part of the wave of so-called Sea Peoples who immigrated to Canaan from the Aegean toward the beginning of the eleventh century B.C.E. David has taken care to set up a special palace guard of foreign mercenaries on whose loyalty he can rely, in contrast to Israelites who might have motives of tribal

allegiance or support for some pretender to the throne in an attempt to displace him.

and David's sons served as priests. This curious detail is probably parallel to the report of a palace guard of foreign origins: just as David creates an elite military contingent outside the framework of the Israelite troops, he invests his own sons with sacerdotal duties within the circle of the court, outside the framework of the hereditary priesthood that controlled the public cult.

CHAPTER 9

[1]And David said “Is there anyone who is still left from the house of Saul, that I may keep faith with him for the sake of Jonathan?” [2]And there was a servant of the house of Saul named Ziba, and they called him to David, and the king said to him, “Are you Ziba?” And he said, “Your servant.” [3]And the king said, “Is there anyone at all left from the house of Saul, that I might keep God’s faith with him?” And Ziba said to the king, “There is yet a son of Jonathan’s, who is crippled.” [4]And the king said, “Where is he?” And Ziba said, “Why, he is in the house of Machir son of Amiel from Lo-Debar.” [5]And King David sent and fetched him from the house of Machir son of Amiel from Lo-Debar. [6]And Mephibosheth son of Jonathan son of Saul came to David and flung himself on his face and prostrated himself. And David said, “Mephibosheth!” And he said, “Your servant here.” [7]And David said to him, “Fear not, for I will surely keep faith with you for the sake of Jonathan your father, and I will give back to you all the land of Saul

your grandfather, and as for you, you shall eat bread at my table always." [8]And he prostrated himself and said, "What is your servant that you should have turned to a dead dog like me?" [9]And the king called to Ziba, Saul's lad, and said to him, "All that was Saul's and his whole household's I give to your master's son. [10]And you shall work the soil for him, you and your sons and your slaves, and you shall bring food to your master's house and they will eat. But Mephibosheth will always eat bread at my table." And Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty slaves. [11]And Ziba said to the king, "Whatever my lord the king commands his servant, thus will his servant do." And Mephibosheth ate at David's table like one of the king's sons. [12]And Mephibosheth had a little son named Micah, and all who dwelled in Ziba's house were servants to Mephibosheth. [13]And Mephibosheth dwelled in Jerusalem, for at the king's table he would always eat. And he was lame in both his feet.

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And David said*. We are immediately alerted to the fact that we are returning from the chronicle summary of chapter 8 (where there is no dialogue) and from the long set speeches of chapter 7 to the main body of the

David story because once again the narrative is carried forward to a large extent by dialogue. We are again plunged into a world of personal and political transactions engaged through exchanges of spoken language.

Is there anyone who is still left from the house of Saul. The added emphasis of "still," *ʿod* (compare the analogous emphatic phrase in verse 3), reflects David's genuine uncertainty as to whether, after all the deaths of the Saulides previously reported, there are in fact any surviving descendants of Saul. The courtiers who are queried evidently don't know, so they propose summoning a retainer of Saul's in order to put the question to him. The fact that David is later complicit in the execution of seven men of the house of Saul (chapter 21) has led many analysts to conclude that the original place of that episode was before the present chapter. Robert Polzin, on the other hand, argues that the postponement of the report in chapter 21 is deliberately delayed exposition, meant to reveal another troubling facet of David near the end of his story.

3. *keep God's faith*. The "faith" in question (*ḥesed*) is not credal but faithful performance of one's obligation in a covenant, a term that also has the connotation of "kindness." "God" here has the force of an intensifier. The covenant that is explicitly alluded to is the one between Jonathan and David (1 Samuel 20:42). That tight link is one of several arguments against the view widely held ever since the 1926 study of Leonhard Rost that this episode marks the beginning of a wholly independent Succession Narrative, which continues until 1 Kings 2.

who is crippled. Ziba's mention of the surviving Saulide's handicap is probably intended to assure David that Mephibosheth will not pose any challenge to the throne.

4. *Lo-Debar*. Mephibosheth was evidently taken to this northern trans-Jordanian town because it was a place of refuge. It is in the general vicinity of Jabesh-Gilead, the town inhabited by Saul's allies and perhaps kinsmen. Mephibosheth, it will be recalled, was five years old when he was dropped by his nurse and crippled in the flight after the defeat at Gilboa. Since it seems implausible that more than fifteen or so years would have passed since that moment, one may surmise that he is now a man in his twenties.

6. *Mephibosheth . . . flung himself on his face and prostrated himself*. These gestures of abasement may have been standard etiquette in approaching a monarch, but Ziba is not reported making them. Mephibosheth is clearly terrified that the king may have summoned him in order to have him put to death—David's possible complicity in the deaths of other figures associated with the house of Saul might well have been a matter of continuing speculation in Benjaminite circles. As Fokkelman aptly notes, it would have been a particularly painful business for a man crippled in both legs to fling himself down in this fashion.

7. *I will give back to you all the land of Saul*. With the descendants of Saul fled or dead, the king had expropriated Saul's ancestral land around Gibeah.

9. *Saul's lad*. The Hebrew *naʿar* denotes subservience, but it is unclear whether, as some have claimed, it indicates Ziba's role as majordomo (the philological grounds for that construction are shaky) or rather his subaltern status in the house of Saul.

10. *your slaves*. The Hebrew term *ʿeved* straddles the sense of freeborn underling and slave. Ziba evidently belongs to the former category, and so the designation *ʿeved* is rendered as "servant" when it is attached to him. It seems likely that the underlings of a prosperous servant would be slaves. Polzin has noted that different forms of this verbal stem occur ten times in the chapter, which is all about establishing lines of dominance and subservience.

and you shall bring food for your master's house and they will eat. The translation here follows the text of the Septuagint. The Masoretic Text reads: "and you shall bring and it will be food for your master's son and he will eat it." That version can be maintained only with strain, for the very next clause informs us that Mephibosheth was not dependent on the yield of his own land but resided in Jerusalem, sustained at the royal table.

11. *And Mephibosheth ate at David's table*. Again, the translation follows the Septuagint. The Masoretic Text has "And Mephibosheth is eating at my table," but the Bible never gives reported speech without an explicit introduction ("and David said").

13. *for at the king's table he would always eat*. The refrainlike repetition of this clause should give us pause. David is indeed treating Jonathan's crippled

son like one of his own sons, “keeping faith” or “showing kindness” to the offspring of his dead comrade, as he had pledged. He surely means his benefaction to be publicly perceived. At the same time, it is clearly in David’s interest to keep the only conceivable Saulide pretender to the throne close at hand, under easy scrutiny. Mephibosheth’s condition is ostensibly that of an unofficially adopted son, but with an uneasy suspicion that it is really a kind of luxurious house arrest.

And he was lame in both his feet. This emphatic concluding reiteration of his physical impairment might be intended, as some commentators have proposed, to explain why he could not travel back and forth between his estate and Jerusalem. But it surely also strikes a plaintive note at the end, underscoring the vulnerability of Mephibosheth, whether cosseted or held under surveillance in the Jerusalem court. As the court becomes more and more the arena of plots and murderous conflict, Mephibosheth will be victimized by someone close to him. This notice at the end about Mephibosheth’s lameness also underscores the continuing antithesis between the fates of the house of Saul and the house of David: King David came into Jerusalem whirling and dancing before the LORD; the surviving Saulide limps into Jerusalem, crippled in both legs

CHAPTER 10

[1]And it happened thereafter that the king of the Ammonites died and Hanun his son was king in his stead. [2]And David said, “Let me keep faith with Hanun son of Nahash as his father kept faith with me.” And David sent his servants in order to console him for his father, and David’s servants came to the land of the Ammonites. [3]And the Ammonite commanders said to Hanun their lord, “Do you imagine David is honoring your father in sending you consolers? Is it not in order to search out the city and to spy on it and to overthrow it that David has sent his servants to you?” [4]And Hanun took David’s servants and shaved off half the beard of each and cut off half their diplomat’s garb down to their buttocks, and sent them off. [5]And they told David, and he sent to meet them, for the men were very humiliated, and the king said, “Stay here in Jericho until your beards grow back and you can return.”

[6]And the Ammonites saw that they had become
repugnant to David, and the Ammonites sent and hired
Arameans from Beth-Rehob and Arameans from
Zobah, twenty thousand foot soldiers, and King
Maacah with a thousand men, and the men of Tob,
twelve thousand men. [7]And David heard and sent out
Joab together with the whole army of warriors. [8]And
the Ammonites sallied forth and drew up for battle at
the entrance to the gate, and Aram Zobah and Rehob
and the men of Tob were apart in the field. [9]And Joab
saw that there was a battle line against him in front and
behind, and he chose from all the picked men of Israel
and drew them up to meet the Arameans. [10]And the
rest of the troops he gave into the hand of Abishai his
brother, and he drew them up to meet the Ammonites.
[11]And he said, “If the Arameans prove too strong for
me, you will rescue me, and if the Ammonites prove
too strong for you, I shall come to rescue you. [12]Be
strong, and let us find strength for the sake of our
people and for the sake of the towns of our God, and
the LORD will do what is good in His eyes!” [13]And
Joab advanced, and the troops who were with him, to
battle against the Arameans, and they fled before him.
[14]And the Ammonites saw that the Arameans had fled,
and they fled from Abishai and went into the town, and

Joab turned back from the Ammonites and came to Jerusalem.

15 And the Arameans saw that they had been routed by
Israel, and they reassembled. 16 And Hadadezer sent
and brought out the Arameans who were beyond the
Euphrates, and their forces came with Shobach the
commander of Hadadezer's army at their head. 17 And
it was told to David, and he gathered all Israel and
crossed the Jordan, and they came to Helam. 18 And the
Arameans drew up their lines against David and did
battle with him. And the Arameans fled before Israel,
and David killed seven hundred charioteers of the
Arameans and forty thousand horsemen, and Shobach,
the commander of their army, he struck down, and he
died there. 19 And all the kings who were vassals to
Hadadezer saw that they had been routed by Israel,
and they made peace with Israel and became its
vassals, and the Arameans were afraid to rescue the
Ammonites again.

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And it happened thereafter*. Once again this vague temporal formula reflects the achronological ordering of the text. Since the Aramean king Hadadezer is reported in 8:3–7 to have been decisively defeated by David and to have become David's vassal, the campaign that is represented here, in which Hadadezer musters Aramean forces east of the Euphrates in order to confront David, must have taken place as part of David's victorious struggle with Aram Zobah registered in the summary of chapter 8. This whole account of military operations—given its rather dry technical style, it may well have been drawn from Davidic annals—is meant to establish the facts of continuing armed conflict with the Ammonites, which is the crucial background for the story of David and Bathsheba in the next chapter.

2. *Let me keep faith with Hanun son of Nahash as his father kept faith with me*. This chapter, like the preceding one, opens with a declaration of David's desire to keep faith with, or do kindness to, the son of a father toward whom he feels some prior obligation. There is no notice in the previous narrative of Nahash's having done favors for David, but several scholars have surmised that Nahash's enmity toward Saul (see 1 Samuel 11) might have led him to provide refuge or logistical support to David and his men when they were being hunted down by Saul.

3. *to search out the city*. As Moshe Garsiel notes, the walled cities of the ancient Near East often had tunnels, underground conduits, or other points of vulnerability that could provide access to the enemy in a siege. David's forces may have broken into Jerusalem in this fashion. (See the first comment on 5:8.)

4. *shaved off half the beard of each and cut off half their diplomats' garb*. Shaving the beard is an insult to the masculinity of the ambassadors, all the more so because it is done in a disfiguring way, with half the beard left uncut. The exposure of one buttock, by cutting away half the garment vertically, is similarly shaming, perhaps sexually shaming. The garments in question, moreover, are not ordinary clothes, *begadim*, but *madim*, garb worn in the performance of an official function (compare the "battle garb," *madim*, that Saul gives to David in 1 Samuel 17:38). The Ammonites thus are not merely insulting the ambassadors personally but provocatively violating their diplomatic privilege. In all this, we observe an extravagant reflection of the

symbolic violation of Saul by David when he cut off a corner of the king's robe.

5. *Stay here in Jericho*. The town of Jericho is in the Jordan Valley just west of the Jordan, and is plausibly the first place of habitation that the ambassadors would come to on crossing back from Ammonite territory.

6. *And the Ammonites saw*. Shimon Bar-Efrat observes that this narrative sequence is formally structured by the "seeing" of David's trans-Jordanian adversaries (here, verse 14, verse 15, verse 19), in counterpoint to David's "hearing." The latter implies receiving word at a distance, as does the associated locution, "it was told to David," whereas the former signifies immediate observation. Thus Joab, making out the deployment of hostile forces on the battlefield, is also said to see.

7. *David heard and sent out Joab*. Throughout this chapter and the next, the verb "to send" is repeatedly linked with David: for the first time, he plays the role not of martial leader but of sedentary king, delegating the military task to his commander. This new state of affairs will have major implications in the Bathsheba story.

the whole army of warriors. This is a slight variant, supported by three ancient versions, of the Masoretic Text, which reads "the whole army, the warriors."

9. *there was a battle line against him in front and behind*. The Israelite forces are in danger of being caught in the pincer movement between the Aramean mercenaries advancing on them from the northeast and the Ammonites, presumably to the south. Joab rapidly improvises a counterstrategy, selecting a corp of elite troops to assault the larger force of Arameans and sending his brother Abishai with the rest of the troops against the Ammonites. Such attention to military detail is quite untypical of biblical narrative, as is the rousing battlefield exhortation (verse 12) with which Joab concludes his instructions. The point of such detail is surely to show Joab as a superbly competent and resolute field commander, just before the great pivotal episode in the next chapter in which Joab maintains the siege against Rabbath-Ammon while his commander in chief slumbers, and lusts, in Jerusalem.

10. *the rest of the troops he gave*. Polzin observes, with puzzlement, that this story proceeds by dividing things in half: beards, clothing, anti-Israelite forces, Israelite troops. One wonders whether this narrative dynamic of mitosis, even though it is a saving strategy in Joab's case, might be a thematic introduction to all the inner divisions in court and nation, the fractures in the house of David, that take up the rest of the narrative.

14. *and went into the town*. The town into which they withdraw under pressure from Abishai's troops is not named. It could be the capital, Rabbath-Ammon (present-day Amman), though some analysts have wondered whether Hanun would be so unwise as to wait until the Israelites were at the gates of his own city before taking a decisive stand. Another candidate that has been proposed is Medbah, an Ammonite town considerably farther to the south.

15. *they reassembled*. This major regrouping for a second campaign against the Israelites involves the enlisting of greater numbers of troops from the Arameans east of the Euphrates, ethnic kin and in all likelihood political vassals to the people of Aram Zobah.

17. *he gathered all Israel*. Alerted to the augmented size of the trans-Jordanian forces, David musters his entire national army and this time elects to command it himself.

19. *And all the kings who were vassals . . . made peace with Israel*. Seeing who has the military upper hand, they take a small and logical step in exchanging vassal status under Hadadezer for vassal status under David. It should be noted that this whole annalistic prelude to the story of David and Bathsheba concludes with an invocation of "all the kings." The immediately following episode begins by mentioning "the time the kings sally forth"—although, as we shall see, the noun itself there is pointedly ambiguous—and the tale that unfolds will powerfully raise the question of what constitutes kingly behavior.

CHAPTER 11

[1] And it happened at the turn of the year, at the time
the kings sally forth, that David sent out Joab and his
servants with him and all Israel, and they ravaged the
Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. And David was
sitting in Jerusalem.

[2] And it happened at eventide that David arose from his
bed and walked about on the roof of the king's house,
and he saw from the roof a woman bathing, and the
woman was very beautiful. [3] And David sent and
inquired after the woman, and the one he sent said,
"Why, this is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam wife of
Uriah the Hittite." [4] And David sent messengers and
fetched her and she came to him and he lay with her,
she having just cleansed herself of her impurity, and
she returned to her house. [5] And the woman became
pregnant and sent and told David and said, "I am
pregnant." [6] And David sent to Joab: "Send me Uriah
the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah the Hittite to David.

[7]And Uriah came to him, and David asked how Joab
fared and how the troops fared and how the fighting
fared. [8]And David said to Uriah, “Go down to your
house and bathe your feet.” And Uriah went out from
the king’s house and the king’s provisions came out
after him. [9]And Uriah lay at the entrance to the king’s
house with all the servants of his master, and he went
not down to his house. [10]And they told David, saying,
“Uriah did not go down to his house.” And David said
to Uriah, “Look, you have come from a journey. Why
have you not gone down to your house?” [11]And Uriah
said to David, “The Ark and Israel and Judah are
sitting in huts, and my master Joab and my master’s
servants are encamped in the open field, and shall I
then come to my house to eat and to drink and to lie
with my wife? By your life, by your very life, I will not
do this thing.” [12]And David said to Uriah, “Stay here
today as well, and tomorrow I shall send you off.” And
Uriah stayed in Jerusalem that day and the next. [13]And
David called him, and he ate before him and drank,
and David made him drunk. And he went out in the
evening to lie in the place where he lay with the
servants of his master, but to his house he did not go
down. [14]And it happened in the morning that David
wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by the hand of Uriah.
[15]And he wrote in the letter, saying, “Put Uriah in the

face of the fiercest battling and draw back, so that he will be struck down and die.” 16And it happened, as Joab was keeping watch on the town, that he placed Uriah in the place where he knew there were valiant men. 17And the men of the town sallied forth and did battle with Joab, and some of the troops, some of David’s servants, fell, and Uriah the Hittite also died. 18And Joab sent and told David all the details of the battle. 19And Joab charged the messenger, saying, “When you finish reporting all the details of the battle to the king, 20if it should happen that the king’s wrath is roused and he says to you, ‘Why did you approach the town to fight? Did you not know they would shoot from the wall? 21Who struck down Abimelech son of Jerubbesheth? Did not a woman fling down on him an upper millstone from the wall, and he died in Thebez? Why did you approach the wall?’ Then shall you say, ‘Your servant Uriah the Hittite also died.’” 22And the messenger went and came and told David all that Joab had sent him for. 23And the messenger said to David, “The men overpowered us and sallied forth against us into the field, and then we were upon them back to the entrance of the gate. 24And they shot at your servants from the wall, and some of the king’s servants died, and your servant Uriah the Hittite also died.” 25And the king said to the messenger, “Thus shall you say to

Joab, ‘Let this thing not seem evil in your eyes, for the sword devours sometimes one way and sometimes another. Battle all the more fiercely against the city and destroy it. And so rouse his spirits.’”

[26]And Uriah’s wife heard that Uriah her man was dead, and she keened over her husband. [27]And when the mourning was over, David sent and gathered her into his house and she became his wife. And she bore him a son, and the thing that David had done was evil in the eyes of the LORD.

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

Chapters 11 and 12, the story of David and Bathsheba and its immediate aftermath, are the great turning point of the whole David story, as both Meir Sternberg and Robert Polzin have duly observed; and it seems as though the writer has pulled out all the stops of his remarkable narrative art in order to achieve a brilliant realization of this crucially pivotal episode. The deployment of thematic key words, the shifting play of dialogue, the intricate relation between instructions and their execution, the cultivated ambiguities of motive, are orchestrated with a richness that scarcely has an equal in ancient narrative. Although the analytic scholars have variously sought to break up these chapters into editorial frame and Succession Narrative, Prophetic composition and old source, emending patches of the text as they proceed, such efforts are best passed over in silence, for the powerful literary integrity of the text speaks for itself.

1. *at the turn of the year*. The most plausible meaning is the beginning of the spring, when the end of the heavy winter rains makes military action feasible.

at the time the kings sally forth. There is a cunning ambiguity here in the Hebrew text. The received consonantal text reads *mal'akhim*, "messengers," though many manuscripts show *melakhim*, "kings." As Polzin observes, the verb "to sally forth" (or, in nonmilitary contexts, "to go forth") is often attached to kings and never to messengers, so "kings" is definitely the more likely reading, though the ghost of "messengers" shows through in the letters of the text. Polzin beautifully describes this double take: "the verse clearly doubles back on itself in a marvelous display of narrative virtuosity: at a time when kings go forth, David did not, making it a time, therefore, when messengers must go forth; at a time when messengers go forth, David, remaining in Jerusalem, sent Joab, his servants and all Israel to ravage Ammon." What some see here as a scribal error may well be a deliberate orthographic pun

David sent out Joab. The verb "to send"—the right verb for "messengers"—occurs eleven times in this chapter, framing the beginning and the end. This episode is not a moral parable but a story anchored in the realities of political history. It is concerned with the institutionalization of the monarchy. David, now a sedentary king removed from the field of action and endowed with a dangerous amount of leisure, is seen constantly operating through the agency of others, sending messengers within Jerusalem and out to Ammonite territory. Working through intermediaries, as the story will abundantly show, creates a whole new order of complications and unanticipated consequences.

And David was sitting in Jerusalem. The verb for "sitting" also means "to stay" (compare verse 12), but it is best to preserve the literal sense here because of the pointed sequence—sitting, lying, rising—and because in biblical usage "to sit" is also an antonym of "to go out" (or sally forth).

2. *at eventide*. The Hebrew term *'et'erev* echoes ironically with the phrase *'et tse't*, "at the time of sallying forth" in the previous verse. A siesta on a hot spring day would begin not long after noon, so this recumbent king has been in bed an inordinately long time.

he saw from the roof. The palace is situated on a height, so David can look down on the naked Bathsheba bathing, presumably on her own rooftop. This situation of the palace also explains why David tells Uriah to "go down"

to his house. Later in the story, archers deal destruction from the heights of the city wall, the Hebrew using the same preposition, *me'al*, to convey the sense of "from above."

3. *the one he sent said*. The Hebrew uses an unspecified "he said."

Bathsheba daughter of Eliam wife of Uriah the Hittite. It is unusual to identify a woman by both father and husband. The reason may be, as Bar-Efrat suggests, that both men are members of David's elite corps of warriors. Although Uriah's designation as Hittite has led some interpreters to think of him as a foreign mercenary, the fact that he has a pious Israelite name ("the LORD is my light") suggests that he is rather a native or at least a naturalized Israelite of Hittite extraction. In any case, there is obvious irony in the fact that the man of foreign origins is the perfect Good Soldier of Israel, whereas the Israelite king betrays and murders him.

4. *David sent . . . and fetched her and she came to him and he lay with her*. It is not uncommon for biblical narrative to use a chain of verbs in this fashion to indicate rapid, single-minded action. What is unusual is that one verb in the middle of this sequence switches grammatical subject—from David to Bathsheba. When the verb "come to" or "come into" has a masculine subject and "into" is followed by a feminine object, it designates a first act of sexual intercourse. One wonders whether the writer is boldly toying with this double meaning, intimating an element of active participation by Bathsheba in David's sexual summons. The text is otherwise entirely silent on her feelings, giving the impression that she is passive as others act on her. But her later behavior in the matter of her son's succession to the throne (1 Kings 1–2) suggests a woman who has her eye on the main chance, and it is possible that opportunism, not merely passive submission, explains her behavior here as well. In all of this, David's sending messengers first to ask about Bathsheba and then to call her to his bed means that the adultery can scarcely be a secret within the court.

cleansed herself of her impurity. The reference is to the ritually required bath after the end of menstruation. This explains Bathsheba's bathing on the roof and also makes it clear that she could not be pregnant by her husband.

5. *I am pregnant*. Astonishingly, these are the only words Bathsheba speaks in this story. In keeping with the stringent efficiency of biblical narrative, the

story leaps forward from the sexual act to the discovery of pregnancy.

8. *Go down to your house and bathe your feet*. Some interpreters have made this more heavy-handed than it is by construing the final phrase as a euphemism for sex (because "feet" in the Bible is occasionally a euphemism for the male genitals). But in the biblical world, bathing the feet is something travelers regularly do when they come from the dusty road. This bathing of the feet stands in a kind of synecdochic relation to Bathsheba's bathing of her whole body, discreetly suggesting that after the bathing of the feet, other refreshments of the body will ensue.

the king's provisions. David has not explicitly mentioned food or wine, but he sends a kind of catered dinner after Uriah, hoping that the feast with Bathsheba will get husband and wife into the desired amorous mood.

9. *And Uriah lay at the entrance of the king's house*. The verb "to lie," according to David's expectations, should have been followed by "with his wife." Instead, we have not sex but a soldier's sleeping with his comrades, who are guarding the king. It should be remembered (compare 1 Samuel 21) that soldiers in combat generally practiced sexual abstinence.

11. *sitting in huts*. Some construe *sukot*, "huts," as a place-name, the city of Succoth a little east of the Jordan. But if the Ark is sent out of Jerusalem to the front, it would make no sense to detain it at a logistics center only halfway to the battlefield, and Uriah's point is that neither the Ark nor the troops enjoy proper shelter (while David is "sitting in Jerusalem").

shall I then come to my house to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife? Uriah now spells out all that David left unsaid when he urged him to go down to his house. The crucial detail of sleeping with Bathsheba comes at the very end. Menakhem Perry and Meir Sternberg, in a pioneering Hebrew article in 1968 (revised by Sternberg for his English book of 1985), raised the provocative issue of deliberate ambiguity (comparing the strategy of this story with the two mutually exclusive readings possible for Henry James's short story "The Turn of the Screw"). In their view, there are two equally viable readings. If Uriah does *not* know that David has cuckolded him, he is the instrument of dramatic irony—the perfect soldier vis-à-vis the treacherous king who is desperately trying to manipulate him so that the husband will unwittingly cover the traces of his wife's sexual betrayal. If Uriah *does* know

of the adultery, he is a rather different character—not naïve but shrewdly aware, playing a dangerous game of hints in which he deliberately pricks the conscience of the king, cognizant, and perhaps not caring, that his own life may soon be forfeit. More recently, Moshe Garsiel has proposed a reconciliation of these two readings: when Uriah first arrives from the front, he is unaware of what has occurred; after the first night with his comrades at the palace gate, he has been duly informed of the sexual betrayal, so that in his second dialogue with the king, he cultivates a rhetoric of implicit accusation. Garsiel observes that when Uriah swears emphatically by David's life (verse 11), he does not add the deferential "my lord the king."

13. *David called him*. The verb here has the idiomatic sense of "invite."
he ate before him. The preposition is an indication of hierarchical distance between subject and king.
David made him drunk. "David" has been added for clarity. The Hebrew says only "he made him drunk." Plying Uriah with wine is a last desperate attempt, and a rather crude one, to get him to have sex with his wife.

14. *sent it by the hand of Uriah*. The letter would be in the form of a small scroll with either a seal or threads around it. David is counting on the fact that Uriah as a loyal soldier will not dream of opening the letter. If he does not know of the adultery, he has in any case no personal motive to look at the letter. If he does know, he is accepting his fate with grim resignation, bitterly conscious that his wife has betrayed him and that the king is too powerful for him to contend with.

15. *so that he will be struck down and die*. With no possibility of making Uriah seem responsible for Bathsheba's pregnancy, David now gravely compounds the original crime of adultery by plotting to get Uriah out of the way entirely by having him killed. What follows in the story makes it clear that bloodshed, far more than adultery, is David's indelible transgression.

17. *some of the troops . . . fell, and Uriah the Hittite also died*. As Perry and Sternberg have keenly observed, one of the salient features of this story is the repeated alteration of instructions by those who carry them out. It is, indeed, a vivid demonstration of the ambiguous effecting of ends through the agency of others, which is one of the great political themes of the story. The canny Joab immediately sees that David's orders are impossibly clumsy (perhaps an

indication that the Machiavellian David has suddenly lost his manipulative coolness): if the men around Uriah were to draw back all at once, leaving him alone exposed, it would be entirely transparent that there was a plot to get him killed. Joab, then, coldly recognizes that in order to give David's plan some credibility, it will be necessary to send a whole contingent into a dangerous place and for many others beside Uriah to die. In this fashion, the circle of lethal consequences of David's initial act spreads wider and wider.

21. *Did not a woman fling down on him an upper millstone.* The specificity of the prospective dialogue that Joab invents for a wrathful David may at first seem surprising. The story of the ignominious death of Abimelech at the hand of a woman (Judges 9:52–54) may have become a kind of object lesson in siege strategy for professional soldiers—when you are laying siege against a city, above all beware of coming too close to the wall. One suspects also that Joab's emphasis on a woman's dealing death to the warrior—Abimelech had asked his armor bearer to run him through so that it would *not* be said he was killed by a woman!—points back to Bathsheba as the ultimate source of this chain of disasters. (This would be Joab's soldierly judgment, not necessarily the author's.)

Your servant Uriah the Hittite also died. Joab obviously knows that this is the message for which David is waiting. By placing it in the anticipatory "script" that he dictates to the messenger, he is of course giving away the secret, more or less, to the messenger. Might this, too, be calculated, as an oblique dissemination of David's complicity in Uriah's death, perhaps to be used at some future point by Joab against the king? In any case, given David's track record in killing messengers who bear tidings not to his liking, Joab may want to be sure that this messenger has the means to fend off any violent reaction from the king, who would not have been expecting a report of multiple casualties.

23. *and then we were upon them back to the entrance of the gate*. The astute messenger offers a circumstantial account that justifies the mistake of approaching too close to the wall: the Ammonites came out after the Israelites in hot pursuit; then the Israelites, turning the tide of battle, were drawn after the fleeing Ammonites and so were tricked into coming right up to the gates of the city.

24. *and your servant Uriah the Hittite also died*. The messenger has divined the real point of Joab's instructions all too well. He realizes that what David above all wants to hear is the news of Uriah's death, and rather than risk the whole outburst, indicated by the prospective dialogue invented by Joab with the reference to the woman who killed Abimelech, the messenger hastens to conclude his report, before the king can react, by mentioning Uriah's death. Thus the narrative makes palpable the inexorable public knowledge of David's crime.

25. *the sword devours sometimes one way and sometimes another*. The king responds by directing to Joab what sounds like an old soldier's cliché (on the order of "every bullet has its billet"). These vapid words of consolation to the field commander are an implicit admission that Joab's revision of David's orders was necessary: David concedes that many a good man had to die in order to cover up his murder by proxy of Uriah.

Battle all the more fiercely. The Hebrew is literally "make fierce [or strengthen] your battle." The phrase is an emphatic formal echo of "the fiercest battling" in verse 15.

And so rouse his spirits. Literally, "and strengthen him"—that is, Joab.

27. *when the mourning was over*. Normally, the mourning period would be seven days. Bathsheba, then, is even more precipitous than Gertrude after the death of Hamlet the elder in hastening to the bed of a new husband. She does, of course, want to become David's wife before her big belly shows.

David sent and gathered her into his house and she became his wife. Throughout this story, David is never seen anywhere but in his house. This sentence at the end strongly echoes verse 4: "David sent . . . and fetched her and she came to him and he lay with her."

the thing that David had done was evil in the eyes of the LORD. Only now, after the adultery, the murder, the remarriage, and the birth of the son, does the narrator make an explicit moral judgment of David's actions. The invocation of God's judgment is the introduction to the appearance of Nathan the prophet, delivering first a moral parable "wherein to catch the conscience of the king" and then God's grim curse on David and his house.

CHAPTER 12

[1]And the LORD sent Nathan to David, and he came
to him and said to him: “Two men there were in a
single town, one was rich and the other poor. [2]The rich
man had sheep and cattle, in great abundance. [3]And
the poor man had nothing save one little ewe that he
had bought. And he nurtured her and raised her with
him together with his sons. From his crust she would
eat and from his cup she would drink and in his lap she
would lie, and she was to him like a daughter. [4]And a
wayfarer came to the rich man, and it seemed a pity to
him to take from his own sheep and cattle to prepare
for the traveler who had come to him, and he took the
poor man’s ewe and prepared it for the man who had
come to him.” [5]And David’s anger flared hot against
the man, and he said to Nathan, “As the LORD lives,
doomed is the man who has done this! [6]And the poor
man’s ewe he shall pay back fourfold, inasmuch as he
has done this thing, and because he had no pity!” [7]And
Nathan said to David, “You are the man! Thus says the
LORD God of Israel. ‘It is I who anointed you king

over Israel, and it is I Who saved you from the hand of Saul. [8]And I gave you your master's house and your master's wives in your lap, and I gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if that be too little, I would give you even as much again. [9]Why did you despise the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in His eyes? Uriah the Hittite you struck down with the sword, and his wife you took for yourself as wife, and him you have killed by the sword of the Ammonites! [10]And so now, the sword shall not swerve from your house evermore, seeing as you have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.' [11]Thus says the LORD, 'I am about to raise up evil against you from your own house, and I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your fellow man, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. [12]For you did it in secret but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun.'" [13]And David said to Nathan, "I have offended against the LORD." And Nathan said to David, "The LORD has also remitted your offense—you shall not die. [14]But since you surely spurned the LORD in this thing, the son born to you is doomed to die."

15 And Nathan went to his house, and the LORD
afflicted the child whom Bathsheba wife of Uriah the
Hittite had borne David, and he fell gravely ill. 16 And
David implored God for the sake of the lad, and David
fasted, and he came and spent the night lying on the
ground. 17 And the elders of his house rose over him to
rouse him up from the ground, but he would not, nor
did he partake of food with them. 18 And it happened
on the seventh day that the child died, and David's
servants were afraid to tell him that the child was
dead, for they said, "Look, while the child was alive,
we spoke to him and he did not heed our voice, and
how can we say to him, the child is dead? He will do
some harm." 19 And David saw that his servants were
whispering to each other and David understood that
the child was dead. And David said to his servants, "Is
the child dead?" And they said, "He is dead."

20 And David rose from the ground and bathed and
rubbed himself with oil and changed his garments and
came into the house of the LORD and worshipped and
came back to his house and asked that food be set out
for him, and he ate. 21 And his servants said to him,
"What is this thing that you have done? For the sake of
the living child you fasted and wept, and when the

child was dead, you arose and ate food?” [22]And he said, “While the child was still alive I fasted and wept, for I thought, ‘Who knows, the LORD may favor me and the child will live.’ [23]And now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I am going to him and he will not come back to me.”

[24]And David consoled Bathsheba his wife, and he came to her and lay with her, and she bore a son and called his name Solomon, and the LORD loved him. [25]And He sent by the hand of Nathan the prophet and called his name Jedidiah, by the grace of the LORD.

[26]And Joab battled against Rabbah of the Ammonites and he captured the royal town. [27]And Joab sent messengers to David and said,

> “I have battled against Rabbah.
> Yes, I captured the Citadel of
> Waters.

[28]And so now, assemble the rest of the troops and encamp against the city and capture it, lest it be I who capture the city and my name be called upon it.” [29]And David assembled all the troops and went to Rabbah

and battled against it and captured it. [30]And he took the crown of their king from his head, and its weight was a talent of gold, with precious stones, and it was set on David's head. And the booty of the city he brought out in great abundance. [31]And the people who were in it he brought out and set them to work with saws and iron threshing boards and iron axes and he put them to the brick mold. Thus did he do to all the Ammonite towns. And David, and all the troops with him, returned to Jerusalem.

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And the* LORD *sent*. The second stage of the story of David and Bathsheba —the phase of accusation and retribution—begins with a virtual pun on a prominent thematic word of the first half of the story. David was seen repeatedly "sending" messengers, arranging for the satisfaction of his lust and the murder of his mistress's husband through the agency of others. By contrast, God here "sends" his prophet to David—not an act of bureaucratic manipulation but the use of a human vehicle to convey a divine message of conscience.

Two men there were. Nathan's parable, from its very first syllables, makes clear its own status as a traditional tale and a poetic construction. The way one begins a storyteller's tale in the Bible is with the formula "there was a man"—compare the beginning of Job, or the beginning of the story of Hannah and Elkanah in 1 Samuel 1. The Hebrew prose of the parable also is set off strongly from the language of the surrounding narrative by its emphatically rhythmic character, with a fondness for parallel pairs of terms—an effect this translation tries to reproduce. The vocabulary, moreover,

includes several terms that are relatively rare in biblical prose narrative: *kivsah* (ewe), *raʾsh* (poor), *helekh* (wayfarer), *ʾoreaḥ* (traveler). Finally the two "men" of the opening formula are at the end separated out into "rich man," "poor man," and "the man who had come" (in each of these cases, Hebrew *ʾish* is used). This formal repetition prepares the way, almost musically, for Nathan's two-word accusatory explosion, *ʾatah haʾish*, "You are the man!" Given the patently literary character of Nathan's tale, which would have been transparent to anyone native to ancient Hebrew culture, it is a little puzzling that David should so precipitously take the tale as a report of fact requiring judicial action. Nathan may be counting on the possibility that the obverse side of guilty conscience in a man like David is the anxious desire to do the right thing. As king, his first obligation is to protect his subjects and to dispense justice, especially to the disadvantaged. In the affair of Bathsheba and Uriah, he has done precisely the opposite. Now, as he listens to Nathan's tale, David's compensatory zeal to be a champion of justice overrides any awareness he might have of the evident artifice of the story.

3. *eat . . . drink . . . lie*. As Polzin observes, these terms effect full contact with the story of David and Bathsheba, being the three activities David sought to engage Uriah in with his wife (compare Uriah's words in 11:11). The parable begins to become a little fantastic here in the interest of drawing close to the relationships of conjugal intimacy and adultery to which it refers: the little lamb eats from her master's crust, drinks from his cup, and lies in his lap ("lap" as a biblical idiom has connotations not merely of parental sheltering but also of sexual intimacy: compare verse 8, "I gave . . . your master's wives in your lap").

4. *it seemed a pity to him*. The Hebrew uses an active verb, "he pitied," preparing for a literal ironic reversal in verse 6, "he had no pity"—or, "he did not pity."

to prepare. The Hebrew is literally "to do" or "to make." When the verb has as its direct object a live edible animal, it means to slaughter and cook.

5. *David's anger flared hot against the man*. Nathan's rhetorical trap has now snapped shut. David, by his access of anger, condemns himself, and he becomes the helpless target of the denunciation that Nathan will unleash.

doomed is the man. Actually, according to biblical law someone who has illegally taken another's property would be subject to fourfold restitution (verse 6), not to the death penalty. (The Hebrew phrase is literally "son of death"—that is, deserving death, just as in 1 Samuel 26:16.) David pronounces this death sentence in his outburst of moral indignation, but it also reflects the way that the parable conflates the sexual "taking" of Bathsheba with the murder of Uriah: the addition of Bathsheba to the royal harem could have been intimated simply by the rich man's placing the ewe in his flock, but as the parable is told, the ewe must be slaughtered, blood must be shed. David himself will not be condemned to die, but death will hang over his house. As the Talmud (Yoma 22B) notes, the fourfold retribution for Uriah's death will be worked out in the death or violent fate of four of David's children: the unnamed infant son of Bathsheba, Tamar, Amnon, and Absalom.

7. *Thus says the LORD God of Israel*. After the direct knife thrust of "You are the man!," Nathan hastens to produce the prophetic messenger-formula in its extended form, in this way proclaiming divine authorization for the dire imprecation he pronounces against David and his house.

7–8. *It is I who anointed you. . . . And if that be too little, I would give you even as much again*. In the first part of this speech, there are several ironic echoes of David's prayer in chapter 7, in which David thanks God for all His benefactions and professes himself unworthy of them.

8. *and your master's wives in your lap*. At least in the account passed down to us, there is no mention elsewhere of David's having taken sexual possession of his predecessor's consorts, though this was a practice useful for its symbolic force in a transfer of power, as Absalom will later realize.

9. *Uriah the Hittite you struck down with the sword*. The obliquity of working through agents at a distance, as David did in contriving the murder of Uriah, is exploded by the brutal directness of the language: it is as though David himself had wielded the sword. Only at the end of the sentence are we given the explanatory qualification "by the sword of the Ammonites."

10. *the sword shall not swerve from your house evermore*. As Bar-Efrat notes, David's rather callous message to Joab, "the sword sometimes consumes one

way and sometimes another," is now thrown back in his face. The story of David's sons, not to speak of his descendants in later generations, will in fact turn out to be a long tale of conspiracy, internecine struggle, and murder. One of the most extraordinary features of the whole David narrative is that this story of the founding of the great dynasty of Judah is, paradoxically, already a tale of the fall of the house of David. Once again, no one has grasped this tragic paradox more profoundly than William Faulkner in his recasting of the story in *Absalom, Absalom!* The author of the David story continually exercises an unblinking vision of David and the institution of the monarchy that exposes their terrible flaws even as he accepts their divinely authorized legitimacy.

11. *I am about to raise up evil against you from your own house*. As befits a predictive curse, the agents of the evil are left unnamed. The disaster announced is clearly the rebellion of Absalom—as the reference to public cohabitation with David's wives makes clear—and the rape of Tamar and the murder of Amnon that lead up to it. But further "evil" from the house of David will persist to his deathbed, as Absalom's rebellion is followed by Adonijah's usurpation.

12. *For you did it in secret but I will do this thing before all Israel*. The calamitous misjudgments that defined David's dealings with Bathsheba and Uriah were a chain of bungled efforts at concealment. Now, in the retribution, all his crimes are to be revealed.

14. *spurned the* LORD. The Masoretic Text has "spurned the enemies of the LORD," a scribal euphemism to avoid making God the object of a harsh negative verb.

15. *Bathsheba wife of Uriah the Hittite*. At this point, she is still identified as wife of the husband she betrayed in conceiving this child.

16. *fasted . . . and spent the night lying on the ground*. David's acts pointedly replicate those of the man he murdered, who refused to go home and eat but instead spent the night lying on the ground with the palace guard.

18. *on the seventh day*. Seven days were the customary period of mourning. In this instance, David enacts a regimen of mourning, in an effort to placate

God, before the fact of death.

He will do some harm. Presumably, the courtiers fear that David will do harm to himself in a frenzy of grief.

19. *He is dead*. In Hebrew, this is a single syllable, *met*, "dead"—a response corresponding to idiomatic usage because there is no word for "yes" in biblical Hebrew, and so the person questioned must respond by affirming the key term of the question. It should be noted, however, that the writer has contrived to repeat "dead" five times, together with one use of the verb "died," in these two verses: the ineluctable bleak fact of death is hammered home to us, just before David's grim acceptance of it.

20. *David rose . . . bathed . . . rubbed himself with oil . . . changed his garments . . . worshipped . . . ate*. This uninterrupted chain of verbs signifies David's brisk resumption of the activities of normal life, evidently without speech and certainly without explanation, as the courtiers' puzzlement makes clear. The entire episode powerfully manifests that human capacity for surprise, and for paradoxical behavior, that is one of the hallmarks of the great biblical characters. David here acts in a way that neither his courtiers nor the audience of the story could have anticipated.

23. *Can I bring him back again? I am going to him and he will not come back to me*. If the episode of Bathsheba and Uriah is the great turning point of the David story, these haunting words are the pivotal moment in the turning point. As we have repeatedly seen, every instance of David's speech in the preceding narrative has been crafted to serve political ends, much of it evincing elaborately artful rhetoric. Now, after the dire curse pronounced by Nathan, the first stage of which is fulfilled in the death of the child, David speaks for the first time not out of political need but in his existential nakedness. The words he utters have a stark simplicity—there are no elegies now—and his recognition of the irreversibility of his son's death also makes him think of his own mortality. In place of David the seeker and wielder of power, we now see a vulnerable David, and this is how he will chiefly appear through the last half of his story.

24. *David consoled Bathsheba his wife*. Now, after the terrible price of the child's life has been paid for the murder of her husband, the narrator refers to her as David's wife, not Uriah's. A specific lapse of time is not mentioned, but

one must assume that at least two or three months have passed, during which she recovers from the first childbirth.

she . . . called his name Solomon, and the LORD *loved him*. As a rule, it was the mother who exercised the privilege of naming the child. Despite some scholarly efforts to construe the name differently, its most plausible etymology remains the one that links it with the word for "peace" (the Hebrew term *Shelomoh* might simply mean "His peace"). The LORD's loving Solomon, who will disappear from the narrative until the struggle for the throne in 1 Kings 1, foreshadows his eventual destiny, and also harmonizes this name giving with the child's second name, Jedidiah, which means "God's friend."

25. *Jedidiah, by the grace of the* LORD. For the last phrase, this translation adopts a proposal by Kyle McCarter Jr. The usual meaning of the preposition used, *baʿavur,* is "for the sake of." It remains something of a puzzlement that the child should be given two names, one by his mother and the other by God through His prophet. One common suggestion is that Jedidiah was Solomon's official throne name. But perhaps the second name, indicating special access to divine favor, reflects a political calculation on the part of Nathan: he is already aligning himself with Solomon (and with Bathsheba), figuring that in the long run it will be best to have a successor to David under some obligation to him. In the event, Nathan's intervention will prove crucial in securing the throne for Solomon.

26. *Joab battled against Rabbah*. It is possible, as many scholars have claimed, that the conquest of Rabbah, in the siege of which Uriah had perished, in fact occurs before the birth of Solomon, though sieges lasting two or more years were not unknown in the ancient world.

27. *I have battled against Rabbah*. Joab is actually sending David a double message. As dutiful field commander, he urges David (verse 28) to hasten to the front so that the conquest of the Ammonite capital will be attributed to him. And yet, he proclaims the conquest in the triumphal formality of a little victory poem (one line, two parallel versets) in which it is he who figures unambiguously as conqueror. This coy and dangerous game Joab plays with David about who has the real power will persist in the story.

the Citadel of Waters. The reference is not entirely clear, but the narrative context indicates that Joab has occupied one vital part of the town—evidently, where the water supply is—while the rest of the town has not yet been taken.

30. *the crown of their king*. The Septuagint reads "Milcom" (the Ammonite deity) instead of *malkam*, "their king."

31. *set them to work with saws and iron threshing boards and iron axes*. The meaning of this entire sentence is a little uncertain, but the most plausible reading is that David impressed the male Ammonites into corvée labor. Some have suggested that the Ammonites were forced to tear down the walls of their own cities with the cutting tools listed in the catalogue here, although the reference to the brick mold at the end indicates some sort of construction, not just demolition.

CHAPTER 13

[1]And it happened thereafter—Absalom, David's son, had a beautiful sister named Tamar, and Amnon, David's son, loved her. [2]And Amnon was so distressed that he fell sick over Tamar his sister, for she was a virgin and it seemed beyond Amnon to do anything to her. [3]And Amnon had a companion named Jonadab son of Shimeah brother of David, and Jonadab was a very wise man. [4]And he said to him, "Why are you so poorly, prince, morning after morning? Will you not tell me?" And Amnon said to him, "Tamar the sister of Absalom my brother I do love." [5]And Jonadab said to him, "Lie in your bed and play sick, and when your father comes to see you, say to him, 'Let Tamar my sister, pray, come and nourish me with food and prepare the nourishment before my eyes, so that I may see and eat from her hand.'" [6]And Amnon lay down and played sick, and the king came to see him, and Amnon said to the king, "Let Tamar my sister, pray, come, and shape a couple of heart-shaped dumplings before my eyes, that I may take nourishment from her

hand.” [7]And David sent to Tamar at home, saying,
“Go, pray, to the house of Amnon your brother, and
prepare nourishment for him.” [8]And Tamar went to
the house of Amnon her brother—he lying down—
and she took the dough and kneaded it and shaped it
into hearts before his eyes and cooked the dumplings.
[9]And she took the pan and set it before him, but he
refused to eat. And Amnon said, “Clear out everyone
around me!” and everyone around him cleared out.
[10]And Amnon said to Tamar, “Bring the nourishment
into the inner chamber, that I may take nourishment
from your hand.” And Tamar took the dumplings that
she had made and brought them to Amnon her brother
within the chamber. [11]And she offered them to him to
eat, and he seized her and said to her, “Come lie with
me, my sister.” [12]And she said to him, “Don’t, my
brother, don’t abuse me, for it should not be done thus
in Israel, don’t do this scurrilous thing. [13]And I, where
would I carry my shame? And you, you would be like
one of the scurrilous fellows in Israel. And so, speak,
pray, to the king, for he will not withhold me from
you.” [14]And Amnon did not want to heed her voice,
and he overpowered her and abused her and bedded
her. [15]And Amnon hated her with a very great hatred,
for greater was the hatred with which he hated her
than the love with which he had loved her. And

Amnon said, “Get up, go!” [16]And she said to him, “Don’t!—this wrong is greater than the other you did me, to send me away now.” And he did not want to heed her. [17]And he called his lad, his attendant, and said, “Send this creature, pray, away from me and bolt the door behind her!” [18]And she had on an ornamented tunic, for the virgin princesses did wear such robes. And his attendant took her outside and bolted the door behind her. [19]And Tamar put ashes on her head, and the ornamented tunic that she had on she tore, and she put her hand on her head and walked away screaming as she went. [20]And Absalom her brother said to her, “Has Amnon your brother been with you? For now, my sister, hold your peace. He is your brother. Do not take this matter to heart.” And Tamar stayed, desolate, in the house of Absalom her brother. [21]And King David had heard all these things, and he was greatly incensed. [22]And Absalom did not speak with Amnon either evil or good, for Absalom hated Amnon for having abused Tamar his sister.

[23]And it happened after two years that Absalom had a sheepshearing at Baal-Hazor, which is near Ephraim, and Absalom invited all the king’s sons. [24]And Absalom came to the king and said, “Look, pray, your

servant has a sheepshearing. Let the king, pray, go,
and his servants, with your servant." [25]And the king
said to Absalom, "No, my son, we shall not all of us
go, and we shall not burden you." And he pressed him
but he did not want to go, and he bade him farewell.
[26]And Absalom said to him, "If not, pray, let Amnon
my brother go with us." And the king said to him,
"Why should he go with you?" [27]And Absalom pressed
him, and he sent Amnon with him, together with all
the king's sons. [28]And Absalom charged his lads,
saying, "See, pray, when Amnon's heart is merry with
wine and I say to you, 'Strike down Amnon,' you shall
put him to death, fear not, for is it not I who charge
you? Be strong, and act as valiant men." [29]And
Absalom's lads did to Amnon as Absalom had charged
them, and all the king's sons arose and rode away each
on his mule and fled. [30]And as they were on the way,
the rumor reached David, saying, "Absalom has struck
down all the king's sons, and not one of them
remains." [31]And the king arose and tore his garments
and lay on the ground, with all his servants standing in
attendance in torn garments. [32]And Jonadab son of
Shimeah brother of David spoke up and said, "Let not
my lord think, 'All the lads, the king's sons, they have
put to death,' for Amnon alone is dead, for it was fixed
upon by Absalom from the day he abused Tamar his

sister. [33]And now, let not my lord the king take the matter to heart, saying, ‘All the king’s sons have died,’ but Amnon alone is dead.”

[34]And Absalom fled. And the lookout lad raised his eyes and saw and, look, a great crowd was going round the side of the mountain from the road behind it. [35]And Jonadab said to the king, “Look, the king’s sons have come, as your servant has spoken, so it has come about.” [36]And just as he finished speaking, look, the king’s sons came, and they raised their voices and wept, and the king, too, and all his servants wept very grievously. [37]And Absalom had fled, and he went to Talmai son of Amihur king of Geshur. And David mourned for his son all the while. [38]And Absalom had fled and gone to Geshur, and he was there three years. [39]And David’s urge to sally forth against Absalom was spent, for he was consoled over Amnon, who was dead.

CHAPTER 13 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *a beautiful sister*. The catastrophic turn in David’s fortune began when he saw a beautiful woman and lusted after her. Now, the curse pronounced by Nathan on the house of David begins to unfold through the very same

mechanism: a sexual transgression within the royal quarters resulting in an act of murder elsewhere. Several important terms and gestures here reinforce this link with the story of David and Bathsheba.

Amnon . . . loved her. The love in question will be revealed by the ensuing events as an erotic obsession—what the early rabbis aptly characterized as "love dependent upon a [material] thing."

2. *she was a virgin and it seemed beyond Amnon to do anything to her*. The last phrase here has a definite negative connotation (rather like the British "to interfere with her") and makes clear the narrow carnal nature of Amnon's "love" for Tamar. Sexual tampering with a virgin had particularly stringent consequences in biblical law.

3. *companion*. The Hebrew *reaʾ* could simply indicate a friend, though in royal contexts it is also the title of someone who played an official role as the king's, or the prince's, companion and councillor. The emphasis on Jonadab's "wisdom"—in biblical usage, often a morally neutral term suggesting mastery of know-how in a particular activity—makes the technical sense of councillor more likely, though one role does not exclude the other.

4. *And he said to him*. Shimon Bar-Efrat has aptly observed that the whole story of the rape of Tamar is constructed out of seven interlocking scenes with two characters in each, one of whom appears in the next scene. (The story of the stealing of Isaac's blessing in Genesis 27 has the same structure.) The sequence is: (1) Jonadab–Amnon, (2) Amnon–David, (3) David–Tamar, (4) Tamar–Amnon, (5) Amnon–attendant, (6) attendant–Tamar, (7) Tamar–Absalom. J. P. Fokkelman adds to this observation that the spatial and structural center of this design is the bed in Amnon's inner chamber (4), where the rape is perpetrated.

Tamar the sister of Absalom my brother. Kyle McCarter Jr. vividly notes that Amnon's speech with its alliterated initial aspirants in the Hebrew "is a series of gasping sighs" (*ʾet-tamarʾ aḥot ʾavshalom ʾaḥi ʾani ʾohev).*

5. *Lie in your bed and play sick*. David at the beginning of the Bathsheba story was first seen lying in bed, and then he arranged to have the desired woman brought to his chamber. Jonadab on his part observes that Amnon already looks ill (verse 2) and so suggests that he play up this condition by pretending to be dangerously ill and in need of special ministrations.

nourish me. The Hebrew verbal root *b-r-h* and the cognate noun *biryah* ("nourishment") denote not eating in general but the kind of eating that is sustaining or restoring to a person who is weak or fasting. When you eat a *biryah* you become *bar'i*, healthy or fat, the opposite of "poorly," *dal*. The distinction is crucial to this story.

so that I may see and eat from her hand. Perhaps Amnon is encouraged to say this because, as a person supposed to be gravely ill, he would want to see with his own eyes that the vital nourishment is prepared exactly as it should be. The writer is clearly playing with the equivalence between eating and sex, but it remains ambiguous whether Jonadab has in mind the facilitating of a rape, or merely creating the possibility of an intimate meeting between Amnon and Tamar.

6. *the king came to see him*. As the events work out, David, who sinned through lust, inadvertently acts as Amnon's pimp for his own daughter.

shape a couple of heart-shaped dumplings. The verb and its object are both transparently cognate with *lev* (or *levav*), "heart." The term could refer to the shape of the dumplings, or to their function of "strengthening the heart" (idiomatic in biblical Hebrew for sustaining or encouraging). In the Song of Songs, this same verb is associated with the idea of sexual arousal.

9. *Clear out everyone around me.* The identical words are pronounced by another princelike figure, Joseph, just before he reveals his true identity to his brothers (Genesis 45:1). In Genesis, these words preface the great moment of reconciliation between long-estranged brothers. Here they are a prelude to a tale of fraternal rape that leads to fratricide. The story of the rape of Tamar continues to allude to the Joseph story, in reverse chronological order and with pointed thematic reversal. The moment before the rape echoes the encounter between Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39) in the middle of the Joseph story, and the attention drawn to the ornamented tunic that the violated Tamar tears takes us back to Joseph's ornamented tunic at the beginning of his story (Genesis 37). From such purposeful deployment of allusion, the inference is inevitable that the author of the David story was familiar at least with the J strand of the Joseph story in a textual version very like the one that has come down to us.

11. *Come lie with me, my sister*. The core of this abrupt command is a citation of the words of Potiphar's wife to Joseph, "Lie with me." Perhaps, as some have suggested, "Come" has a slight softening effect. The addition of "my sister" of course highlights the fact that this sexual assault is also incestuous.

12. *Don't, my brother*. Tamar's response constitutes a structural allusion to Joseph and Potiphar's wife, for he, when confronted by the sexual brusqueness of her terse "lie with me," also responds, in contrastive dialogue, with a nervous volubility in a relatively lengthy series of breathless objections.

it should not be done thus in Israel . . . this scurrilous thing. The language here echoes that of another sexual episode in Genesis, the rape of Dinah (Genesis 34). Again, the divergence in the parallel is significant, for Dinah's rapist comes to love her after violating her and wants to make things good by marriage, whereas Amnon despises Tamar after he possesses her, and drives her away. The rape in both stories leads to murderous fraternal vengeance. But our writer's brilliant game of literary allusion does not end here, for, as Robert Polzin has pointed out, Tamar's words are also a precise echo of the plea of the Ephraimite in Gibeah to the mob of rapists: "No, my brothers . . . do not do this scurrilous thing" (Judges 19:23). That story ended in the woman's being gang-raped to death, an act that in turn led to bloody civil war —as Tamar's rape will lead to fratricide and, eventually, rebellion and civil war.

13. *speak, pray, to the king, for he will not withhold me from you.* Marriage between a half brother and a half sister is explicitly banned by biblical law. Perhaps, it has been suggested, this prohibition was not yet held to be binding in the early tenth century, or in the royal circle in Jerusalem. But it is at least as plausible that the desperate Tamar is grasping at any possibility to buy time and deflect her sexual assailant: why do this vile thing and take me by force when you can enjoy me legitimately?

14. *he overpowered her and abused her and bedded her*. The three transitive verbs in quick sequence reflect the single-minded assertion of male physical force. In the analogous story of Joseph and the Egyptian woman, because the gender roles are reversed, the sexually assaulted male is strong enough to break free from the woman's grasp and flee. Here, the assaulted woman cannot break her assailant's grip (verse 11), and so she now succumbs to

brute force. The verb represented as "bedded" (*shakhav*) is the same one used by Jonadab in verse 5 ("Lie in your bed," *shekhav ʿal-mishkavkha*) and in Amnon's "lie with me." But when it has a direct feminine object (instead of "lie *with*"), it suggests sexual violation, and a transitive verb is called for in the English.

15. *greater was the hatred with which he hated her than the love with which he had loved her*. The psychological insight of this writer is remarkable throughout the story. Amnon has fulfilled his desire for this beautiful young woman—or, given the fact that she is a bitterly resistant virgin, perhaps it has hardly been the fulfillment he dreamed of. In any case, he now has to face the possibly dire consequences to himself from her brother Absalom, or from David. The result is an access of revulsion against Tamar, a blaming of the victim for luring him with her charms into all this trouble.

Get up, go! The brutality of these imperative verbs is evident. They are also, as Bar-Efrat neatly observes, exact antonyms, in reverse order, of the two imperative verbs of sexual invitation he used before, "Come, lie."

16. *Don't!—this wrong is greater*. There is a textual problem here in the Hebrew, which seems to say, "Don't—about this wrong . . ." (*ʿal-ʾodot haraʿah*). Some versions of the Septuagint read here, "Don't, my brother" (*ʿal ʾaḥi*), as in verse 12, but this could reflect an attempt to straighten out a difficult text rather than a better Hebrew version used by the ancient Greek translators.

to send me away now. "Now" is added in the translation in order to remove an ambiguity as to when the sending away is done. "Sending away" is an idiom that also has the sense of "divorce"—precisely what the rapist of a virgin is not allowed to do in biblical law. If some modern readers may wonder why being banished seems to Tamar worse than being raped, one must say that for biblical women the social consequence of pariah status, when the law offered the remedy of marriage to the rapist, might well seem even more horrible than the physical violation. Rape was a dire fate, but one that could be compensated for by marriage, whereas the violated virgin rejected and abandoned by her violator was an unmarriageable outcast, condemned to a lifetime of "desolation" (verse 20).

17. *Send this creature, pray, away from me*. "This creature" reflects the stingingly contemptuous monosyllabic feminine demonstrative pronoun, *zoʾt* ("this one"). Note that at the same time that Amnon speaks brutally to Tamar, he is polite to his servant, using the particle of entreaty *naʾ* ("pray").

and bolt the door behind her. Having devised such an elaborate strategy for drawing Tamar into the inner chamber where he can have his way with her, he now has her thrust out into the open square, with the door bolted against her as though she were some insatiable, clinging thing against which he had to set up a barricade.

18. *ornamented tunic*. The translation for this term follows a suggestion of E. A. Speiser. (The famous King James Version rendering in Genesis is "coat of many colors.") Others interpret this as a garment reaching the ankles. In any case, Tamar and Joseph are the only two figures in the Bible said to wear this particular garment. Joseph's, too, will be torn, by his brothers, after they strip him of it and toss him into the pit, and they will then soak it in kid's blood. Tamar's ornamented tunic may well be bloodstained, too, if one considers what has just been done to her as a virgin.

19. *put her hand on her head*. This is a conventional gesture of mourning, like the rending of the garment and the sprinkling of ashes on the head.

20. *Has Amnon your brother been with you?* Absalom, addressing his screaming, tearstained, disheveled sister, exercises a kind of delicacy of feeling in using this oblique euphemism for rape.

He is your brother. This identification, which plays back against the heavily fraught, often ironic uses of "brother" and "sister" throughout the story, would hardly be a consolation. What Absalom may be suggesting is that, were it any other man, I would avenge your honor at once, but since he is your brother, and mine, I must bide my time ("*For now*, my sister, hold your peace.")

Do not take this matter to heart. The idiom he uses echoes ironically against the making of heart-shaped dumplings to which Amnon enjoined her.

21. *King David had heard all these things, and he was greatly incensed.* The Qumran Samuel and the Septuagint add here: "but he did not vex the spirit of Amnon his son, for he loved him, since he was his firstborn." But this looks suspiciously like an explanatory gloss, an effort to make sense of David's

silence. That imponderable silence is the key to the mounting avalanche of disaster in the house of David. Where we might expect some after-the-fact defense of his violated daughter, some rebuke or punishment of his rapist son, he hears, is angry, but says nothing and does nothing, leaving the field open for Absalom's murder of his brother. In all this, the rape of Tamar plays exactly the same pivotal role in the story of David as does the rape of Dinah in the story of Jacob. Jacob, too, "hears" of the violation and does nothing, setting the stage for the bloody act of vengeance carried out by his sons Simeon and Levi. By the end of the episode, Jacob is seen at the mercy of his intransigent sons, and that is how this once powerful figure will appear through the rest of his story. An analogous fate, as we shall abundantly see, awaits David from this moment on.

23. *a sheepshearing*. The sheepshearing is a grand occasion for feasting and drinking (compare 1 Samuel 25:2–8), and so it is proper to speak of "having" a sheepshearing as one would have a celebration.

24. *Let the king, pray, go*. Given David's increasingly sedentary habits, Absalom appears to count on the fact that his father will refuse the invitation, and this refusal will then give greater urgency to his invitation of Amnon. Had Absalom begun by asking David to help him persuade Amnon to go the festivities, David might have been suspicious about Absalom's motives, since the grudge he bore his half brother would scarcely have been a secret. In any case, Absalom is making David his go-between to lure Amnon to his death, just as Amnon made David his go-between to lure Tamar to her violation.

27. *with all the king's sons*. This phrase recurs like a refrain from this point on: David is haunted by the specter of the ultimate catastrophe, that "all the king's sons" have perished, a specter that will cast a shadow over the subsequent events of the story as well. The man promised an everlasting house is threatened with the prospect (like his avatar, Faulkner's Sutpen, in *Absalom, Absalom!*) of being cut off without surviving progeny.

28. *when Amnon's heart is merry with wine*. The heart that lusted after Tamar and asked her to make heart-shaped dumplings will now be befuddled with wine to set up the murder.

29. *each on his mule*. In this period in ancient Israel, the mule was the customary mount for royal personages.

31. *the king arose and tore his garments and lay on the ground*. These acts of mourning are reminiscent of Tamar's and of David's own when his infant son by Bathsheba was deathly ill. Again there is a resemblance to Jacob, who flings himself into extravagant mourning over a son supposed to be dead who is actually alive (Genesis 37).

32. *they have put to death*. Jonadab, exercising his "wisdom," is careful not to condemn Absalom immediately, but instead first uses a plural verb with an unspecified agent. Then he introduces Absalom as the source of the determination to kill Amnon, choosing a verb, "abused," that concedes the crime of rape. Whether or not this was a possibility he had in mind when he offered counsel to Amnon, he now implicity distances himself from Amnon's act.

33. *let not my lord the king take the matter to heart*. This is virtually the same idiom Absalom used to Tamar in consoling her after the rape.

34. *going round the side of the mountain from the road behind it*. The Hebrew has "the road behind it" before "the side of the mountain," such proleptic use of pronominal reference sometimes occurring in biblical Hebrew. The Septuagint reads "from the Horonim road" (*miderekh ḥoronim*) instead of "from the road behind it" (*miderekh aḥaraw*).

36. *wept very grievously*. The literal Hebrew phrasing is "wept a very great weeping."

37. *Talmai son of Amihur king of Geshur*. Absalom takes refuge in the court of his maternal grandfather in Geshur, to the north and east of the Jordan, outside David's jurisdiction.

David mourned for his son all the while. As verse 39, which will mark the beginning of a new narrative episode, makes clear, the son he is mourning is the dead Amnon, not the absent Absalom.

39. *David's urge to sally forth against Absalom was spent*. The received text is either defective or elliptical at this point. The verb *watekhal* is feminine,

though there is no feminine noun in the clause. Many have construed it as the predicate of an omitted noun, *nefesh*, which coupled with this verb would yield idiomatically "David pined after Absalom." Such paternal longings scarcely accord with David's refusal to see his son once he has returned to Jerusalem, or with the very necessity of elaborate manipulation in order to get him to agree to rescind Absalom's banishment. The Qumran Samuel scroll, though incomplete at this point, appears to have the feminine noun—*ruaḥ*—"spirit," "impulse," "urge"—as the subject of the verb. An abatement of hostility against Absalom rather than a longing for him makes much more sense in terms of what follows.

CHAPTER 14

[1]And Joab son of Zeruiah knew that the king's mind
was on Absalom. [2]And Joab sent to Tekoa and fetched
a wise woman from there and said to her, "Take up
mourning, pray, and, pray, don mourning garments,
and do not rub yourself with oil, and you shall be like
a woman a long while mourning over a dead one. [3]And
you shall come to the king and speak to him in this
manner—" and Joab put the words in her mouth. [4]And
the Tekoite woman said to the king, and she flung
herself on her face to the ground and bowed down, and
she said, "Rescue, O king!" [5]And the king said to her,
"What troubles you?" And she said, "Alas, I am a
widow-woman, my husband died. [6]And your servant
had two sons, and they quarreled in the field, and there
was no one to part them, and one struck down the
other and caused his death. [7]And, look, the whole clan
rose against your servant and said, 'Give over the one
who struck down his brother, that we may put him to
death for the life of his brother whom he killed, and
let us destroy the heir as well. And they would have

quenched my last remaining ember, leaving my husband no name or remnant on the face of the earth.”
[8]And the king said to the woman, “Go to your house and I myself shall issue a charge concerning you. [9]And the Tekoite woman said to the king, “Upon me, my lord the king, and upon my father’s house, let the guilt be, and the king and his throne shall be blameless.”
[10]And the king said, “The man who dares speak to you I will have brought to me, and he will not touch you anymore.” [11]And she said, “May the king, pray, keep in mind the LORD your God, that the blood avenger should not savage this much and let them not destroy my son.” And he said, “As the LORD lives, not a single hair of your son’s shall fall to the ground!” [12]And the woman said, “Let your servant, pray, speak a word to my lord the king.” And he said, “Speak.” [13]And the woman said, “Why did you devise in this fashion against God’s people? And in speaking this thing, the king is as though guilty for the king’s not having brought back his own banished one. [14]For we surely will die, like water spilled to the ground, which cannot be gathered again. And God will not bear off the life of him who devises that no one of his be banished.
[15]And so now, the reason I have come to speak this thing to the king my lord is that the people have made me afraid, and your servant thought, ‘Let me but speak

to the king. Perhaps the king will do what his servant asks. [16]For the king would pay heed to save his servant from the hand of the person bent on destroying me and my son together from God's heritage.' [17]And your servant thought, 'May the word of my lord the king, pray, be a respite, for like a messenger of God, so is my lord the king, understanding good and evil.' And may the LORD your God be with you." [18]And the king said to the woman, "Pray, do not conceal from me the thing that I ask you." And the woman said, "Let my lord the king speak, pray." [19]And the king said, "Is the hand of Joab with you in all this?" And the woman answered and said, "By your life, my lord the king, there is no turning right or left from all that my lord the king has spoken! For your servant Joab, he it was who charged me, and he it was who put in your servant's mouth all these words. [20]In order to turn the thing round your servant Joab has done this thing. And my lord is wise, as with the wisdom of a messenger of God, to know everything in the land." [21]And the king said to Joab, "Look, pray, I have done this thing. Go and bring back the lad Absalom." [22]And Joab flung himself on his face to the ground and bowed down. And he blessed the king, and Joab said, "Your servant knows that I have found favor in the eyes of my lord the king, for the king has done what his servant

asked.” [23]And Joab rose and went to Geshur and he
brought Absalom to Jerusalem. [24]And the king said,
“Let him turn round to his house, and my face he shall
not see.” And Absalom turned round to his house, and
the king’s face he did not see.

[25]And there was no man so highly praised for beauty as
Absalom in all Israel—from the sole of his foot to the
crown of his head, there was no blemish in him. [26]And
when he cut his hair, for from one year’s end till the
next he would cut it, as it grew heavy upon him, he
would weigh the hair of his head, two hundred shekels
by the royal weight. [27]And three sons were born to
Absalom and a daughter named Tamar, she was a
beautiful woman. [28]And Absalom lived in Jerusalem
two years, but the king’s face he did not see. [29]And
Absalom sent to Joab in order to send him to the king,
but he did not want to come to him, and he sent still a
second time, but he did not want to come. [30]And he
said to his servants, “See Joab’s field next to mine, in
which he has barley—go set it on fire!” And
Absalom’s servants set fire to the field. [31]And Joab rose
and came to Absalom’s house and said to him, “Why
did your servants set fire to the field that belongs to
me?” [32]And Absalom said to Joab, “Look, I sent to

you, saying, ‘Come here that I may send you to the king, saying, Why did I come from Geshur? It would be better for me were I still there. And now, let me see the face of the king, and if there be guilt in me, let him put me to death.’” 33 And Joab came to the king and told him. And he called to Absalom and he came to the king and bowed down to him, his face to the ground before the king, and the king kissed Absalom.

CHAPTER 14 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the king’s mind was on Absalom*. The preposition *ʿal* is ambiguous, and it could also mean “against.”

2. *Joab sent to Tekoa*. Tekoa is a village about ten miles north of Jerusalem. Why does Joab contrive to make David agree to Absalom’s return? Given his relentlessly political character, it seems likely that Joab perceives Absalom’s continuing banishment as a potential source of rebellion against the throne, and concludes that the safest course is to reconcile the king with his son. This calculation will prove to be gravely misguided because Joab does not reckon with David’s ambivalence toward his fratricidal son (see verse 24) or with the impulse to usurpation that the ambivalence will encourage in Absalom.

a wise woman. It should be noted that the whole David story, seemingly dominated by powerful martial men, pivots at several crucial junctures on the intervention of enterprising “wise women.” The first of these is Abigail, though, unlike two of the others, she is not assigned the epithet “wise woman” as a kind of professional title. Later, a resourceful woman hides the two spies who are bringing intelligence of Absalom to David in trans-Jordan. In the subsequent rebellion of Sheba son of Bichri, another wise woman prevents Joab’s massacre of the besieged town of Abel Beth-Maacah.

like a woman a long while mourning over a dead one. The phrasing here pointedly echoes "David mourned for his son all the while" in 13:37.

3. *Joab put the words in her mouth*. As Robert Polzin observes, the entire episode turns on manipulation of people through language, with abundant repetition of the verb "speak." In contrast to the common practice elsewhere in biblical narrative, we are not given the actual script that Joab dictates to the woman, which she will then repeat to David. This omission heightens the sense that, using a general outline provided by Joab, the woman is in fact brilliantly improvising—which in some ways she would have to do, given the fact that she is not reciting an uninterrupted speech but responding to David's declarations, picking up clues from the way he reacts.

4. *Rescue, O king*! This is a formulaic plea used by petitioners for royal justice.

6. *they quarreled in the field . . . and one struck down the other*. As several commentators have noted, her formulation aligns the story with the archetypal tale of Cain and Abel. The fratricidal Cain is banished, but also given a sign to protect him from blood vengeance.

7. *and let us destroy the heir as well*. Although it is unlikely that the clansmen would have actually said these words, there is no need to tamper with the text. The wise woman, in reporting the dialogue, insinuates her own anxious maternal perspective into this last clause. The implication is that the members of the clan would like to kill the remaining son not only to execute justice but in order to get his inheritance.

8. *I myself shall issue a charge concerning you*. Although David emphatically announces (by adding the first-person pronoun *ʾani*) that he himself will take up the case, his language remains vague ("issue a charge"), and the Tekoite woman's response in the next verse clearly indicates that she requires something further of him.

9. *Upon me . . . the guilt . . . and the king and his throne shall be blameless.* The legal issue involved is bloodguilt. From David's vagueness, she infers that he is loath to intervene on behalf of the fratricide because by so doing he, and his throne, would take on the guilt of allowing the killing to go unavenged.

10. *The man who dares speak to you I will have brought to me*. Her declaration that she and her father's house will bear the guilt for allowing the killer to live—evidently construed by David as a performative speech-act, efficacious once uttered—encourages the king to declare that he will absolutely protect her against the vengeful kinsmen who are seeking out her son.

11. *let them not destroy my son.* The woman is still not satisfied, for David's pledge to safeguard her did not mention her son: she wants to extract an explicit declaration from David that he will protect the life of her son.

not a single hair of your son's shall fall to the ground. Now she has what she has been after, with David's hyperbolic declaration about guarding the well-being of the fratricidal son, she is prepared to snap shut the trap of the fiction, linking it to David's life, just as Nathan did with the parable of the poor man's ewe. We should note that not a single hair of the fictitious son is to fall to the ground, whereas the extravagantly abundant hair of his real-life referent, Absalom, will be cut annually in a kind of public ceremony.

12. *Let your servant, pray, speak*. She uses these words of entreaty to preface the transition to the real subject, David and Absalom.

13. *against God's people*. The implicit key concept here is "inheritance," which links her fiction to the national political situation. She may be hinting that Absalom is the appropriate heir to the throne. In any case, his banishment is potentially divisive to the kingdom.

in speaking this thing, the king is as though guilty. The Hebrew of this whole sentence is rather crabbed, an effect reproduced in the translation. Rather than reflecting difficulties in textual transmission, her language probably expresses her sense of awkwardness in virtually indicting the king: he is "as though guilty," for "in speaking this thing," in declaring his resolution to protect the fratricidal son, he has condemned his own antithetical behavior in the case of Absalom. But the woman is careful not to mention Absalom explicitly by name—she struggles verbally in the crossover from fiction to life, knowing she is treading on dangerous ground.

14. *we surely will die, like water spilled to the ground*. Moving beyond Absalom to a wise woman's pronouncement on human fate, she breaks free of her verbal stumbling and becomes eloquent. The spilled water as an image of

irreversible mortality is an obvious and effective counterpoint to her previous image of the ember that should not be quenched. It also picks up thematically David's own bleak reflection on the irreversibility of death after his infant son expires (chapter 12).

God will not bear off the life of him who devises that no one of his be banished. As the wise woman switches back from philosophic statement to the juridical issue confronting David, her language again becomes knotty and oblique. What she is saying is that God will scarcely want to punish the father who brings back his banished son, even though bloodguilt remains unavenged.

15. *the reason I have come to speak this thing to the king*. The Tekoite woman, having nervously broached the issue of David and Absalom, now hastily retreats to the relative safety of her invented story about two sons, as though that were the real reason for her appearance before the king. The dramatic and psychological logic of this entire speech argues against scholarly attempts to make it more "coherent" by moving around whole swatches of it.

17. *respite*. The king's word will give her respite from her persecutors, the would-be killers of her son. The Hebrew term *menuḥah* also points to a bound locution, *menuḥah wenaḥalah*, "respite and inheritance," the very thing the kinsmen would take from her.

19. *Is the hand of Joab with you in all this?* David rightly infers that a village wise woman would have no motive of her own for undertaking this elaborate stratagem, and so someone in court with political aims must be behind her. Polzin shrewdly proposes that Joab may actually have wanted David to detect him at the bottom of the scheme: "The woman's eventual admission that she has been sent by Joab (verses 19–20) may itself be part of Joab's indirect message to David—something like, 'Bring Absalom back or I may side with him against you.'"

there is no turning right or left from all that my lord the king has spoken. She is saying two things at once—that the king has hit the target in saying that Joab is behind her, and that, having committed himself by his own speech to protect the fratricidal son, he cannot now permit himself to continue Absalom's banishment.

20. *my lord is wise, as with the wisdom of a messenger of God.* It is of course she who has been demonstrably wise. David will soon show unwisdom by

bringing Absalom back while resisting real reconciliation, and his subsequent blindness to Absalom's demagogic activities within a stone's throw of the court indicates that there is much in the land about which he knows nothing.

21. *bring back the lad Absalom.* Momentarily, David refers to Absalom by a term (*naʿar*) that is generally an expression of paternal affection. He will use the same word repeatedly during Absalom's rebellion to stress his concern for Absalom's safety.

25. *there was no man so highly praised for beauty.* Both Absalom and his sister Tamar are remarkable for their beauty (as was the young David). For Absalom, this will become an asset he trades on in his appeal for popular support.

26. *when he cut his hair . . . he would weigh the hair of his head*. There is clearly something narcissistic about this preoccupation with his luxuriant hair. It is of course a foreshadowing of the bizarre circumstances of Absalom's death (chapter 18:9–15). Beyond that, the spectacular growth of hair invokes a comparison with Samson, who never cut his hair until the cutting of the hair against his will led to his undoing. The parallel with Samson is extended in the burning of Joab's field, which recalls the foxes with torches tied to their tails used by Samson to set fire to the fields of the Philistines. Perhaps the parallel with Samson is meant to foreshadow Absalom's fate as a powerful leader whose imprudence brings him to an early death.

27. *And three sons were born to Absalom and a daughter named Tamar, she was a beautiful woman*. Later, we are informed (18:18) that Absalom was childless. The two reports can be harmonized only with considerable strain, and it is best to view them as contradictory traditions incorporated in the final text. But it is noteworthy that, against patriarchal practice, the sons are left unnamed here, and only the daughter, named after Absalom's raped sister, is not anonymous. It is unnecessary to assume that this second beautiful Tamar was born after the violation of her aunt by Amnon: here she is represented as a woman, and it seems unlikely that so many years would have passed from the time of Tamar's rape until Absalom's resumption of residence in Jerusalem.

29. *he did not want to come*. Throughout this story, there is a precarious game of power going on. Joab has manipulated David to effect Absalom's return, but seeing that the king remains estranged from Absalom, Joab does not want to push his luck by interceding at court on Absalom's behalf. The power of the king may be qualified, but he remains the king.

30. *set it on fire*. Absalom's Samson-like burning of the field is a strong indication that he is a man prepared to use violence to achieve his ends: mafia style, he presents Joab with an offer he can't refuse.

32. *if there be guilt in me, let him put me to death*. Absalom of course knows he is responsible for the killing of Amnon, but he construes that act as something other than "guilt" because it was done to avenge the violation of Tamar—a crime David left unpunished.

33. *he . . . bowed down to him, his face to the ground*. Fokkelman notes that there is a series of three acts of prostration before the king—first the Tekoite woman, then Joab, and now Absalom, the third bowing-down ostensibly consummating the reconciliation of father and son toward which all three acts are directed.

and the king kissed Absalom. The noun used (rather than "David") may suggest that this is more a royal, or official, kiss than a paternal one. It clearly gives Absalom no satisfaction, as his initiative of usurpation in the next episode strongly argues.

CHAPTER 15

[1]And it happened thereafter that Absalom made
himself a chariot with horses and fifty men running
before him. [2]And Absalom would rise early and stand
by the gate road, and so, to every man who had a suit
to appear in judgment before the king, Absalom would
call and say, “From what town are you?” And he
would say, “From one of the tribes of Israel is your
servant.” [3]And Absalom would say to him, “See, your
words are good and right, but you have no one to listen
to you from the king.” [4]And Absalom would say,
“Would that I were made judge in the land, and to me
every man would come who had a suit in justice, and I
would declare in his favor.” [5]And so, when a man
would draw near to bow down to him, he would reach
out his hand and take hold of him and kiss him.

[6]And Absalom would act in this fashion to all the
Israelites who appeared in judgment before the king,
and Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel.

[7]And it happened at the end of four years that
Absalom said to the king, “Let me go, pray, and pay
my vow that I pledged to the LORD in Hebron. [8]For
your servant made a vow when I was staying in Geshur
in Aram, saying, “If the LORD indeed brings me back
to Jerusalem, I shall worship the LORD.” [9]And the
king said to him, “Go in peace to Hebron.” And he
arose and went to Hebron. [10]And Absalom sent agents
through all the tribes of Israel, saying, “When you hear
the sound of the ram’s horn, you shall say, ‘Absalom
has become king in Hebron.’” [11]And with Absalom two
hundred men went from Jerusalem, invited guests
going in all innocence, and they knew nothing. [12]And
Absalom sent Ahitophel the Gilonite, David’s
councillor, from his town, from Giloh, while he was
offering the sacrifices, and the plot was strong, and the
people with Absalom were growing in number. [13]And
the informant came to David, saying, “The hearts of
the men of Israel are following Absalom.” [14]And David
said to all his servants who were with him in
Jerusalem, “Rise and let us flee or none of us will
escape from Absalom. Hurry and go, lest he hurry and
overtake us and bring down harm upon us and strike
the town with the edge of the sword.” [15]And the king’s
servants said to the king, “Whatever my lord the king
chooses, look, we are your servants.” [16]And the king

went out, and all his household with him, on foot, and the king left his ten concubines to watch over the house. [17]And the king, and all the people with him, went out on foot, and they stopped by the outlying house. [18]And all his servants were crossing over alongside him, and all the Cherithites and the Pelethites and all the Gittites, six hundred men who had come at his heels from Gath, were crossing over before the king. [19]And the king said to Ittai the Gittite, "Why should you too go with us? Go back, stay with the king. For you are a foreigner, and you are also in exile from your own place. [20]Just yesterday you came, and today should I make you wander with us, when I myself am going to wherever I may go? Turn back, and bring back your brothers. Steadfast kindness to you!" [21]And Ittai answered the king and said, "As the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, whatever place that my lord the king may be, whether for death or for life, there your servant will be." And David said, "Go and cross over." [22]And Ittai crossed over, and all his men and all the children who were with him. [23]And all the land was weeping loudly and all the people were crossing over, and the king was crossing over the Wadi Kidron, and all the people were crossing over along the road to the wilderness. [24]And, look, Zadok and all the Levites were also with him, bearing the Ark of the

Covenant of God, and they set down the Ark of God,
and Abiathar came up, until all the people had finished
crossing over from the town. [25]And the king said to
Zadok, “Bring back the Ark of God to the town.
Should I find favor in the eyes of the LORD, He will
bring me back and let me see it and its abode. [26]And
should He say thus, ‘I want no part of you,’ let Him do
to me what is good in His eyes.” [27]And the king said to
Zadok the priest, “Do you see? Go back to the town in
peace, and Ahimaaz your son and Jonathan son of
Abiathar—your two sons with you. [28]See, I shall be
tarrying in the steppes of the wilderness until word
from you reaches me to inform me.” [29]And Zadok, and
Abiathar with him, brought back the Ark of God to
Jerusalem, and they stayed there. [30]And David was
going up the Slope of Olives, going up weeping, his
head uncovered, and he walking barefoot, and all the
people who were with him, everyone with his head
uncovered, went on up weeping the while. [31]And to
David it was told, saying, “Ahitophel is among the
plotters with Absalom.” And David said, “Thwart,
pray, the counsel of Ahitophel, O LORD.” [32]And
David had come to the summit, where one would bow
down to God, and, look, coming toward him was
Hushai the Archite, his tunic torn and earth on his
head. [33]And David said, “If you cross over with me,

you will be a burden to me. [34]But if you go back to the town and say to Absalom, ‘Your servant, O king, I will be. Your father’s servant I always was, and now I am your servant,’ you shall overturn Ahitophel’s counsel for me. [35]And are not Zadok and Abiathar the priests there with you? And so, whatever you hear from the king’s house you shall tell to Zadok and to Abiathar the priests. [36]Look, there with them are their two sons, Ahimaaz, who is Zadok’s, and Jonathan, who is Abiathar’s, and you shall send to me by their hand whatever you hear.” [37]And Hushai, David’s friend, came to the city, as Absalom was coming into Jerusalem.

CHAPTER 15 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *a chariot with horses and fifty men running before him*. All this vehicular pomp and circumstance, as other biblical references to chariots, horses, and runners in conjunction with kings suggest, is a claim to royal status. The gestures of usurpation are undertaken in Jerusalem, under David’s nose, yet the king, who has been described by the Tekoite woman as “knowing everything in the land,” does nothing.

2–5. This whole tableau of Absalom standing at the gate to the city, accosting each newcomer, professing sympathy for his cause, and announcing that were he the supreme judicial authority, he would rule in the man’s favor, is a stylized representation of the operation of a demagogue. It is hard to imagine realistically that Absalom would tell each person so flatly that, whatever the

legal case, he would declare in his favor, but the point of the stylization is clear: the demagogue enlists support by flattering people's special interests, leading them to believe that he will champion their cause, cut their taxes, increase their social security benefits, and so forth.

3. *you have no one to listen to you from the king.* The heart of Absalom's demagogic pitch is his exploiting what must have been widespread dissatisfaction over the new centralized monarchic bureaucracy with its imposition of taxes and corvées and military conscription: there is no one in this impersonal palace to listen to you with a sympathetic ear, as I do.

5. *he would reach out his hand and take hold of him and kiss him.* The odd "rhyming" of Absalom's kiss to each man he seduces and David's kiss to Absalom at the end of the immediately preceding chapter is obvious. Could it suggest, retrospectively, that David's kiss has an element of falseness that recurs, grossly magnified, in Absalom's kiss? It should also be noted that Absalom's gesture of "taking hold" of each of his political victims is verbally identical with Amnon's "taking hold" of Tamar before the rape.

7. *at the end of four years*. The Masoretic Text has "forty years," an untenable number in this narrative context, but four different ancient versions show "four years."

pay my vow that I pledged to the LORD *in Hebron*. Haim Gevaryahu proposes that the vow is to offer an exculpatory sacrifice for the crime of manslaughter. With three years in Geshur and another four in Jerusalem, Absalom would have come to the end of the period of seven years of penance that, according to some ancient parallels, might have applied to such crimes. Absalom of course wants to go off to Hebron—David's first capital city—in order to proclaim himself king at a certain distance from his father's palace. It also appears that he feels he can call on a base of support from Judah, his father's tribe. But why is David not suspicious when his son proposes to pay his cultic vow in Hebron rather than in Jerusalem? Gevaryahu, citing Greek analogues, makes the interesting suggestion that a fratricide who had not yet atoned for his crime was not permitted to worship in the same sanctuary as his father and brothers.

11. *invited guests* going *in all innocence*. In a shrewd maneuver, Absalom takes with him a large contingent of people not known to be his partisans, and

not willing participants in the conspiracy, and in this way he wards off suspicion about the aim of his expedition. Once in Hebron, the two hundred men would presumably be caught up in the tide of insurrection.

14. *Rise and let us flee*. Suddenly, under the pressure of crisis, with intelligence that Absalom has overwhelming support, David shakes himself from his slumber of passivity, realizing he must move at once if he is to have any chance of surviving. Against superior forces, the walled city of Jerusalem would be a death trap. As Fokkelman aptly puts it, "Once again he is in contact with his old self. . . . Once again men seek his death and he enters the wilderness both figuratively and literally."

15. *Whatever my lord the king chooses, look, we are your servants*. As the episode unfolds, there is a constant counterpoint between those who reveal their unswerving loyalty to David no matter how grim the outlook and the betrayal of David by his son and all those who have rallied to the usurper.

16. *the king left his ten concubines to watch over the house*. This gesture sounds as though it might be an expression of hope that David will return to Jerusalem. In the event, it produces a disastrous consequence that fulfills one of the dire terms of Nathan's curse in chapter 12.

17. *the king, and all the people with him, went out on foot*. This restatement of the first clause of the previous verse reflects the device that biblical scholars call "resumptive repetition": after an interruption of the narrative line—here, the introduction of the information about the concubines—the words just before the interruption are repeated as the main line of the narrative resumes. Moreover, the emphasis through repetition on going by foot suggests how David and his entourage have been reduced from royal dignity in this abrupt flight.

the outlying house. The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "the house of distance." It clearly means the last house in the settled area beyond the walls of the city.

18. *all his servants were crossing over*. The verb "to cross over" (*'avar*), abundantly repeated, is a thematic focus of the episode. David and his followers are crossing over eastward from Jerusalem, headed first up the Mount of Olives and then down the long declivity to the Jordan, which they

will cross (the verb *ʿavar* is often used for Jordan crossing) in their flight. The entire episode is unusual in the leisurely panoramic view it provides of the eastward march from the city. Instead of the preterite verb form ordinarily used for narration, participial forms ("were crossing over") predominate, imparting a sense of something like a present tense to the report of the action.

Cherithites . . . Pelethites . . . Gittites. This elite palace guard, which we have encountered before, are Philistine warriors who became David's followers, probably when he was residing in Gath. Ittai's expression of loyalty suggests that they were more than mere mercenaries.

19. *Ittai*. His name is close to the preposition *ʾiti*, "with me." Both Moshe Garsiel and Robert Polzin have proposed that the name has a symbolic function: Ittai is the loyalist who insists on remaining with David. Polzin notes that this preposition is constantly reiterated in the episode, rather than its synonym *ʿim*: David, for example, says to Ittai, "Why should you too go with us [*ʾitanu*]*?*"

stay with the king. This designation of the usurping son would be especially painful for David to pronounce. He does it in order to try to persuade Ittai that he should cast his fate with the person exercising the power of king.

20. *Steadfast kindness to you*. The translation reproduces the elliptical character of the Masoretic Text at this point. The Septuagint has an easier reading: "May the LORD show steadfast kindness to you."

21. *whether for death or for life*. Given the grim circumstances, this loyal soldier unflinchingly puts death before life in the two alternatives he contemplates.

23. *and the king was crossing over the Wadi Kidron*. In the slow-motion report of the flight, reinforced by the participial verbs, David is now crossing the Kidron brook at the foot of the slope descending eastward from the walled city. He will then make his way up the Mount of Olives.

25. *Bring back the Ark of God to the town*. Given the difficulties David encountered in bringing the Ark to Jerusalem in the first place, and given the disastrous consequences at the time of Eli in carrying it out to the battlefield,

it is understandable that he should want the Ark left in Jerusalem. He makes this act a token of his reiterated fatalism about his predicament.

27. *and the king said to Zadok the priest.* Again we see the distinctive biblical convention in the deployment of dialogue: when the first party speaks and the second party does not respond, and a second speech of the first party is introduced, there is an intimation of some sort of failure of response. Zadok is nonplussed by David's instructions to return the Ark and also by David's fatalism. Now, in his second speech, David provides a practical, strategic rationale for Zadok's going back to the city with the Ark—he and his two acolytes will then be able to act as spies for David (see the end of his speech in verse 28).

30. *his head uncovered*. There is a difference of philological opinion as to whether the verb here means covered or uncovered. The usual meaning of the root is "to cover," but an uncovered head is more likely as a gesture of mourning—which is clearly intended—and this could be an instance of the same term denoting antonyms, like the English verb "cleave."

31. *And to David it was told*. The Masoretic Text reads, "And David told," but both the Qumran Samuel and the Septuagint reflect the more likely idea —a difference of one Hebrew letter—that someone told David.

32. *the summit, where one would bow down to God, and, look, coming toward him was Hushai*. This crucial moment in the story is an especially deft manifestation of the system of double causation that Gerhard von Rad and others after him have attributed to the David narrative: everything in the story is determined by its human actors, according to the stringent dictates of political realism; yet, simultaneously, everything is determined by God, according to a divine plan in history. David, informed that his own shrewd political advisor Ahitophel is part of Absalom's conspiracy, urgently and breathlessly invokes God, "Thwart, pray, the counsel of Ahitophel, O LORD." Then he reaches a holy site, an altar on the crest of the Mount of Olives ("where one would bow down to God"), and here he sees Hushai, his loyalty betokened by the trappings of mourning he has assumed, coming toward him. Theologically, Hushai is the immediate answer to David's prayer. Politically, David seizes upon Hushai as the perfect instrument to thwart Ahitophel's counsel, so from a certain point of view David is really answering his own

prayer through his human initiative. Yet the encounter with Hushai at a place of worship leaves the lingering intimation that Hushai has been sent by God to David.

34. *say to Absalom, "Your servant, O king, I will be*." David, passive to a fault in the preceding episodes, now improvises in the moment of crisis a detailed plan for subverting Absalom, even dictating to Hushai the exact script he is to use when he comes before the usurper.

35. *are not Zadok and Abiathar the priests there with you?* David is both offering encouragement to Hushai, assuring him that he will not be the sole, isolated undercover agent in Jerusalem, and indicating to him what every spy needs to know, that there will be a reliable network for transmitting intelligence to the command center for which the spy is working.

CHAPTER 16

[1]And when David had crossed over a little beyond the
summit, look, Ziba, Mephibosheth's lad, was there to
meet him, with a yoke of saddled donkeys and on
them two hundred loaves of bread and a hundred
raisin cakes and a hundred of summer fruit and a jug
of wine. [2]And the king said to Ziba, "What would you
with these things?" And Ziba said, "The donkeys are
for the king's household to ride upon, and the bread
and the summer fruit for the lads to eat, and the wine
for the exhausted to drink in the wilderness." [3]And the
king said, "And where is your master's son?" And Ziba
said to the king, "Why, he is staying in Jerusalem, for
he has said, 'Today the house of Israel will give back
to me my father's kingdom.'" [4]And the king said to
Ziba, "Look, everything of Mephibosheth's is yours!"
And Ziba said, "I am prostrate! May I find favor in
your eyes, my lord the king."

[5]And King David came as far as Bahurim, and, look,
from there out came a man from the clan of the house
of Saul, Shimei son of Gera was his name, and he
came cursing. [6]And he hurled stones at David and at
all King David's servants, and all the troops and all the
warriors were at his right and at his left. [7]And thus said
Shimei as he cursed, "Get out, get out, you man of
blood, you worthless fellow! [8]The LORD has brought
back upon you all the blood of the house of Saul, in
whose place you became king, and the LORD has
given the kingship into the hand of Absalom your son,
and here you are, because of your evil, for you are a
man of blood." [9]And Abishai son of Zeruiah said to
the king, "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the
king? Let me, pray, cross over and take off his head."
[10]And the king said, "What do I have to do with you, O
sons of Zeruiah? If he curses, it is because the LORD
has said to him, 'Curse David,' and who can say, 'Why
have you done this?'" [11]And David said to Abishai and
to all his servants, "Look—my son, the issue of my
loins, seeks my life. How much more so, then, this
Benjaminite. Leave him be and let him curse, for the
LORD has told him. [12]Perhaps the LORD will see my
affliction and the LORD may requite me good for his
cursing this day." [13]And David, and his men with him,
went off on the way, and Shimei was walking round

the side of the mountain alongside him, cursing and hurling stones at him and flinging dirt. [14]And the king came, and all the troops who were with him, exhausted, and took a breathing stop there. [15]And Absalom and all the troops, the men of Israel, had come to Jerusalem, and Ahitophel was with him.

[16]And it happened when Hushai the Archite, David's friend, came to Absalom, that Hushai said, "Long live the king, long live the king!" [17]And Absalom said to Hushai, "Is this your loyalty to your friend? Why did you not go with your friend?" [18]And Hushai said to Absalom, "On the contrary! Whom the LORD has chosen, and this people and every man of Israel—his I will be and with him I will stay. [19]And, besides, whom should I serve? Should it not be his son? As I served your father, so will I be in your service." [20]And Absalom said to Ahitophel, "Give you counsel: what shall we do?" [21]And Ahitophel said to Absalom, "Come to bed with your father's concubines whom he left to watch over the house, and let all Israel hear that you have become repugnant to your father, and the hand of all who are with you will be strengthened." [22]And they pitched a tent for Absalom on the roof, and he came to bed with his father's concubines before the

eyes of all Israel. [23]And the counsel of Ahitophel that he would give in those days was as one would inquire of an oracle of God, even so was every counsel of Ahitophel, for David and for Absalom as well.

CHAPTER 16 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *David had crossed over*. The verbal motif of "crossing over," which virtually defines David's flight eastward from Jerusalem to trans-Jordan, is continued here. It will be given another odd turn in verse 17 when the bloody-minded Abishai volunteers to "cross over" and lop off Shimei's head.

a little beyond the summit. The summit in question is of course the top of the Mount of Olives, where David has just encountered Hushai and sent him off to Jerusalem as an undercover agent. Polzin acutely observes that the two low points of David's abasement—his humiliation by Shimei and the sexual possession of his concubines by his son—both take place on an elevation: near the summit and on the palace roof. The Hebrew term for summit used here is *roʾsh*, which is the ordinary word for "head," and as Polzin goes on to note, "head" is an organizing image of the entire episode: David goes up the mountainside with his head uncovered in a sign of mourning, as do the people with him. Hushai puts dirt on his head as a related expression of mourning. Both Hushai and Ziba are encountered on or near the head of the mountain. Abishai is prepared to cut off Shimei's head. And, as in other languages, head also designates political leader—an ironic verbal background to his moment when the head of all Israel has been displaced. Finally, Absalom's usurpation will come to a violent end when his head—the narrator does not say hair—is caught in the branches of a tree.

2. *for the king's household*. That is, for a couple of members of the king's immediate family. David, it should be recalled, has set off on foot.

the exhausted. The Hebrew term *yaʿef*—also, by metathesis, *ʿayef*, as in verse 14—straddles the two meanings of exhausted and famished.

3. *And where is your master's son?* Mephibosheth, who is crippled in both legs, would scarcely have been up to joining the flight from Jerusalem. But David, overwhelmed by betrayals from within his own court, is suspicious of Mephibosheth's absence, and it is clear that Ziba has been counting on this suspicion in his scheme to discredit Mephibosheth and take over his property. It is noteworthy that, at this late date, David still refers to Mephibosheth as "your master's son," still thinks of the long-dead Jonathan as Ziba's real master.

Today the house of Israel will give back to me my father's kingdom. There is no corroborating evidence in the story that Mephibosheth actually said these words. What in fact seems to be happening is that Ziba is flatly lying about his master in order to make himself appear to be the only loyal subject worthy of David's benefactions, and of title to Saul's property. The notion Ziba puts forth that Absalom would have turned over the throne to the surviving Saulide is highly improbable, but what he proposes to David is that the purportedly treacherous Mephibosheth sees in the general political upheaval of the rebellion an opportunity to reinstate the house of Saul.

5. *as far as Bahurim*. This is a village in the vicinity of Jerusalem on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives.

6. *and all the troops and all the warriors were at his right and at his left*. Perhaps Shimei is counting on the abject mood of David and his men to guarantee his safety in this act of extreme provocation. Yet he is clearly playing a very dangerous game—the history of David's warriors and of the sons of Zeruiah in particular as ruthless and implacable enemies is well-known to him, as the very language of his words of revilement attest. Only a great, pent-up rage against David, joined now with gloating over David's being thrust from power, could explain Shimei's act.

7. *Get out, get out, you man of blood, you worthless fellow*. The blood that, according to the narrative itself, David has on his hands is that of Uriah the Hittite, and of the fighting men of Israel who perished at Rabbath-Ammon with Uriah. But the Benjaminite Shimei clearly believes what David himself, and the narrative with him, has taken pains to refute—that the blood of the house of Saul is on David's hands: Abner, Ish-Bosheth, and perhaps even Saul and Jonathan (for David was collaborating with the Philistine Achish when

they fell at Gilboa). Hence the phrase Shimei hurls at David in his next sentence, “all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you became king,” suggesting a conjunction of murder and usurpation.

8. *and here you are, because of your evil*. Most translations understand the last phrase (a single word in the Hebrew) to mean “You are in evil circumstances,” but the prefix *bet*, which can mean “in,” also has a *causal* meaning, and that makes more sense here: David has come into dire straits, losing the throne, displaced by his own son, because of his own evil actions.

9. *Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king?* We have seen previously the idiomatic use of “dead dog” to mean the lowest of the low, David applying this designation to himself in his speech to Saul at Ein-Gedi. Here the polar contrast between “dead dog” and “my lord the king” is striking. But Abishai is also reviving the literal force of the idiom, since he proposes to deal swift death to the snarling Shimei. This is not the first time that Abishai has been prepared to kill someone on the spot: when he accompanied David into Saul’s camp (1 Samuel 26:8), he had to be restrained from his impulse to dispatch Saul with a single thrust of the spear.

10. *If he curses, it is because the* LORD *has said to him, “Curse David.”* This is one of the most astonishing turning points in this story that abounds in human surprises. The proud, canny, often implacable David here resigns himself to accepting the most stinging humiliation from a person he could easily have his men kill. David’s abasement is not a disguise, like Odysseus’s when he takes on the appearance of a beggar, but a real change in condition—from which, however, he will emerge in more than one surprising way. The acceptance of humiliation is a kind of fatalism: if someone commits such a sacrilegious act against the man who is God’s anointed king, it must be because God has decreed it. Behind that fatalism may be a sense of guilt: I am suffering all this because of what I have done, for taking Bathsheba and murdering her husband, for my inaction in Amnon’s rape of Tamar and Absalom’s murder of Amnon. The guilt is coupled with despair: as David goes on to say, When my own son is trying to kill me, what difference could it make if this man of a rival tribe, who at least has political grounds for hostility toward me, should revile me?

13. *cursing and hurling stones at him and flinging dirt*. It is with this image that the episode concludes—Shimei walking along, angrily persisting in his insults, the dirt flung a material equivalent of the words uttered.

14. *came*. Some indication of where he came seems to be required. One version of the Septuagint supplies "to the Jordan" as the answer. That would be a plausible stopping place.

15. *And Absalom . . . had come to Jerusalem, and Ahitophel was with him*. This brief switch of narrative tracks, in a pluperfect verbal form, lays the ground for the fateful clash of counsels between Ahitophel and Hushai and also provides the necessary indication that David and his people have succeeded in fleeing a good many miles to the east by the time Absalom's forces enter the city.

16. *David's friend*. As we have noted, *reaʿ*, "friend" or "companion," is a court title, but when Absalom uses it, he leans on the ordinary sense of friendship.

Long live the king. Fokkelman nicely observes that "what he particularly does not say is 'long live King Absalom.'" Thus, in a dramatic irony evident to the audience of the story and of course concealed from Absalom, Hushai is really wishing long life to *his* king—David. And again in his response to Absalom's question about his disloyalty to David, he avoids the use of Absalom's name in a sentence that he secretly applies to David: "Whom the LORD has chosen . . . his I will be and with him I will stay."

19. *And, besides, whom should I serve? Should it not be his son?* Only now does Hushai invoke the line of explanation that David instructed him to use when he came before Absalom.

20. *Give you counsel*. Both the verb and the ethical dative "you" are in the plural, though Absalom is said to be speaking to Ahitophel. Shimon Bar-Efrat proposes that the language implies Absalom is addressing both Ahitophel and Hushai, although it is from Ahitophel as his official advisor that he expects to receive counsel. The plural forms, then, suggest that Absalom has been persuaded by Hushai and has accepted him into his circle of court councillors. That inference helps make sense of the immediately following

encounter in which both men appear as members of Absalom's national security council.

21. *Come to bed with your father's concubines*. Cohabiting with the sexual consorts of a ruler is an assertion of having taken over all his prerogatives of dominion. Ahitophel's shrewd counsel especially addresses the effect on public opinion of the action proposed: after it, no one will be able to imagine a reconciliation between Absalom and his father ("let all Israel hear that you have become repugnant to your father"), and so the hand of Absalom's supporters will be strengthened, for no one will hedge his support, thinking that David and Absalom will somehow come to terms.

22. *he came to bed with his father's concubines before the eyes of all Israel*. The tent on the roof ensures sexual privacy, but Absalom's entering into it with each of the women is a public display of the act of cohabitation. Either this is to be accepted as an unrealistic event, given that there are ten concubines, or Absalom is supposed to be not only beautiful and hirsute but also a sexual athlete. His act, of course, is a fulfillment of Nathan's dire curse in chapter 12. As several commentators have noted, the usurper's sexual transgression of David's women takes place on the very palace roof from which his father first looked lustfully at Bathsheba.

23. *the counsel of Ahitophel . . . was as one would inquire of an oracle of God*. This quasireligious trust in Ahitophel's counsel is obviously from the point of view of those who seek it, there being a sour irony in likening the sordid, if pragmatic, counsel to have sex with the king's concubines to a divine oracle. In any event, this observation throws a retrospective light on David's disturbance over the news that Ahitophel was among the conspirators and his prayer to God to confound Ahitophel's counsel (15:31). Ahitophel, it seems, is a kind of Israelite Metternich or Bismarck, and David fears that in losing him he has lost a vital strategic resource. The canniness of Ahitophel's military advice will be evident in his clash with Hushai.

CHAPTER 17

[1]And Ahitophel said to Absalom, “Let me pick, pray,
twelve thousand men, and let me rise and pursue
David tonight. [2]And let me come upon him when he is
tired and slack-handed, and I shall panic him, and all
the troops who are with him will flee, and I shall strike
down the king alone. [3]And let me turn back all the
troops to you, for it is one man you seek, and all the
troops will be at peace.” [4]And the thing seemed right
in the eyes of Absalom and in the eyes of all the elders
of Israel. [5]And Absalom said, “Call, pray, to Hushai
the Archite, too, and let us hear what he, too, has to
say.” [6]And Hushai came to Absalom, and Absalom
said to him, saying, “In the following manner
Ahitophel has spoken. Shall we act on his word? If
not, you must speak.” [7]And Hushai said to Absalom,
“The counsel that Ahitophel has given is not good this
time.” [8]And Hushai said, “You yourself know of your
father and his men that they are warriors and that they
are bitter men, like a bear in the field bereaved of its
young. And your father is a seasoned fighter and he

will not spend the night with the troops. [9]Look, he will
now be hiding in some hollow or some other place,
and it will happen when they fall from the very first
that he who hears of it will say, 'There's a rout among
the troops who follow Absalom.' [10]And though he be a
valiant fellow whose heart is like the heart of a lion, he
will surely quail, for all Israel knows that your father is
a warrior, and valiant men are those who are with him.
[11]And so I counsel you—let all Israel gather round you,
from Dan to Beersheba, multitudinous as the sand that
is on the seashore, and you in person will go forward
into battle. [12]And we shall come upon him in whatever
place that he may be, and we shall light upon him as
the dew falls upon the ground, and not a single one will
be left of all the men who are with him. [13]And should
he withdraw into a town, all Israel will bear ropes to
the town and haul it away to the wadi until not a stone
remains there." [14]And Absalom said, and every man of
Israel with him, "The counsel of Hushai the Archite is
better than the counsel of Ahitophel." And the LORD
had ordained to overturn Ahitophel's good counsel in
order for the LORD to bring evil upon Absalom.

[15]And Hushai said to Zadok and to Abiathar the
priests, "Such-and-such did Ahitophel counsel

Absalom and the elders of Israel, and such-and-such I on my part counseled. [16]And now, send quickly and inform David, saying, ‘Spend not the night in the steppes of the wilderness, but rather cross over onward, lest disaster engulf the king and all the troops who are with him.’” [17]And Jonathan and Ahimaaz were stationed at Ein-Rogel, and the slavegirl would go and inform them and they would go and inform King David, for they could not be seen coming into the town. [18]And a lad saw them and informed Absalom, and the two of them went quickly and came to the house of a man in Bahurim who had a well in his courtyard, and they went down into it. [19]And the woman took a cloth and stretched it over the mouth of the well and spread groats on top of it, so that nothing could be noticed. [20]And Absalom’s servants came to the woman in the house and said, “Where are Ahimaaz and Jonathan?” And she said to them, “They’ve crossed over past the water reservoir.” And they searched and they found nothing and they went back to Jerusalem. [21]And it happened after they had gone that Ahimaaz and Jonathan came up from the well and went and informed King David, and they said to David, “Rise and cross over the water quickly, for thus has Ahitophel counseled against you.” [22]And David rose, and all the troops with him, and they

crossed over the Jordan. By the light of morning not a single one was missing who had not crossed over the Jordan.

[23]And Ahitophel saw that his counsel was not acted on, and he saddled his donkey and arose and went to his home to his town, and he left a charge for his household, and he hanged himself and died. And he was buried in the tomb of his father. [24]And David had come to Mahanaim when Absalom crossed over the Jordan, he and every man of Israel with him. [25]And Absalom had placed Amasa instead of Joab over the army, and Amasa was the son of a man named Ithra the Ishmaelite, who had come to bed with Abigail daughter of Jesse, sister of Zeruiah, Joab's mother. [26]And Israel and Absalom camped in the land of Gilead. [27]And it happened when David came to Mahanaim that Shobi son of Nahash from Rabbath-Ammon and Machir son of Amiel from Lo-Debar and Barzillai the Gileadite from Rogelim [28]brought couches and basins and earthenware, and wheat and barley and flour and parched grain and beans and lentils [29]and honey and curds from the flock and cheese from the herd. These they offered to David and the troops with

him to eat, for they thought, “The troops are hungry and exhausted and thirsty in the wilderness.”

CHAPTER 17 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Let me pick . . . twelve thousand men . . . and pursue David tonight*. Ahitophel not only offers counsel but proposes to undertake the command of the expedition himself, in striking contrast to Hushai, who begins with a lengthy descriptive statement and then uses a third-person verbal form (verse 11, “let all Israel gather round you”) to express his recommended course of action. It seems as though the urgent Ahitophel has taken on the attribute of his rival’s name, which carries the verb *ḥush*, “hurry.”

2. *let me come upon him when he is tired and slack-handed*. This is, of course, very sound advice: David and his men are in fact fatigued from their flight to the banks of the Jordan (16:14), and are likely to be vulnerable to a surprise attack.

I shall strike down the king alone. Ahitophel seeks to avoid a protracted civil war: if he can panic David’s forces into a general retreat, the death of David will then put an end to the opposition, and his troops are likely to transfer their loyalty to Absalom. The image of one man struck down as the troops flee may ironically echo David’s plan for doing away with Uriah.

3. *for it is one man you seek*. The Masoretic Text has three simple Hebrew words here that make no sense as a syntactic sequence: *keshuv hakol haʾish* (“as-return all the-man”). Many modern interpreters follow the Septuagint, which rearranges the Hebrew letters to read *keshuv kalah leʾishah*, “as a bride returns to her husband.” But, as Bar-Efrat contends, this would be a strange image for the movement of troops to the opposite side and it would violate the pointedly unmetaphoric, businesslike character of Ahitophel’s language, which stands in sharp contrast to Hushai’s elaborately figurative rhetoric of persuasion. This translation therefore adopts Bar-Efrat’s proposal that *keshuv hakol* is an inadvertent scribal repetition of *weʾashiva kol* (“let me turn back

all") at the beginning of the verse; that phrase is omitted here, and *ʾish ʾeḥad*, "one man," is presumed instead of *haʾish ʾasher*, "the man who."

4. *the elders of Israel*. This term clearly designates an official group, a kind of royal council. Ahitophel, addressing this group, acts as national security advisor.

5. *Hushai the Archite, too*. Although Hushai does not have Ahitophel's official standing, he has sufficiently won Absalom's trust that the usurper is at least curious to see whether Hushai will concur with Ahitophel. This will prove to be a fatal error.

7. *not good this time*. Shrewdly, Hushai begins by implicity conceding that as a rule Ahitophel's counsel is good—but in this specific instance, the trusty advisor has exhibited a lapse in judgment.

8. *And Hushai said*. Absalom is silent, astounded that anyone should deny the self-evident rightness of Ahitophel's counsel. So the formula for introducing direct discourse, according to the biblical convention, must be repeated, and now Hushai launches upon his cunningly devised argument.

You yourself know. Hushai's opening rhetorical move is to flatter his interlocutor: I hardly have to tell you what you yourself well know, that your father is a very dangerous adversary who cannot be attacked impulsively, without proper preparation.

warriors . . . bitter men . . . like a bear in the field . . . a seasoned fighter. Hushai uses language that, as Bar-Efrat and others have noted, recapitulates a series of moments from the earlier story of David. What he is doing in effect is invoking the legend of the heroic David, who as a boy slew bear and lion (compare the lion simile in verse 10), and who gathered round him bitter men, warriors, seasoned fighters.

he will not spend the night with the troops. This image of David as the constantly wakeful, elusive guerilla leader scarcely accords with the figure David has cut in the last several years of reported narrative—sleeping through the long afternoon while his army fights in Ammon, sedentary in his palace while internecine struggle goes on between his own children.

9. *he will now be hiding in some hollow or some other place*. Hushai's rather vague language once again evokes the time when David was a fugitive from

Saul, hiding in caves and wildernesses.

when they fall from the very first. The unspecified subject of the verb—actually emended by some as "the troops"—clearly refers to Absalom's forces: ambushed by the wily David, they will quickly panic.

10. *he will surely quail*. The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "he will surely melt."

11. *multitudinous as the sand . . . on the seashore*. This traditional simile is used to convey the idea that only overwhelmingly superior numbers, achieved through a general (and time-consuming!) conscription, can prevail against so formidable a foe as David.

12. *we shall light upon him as the dew falls upon the ground*. Hushai, as Fokkleman has observed, pairs the traditional simile of the sands of the seashore with a more innovative, yet related simile of dew on the field. The dew falls silently, effortlessly, and this is how this huge army will "light upon" David's forces. Dew, elsewhere an image of peacetime blessing, is here associated with destruction.

not a single one will be left of all the men who are with him. Ahitophel proposed a strategy through which it might be possible to kill David alone and then to enlist the support of his followers. Hushai's counsel is to annihilate David's forces, a much more violent means of preventing civil war. The bloodthirsty alternative evidently appeals to something in Absalom, who is unwilling to trust the future loyalty of the troops who have remained with David.

13. *should he withdraw into a town*. This little addendum to Hushai's scenario is intended to anticipate an obvious objection to it: the recommended course of action would give David time to pull back his forces to a strong defensive position in a fortified town. Hushai's counterargument is that with so huge an army, Absalom's people could easily take down the walls of the town stone by stone.

14. *The counsel of Hushai . . . is better than the counsel of Ahitophel*. This entire episode turns on an ingenious reversal of values. The straight-talking, clear-seeing advisor is defeated by the lying secret agent who musters the resources of a figurative, psychologically manipulative rhetoric to achieve his

ends. Yet it is the master of deception who serves the forces of legitimacy while the plain dealer looks out for the interests of a usurper and would-be parricide.

the LORD had ordained to overturn Ahitophel's good counsel. This theological explanation can be viewed as adding an overarching perspective, or as merely secondary, to the thoroughly human machinations of Hushai, instigated by David.

16. *And now, send quickly and inform David*. Although Zadok and Abiathar presumably know that Absalom has chosen to follow Hushai's counsel, they appear to be nervous that he may change his mind and implement Ahitophel's strategy, for they urge David not to waste a moment but to flee eastward across the Jordan.

17. *Ein-Rogel*. The site of this village has not been confidently identified, but it would have to be near Jerusalem to the east.

18. *the house of a man in Bahurim*. This village on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives is the hometown of Shimei, who cursed David. What appears to be reflected is a political reality in which the populace is divided between loyalists and supporters of the usurper.

19. *And the woman took a cloth*. The woman is evidently the wife of the man from Bahurim (the same Hebrew word means both "woman" and "wife," like *femme* in French and *Frau* in German). This is still another instance in the David story in which the enterprising intervention of a shrewd woman saves the day. As has often been noted, this moment alludes to the story told in Joshua 2 of Rahab the harlot, who hides the two spies sent out to Jericho by Joshua. In Joshua, the spies are hidden up above, in the roof thatch; here they hide below in the well. There may be a certain agricultural affinity between the covering of thatch and the cloth covered with groats (if that is what the anomalous Hebrew *rifot* means) under which the pairs of spies hide. In any case, the destruction of all the men of Jericho who sought Joshua's spies foreshadows the destruction of Absalom's army.

20. *They've crossed over past the water reservoir*. Rahab, too, gives the pursuers false directions about where the spies have gone. Here, the thematically crucial "cross over" is again invoked. The meaning of *mikhal*,

the word rendered here as “reservoir,” is a little doubtful, though it could be derived from a verbal root that means “to contain.”

21. *cross over the water quickly, for thus has Ahitophel counseled against you*. The two couriers now assume the worst-case scenario, that Ahitophel’s counsel will after all be followed. The reference to crossing over the water is a clear indication that David is encamped on the west bank of the Jordan.

23. *he saddled his donkey and arose and went to his home to his town, and he left a charge for his household, and he hanged himself*. This haunting notice of Ahitophel’s suicide shows him a deliberate, practical man to the very end, making all the necessary arrangements for his family and being sure to do away with himself in his hometown, where he knows he will be readily buried in the ancestral tomb. Ahitophel kills himself not only because, in quasi-Japanese fashion, he has lost face, but also out of sober calculation: he realizes that Hushai’s counsel will enable David to defeat Absalom, and with the old king returned to the throne, an archtraitor like Ahitophel will surely face death. Thus, in tying the noose around his own neck, he anticipates the executioner’s sword.

24. *Mahanaim*. This is an Israelite walled city in trans-Jordan.

25. *Ithra the Ishmaelite*. There are two different problems with the identification of Amasa’s progenitors in the Masoretic Text. The Masoretic version has “Israelite,” but this national label (rather than identification by tribe) would be strange here, and the same Ithra in 1 Chronicles 2:17—called there, in a variant of the name, Jether—is said, more plausibly, to be the son of an Ishmaelite. The fact that the father is a member of another national-ethnic group accords with the report that he “had come to bed with Abigail,” for that sexual term by no means necessarily implies marriage. The Masoretic Text makes Nahash, an Ammonite, Abigail’s father, but it looks as though that name may have drifted into this verse in scribal transcription from verse 27. 1 Chronicles 2 more plausibly reports that Jesse was Abigail’s father. She would then be the sister of David and of Zeruiah, Joab’s mother; and so Amasa and Joab, the two army commanders, are first cousins, and both of them David’s nephews.

28. *beans and lentils*. The received text adds “and parched grain” at the end of the list, an apparent scribal duplication of the word that occurs just before “beans and lentils.” This detailed catalogue of vitally needed victuals, preceded by the utensils required to serve them and something like bedrolls, is a vivid expression of loyalty to David’s beleaguered forces on the part of the trans-Jordanian Israelites and their Ammonite vassals. Barzillai’s faithfulness will be singled out when David returns.

29. *curds from the flock*. This reflects a very minor emendation of the Masoretic Text, which says “curds and flock.” In the next phrase, the Hebrew word for “cheese” (*shefot*) has no precedent but is usually understood as cheese because of the alimentary context and the likely root of the word.

CHAPTER 18

[1]And David marshaled the troops that were with him
and set over them commanders of thousands and
commanders of hundreds. [2]And David sent out the
troops—a third under Joab and a third under Abishai
son of Zeruiah, Joab's brother, and a third under Ittai
the Gittite. And the king said to the troops, "I, too,
will surely sally forth with you." [3]And the troops said,
"You shall not sally forth. For if we must flee, they will
pay us no mind, and should half of us die, they will
pay us no mind, for you are like ten thousand of us,
and so it is better that you be a help for us from the
town." [4]And the king said to them, "Whatever is good
in your eyes I shall do." And the king stood by the gate
and all the troops sallied forth by their hundreds and
their thousands. [5]And the king charged Joab and
Abishai and Ittai, saying, "Deal gently for me with the
lad Absalom." And all the troops heard when the king
charged the commanders concerning Absalom. [6]And
the troops sallied forth to the field to meet Israel, and
the battle took place in the forest of Ephraim. [7]And

the troops of Israel were routed there by David's servants, and great was the slaughter there, twenty thousand. [8]And the battle spread out over all the countryside, and the forest devoured more of the troops than the sword devoured on that day. [9]And Absalom chanced to be in front of David's servants, Absalom riding on his mule, and the mule came under the tangled branches of a great terebinth, and his head caught in the terebinth, and he dangled between heaven and earth, while the mule which was beneath him passed on. [10]And a certain man saw and informed Joab and said, "Look, I saw Absalom dangling from the terebinth." [11]And Joab said to the man informing him, "And look, you saw, and why did you not strike him to the ground there, and I would have had to give you ten pieces of silver and a belt?" [12]And the man said to Joab, "Even were I to heft in my palms a thousand pieces of silver, I would not reach out my hand against the king's son, for within our hearing the king charged you and Abishai and Ittai, saying, 'Watch for me over the lad Absalom.' [13]Otherwise, I would have wrought falsely with my own life, and nothing can be concealed from the king, while you would have stood aloof." [14]And Joab said, "Not so will I wait for you!" And he took three sticks in his palm and he thrust them into Absalom's heart, still alive in the heart

of the terebinth. [15]And ten lads, Joab's armor bearers, pulled round and struck down Absalom and put him to death. [16]And Joab sounded the ram's horn, and the troops came back from pursuing Israel, for Joab held back the troops. [17]And they took Absalom and flung him into the big hollow in the forest, and they heaped up over it a very big mound of stones. And all Israel had fled, each to his tent.

[18]And Absalom had taken and heaped up a cairn for himself in his lifetime, which is in the Valley of the King, for he said, "I have no son to make my name remembered." And he called the cairn after his name, and it is called Absalom's Monument to this day.

[19]And Ahimaaz son of Zadok had said, "Let me run, pray, and bear tidings to the king that the LORD has done him justice against his enemies." [20]And Joab said to him, "You are no man of tidings this day. You may bear tidings on another day, but this day you shall bear no tidings, for the king's son is dead." [21]And Joab said to the Cushite "Go, inform the king of what you have seen," and the Cushite bowed down before Joab and ran off. [22]And Ahimaaz son of Zadok once again said to Joab, "Whatever may be, let me, too, pray, run after

the Cushite." And Joab said, "Why should you run, my son, when yours are not welcome tidings?"
23"Whatever may be, I will run!" And he said to him, "Run." And Ahimaaz ran by the way of the Plain, and he overtook the Cushite.

24And David was sitting between the gates, and the lookout went up on the roof of the gate on the wall, and he raised his eyes and saw and, look, a man was running alone. 25And the lookout called and told the king, and the king said, "If he's alone, there are tidings in his mouth." And he came on, drawing nearer. 26And the lookout saw another man running, and the lookout called to the gatekeeper and said, "Look, a man is running alone." And the king said, "This one, too, bears tidings." 27And the lookout said, "I see the running of the first one as the running of Ahimaaz son of Zadok," and the king said, "He is a good man and with good tidings he must come." 28And Ahimaaz called out and said to the king, "All is well." And he bowed down to the king, his face to the ground, and he said, "Blessed is the LORD your God Who has delivered over the men who raised their hand against my lord the king." 29And the king said, "Is it well with the lad Absalom?" And Ahimaaz said, "I saw a great

crowd to send the king's servant Joab, and your servant, and I know not what . . ." [30]And the king said, "Turn aside, stand by!" And he turned aside and took his place. [31]And, look, the Cushite had come and the Cushite said, "Let my lord the king receive the tidings that the LORD has done you justice against all who rose against you." [32]And the king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the lad Absalom?" And the Cushite said, "May the enemies of my lord the king be like the lad, and all who have risen against you for evil!"

CHAPTER 18 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *I, too, will surely sally forth with you*. The aging David, as we have had occasion to note (see the second comment on 11:1), has long been a sedentary monarch rather than a field commander. In the present crisis, he imagines he can rise again to his old role, but the troops, who diplomatically make no reference to age or infirmity, clearly recognize he is not up to it.

3. *should half of us die, they will pay us no mind*. Like Ahitophel, the troops assume that the real object of Absalom's attack is David. But they essentially propose an opposite scenario to Absalom's: David will remain safe inside the fortified town, well behind the lines, while the troops—not panicked, as Ahitophel would have had it, but strategically deployed—will do battle against Absalom's army.

for you are like ten thousand of us. This is the reading of numerous Hebrew manuscripts and the Septuagint and Vulgate. The Masoretic Text reads "for now we are like ten thousand."

4. *the king stood by the gate*. J. P. Fokkelman has noted a wry correspondence here with the beginning of Absalom's usurpation, when he took a stance by the gate of the city and accosted each man who came by in order to enlist him to his cause.

5. *Deal gently*. This is the time-honored and eloquent rendering of the King James Version. But some philologists derive the rare verb here from a root that means "to cover" and hence construe it in context as "protect." This construction would make it a closer synonym of the verb used in the soldier's repetition of David's injunction in verse 12, "watch over."

7. *the troops of Israel were routed there*. The elision of the precise details of the battle is entirely consistent with the narrative treatment of battles elsewhere in the Bible. One may assume that the three divisions of seasoned fighters, led by their experienced commanders, attacked the Israelite army from three different sides, panicking it into disorderly flight—an outcome indicated in the "devouring" forest, where presumably the fleeing soldiers lost their way, stumbled, became entangled in the undergrowth, perhaps even slashed at each other in the dark of the wood. Throughout this episode, Absalom's forces are "Israel" and David's are his "servants." The former are numerically superior, but they behave like a poorly organized conscript army facing professional soldiers.

9. *his head caught in the terebinth, and he dangled between heaven and earth, while the mule which was beneath him passed on*. This striking and bizarre image of Absalom's penultimate moment provides a brilliant symbolic summation of his story. Most obviously, the head of hair that was his narcissistic glory is now the instrument of his fatal entrapment, Absalom the commander microcosmically enacting the fate of his army "devoured" by the forest. There is nothing supernatural here—David's forces have shrewdly taken advantage of the irregular terrain—yet there is a sense that nature is conspiring against Absalom and his men. The mule is in this period the usual mount for princes and kings (one should recall that all the king's sons ride away on their mules after Absalom has Amnon killed), so Absalom's losing his mule from under him is an image of his losing his royal seat. Having climbed from exile and rejection to the throne, he now dangles helplessly between sky and earth. The mule's "passing on" (*ʿavar*), as Polzin notes, picks

up the key verb ("cross over") that has characterized David's flight from the royal city. Fokkelman brilliantly shows that there is also a whole series of contrastive parallels between Absalom's fate and that of his councillor Ahitophel: "The councillor rides calmly on his ass to his home while the prince is abandoned by his mule, a fatal loss. He is thrown into an unknown, nameless and ignominious grave while Ahitophel is 'buried in his father's grave'. . . . With all these contrasts, they have one detail in common: both finally hang."

he dangled. The Masoretic Text has "he was given," but ancient translations into Aramaic, Syriac, Greek, and Latin, now confirmed by the Qumran Samuel scroll, read "dangled," a difference of a single consonant in the Hebrew.

11. *And look, you saw*. The contemptuous Joab throws the soldier's own words back into his face: if that's what you really saw, why didn't you have the brains to finish him off on the spot and get the reward I would have given you? Joab, in his unflinching resolution to kill Absalom in defiance of David's explicit orders to the contrary, remains the consummately calculating political man—something David once was but no longer is. When Joab thought it was politically prudent to reconcile David with Absalom, he took elaborate steps to achieve that end. Now he realizes that an Absalom allowed to survive is likely to be a source of future political dissension and that the only sure way to eliminate this threat is Absalom's death.

12. *were I to heft in my palms a thousand pieces of silver*. The soldier responds to Joab's contempt with righteous indignation, multiplying the hypothetical reward a hundredfold and turning the general act of giving silver into a concrete hefting of its weight in order to express how sacred he holds the king's injunction, which, we now see, has in fact been heard by "all the troops" (verse 5).

14. *he took three sticks in his palm*. Over against the soldier's palms hyperbolically hefting a thousand pieces of silver, Joab's palm grasps a blunt instrument of violence. The Hebrew *shevatim* means "sticks," not "darts," as it is often translated, and had they been darts, the blow would surely have been fatal. On the contrary, it seems probable that Joab's intention is not to kill the prince—after all, this military man is an experienced killer—but

rather to stun him and hurt him badly, and then to spread the responsibility for the death by ordering the warriors to finish him off. Fokkelman proposes that the three sticks jibe with the three divisions of the army, so that Joab performs a deliberately symbolic act, "executing the rebellious prince on behalf of the whole army."

into Absalom's heart, still alive in the heart of the terebinth. The two hearts, one a vulnerable human organ, the other the dense of center of the tangle of branches, produce an unsettling effect.

15. *lads*. The Hebrew *ne'arim,* "lads," in its sense of elite fighting men, rings dissonantly against David's repeated paternal designation of Absalom as *na'ar*, "lad."

16. *sounded*. The Hebrew reflects an untranslatable pun because the verb *taqa'*, "to make a piercing sound with a horn," also means to thrust or stab, and is the word just used to report Joab's blow to the heart.

17. *the big hollow*. An alternative rendering is "pit," but "hollow" is used here to preserve the verbal identity in the Hebrew between this moment and Hushai's imaginary description in chapter 17 of David's hiding in "one of the hollows." To be flung into a hole in the field and covered with a heap of stones is a shameful burial.

18. *Absalom had . . . heaped up a cairn*. This brief notice, in the pluperfect tense, draws a pointed contrast with Absalom's ignominious grave. The same verb, "to heap up," is used for both, and the cairn, or commemorative pile of stones (*not* a "pillar") is the grandiose image that is transformed into the pile of stones over Absalom's body.

I have no son to make my name remembered. Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, with reference to both its David figure and its Absalom figure, beautifully catches the pathos of these words. Those who have sought to harmonize this verse with 14:27, where Absalom is said to have fathered three sons, propose that the sons died, their early death explaining why they are left unnamed.

21. *the Cushite*. This Nubian is the third foreign messenger introduced into the story (the other two are the Egyptian slave who informs David of the whereabouts of the Amalekite raiding party and the Amalekite who reports

Saul's death to David). Joab appears to exhibit a certain paternal concern for Ahimaaz, a priest and a faithful agent of David's during the insurrection—in the next verse he addresses him as "my son." Joab is keenly aware that David has in the past shown himself capable of killing the bearer of ill tidings in a fit of rage, and so the commander prefers to let a foreigner take the risk.

22. *yours are not welcome tidings*. The Hebrew—literally, "finding tidings"—is anomalous, and has inspired both emendation and excessively ingenious interpretation. The immediate context suggests "welcome" as the most plausible meaning, and this could easily be an idiom for which there are no other occurrences in the biblical corpus, which, after all, provides only a small sampling of ancient Hebrew usage. In fact, these two words, *besorah motsei't*, could well be an idiomatic ellipsis for *besorah motsei't ḥen*, "tidings finding favor (in his eyes)."

23. *by the way of the Plain*. The Plain in question is the Jordan Valley on the east side of the river. Some have suggested that Ahimaaz overtakes the Cushite not by speed but by running along a flatter, if less direct, route in the Jordan Valley riverbed, but verses 25–27 indicate that Ahimaaz outruns the Cushite.

24. *David was sitting between the gates*. Walled cities in ancient Israel and environs often had double walls, with an inner and outer gate and a small plaza between them. Moshe Garsiel neatly observes that David's ambivalence about the armed struggle is spatially figured by his physical location: he wanted to sally forth with the army; the troops wanted him within the town; he stations himself in between. Before the battle he stood by the gate; now he is seated by the gate, awaiting the news from the front—as Polzin notes, exactly like Eli, who is told of the death of his two sons.

the lookout went up on the roof of the gate . . . and he raised his eyes and saw. This moment is quite exceptional, and striking, in representing the arrival of the two messengers visually, from the perspective of the lookout on the wall reporting to David down below in the gate plaza. David's troubles with all his sons, it should be remembered, began when he himself looked down from a roof and saw a woman bathing.

25. *If he's alone, there are tidings in his mouth*. A solitary runner is likely to be a courier. Soldiers, whether in retreat or maneuvering, would travel in

groups.

27. *He is a good man and with good tidings he must come*. This obvious non sequitur suggests that the desperately anxious David is grasping at straws. In fact, as revelatory dialogue, it shows us just how desperate he feels.

28. *All is well*. This is one word in the Hebrew, *shalom*. That word is the last two syllables of Absalom's name in Hebrew, *ʾAvshalom*, a link David will reinforce when he nervously asks, "Is it well [*shalom*] with the lad Absalom [*ʾAvshalom*]?"

Who has delivered over the men who raised their hands against my LORD *the king*. Ahimaaz hastens to report, in terms that express both his Israelite piety and his loyalty to the king, the general defeat of the usurper's army. He of course says nothing of Absalom's fate.

29. *Is it well with the lad Absalom*? This seems to be David's overriding concern, not the military victory. Again and again, he insists on the term of affection, "lad," for the rebel son who would have killed him. The tension between his political role, which, as Joab understood, requires Absalom's destruction, and his paternal role is painfully palpable. In this connection, it is noteworthy that David, so much the emotionally vulnerable father here, is consistently referred to as "the king," not as "David."

I saw a great crowd to send the king's servant. This is nearly gibberish but not because of any corruption of the text. Ahimaaz has been posed a question he does not dare answer, and so he begins to talk nervously and incoherently ("and I know not what . . .").

30. *Turn aside, stand by*. David, realizing he is unlikely to extract anything from the babbling Ahimaaz, decides to wait and interrogate the second messenger, whose arrival is imminent.

31. *Let my lord the king receive the tidings*. The Cushite is considerably more brusque than his predecessor. He does not begin with a reassuring "All is well." There is no indication of his bowing down before the king. He proceeds quickly to the report of the victory, and though the language of that report approximately parallels Ahimaaz's language, it is briefer, and ends with "against you" instead of the more deferential "against my lord the king."

32. *May the enemies of my LORD the king be like the lad*. The Cushite promptly and clearly responds by reporting Absalom's death, although even he has enough sense to phrase it indirectly, neither mentioning Absalom by name nor using the word "died." In referring to the usurper as "the lad," he is quoting David, but without having picked up the crucial cue of David's paternal feelings reflected in the word. He blithely assumes that because Absalom was at the head of "all who have risen against" the king, the news of his death will be welcome. It strikes exactly the right note that the Cushite's very last word is "evil" (or, "harm").

CHAPTER 19

[1]And the king was shaken. And he went up to the upper room over the gate and he wept, and thus he said as he went, “My son, Absalom! My son, my son, Absalom! Would that I had died in your stead! Absalom, my son, my son!” [2]And it was told to Joab, “Look, the king is weeping and he is grieving over Absalom.” [3]And the victory on that day turned into mourning for all the troops, for the troops had heard on that day, saying, “The king is pained over his son.” [4]And the troops stole away on that day to come to the town as troops disgraced in their flight from the battle would steal away. [5]And the king covered his face, and the king cried out with a loud voice, “My son, Absalom! Absalom, my son, my son!” [6]And Joab came to the king within the house and said, “You have today shamed all your servants who have saved your life today and the lives of your sons and daughters and the lives of your wives and the lives of your concubines, [7]to love those who hate you and to hate those who love you. For you have said today that you have no

commanders or servants. For I know today that were Absalom alive and all of us today dead, then would it have been right in your eyes! [8]And now, rise, go out, and speak to the heart of your servants. For by the LORD I have sworn, if you go not out, that not a man shall spend the night with you, and this will be a greater evil for you than any evil that has befallen you from your youth until now." [9]And the king arose and sat in the gate, and to all the troops they told, saying, "Look, the king is sitting in the gate." And all the troops came before the king, while Israel had fled each man to his tent.

[10]And all the people were deliberating throughout the tribes of Israel, saying, "The king rescued us from the clutches of our enemies and he saved us from the clutches of the Philistines, but now he has fled the land before Absalom, [11]and Absalom, whom we anointed over us, has died in battle. And now why do you not speak up to bring back the king?" [12]And King David had sent to Zadok and to Abiathar the priests, saying, "Speak to the elders of Judah, saying, 'Why should you be the last to bring back the king to his house when the word of all Israel has come to the king regarding his house? [13]You are my brothers. You are my bone

and my flesh, and why should you be the last to bring back the king?' [14]And to Amasa you shall say, 'Are you not my bone and my flesh? So may the LORD do to me, and even more, if you will not be commander of the army before me for all time instead of Joab,'" [15]And he inclined the heart of all the men of Judah as a single man, and they sent to the king: "Come back, you and all your servants."

[16]And the king turned back, and he came to the Jordan, and Judah had come to Gilgal to go to meet the king to bring the king across the Jordan. [17]And Shimei son of Gera the Benjaminite from Bahurim hastened and went down with the men of Judah to meet King David. [18]And a thousand men were with him from Benjamin, and Ziba, the lad of the house of Saul and his fifteen sons and his twenty slaves with him, and they rushed down to the Jordan before the king. [19]And as the crossing over was going on, to bring across the king's household and to do what was good in his eyes, Shimei son of Gera flung himself before the king as he was crossing the Jordan [20]and he said to the king, "Let not my lord reckon it a crime, and do not remember the perverse thing your servant did on the day my lord the king went out from Jerusalem, that

the king should pay it mind. [21]For your servant knows
that it was I who offended, and, look, I have come
today first of all the house of Joseph to go down to
meet my lord the king." [22]And Abishai son of Zeruiah
spoke out and said, "For this should not Shimei be put
to death? For he cursed the LORD's anointed." [23]And
David said, "What do I have to do with you, sons of
Zeruiah, that you should become my adversary today?
Should today a man of Israel be put to death? For I
surely know that today I am king over Israel." [24]And
the king said to Shimei, "You shall not die." And the
king swore to him.

[25]And Mephibosheth son of Saul had come down to
meet the king, and he had not dressed his feet or
trimmed his moustache, and his garments he had not
laundered from the day the king had gone until the day
he came back safe and sound. [26]And it happened when
he came from Jerusalem to meet the king, that the
king said to him, "Why did you not go with me,
Mephibosheth?" [27]And he said, "My lord the king! My
servant deceived me. For your servant thought, 'I'll
saddle me the donkey and ride on it and go with the
king,' for your servant is lame. [28]And he slandered
your servant to my lord the king, and my lord the king

is like a messenger of God, and do what is good in your eyes. [29]For all my father's house are but men marked for death to my lord the king, yet you set your servant among those who eat at your table. And what right still do I have to cry out still in appeal to the king?" [30]And the king said to him, "Why should you still speak your words? I say—you and Ziba shall divide the field." [31]And Mephibosheth said to the king, "Let him even take all, seeing that my lord the king has come safe and sound to his house."

[32]And Barzillai the Gileadite had come down from Rogelim, and he crossed over the Jordan with the king to send him off from the Jordan. [33]And Barzillai was very aged, eighty years old, and he had provided for the king during his stay in Mahanaim, for he was a very wealthy man. [34]And the king said to Barzillai, "You, cross over with me, and I shall provide for you by me in Jerusalem." [35]And Barzillai said to the king, "How many are the days of the years of my life that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? [36]Eighty years old I am today. Do I know between good and evil? Does your servant taste what I eat and what I drink? Do I still hear the voice of men and women singing? And why should your servant still be a burden

on my lord the king? [37]Your servant can barely cross
over the Jordan, and why should the king give me this
recompense? [38]Let your servant, pray, turn back, that I
may die in my own town by the tomb of my father and
my mother, and, look, let your servant Chimham cross
over with my lord the king, and do for him what is
good in your eyes." [39]And the king said, "With me
shall Chimham cross over, and I will do for him what
is good in your eyes, and whatever you choose for me,
I will do for you." [40]And all the troops crossed over the
Jordan, and the king crossed over, and the king kissed
Barzillai and blessed him, and he went back to his
place. [41]And the king crossed over to Gilgal, and
Chimham crossed over with him, and all the people of
Judah, they brought the king across, and half of the
people of Israel as well. [42]And, look, all the men of
Israel were coming toward the king, and they said to
the king, "Why have our brothers, the men of Judah,
stolen you away, bringing the king across the Jordan
with his household, and all David's men with him?"
[43]And all the men of Judah answered the men of Israel,
"For the king is kin to us. And why should you be
incensed over this thing? Have we eaten anything of
the king's? Have we been given any gift?" [44]And the
men of Israel answered the men of Judah and they
said, "We have ten parts in the king, even in David,

more than you, and why have you treated us with contempt? Was not our word first to bring back the king?" And the word of the men of Judah was harsher than the word of the men of Israel.

CHAPTER 19 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *My son, my son, Absalom!* Much of the way experience transforms David in the course of his story can be seen through his changing responses to the deaths of those close to him. When Jonathan and Saul died, he intoned an eloquent elegy. When Abner was murdered, he declaimed a much briefer elegy, coupled with a speech dissociating himself from the killing. When his infant son by Bathsheba died, he spoke somber words about his own mortality and the irreversibility of death. Now, the eloquent David is reduced to a sheer stammer of grief, repeating over and over the two Hebrew words, *beni ʾAvshalom*, "my son, Absalom." Although the narrator continues to refer to David only as "the king," in the shifting conflict between his public and private roles the latter here takes over entirely: Absalom is not the usurper who drove him from the throne but only "my son," and David is the anguished father who would rather have died, that his son might have lived.

3. *for the troops had heard on that day*. Before the battle they had all heard David's admonition to his commanders to do no harm to Absalom. Now they hear of his grief and are smitten with shame and apprehension—whether out of empathy for their beloved leader, or guilt over the complicity some of their number share in Absalom's death, or fear of potential violence between David and Joab.

4. *the troops stole away . . . as troops disgraced in their flight from the battle*. This striking image of victory transformed into the bitterness of defeat picks up verbal threads, as Moshe Garsiel has perceptively noted, from the beginning of Absalom's insurrection (chapter 15). There, the usurper stood at

the gate, as David is here made to go out and sit in the gate. Absalom was said to "steal the heart" of the men of Israel as here the men steal away, and in order to recover dominion David is enjoined to speak to their heart (verse 8). The disheartened slipping away of the troops suggests that Joab is addressing an imminent danger of the disintegration of the army.

5. *the king covered his face*. The gesture makes perfect psychological sense, while the verb used, *laʾat,* is the same one David chose when he said "Deal gently [*leʾat*] with the lad Absalom."

6. *within the house*. The implication is that Joab speaks with David in private. The thematic opposition to this term is "in the gate," where Joab will send David.

You have today shamed all your servants who have saved your life today. Again and again here Joab insists on the word "today." It is this very moment, he suggests, this crucial turning point, that you must seize in order to reestablish your reign. You cannot allow yourself to think of the past, of your history as Absalom's father: as king, you must confront *today*, with its challenge and its political responsibilities.

7. *to love those who hate you and to hate those who love you*. Joab uses rhetorical exaggeration in order to elevate David's paternal attachment to Absalom into a generalized, perverse political principle: if you show such extravagant fondness for the usurper who sought your life, then you are behaving as though all your enemies were your friends and your friends your enemies.

For you have said today that you have no commanders or servants. That is, by exhibiting such love for your archenemy, you are showing flagrant disregard for the loyal officers and followers to whose devotion you owe your life.

8. *speak to the heart of your servants*. This personal act of rallying the men is deemed urgently necessary by Joab because the army has already begun to disperse ("steal away").

if you go not out . . . not a man shall spend the night with you. These words are a naked threat: if David does not follow Joab's order, the commander will encourage the army to abandon the king, and he will be alone, without power or troops, engulfed in "a greater evil" than any that has

befallen him in his long and arduous career. In all this, Joab's verbal assault on David, however motivated by pressing considerations of practical politics, is also a defense of his own flouting of David's injunction to protect Absalom. David at this point knows only the bare fact of his son's death, not who was responsible for it. This is something that he will inevitably soon learn, and that bitter knowledge is surely registered in his decision to replace Joab with Amasa (verse 14).

9. *the king arose and sat in the gate*. Fokkelman brilliantly observes the disparity between Joab's exhortation and the report of David's action. Joab had said, "go out, and speak to the heart of your servants." Instead of these active gestures, we see David passively sitting in the gate while the troops come to him, and we are given no reported speech for him. In Fokkelman's reading, this gap between command and act "call[s] up the image of a man beaten to a pulp, who can barely stand, and does only the minimum requested or expected of him."

10. *deliberating*. The verb *nadon* in this verse is conventionally related to the noun *madon,* "quarrel" or "contention." But in fact what the people say is not contentious, and it is preferable to derive the passive (perhaps implicitly reflexive) verbal form here from *dun*, to judge, consider, or deliberate.

12. *Why should you be the last to bring back the king*. Throughout this episode, there is a central focus on who will be first and who will be last to show support for the Davidic restoration. The northern tribes, Israel, have already evinced support (verse 10), and David is concerned to enlist the backing of his own tribe, Judah, which had largely swung to Absalom during the insurrection.

regarding his house. Or simply, "to his house." Many textual critics regard this phrase as a mistaken scribal duplication of the same phrase earlier in this verse.

13. *You are my bone and my flesh*. That is, you are Judahites, just as I am, and so there is actual kinship between us.

14. *to Amasa . . . "Are you not my bone and my flesh?"* Now the phrase is no longer hyperbolic, for Amasa is David's nephew. The extraordinary offer of the post of commander of the army to Absalom's general in the rebellion

reflects David's knack for combining personal and political motives. It is a slap in the face to Joab, the killer of David's son, against whom David evidently does not dare to take any more direct steps of vengeance. At the same time, the hesitation of the Judahites in rallying behind the restored king suggests that an act such as the appointment of Amasa as commander may be required to enlist their support. Joab, not surprisingly, will not quietly acquiesce in his abrupt dismissal from the office he has held since the beginning of David's career.

15. *he inclined the heart*. It is not clear whether the Hebrew, characteristically overgenerous in its use of pronouns, intends the "he" to refer to David or to Amasa. In either case, David's overture succeeds in bringing the tribe of Judah into his camp.

16. *to bring the king across the Jordan*. The verb *ʿavar,* "cross over," and its causative form, *haʿavir,* "to bring across," which thematically defined David's exodus from Jerusalem in chapter 15, dominates this episode, too, as the crossing over in flight to the east is reversed by the crossing over westward back to Jerusalem.

17. *Shimei son of Gera*. There is an approximate symmetry between David's encounters in his exodus from Jerusalem and those that now occur in his return. Then he met a hostile Shimei, now he meets a contrite Shimei. Then he met Ziba, who denounced his master Mephibosheth; now he meets Mephibosheth himself, who defends his own loyalty. Then he spoke with Ittai, the loyalist who insisted on accompanying him; now he speaks with Barzillai, the proven loyalist who refuses to accompany him back to the capital. The encounter with Hushai, who becomes David's secret agent, has no counterpart here.

21. *first of all the house of Joseph to go down to meet my lord the king*. Shimei, who has rushed down to the Jordan in order to demonstrate his newfound loyalty to David, uses "the house of Joseph" loosely to refer to the northern tribes. He is, of course, actually from the tribe of Benjamin. He "goes down" because his hometown of Bahurim is in the high country near Jerusalem.

22. *For this should not Shimei be put to death?* Abishai remains true to character, for the third time prepared to kill someone on the impulse of the moment.

23. *What do I have to do with you, sons of Zeruiah*. These words by now are a kind of refrain, as David seeks to dissociate himself from the murderous sons of Zeruiah. It is noteworthy that though Abishai alone has just spoken, David, mindful of the killing of Absalom, includes Joab as well in his protest by using the plural "sons of Zeruiah."

Should today a man of Israel be put to death? David's "today" is an implicit rejoinder to Joab's "today" in the confrontation over his mourning Absalom. This day of victorious return is a moment for national reconciliation and hence for a general amnesty for both the Saulides and the supporters of Absalom. In the course of time, it will appear that David in effect restricts his pledge not to harm Shimei to an extended "today."

25. *he had not dressed his feet or trimmed his moustache, and his garments he had not laundered*. These acts of mourning, reported to us by the authoritative narrator, are an indication that in fact Mephibosheth remained loyal to David throughout the insurrection, and that Ziba's denunciation was a self-interested calumny. (Some interpret "dressing"—literally "doing"—the feet as cutting the toenails, though the parallel usage often cited from Deuteronomy has "toenails," not "feet," as the object of the verb "to do.")

26. *when he came from Jerusalem*. The Masoretic Text simply says "Jerusalem" but this encounter presumably takes place down by the Jordan. One version of the Septuagint removes the word from this verse and places it at the end of verse 25.

27. *I'll saddle me the donkey . . . for your servant is lame*. The evident implication is that it would have taken the crippled Mephibosheth some time to get ready to go after the fleeing king. Meanwhile, his servant headed out before him in order to denounce him, perhaps actually leaving his master awaiting his help to saddle the donkey.

29. *For all my father's house are but men marked for death to my lord the king*. Mephibosheth's choice of words—the literal phrasing of the Hebrew is "men of death"—is an oblique, perhaps inadvertent, concession that he shares

what must have been the general suspicion among the Saulides that David was responsible for the chain of violent deaths in the house of Saul.

30. *Why should you still speak your words?* David cuts off Mephibosheth impatiently, picking up the "still" that the anxious supplicant has just twice used.

you and Ziba shall divide the field. This "Solomonic" judgment may actually be another sign that David has lost his ruler's grip. For if Ziba has told the truth about his master, Mephibosheth as a traitor would deserve nothing, except perhaps capital punishment. And if Ziba was lying, then the servant would deserve nothing except a harsh legal penalty for defamation. Perhaps Mephibosheth is paying a price for having betrayed that he thought David was responsible for the Saulide deaths: in this reading, David knows Mephibosheth is telling the truth, but he punishes him for assuming David was involved in the killings by decreeing Mephibosheth will lose half his property.

31. *Let him even take all*. By this verbal gesture, Mephibosheth shows himself loyal to David to the end, regardless of personal benefit. These words could well be an implicit judgment on the unwisdom of David's decree.

32. *Barzillai the Gileadite*. David's three encounters at the ford of the Jordan from a progressive series on the scale of loyalty: first Shimei, who has heaped insults on him and now pleads for forgiveness; then Mephibosheth, whose loyalty, although probably genuine, has been called into question by Ziba; and then the unswervingly devoted old man, Barzillai.

35. *How many are the days of the years of my life*. Though this rhetorical question literally echoes the question that Pharaoh asks the aged Jacob, the meaning is the opposite—not "How long have I lived?" but "How long could I possibly have left to live?"

38. *your servant Chimham*. This is presumably Barzillai's son.

40. *the king kissed Barzillai*. This entire catastrophic sequence in the David story began with David's cold kiss to the son from whom he had been estranged, followed by Absalom's calculated kiss for every man he enlisted to his cause at the gate of the city. Now the king bestows a kiss of true affection

upon the loyal old man who provided for him and his troops in their moment of need.

41. *the king crossed over . . . and Chimham crossed over with him, and . . . they brought the king across*. The crossing over eastward of the banished king, which never should have occurred, is now decisively reversed, as David and all his people come across the Jordan and head for Jerusalem. But, as the immediately following dialogue intimates, David's political troubles are far from over.

to Gilgal. This is the gathering place where Saul was consecrated as king and later severed by Samuel from his role as God's anointed.

half of the people of Israel as well. In all likelihood, "half" is used loosely to indicate simply that some members of the northern tribes took part in bringing David to Gilgal.

42. *and they said to the king*. Although their complaint is addressed to the king, he never answers them. Instead, as Fokkelman notes, the scene breaks down into a squabble between Israelite and Judahite. Once again, David appears to be losing his regal grip.

43. *the king is kin to us*. That is, David is actually a member of the tribe of Judah.

44. *We have ten parts in the king, even in David, more than you*. Though ten to one might merely be idiomatic for great preponderance, it seems likely that they allude to the fact that they are ten tribes to Judah's one—if David is king of the entire nation, this gives them ten times the claim to the king that Judah has. The phrase "even in David" (or, "also in David") is a little odd, and the Septuagint reads instead, "also I am firstborn more than you." It should be noted that all the pronouns in this dialogue in the Hebrew are cast in the first-person singular, referring to a singular, collective "man of Israel" and "man of Judah," but that usage doesn't quite work in English.

the word of the men of Judah was harsher than the word of the men of Israel. The episode concludes in a clash of words, to be followed by a clash of swords. The implication of the greater "harshness" (or, "hardness") of the Judahite words is aptly caught by the medieval Hebrew commentator David Kimchi: "Their word was harsher and stronger than the word of the men of Israel, and the men of Judah spoke harshly to the men of Israel, with the king

saying nothing to them. Therefore the men of Israel were incensed and they followed after [the rebel] Sheba son of Bichri."

CHAPTER 20

[1]And there chanced to be there a worthless fellow
named Sheba son of Bichri, a Benjaminite. And he
blew the ram's horn and said,

"We have no share in David,
no portion have we in Jesse's son
—
every man to his tent, O Israel!"

[2]And all the men of Israel turned away from David to
follow Sheba son of Bichri, but the men of Judah
clung to their king from the Jordan to Jerusalem.

[3]And David came to his house in Jerusalem, and the
king took his ten concubine women whom he had left
to watch over the house, and he placed them in a
house under watch, but he did not come to bed with
them, and they were shut up till their dying day in
living widowhood.

[4]And the king said to Amasa, “Muster me the men of
Judah, in three days, and you take your stand here.”
[5]And Amasa went to muster Judah, and he missed the
appointed time that was set for him. [6]And David said
to Abishai, “Now Sheba son of Bichri will do us more
harm than Absalom. You, take your master’s servants
and pursue him, lest he find him fortified towns, and
elude our gaze.” [7]And Joab’s men sallied forth after
him, and the Cherithites and the Pelethites and all the
warriors. And they sallied forth from Jerusalem to
pursue Sheba son of Bichri. [8]They were just by the
great stone which is in Gibeon when Amasa came
before them, and Joab was girt in his battle garb, and
he had on a belt for a sword strapped to his waist in its
sheath, and as he came forward, it slipped out. [9]And
Joab said to Amasa, “Is it well with you, my brother?”
And Joab’s right hand grasped Amasa’s beard so as to
kiss him. [10]And Amasa did not watch out for the sword
which was in Joab’s hand, and he struck him with it in
the belly and spilled his innards to the ground—no
second blow did he need—and he died. And Joab with
Abishai his brother pursued Sheba son of Bichri.
[11]And a man stood over him, one of Joab’s lads, and
said, “Whoever favors Joab and whoever is for David
—after Joab!” [12]And Amasa was wallowing in blood in
the midst of the road, and the man saw that all the

troops had come to a halt, and he moved Amasa aside from the road to the field and flung a cloak over him when he saw that all who came upon him had come to a halt. [13]When he had been removed from the road, every man passed on after Joab to pursue Sheba son of Bichri. [14]And he passed through all the tribes of Israel to Abel of Beth-Maacah, and all the Bichrites assembled and they, too, came in after him. [15]And all the troops who were with Joab came and besieged him in Abel of Beth-Maacah, and they heaped up a siege mound against the town and it stood up against the rampart, and they were savaging the wall to bring it down. [16]And a wise woman called out from the town,

> "Listen, listen—speak, pray, to Joab,
> approach here, that I may speak to
> you."

[17]And he approached her, and the woman said, "Are you Joab?" And he said, "I am." And she said to him, "Listen to the words of your servant." [18]And he said, "I am listening," And she said, saying,

> "Surely would they speak in days of
> old, saying:

‘Surely will they ask counsel of
Abel, and thus conclude.’
[19]I am of the peaceable steadfast of
Israel.
You seek to put to death a mother
city in Israel.
Why should you engulf the
LORD’s heritage?”

[20]And Joab answered and said, “Far be it from me, far be it, that I should engulf and that I should destroy. [21]It isn’t so. But a man from the high country of Ephraim named Sheba son of Bichri has raised his hand against the king, against David. Give over him alone, that I may turn away from the town.” And the woman said to Joab, “Look, his head is about to be flung to you from the wall.” [22]And the woman came in her wisdom to all the people, and they cut off the head of Sheba son of Bichri and flung it to Joab. And he blew the ram’s horn and they dispersed from the town, every man to his tent, but Joab came back to Jerusalem.

[23]And Joab was over all the army of Israel and Benaiah son of Johoiada was over the Cherithites and the Pelethites. [24]And Adoram was over the corvée, and

Jehoshaphat son of Ahilud was recorder. [25]And Sheva was scribe, and Zadok and Abiathar, priests. [26]And Ira the Jairite was also a priest to David.

CHAPTER 20 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *there chanced to be there*. The narrative is a direct continuation of the end of the previous chapter, and so "there" is the national assembly grounds at Gilgal where the northern tribes, Israel, and the tribe of Judah have just quarreled. The northerners, resentful of the harshness of the Judahites' words, in which the members of David's own tribe claimed a special proprietary relationship with the king, are ripe for the appeal of a demagogue such as Sheba, who is at once identified as "a worthless fellow."

We have no share in David. This is a defiant reversal of the claim just made by the Israelites that they had "ten parts" in the king. Later, in 1 Kings, when the monarchy actually splits in two, the same rallying cry will be used by the secessionists.

2. *the men of Judah clung to their king*. David is, of course, "their" king because he is from the tribe of Judah. The reach of the tribe stretches west to east, from the Jordan to Jerusalem, and also to the south of Jerusalem, while the rebel forces are to the north.

3. *David came to his house in Jerusalem, and . . . took his ten concubine women*. The concubines have become taboo to David because they cohabited with Absalom his son. But this whole sad notice suggests that David now cannot fully "come back to his house." The women he left, perhaps foolishly and surely futilely, "to watch over the house" are now sequestered "in a house under watch." There is a wry echo in all this of that early moment of David's investment of Jerusalem when he was confronted by another wife he had left behind who had slept with another man—Michal. She had no child "till her

dying day"—an image of interrupted conjugality that is multiplied tenfold here with the concubines.

4. *the king said to Amasa*. Amasa, Absalom's commander in the rebellion, has been designated by David to replace Joab. At the margins of the narrative report lurks the question, Where is Joab? The answer forthcoming will be savage.

take your stand. That is, report to me.

6. *Now Sheba son of Bichri will do us more harm than Absalom*. Although it is not clear why Amasa is late for his appointed meeting with David (perhaps his appearance at Gibeon in verse 8 suggests that he decided, out of military considerations, to pursue Sheba at once without reporting back to the king), David's unjustified panic is another indication that he has lost his political composure. By sending out Abishai, Joab's brother, to give chase after Sheba, he sets up the circumstances for Joab's murder of Amasa and his subsequent return to power.

You, take your master's servants. The obtrusively imperative "you" is very brusque, at the same time expressing David's intention to designate Abishai, and not his brother, to command the pursuit.

and elude our gaze. The two Hebrew words here, *wehitsil ʿeynenu*, are problematic. They might mean "and save [himself] [from] our eyes" (the bracketed words would be implied via ellipsis by the Hebrew); or, if the verb here is vocalized differently, the words might mean "and cast a shadow over our eyes." Needless to say, many emendations have been proposed. In any case, the idea strongly suggested by the context is that Sheba would place himself beyond the reach of pursuit by withdrawing into fortified towns. In the event, he is trapped inside just such a town.

7. *Joab's men sallied forth*. J. P. Fokkelman must be credited with seeing what an extraordinary designation this is. David has dismissed Joab. The elite warriors are in any case David's men (note how David has just referred to them in addressing Abishai as "your master's servants"). The fact that they are here called "Joab's men" suggests where the real power is, and where Joab's brother Abishai assumes it must be. The clear implication is that the supposedly dismissed Joab is actually leading his men in the pursuit.

8. *They were just by the great stone which is in Gibeon*. Gibeon, it should be recalled, is the very place where the civil war between the house of Saul (Israel) and the house of David (Judah) began. That first battle (2 Samuel 2) began with a choreographed duel between twelve champions from each side, each warrior clasping the head of his adversary and stabbing him in the side. Joab's posture in the killing of Amasa strikingly recalls those lethal gestures.

he had on a belt for a sword strapped to his waist . . . and as he came forward, it slipped out. The sword—often, as here, a weapon closer to a long dagger—was customarily strapped against the left thigh, for easy unsheathing across the lower belly by a right-handed fighter. Joab may have deliberately fastened the sword to his waist so that it would slip out of the scabbard as he leaned forward to embrace Amasa. The last two verbs here are rather cryptic in the Hebrew: literally "he/it went out and she/it fell/slipped." Since "sword" is feminine in Hebrew, that is the only likely subject for "slipped," and "he" (Joab) is the plausible masculine subject for "went out" (or, "came forward"), though it could also be the scabbard. Josephus's reading of this verse remains the most persuasive one: the wily Joab, deliberately allowing his dagger to slip to the ground as he bends forward, then snatches it up with his left hand while his right hand grasps Amasa's beard.

9. *so as to kiss him*. We remember David's cool kiss to Absalom, then Absalom's demagogic kiss, as we witness this kiss, which is a prelude to murder.

10. *Amasa did not watch out for the sword which was in Joab's hand*. His attention caught by Joab's gesture of affection, Amasa does not think to look at Joab's left hand, which one would not normally expect to hold a weapon. (Has Joab learned the lesson of Ehud, Judges 3, who takes the Moabite king Eglon by surprise with a dagger thrust to the belly delivered by the left hand?) Joab's manual proficiency as a killer reinforces the perception that he struck at Absalom in the heart with sticks, not "darts," in order to hurt him badly but deliberately not to finish him off. The phrase "did not watch out" rhymes ironically with the plight of the ten concubines left to watch over the house and condemned to a house under watch.

he struck him with it in the belly and spilled his innards to the ground. It is by a blow to the belly (*ḥomesh*) that Abner's brother Asahel died at this same place, Gibeon, and by a thrust to the belly that Joab killed Abner in revenge.

The spilling of the innards implies a horrendous welter of blood, and that gruesome image of violent death will then pursue Joab through the story to his own bloody end.

11. *Whoever favors Joab and whoever is for David*. In dismissing Joab, David had severed himself from his longtime commander. This henchman of Joab's smoothly sutures the rift by bracketing Joab and David in these parallel clauses, publicly assuming that Joab is once more David's commander.

12. *Amasa was wallowing in blood . . . and . . . all the troops had come to a halt*. The soldiers come to a halt because they are confounded by seeing their commander reduced to a bloody corpse, and they also recoil from the idea of treading on the blood of the murdered man, who lies in the midst of the roadway.

14. *And he passed through*. The switch in scene is effected, in accordance with an established technique of biblical narrative, by a repetition of the verb in a slightly different meaning: the Judahite soldiers "pass on" beyond the corpse at Gibeon; the object of their pursuit "passes through" the territories of the northern tribes.

Abel of Beth-Maacah. "Abel" means "brook." Thus "Beth-Maacah" is required in order to distinguish it from other place-names that have a brook component. This fortified town is located near the northern border of ancient Israel.

they, too, came in after him. That is, they withdraw with him into the shelter of the fortified town.

15. *savaging the wall*. This is the first of several verbal clues intended to establish a link between this episode involving a "wise woman" and the episode of the wise woman of Tekoa that prepared the way for Absalom's return to Jerusalem, which then eventuated in the rebellion. Both women seek to deflect an impulse of vengeful violence. The Tekoite implores the king to take steps "that the blood avenger not savage this much" (2 Samuel 14:11). She fears those bent on "destroying me and my son together from God's heritage" (14:16), just as the wise woman of Abel of Beth-Maacah asks Joab, "Why should you engulf the LORD'S heritage?" He responds by saying "Far be it from me . . . that I should engulf and that I should destroy", "destroy" uses the same root as the verb rendered as "savage."

16. *Listen, listen—speak, pray, to Joab*. As befits a professional wise woman in a place evidently famous for its oracle (see verse 18), she speaks in poetry, in a style that is elevated, ceremonially repetitive, hieratic, and at least a little obscure.

18. *Surely would they speak . . . Surely will they ask counsel*. The Hebrew expresses this emphasis by repeating the verbal root, first as infinitive, then in conjugated form: *daber yedaberu, shaʾol yeshaʾalu*. Since the woman extravagantly uses this sort of initial reiteration three times in four clauses, the effect is incantatory. The burden of what she says here is that Abel has long been a revered city, so why would Joab think of destroying it?

and thus conclude. This might mean, come to a conclusion regarding the question posed to the oracle at Abel, but the Hebrew is rather enigmatic, perhaps because the wise woman herself is quoting an ancient proverb, in archaic language, about the town.

19. *I am of the peaceable steadfast of Israel*. She at once affirms her loyalty to the national cause ("I am no rebel," she implies) and her commitment to peace rather than violence. Some interpreters understand the first term of this construct chain, *shelumey ʾemuney yisraʾel*, as "whole" (from *shalem*), but the context argues for a reference to peace.

to put to death a mother city in Israel. The literal Hebrew is "town and mother," a hendiadys that clearly means something like "principal town." (The phrase would remain idiomatic in later Hebrew.) Since in biblical Hebrew the suburbs or outlying villages around a town are called "daughters," the logic of the idiom is evident. It is, however, an idiom that appears only here in the entire biblical corpus, and there is thematic point in its use. In this narrative reflecting a male warrior culture and acts of terrible violence, from decapitation to evisceration, a series of female figures—Abigail, the Tekoite, the wise woman of Abel—intervene to avert violence. The city itself is figured as a mother; its destruction would be a kind of matricide, and the wise woman speaks on behalf of the childbearers and nurturers of life in Israelite society to turn aside Joab's terrible swift sword.

21. *But a man from the high country of Ephraim*. This region is part of the territory of Benjamin, Saul's tribe. By providing this identification, Joab

distinguishes the rebel who is the object of his pursuit from the non-Benjaminite inhabitants of Abel of Beth-Maacah.

against the king, against David. By using this apposition (instead of the usual "King David") Joab implicitly responds to some doubt as to whether in fact it is David who is the king. Recent political events might well have triggered general questioning about David's grip on the monarchy.

Look, his head is about to be flung to you. This decisive woman, instead of using a simple future form, employs a participial form introduced by the presentative *hineh*, as if to say: it's already on the way to being done.

22. *in her wisdom*. The wisdom is her shrewdness in finding a way to avert a general massacre (as the wise Abigail had done in mollifying David, bent on vengeance) and perhaps also in the aptness of rhetoric she no doubt employs to persuade the people.

he blew the ram's horn and they dispersed . . . every man to his tent. These phrases echo the ones used in verse 1 to report the beginning of Sheba's rebellion, and thus conclude the episode in a symmetric envelope structure.

but Joab came back to Jerusalem. He comes back to Jerusalem, not to his house ("tent") in nearby Bethlehem. The implication, as Bar-Efrat notes, is that he now resumes his post as David's commander. David evidently has little say in the matter, being confronted with a fait accompli of military power. This clause then provides a motivation for the introduction of the notice of David's governing council in the next three verses.

23. *Joab was over all the army of Israel*. This list of David's royal bureaucracy parallels the one in 8:16–18, with a couple of instructive differences. The two serve as bookends to David's reign in Jerusalem. The first is introduced after he has consolidated his mini-empire, and this one after the suppression of two successive rebellions and just before the account of David's last days in 1 Kings 1–2. (As we shall see, the remaining four chapters of 2 Samuel are actually a series of appendices to the story proper and not a direct continuation of it.) In chapter 8, Joab was simply "over the army." Here, after the defeat of the secessionist northern tribes, he is said to be "over all the army of Israel." Adoram as supervisor of the corvée does not appear in the earlier list but is inserted here to anticipate the role he will play in Solomon's grand building projects, and he may in fact have been a much later appointment by David. The name of the royal scribe, Sheva, is

anomalous in the Hebrew, and may be the same person identified in chapter 8 as Seraiah.

26. *And Ira the Jairite was also a priest to David*. In addition to the hereditary priests of the public cult just mentioned, David has a kind of special royal chaplain. In chapter 8, it is David's sons who are said to perform this service. Either later editors were uneasy with this intimation of priestly dynasty in the royal family, or David, after all the tribulations he has suffered because of two of his sons, decided to designate someone else as his chaplain.

CHAPTER 21

[1]And there was a famine in the days of David three
years, year after year. And David sought out the
presence of the LORD. And the LORD said, “On
account of Saul and on account of the house of
bloodguilt, because he put the Gibeonites to death.”
[2]And the king called to the Gibeonites and said to
them—and the Gibeonites were not of Israelite stock
but from the remnant of the Amorites, and the
Israelites had vowed to them, but Saul sought to strike
them down in his zeal for the Israelites and for Judah.
[3]And David said to the Gibeonites, “What shall I do
for you and how shall I atone, that you may bless the
LORD’s heritage?” [4]And the Gibeonites said to him,
“We have no claim of silver and gold against Saul and
his house, and we have no man in Israel to put to
death.” And he said, “Whatever you say, I shall do for
you.” [5]And they said to the king, “The man who
massacred us and who devastated us—we were
destroyed from having a stand in all the territory of
Israel—[6]let seven men of his sons be given to us, that

we may impale them before the LORD at Gibeah of Saul, the LORD's chosen." And the king said, "I will give them." [7]And the king spared Mephibosheth son of Jonathan son of Saul because of the LORD's vow that was between them, between David and Jonathan son of Saul. [8]And the king took the two sons of Rizpah daughter of Aiah, whom she had born to Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth, and the five sons of Merab daughter of Saul, whom she had born to Adriel son of Barzillai the Meholathite. [9]And he gave them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they impaled them on the hill before the LORD, and the seven of them fell together. And they were put to death in the first days of the harvest, the beginning of the barley harvest. [10]And Rizpah daughter of Aiah took sackcloth and stretched it out over herself on the rock from the beginning of the harvest till the waters poured down on them from the heavens, and she did not allow the fowl of the heavens to settle on them by day nor the beasts of the field by night. [11]And David was told what Rizpah daughter of Aiah, Saul's concubine, had done. [12]And David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of Jonathan his son from the notables of Jabesh-Gilead who had stolen them from the square of Beth-Shan, where the Philistines had hanged them on the day the Philistines struck down Saul at Gilboa. [13]And

he brought up from there the bones of Saul and the bones of Jonathan his son, and they collected the bones of the impaled men. [14]And they buried the bones of Saul and of Jonathan his son in the territory of Benjamin in Zela, in the tomb of Kish his father, and they did all that the king had charged. And God then granted the plea for the land.

[15]And once again there was fighting between the Philistines and Israel, and David went down, and his servants with him, and they did battle with the Philistines, and David grew weary. [16]And Ishbi-Benob, who was of the offspring of the titan, the weight of his weapon three hundred weights of bronze, and he was girded with new gear—he meant to strike down David. [17]And Abishai son of Zeruiah came to his aid and struck down the Philistine and put him to death. Then David's men swore to him, saying, "You shall not sally forth with us again to battle, lest you snuff out the lamp of Israel."

[18]And it happened thereafter that once again there was fighting with the Philistines, at Gob. Then did Sibbecai the Hushathite strike down Saph, who was of the offspring of the titan. [19]And once again there was

fighting with the Philistines at Nob, and Elhanan son of Jair the Bethlehemite struck down Goliath the Gittite, and the shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam.

[20]And once again there was fighting, at Gath. And there was a man of huge measure, who had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot, twenty-four in all, and he, too, was sprung from the titan. [21]And he insulted Israel, and Jonathan son of Shimei, David's kinsman, struck him down. [22]These four were sprung from the titan, and they fell at the hand of David and at the hand of his servants.

CHAPTER 21 NOTES

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Chapters 21–24 appear to be a series of appendices to the David story proper, manifestly written by different writers in styles that exhibit notable differences from that of the main narrative, and also certain differences in ideological assumptions and even in what are presumed to be the narrative data of David's history. It should, however, be kept in mind that creating a collage of disparate sources was an established literary technique used by the ancient Hebrew editors and sometimes by the original writers themselves. Recent critics have abundantly demonstrated the compositional coherence of chapters 21–24 and have argued for some significant links with the preceding narrative. For that reason, it may be preferable to think of this whole unit as a coda to the story rather than as a series of appendices. The structure of the

chapters is neatly chiastic, as follows: a story of a national calamity in which David intercedes; a list (chapter 21); a poem (chapter 22); a poem; a list (chapter 23); a story of a national calamity in which David intercedes (chapter 24). The temporal setting of these materials is unclear but they seem to belong somewhere in the middle of David's career, and do not follow from the late point in his reign reported in the immediately preceding account of the rebellion of Sheba son of Bichri. The editors placed these chapters here, rather than after David's death, and then set the account of his last days, which they interrupt, at the beginning of 1 Kings in order to underline the dynastic continuity between David's story and Solomon's, which then immediately follows as the first large unit of the Book of Kings.

1. *David sought out the presence of the* LORD. The idiom means to seek an audience (with a ruler), though what is referred to in practical terms is inquiry of an oracle. The rest of the verse gives God's response to the question put to the oracle. At the very outset, a difference in idiom from the main narrative, where people consistently "inquire of the LORD," is detectable. The idiom preferred by this new author emphasizes hierarchical relationship rather than the practical business of putting a question to the oracle.

2. *and the Gibeonites were not of Israelite stock*. The syntactic looseness of this long parenthetical sentence (compare the similar syntax in verse 5) is uncharacteristic of the David story proper.

the Israelites had vowed to them. The story of the vow to do no harm to this group of resident aliens is reported in Joshua 9:15.

but Saul sought to strike them down. There is no way of knowing whether this massacre of Gibeonites by Saul reflects historical fact, but there is not the slightest hint of it in the story of Saul recounted in 1 Samuel. As with the differences of style, one sees here the presence of a distinctly different literary source.

3. *What shall I do for you and how shall I atone*. The speech and acts of David in this story show nothing of the psychological complexity of the experience-torn David whose story we have been following. He speaks in flat terms, almost ritualistically, fulfilling his public and cultic functions as king. And after this brief initial exchange with the Gibeonites, the writer entirely

abandons dialogue, which had been the chief instrument for expressing emotional nuance and complication of motive and theme in the David story.

4. *We have no claim of silver and gold . . . we have no man in Israel to put to death*. The second clause is really an opening ploy in negotiation: they say they have no claim to execute any Israelite ("claim" in the first clause is merely implied by ellipsis in the Hebrew), suggesting that they are waiting for David to agree to hand Israelites over to them in expiation of Saul's crime.

Whatever you say, I shall do for you. David's submissiveness to the Gibeonites reflects a notion of causation and the role of human action scarcely evident in the main narrative. A famine grips the land because its former ruler violated a national vow. Collective disaster can be averted only by the expiatory—indeed, sacrificial—offering of human lives. This archaic world of divine retribution and ritual response is very far from the historical realm of realpolitik in which the story of David has been played out.

6. *impale*. There is no scholarly consensus on the exact form of execution, except that it obviously involves exhibiting the corpses. Some understand it as a kind of crucifixion.

before the LORD at Gibeah of Saul, the LORD's chosen. "Before the LORD" is an explicit indication of the sacrificial nature of the killings. Many scholars have doubted that the Saulides would be executed in Saul's own town and emend this to read "at Gibeon, on the mount of the LORD." If the phrase "the LORD's chosen" is authentic, it would be spoken sarcastically by the Gibeonites.

8. *Merab*. This is the reading of one version of the Septuagint and of many Hebrew manuscripts. The Masoretic Text has "Michal," who had no children and who, unlike her sister Merab, was not married to Adriel son of Barzillai.

9. *the seven of them fell together*. Robert Polzin neatly observes that this phrase precisely echoes "they fell together" of 2:16—the account of the beginning of the civil war at this very same place, Gibeon. He also notes how this whole episode is organized around recurring units of three and seven, the latter number *shivʿah* punning on the reiterated *shevuʿah*, vow.

the beginning of the barley harvest. This would be in April. The bereaved Rizpah then watches over the corpses throughout the hot months of the

summer, until the rains return—heralding the end of the long famine—in the fall.

10. *Rizpah . . . took sackcloth and stretched it out over herself*. The verb here is the one generally used for pitching tents, so the translations that have Rizpah spreading the cloth over the rock are misleading. What she does is to make a little lean-to with the sackcloth to shield herself from the summer sun.

she did not allow the fowl of the heavens to settle on them. The antecedent of "them" is of course the corpses. As in the ancient Greek world, leaving a corpse unburied is a primal sacrilege, a final desecration of the sacredness of the human person. Rizpah, watching over the unburied corpses, is a kind of Hebrew Antigone. David had delivered the seven descendants of Saul to the Gibeonites with the single-minded intention of expiating the crime that had caused the famine. Evidently, he gave no thought to the possibility that the Gibeonites would desecrate the bodies of the Saulides after killing them by denying them burial.

11. *And David was told what Rizpah . . . had done*. Rizpah's sustained act of maternal heroism finally achieves its end: the king is shaken out of his acquiescence in the Gibeonite inhumanity.

12. *David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of Jonathan*. According to the account in 1 Samuel 31, they were cremated. Either this report reflects a conflicting tradition or "bones" here has to be understood as "ashes."

14. *they buried the bones of Saul and of Jonathan his son. . . . And God then granted the plea for the land*. It should be noted that the end of the famine does not come with the sacrificial killing of the seven Saulides but only after all of them, together with Saul himself and Jonathan, are given fitting burial in their own place (a biblical desideratum). In this strange story, David is seen handing over the surviving offspring of Saul to be killed, but only for the urgent good of the nation, after which he pays posthumous respect to the line of Saul. It is conceivable that this story reflects an alternative narrative tradition to the more politically complex one of the David story proper through which David is exonerated from what may well have been a widespread accusation that he deliberately liquidated all of Saul's heirs, with the exception of Mephibosheth.

15. *David grew weary*. This phrase probably indicates an aging David, though not yet the vulnerable sedentary monarch of the conflict with Absalom.

16. *Ishbi-Benob*. This name looks as bizarre in the Hebrew as in transliteration and probably betrays a corrupt text. (The textual obscurities that abound in this section in all likelihood reflect the fact that this is an old literary document imperfectly transmitted.) There have been attempts to revocalize the name as a verb, but those in turn necessitate extensive tinkering with other parts of the verse.

of the offspring of the titan. The Hebrew *rafah* (with a definite article here) elsewhere means "giant." The ending is feminine and it is not clear whether the reference is to a progenitrix or a progenitor.

the weight of his weapon. The Hebrew for "weapon," *qayin*, appears only here, and so the translation is merely inference from context. It might be related to a word that means "metalsmith." The invocation of the titanic weight of the weapon (spear?) is of course reminiscent of the earlier description of Goliath.

girded with new gear. The Hebrew says simply "girded with new [feminine ending]." Some assume the reference is to sword, which is feminine in Hebrew.

17. *You shall not sally forth with us again*. This fragmentary episode is obviously remembered because it marks a turning point in David's career. It is at least consonant with the image of David at Mahanaim asked by his men to stay behind as they go out to the battlefield.

19. *Elhanan son of Jair*. So he is identified in the parallel report in Chronicles. The Masoretic Text here reads "Elhanan son of Jaʿarey ʾOrgim," but the last word, ʾ*orgim*, means "weavers," and seems clearly a scribal duplication of ʾ*orgim* at the very end of the verse.

Elhanan. . . struck down Goliath the Gittite. This is one of the most famous contradictions in the Book of Samuel. Various attempts, both ancient and modern, have been made to harmonize the contradiction—such as the contention that "Goliath" is not a name but a Philistine title—but none of these efforts is convincing. Of the two reports, this one may well be the more plausible. In the literary shaping of the story of David, a triumph originally attributed, perhaps with good reason, to Elhanan was transferred to David

and grafted onto the folktale pattern of the killing of a giant or an ogre by a resourceful young man. The writer used this material, as we have seen, to shape a vivid and arresting portrait of David's debut.

22. *These four were sprung from the titan, and they fell at the hand of David*. Stylistically, the entire unit from verse 15 to the end of the chapter has the feel of a deliberately formulaic epic catalogue (rather than an actual epic narrative, which the earlier Goliath story in 1 Samuel 17 more closely approximates). Formally, the predominant number three of the famine story is succeeded by four here—just as in biblical poetic parallelism three is conventionally followed by four (for example, Amos 1:3, "For three trespasses of Damascus / and for four, I will not turn it back").

CHAPTER 22

[1]And David spoke to the LORD the words of this
song on the day the LORD rescued him from the
clutches of all his enemies and from the clutches of
Saul, [2]and he said:

“The Lord is my crag and my
fortress
and my own deliverer.
[3]God, my rock where I shelter,
my shield and the horn of my
rescue,
My bulwark and refuge,
my rescuer, saves me from havoc.
[4]Praised! did I call the LORD,
and from my enemies I was
rescued.
[5]For the breakers of death beset me,
the underworld’s torrents
dismayed me.

[6]The snares of Sheol coiled round
me,
the traps of death sprang against
me.
[7]In my strait I called to the LORD,
to my God I called,
And from His palace He heard my
voice,
My cry in His ears.
[8]The earth heaved and quaked,
the heavens' foundations
shuddered,
they heaved, for He was
incensed.
[9]Smoke went up from His nostrils,
consuming fire from His mouth,
coals before Him blazed.
[10]He tilted the heavens, came down,
dense mist beneath His feet.
[11]He mounted a cherub and flew,
He soared on the wings of the
wind.
[12]He set darkness as shelters around
Him,
a massing of waters, the clouds of
the skies.

[13]From the radiance before Him,
fiery coals blazed.
[14]The LORD from the heavens
thundered,
the Most High sent forth His
voice.
[15]He let loose arrows and routed
them,
lightning, and struck them with
panic.
[16]The channels of the sea were
exposed,
the world's foundations laid bare,
by the LORD's roaring,
the blast of His nostrils' breath.
[17]He reached from on high and He
took me,
He drew me out of vast waters,
[18]saved me from enemies fierce,
from my foes who had
overwhelmed me.
[19]They sprang against me on my
most dire day,
but the LORD was a stay then for
me.
[20]He led me out to an open place.

He freed me for He took up my
cause.
[21]The LORD dealt with me by my
merit,
by the cleanness of my hands,
requited me.
[22]For I kept the ways of the LORD,
I did no evil before my God.
[23]For all His statutes are before me,
from His laws I have not swerved.
[24]I have been blameless before Him,
I kept myself from sin.
[25]The LORD requited me by my
merit,
by the cleanness of my hands
before His eyes.
[26]With the loyal You act in loyalty,
with the blameless warrior You
are without blame.
[27]With the pure You show Your
pureness,
with the perverse You twist and
turn.
[28]A lowly people You rescue,
You cast Your eyes down on the
haughty.

[29]For You are my lamp, O LORD!
The LORD has lit up my
darkness.
[30]For through You I rush a barrier,
through my God I vault a wall.
[31]The God Whose way is blameless,
the LORD's speech is without
taint,
a shield He is to those who
shelter in him.
[32]For who is god but the LORD,
who is a rock but our God?
[33]The God, my mighty stronghold,
He frees my way to be blameless,
[34]makes my legs like a gazelle's,
and stands me on the heights,
[35]trains my hands for combat,
makes my arms bend a bow of
bronze.
[36]You gave me Your shield of rescue,
Your battle cry made me many.
[37]You lengthened my stride beneath
me,
and my ankles did not trip.
[38]I pursued my foes and destroyed
them,

never turned back till I cut them
down.
[39]I cut them down, smashed them,
they did not rise,
they fell beneath my feet.
[40]You girt me with might for combat,
those against me You brought
down beneath me,
[41]You showed me my enemies' nape,
my foes, I demolished them.
[42]They cried out—there was none to
rescue,
to the LORD, He answered them
not.
[43]I crushed them like dust of the
earth,
like street mud, I pounded them,
stomped them.
[44]You delivered me from the strife of
peoples,
kept me at the head of nations
a people I knew not did serve
me.
[45]Foreigners cowered before me,
by what the ear heard they obeyed
me.

[46]Foreigners did wither,
filed out from their forts.
[47]The LORD lives and blessed is my Rock,
exalted the God, Rock of my rescue!
[48]The God Who grants vengeance to me
and brings down peoples beneath me,
[49]frees me from my enemies,
from those against me You raise me up,
from a man of violence You save me.
[50]Therefore I acclaim You among nations, O LORD,
and to Your name I would hymn.
[51]Tower of rescue to His king,
keeping faith with His anointed,
for David and his seed,
forever.”

CHAPTER 22 NOTES

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1. *And David spoke to the LORD the words of this song*. It was a common literary practice in ancient Israel to place a long poem or "song" (*shirah*) at or near the end of a narrative book—compare Jacob's Testament, Genesis 49, and the Song of Moses, Deuteronomy 32. In the case of the Book of Samuel, David's victory psalm and Hannah's psalm, respectively a song of the male warrior's triumph and a song contextualized as an expression of maternal triumph, enclose the large narrative like bookends, and there is even some interechoing of language between the two poems. These long concluding poems were presumably selected by the editor or composer of the book from a variety of texts available in the literary tradition and then ascribed to a principal character of the story. There is, of course, a persistent biblical notion of David the poet as well as of David the warrior-king, and the idea that he actually composed this poem, though unlikely, cannot be categorically dismissed. In any case, most scholars (Albright, Cross and Friedman, Robertson) detect relatively archaic language in the poem and date it to the tenth century, David's time. The archaic character of the language makes the meaning of many terms conjectural. Even in the ancient period, some of the older locutions may already have been obscure to the scribes, who seem to have scrambled many phrases in transmission; but in contrast to the confident practice of many biblical scholars, caution in presuming to reconstruct the "primitive" text is prudent. It should be noted that this same poem occurs in the Book of Psalms as Psalm 18, with a good many minor textual variants. In several instances, the reading in Psalm 18 seems preferable, but here, too, methodological caution is necessary: Psalm 18 appears to be a secondary version of the poem, and its editor at least in some cases may have clarified obscurities through revision.

2. *my crag and my fortress*. Albright notes that many of the northwest Semitic gods were deified mountains. Thus the imagery of the god as a lofty rock or crag abounds in the poetic tradition upon which the biblical poet drew. It also makes particular sense for a poem of military triumph, since a warrior battling in the mountainous terrain of the land of Israel would keenly appreciate the image of protection of a towering cliff or a fortress situated on a height.

3. *horn*. The idiom is drawn from the goring horn of a charging ram or bull. In keeping with the precedent of the King James Version, it is worth

preserving in English in order to suggest the concreteness and the archaic coloration of the poem.

5. *For the breakers of death beset me*. The condition of being mortally threatened is regularly figured in the poetry of Psalms as a descent, or virtual descent, into the terrifying shadows of the underworld.

8. *The earth heaved and quaked*. God's descent from His celestial palace to do battle on behalf of his faithful servant is imagined as a seismic upheaval of the whole earth.

9. *Smoke went up from His nostrils*. The poetic representation of God, drawing on premonotheistic literary traditions such as the Ugaritic Baal epic, is unabashedly anthropomorphic. One must be cautious, however, in drawing theological inferences from this fact. Modes of literary expression exert a powerful momentum beyond their original cultural contexts, as Milton's embrace of the apparatus of pagan epic in *Paradise Lost* vividly demonstrates. The LORD figures as a fierce warrior, like Baal, because that works evocatively as poetry. This God of earthquakes and battles breathes fire: in an intensifying narrative progression from one verset to the next and then from line to line, smoke comes out of His nostrils, His mouth spews fire, in His awesome incandescence coals ignite before Him, and then He begins his actual descent from on high.

11. *He mounted a cherub and flew*. The cherub is a fierce winged beast, the traditional mount of the deity.

He soared on the wings of the wind. The translation reads with Psalm 18 *wayeda'*, instead of the weaker *wayera'*, "He was seen" (the Hebrew graphemes for *d* and *r* being very close).

19. *They sprang against me*. The verb here—its basic meaning is to meet or greet, sometimes before the person is ready—repeats "the traps of death sprang against me" in verse 6: first that act of being taken by surprise occurs metaphorically, and now again in the literal experience of the speaker on the battlefield.

21. *The LORD dealt with me by my merit*. It is often claimed that verses 21–25 are a Deuteronomistic interpolation in the poem—that is, seventh century

B.C.E. or later. The evidence is not entirely persuasive because the theological notion of God's rewarding the innocence of the individual by rescuing him from grave danger is by no means a Deuteronomistic innovation, and adherence to "statutes" and "laws" (verse 23), though encouraged in the Deuteronomistic literary environment, is neither its unprecedented invention nor its unique linguistic marker.

25. *by the cleanness of my hands*. The Masoretic Text has merely "by my cleanness" (*kevori*), but the parallel version in Psalm 18 shows *kevor yadai* "by my cleanness of hands," as do the Septuagint and other ancient translations of this line. The concrete juxtaposition of idioms anchored in body parts—"cleanness of hands" for "innocence" and "before Your eyes" for "in Your sight"—is characteristic of biblical usage.

26. *with the blameless warrior You are without blame*. Many textual critics consider "warrior" to be an interpolation and either delete it or substitute for *gibor*, "warrior," *gever*, "man." The parallelism of these four versets, in each of which God, in a verb, answers in kind to the adjectivally defined human agent, is better preserved without "warrior." The profession of blamelessness scarcely accords with David's behavior in the body of the story.

27. *twist and turn*. This English phrase represents a single reflexive verb in the Hebrew. It is the sole instance in this series of four versets in which the verb describing God's action has a root different from the adjective characterizing the kind of person to whom God responds, although there is still a manifest semantic connection between the two terms here, and this works quite nicely as a small variation on the pattern to conclude the series.

28. *A lowly people You rescue, / You cast Your eyes down on the haughty*. The opposition between low and high is conventional in the poetry of Psalms—it also figures in Hannah's Song—but is nonetheless effective. The speaker's people is "lowly" in the sense that it is miserable, afflicted, endangered by superior forces. God on high looks down on the lofty who seem to have the upper hand and, as the triumphant images from verse 39 onward make clear, brings them low.

30. *I rush a barrier . . . vault a wall*. The speaker who has just been seen among "a lowly people" and then vouchsafed a beam from God's lantern as he

gropes in the dark now suddenly takes the offensive, charging the enemies' ramparts.

33. *The God, my mighty stronghold*. Although this phrase, *maʿuzi ḥayil*, is intelligible as it stands, the variant in Psalm 18, supported by the Qumran Samuel scroll, is more fluent and sustains a parallelism of verbs between the two halves of the line. That reading is *hameʾazreni ḥayil*, "Who girds me with might."

He frees my way to be blameless. The verb here, *wayater*, is problematic. The most obvious construction would be as a term that generally means "to loosen," though the syntactic link with "blameless" (there is no explicit "to be" in the Hebrew) is obscure. The version in Psalm 18 substitutes *wayiten*, "he kept" (or "set"), but the use of that all-purpose verb may simply reflect the scribe's bafflement with the original verb.

34. *makes my legs like a gazelle's, / and stands me on the heights*. The swiftness of the gazelle accords nicely with the image in verse 30 of the warrior sprinting in assault against the ramparts of the foe. Standing secure on the heights, then, would mark the successful conclusion of his trajectory of attack: the victorious warrior now stands on the walls, or within the conquered bastion, of the enemy. The *ai* suffix of *bamotai*, "heights," normally a sign of the first-person possessive, is an archaic, or poetic, plural ending. The sense proposed by some scholars of "my back [or, thighs?]" is very strained, and destroys the narrative momentum between versets that is a hallmark of biblical poetry.

35. *makes my arms bend a bow of bronze*. The verb *niḥat* has not been satisfactorily explained, nor is its syntactic role in the clause clear. This translation, like everyone else's, is no more than a guess, based on the possibility that the verb reflects a root meaning "to come down," and so perhaps refers to the bending down of a bow.

36. *Your battle cry*. This noun, *ʿanotkha*, is still another crux. The least farfetched derivation is from the verbal steam *ʿ-n-h*, which means either "to answer," thus yielding a sense here of "answering power," or "to call out," "speak up." Given the sequence of concrete warfare images in these lines, from bronze bow to saving shield, this translation proposes, conjecturally, "battle cry," with the established verbal noun *ʿanot*, "noise" or "calling-out" in

mind. Compare Exodus 32:18: “the sound of crying out in triumph” (*qol ‘anot gevurah*). The battle cry would use God’s name (perhaps something like “sword of the LORD and of David”) with the idea that it had a potency that would infuse the warrior with strength and resolution and strike fear in the enemy. Thus the battle cry makes the solitary fighter, or the handful he leads, “many” against seemingly superior forces.

37. *You lengthened my stride beneath me, / and my ankles did not trip*. This focus on the long, firm stride jibes with the previous images of rapid running against the enemy and anticipates the evocation in the lines that follow of the victorious warrior’s feet trampling the foe.

38. *till I cut them down*. The English phrase, chosen to reflect the rhythmic compactness of the original, represents a Hebrew verb that means “to destroy them utterly,” or, “to finish them off,” but the former phrase is too much of a mouthful and the latter is the wrong level of diction. In any event, the narrative sequence of being provided with armor and weapons and charging against a fleeing enemy is now completed as the victor overtakes his adversaries and tramples them to death.

42. *there was none to rescue, / to the LORD, He answered them not*. The frustration of the enemy’s desperate prayers is meant to be a pointed contrast to the situation of the speaker of the poem, who calls out to the LORD and is saved (verse 4).

44. *the strife of peoples*. The translation follows the minor variation of the parallel reading in Psalm 18, *merivey ‘am*, literally, “the strife of people.” The Masoretic Text here reads *merivey ‘ami*, “the strife of my people,” which may simply mean the battles in which my people is embroiled, but it also inadvertently suggests internal strife. Despite the presence of Saul in the poem’s superscription, the immediately following lines here indicate external enemies.

kept me at the head of nations. This phrase and the language of the next verset are perfectly consonant with David’s creation of an imperial presence among the peoples of the trans-Jordan region.

45. *Foreigners cowered before me*. All that can be said in confidence about the Hebrew verb is that it indicates something negative. The common meaning of

the root is “to deny” or “to lie.” Perhaps that sense is linked in this instance with the foreigners’ fawning on their conqueror.

46. *filed out from their forts*. The meanings of both the verb and the noun are in dispute. The verb *ḥagar* usually means “to gird,” but the text in Psalm 18, more plausibly, inverts the second and third consonants, yielding *ḥarag*, which is generally taken to mean “emerge from,” or “pop out from,” a restrictive framework. The noun *misgerotam* is clearly derived from the root *s-g-r*, “to close,” and “fort” (an enclosure) seems fairly plausible. (The proposal of “collar” has little biblical warrant and makes rather bad sense in context.)

50. *Therefore I acclaim You . . . O* LORD. In keeping with a formal convention of the thanksgiving psalm, or *todah*, the poem concludes by explicitly stating that the speaker has acclaimed or given thanks (the verb cognate with the noun *todah*) to God.

and to your name I would hymn. The pairing in poetic parallelism of the two verbs, *hodah*, “acclaim,” and *zimer*, “hymn,” is common in the conclusion of thanksgiving psalms.

51. *Tower of rescue*. The variant reading in Psalm 18, supported by the consonantal text here but not by its Masoretic vocalization, is “making great the rescues [or victories] of” (instead of the noun, *migdol*, “tower,” the verb *magdil*, “to make big”). The one attraction of the Masoretic reading here of this word is that it closes the poem with an image that picks up the multiple metaphors of a lofty stronghold at the beginning.

keeping faith with His anointed, / for David and his seed, forever. Many critics have seen the entire concluding verse as an editorial addition, both because of the switch to a third-person reference to the king and because of the invocation of dynasty, beyond the temporal frame of the warrior-king’s own victories. The inference, however, is not inevitable. Switches in grammatical person, even in a single clause, occur much more easily in biblical Hebrew than in modern Western languages, and if the triumphant speaker of the poem is actually David or in any event is imagined to be David, it is quite possible that he would conclude his account of attaining imperial greatness by a prayer that the dynasty he has founded will continue to enjoy God’s steadfast support for all time.

CHAPTER 23

[1]And these are the last words of David:

“Thus spoke David son of Jesse,
thus spoke the man raised on high,
anointed of the God of Jacob,
and sweet singer of Israel.
[2]The LORD’S spirit has spoken in me,
his utterance on my tongue.
[3]The God of Israel has said,
to me the Rock of Israel has spoken:
He who rules men, just,
who rules in the fear of God.
[4]Like morning’s light when the sun comes up,
morning without clouds,

from radiance, from showers—
grass from earth.
[5]For is not thus my house with God?
An eternal covenant He gave me,
drawn up in full and
guaranteed.
For all my triumph and all my
desire
will He not bring to bloom?
[6]And the worthless man is like a
thorn—
uprooted every one,
they cannot be picked up by
hand.
[7]Should a man touch them,
he must get himself iron
or the shaft of a spear.
And in fire they'll be utterly burned
where they are."

[8]These are the names of the warriors of David: Josheb-Basshebeth, a Tahchemonite, head of the Three, he is Adino the Eznite. He brandished his spear over eight hundred slain at a single time. [9]And after him Eleazar son of Dodo son of Ahohi, of the three warriors with

David when they insulted the Philistines gathered there for battle and the Israelites decamped. [10]He arose and struck down Philistines until his hand tired and his hand stuck to the sword. And the LORD wrought a great victory on that day, and the troops came back after him only to strip the slain. [11]And after him Shammah son of Agei the Ararite. And the Philistines gathered at Lehi, and there was a plot of land there full of lentils, and the troops had fled before the Philistines. [12]And he took a stand in the plot and saved it and struck down the Philistines. And the LORD wrought a great victory. [13]And three of the Thirty, at the head, went down in the harvest to David at the cave of Adullam, with the Philistine force camped in the Valley of Rephaim. [14]And David was then in the stronghold and the Philistine garrison then at Bethlehem. [15]And David had a craving and said, “Who will give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate?” [16]And the three warriors broke through the Philistine camp and drew water from the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate, and they bore it off and brought it to David. But he would not drink it, and he poured it out in libation to the LORD. [17]And he said, “Far be it from me that I should do such a thing. Shall I drink the blood of men who have gone at the risk of their lives?” And he

would not drink it. These things did the three warriors
do. [18]And Abishai brother of Joab son of Zeruiah—he
was chief of the Thirty. And he brandished his spear
over three hundred slain, and he had a name with the
Three. [19]Of the Thirty he was most honored and so he
became their captain, but he did not attain to the
Three. [20]And Benaiah son of Jehoida from Kabzeel,
son of a valiant man, great in deeds—he struck down
the two sons of Ariel of Moab and he went down and
killed the lion in the pit on the day of the snow. [21]And
he struck down an Egyptian man, a man of daunting
appearance, a spear was in the hand of the Egyptian.
And he went down to him with a staff and stole the
spear from the hand of the Egyptian and he killed him
with his own spear. [22]These things did Benaiah son of
Jehoida do, and he had a name with the Three
Warriors. [23]Of the Thirty he was honored but he did
not attain to the Three. And David put him over his
royal guard. [24]Asahel brother of Joab was in the
Thirty, and Elhanan son of Dodo of Bethlehem.
[25]Shammah the Harodite, Elika the Harodite, [26]Helez
the Paltite, Ira son of Ikkesh the Tekoite, [27]Abiezer the
Anathothite, Mebunnai the Hushathite. [28]Zalmon the
Ahohite, Maharai the Netophathite, [29]Heleb son of
Baanah the Netophathite, Ittai son of Ribai from
Gibeah of the Benjaminites, [30]Benaiah the Pirathonite,

Hiddai from Nahalei-Gaash, [31]Abi-Albon the
Anbathite, Azmaveth the Barhumite, [32]Eliahba the
Shaalbonite, sons of Jashen Jonathan, [33]Shammah the
Hararite, Ahiam son of Sharar the Ararite, [34]Eliphelet
son of Ahasbai son of the Maacathite, Eliam son of
Ahitophel the Gilonite, [35]Hezrai the Carmelite, Paarai
the Arbite, [36]Igal son of Nathan from Zobah, Bani the
Gadite, [37]Zelek the Ammonite, Naharai the Beerothite,
armor bearer to Joab son of Zeruiah, [38]Ira the Ithrite,
Gareb the Ithrite, [39]Uriah the Hittite—thirty-seven in
all.

CHAPTER 23 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *these are the last words of David*. David's victory psalm in the preceding chapter is now followed by a second archaic poetic text, quite different in style, unrelated to the psalm tradition, and a good deal obscurer in many of its formulations. Although there is scholarly debate about the dating of this poem, the consensus puts it in or close to David's own time in the tenth century B.C.E. The mystifying features of the language certainly suggest great antiquity, and it is just possible that the poem was really by David. The exact application of "the last words of David" is unclear. In terms of the narrative, they are not literally his last words because he will convey a deathbed testament to Solomon (1 Kings 2). The phrase might be intended to designate the last pronouncement in poetry of David the royal poet.

Thus spoke David. This introductory formula is a mark of prophetic or oracular language—compare the beginning of Balaam's third oracle in Numbers 24:3.

raised on high. The two Hebrew words reflected in this translation, *huqam ʿal*, have a gorgeous strangeness as compacted idiom—so strange that both the Septuagint and the Qumran Samuel prefer a more common Hebrew locution, *heqim ʾel*, "God has raised up." In either case, the phrase refers to David's elevation to the throne.

sweet singer of Israel. The eloquent and famous wording of the King James Version (KJV) seems worth emulating (though the KJV uses "psalmist"), because the divergent proposals for understanding the phrase are scarcely more certain than that of the KJV. The literal meaning of *neʿim zemirot yisraʾel* is "sweet one [or favorite] of the chants of Israel." The root *z-m-r* has a homonymous meaning—strength—which has encouraged some interpreters to construe this as "preferred of the Strong One [or Stronghold] of Israel" in parallel to "anointed of the God of Israel." It must be said, however, that there are no instances in which the root *z-m-r* in the sense of strength serves as an epithet for the deity.

2. *The LORD'S spirit has spoken in me*. This does not mean, as some have understood, that David is claiming actual status as a prophet but rather that he is attesting to an access of oracular elevation as he proclaims his lofty (and enigmatic!) verse.

3. *He who rules men, just*. The translation reproduces the cryptic (elliptic?) syntax of the Hebrew, adding a clarifying comma (the Hebrew of course has no punctuation).

who rules in the fear of God. The compacted syntax of the Hebrew has no "in," but most interpreters assume it is implied.

4. *from radiance, from showers—grass from earth*. The meaning of these images is much disputed, and some critics move "from radiance" altogether back to the preceding clause. The tentative reading presumed by the translation is as follows: The anointed king has been compared to the brilliant rising sun on a cloudless morning (solar imagery for kings being fairly common in ancient Near Eastern literature). The poet now adds that from the sun's radiance, coupled with rainfall, grass springs forth from the earth. Thus the rule of the just king is a source of blessed fruitfulness to his subjects.

5. *For is not thus my house with God?* The Hebrew grammar here is a little confusing. It is most plausible to construe both this clause and the one at the

end of the verse not as negative statements but as affirmative questions. The image of bringing to bloom in the concluding clause suggests that David's dynasty in relation to God is to be imagined like the earth in relation to sun and showers and like the people in relation to the king: because of the everlasting covenant with David, God will make his house blossom.

6. *the worthless man is like a thorn— / uprooted every one*. The antithesis between flourishing soft grass and the prickly thorn torn from its roots is manifest (though it must be said that "uprooted" for the obscure *munad* is conjectural, if widely accepted).

7. *he must get himself iron*. The translation adopts the common proposal that the verb *yimale'* (literally, "he will fill") is an ellipsis for *yimale' yado*, "he will fill his hand," "equip himself with"). Others emend it to read 'im *lo'*, "except [with]."

or the shaft of a spear. The Hebrew is usually construed as "and the shaft," but the particle *waw* does occasionally have the force of "or," which is more plausible here.

in fire they'll be utterly burned. The only suitable disposition of these nasty thorns is to rake them up with an iron tool or a spear shaft and make a bonfire of them, in order to get entirely rid of the threat they pose. The fact that weapons are used for the raking suggests the political referent of the metaphor. Such will be the fate of mischief makers ("the worthless")—evidently all who would presume to oppose the legitimate monarchy.

where they are. This phrase reflects a single, highly dubious word in the Masoretic Text, *bashavet*. That word may well be an inadvertent repetition by a baffled scribe of the seventh Hebrew word in the following verse. The whole phrase in which that term occurs is itself textually problematic.

8. *These are the names of the warriors of David*. This list of military heroes and their exploits is perhaps the strongest candidate of any passage in the Book of Samuel to be considered a text actually written in David's lifetime. The language is crabbed, and the very abundance of textual difficulties, uncharacteristic for prose, reflects the great antiquity of the list. These fragmentary recollections of particular heroic exploits do not sound like the invention of any later writer but, on the contrary, like memories of remarkable martial acts familiar to the audience (for example, "he . . . killed

the lion in the pit on the day of the snow" [verse 20]) and requiring only the act of epic listing, not of narrative elaboration. It should also be noted that the list invokes the early phase of David's career—when the Philistines were the dominant military force in the land, when David was at Adullam and in "the stronghold," and when Asahel, destined to perish at the hands of Abner at the beginning of the civil war, was an active member of David's corp of elite fighters.

Josheb-Basshebeth a Tahchemonite. So reads the Masoretic Text. But this looks quite dubious as a Hebrew name. One version of the Septuagint has Ish-Baal (alternately, Jeshbaal), which by scribal euphemism also appears as Ish-Bosheth and hence may have produced the confusion in the Masoretic Text. Many authorities prefer the gentilic "Hachmoni," in accordance with the parallel verse in Chronicles.

the Three. Throughout the list, there are confusions between three, third, and thirty. The received text at this point seems to read *shalishim*, "commanders of units of thirty," but "three" makes far better sense.

He brandished his spear. This whole phrase, which seems strictly necessary to make the sentence intelligible, is lacking in the Masoretic Text but appears in the parallel verse in Chronicles.

10. *to strip the slain*. No object of the verb "to strip" appears in the Hebrew, but this may be a simple ellipses for a common military idiom rather than a scribal omission.

11. *at Lehi*. The translation presupposes a minor emendation of the Masoretic *laḥayah* (meaning obscure, though some understand it as "in a force") to *leḥi*, a place-name, which the rest of the clause seems to require.

there was a plot of land there full of lentils. The homey specificity of the detail is another manifestation of the feeling of remembered anecdote in this catalogue of exploits.

13. *at the head*. The Hebrew says only "head," but the word seems to have an adverbial function, and so "at the head" is not unlikely.

15. *Who will give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem*. Or "Would that I might drink water . . ." Bethlehem, of course, is David's hometown, at this juncture a headquarters of the occupying Philistine forces. David expresses a sudden yen to taste the sweet water he remembers from that well

by the gate of his native town, although he scarcely intends this as a serious invitation to his men to undertake anything so foolhardy as to attempt breaking through the Philistine lines in order to get it. Presumably, the three warriors—it is unclear as to whether they are identical with the Three just named, for they are said to be part of the Thirty—do not misunderstand David's intentions. Rather, as daring fighters, they decide to take him at his word and risk their necks in raiding the Philistine garrison at Bethlehem in order to prove they can execute a seemingly impossible mission. It is easy to understand how such an exploit would be vividly recalled and registered in the epic list.

17. *Shall I drink the blood of men*. The verb (one word in the Hebrew) "shall I drink" is missing from the Masoretic Text, though present in both the parallel verse in Chronicles and in the Septuagint. It is possible that some ancient scribe recoiled from an expression that had David drinking human blood, even in a hyperbolic verbal gesture.

18. *he was chief of the Thirty*. The received text here and in verse 19 reads "Three," but this makes no sense, as we are told that Abishai "did not attain to the Three."

with the Three. Or, "in the three." Since Abishai is not a member of the Three, this would have to mean that his prowess won him a reputation even among the legendary Three. Another solution is to emend the initial *ba* ("in," "among") to *ka* ("like"), yielding "he had a name like the Three."

20. *son of a valiant man*. Many textual critics conclude that "son of" (*ben*) is an erroneous scribal addition.

he struck down the two sons of Ariel of Moab. These words are among the most enigmatic in the report of the exploits of David's heroes. The words "two sons of" (*sheney beney*) are supplied from the Septuagint in an effort to make this clause at least a little intelligible. "Ariel" is probably a cultic site or object in Moab.

22. *he had a name with the Three Warriors*. See the comment on verse 18. The same problem is reflected here.

25. *the Harodite*. All these identifying terms in the list designate the villages from which the warriors come. A likely location of the biblical Harod would

be not far from Bethlehem. The earlier names in the list cluster geographically in the territory of Judah, David's tribe. Some of the later names indicate places in the territories of tribes to the north—perhaps reflecting new recruits to the elite unit after the conclusion of the civil war. Toward the end of the list there are also non-Israelites: these could have been mercenaries, or perhaps rather naturalized subjects of the new monarchy.

32. *sons of Jashen Jonathan*. This identification definitely looks scrambled. "Sons of" appears not to belong, and many textual critics omit it. "Jonathan," as a second proper name immediately after "Jashen," is also problematic, and one wonders whether Jashen (Hebrew *yashen* means "sleeping") was ever a name.

34. *Eliam son of Ahitophel*. One notes that the son of the state councillor who betrayed David for Absalom was a member of David's elite corps. He might also be the same Eliam who is Bathsheba's father.

39. *Uriah the Hittite*. Is it an intended irony that the list of David's picked warriors concludes with the man he murdered? The irony may be an artifact of the editor, if this list was composed after the events recorded in the Bathsheba story.

thirty-seven in all. As elsewhere in biblical tabulations, it is hard to make this figure compute. One system of counting yields a total of thirty-six, and the addition of Joab—rather surprisingly, omitted from the list—would produce thirty-seven.

CHAPTER 24

[1]And once more the wrath of the LORD was kindled
against Israel, and He incited David against them,
saying, “Go, count Israel and Judah.” [2]And the king
said to Joab, commander of the force that was with
him, “Go round, pray, among all the tribes of Israel,
from Dan to Beersheba, and take a census of the
people, that I may know the number of the people.”
[3]And Joab said to the king, “May the LORD your God
add to the people a hundred times over with the eyes
of my lord the king beholding. But why should my
lord the king desire this thing?” [4]And the king’s word
prevailed over Joab and over the commanders of the
force, and Joab, and the commanders of the force with
him, went out from the king’s presence to take a
census of the people, of Israel. [5]And they crossed the
Jordan and camped in Aroer south of the town, which
is in the middle of the Wadi of Gad and by Jazer.
[6]And they came to Gilead and to the region of Tahtim-
Hodshi, and they came to Dan-Jaan and round toward
Sidon. [7]And they came to the fortress of Tyre and to

all the towns of the Hivvite and the Canaanite, and they went out to the Negeb of Judah, to Beersheba.
8 And they went round through all the land and returned at the end of nine months and twenty days to Jerusalem. 9 And Joab gave the number of the census of the people to the king, and Israel made up eight hundred thousand sword-wielding men, and Judah five hundred thousand men. 10 And David was smitten with remorse afterward for having counted the people. And David said to the LORD, “I have offended greatly in what I have done. And now, LORD, remit the guilt of your servant, for I have been very foolish.” 11 And David arose in the morning, and the word of the LORD had come to Gad the prophet, David’s seer, saying, 12 “Go and speak to David—‘Thus says the LORD: Three things I have taken against you. Choose you one of them, and I shall do it to you. 13 Seven years of famine in your land, or three months when you flee before your foes as they pursue you, or let there be three days of plague in your land.’ Now, mark and see, what reply shall I bring back to Him Who sent me?”
14 And David said to Gad, “I am in great straits. Let us, pray, fall into the LORD’S hand, for great is His mercy, and into the hand of man let me not fall.”
15 And the LORD sent a plague against Israel from morning until the fixed time, and from Dan to

Beersheba seventy-seven thousand men of the people died.

16 And the messenger reached out his hand against
Jerusalem to destroy it, and the LORD regretted the
evil and said to the messenger who was sowing
destruction among the people, “Enough! Now stay
your hand.” And the LORD’s messenger was at the
threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. 17 And David
said to the LORD when he saw the messenger who
was striking down the people, thus he said, “It is I who
offended, I who did wrong. And these sheep, what
have they done? Let your hand be against me and my
father’s house.” 18 And Gad came to David on that day
and said to him, “Go up, raise to the LORD an altar
on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.” 19 And
David went up according to the word of Gad, as the
LORD had charged. 20 And Araunah looked out and
saw the king and his servants crossing over toward
him, and Araunah went out and bowed down to the
king, his face to the ground. 21 And Araunah said,
“Why has my lord the king come to his servant?” And
David said, “To buy the threshing floor from you to
build an altar to the LORD, that the scourge may be
held back from the people. 22 And Araunah said to

David, “Let my lord the king take and offer up what is good in his eyes. See the oxen for the burnt offering and the threshing boards and the oxen’s gear for wood. [23]All of it Araunah has, O king, given to the king.” And Araunah said to the king, “May the LORD your God show you favor.” [24]And the king said to Araunah, “Not so! I will surely buy it from you for a price, and I will not offer up burnt offerings to the LORD my God at no cost.” And David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. [25]And David built there an altar to the LORD and offered up burnt offerings and well-being sacrifices, and the LORD granted the plea for the land and the scourge was pulled back from Israel.

CHAPTER 24 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And once more the wrath of the LORD was kindled against Israel*. The reason for God’s wrath is entirely unspecified, and attempts to link it to events in the preceding narrative are quite unconvincing. In fact, this entire narrative unit (which some scholars claim is itself composite) is strikingly different in theological assumptions, in its imagination of narrative situation and character, and even in its style from the David story proper as well as from the tale of David and the Gibeonites in chapter 21 with which it is symmetrically paired. Perhaps, indeed, there is no discernible reason for God’s fury against Israel. The God of this story has the look of acting arbitrarily, exacting terrible human costs in order to be placated. Unlike the

deity of 1 Samuel 1–2 Samuel 20, He is decidedly an interventionist God, pulling the human actors by strings, and He may well be a capricious God, here "inciting" David to carry out a census that will only bring grief to the people.

2. *Joab, commander of the force*. A different vocabulary is another indication that a different writer is at work here. Throughout the David narrative, Joab is designated *sar hatsava'*, "commander of the army," but here the terminology changes to the unusual *sar haḥayil*, "commander of the force." Similarly, the verb for "go round," *sh-w-t*—it is attached to the Adversary in the frame story of Job—is distinctive of this narrative.

3. *But why should my LORD the king desire this thing?* Underlying the story is both a cultic and a superstitious fear of the census, reflected in Joab's objection to it. Several commentators have noted that according to Exodus 30:12 every Israelite counted in a census was required to pay a half shekel as "ransom" (*kofer*) for his life. Since such payment could not be realistically expected in a total census of the nation, masses of people would be put in a condition of violation of ritual. But there is also a folkloric horror of being counted as a condition of vulnerability to malignant forces. In Rashi's words: "For the evil eye holds sway over counting." Beyond these considerations, Joab the commander may have a political concern in mind: the census served as the basis for conscription (compare the notation in verse 9 of those counted as "sword-wielding men"), and thus imposing the census might conceivably have provoked opposition to the threatened conscription and to the king who was behind it. It is noteworthy that the census is carried out by army officers.

5. *they crossed the Jordan and camped in Aroer*. Aroer is roughly fifteen miles east of the Dead Sea. The trajectory of the census takers describes a large ellipsis: first to the southeast from Jerusalem, then north through trans-Jordan to Gilead and beyond, then west through the northernmost Israelite territory to the sea, then all the way south to Beersheba, and back to Jerusalem. All this, which will lead to wholesale death, is accomplished in nine months and twenty days—the human gestation period.

6. *Tahtim-Hodshi*. The name is suspect, but efforts to recover an original name behind it remain uncertain.

7. *the fortress of Tyre*. Evidently a mainland outpost to the south of Tyre proper, which was on an island.

9. *sword-wielding*. The Hebrew says literally "sword-drawing."

10. *I have offended greatly in what I have done*. In contrast to the cogent sense of moral agency and moral responsibility in the David story proper, there is a peculiar contradiction here: David confesses deep contrition, yet he has, after all, been manipulated by God ("incited") to do what he has done.

11. *Gad the prophet, David's seer*. Gad was mentioned earlier (1 Samuel 22:5). His appearance here by no means warrants the claim of Kyle McCarter Jr. and others that this story is the work of a "prophetic" writer. Visionary intermediaries between king and God were a common assumption in the ancient world. Gad is called "seer" (*ḥozeh*), not the way prophetic writers would ordinarily think of prophets (and also not the term used for Samuel in 1 Samuel 9). Above all, the prophetic current in biblical literature does not presuppose either this kind of arbitrarily punitive God or the accompanying hocus-pocus with choices of punishment and divine messengers of destruction visible to the human characters.

14. *Let us . . . fall into the* LORD*'s hand . . . and into the hand of man let me not fall*. There is a puzzle in David's choice because only one of the three punishments—the flight from enemies—clearly involves human agency. Perhaps David has in mind that an extended famine would lead to absolute dependence on those foreign nations unaffected by the famine, as in the story of Joseph's brothers going down to Egypt. In all this, it should be noted that David is scarcely the same character we have seen in the body of his story. Instead of that figure of conflicting feelings and emotions so remarkable in psychological depth, we have a flat character instigated to act by God, then expressing remorse, then speaking in rather official tones in his role as political ruler and cultic chief responsible for all the people.

15. *the fixed time*. There is some question about what this refers to, though the grounds for emending the text to solve the problem are shaky. The phrase ought logically to refer to the end of the ordained three days of the plague. Yet David's intercession to stop the plague short before it engulfs Jerusalem suggests that the plague does not go on for the full three days. The difficulty

might be resolved simply by assuming that the initial verb—"and the LORD sent a plague against Israel"—refers to the initiating of the process according to the promised time limitations: God sends a plague against Israel intended to rage for the stipulated time of three days, but after it has devastated the people on a terrible scale for a certain time (perhaps two days?), David, aghast that these horrors should visit his own city as well, takes steps to induce God to cut the plague short.

16. *And the messenger reached out his hand against Jerusalem to destroy it*. Once again, the apparatus and the theology of this story reflect a different imaginative world from that of the main narrative about David, in which there are no divine emissaries of destruction brandishing celestial swords. The text of the Qumran Samuel scroll, paralleled in 1 Chronicles 21, makes the mythological character of this story even clearer: "and David raised his eyes and saw a messenger of the LORD standing between earth and heaven, his sword unsheathed in his hand reaching out against Jerusalem, and David and the elders fell on their faces, covered with sackcloth."

stay your hand. Literally, "let your hand go slack, unclench it."

the LORD's messenger was at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. In this fashion, the last-minute averting of the destruction of Jerusalem is linked with the etiological tale explaining how the site of the future temple was acquired. (Although the Temple is not explicitly mentioned, this acquisition of an altar site in Jerusalem is clearly placed here to prepare the way for the story of Solomon the temple builder that is to follow.) Thus, the first sacrifice offered on this spot is associated with a legendary turning away of wrath from Jerusalem—a token of the future function of the Temple. The name Araunah is not Semitic and is generally thought to be Hittite or Hurrian. Some scholars claim it is a title, not a name. In any event, Araunah's presence indicates that the conquered Jebusites were not massacred or entirely banished but continued to live in Jerusalem under David as his subjects.

17. *It is I who offended*. The Qumran text reads here, "It is I, the shepherd, who did evil." That, of course, neatly complements "these sheep" in the next clause, but it is hard to know whether "shepherd" was original or added by a later scribe to clarify the sheep metaphor.

21. *Why has my LORD the king come to his servant?* Isaac Abravanel aptly notes that it would not have been customary for the king to come to his subject: "You should have sent for me, for the lesser man goes to the greater and the greater does not go to the lesser." Abravanel, a councillor to Ferdinand and Isabella who was in the end exiled by them, would have been keenly familiar with such protocol.

to build an altar to the LORD, that the scourge may be held back. According to the ritualistic assumptions of this narrative, it requires not merely contrition but a special sacrifice to placate the deity. This leads one to suspect that the story, far from being prophetic literature, may have originated in some sort of priestly circle.

22. *Let my lord . . . take . . . what is good in his eyes*. In this whole exchange, there is a distinct parallel to Abraham's bargaining with Ephron the Hittite for the purchase of a gravesite at Hebron in Genesis 23. Ephron, too, first offers to make a gift to Abraham of what he requires, but the patriarch, like David here, insists on paying full price in order to have undisputed possession of the property.

the oxen for the burnt offering and the threshing boards and the oxen's gear. What Araunah does not offer David is the land itself, which he clearly wants. Both the threshing board and the "gear" (presumably, the yoke) would have been wooden. Since the sacrifice needs to be performed at once in order to avert the plague, Araunah is quick to offer not only the sacrificial beasts but firewood on the spot.

23. *All of it Araunah has, O king, given to the king*. The Hebrew, with the repeated "king," looks peculiar, though it is intelligible if the first "king" is construed as a vocative. Some emend the verse to read "all of it has Araunah your servant given to my lord the king."

25. *the LORD granted the plea for the land*. This is, of course, a near verbatim repetition of the words that conclude the story of David and the Gibeonites' execution of the descendants of Saul (21:14). The repetition may well be an editorial intervention intended to underscore the symmetry between the tale of a scourge averted by David's intercession at the beginning and at the end of this large composite coda to 1 and 2 Samuel. Although neither of these stories is especially continuous with the David story proper, both reflect a

connection with it in the emphasis on guilt that the king incurs, which brings disaster on the nation and which requires expiation. But the writer of genius responsible for the larger David narrative imagines guilt in far more probing moral terms and does not assume that the consequences of moral offenses and grave political misjudgments can be reversed by some ritual act.

KINGS

Introduction

The Book of Kings, like the Book of Samuel, as Josephus and early rabbinic sources indicate, was originally one book, not two. Its first two chapters, moreover, are clearly a completion of the story of David, showing the masterly hand of the great writer who fashioned the long narrative of Israel's founding king. The ancient editors set this material at the beginning of the Book of Kings because it reports Solomon's accession to the throne, though that story is intertwined with the wrenching portrait of the aging and failing David and his troubled relationship with his henchman Joab and his actual and potential enemies within and without the court. Once this story is completed, the Book of Kings proper exhibits an approach to politics, character, and historical causation that is quite different from the one that informs the David story.

Kings proves to be the most miscellaneous of the books assembled as the Former Prophets, although all of them are composite at least to some degree. The encompassing redactional framework is patently Deuteronomistic. The measure of every king is whether he did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and doing evil, with only a few limited exceptions, is conceived in cultic terms. The Deuteronomistic compiler repeatedly invokes the stipulation that there can be only one legitimate place of worship, which is the temple in Jerusalem—an idea that became firmly entrenched only with King Josiah's reforms around 621 B.C.E., scant decades before the Babylonian exile. Through most of these stories, the editor holds clearly in view the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C.E. and evidently also the destruction of the southern kingdom of Judah in 586 B.C.E. Since there is no hint, even at the end of the narrative, of any return to Zion after the exile, scholars have plausibly inferred that the book as a whole was put together in the early decades after the destruction of Judah.

It was put together, however, from a variety of widely disparate sources, which is why it is best to think of the person or persons responsible for its final form as a compiler or compilers. The large unit at the very beginning (1 Kings 1–11) in itself illustrates the

composite character of the book as a whole. The first two chapters, as I have noted, belong to the end of the David story, exhibiting its brilliant deployment of dialogue and of techniques of narrative repetition and its shrewd sense of realpolitik. Chapter 3 begins with an emphatically theological story of God's appearance to Solomon in a dream and the king's request for the gift of wisdom. This encounter with the divine is followed in the second half of the chapter by the often recalled Judgment of Solomon, a fable obviously meant to illustrate his wisdom and clearly reflecting a different narrative genre, the folktale. Chapter 4 is a roster of Solomon's royal bureaucracy, quite different from anything that precedes it.

The first half of chapter 5 is taken up with a report of the material grandeur of Solomon's court and of his unsurpassed wisdom, manifested in his composition of proverbs and poems. The next two and a half chapters focus on Solomon's great building projects, the Temple and the palace, undertaken with the collaboration of Hiram king of Tyre. Chapter 8 recounts the dedication of the Temple, most of it being the grand speech delivered by Solomon on that occasion (and deemed by many scholars to be a later composition). Chapter 9 begins with God's theologically freighted response to Solomon, then moves on to more of his royal projects.

In chapter 10 we get the enchanting folktale of the visit to Solomon's court of the Queen of Sheba. The following chapter, the last in Solomon's story, switches gears to show us the hitherto exemplary king led into the encouraging of pagan practices by his sundry foreign wives.

At the very end of the Solomon narrative, the editor informs us that "the rest of the acts of Solomon and all that he did, and his wisdom, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of Solomon?" (1 Kings 11:42). We may infer that at least some of the material in chapters 3–11 was drawn from this source, which seems to have been some sort of court annal. The reports of the royal bureaucracy and of Solomon's building projects, including a great abundance of architectural details and catalogues of furnishings, and of his marriage to Pharaoh's daughter, are likely candidates for this annalistic source. Other sources appear to have been tapped for the two folktales and probably also for the account at the end of Solomon's backsliding into pagan ways.

The sundry stories of the kings that come after the Solomon narrative approximately follow this pattern of drawing together disparate documents. More than any other narrative book of the Bible, the stories in Kings are repeatedly and insistently framed by formulaic

declarations. Wayward monarchs being preponderant, one king after another is said to swerve from the ways of the LORD, and in the case of the northern kingdom, to follow the dire path of its founder, Jeroboam son of Nebat, who offended and led Israel to offend. Again and again, the compiler, with his overriding concern for the exclusivity of the cult in the Jerusalem temple, inveighs against both northern and southern kings in formulaic language for allowing the people to burn incense and offer sacrifice on "the high places," that is, local rural altars. And the story of each king is concluded, like Solomon's, by a notation that the rest of the acts of this monarch are recorded in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Judah or the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Israel, depending on whether the king is southern or northern.

The reasonable inference from this editorial procedure is that much of the factual material of the Book of Kings was drawn from these two annalistic sources, one for the Kingdom of Judah and the other for the Kingdom of Israel. There is no way of knowing how much of the two lost annals was left out of the canonical text, though it seems likely that a good deal of circumstantial detail about the various kings was deemed irrelevant to this narrative, encompassing four centuries of Israelite history, that is meant to expound

the cumulative chain of actions that led to two nationally traumatic events, the destruction of the northern kingdom in 721 B.C.E. and, 135 years later, the destruction of its southern counterpart.

But we should not think of the Book of Kings merely as a series of extracts from two sets of royal annals. The Deuteronomistic editor provides a good deal of interpretation of the events, especially in his repeated insistence that cultic disloyalty to YHWH brought about the national catastrophes, and in all likelihood he also introduces some of his own narrative invention in order to support his interpretation of the history he conveys. Beyond these interventions, he incorporates materials from sources that are clearly not annalistic. In the later chapters of 2 Kings, there are a few extended passages perhaps taken directly from a narrative section of Isaiah, and, at the very end, a short section is drawn from Jeremiah (although it could well be the other way around—that the two Prophetic books drew from Kings). Elsewhere, there are numerous stories about prophets—not "writing prophets" but men of God who roam the countryside and are active players in the political realm—that have a strong folkloric stamp. Scholars have conjectured that there were collections of tales about prophets, probably produced in Prophetic circles,

which the later compiler decided to include in the large narrative. However, the fact that these stories are about prophets does not necessarily mean that they were the product of a Prophetic milieu, and I would propose that what is most salient about them is their generic character as folktales—stories spun out by the people awestruck by the remembered or imagined powers of these men of God.

There is, in fact, a palpable tension between the narrative of the kings and the tales of the prophets, however they intersect. The royal narrative appears to be historical, at least in its broad outlines. The kingdom did split in two after the death of Solomon around 930 B.C.E. There is no reason to doubt the reports of chronic political instability, especially in the northern kingdom where there was no authorized dynasty, involving a long and bloody sequence of court conspiracies, assassinations of kings, and usurpations. Israel's and Judah's struggles with the Arameans, the Assyrians, and finally the Babylonians were actual historical events, many of them attested in the Assyrian and Babylonian annals that have been uncovered by modern archaeology. The compiler of Kings, then, registers the course of historical events in the two kingdoms, making efforts to synchronize their chronology with reference to regnal spans, though his

commitment to theological historical causation leads him occasionally to introduce a supernatural event into the historical account. Thus, the Assyrian emperor Sennacherib did in fact conduct a campaign against Judah and neighboring regions toward the end of the seventh century B.C.E. and laid siege against Jerusalem in 601 B.C.E., then withdrew for reasons that remain uncertain. The author of Kings, however, chooses to represent the lifting of the siege as the result of an act of divine intervention in which the Assyrian army is suddenly stricken with a mysterious plague. This retreat of the Assyrian forces confirms his view that Jerusalem is a divinely protected city, the exclusive place that God has chosen to set his name upon. In this view, it is only the pagan outrages and the murderous practices of King Manasseh that later tip the balance and determine the destruction of Jerusalem.

If the accounts of the kings are by and large historical, the tales of the prophets—preeminently, the cycle of stories about Elijah and Elisha—abound in displays of supernatural powers that set them off not only from the royal history but also from virtually everything that precedes them in the Book of Samuel. Fire is brought down from the heavens to consume a sacrifice in a confrontation with the prophets of Baal; a

dead child is revived; a cruse of oil becomes bottomless to provide for a destitute widow; a precious borrowed axehead, sunk in the Jordan, floats to the surface; Elijah does not die but ascends in a chariot of fire to the heavens. In the actual miracle-count, Elisha somewhat surpasses his master Elijah, but it is Elijah who is embraced by later tradition, singled out at the end of Malachi as the man who will announce the coming of the redeemer; serving as a model for the Gospel writers in their stories of the miraculous acts performed by Jesus; and becoming a cherished folk hero in later Jewish tradition. It is Elijah rather than Elisha who enjoys this vivid afterlife because he is the master, not the disciple, and perhaps also because he is finally the more sympathetic figure of the two—it is hard to forget Elisha's initial act of sending bears to devour the boys who mock him, an event that already caused discomfort among the early rabbis.

The Elijah stories, it should be said, are not only a chronicle of signs and wonders but the representation of a rather arresting character. First we see him in flight, hiding out from Ahab's wrath. Then he shows himself as the iron-willed spokesman of God, denouncing Ahab to his face as "the troubler of Israel." After his triumph over the Baal prophets on Mount Carmel, finding himself nevertheless again

mortally threatened by Ahab and Jezebel, he flees to the wilderness where he despairs, asking God, "Enough, now, LORD. Take my life, for I am no better than my fathers" (1 Kings 19:4). But the despair is countered by the epiphany vouchsafed him in the wilderness, and he climbs back from his nadir again to confront Ahab after the judicial murder of Naboth contrived by Jezebel—"Have you murdered and also taken hold?" (1 Kings 21:19).

In all this, as in the Samson stories and elsewhere in the Bible, the folktale fondness for wondrous acts is interfused with a subtle narrative art in which dialogue, cunning patterns of repetition, and intimations of the character's inwardness are impressively deployed. Among all the narratives of monarchs, southern and northern, in the Book of Kings, pride of place is accorded to two characters—King Solomon and Elijah the prophet. Solomon is the embodiment of the regal grandeur of Israel's divinely elected monarchy, and as such great attention is lavished on his wealth, his grand royal enterprises, and his wisdom. He, like Elijah, will survive in later tradition as a figure both unmatched and revered. At the end of his story, he is seen falling away from his high calling, thus providing a rationale for the dividing of the kingdom and, ultimately, for its destruction.

Elijah's story ends in a fiery ascent, assuring his future standing as the harbinger of the messiah and the folk hero who will come to the wretched of his people in their hour of distress.

The compiler who put Kings together for posterity above all sought to provide an account of the nation's history and an explanation of why that history took the course it finally did. The artful crafting of narrative was not one of his conscious aims. The deep-seated storytelling impulse, however, that drives so much biblical narrative manifests itself in this book as well, in some degree in the luminous tales about King Solomon and even more in the cycle of stories marked by confrontation, triumph, and dejection about Elijah the Tishbite.

1 Kings

CHAPTER 1

[1]And King David had grown old, advanced in years,
and they covered him with bedclothes, but he was not
warm. [2]And his servants said to him, “Let them seek
out for my lord the king a young virgin, that she may
wait upon the king and become his familiar, and lie in
your lap, and my lord the king will be warm.” [3]And
they sought out a beautiful young woman through all
the territory of Israel, and they found Abishag the
Shunamite and brought her to the king. [4]And the
young woman was very beautiful, and she became a
familiar to the king and ministered to him, but the
king knew her not.

[5]And Adonijah son of Haggith was giving himself airs,
saying, “I shall be king!” And he made himself a
chariot and horsemen with fifty men running before
him. [6]And his father never caused him pain, saying,
“Why have you done thus?” And he, too, was very
goodly of appearance, and him she had born after

Absalom. [7]And he parlayed with Joab son of Zeruiah
and with Abiathar the priest, and they lent their
support to Adonijah. [8]But Zadok the priest and
Benaiah son of Jehoiada and Nathan the prophet and
Shimei and Rei and David's warriors were not with
Adonijah. [9]And Adonijah made a sacrificial feast of
sheep and oxen and fatlings by the Zoheleth stone
which is near Ein-Rogel, and he invited all his
brothers, the king's sons, and all the men of Judah, the
king's servants. [10]But Nathan the prophet and Benaiah
and the warriors and Solomon his brother he did not
invite.

[11]And Nathan said to Bathsheba, Solomon's mother,
saying, "Have you not heard that Adonijah son of
Haggith has become king, and our lord David knows it
not? [12]And now, come let me give you counsel that you
may save your own life and the life of your son
Solomon. [13]Go and get you to King David and say to
him, 'Has not my lord the king sworn to your servant,
saying: Solomon your son shall be king after me, and
he shall sit on my throne. And why has Adonijah
become king?' [14]Look, while you are still speaking
there, I shall come after you and fill in your
words."[15]And Bathsheba came to the king in the inner

chamber, and the king was very old, with Abishag the Shunamite ministering to the king. [16]And Bathsheba did obeisance and bowed down to the king, and the king said, “What troubles you?” [17]And she said to him, “My lord, you yourself swore by the LORD your God to your servant, ‘Solomon your son shall be king after me, and he shall sit on my throne.’ [18]And now, look, Adonijah has become king and my lord the king knows it not. [19]And he has made a sacrificial feast of oxen and fatlings and sheep in abundance and has invited all the king’s sons and Abiathar the priest and Joab commander of the army, but Solomon your servant he did not invite. [20]And you, my lord the king, the eyes of all Israel are upon you to tell them who will sit on the throne of my lord the king after him. [21]And it will come about when my lord king lies with his fathers, that I and my son Solomon will be held offenders.” [22]And, look, she was still speaking with the king when Nathan the prophet came in. [23]And they told the king, saying, “Here is Nathan the prophet.” And he came before the king and bowed to the king, his face to the ground. [24]And Nathan said, “My lord the king, have you yourself said, ‘Adonijah shall be king after me and he shall sit on my throne’? [25]For he has gone down today and made a sacrificial feast of oxen and fatlings and sheep in abundance, and he has

invited all the king's sons and the commanders of the army and Abiathar the priest, and there they are eating and drinking before him, and they have said, 'Long live King Adonijah!' [26]But me—your servant—and Zadok the priest and Benaiah son of Jehoiada and Solomon your servant he did not invite. [27]Has this thing been done by my lord the king without informing your servant who will sit on the throne of my lord the king after him?" [28]And King David answered and said, "Call me Bathsheba." And she came before the king and stood before the king. And the king swore and said, [29]"As the LORD lives Who rescued me from every strait, [30]as I swore to you by the LORD God of Israel, saying, 'Solomon your son shall be king after me, and he shall sit on my throne in my stead,' even so will I do this day." [31]And Bathsheba did obeisance, her face to the ground, and bowed to the king and said, "May my lord King David live forever." [32]And David said, "Call to me Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet and Benaiah son of Jehoiada." And they came before the king. [33]And the king said to them, "Take with you your lord's servants and mount Solomon my son on my special mule and bring him down to the Gihon. [34]And Zadok the priest shall anoint him there, with Nathan the prophet, as king over Israel, and sound the ram's horn and say, 'Long live

King Solomon.’ [35]And you shall come up after him,
and he shall come and sit on my throne, and he shall
be king after me, him have I charged to be prince over
Israel and over Judah.” [36]And Benaiah son of Jehoiada
answered the king and said, “Amen! May thus, too,
say the LORD, my lord the king’s God. [37]As the
LORD has been with my lord the king, thus may He
be with Solomon and make his throne even greater
than the throne of my lord King David.”

[38]And Zadok the priest, with Nathan the prophet and
Benaiah son of Jehoiada and the Cherithites and the
Pelethites, went down and mounted Solomon on King
David’s mule and led him to the Gihon. [39]And Zadok
the priest took the horn of oil from the Tent and
anointed Solomon, and they blew the ram’s horn and
all the people said, “Long live King Solomon!” [40]And
all the people went up after him, and the people were
playing flutes and making such revelry that the very
earth split apart with their noise. [41]And Adonijah
heard, and all the invited guests who were with him,
and they had finished eating, and Joab heard the sound
of the ram’s horn and said, “Why this sound of the
town in an uproar?” [42]He was still speaking when,
look, Jonathan son of Abiathar the priest came. And

Adonijah said, “Come! For you are a valiant fellow
and you must bear good tidings.” 43And Jonathan
answered and said to Adonijah, “Alas, our lord King
David has made Solomon king. 44And the king has sent
with him Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet and
Benaiah son of Jehoiada and the Cherithites and the
Pelethites, and they have mounted him on the king’s
mule. 45And Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet
have anointed him king at the Gihon, and they have
gone up from there reveling, and the town is in an
uproar. This is the sound you heard. 46And what’s
more, Solomon is seated on the royal throne. 47And
what’s more, the king’s servants have come to bless
our lord King David, saying, ‘May your God make
Solomon’s name even better than your name and make
his throne even greater than your throne.’ And the king
bowed down on his couch. 48And what’s more, thus has
the king said, ‘Blessed is the LORD God of Israel
Who has granted today someone sitting on my throne
with my own eyes beholding it.’” 49And all of
Adonijah’s invited guests trembled and rose up and
each man went on his way. 50And Adonijah was afraid
of Solomon, and he rose up and went off and caught
hold of the horns of the altar. 51And it was told to
Solomon, saying, “Look, Adonijah is afraid of King
Solomon and, look, he has caught hold of the horns of

the altar, saying, ‘Let King Solomon swear to me today that he will not put his servant to death by the sword.’” [52]And Solomon said, “If he prove a valiant fellow, not a hair of his will fall to the ground, but if evil be found in him, he shall die.” [53]And King Solomon sent, and they took him down from the altar, and he came and bowed to King Solomon, and Solomon said to him, “Go to your house.”

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And King David had grown old*. Although an editor, several centuries after the composition of the story, placed this episode and the next one at the beginning of the Book of Kings, and after the coda of 2 Samuel 21–24, because of the centrality in them of Solomon’s succession, they are clearly the conclusion to the David story and bear all the hallmarks of its author’s distinctive literary genius. There are strong stylistic links with the previous David narrative; the artful deployment of dialogue and of spatial shifts is very similar; and there are significant connections of phrasing, motif, and theme.

they covered him with bedclothes, but he was not warm. This extraordinary portrait of a human life working itself out in the gradual passage of time, which began with an agile, daring, and charismatic young David, now shows him in the extreme infirmity of old age, shivering in bed beneath his covers.

2. *Let them seek out for my lord the king a young virgin*. The language used by the courtiers recalls that of the mentally troubled Saul’s courtiers, “We shall seek out a man skilled in playing the lyre” (1 Samuel 16:16)—the very words that were the prelude to the young David’s entrance into the court.

become his familiar. The exact meaning of the Hebrew noun *sokhenet* is uncertain. Some translate it as “attendant” on the basis of the context. The

verbal stem from which the word is derived generally has the meaning of "to become accustomed," hence the choice here of "familiar"—of course, in the social sense and not in the secondary sense linked with witchcraft. The only other occurrence of this term in the biblical corpus, Isaiah 22:15, seems to designate a (male) court official.

and lie in your lap. Nathan in his denunciatory parable addressed to David represented the ewe, symbolic of Bathsheba, lying in the poor man's lap (2 Samuel 12:3).

4. *the young woman was very beautiful . . . but the king knew her not*. David, lying in bed with this desirable virgin, but now beyond any thought or capacity of sexual consummation, is of course a sad image of infirm old age. At the same time, this vignette of geriatric impotence is a pointed reversal of the Bathsheba story that brought down God's curse on the house of David, triggering all the subsequent troubles of dynastic succession. There, too, David was lying in his bed or couch (*mishkav*, as in verse 47 here), and there, too, he sent out emissaries to bring back a beautiful young woman to lie with him, though to antithetical purposes.

5. *was giving himself airs*. The reflexive verb has a root that means to raise up (hence the King James Version, "exalted himself"). Since a common noun derived from that verb, *nasiʾ*, means "prince," the reflexive verb might even have the sense of "acting the part of a prince."

he made himself a chariot and horsemen with fifty men running before him. These acts of regal presumption are the same ones carried out by the usurper Absalom, Adonijah's older brother.

6. *his father never caused him pain*. The obvious sense of the verb in context is "reprimand." The Septuagint reads "restrained him" (*ʿatsaro* instead of *ʿatsavo*), either because the Greek translators had a better Hebrew version here or were smoothing out the Hebrew.

And he, too, was very goodly of appearance. As the second clause of this sentence makes clear, the "too" refers to Absalom, the son Haggith bore David before Adonijah.

8. *Shimei and Rei*. The Septuagint reads "Shimei and his companions" (*reʿaw* instead of *reʿi*).

9. *made a sacrificial feast*. The Hebrew verb *z-b-ḥ* refers both to the sacrifice of the animals, the greater part of which was kept to be eaten, and to the feast. This is clearly a ceremonial feast at which the monarchy is to be conferred on Adonijah.

the Zoheleth stone which is near Ein-Rogel. The spring (Hebrew *'ayin*) of Rogel is within a couple of miles of Jerusalem. The spatial proximity becomes important later in the story because Adonijah's supporters, after they finish their feast, are able to hear the shouting from the city. Zoheleth means "creeping thing," which has led some scholars to conjecture that this location was a sacred site dedicated to the worship of a snake deity.

and all the men of Judah, the king's servants. Like his brother Absalom, Adonijah draws on a base of support from his own tribe, Judah. In political and royal contexts, the phrase "the king's servants" usually refers to courtiers, members of the king's inner circle.

10. *But Nathan the prophet and Benaiah*. In keeping with the established convention of biblical narrative, this list of the uninvited and the report of Adonijah's self-coronation feast will be repeated more or less verbatim, with subtle and significant changes reflecting who the speaker is.

and the warriors. One should remember that Joab, commander of the army, was not listed in 2 Samuel 23 as a member of "the Three Warriors," David's elite fighting corps. Although few in number, they would have been a formidable counterforce in a struggle for the throne.

11. *Bathsheba, Solomon's mother*. After her fatal affair with David, she disappears from the narrative. Now, after some two decades or perhaps more of elapsed time, she resurfaces. Whereas the beautiful young wife was accorded no dialogue except for her report to David of her pregnancy, the mature Bathsheba will show herself a mistress of language—shrewd, energetic, politically astute.

Adonijah . . . has become king, and our lord David knows it not. J. P. Fokkelman notes the play on words in the Hebrew between *ʾAdoniyah* ("my lord is Yah") and *ʾadoneinu* ("our lord"). Playing also on the double sense of the Hebrew verb "to know," the writer represents David in a state of both sexual and cognitive impotence: he knows not Abishag and he knows not Adonijah's initiative to assume the throne.

13. *Has not my lord the king sworn to your servant*. The script that Nathan dictates to Bathsheba invokes a central ambiguity, which the writer surely intends to exploit. Perhaps David actually made a private vow to Bathsheba promising that Solomon would succeed him. There is, however, no mention of such a vow anywhere in the preceding narrative, including the report of Solomon's God-favored birth, where one might expect it. This opens up a large, though by no means certain, possibility that Nathan the man of God has invented the vow and enlists Bathsheba's help in persuading the doddering David that he actually made this commitment.

Solomon your son shall be king after me, and he shall sit on my throne. The verselike parallelism of David's purported vow has the effect of impressing it on memory. It is repeated three times: here by Nathan, then by Bathsheba as she carries out Nathan's orders, then by David, who will make one small but crucial change in the wording of the formula.

14. *fill in your words*. Many translate the Hebrew verb that means "to fill" as "confirm." But in fact what Nathan will do is to complement Bathsheba's speech, adding certain elements and not repeating certain others.

15. *the inner chamber*. At an earlier moment, a figure from David's house, Amnon, was seen lying ill (or pretending) while a beautiful woman came to him in the inner chamber.

16. *Bathsheba did obeisance and bowed down to the king*. Whatever the actual relationship between Bathsheba and David at this very late point in his life, it seems reduced to a punctilious observance of palace protocol. In the background, silent, stands the beautiful young Abishag, now the king's bedmate but not really his consort.

17. *My lord, you yourself swore by the* LORD *your God*. Bathsheba edits the script Nathan has given her in two ways: the third-person address to the king is switched to the second person, allowing her to introduce an emphatic, "you yourself" (in the Hebrew the addition of the pronoun *ʾatah* before the conjugated verb); and the vow is said to have been made solemnly "by the LORD your God." If in fact the vow is a fabrication, perhaps Nathan the prophet was leery of invoking God's name in connection with it.

19. *oxen and fatlings and sheep in abundance*. The last term, "in abundance," is added to the verbal chain from the narrator's initial report of the feast, a small magnification of the scale of the event that Adonijah has staged.

but Solomon your servant he did not invite. Nathan had not incorporated a list of the excluded in his instructions to her. Bathsheba singles out only her own son among the uninvited, but she is careful to identify him to David not as "my son" but as "your servant," emphasizing Solomon's status as loyal subject.

20. *the eyes of all Israel are upon you to tell them who will sit on the throne*. Now improvising, Bathsheba uses words that strongly evoke David's authority, though in fact he has been out of the picture, failing and bedridden.

21. *when my lord the king lies with his fathers . . . I and my son Solomon will be held offenders*. With admirable tact, she uses a decorous euphemism for dying, and then expresses her perfectly plausible fear that as king, Adonijah would take prompt steps to eliminate both her and Solomon. (Compare Nathan's "save your own life and the life of your son.")

23. *Here is Nathan the prophet*. Nathan in his role as prophet is formally announced to David by the courtiers. According to biblical convention, there are no three-sided dialogues. Bathsheba presumably withdraws as soon as she sees Nathan enter. In verse 28, after the conversation with Nathan, David has to summon her back. All this takes place not in the throne room but in the "inner chamber," where David lies in bed.

24. *have you yourself said, "Adonijah shall be king."* Unlike Bathsheba, Nathan makes no reference to a vow regarding Solomon, presumably because it would have been a private vow to her. Instead, he refers to observable public events: have you authorized the succession of Adonijah? He uses the identical formula for succession that has already twice been attached to Solomon ("shall be king after me . . . shall sit on my throne").

25. *he has invited all the king's sons and the commanders of the army*. Nathan's more political version of the unfolding usurpation adds to the list of Adonijah's supporters the whole officer corps of the army.

Long live King Adonijah. This vivid acclamation of Adonijah's kingship, not reported by the narrator, is calculated to rouse David's ire. The evocation

of the coronation feast ("they are eating and drinking before him") is similarly more vivid than Bathsheba's account.

26. *But me—your servant*. Nathan takes pains, in righteous indignation as prophet to the throne, to highlight his own exclusion, at the very beginning of the list.

30. *as I swore to you by the* LORD *God of Israel*. Whether or not David actually made this vow to Bathsheba, by now he is thoroughly persuaded that he did. Note that he raises Bathsheba's language to still another level of politically efficacious resonance: Nathan had made no mention of God in invoking the vow; Bathsheba had said "you . . . swore by the LORD your God"; David now encompasses the whole national realm in declaring, "as I swore to you by the LORD God of Israel."

he shall sit on my throne in my stead. David introduces a crucial change into the formula for the promise of succession, as Fokkelman shrewdly observes: to the understandable "after me" of the first clause he adds "in my stead," implying not merely that Solomon will succeed him but that Solomon will replace him on the throne while he is still alive. Accordingly, David then proceeds to give instructions for an immediate ceremony of anointment. In the face of Adonijah's virtual coup d'état, David appears to realize that he is no longer physically capable of acting as monarch and protecting himself against usurpation, and that the wisest course is to put his chosen successor on the throne without a moment's delay.

31. *May my lord King David live forever*. Bathsheba's tact remains flawless. Now that she has extracted from David exactly the commitment she wanted, she wishes him, hyperbolically, eternal life, even as he teeters on the edge of the grave.

33. *your lord's servants*. That is, David's courtiers.

my special mule. Literally, "the mule that is mine." Seating Solomon on the royal mule is the first public expression of the conferral of the kingship on him.

the Gihon. This is a brook just outside the city walls. David enjoins his officials to act rapidly in anointing Solomon while Adonijah's coronation feast is still under way a couple of miles off.

35. *he shall come and sit on my throne*. This reiterated symbolic statement is now literalized: after the anointment at the Gihon brook, Solomon is to be brought to the palace and publicly seated on the throne.

him have I charged to be prince. The term *nagid*, "prince," previously attached to Saul and now to David, appears for the last time to designate the monarch. He is to be prince over Judah, where Adonijah has gathered support, as well as over Israel.

38. *the Cherithites and the Pelethites*. These members of the palace guard of Philistine origin provide a show of arms for the act of anointing Solomon.

39. *took the horn of oil from the Tent*. The Tent in question is obviously the cultic site where the Ark of the Covenant is kept—the emphasis is that the oil of anointment is sanctified oil.

40. *the people were playing flutes and making such revelry that the very earth split apart with their noise*. This hyperbolic report of the public rejoicing over Solomon's succession to the throne serves two purposes: the tremendous clamor is so loud that the sound reaches Adonijah and his supporters at Ein-Rogel (verse 41), and it is a vocal demonstration that the choice of Solomon immediately enjoys extravagant popular support. This latter consideration is crucial for the politics of the story because it makes clear that Adonijah has no hope of mustering opposition to Solomon.

41. *Adonijah heard, and all the invited guests . . . and Joab heard the sound of the ram's horn*. As a couple of commentators have noted, Adonijah and his followers hear only the hubbub from the town, whereas Joab, the military man, picks up the sound of the *shofar*, the ram's horn. This would be either a call to arms or the proclamation of a king.

42. *For you are a valiant fellow and you must bear good tidings*. This obvious non sequitur ominously echoes David's anxious words about Ahimaaz (2 Samuel 18), "He is a good man and with good tidings he must come." Jonathan's very first word, "alas," shows how mistaken Adonijah is.

43. *our lord King David has made Solomon king*. Jonathan flatly begins with the brunt of the bad news, then fleshes out the circumstances to make it all

the worse. He at once identifies David as "our lord," conceding that, after all, David retains a monarch's authority to determine his successor.

46–48. *And what's more, Solomon is seated. . . . And what's more, the king's servants have come. . . . And what's more, thus has the king said*. Jonathan's long, breathless account of the installation of Solomon as king, with its reiterated "what's more" (*wegam*), conveys an excited cumulative sense of the chain of disasters that have destroyed all of Adonijah's hopes. He goes beyond what the narrator has reported to depict Solomon actually seated on the throne, receiving his father's blessing.

48. *someone sitting on my throne*. Some textual critics propose instead the Masoretic reading "a son sitting on my throne."

49. *each man went on his way*. Terrified, the supporters of Adonijah's claim to the throne disperse. This moment is reminiscent of the dispersal and flight of "all the king's sons" from Amnon's feast after Absalom's men murder Amnon.

50. *caught hold of the horns of the altar*. The typical construction of ancient Israelite altars, as archaeology has confirmed, featured a curving protuberance at each of the four corners, roughly like the curve of a ram's horn. The association of horn with strength may explain this design. Gripping the horns —actually, probably one horn—of the altar was a plea for sanctuary: at least in principle, although not always in practice, a person in this posture and in this place should be held inviolable by his pursuers.

51. *Let King Solomon swear . . . that he will not put his servant to death*. Adonijah, compelled by force majeure, fully acknowledges Solomon's kingship and his own status as subject in his plea for mercy.

52. *And Solomon said*. Until this point, Solomon has been acted upon by others, and no dialogue has been assigned to him. Now that he is king, he speaks with firm authority.

If he prove a valiant fellow. In immediate context, the force of the idiom *ben ḥayil* is obviously something like "a decent fellow." But its usual meaning is worth preserving because it precisely echoes the term Adonijah addressed

to Jonathan (verse 42), and it also points up ironically that Adonijah now is trembling with fear.

if evil be found in him, he shall die. The evil Solomon has in mind would be further political machinations. He thus does not agree to swear unconditionally, as Adonijah had pleaded, not to harm his half brother, and he will make due use of the loophole he leaves himself.

53. *Go to your house*. This injunction concludes the episode on a note of ambiguity. Solomon is distancing Adonijah from the palace. He sends him to the presumed safety of his own home, or is it to a condition of virtual house arrest? In any case, Adonijah is surely meant to be kept under surveillance, and Solomon has already put him on warning.

CHAPTER 2

[1]And David's time to die grew near, and he charged Solomon his son, saying: [2]"I am going on the way of all the earth. And you must be strong, and be a man. [3]And keep what the LORD your God enjoins, to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, His commands, and His dictates and His admonitions, as it is written in the Teaching of Moses, so that you may prosper in everything you do and in everything to which you turn. [4]So that the LORD may fulfill His word that He spoke unto me, saying, 'If your sons keep their way to walk before Me in truth with their whole heart and with their whole being, no man of yours will be cut off from the throne of Israel.' [5]And, what's more, you yourself know what Joab son of Zeruiah did to me, what he did to the two commanders of the armies of Israel, Abner son of Ner and Amasa son of Jether—he killed them, and shed the blood of war in peace, and put the blood of war on his belt that was round his waist and on his sandals that were on his feet. [6]And you must act in your wisdom, and do not let his gray

head go down in peace to Sheol. [7]And with the sons of
Barzillai the Gileadite keep faith, and let them be
among those who eat at your table, for did they not
draw near me when I fled from Absalom your brother?
[8]And, look, with you is Shimei son of Gera the
Benjaminite from Bahurim, and he cursed me with a
scathing curse on the day I went to Mahanaim. And he
came down to meet me at the Jordan, and I swore to
him by the LORD, saying, 'I will not put you to death
by the sword.' [9]And now, do not hold him guiltless, for
you are a wise man, and you will know what you
should do to him, and bring his gray head down in
blood to Sheol!" [10]And David lay with his fathers and
he was buried in the City of David. [11]And the time that
David was king over Israel was forty years—in Hebron
he was king seven years and in Jerusalem he was king
thirty-three years. [12]And Solomon sat on the throne of
David like his father, and his kingdom was wholly
unshaken.

[13]And Adonijah son of Haggith came to Bathsheba,
Solomon's mother, and she said, "Do you come in
peace?" And he said, "In peace." [14]And he said, "There
is something I have to say to you." And she said,
"Speak." [15]And he said, "You yourself know that mine

was the kingship, and to me did all Israel turn their faces to be king, yet the kingship was brought round and became my brother's, for from the LORD was it his. [16]And now, there is one petition I ask of you, do not refuse me." And she said, "Speak." [17]And he said, "Pray, say to Solomon the king, for he would not refuse you, that he give me Abishag the Shunamite as wife." [18]And Bathsheba said, "Good, I myself shall speak for you to the king." [19]And Bathsheba came to King Solomon to speak to him about Adonijah. And the king arose to greet her and bowed to her and sat down on his throne and set out a throne for the queen mother, and she sat down to his right. [20]And she said, "There is one small petition that I ask of you, do not refuse me." And the king said to her, "Ask, Mother, for I shall not refuse you." [21]And she said, "Let Abishag the Shunamite be given to Adonijah your brother as wife." [22]And King Solomon answered and said to his mother, "And why do you ask Abishag the Shunamite for Adonijah? Ask the kingship for him, as he is my older brother, and Abiathar the priest and Joab son of Zeruiah are for him." [23]And King Solomon swore by the LORD, saying, "Thus may God do to me and even more, for at the cost of his life has Adonijah spoken this thing! [24]And now, as the LORD lives, Who seated me unshaken on the throne of David my father,

and Who made me a house just as He had spoken, today shall Adonijah be put to death.” [25]And King Solomon sent by the hand of Benaiah son of Jehoiada, and he stabbed him and he died. [26]And to Abiathar the priest did the king say, “Go to Anathoth to your own fields, for you are a doomed man, but on this day I shall not put you to death, for you bore the Ark of the LORD God before David my father and you suffered through all that my father suffered.” [27]And Solomon banished Abiathar from being priest to the LORD, so as to fulfill the word of the LORD that He spoke concerning the house of Eli at Shiloh.

[28]And the news reached Joab, for Joab had sided with Adonijah, though with Absalom he had not sided, and Joab fled to the Tent of the LORD, and he grasped the horns of the altar. [29]And it was told to the king that Joab had fled to the Tent of the LORD, and there he was by the altar, and Solomon sent Benaiah son of Johoiada, saying, “Go, stab him.” [30]And Benaiah came to the Tent of the LORD and said to him, “Thus says the king, ‘Come out.’” And he said, “No, for here I shall die.” And Benaiah brought back word to the king, saying, “Thus did Joab speak and thus did he answer me.” [31]And the king said, “Do as he has

spoken, and stab him and bury him, and you shall take away the blood that Joab shed for no cause, from me and from my father's house. [32]And the LORD will bring back his bloodguilt on his own head, for he stabbed two men more righteous and better than himself and he killed them by the sword, unbeknownst to my father David—Abner son of Ner, commander of the army of Israel, and Amasa son of Jether, commander of the army of Judah. [33]And their blood will come back on the head of Joab and on the head of his seed forever, but for David and his seed and his house and his throne there will be peace evermore from the LORD." [34]And Benaiah son of Jehoiada went up and stabbed him and put him to death, and he was buried at his home in the wilderness. [35]And the king put Benaiah son of Jehoiada in his stead over the army, and Zadok the priest did the king put instead of Abiathar.

[36]And the king sent and called to Shimei and said to him, "Build yourself a house in Jerusalem and dwell in it, and do not go out from there hither and yon. [37]For should you cross the Wadi Kidron, on the very day you go out, you must surely know that you are doomed to die, your blood will be on your own head." [38]And

Shimei said to the king, “The thing is good. Even as
my lord the king has spoken, so will his servant do.”
And Shimei dwelled in Jerusalem a long while. 39And
it happened at the end of three years that two of
Shimei’s slaves ran away to Achish son of Maacah,
king of Gath, and they told Shimei, saying, “Look,
your slaves are in Gath.” 40And Shimei arose and
saddled his donkey and went to Gath, to Achish, to
seek his slaves, and Shimei went and brought his slaves
from Gath. 41And it was told to Solomon that Shimei
had gone from Jerusalem and had come back. 42And
the king sent and called Shimei and said to him, “Did I
not make you swear by the LORD and warn you,
saying, ‘The day you go out and move about hither and
yon, you must surely know that you are doomed to
die,’ and you said to me, ‘The thing is good. I do hear
it.’ 43And why have you not kept the LORD’s oath and
the command with which I charged you?” 44And the
king said to Shimei, “You yourself know all the evil,
which your own heart knows, that you did to David my
father, and the LORD has brought back your evil on
your own head. 45But King Solomon shall be blessed
and the throne of David shall be unshaken before the
LORD forevermore.” 46And the king charged Benaiah
son of Jeohaiada, and he went out and stabbed him,
and he died.

And the kingdom was unshaken in Solomon's hand.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3–4. These two relatively long verses are an unusual instance of the intervention of a Deuteronomistic editor in the dialogue of the original David story that was composed perhaps nearly four centuries before him. The language here is an uninterrupted chain of verbal formulas distinctive of the Book of Deuteronomy and its satellite literature: *keep what the LORD your God enjoins, walk in His ways, keep His statutes, His commands, and His dictates and admonitions, so that you may prosper in everything you do and in everything to which you turn, walk before Me in truth with their whole heart and with their whole being*. The very mention of the Teaching [*torah*] of Moses is a hallmark of the Deuteronomist, and as phrase and concept did not yet have currency in the tenth century. The long sentences loaded with synonyms are also uncharacteristic of the author of the David story, and there is no one in that story—least of all, David himself—who speaks in this high-minded, long-winded, didactic vein. Why did the Deuteronomistic editor choose to intervene at this penultimate point of the David story? It seems very likely that he was uneasy with David's pronouncing to Solomon a last will and testament worthy of a dying mafia capo: be strong and be a man, and use your savvy to pay off all my old scores with my enemies. In fact, David's deathbed implacability, which the later editor tries to mitigate by first placing noble sentiments in his mouth, is powerfully consistent with both the characterization and the imagination of politics in the preceding narrative. The all-too-human David on the brink of the grave is still smarting from the grief and humiliation that Joab's violent acts caused him and from the public shame Shimei heaped on him, and he wants Solomon to do what he himself was prevented from doing by fear in the one case and by an inhibiting vow in the other. In practical political terms, moreover, either Joab, just recently a supporter of the usurper Adonijah, or Shimei, the disaffected Benjaminite, might threaten Solomon's hold on power, and so both should be eliminated.

5. *what he did to the two commanders of the armies of Israel*. David is silent about the third murder perpetrated by Joab, and the one that caused him the greatest grief—the killing of Absalom. Perhaps he does not mention it because it was a murder, unlike the other two, that served a reason of state. But it was surely the one act he could not forgive.

shed the blood of war in peace, and put the blood of war on his belt . . . and on his sandals. Both killings were done on the roadway, Joab approaching his victim with gestures of peace. In the case of Abner, his rival had come to make peace with David, and the phrase "went in peace [*shalom*]" was attached to Abner in a triple repetition (2 Samuel 3). In the case of Amasa, Joab's last words to him before stabbing him in the belly were "Is it well [*shalom*] with you, my brother?" (2 Samuel 20:9). The virtually visual emphasis of blood on belt and sandals recalls in particular the murder of Amasa, who lay in the middle of the road wallowing in blood, while the mention of Joab's belt looks back to his stratagem of belting his sword to his waist so that it would fall out when he bent over, to be picked up by his left hand. The reference to Joab's waist and feet conveys an image of a man splashed all over with blood. Beyond this integration of details from the preceding narrative in the words David chooses, the concentration on blood reflects a general belief that blood shed in murder lingers not only over the murderer but also over those associated with the victim like a contaminating miasma until it is "redeemed" or "taken away" by vengeance.

6. *you must act in your wisdom*. The wisdom of Solomon in the subsequent narrative is proverbial, but what David already has in mind here is political shrewdness: Joab is, after all, a formidable adversary, and Solomon will have to choose the right time and place, when Joab is without allies or protection, to dispatch him.

do not let his gray head go down in peace to Sheol. This proverbial phrase is actualized here because we realize that Joab, after half a century as David's commander—forty regnal years plus several years before that in David's guerilla band—is now an old man. He who shed the blood of war in peace will not be allowed to go down in peace to the underworld.

9. *for you are a wise man, and you will know what you should do to him*. In regard to Shimei, the "wisdom" Solomon must exercise is to find some legal loophole to obviate his father's vow not to harm the Benjaminite. In the event,

Solomon does this with considerable cleverness. David's vow to Shimei was made at a moment when it seemed politically prudent to include the man who had cursed him in what was probably a general amnesty after the suppression of the rebellion. It is understandable that later on David would regret this binding act of forgiveness to a vile-spirited enemy.

bring his gray head down in blood to Sheol. Shimei had screamed at the fleeing David, "man of blood." Now David enjoins Solomon to send him to the netherworld in blood. In his long career, David has had noble moments as well as affectingly human ones, but it is a remarkable token of the writer's gritty realism about men in the vindictive currents of violent politics that the very last words he assigns to David are *bedam She'ol*, "in blood to Sheol."

11. *forty years*. One may assume this is no more than an approximation of David's regnal span since forty years, as the Book of Judges repeatedly shows, is a formulaic number for a full reign.

13. *Adonijah son of Haggith*. The reappearance of Solomon's rival follows hard upon the report that his kingdom was unshaken, introducing a potential dissonance. Adonijah was not included in David's list of enemies to be eliminated because he is Solomon's problem, not David's.

Do you come in peace? After Adonijah's attempt to seize the throne that was then given to her son, Bathsheba is understandably uncertain about Adonijah's intentions in coming to see her.

15. *You yourself know that mine was the kingship . . . yet the kingship was brought round and became my brother's, for from the* LORD *was it his*. Adonijah tries to have it both ways in his overture to Bathsheba: on the one hand, the kingship really was his, and he enjoyed popular support; on the other hand, he is prepared to be reconciled with the idea that it was God's determination that the crown should pass on from him to his brother. There may be a note of petulance here: Adonijah speaks of his situation as though he deserved some sort of consolation prize. It will prove a fatal imprudence that he should have addressed this complaint to the mother of the man he sought to anticipate in seizing the throne.

17. *that he give me Abishag the Shunamite as wife*. The promotion of fruitful ambiguity through narrative reticence so characteristic of the author of the David story is never more brilliantly deployed. What is Adonijah really up to?

He approaches Solomon's mother because he thinks she will have special influence over the king and because he is afraid to go to Solomon himself. Perhaps, Adonijah imagines, as a mother she will have pity for him and do him this favor. But in taking this course, Adonijah betrays the most extraordinary political naïveté. Why does he want Abishag? The political motive would be that by uniting with a woman who had shared the king's bed, though merely as a bedwarmer, he was preparing the ground for a future claim to the throne. (The act of his brother Absalom in cohabiting with David's concubines stands in the background.) If this motive were transparent, as it turns out to be in Solomon's reading of the request, it would be idiotic for Adonijah to ask for Abishag. Perhaps he feels safe because Abishag was not technically David's consort. Perhaps the political consideration is only at the back of his mind, and he really is seeking consolation in the idea of marrying a beautiful young woman who has, so to speak, a kind of association by contiguity with the throne. In any case, he will pay the ultimate price for his miscalculation.

18. *I myself shall speak for you to the king*. As with Adonijah, there is no explanation of her motive. But given the shrewdness with which Bathsheba has acted in the previous episode, it is entirely plausible that she immediately agrees to do this favor for Adonijah because she quickly realizes what escapes him—that it will prove to be his death sentence, and thus a threat to her son's throne will be permanently eliminated.

19. *and bowed to her*. The Septuagint has "and kissed her" because of the anomaly of a king's bowing to his subject.

20. *There is one small petition that I ask of you*. In accordance with the established convention of biblical narrative, she uses the very same words Adonijah has spoken to her, adding only the adjective "small." This is just a tiny request, she appears to say, full knowing that Solomon is likely to see it, on the contrary, as a huge thing—a device that could be turned into a ladder to the throne on which Solomon sits. One should note that this whole large narrative begins when a woman who is to become a mother (Hannah) puts forth a petition (*she'eilah*, the same word used here).

22. *as he is my older brother, and Abiathar . . . and Joab . . . are for him*. If he makes the dead king's consort his wife, that, together with the fact that he

is my elder and has powerful supporters in the court, will give him a dangerously strong claim to the throne. In the Hebrew, the second clause appears to say "and for him and for Abiathar . . . and for Joab," which makes little sense, and so the small emendation, deleting the second and third occurrence of "for" (a single-letter prefix in the Hebrew), is presumed in the translation.

26. *to Abiathar the priest*. Throughout this episode centering on Adonijah, Solomon shows himself to be decisive, emphatic, and ruthless—a worthy son of his father. The moment he hears of Adonijah's pretentions to the late king's nurse-bedmate, he orders him to be killed immediately. He then proceeds to remove from office and banish the key priestly supporter of Adonijah, and he will go on to deal with Joab as well.

on this day I shall not put you to death. There is a veiled threat in this formulation: right now I shall not kill you, and in any case you had better stay away from Jerusalem on the farm at Anathoth.

for you bore the Ark of the LORD . . . and you suffered through all that my father suffered. Solomon is circumspect in not ordering the execution of a priest—in sharp contrast to Saul, who thought he might protect his kingship from a perceived threat by massacring a whole town of priests who he imagined were allied with his rival. Solomon also honors the fact that Abiathar has shared many years of danger and hardship with David, and during that time never betrayed David, as Joab did.

27. *so as to fulfill the word of the LORD . . . concerning the house of Eli*. One sees how this chapter concludes a grand narrative that begins in 1 Samuel 1, and is not merely the end of a supposedly independent Succession Narrative.

28. *And the news reached Joab . . . and Joab fled to the Tent of the LORD*. With Adonijah dead and Abiathar banished, Joab realizes that all who remain from the recent anti-Solomon alliance have been isolated and cut off. This relentlessly political general recognizes that he has no power base left to protect him against the resolute young king. He has only the desperate last remedy of seeking sanctuary at the altar.

30. *Thus says the king, "Come out."* Solomon's blunt order was simply to stab Joab, but Benaiah, steely executioner though he has shown himself, is loath to

kill a man clinging to the altar, and so he directs Joab to come down out of the Tent of the LORD.

31. *stab him and bury him*. Solomon's command is to take Joab's life in the very place of sanctuary ("for here shall I die"), a decision that is in accordance with biblical law: "And should a man scheme against his fellow man to kill him by cunning, from My altar you shall take him to die" (Exodus 21:14). But Solomon also enjoins Benaiah to see to it that Joab, who was after all a stalwart soldier and once David's boon companion, should have a proper burial and not be thrown to the scavengers of sky and earth—the ultimate indignity in ancient Mediterranean cultures.

32. *for he stabbed two men more righteous and better than himself . . . unbeknownst to my father David*. Solomon in his "wisdom" has thus used the purported renewal of the Adonijah conspiracy to carry out the will of vengeance his father conveyed to him, and for the precise reasons David stipulated.

33. *their blood will come back on the head of Joab and on the head of his seed*. The miasma of blood guilt settles on the house of Joab for all time: a curse on the house of Joab was not part of David's injunction, but perhaps Solomon means to ward off any prospect that resentful descendants of Joab will seek to marshal forces against the Davidic line.

but for David and his seed and his house there will be peace evermore. There is an emphatic contrast between permanent blessing on the line of David and an everlasting curse on the line of Joab, with "peace" counterpointed to "blood," as in verse 5.

34. *he was buried at his home in the wilderness*. This notation has puzzled commentators because one would assume that Joab's home (like David's original home) was in the town of Bethlehem. The Hebrew for "wilderness," *midbar*, has the basic meaning of uninhabited terrain, and it is not improbable that Joab would have had a kind of hacienda removed from the town. Nevertheless, the report of Joab's burial in the wilderness concludes his story on a haunting note. That resonance has been nicely caught by the medieval Hebrew commentator Gersonides: "he was buried in the wilderness, which was the home fitting for him, for it would not be meet for a man like him to

be part of civil society [*lihyot medini*] because he had killed men by devious means and by deception."

37. *should you cross the Wadi Kidron*. This brook runs at the foot of Jerusalem to the east, and Shimei would have to cross it to go back to his native village of Bahurim.

your blood will be on your own head. Again, behind these words lies the spectacle of Shimei reviling David with the epithet "man of blood" and asking that the blood of the house of Saul come down on his head.

38. *The thing is good*. Shimei has no alternative but to agree—better virtual confinement in the capital city than death.

40. *Shimei arose and saddled his donkey and went to Gath . . . to seek his slaves*. According to several ancient Near Eastern codes (though not Israelite law), authorities were obliged to return a runaway slave. Evidently, by this point peaceful relations obtained between Israel and the Philistine cities. Lulled into a false sense of security by the passage of three years ("a long while"), Shimei may be allowing his cupidity for recovering lost property to override the concern he should have preserved about Solomon's injunction not to leave Jerusalem. Or he may be a bad reader of Solomon's oral text, construing the ban on crossing the Wadi Kidron as implicit permission to leave the city temporarily in the opposite direction, so long as he does not try to return to his hometown.

42. *Did I not make you swear by the* LORD. In the actual report, only Solomon swore (the Septuagint supplies an oath for Shimei), though perhaps Shimei's taking a solemn oath is implied in verse 38.

The thing is good. I do hear it. Solomon adds "I do hear it" (*shamaʿti*) to the actual report in verse 38 of Shimei's words, in order to emphasize that Shimei gave full and knowing assent to Solomon's terms. Fokkelman notes that there is a pun on Shimei's own name—*Shimʿi/shamaʿti*.

43. *And why have you not kept the* LORD'S *oath*. Here, then, is Solomon's wisdom in carrying out his father's will: he has set Shimei up, waiting patiently until he violates the oath, which then frees Solomon of any obligation lingering from David's earlier oath to do no harm to Shimei.

45. *But King Solomon shall be blessed*. As in the killing of Joab, the imprecation pronounced over the doomed man is balanced by the invocation of the LORD's perpetual blessing on the house of David.

46. *And the kingdom was unshaken in Solomon's hand*. This seemingly formulaic notice at the very end of the story is a last touch of genius by that unblinking observer of the savage realm of politics who is the author of the David story: Solomon's power is now firmly established, blessed by the God Who has promised an everlasting covenant with David and his descendants; but the immediately preceding actions undertaken so decisively and so shrewdly by the young king involve the ruthless elimination of all potential enemies. The solid foundations of the throne have been hewn by the sharp daggers of the king's henchmen.

CHAPTER 3

[1]And Solomon became son-in-law to Pharaoh king of
Egypt, and he took Pharaoh's daughter and brought
her to the City of David till he could finish building his
house and the house of the LORD and the wall of
Jerusalem all around. [2]But the people were sacrificing
on the high places, for a house had not been built for
the LORD as yet in those days. [3]And Solomon loved
the LORD, going by the statutes of David his father,
but on the high places he was sacrificing and burning
incense. [4]And the king went to Gibeon to sacrifice
there, for it was a great high place—a thousand burnt
offerings would Solomon offer up on that altar. [5]In
Gibeon did the LORD appear to Solomon in a night-
dream, and God said, "Ask. What shall I give you?"
[6]And Solomon said, "You Yourself did great kindness
with Your servant David my father, as he walked in
Your presence in truth and in justice and in the heart's
rightness with You. And You kept for him this great
kindness and gave him a son sitting on his throne to
this day. [7]And now, O LORD my God, You Yourself

made Your servant king in place of my father when I
was a young lad, not knowing how to lead into the
fray. [8]And Your servant was in the midst of Your
people that You chose, a multitudinous people that
could not be numbered and could not be counted for
all its multitude. [9]May You give Your servant an
understanding heart to discern between good and evil.
For who can judge this vast people of Yours?" [10]And
the thing was good in the eyes of the LORD that
Solomon had asked for this thing. [11]And God said to
him, "Inasmuch as you have asked for this thing and
you did not ask long life for yourself and did not ask
wealth for yourself and did not ask for the life of your
enemies, but you asked to discern and understand
justice, [12]look, I am doing according to your words.
Look, I give you a wise and discerning heart, so that
your like there will not have been before you, and after
you none like you shall arise. [13]And even what you did
not ask I give to you—both wealth and honor, so that
there will not have been any man like you among kings
all your days. [14]And if you go in My ways, to keep My
statutes and My commands, as David your father went,
I shall grant you length of days." [15]And Solomon
awoke and, look, it was a dream. And he came to
Jerusalem and stood before the Ark of the LORD's
Covenant and offered up burnt offerings and prepared

well-being sacrifices and made a feast for all his servants. [16]Then two whore-women did come to the king and stood in his presence. [17]And the one woman said, “I beseech you, my lord. I and this woman live in a single house, and I gave birth alongside her in the house. [18]And it happened on the third day after I gave birth that this woman, too, gave birth, and we were together, no stranger was with us in the house, just the two of us in the house. [19]And this woman’s son died during the night, as she had lain upon him. [20]And she rose in the middle of the night and took my son from by me, your servant being asleep, and she laid him in her lap, and her dead son she laid in my lap. [21]And I rose in the morning to nurse my son, and, look, he was dead, and when I examined him in the morning, look, he was not my son whom I had born.” [22]And the other woman said, “No, for my son is the living one and your son is dead.” And the other said, “No, for your son is dead and my son is the living one.” And they spoke before the king. [23]And the king said, “This one says, ‘This is my live son and your son is dead,’ and this one says, ‘No, for your son is dead and my son is the living one.’” [24]And the king said, “Fetch me a sword.” And they brought a sword before the king. [25]And the king said, “Cut the living child in two, and give half to one and half to the other.” [26]And the

woman whose son was alive said to the king, for her compassion welled up for her son, and she said, “I beseech you, my lord, give her the living newborn but absolutely do not put him to death.” And the other was saying, “Neither mine nor yours shall he be. Cut him apart!” [27]And the king spoke up and said, “Give her the living newborn, and absolutely do not put him to death. She is his mother.” [28]And all Israel heard of the judgment that the king had judged, and they held the king in awe, for they saw that God’s wisdom was within him to do justice.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Solomon became son-in-law to Pharaoh*. The Hebrew verb, although it involves marriage, indicates an establishment of relationship between the groom and the father of the bride. The marriage is thus politically motivated and will be the first of many such unions for Solomon in his effort to consolidate the mini-empire created by his father.

took. This ordinary verb often has the force of “marry,” as here.

2. *But the people were sacrificing on the high places*. Since the Temple was not yet built, there was no alternative to these local altars on hilltops. But the notation reveals the unease of the Deuteronomist with a moment when both the people and Solomon himself offered sacrifices at sites other than the center of the cult in Jerusalem. The strong presence of the Deuteronomist and the shift that reveals itself in the subsequent passages to a different kind of

narrative suggest that the book has now moved on from the David story to the work of very different writers.

3. *Solomon loved the* LORD. This is not said of David. There may be a play on Solomon's other name, Jedidiah, which means friend, or lover (though different from the verb used here), of the LORD.

4. *for it was a great high place*. Evidently, the altar at Gibeon was much larger than the one Solomon had available in Jerusalem, hence his move to Gibeon to offer a huge sacrifice.

5. *a night-dream*. This is a lesser form of divine revelation, one even vouchsafed the pagan king Abimelech (Genesis 20). In the David story, God calls upon Nathan the prophet in a night-vision, but it is Nathan as intermediary who then goes to deliver the message to David (2 Samuel 7).

6. *David my father . . . walked in Your presence in truth and in justice*. The words assigned here to Solomon adopt the Deuteronomist's revisionist portrait of David (see the comment on 2:3–4) as an exemplary servant of God. The actual representation of David gives us a much more mixed picture of the man with all his calculations of power and his weaknesses and moral failings.

7. *not knowing how to lead into the fray*. The account of Solomon's reign does not represent him as a military leader combating surrounding nations, but in assuming the throne he does have dangerous enemies in the court who could have contested the succession.

9. *May You give Your servant an understanding heart*. Solomon's legendary wisdom is here given a divine etiology: it is the one gift he asks of God, and it is granted.

vast. Elsewhere this term usually means "heavy."

13. *wealth and honor, so that there will not have been any man like you among kings*. This statement, of course, is a fantastic exaggeration because the head of a small kingdom like Israel could scarcely compare with the monarchs who commanded the great empires to the east and the south. Solomon, quite unlike David, is manifestly woven out of the stuff of legend in this literary account.

16. *Then two whore-woman*. The introduction of the story with "then," *ʾaz*, is unusual in Hebrew narrative. It clearly serves to mark a direct link with the preceding episode: the gift of wisdom that God has granted Solomon will now be exemplified in this tale.

stood in his presence. A primary function of the monarch, in the Bible and in the Ugaritic texts before it, is to administer justice, and so the two whores come before him to make their case against each other.

17. *a single house . . . gave birth alongside her in the house*. The repetition of "house" (which recurs still again twice in the next verse) both underlines the idea of their sharing quarters and reflects the style of this story, which abounds in symmetrical repetitions. It may not be coincidental that the larger narrative of Solomon begins (verse 1) by twice using the same word, "house."

18. *no stranger was with us*. There are therefore no witnesses.

19. *as she had lain upon him*. There is thus a suggestion that the mother of the dead child may have been negligent, and at any rate she was inadvertently responsible for her infant's death.

22. "*No, for my son" . . . And the other said, "No, for your son."* This interechoing dialogue, heightened by the fact that neither woman is given a name, underscores the seeming undecidability of the case: each is saying exactly the same thing, so how can anyone know which one is lying? Solomon's repetition of their words in the next verse amplifies this effect.

25. *Cut the living child in two*. This momentarily shocking decree, which then will be seen to be a manifestation of Solomon's wisdom, is a clear expression of the fabulous or folktale character of the whole story. There is an approximate equivalent of the Judgment of Solomon in Indian literature that some scholars think may even have been its ultimate source, reaching ancient Israel through oral transmission. In any case, it sounds very much like a tale of surprising wisdom told among the people, or perhaps among many peoples, that was eventually attributed to Solomon.

26. *Neither mine nor yours shall he be*. Finally, the bewildering symmetry between the two women is shattered, and the false mother reveals herself.

Cut him apart. This plural imperative is a single word in the Hebrew, *gezoru* (“cut”), exposing the brutal lack of maternal feeling of the lying woman.

28. *for they saw that God’s wisdom was within him*. This concluding flourish confirms that God’s promise to Solomon of a discerning heart has been amply realized.

CHAPTER 4

[1]And Solomon was king over all Israel.
[2]And these are the names of the officials he had:
Azariah son of Zadok the priest.
[3]Elihoreph and Ahijah sons of Shisha, scribes.
Jehoshaphat son of Ehilud, recorder.
[4]And Benaiah son of Jehoiada, over the army.
And Zadok and Abiathar, priests.
[5]And Azariah son of Nathan, over the prefects.
And Zabud son of Nathan the priest, the king's
companion.
[6]And Ahishar, over the house,
and Adoniram son of Abda, over the forced labor.

[7]And Solomon had twelve prefects over all Israel, and they provisioned the king and his household—one month in a year each one had to provision. [8]And these were their names: Ben-Hur, in the high country of Ephraim. [9]Ben-Deker, in Makaz and in Shaalbim and Beth-Shemesh and Elon-Beth-Hanan. [10]Ben-Hesed, in

Arubboth, his was Socho and all the land of Hepher.
[11]Ben-Abinadab, all Naphath-Dor. Taphath daughter
of Solomon became his wife. [12]Baana son of Ahilud,
Taanach and Megiddo and all Beth-Sheʾan, which is
by Zarethon below Jezreel, from Beth-Sheʾan as far as
Abel-Meholah, as far as the other side of Jokneam.
[13]Ben-Geber, in Ramoth-Gilead. His were the hamlets
of Jair son of Manasseh that were in Bashan. His was
the region of Argob which is in Bashan, sixty great
towns with walls and bronze bolts. [14]Ahinadab son of
Iddo, at Mahanaim. [15]Ahimaaz in Naphtali. He, too,
took a daughter of Solomon, Bosmath, as wife.
[16]Baanah son of Hushi, in Asher and Bealoth.
[17]Jehoshaphat son of Paruah, in Issachar. [18]Shimei son
of Ela in Benjamin. [19]Geber son of Uri, in the land of
Gilead, the land of Shihor king of the Amorites and
Og king of Bashan. And one prefect who was in the
land of Judah. [20]And Israel was multitudinous as the
sand of the sea in multitude, eating and drinking and
rejoicing.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Solomon was king over all Israel*. This declaration of his sovereignty over the entire nation prefaces the catalogue of his royal bureaucracy.

2. *And these are the names of the officials he had*. Everything that follows in this chapter is another indication of the composite character of the Solomon narrative. First we have the story of his ascent to the throne, which is actually the last episode of the David story and manifestly written by its brilliant author. Then we are given the report of Solomon's dream-vision in which he asks for the gift of wisdom, which is followed by the folktale of Solomon's Judgment, illustrating the exercise of that wisdom. Now we are presented with two documents listing the royal bureaucracy. The first lists the members of his cabinet in the Jerusalem court, and the second the prefects overseeing the sundry regions of the country and making sure each supplies its due provision—a form of taxation—to the royal court. Both these sections may be old documents, though there are at least a few seemingly scrambled entries and probably some later additions.

son of Zadok. Zadok is the priest who sided with Solomon in his struggle for the throne. Not surprisingly, several of the members of the king's inner circle listed here are either his supporters, or the sons of his supporters, in that struggle.

4. *Benaiah*. He is the man Solomon sent to kill Joab.

6. *forced labor*. Conscripted labor on behalf of the king was another instrument of taxation.

8. *Ben-Hur*. An oddity of the list of prefects is that many names are given with patronymic only and no first name.

19. *And one prefect who was in the land of Judah*. The Masoretic Text reads "And one prefect who was in the land." The next verse then begins "Judah and Israel were multitudinous." That division of the text is problematic for two reasons: it is unclear what a prefect "in the land," with no specified territory to supervise, would be doing; beginning a new sentence without an introductory "and" (simply, "Judah") diverges from the norm of biblical narrative style. The assumption of this translation is that in addition to the twelve prefects named, there was to be a thirteenth prefect, perhaps designated ad hoc by the king, over the king's own tribal territory, which would also be obliged to make an annual contribution to the court.

20. *eating and drinking and rejoicing*. The last term of this series could also mean “making merry.” Although all the regions of the country have to make annual contributions to the court, the implication of this verse is that the prosperity—contrary to Samuel’s dire warnings about the monarchy in 1 Samuel 8—was shared by the entire country as its population swelled.

CHAPTER 5

[1]And Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the River to the land of the Philistines and as far as the border of Egypt. They offered tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life. [2]And Solomon's fare for a single day was thirty *kors* of fine flour and sixty *kors* of plain flour, [3]ten fatted oxen and twenty pasture-fed oxen and a hundred sheep, besides deer and gazelle and roebuck and fatted geese. [4]For he held sway over all that was west of the River from Tiphsah as far as Gaza, over all the kings west of the River. And he had peace on all sides round about. [5]And Judah and Israel dwelled secure, each man under his vine and under his fig tree, from Dan to Beersheba, all the days of Solomon. [6]And Solomon had forty thousand horse stalls for his chariots and twelve thousand horsemen. [7]And those prefects provisioned King Solomon and all who were adjoined to King Solomon's table, each one for his month, they let nothing lack. [8]And they would bring the barley and the straw for the horses and for the chargers to the place where each was, each man

according to his regimen. [9]And God gave very great
wisdom and discernment to Solomon and breadth of
understanding like the sand that is on the shore of the
sea. [10]And Solomon's wisdom was greater than the
wisdom of all the Easterners and all the wisdom of
Egypt. [11]And he was wiser than all men, than Ethan
the Ezrahite and Heman and Calcol and Darda, the
sons of Mahol, and his fame was in all the nations
round about. [12]And he spoke three thousand proverbs,
and his poems came to five thousand. [13]And he spoke
of the trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the
moss that springs from the wall, and he spoke of beasts
and birds and creeping things and fish. [14]And from all
peoples they came to listen to Solomon's wisdom,
from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his
wisdom.

[15]And Hiram king of Tyre sent his servants to
Solomon, for he had heard that they had anointed him
king in his father's stead, for Hiram was friendly
toward David always. [16]And Solomon sent to Hiram,
saying, [17]"You yourself knew of David my father that
he could not build a house for the LORD his God
because of the fighting that was all round him, until
the LORD should set them under his footsoles. [18]And

now, the LORD my God has granted me rest all around. There is no adversary nor evil chancing. [19]And I am about to build a house for the name of the LORD my God as the LORD spoke to David my father, saying, 'Your son whom I put in your stead on your throne, he shall build the house for My name.' [20]And now, charge that they cut down cedars from Lebanon, and my servants will be with your servants, and the wages of your servants I shall give you, whatever you say, for you yourself know that there is no man among us who knows how to cut down trees like the Sidonians." [21]And it happened when Hiram heard Solomon's words that he greatly rejoiced, and he said, "Blessed is the LORD today, that He has given David a wise son over this large people." [22]And Hiram sent to Solomon, saying, "I have heard what you sent to me. I will meet all you desire in cedarwood and in cypresswood. [23]My servants will come down from Lebanon to the sea, and I will turn the wood into rafts in the sea, to the place that you will tell me, and I will break it up there and you will bear it off. And you on your part will meet my desire to provide the bread of my house." [24]And so Hiram gave to Solomon cedar trees and cypress trees, all he desired. [25]And Solomon gave to Hiram twenty thousand *kors* of wheat as provision for his house and twenty thousand *kors* of

fine-pressed oil. Thus would Solomon give to Hiram year after year. [26]And the LORD had given wisdom to Solomon as He had spoken to him. And there was peace between Hiram and Solomon, and the two sealed a pact. [27]And King Solomon exacted forced labor from all Israel, and the forced labor came to thirty thousand men. [28]And he sent them to Lebanon—ten thousand a month, by turns they were a month in Lebanon and two months at his house. And Adoniram was over the forced labor. [29]And Solomon had seventy thousand porters and eighty thousand quarriers in the mountains, [30]besides Solomon's prefect officers who were over the labor, three thousand three hundred, who held sway over the people doing the labor. [31]And the king gave the order, and they moved great stones, costly stones, for the foundation of the house, hewn stones. [32]And Solomon's builders and Hiram's builders and the Gebalites carved and readied the timber and the stones to build the house.

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *ruled . . . offered*. The Hebrew uses a participial form of the verb, suggesting sustained activity over an extended time-span.

the River. As throughout the Bible, this means the Euphrates. It is highly unlikely that all the kingdoms to the east as far as the Euphrates could have been subject to Solomon.

2. *fare*. The literal sense is "bread," a synecdoche for all kinds of food, and the list that follows includes meat and fowl.

kors. The *kor* is a large measure, so 30 *kors* would have been hundreds of pounds.

3. *geese*. In modern Hebrew, *barbur* means "swan," but swans were rare in ancient Israel, and the likely fowl is the goose.

10. *greater than the wisdom of all the Easterners and all the wisdom of Egypt*. Wisdom was a known international activity, and both Mesopotamia and Egypt were renowned for their wisdom schools, their achievements in astronomy, mathematics, and much else. Here the celebration of Solomon's unmatched wisdom is properly referred to the broad Near Eastern context.

11. *Ethan . . . and Heman and Calcol and Darda*. The first two are temple poets to whom, respectively, Psalm 88 and Psalm 89 are attributed, and the last two are mentioned in 1 Chronicles 2:6 as temple choristers, although in Chronicles the last name is spelled Dara. The link between wisdom and the fashioning of poetry or song is a commonly shared assumption in the ancient Near East.

12. *proverbs*. The proverb was thought of as a quintessential expression of wisdom, a notion evident in the Book of Proverbs, attributed by tradition to Solomon, in part because of this passage. The proverb was formulated in verse, and other kinds of poetry as well are supposed to have been composed by Solomon.

13. *trees . . . beasts . . . birds . . . creeping things . . . fish*. Solomon's wisdom includes a mastery of the whole realm of nature. The words here gave rise to later legends that Solomon was able to speak the language of animals.

15. *Hiram king of Tyre*. Tyre is the principal city on the Phoenician coast.

Hiram was friendly toward David always. These words may reflect an actual historical alliance. It was David who subdued the Philistines, the great

enemies of the Phoenicians on the Mediterranean coast, and that victory might conceivably have enabled the commercial and colonial impetus enjoyed by Phoenicia in the tenth century B.C.E.

17. *should set them under his footsoles*. This posture of subjugation appears in quite a few ancient Near Eastern bas-reliefs celebrating the victory of a king.

20. *my servants will be with your servants*. This proposal of joint labor may have been motivated by a desire to expedite the costly work. Hiram doesn't mention it in his response, perhaps because he is not enthusiastic about the idea, but verse 27 reports that ten thousand Israelite workers were sent each month to Lebanon.

no man among us . . . knows how to cut down trees like the Sidonians. Sidon is another Phoenician city, and "Sidonians" is often used as a general term for Phoenicians. It is in their territory that there are large stands of timber, which they used to build ships and as a valuable export, and so they were experienced lumberjacks.

21. *when Hiram heard Solomon's words*. A possible though not necessary inference from this formulation is that Solomon's message was oral, but the emissary or a courtier might have read out a written message to the king.

he greatly rejoiced. He has good reason to rejoice because he sees here the opportunity for a lucrative agreement. The words that immediately follow are his exclamation and not part of his message in response to Solomon.

23. *My servants will come down from Lebanon to the sea*. They will take charge of transporting the timber from the mountainsides to the seashore.

the wood. This word is added in the translation for clarity. The Hebrew says "them," a plural accusative suffix referring to "the trees."

turn the wood into rafts. Binding the cut logs together into improvised rafts is a widespread device for transporting timber by water.

meet my desire to provide the bread of my house. Solomon had offered to pay the wages of Hiram's workers. Hiram now counters this proposal by stipulating a much higher price—the cost of provisions for the Phoenician court with all its entourage for the entire period in which the labor is done. In this whole exchange, there is an element of canny bargaining reminiscent of the negotiations over a gravesite between Abraham and Ephron the Hittite in Genesis 23.

25. *twenty thousand* kors *of wheat . . . twenty thousand* kors *of fine-pressed oil*. The price exacted, one notes, is very high. Solomon provides wheat and olive oil, which the Land of Israel had in abundance. The mountainous terrain of Lebanon did not favor the cultivation of these crops but was ideally suited for timber, which Israel lacked.

31. *they moved great stones*. The stones, of course, would have been a much bigger challenge to transport than the wood, which was floated most of the way, but there were quarries in the mountains of Judah not far from Jerusalem.

32. *And Solomon's builders and Hiram's builders and the Gebalites*. It emerges that there was a blended labor force of Phoenicians and Israelites both in Lebanon and in Jerusalem. The Gebalites are residents of the Phoenician town of Gebal. One may infer from the separate reference to them here that they constituted a kind of guild with special building skills, perhaps as stonemasons.

CHAPTER 6

[1]And it happened in the four hundred and eightieth
year after the Israelites came out of Egypt, in King
Solomon's fourth year in the month of Ziv, which is
the second month, that he set out to build a house to
the LORD. [2]And the house that King Solomon built
was sixty cubits in length and twenty in width and
thirty cubits in height. [3]And the outer court that was in
front of the great hall of the house was twenty cubits
in length along the width of the house, ten cubits in
width along the house. [4]And he made inset and latticed
windows for the house. [5]And he built on the wall of
the house a balcony all around the walls of the house
in the great hall and in the sanctuary, and he made
supports all around. [6]And the lowest balcony was five
cubits in width and the middle one six cubits in width
and the third one seven cubits in width, for he set
recesses in the house all around on the outside so as to
fasten nothing to the walls of the house. [7]And the
house when it was built, of whole stones brought from
the quarry it was built, and no hammers nor axes nor

any iron tools were heard in the house when it was
built. [8]The entrance at the middle support was on the
right side of the house, and on spiral stairs they would
go up to the middle chamber and from the middle to
the third. [9]And he built the house and finished it, and
he paneled the house with cedar beams and boards.
[10]And he built the balcony over all the house, five
cubits in height, and it held the house fast in
cedarwood. [11]And the word of the LORD came to
Solomon, saying: [12]"This house that you build—if you
walk by My statutes and do My laws and keep all My
commands to walk by them, I shall fulfill My word
with you that I spoke to David your father, [13]and I shall
dwell in the midst of the Israelites, and I shall not
forsake My people Israel." [14]And Solomon built the
house and finished it. [15]And he built the walls of the
house from within with cedar supports from the floor
of the house to the ceiling, overlaid it with wood
within, and he overlaid the floor of the house with
cypress supports. [16]And he built the twenty cubits from
the corners of the house with cedar supports from the
floor to the walls, and he built it from within the
sanctuary, the Holy of Holies. [17]And the house was
forty cubits, which was the great hall. [18]And cedar was
the house inside, a weave of birds and blossoms.
Everything was cedar, no stone was seen. [19]And the

sanctuary in the innermost part of the house he readied to place there the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD. [20]And before the sanctuary twenty cubits in length and twenty cubits in width and twenty cubits in height he overlaid with pure gold, and he overlaid the altar with cedar. [21]And Solomon overlaid the house from within with pure gold, and he fastened gold chains in front of the sanctuary and overlaid it with gold. [22]And the house he overlaid with gold till the whole house was finished, and the whole altar which was in the inner sanctum he overlaid with gold. [23]And in the sanctuary he made two cherubim of olivewood, [24]one cherub with a five-cubit wing and the other wing five cubits, ten cubits from one edge of its wings to the other. [25]And the second cherub was ten cubits, a single measure and shape for both cherubim. [26]The height of the one cherub was ten cubits, and the same for the second cherub. [27]And he placed the cherubim within the inner chamber. And the wings of the cherubim were spread, and the wing of the one touched the wall and that of the second cherub touched the other wall, and their inner wings touched wing to wing. [28]And he overlaid the cherubim with gold. [29]And all the walls of the house all round he wove in carvings of intertwined cherubim and palms and birds, within and without. [30]And the floor of the house he overlaid with gold,

within and without. [31]And the entrance of the sanctuary he made of olivewood doors, five-sided capitals and doorposts, [32]and two olivewood doors. And he wove on them a weave of cherubim and buds and overlaid them with gold, and he worked the gold down over the cherubim and the palms. [33]And the same he did for the entrance of the great hall, four-sided olivewood doorposts. [34]And the two doors were cypresswood, the two supports of the one door cylindrical and the two supports of the other door cylindrical. [35]And he wove cherubim and palms and buds and overlaid them with gold directly over the incising. [36]And he built the inner court in three rows of hewn stone and a row of cut cedars. [37]In the fourth year did he lay the foundations of the LORD's house, in the month of Ziv. [38]And in the eleventh year, in the month of Bul, which is the eighth month, he finished the house in all its details and in all its designs, and he was seven years building it.

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the four hundred and eightieth year*. This is a manifestly schematic figure, produced by multiplying two formulaic numbers, forty and twelve. In fact, the

number of years from the Exodus to the building of the Temple would be not much more than half of 480.

in the month of Ziv. This name for the second month, which would roughly correspond to May, is borrowed from the Phoenician, and that may be why an explanatory gloss is added, "which is the second month." The term for month is also not the standard term, *ḥodesh*, but rather *yareaḥ* (literally, "moon"). *Ziv* means "brilliance," "bright light."

2. *sixty cubits*. This would be less than 120 feet, perhaps as little as 100 feet, which makes Solomon's temple a relatively intimate structure—the Chartres cathedral is three times as long, and the great mosque at Cordova, before its conversion into a church, still larger. These dimensions may be historically accurate.

4. *he made inset and latticed windows for the house*. The reader should be warned that the precise meaning of these and other architectural terms here is uncertain. Because of the perennial fascination with Solomon's temple, many elaborate attempts to reconstruct its exact configuration have been made, in analytic descriptions, drawings, and scale models, but all of these remain highly conjectural. What is clear is that, like the sanctuary in Exodus, it had a tripartite structure: an outer court (*'ulam*), a great hall (*heikhal*), and an inner sanctuary (*devir*) in which the Ark of the Covenant was placed.

5. *balcony . . . supports*. The meaning of both these Hebrew terms, *yatsiaʿ* and *tselaʿot*, is much disputed.

7. *of whole stones . . . it was built, and no hammers nor axes nor any iron tools were heard in the house*. The stones were dressed at the site of the quarry and then set in place in Jerusalem. This procedure in part picks up the instructions for building the altar in Exodus 20:25: "you shall not build them of hewn stones, for your sword you would brandish over it and profane it."

9. *And he built the house and finished it*. This report of completion marks the finishing of the stone structure. What follows is an account of the paneling, carving, and finishing of the structure.

12. *if you walk by My statutes and do My laws*. The language in God's speech is preeminently Deuteronomistic.

14. *And Solomon built the house and finished it*. These words are what scholars call a "resumptive repetition" of verse 9. That is, when the continuity of a narrative is interrupted—here, by God's address to Solomon—phrases or sentences from just before the break are repeated as the narrative resumes its forward momentum.

16. *and he built it from within the sanctuary, the Holy of Holies*. This is the first of several places in this chapter where the Hebrew syntax seems a little doubtful.

18. *a weave*. The "weave" of course is a carving of interlaced ornamental figures.

Everything was cedar, no stone was seen. The cedarwood paneling entirely covered the stone surfaces. The pervasive use of wooden elements made the stone structure thoroughly flammable, as the Babylonian army would demonstrate when it destroyed the temple in 586 B.C.E.

23. *two cherubim*. In a borrowing from Canaanite mythology, the cherubim were imagined, at least in poetry, as God's mounts. (The word *keruv* means either "mount" or "hybrid.") They were fierce-looking winged beasts, probably with leonine bodies and heads, perhaps resembling the Egyptian sphinx and other bas-relief figures that have been found across the Near East.

30. *the floor of the house he overlaid with gold*. From what can be made out from the preceding description, the gold would have been overlaid on the cedar paneling.

31. *five-sided capitals and doorposts*. The translation of the three Hebrew words here is conjectural, and the text looks suspect. It may well be that the ancient scribes were as confused as we moderns by the architectural details and thus scrambled words at some points.

33. *four-sided*. The Hebrew term is problematic in the same way that "five-sided" is in verse 31.

35. *directly over the incising*. This is still another architectural indication of uncertain meaning.

38. *in the eleventh year*. Thus the years of the building of the Temple are reported to conform to the sacred number seven, as the end of this verse confirms with a flourish.

in the month of Bul. This is still another Phoenician month name, accompanied by an explanatory gloss, as is Ziv in verse 1, and again the unusual term *yareaḥ* is used for "month." As the eighth month, it would come in the late fall, and the name Bul may derive from a word that means "harvest."

CHAPTER 7

[1]And his own house Solomon was building for thirteen
years, and he finished his house. [2]And he built the
Lebanon Forest House, a hundred cubits in length and
fifty cubits in width and thirty cubits in height with
four rows of cedar columns and cedar beams on the
columns. [3]And it was paneled in cedarwood from
above on the supports, which were on the columns,
forty-five, fifteen in each row. [4]And there were
windows in three rows, three tiers face-to-face. [5]And
all the entrances and the doorposts were square-
windowed, three tiers face-to-face. [6]And the Court of
Columns he made fifty cubits in length and thirty
cubits in width, and the court was in front of the
columns, and the columns with a beam over them.
[7]And the Court of the Throne, where he meted out
justice, the Court of Justice, did he make, and it was
paneled in cedarwood from floor to roof-beams. [8]And
in his house in which he would dwell, there was
another court besides the outer court made in the same
fashion, and he made a house for Pharaoh's daughter

whom Solomon had married, like this court. [9]All these were of costly stones, hewn in measure, smoothed with an adze inside and out, and from the foundation up to the coping and on the outside up to the great court, [10]and founded with costly stones, great stones, stones of ten cubits and stones of eight cubits. [11]And above were costly stones hewn in measure, and cedarwood. [12]And the great court all around had three rows of hewn stone and a row of cedar planks, as for the inner court of the house of the LORD and for the outer court of the house.

[13]And King Solomon sent and fetched Hiram from Tyre. [14]He was the son of a widow-woman from the tribe of Naphtali, and his father was a Tyrean man who was a coppersmith, and he was filled with wisdom and discerning and knowledge to do every task in bronze. And he came to King Solomon and did all his task. [15]And he fashioned the two pillars of bronze, eighteen cubits the height of each column, and a twelve-cubit line went round the second pillar. [16]And he made two capitals to put on the tops of the pillars, cast in bronze, five cubits the height of the one capital and five cubits the height of the other capital. [17]Nets of meshwork, chainwork wreaths for the capitals that

were on the top of the pillars, seven for the one capital and seven for the other. [18]And he made the pillars, with two rows around over the one net to cover the capitals that were on top of the pomegranates, and so he did for the other capital. [19]And the capitals that were on top of the pillars in the outer court were a lily design, four cubits high. [20]And the capitals on the two pillars above as well, opposite the curve that was over against the net, and the pomegranates were in two hundred rows around on the second capital. [21]And he set up the pillars for the great hall and set up the right pillar and called its name Jachin and set up the left pillar and called its name Boaz. [22]And on the top of the pillars was a lily design. And the task of the pillars was finished. [23]And he made the cast-metal sea ten cubits from edge to edge, circular all around, and five cubits in height, and a line of thirty cubits going all around. [24]And birds beneath its edge going all around it, ten cubits, encompassing the sea all around, two rows cast in its casting. [25]It stood on twelve oxen, three facing north and three facing west and three facing south and three facing east. And the sea was on top of them, and their hind parts were inward. [26]And its thickness was a hand-span, and its rim like the design of a cup's rim, blossom and lily, two thousand *bats* did it hold. [27]And he made ten stands of bronze, four cubits in length

each stand and four cubits in width and three cubits in height. [28]And this was the design of the stands: they had frames, and there were frames between the rungs. [29]And on the frames between the rungs were lions, oxen, and cherubim on the bevels, so it was above and below the lions and the oxen, hammered metal spirals. [30]And each stand had four bronze wheels and bronze axletrees. And its four legs had brackets beneath the laver. The brackets were cast in spirals opposite each. [31]And its spout was within the capital a cubit above it, and its spout was round in the design of a stand, a cubit and a half. And on its spout, too, there was woven-work. And their frames were square, not round. [32]And the four wheels were beneath the frames, and the axletrees of the wheels inserted in the stand. And the height of each wheel was a cubit and a half. [33]And the design of the wheels was like the design of a chariot's wheels. Their axletrees and rims and their spokes and their hubs were all of cast metal. [34]And the four brackets at the four corners of each stand, of a piece with the stand were its brackets. [35]And on top of the stand was a circular form all around, and on top of the stand its brackets and its frames were of a piece with it. [36]And he carved on the panels of its brackets and on its frames cherubim, lions, and palms, each laid bare, and a spiral all around. [37]Thus did he make the

ten stands, each cast the same, a single measure and a single shape they all had. [38]And he made ten lavers of bronze, each laver would hold forty *bats*, four cubits each laver on each stand, for the ten stands. [39]And he placed the stands, five on the right side of the house and five on the left side of the house. And the sea he placed on the right side of the house to the east, facing south. [40]And Hiram made the lavers and the shovels and the basins. And Hiram completed doing the task that he had done for King Solomon in the house of the LORD: [41]two pillars and two globes of the capitals that were on top of the pillars and two nets to cover the two globes of the capitals that were on top of the pillars, [42]and four hundred pomegranates for the nets, two rows of pomegranates for every net to cover the globes of the capitals that were on the pillars, [43]and the ten stands and the ten lavers on the stands, [44]and the one sea and the twelve oxen beneath the sea. [45]And the bowls and the shovels and the basins and those vessels that Hiram made for King Solomon in the house of the LORD, burnished bronze. [46]In the plain of the Jordan did the king cast them, in the thick of the ground, between Succoth and Zarethan. [47]And Solomon left all the vessels unweighed on account of their very great abundance; the measure of the bronze was not taken. [48]And Solomon made all the vessels that were in the

house of the LORD, the gold altar and the gold table on which was the bread of display, [49]and the pure gold lampstands, five on the right and five on the left in front of the sanctuary, and the gold blossoms and lamps and tongs, [50]and the pure gold bowls and the snuffers and the basins and the ladles and fire-pans, and the gold sockets for the doors of the inner house, for the Holy of Holies, for the doors of the great hall of the house. [51]And the task that King Solomon had done was finished in the house of the LORD, and Solomon brought the dedicated things of David his father, the silver and the gold, and he placed the vessels in the treasury of the house of the LORD.

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *his own house*. Solomon's two main building projects were the Temple and the palace. No date is given for the inception of the palace, but the notation in 9:7 that the building of the two structures together took twenty years would indicate that the palace was begun after the Temple was completed. The palace, the bigger of the two structures, took almost twice as long to build.

2. *the Lebanon Forest House*. This structure is evidently so called because of the rows of Lebanon cedar it contained. Some think it may have served as an armory.

4. *three tiers face-to-face*. This is the first of many places in this chapter where the architectural indications are quite obscure in the Hebrew, whether

because of scribal scrambling or because we have lost the precise applications of this technical vocabulary. In much of what follows, then, any translation, including this one, is no more than educated guesswork.

6. *beam*. The Hebrew *ʿav* usually means "cloud," leading some to speculate that here it might refer to some sort of canopy or cover.

7. *from floor to roof-beams*. The Masoretic Text reads "from floor to floor," but the Septuagint, more plausibly, has "from floor to roof-beams."

8. *he made a house for Pharaoh's daughter*. Although the ground plan of the palace is hard to reconstruct, the fact that a separate residence was built for one of Solomon's wives reflects the grandeur of the overall construction.

13. *And King Solomon sent and fetched Hiram from Tyre*. The legendary and schematic character of the narrative at this point is manifest: it is highly unlikely that the Phoenician king himself would come to Jerusalem to perform or even supervise the building work. What this refers to is that Hiram may have sent master artisans from Tyre to participate in the project.

14. *He was the son of a widow-woman from the tribe of Naphtali*. It is even more unlikely that a Phoenician king would have had an Israelite mother, and a woman previously married, besides. The narrative here may be reaching to establish a genetic connection between Israel and the foreign king who helped to build both the Temple and the palace.

his father was a Tyrean man who was a coppersmith. The notion of an artisan king (both Hiram's father and Hiram are represented as that) sounds odd, but the idea is that the king is imagined to embody the distinctive skills and expertise of his people.

20. *the curve*. The Hebrew is literally "belly," and its architectural meaning is uncertain.

21. *Jachin . . . Boaz*. The naming of pillars and altars was not uncommon in the ancient Near East. These two names mean "he will firmly found" (*yakhin*) and "strength in him" (the latter is an attested personal name). Both names appear to refer to the stability of the royal dynasty.

23. *the cast-metal sea*. This is essentially a metal pool, to be used by the priests to bathe hands and feet before they perform their ritual duties. The Hebrew uses the rather grand term "sea" (*yam*) perhaps to suggest a cosmic correspondence between the structure of the Temple and of creation at large.

a line. The translation reads, with many Hebrew manuscripts, *qaw* for the incomprehensible Masoretic *qawoh*.

26. two thousand bats. The *bat* is a relatively large unit of liquid measure, but the precise quantity is uncertain.

28. *rungs*. The meaning of the Hebrew *shelabim* is conjectural, but a laddered structure may be involved.

30. *four bronze wheels*. Wheeled ritual vessels have been uncovered across the Near East.

in spirals opposite each. The Hebrew here is particularly obscure.

31. *woven-work*. As elsewhere, the term refers to carved interlaced figures.

36. *each laid bare*. The Hebrew *kemaʿar ʾish* is not intelligible. The translation is based on a tentative guess that the first of these words is a verbal noun derived from the root *ʿ-r-h*, "lay bare."

40. *And Hiram completed doing the task that he had done*. This is an explicit echoing of Genesis 2:2, suggesting that the work of building the Temple is analogous to the work of building the world.

41. *two pillars and two globes*. What begins here is a summarizing catalogue of all the sacred furniture fashioned for the Temple.

45. *those*. The translation reads, with many Hebrew manuscripts, *haʾeleh* for the incomprehensible Masoretic *haʾehel* (a simple reversal of consonants, which is a common scribal error).

46. *in the thick of the ground*. The casting was done in earthen molds.

47. *unweighed*. This term is merely implied in the Hebrew.

50. *snuffers*. Others, including many Jewish commentators from Late Antiquity on, construe this to mean “musical instruments.”

51. *And the task that King Solomon had done was finished*. Through both this long chapter and the preceding one, it should be observed that Solomon virtually disappears as an individualized character: the king here functions as an impersonal royal “he” who directs these elaborate building projects.

CHAPTER 8

[1]Then did Solomon assemble the elders of Israel, all
the heads of the tribes, the patriarchal chieftains of the
Israelites, round King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring
up the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD from the
City of David, which is Zion. [2]And every man of Israel
assembled round Solomon in the month of Ethanim,
which is the seventh month, at the festival. [3]And all the
elders of Israel came, and the priests carried the Ark.
[4]And they brought up the Ark of the LORD and the
Tent of Meeting and all the sacred vessels that were in
the Tent, and the priests and the Levites brought them
up. [5]And King Solomon and all the community of
Israel who had gathered round him were with him
before the Ark, sacrificing sheep and oxen that could
not be numbered for their abundance. [6]And the priests
brought the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD to its
place, to the sanctuary of the house, to the Holy of
Holies, beneath the wings of the cherubim. [7]For the
cherubim spread wings over the place of the Ark, and
the cherubim sheltered the Ark and its poles from

above. [8]And the poles extended, and the ends of the poles could be seen from the Holy Place in the front of the sanctuary, but they could not be seen from without, and they have been there to this day. [9]There was nothing in the Ark except the two stone tablets that Moses had put there on Horeb, which the LORD had sealed as a covenant with the Israelites when they came out of the land of Egypt. [10]And it happened when the priests came out of the Holy Place, that a cloud filled the house of the LORD. [11]And the priests could not stand up to minister because of the cloud, for the LORD's glory filled the house of the LORD.
[12]Then did Solomon say:

"The LORD meant to abide in thick
fog.
[13]I indeed have built You a lofty
house,
a firm place for Your dwelling
forever."

[14]And the king turned his face and blessed all the assembly of Israel with all the assembly of Israel standing. [15]And he said: "Blessed is the LORD God of Israel Who spoke with His own mouth to David my

father, and with His own hand has fulfilled it, saying,
‘[16]From the day that I brought out My people Israel
from Egypt, I have not chosen a town from all the
tribes of Israel to build a house for My name to be
there, but I chose David to be over My people Israel.’
[17]And it was in the heart of David my father to build a
house for the name of the LORD God of Israel. [18]And
the LORD said to David my father, ‘Inasmuch as it
was in your heart to build a house for My name, you
have done well, for it was in your heart. [19]Only you will
not build the house, but your son, who issues from
your loins, he will build the house for My name.’ [20]And
the LORD has fulfilled His word that He spoke, and I
arose in place of David my father and sat on the throne
of Israel as the LORD spoke and I have built the house
for the name of the LORD God of Israel. [21]And I have
set there a place for the Ark in which is the covenant
of the LORD that He sealed with our fathers when He
brought them out of the land of Egypt.” [22]And
Solomon stood before the LORD’s altar over against
all the assembly of Israel and spread his palms toward
the heavens. [23]And he said, “LORD God of Israel!
There is no god like You in the heavens above and on
the earth below, keeping the covenant and the
kindness for Your servants who walk before You with
all their heart, [24]which You kept for David my father,

what You spoke to him, and You spoke with Your own mouth, and with Your own hand You fulfilled it, as on this day. [25]And now, LORD God of Israel, keep for Your servant David my father what You spoke to him, saying, 'No man of yours will be cut off from before Me, sitting on the throne of Israel, if only your sons will keep their way to walk before Me as you have walked before Me.' [26]And now, God of Israel, may Your words, pray, be shown true that You spoke to David my father. [27]But can God really dwell on earth? Look, the heavens and the heavens beyond the heavens cannot contain You. How much less this house that I have built. [28]Yet turn to the prayer of Your servant and to his plea, LORD God of Israel, to hearken to the glad song and to the prayer that Your servant prays before You today, [29]so that Your eyes be open to this house night and day, to this place of which You have said, 'My name is there,' to hearken to the prayer that Your servant prays in this place. [30]And may You hearken to the plea of Your servant and of Your people Israel, which they will pray in this place, and may You hearken in Your dwelling place in the heavens, and hearken and forgive [31]what a man offends against his fellow and bears an oath against him to bring a curse on him, and the oath comes before Your altar in this house. [32]But You will hearken in the

heavens and judge Your servant to condemn the guilty,
to bring down his way on his head, and to vindicate
him who is right, to mete out to him according to his
righteousness. [33]When Your people Israel are routed by
an enemy, for they will offend You, and they come
back to You and acclaim Your name and pray and
plead to You in this house, [34]You will hearken in the
heavens and forgive the offense of Your people Israel,
and bring them back to the land that You gave to their
fathers. [35]When the heavens are shut up and there is no
rain, for the Israelites will have offended against You,
and they pray in this place and acclaim Your name,
You shall forgive the offense of Your servants and turn
back from their offense, for You will answer them.
[36]You will hearken in the heavens and forgive the
offense of Your servants, Your people Israel, for You
will teach them the good way in which they should
walk, and You will give rain upon Your land that You
have given to Your people in estate. [37]Should there be
famine in the land, should there be plague, blight,
mildew, locusts, caterpillars, should his enemy besiege
him in the gates of his land, any affliction, any disease,
[38]any prayer, any plea that any man have in all Your
people Israel, that every man know his heart's
affliction, he shall spread out his palms in this house.
[39]And You shall hearken in the heavens, the firm place

of Your dwelling, and You shall forgive and act and give to a man according to his ways, as You know his heart, for You alone know the heart of all men. [40]So that they may fear You all the days that they live on the land that You gave to their fathers. [41]And the foreigner, too, who is not from Your people Israel and has come from a distant land for the sake of Your name, [42]if he hearkens to Your great name and Your strong hand and Your outstretched arm and comes and prays in this house, [43]You will hearken in the heavens, the firm place of Your dwelling and do as all that the foreigner will call out to You, so that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name to fear You as does Your people Israel, to know that Your name has been called on this house that I have built. [44]Should your people go out to battle against its enemy on the way that You send them, they shall pray to the LORD through the city that You have chosen and the house that I have built for Your name. [45]And You shall hearken in the heavens to their prayer and to their plea, and You shall do justice for them. [46]Should they offend against You, for there is no man who does not offend, and You are furious with them and give them to the enemy, and their captors take them off to a distant or nearby land, [47]and they turn their heart back to You in the land in which they are captive, and turn back to

You and plead with You in the land of their captors, saying, ‘We have offended and have done wrong, we have been evil,’ [48]and they turn back to You with all their heart and all their being in the land of their enemies who took them in captivity, and they pray to you through their land that You gave to their fathers, the city that You chose and the house that I have built for Your name, [49]You shall hearken from the heavens, the firm place of Your dwelling, to their prayer and to their plea, and do justice for them. [50]And You shall forgive Your people who have offended against you for all their crimes that they committed, and You shall grant them mercy before their captors, who will have mercy upon them. [51]For they are Your people and Your estate that You brought out of the land of Egypt from the forge of iron. [52]So that Your eyes be open to the plea of Your servant and the pleas of Your people Israel, to listen to them whenever they call to You. [53]For You set them apart for You as an estate from all the peoples of the earth as You spoke through Moses Your servant when You brought out our fathers from Egypt, O Master LORD.” [54]And it happened when Solomon finished praying to the LORD all this prayer and plea, that he rose from before the LORD’s altar from kneeling on his knees with his palms stretched out to the heavens. [55]And he stood and blessed all the

assembly of Israel in a loud voice, saying: [56]“Blessed is the LORD Who has granted to his people Israel as all that He spoke. Not a single thing has failed of all His good word that He spoke through Moses His servant. [57]May the LORD our God be with us as He was with our Fathers. May He not forsake us and not abandon us, [58]to incline our heart to Him to walk in all His ways and to keep His commands and His statutes and His laws with which He charged our fathers. [59]And may these words that I pleaded before the LORD be near the LORD our God day and night to do justice for His servant and justice for His people Israel day after day, [60]so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is our God, there is none else. [61]And may your heart be whole with the LORD our God to walk in His statutes and to keep His commands as on this day.” [62]And the king and all Israel with him were offering sacrifice before the LORD. [63]And Solomon offered up the well-being sacrifices that he sacrificed to the LORD, twenty-two thousand oxen and a hundred twenty thousand sheep. And the king and all the Israelites dedicated the house of the LORD. [64]On that day the king sanctified the midst of the court that was before the house of the LORD, for he did there the burnt offering and the grain offering and the fat of the well-being sacrifices. For the bronze altar that was

before the LORD was too small to hold the burnt offering and the grain offering and the fat of the well-being sacrifices. [65]And at that time Solomon performed the festival and all Israel his people was with him, a great assembly from Lebo-Hamath to the Wadi of Egypt, seven days and seven days—fourteen days. [66]On the seventh day he sent off the people, and they blessed the king and went to their tents, rejoicing and of good cheer over all the good that the LORD had done for David his servant and for Israel His people.

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the City of David, which is Zion*. Though part of Jerusalem, this area is distinct from the Temple mount, to its west. The Ark was kept here in a temporary structure (probably the Tent of Meeting) after David brought it up to Jerusalem (see 2 Samuel 6:12),

2. *the month of Ethanim, which is the seventh month*. Again, a nonstandard nomenclature for the months is used, necessitating the explanatory gloss. The seventh month would correspond approximately to October, and the festival celebrated on this occasion (see verse 65) is Succoth, which, because it was a seven-day festival at the end of the fall harvest, was of the three pilgrim festivals the one for which the greatest number of celebrants came to Jerusalem from all over the country. Solomon thus chooses wisely the time for dedicating the Temple.

7. *its poles*. The Ark was a portable structure, carried on poles.

9. *as a covenant*. These words are merely implied by the verb "sealed."

11. *the LORD's glory filled the house*. The manifestation of God's glory, as is clear from a number of biblical texts, is a dense cloud. The ultimate source of this idea may be the poetic image of God, drawn from the Canaanite representation of Baal, as a dweller or rider of the clouds.

12. *Then did Solomon say*. This solemn declaration about where God abides is cast in a triadic line of poetry.

The LORD meant to abide in thick fog. What tradition—especially, poetic tradition—tells us of Him is that He abides in the clouds above.

13. *I indeed have built You a lofty house*. But with the erection of the Temple, a new era is inaugurated in which the God of Israel has an earthly abode.

a firm place for Your dwelling. This phrase, which will be repeated in Solomon's lengthy address, occurs at the end of the Song of the Sea, Exodus 15:17.

15. *to David my father*. This weighted designation is reiterated throughout the speech: Solomon, consolidating his own rule through the construction of the Temple, repeatedly emphasizes that he is David's son and sole heir and that God's promises to his father are now fulfilled in him.

20. *I arose in place of David my father*. It should be recalled, as Solomon's phrasing here invites us to recall, that he was designated by his father to assume the throne while his father was still alive.

for the name of the LORD. The Temple is understood to enhance the glory or reputation ("the name") of the LORD.

21. *in which is the covenant*. The two stone tablets are conceived as the material equivalent of the covenant between God and Israel (see verse 9).

22. *spread his palms toward the heavens*. This conventional gesture of prayer is visible in many ancient Near Eastern statues and bas-reliefs.

23. *LORD God of Israel*. The first part of Solomon's speech is an address to Israel in which he reminds the people that God's promise to David is now fulfilled through his acts. At this point, he proceeds to voice a prayer to God.

There is no god like You in the heavens above and on the earth below. This wording may, like the Song of the Sea, reflects an older concept in which there are gods besides YHWH, but they are insubstantial and cannot compete with Him.

walk before You with all their heart. The language here is Deuteronomistic. The idiom "walk before" suggests entering into a relationship of devoted servitude.

27. *can God really dwell on earth?* Solomon now touches on a theological problem raised by the building of the Temple: it is figuratively and symbolically God's dwelling place, but Solomon wants to deflect any literal notion that God actually abides in a human structure.

30. *hearken to the plea of Your servant and of Your people*. Throughout Solomon's prayer, the emphasis is on the Temple as a place of prayer and supplication, a kind of terrestrial communications center for speaking with God. Sacrifice is not mentioned. It is possible, though not demonstrable, that the stress on prayer rather than sacrifice reflects some influence of the prophets, beginning with Isaiah in the late seventh century B.C.E. There are other features of Solomon's speech that look late.

34. *bring them back to the land*. It is unlikely that the historical Solomon in the mid-tenth century B.C.E., at the very moment of his royal grandeur, with peace all around, should have introduced into his prayer, in the hearing of all Israel, this stark intimation of a future exile. The plausible inference is that the speech, or at the very least this part of it, was composed after the exile of the northern kingdom in 721 B.C.E. and perhaps even after the destruction of the southern kingdom in 586 B.C.E.

35. *the Israelites*. The Hebrew says simply "they," but this implied antecedent is introduced in the translation to avoid the impression that it is the heavens that have offended.

37. *Should there be famine in the land*. This long run-on sentence—and there are more like it as the speech continues—is not typical of biblical prose style, although the Book of Deuteronomy exhibits a fondness for lengthy, periodic sentences, most of them more syntactically controlled that this one.

39. *And You shall hearken in the heavens, the firm place of Your dwelling*. This refrainlike clause picks up the previous notion that God does not actually dwell in the Temple but in the heavens above, from which He is disposed to listen to the prayers enunciated in the Temple because He regards it as a favored focal point for prayer.

41. *And the foreigner, too*. This sympathetic attitude toward the devoutness of foreigners who join the community of Israel sounds rather like a theme in Deutero-Isaiah, though one might argue that Solomon's cordial relations, political, commercial, and marital, with surrounding nations might be reflected here.

44. *through the city*. Others understand the preposition as "in the direction of."

46. *their captors take them off*. At this point, the prospect of exile becomes more explicit and emphatic.

47. *We have offended and have done wrong, we have been evil*. These words were incorporated in the short confession of sins in the Yom Kippur liturgy.

48. *through their land*. Again, the translation understands this to mean that they will invoke their land, though it could mean that they will turn in the direction of the land as they pray.

50. *their captors, who will have mercy upon them*. It is noteworthy that the defeat or humiliation of Israel's enemies is not envisaged but rather the prospect that the captors will have compassion and treat them kindly. It is tempting to see in these words a reflection of Cyrus's beneficence toward the exiled Israelites, but it is hard to know whether any of the speech could have been written that late.

56. *Blessed is the* LORD. This last part of Solomon's quoted words, to the end of verse 61, is a kind of peroration that concludes his long address, appropriately invoking the divine promises to Moses and the importance of continuing loyalty to the covenant, framed once again in Deuteronomistic language.

63. *twenty-two thousand oxen and a hundred twenty thousand sheep*. These imposing numbers are surely a fantastic embellishment of the actual ceremony.

65. *from Lebo-Hamath*. This town was at the border of Lebanon in the north.

seven days and seven days—fourteen days. The wording is a little confusing. The designated span of the pilgrim festival of Succoth was seven days. Solomon evidently doubled the time, adding a second week of celebration. But the report in the next verse that he sent the people home on the seventh day might suggest that he continued a more private celebration, perhaps involving only the royal house and priests, for the second week. Alternately, "he sent off the people on the seventh day" might mean the seventh day of the second week

CHAPTER 9

[1]And it happened when Solomon finished building the
house of the LORD and the house of the king and all
Solomon's desire that he was pleased to do, [2]that the
LORD appeared to Solomon a second time as He had
appeared to him in Gibeon. [3]And the LORD said to
him: "I have hearkened to your prayer and to your plea
that you pleaded before Me. I have sanctified this
house that you built to set My name there forever, and
My eyes and My heart shall be there for all time. [4]As
for you, if you walk before Me, as David your father
walked, wholeheartedly and uprightly, to do as all that
I have charged you, My statutes and My laws to keep,
[5]I shall raise up the throne of your kingdom over Israel
forever as I spoke to David your father, saying, 'No
man of yours shall be cut off from the throne of
Israel.' [6]If you and your sons actually turn back from
Me and you do not keep My commands, My statutes
that I gave you, and you go and serve other gods and
bow down to them, [7]I shall cut Israel off from the land
that I gave them, and the house that I have sanctified

for My name will I send away from My presence, and Israel shall become a byword and a mockery among all the peoples. [8]And this house will turn into ruins—all who pass by it will be dismayed and whistle in derision and say, ‘Why did the LORD do thus to this land and to this house?’ [9]And they will say, ‘Because they forsook the LORD their God Who brought their fathers out of the land of Egypt and held fast to other gods and bowed down to them and served them. Therefore has the LORD brought upon them all this harm.’”

[10]And it happened at the end of the twenty years that Solomon was building the two houses, the house of the LORD and the house of the king, [11]that Hiram king of Tyre had furnished Solomon with cedarwood and cypresswood and gold as all that he desired, then did Solomon give Hiram twenty towns in the land of the Galilee. [12]And Hiram went out from Tyre to see the towns that Solomon had given him, and they were not right in his eyes. [13]And he said, “What are these towns that you have given me, my brother?” And they have been called the Land of Cabul to this day. [14]And Hiram had sent to the king a hundred twenty talents of gold. [15]And this is the aim of the forced labor that

Solomon exacted: to build the house of the LORD and
his house and the citadel, and the wall of Jerusalem
and Hazor and Megiddo and Gezer. [16]Pharaoh king of
Egypt had gone up and taken Gezer and burned it in
fire and killed the Canaanites who dwelled in the town,
and he gave it as a dowry to his daughter, Solomon's
wife. [17]And Solomon rebuilt Gezer and Lower Beth-
Horon, [18]and Baalath and Tamor in the wilderness, in
the land, [19]and all the storehouse towns that were
Solomon's, and the towns for the chariots and the
towns for the horsemen, and every desire of Solomon
that he desired to build in Jerusalem and in Lebanon
and in all the land of his dominion. [20]All the people
remaining in the land, the Amorite, the Hittite, the
Perizzite and the Jebusite, who were not of the
Israelites, [21]their sons who remained after them whom
the Israelites could not wholly destroy, Solomon put to
forced labor to this day. [22]And of the Israelites
Solomon made no slave, for they were men of war,
and his servants and his commanders and his captains
and the officers of his chariots and his horsemen.
[23]These were the commander-prefects who were over
the tasks of Solomon, five hundred fifty holding sway
over the people who performed the tasks. [24]But
Pharaoh's daughter had gone up from the city of David
to her house that he built for her. Then did he build

the citadel. [25]And three times in the year Solomon offered up burnt offerings and well-being sacrifices on the altar that he had built for the LORD, and turned it to smoke before the LORD and made the house whole. [26]And a fleet did Solomon make in Ezion-Geber, which is by Eloth on the shore of the Red Sea in the land of Edom. [27]And Hiram sent his servants to the fleet—shipmen, adept in the sea—with Solomon's servants. [28]And they came to Ophir and took four hundred twenty talents of gold from there and brought it to King Solomon.

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *the LORD appeared to Solomon a second time*. Solomon's royal enterprise is framed by two revelations. Early in his reign, God appears to him at Gibeon and grants him the gift of wisdom (3:5–14). The wisdom is first manifested in the episode of the Judgment of Solomon and in his composing proverbs. His great building projects, now completed, may reflect another kind of wisdom because they consolidate his rule. Now God comes to him to tell him that the sanctity of the Temple is divinely ratified.

4. *if you walk before Me, as David your father walked*. The legitimacy of the dynasty necessitates this idealized representation of David. In fact, the older —and probing—narrative of David shows him to be deeply flawed—an adulterer, a murderer, and a man beset with weaknesses.

to do as . . . I have charged you, My statutes and My laws to keep. As in Solomon's speech at the dedication of the temple, the language is emphatically Deuteronomistic.

7. *I shall cut Israel off from the land*. The invocation of the specter of exile, as earlier, looks like the reflection of a later historical moment.

I will send away from My presence. This is a slightly odd idiom to attach to the Temple. Its usual connotation is divorce, a trope often used by the Prophets for God's disaffection with Israel.

a byword and a mockery. This phrase is also fairly common in the Prophets to indicate Israel's national humiliation.

8. *this house will turn into ruins*. The received text reads, "this house will be exalted." This translation reads instead of ʿ*elyon*, "exalted" or "high," ʿ*iyyim*, "ruins," along with the Syriac and two versions of the Vulgate.

9. *Because they forsook the* LORD. In keeping with the Deuteronomistic theology, it is cultic infidelity that will cause the catastrophe of exile.

10. *the twenty years*. That is, seven for the building of the Temple and another thirteen for the palace.

11. *gold*. This precious substance, which was needed for the furnishings of the Temple and the palace, was not mentioned in the initial negotiations between Solomon and Hiram. Though Tyre did not have its own gold mines, it would have accumulated stockpiles of gold through its flourishing international trade.

Solomon give Hiram twenty towns in the land of the Galilee. In the original agreement, Solomon was to pay for the cedarwood and cypresswood with wheat and olive oil. Perhaps Hiram's providing gold came afterward and thus required additional payment.

13. *What are these towns that you have given me, my brother?* Hiram obviously regards these paltry towns on his southern border as poor recompense, but he maintains his diplomatic relationship with Solomon by adding "my brother" to his objection.

the Land of Cabul. No satisfactory explanation for the enigmatic *kabul* has been offered, although it clearly indicates something quite negative, mirroring Hiram's disappointment. It could mean "land of the chained one" (the one chained to a bad agreement?). It could also mean "land like the produce" (land offered in payment, like the wheat and oil?). Perhaps an explanatory clause in Hiram's speech has dropped out of the text.

14. *And Hiram had sent to the king a hundred twenty talents of gold*. It would make no sense for Hiram to send Solomon gold after his dismissing the twenty towns as poor payment. Thus, though the form of the Hebrew verb does not indicate a pluperfect, one is compelled to understand this as a reference to his earlier shipments of gold to Solomon.

15. *And this is the aim of the forced labor*. The connection with what precedes is associative: in the great building enterprise in which Hiram was Solomon's partner, Israelite forced labor was used.

the citadel. The Hebrew *milo'* derives from a root that means "to fill," perhaps suggesting a raised citadel erected on landfill.

Hazor and Megiddo and Gezer. Solomon's building projects thus extended far beyond Jerusalem, involving fortified towns around the country.

18. *Tamor*. The Masoretic marginal note (*qeri*) reads this as "Tadmor," which is Palmyra in Syria. That would be an improbable place for Solomon to build, so the translation adheres to the consonantal text, indicating a town in the Negeb.

19. *in Lebanon*. This might mean on the border of Lebanon.

21. *Solomon put to forced labor*. This notion that the indigenous inhabitants of the land became forced laborers, subject to Israel, is put forth in the Book of Joshua.

22. *And of the Israelites Solomon made no slave*. The Israelite forced laborers paid what amounted to a tax through their labor for a limited period of time.

for they were men of war. Here, however, a different reason is offered for not enslaving Israelites—their value as warriors.

25. *and turned it to smoke*. The Masoretic Text adds "with him that," which is syntactically incoherent and looks like a scribal error.

made the house whole. The verb *shilem*, which elsewhere means "requite," derives from a root meaning "whole" and here may refer to an affirmation or restoration of the integrity of the Temple through the act of sacrifice.

26. *Eloth*. This place-name is evidently identical with Elath.

27. *shipmen, adept in the sea*. The Phoenicians, of course, were a great seafaring nation, and Solomon could well have used the expertise of his northern ally.

28. *Ophir*. This location, somewhere to the south by the shore of the Red Sea, is repeatedly identified in the Bible as a source of gold—so much so that in poetry the name "Ophir" alone can mean "fine gold."

CHAPTER 10

[1]And the Queen of Sheba heard the rumor of
Solomon for the name of the LORD, and she came to
try him with riddles. [2]And she came to Jerusalem with
a very great retinue—camels bearing a very great
abundance of spices and gold and precious stones, and
she came to Solomon and spoke to him all that was in
her heart. [3]And Solomon told her all her questions.
There was no question hidden from the king that he
did not tell her. [4]And the Queen of Sheba saw all
Solomon's wisdom and the house that he had built,
[5]and the food on his table and the seat of his servants
and the standing of his attendants and their garments
and his cupbearers and the burnt offering he would
offer up in the house of the LORD—and she was
breathless. [6]And she said to the king: "The word that I
heard in my land about your doings and about your
wisdom is true. [7]And I did not believe these words
until I came and my own eyes saw, and, look, the half
of it was not told me. You exceed in wisdom and
bounty beyond the rumor that I heard. [8]Happy are your

men, happy your servants, those who stand in your presence perpetually, listening to your wisdom. [9]May the LORD your God be blessed, Who has desired you to set you on the throne of Israel through the LORD's love of Israel forever, and has made you king to do judgment and justice." [10]And she gave the king a hundred and twenty talents of gold and a very great abundance of spices and precious stones—never again did such an abundance of spice come as the Queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon. [11]And Hiram's fleet as well that bore gold from Ophir brought from Ophir a great abundance of sandalwood and precious stones. [12]And the king made from the sandalwood beams for the house of the LORD and the house of the king and lutes and lyres for the singers—the like of the sandalwood has not come nor been seen to this day. [13]And King Solomon gave to the Queen of Sheba all she desired, for which she had asked, besides what Solomon had given her in royal bounty. And she turned and went off to her land, she and her servants.

[14]And the weight of gold that came to Solomon in a single year was six hundred and sixty-six talents of gold, [15]besides what he had from the merchants and the traffic of the traders and all the kings of Arabia and

the governors of the land. [16]And King Solomon made
two hundred shields of hammered gold, six hundred
measures of gold he put on each shield, [17]and three
hundred bucklers of hammered gold, three hundred
measures of gold on each buckler. And the king put
them in the Lebanon Forest House. [18]And the king
made a great ivory throne and overlaid it with choicest
gold. [19]Six steps the throne had, and a round top
behind it the throne had, and arms on each side at the
seat and two lions standing by the arms. [20]And twelve
lions stood there on the six steps on each side. Its like
was not made in all the kingdoms. [21]And all King
Solomon's drinking vessels were gold, and all the
vessels of the Lebanon Forest House pure gold. There
was no silver—in Solomon's days it was counted as
naught. [22]For the king had a Tarshish fleet in the sea
together with Hiram's fleet bearing gold and silver,
ivory, apes, and parrots. [23]And King Solomon was
greater than all the kings of the earth in wealth and in
wisdom. [24]And the whole earth sought Solomon's
presence to hear his wisdom that God had put in his
heart. [25]And they would bring each his tribute, vessels
of silver and vessels of gold and cloaks and arms and
spices, horses and mules, the set amount year by year.
[26]And Solomon gathered chariots and horsemen, and
he had a thousand four hundred chariots and twelve

thousand horsemen, and he led them to the chariot towns, and with the king in Jerusalem. [27]And the king made silver in Jerusalem as abundant as stones, and cedar as the sycamores in the lowlands. [28]And the source of Solomon's horses was from Muzri and from Kue. The king's merchants would take them from Kue for a set price. [29]And a chariot coming up out of Muzri cost six hundred silver shekels and a horse a hundred fifty. And thus by the sea to all the kings of the Hittites and to the kings of Aram they would bring them out.

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the Queen of Sheba*. The consensus is that Sheba is far to the south of ancient Israel, somewhere on the Arabian peninsula along the shore of the Red Sea. This episode is linked associatively with the immediately preceding passage in which Solomon builds fleets on the Red Sea and carries on trade in rich materials with the south.

for the name of the LORD. This phrase, repeatedly used for the building of the Temple, is a little cryptic in the present context. It might mean that Solomon's fabulous wisdom, granted to him as a special gift by God, was because of its divine source "for the name of the LORD."

2. *And she came to Jerusalem with a very great retinue*. This encounter between the queen of a southern kingdom and the great King Solomon has gripped the imagination of readers, writers, and artists over the ages. Among countless elaborations of the story in poetry and painting, an especially memorable one is "The Visit of the Queen of Sheba," a cycle of poems by the

great Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai, which highlights the grand voyage over the Red Sea and teases out an erotic subtext from the biblical tale.

spoke to him all that was in her heart. The heart here is the locus of intellection, not emotion, so what she speaks are all the riddles she had carefully prepared to pose to him.

3. *And Solomon told her all her questions*. The verb "told," is regularly used for pronouncing the solution to a riddle, as in the Samson story. "Questions" here is the term that usually means "words" but has to be rendered as "questions" to make the sentence intelligible. It is something of a tease that the story does not divulge any of her riddles—of course, leaving much room for later interpreters.

4. *And the Queen of Sheba saw all Solomon's wisdom*. Scholars conventionally classify this story as a Wisdom text, a judgment that might be questioned. Wisdom is celebrated as a value, but in fact there is no Wisdom content in this story (in contrast to Proverbs or Qohelet).

and the house that he had built. She is impressed not only by Solomon's wisdom but—perhaps just as much—by the material splendor and affluence of his palace and his court. One extravagantly wealthy monarch duly recognizes the tremendous wealth of the other.

5. *the burnt offering*. Two ancient versions vocalize this word differently to yield "the ascent on which he would go up to the house of the LORD," though a grand abundance of daily sacrifices would certainly be evidence of his regal wealth.

9. *May the LORD your God be blessed*. The dazzling impression that Solomon makes on the Queen of Sheba is thus seen as a confirmation of the greatness of YHWH, the God of Israel. At the same time, the whole story of the triumphal encounter of Israel's king with a great queen from the distant south is a vivid illustration of Solomon's supreme regal grandeur, which has been a repeated theme in the preceding chapters.

10. *And she gave the king a hundred and twenty talents of gold*. There is no indication that a wager was involved in solving the riddles, as in the Samson story, although that is possible. The more likely explanation of her act is that she is moved to offer a generous gift from her own great wealth as a gesture

of appreciation to the wise and great king. In verse 13, we learn that she on her part asks for an exchange of gifts, to which Solomon readily agrees. Some interpreters see this part of the story as an oblique reflection of trade relations between Israel and Sheba, though it may be more plausible to read it simply as a diplomatic exchange of regal generosity.

a very great abundance of spices. The Arabian peninsula was in fact known in the ancient world for its spices and perfumes, something of which Shakespeare was still aware when he had Lady Macbeth say, "All the perfumes of Araby will not sweeten this little hand."

11. *And Hiram's fleet . . . that bore gold from Ophir*. The obvious associative connection is the bringing of precious materials from southern regions. Ophir probably was also in the Arabian peninsula.

16. *two hundred shields of . . . gold*. These shields and bucklers (the precise distinction between the two Hebrew terms cannot be determined) made of gold are obviously not fashioned to be used in combat but as ornamental objects, evoking by their form the king's military power and by their substance his great wealth.

17. *three hundred*. The received text reads "three," too little if six hundred are used for the shields, but two ancient versions show "three hundred."

the Lebanon Forest House. If this evidently impressive hall in the palace was, as some claim, an armory, it might have been a symbolic armory because the shields displayed in it were not actually for military use. Verse 21 notes that *everything* in the House of Lebanon was made of pure gold, so it could even have been a kind of treasury.

22. *a Tarshish fleet*. Tarshish is generally thought to be a Mediterranean port far to the west, though scholars differ about its precise location. The allied fleets of Solomon and Hiram, however, were plying the Red Sea, so it is more likely that the term refers to a kind of ship—the sort built in Tarshish or outfitted to reach far-off Tarshish. It has also been proposed that the term derives from the Greek *tarsos*, "oar," and so designates a sailing ship that is also equipped with oars.

parrots. Others understand the term to mean "peacocks," although parrots are a better pairing with apes.

23. *And King Solomon was greater than all the kings of the earth in wealth and in wisdom*. This stature has just been demonstrated in the story of the Queen of Sheba.

26. *And Solomon gathered chariots and horsemen*. The reiterated emphasis on Solomon's chariots and horses might reflect historical reality, but it also echoes, perhaps a little ominously, the warning in Deuteronomy 17:16 for the future king, "Only let him not get himself many horses." The text in Deuteronomy, of course, might be a response to Solomon's royal extravagances.

twelve thousand horsemen. The fact that the number of horsemen is so much greater than the number of chariots suggests that the term *parashim* refers both to charioteers and to cavalrymen.

28. *And the source of Solomon's horses was from Muzri and from Kue*. Both the geography and the terminology for Solomon's international horse trading in these last two verses of the chapter are rather obscure. The received text reads Mitsrayim, "Egypt," which was not known for the export of horses, but many scholars emend this to Mutsri, a town in northern Syria (Kue is in Asia Minor). The substitution of a familiar term for an unfamiliar word is one of the most common causes of scribal error.

29. *coming up*. Literally, "would come up and go out." Some interpreters take this as an idiom for "export," but that is not entirely clear.

by the sea. The Masoretic Text reads *beyadam*, "in their hand," which is obscure because there is no clear antecedent for "their." This translation follows the Septuagint, which appears to have used a Hebrew text that read *bayam*, a difference of a single consonant. The transportation of horses from the north by ship along the Mediterranean coast seems plausible.

to all the kings of the Hittites and to the kings of Aram. This would mean that Solomon not only purchased horses for his own use but engaged in an international trade of horses. It is also possible that the preposition "to" (a single-consonant particle) is a scribal error for "from."

CHAPTER 11

[1]And King Solomon loved many foreign women—
Pharaoh's daughter and Moabites, Ammonites,
Edomites, Sidonians, Hittites, [2]from the nations of
which the LORD had said to the Israelites, "You shall
not come among them and they shall not come among
you, for they will surely lead your heart astray after
their gods." To these did Solomon cling in love. [3]And
he had seven hundred princess wives and three
hundred concubines, and his wives led his heart astray.
[4]And it happened in Solomon's old age that his wives
led his heart astray after other gods, and his heart was
not whole with the LORD his God like the heart of
David his father. [5]And Solomon went after Ashtoreth
goddess of the Sidonians and after Milcom
abomination of the Ammonites. [6]And Solomon did
evil in the eyes of the LORD, and he did not obey the
LORD like David his father. [7]Then did Solomon build
a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab on
the mountain facing Jerusalem and for Molech the
abomination of the Ammonites. [8]And, thus did he do

for all his foreign wives who would burn incense and would sacrifice to their gods. [9]And the LORD was furious with Solomon, for his heart had gone astray from the LORD God of Israel, Who had appeared to him twice, [10]and had charged him about this thing not to go after other gods, and he had not kept what the LORD had charged. [11]And the LORD said to Solomon: “Inasmuch as this was with you and you did not keep My covenant and my statutes that I charged to you, I will surely tear away the kingdom from you and give it to your servant. [12]But in your days I will not do it, for the sake of David your father. From the hand of your son I will tear it away. [13]Only the entire kingdom I will not tear away. One tribe I will give to your son, for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen.” [14]And the LORD raised up an adversary against Solomon, Hadad the Edomite, who was of the royal seed in Edom. [15]And it had happened when David was in Edom, when Joab commander of the army went up to bury the fallen, that he struck down every male in Edom. [16]For six months Joab had stayed there, and all Israel with him, until he cut off every male in Edom. [17]And Hadad fled, and Edomite men of his father’s servants with him, and went to Egypt, and Hadad was a young lad. [18]And they arose from Midian and came to Paran, and

they took men with them from Paran and came to Egypt to Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he gave him a house, and he decreed food for him, and he gave him land. [19]And Hadad found great favor in the eyes of Pharaoh, and he gave him a wife, the sister of his own wife Tahpanes the royal consort. [20]And Tahpanes's sister bore him his son Genubath, and Tahpanes weaned him in Pharaoh's house, and Genubath was in Pharaoh's house in the midst of Pharaoh's sons. [21]And Hadad had heard in Egypt that David lay with his fathers and that Joab the commander of the army was dead, and Hadad said to Pharaoh, "Send me off, that I may go to my land." [22]And Pharaoh said to him, "Why, what are you lacking with me that you should seek to go to your land?" And he said, "No. Send me off." [23]And God raised up against him as adversary Rezon son of Eliadu, who had fled from Hadadezer his master, king of Zobah. [24]And he gathered men about him and became the commander of a troop after David killed them, and they went to Damascus and dwelled there, and they reigned in Damascus. [25]And he was an adversary against Israel all the days of Solomon, together with all the harm that Hadad had done, and he loathed Israel and reigned over Aram.

[26]And Jeroboam son of Nebat, an Ephraimite from
Zeredah, whose mother's name was Zeruah, a widow-
woman, was a servant to Solomon. And he raised his
hand against the king. [27]And this is how he raised his
hand against the king: Solomon had built the Citadel,
had closed the breaches of the City of David his
father. [28]And the man Jeroboam was an able fellow and
Solomon saw that the lad could carry out tasks, and he
appointed him over all the heavy labor of the house of
Joseph. [29]And it happened at that time that Jeroboam
went out from Jerusalem, and the prophet Ahijah the
Shilonite found him on the way, he covering himself in
a new cloak and the two of them alone in the field.
[30]And Ahijah caught hold of the new cloak and tore it
into twelve pieces. [31]And he said to Jeroboam, "Take
you ten pieces, for thus said the LORD God of Israel:
'I am about to tear away the kingdom from Solomon's
hand and give it to the ten tribes. [32]And the one tribe
shall be his for the sake of My servant David and for
the sake of Jerusalem, the city that I have chosen from
all the tribes of Israel, [33]inasmuch as they have
forsaken Me and have bowed down to Ashtoreth
goddess of the Sidonians and to Chemosh god of
Moab and to Milcom god of the Ammonites, and they
have not walked in My ways to do what is right in My
eyes and My statutes and My laws, like David his

father. [34]But I will not take the entire kingdom from
his hand, for I will keep him as a prince all the days of
his life for the sake of David whom I chose, who kept
My commands and My statutes. [35]And I will take the
kingship from the hand of his son and give it to you—
the ten tribes. [36]And to his son I will give one tribe, so
that there be a lamp for David my servant for all time
before Me in Jerusalem, the city that I have chosen to
set My name there. [37]And you will I take, and you shall
reign over all that you desire, and you shall be king
over Israel. [38]And it shall be, if you hearken to all that I
charge you and walk in My ways and do what is right
in My eyes to keep My statues and My commands as
did David My servant, I shall be with you and build for
you a lasting house, as I built for David, and I shall
give Israel to you. [39]And I shall afflict the seed of
David because of this, but not for all time.'" [40]And
Solomon sought to put Jeroboam to death, and
Jeroboam arose and fled to Egypt, to Shishak king of
Egypt, and he stayed in Egypt until Solomon's death.
[41]And the rest of the acts of Solomon and all that he
did, and his wisdom, are they not written in the Book
of the Acts of Solomon? [42]And the time that Solomon
reigned in Jerusalem over all Israel was forty years.
[43]And Solomon lay with his fathers and was buried in

the City of David his father. And Rehoboam his son reigned in his stead.

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And King Solomon loved many foreign women*. These words mark a strong shift in the perception of Solomon. Up to this point, he had been portrayed as an ideally wise and fabulously wealthy king to whom God gave rousing promises and who built God's house in Jerusalem. The previous mentions of his marriage to Pharaoh's daughter do not put that alliance in any negative light. (Later prohibitions on intermarriage were not operative in the early centuries of Israelite national existence.) Here, however, the legendary profusion of Solomon's foreign wives—a full thousand—leads to the sin of idolatry. The Deuteronomistic editor, for all the inherited stories of Solomon's grandeur, needed an explanation for the splitting of the kingdom after Solomon's death, and he now provides it in a manner in keeping with Deuteronomy's conception of historical causation, in which idolatry leads to national disaster.

2. *from the nations of which the* LORD *had said . . . , "You shall not come among them*." The Moabites and the Ammonites in particular were singled out for this ban.

To these did Solomon cling in love. This expression suggests that the wise Solomon was besotted with his foreign wives and hence ready to follow their lead in cultic practice.

3. *his wives led his heart astray*. One may infer that he initially allowed them freedom of worship and then was drawn into their pagan ways.

7. *Then did Solomon build a high place for Chemosh*. The building of "high places"—typically, rural hilltop altars—is a bête noire of the Deuteronomist both because he insists on the exclusivity of the Jerusalem temple and

because such altars were vulnerable to pagan influences. Here Solomon is seen taking an active role in the pagan cult, actually promulgating it.

11. *give it to your servant*. In royal contexts, "servant," *ʿeved*, usually means "courtier." Jeroboam, who will appear later in the story, is a member of the royal bureaucracy and hence Solomon's "servant."

13. *One tribe I will give to your son*. It should be two tribes because the breakaway kingdom in the north will have ten. Either "one" is used hyperbolically, to emphasize how little will be left to Solomon's line, or it reflects the assimilation of Benjamin into Judah, which became to all intents and purposes the only tribe of the southern kingdom.

14. *adversary*. The Hebrew *satan* does not strictly mean "enemy" but something like "troublemaker," someone who is a stumbling block.

18. *from Midian*. This kingdom to the southeast of Israel would have been a way station between Edom, farther north, and Egypt.

came to Paran. Paran is in the Sinai desert, south of Midian and on the way to Egypt.

Pharaoh . . . gave him a house . . . food . . . land. The Pharaoh in David's time, unlike the successor who gave his daughter to Solomon, was hostile to Israel. His providing refuge and sustenance to this Edomite refugee from David's onslaught is politically motivated, with the calculation that at some future point Hadad might prove useful in the conflict with David.

19. *the royal consort*. Translations invariably render this as "the queen." But the Hebrew does not call her queen, *malkah*, but rather *gevirah*, a term that elsewhere (including 15:13 in this book) designates the queen mother. Tahpenes could not be the king's mother because she is his wife, but *gevirah* seems to be extended to a woman intimately related to the king though lacking the full authority and status of queen.

20. *Tahpanes weaned him*. This looks odd because as his aunt, she certainly would not have suckled the child. The attachment of this verb to her might suggest that she had a kind of adoptive relationship with the infant, a child fathered by a foreigner, and so in some symbolic or even legal fashion could be said to preside over his weaning.

22. *No. Send me off*. No continuation of the story is given, so there is no way of knowing whether Hadad was repatriated. If he was, then he would presumably have taken up his role as "adversary" to Solomon, son of the man who had massacred the male population of Edom. Verse 25 suggests that in fact he played this role.

23. *who had fled from Hadadezer his master*. Rezon is not referred to as being "of the royal seed." The implication may be that he was a plebeian who may have been part of a conspiracy against the king.

24. *they reigned in Damascus*. The use of the plural may make sense in this context: Rezon is not of royal stock; he has gathered around him a private militia; and it is this group of fighting men who have seized control of Damascus.

25. *together with*. The Hebrew preposition looks a little strange but could simply mean that the harm perpetrated by Rezon was in addition to the harm done by Hadad.

26. *a servant to Solomon*. The precise nature of the service he performs in Solomon's court is spelled out in verse 28.

28. *an able fellow*. The Hebrew *gibor ḥayil* in military contexts means "valiant warrior," but it can also indicate in pacific contexts either competence or wealth.

the lad. The Hebrew *naʿar* here might refer not to youth but to subordinate position.

could carry out tasks. More literally, "was a carrier-out of tasks."

the heavy labor. This activity is linked with the building and the repair of breaches in the wall mentioned in the previous verse. The Hebrew *sevel* derives from a root that means bearing burdens.

29. *the prophet Ahijah*. The only prophet who has appeared in this story until now is Nathan, but from this point there will be many. Unlike the so-called literary prophets, they do not deliver extensive poetic messages of rebuke or consolation, but they do pronounce what the future will be.

the two of them alone in the field. By its subversive nature, Ahijah's communication to Jeroboam has to be in a clandestine setting.

30. *tore it into twelve pieces*. Turning the torn cloak into a sign picks up Saul's tearing of Samuel's cloak, which Samuel immediately turns into a sign that God will tear the kingship away from Saul. The earlier tearing of the garment was inadvertent, whereas this act is deliberately carried out as a symbol of what will happen.

34. *prince*. God's words, as quoted by Ahijah, avoid the authoritative title "king" and instead use an ambiguous word that often designates a tribal chieftain. Solomon's kingship, one sees, is already slipping away.

36. *so that there be a lamp for David my servant*. The language of the prophecy labors to preserve the notion of a divinely elected Davidic dynasty even as most of the kingdom is about to be shorn from the line of David.

38. *if you hearken to all that I charge you*. Once again, the language is explicitly Deuteronomistic.

39. *because of this*. Presumably the reference is to the idolatrous backsliding under the rule of Solomon.

40. *And Solomon sought to put Jeroboam to death*. No report is given of the actions by Jeroboam that might have provoked the king's attempt to kill him (the Septuagint supplies details, but these are of doubtful authority), but one must assume that after the encounter with Ahijah, Jeroboam took steps—like Macbeth after the prophecy of the witches—to secure the throne for himself.

Shishak king of Egypt. This is clearly a Pharaoh who has come after the one who gave his daughter to Solomon, and who regards Solomon's kingdom with suspicion, if not hostility.

41. *the Book of the Acts of Solomon*. This text would seem to be some sort of court annals. It is quite possible that the writer or writers responsible for Solomon's story beginning with 1 Kings 3 drew materials from this book, though that remains in the realm of conjecture.

42. *forty years*. This is, of course, a formulaic number—one frequently used to designate the length of time a leader in the Book of Judges remained in power. In all likelihood, it reflects knowledge that Solomon reigned for a relatively long time, a full generation in biblical terms.

CHAPTER 12

[1]And Rehoboam came to Shechem, for all Israel had
come to Shechem to make him king. [2]And it happened
when Jeroboam son of Nebat heard, and he was still in
Egypt where he had fled from King Solomon, and
Jeroboam had stayed in Egypt, [3]that they sent and
called to him, and Jeroboam and all the assembly of
Israel came and spoke to Rehoboam, saying, [4]"Your
father made our yoke heavy, and you, now lighten the
hard labor of your father and his heavy yoke that he
put on us, that we may serve you." [5]And he said to
them, "Go off another three days and come back to
me," and the people went off. [6]And King Rehoboam
took counsel with the elders who stood in the service
of his father while he was alive, saying, "How do you
counsel to respond to this people?" [7]And, they spoke
to him, saying, "If today you will be a servant to this
people and serve them and answer them and speak
good words to them, they will be servants to you
always." [8]And he forsook the counsel of the elders that
they had given him and took counsel with the young

men with whom he had grown up, who stood in his service. [9]And he said to them, “What do you counsel that we should respond to this people that has spoken to me, saying, ‘Lighten the yoke that your father put on us’?” [10]And the young men with whom he had grown up spoke to him, saying, “Thus shall you say to these people who have spoken to you, saying, ‘Your father made our yoke heavy, and you, lighten it for us.’ Thus shall you say to them, ‘My little finger is thicker than my father’s loins. [11]And now, my father burdened you with a heavy yoke, and I will add to your yoke. My father scourged you with whips, and I will scourge you with scorpions.’” [12]And Jeroboam, and all the people with him, came to Rehoboam on the third day, as the king had said, “Return to me on the third day.” [13]And the king answered the people harshly and forsook the counsel of the elders that they had given him. [14]And he spoke to them according to the counsel of the young men, saying, “My father made your yoke heavy and I will add to your yoke. My father scourged you with whips and I will scourge you with scorpions.” [15]And the king did not hearken to the people, for it was brought about by the LORD in order to fulfill His word that the LORD had spoken through Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam son of Nebat. [16]And all Israel

saw that the king had not hearkened to them, and the people responded to the king, saying,

> “We have no share in David
> nor an estate in the son of
> Jesse.
> To your tents, O Israel!
> See to your house, O
> David!”

And Israel went to their tents. [17]As to the Israelites dwelling in the towns of Judah, Rehoboam was king over them. [18]And King Rehoboam sent out Adoram, who was over the forced labor, and all Israel stoned him and he died. Then King Rehoboam hastened to mount a chariot to flee to Jerusalem. [19]And Israel has rebelled against the house of David to this day. [20]And it happened when all Israel heard that Jeroboam had come back, that they sent and called him to the community and made him king over all Israel. There was no one following the house of David save Judah alone. [21]And Rehoboam came to Jerusalem and assembled all the house of Judah and the tribe of Benjamin, a hundred eighty thousand picked warriors to do battle with the house of Israel to bring back the

kingship to Rehoboam son of Solomon. [22]And the word of the LORD came to Shemaiah man of God, saying, [23]“Say to Rehoboam son of Solomon king of Judah and to all the house of Judah and Benjamin and the rest of the people, saying, [24]Thus said the LORD, ‘You shall not go up and you shall not do battle with your Israelite brothers. Go back each man to his house, for from Me has this thing come about.’” And they heeded the LORD’s word and turned back from going, according to the LORD’s word.

[25]And Jeroboam rebuilt Shechem in the high country of Ephraim and dwelled in it. And he went out from there and rebuilt Penuel. [26]And Jeroboam said in his heart, “Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David, [27]if this people go up to do sacrifices in the house of the LORD in Jerusalem, the heart of this people will turn back to their master, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and turn back to Rehoboam king of Judah.” [28]And the king took counsel and made two golden calves and said to the people, “Enough for you to go up to Jerusalem! Here are your gods, Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.” [29]And he placed one in Bethel and the other he set in Dan. [30]And this thing became an

offense; and the people marched before the one in Bethel and the other in Dan. [31]And he made buildings for the high places and made priests from the pick of the people who were not from the sons of Levi. [32]And Jeroboam made a festival in the eighth month on the fifteenth day of the month like the festival that was in Judah, and he went up on the altar. Thus did he do in Bethel to sacrifice to the calves that he had made, and he set up in Bethel the priests of the high places he had made. [33]And he went up on the altar that he had made in Bethel on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, in the month he had devised from his own heart. And he made a festival for the Israelites and went up on the altar to burn incense.

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king*. Shechem was a frequent assembly point in the tribal period. One might have expected, however, that the coronation would take place in Jerusalem. In this national meeting at Shechem there appears to be an intimation that Rehoboam's succession to the throne was not an automatic matter, or, to put this differently, that the Davidic rule over what had been, barely half a century earlier, a federation of tribes was not entirely assured. Thus Rehoboam comes out from Jerusalem to an assembly that he hopes will acclaim or ratify his succession. His knowledge of Jeroboam's ambitions for the throne may be a motivator.

4. *made our yoke heavy*. The literal sense of the Hebrew verb is "made hard," but in all the subsequent occurrences of "yoke" in this story, the more expected "heavy" is used.

now lighten the hard labor. The people refer, of course, to the punishing taxation through forced labor necessitated by Solomon's vast building projects. Requests for remission of taxes and obligations to the crown when a new king assumed the throne were common in the ancient Near East.

6. *the elders*. These would be a group of state councillors, experienced men who are not necessarily aged but knowledgeable.

7. *this people*. They are referred to by all parties in this story with the demonstrative pronoun, distancing them and indicating them as a refractory group with which one must know how to deal properly.

8. *the young men with whom he had grown up*. The word for "young men," *yeladim*, usually means "child" or even "infant." Since we later learn that Rehoboam was forty when he became king, these are actually middle-aged men. The term may have been chosen to underscore their puerile behavior. In any case, the episode surely reflects the ancient predisposition to seek wisdom from elders, as Job's three friends repeatedly stress.

10. *My little finger is thicker than my father's loins*. This extravagant metaphor is the advice of arrogance. In the event, Rehoboam deletes these words in his response to the people. A few interpreters have seen a sexual allusion here, perhaps because of the proximity to loins, with "little finger" a euphemism for the male member (in rabbinic Hebrew, "little member" means "penis"). That would be in keeping with the macho brashness of these words.

11. *I will scourge you with scorpions*. These would be either actual scorpions, perhaps poisonous, or an iron implement with a ragged head, perhaps one carved to resemble a scorpion.

15. *for it was brought about by the* LORD. Rehoboam's alienating the people has been reported in realistic—possibly historical—terms as a very unwise policy decision. Now, however, it is given a theological explanation: this is the means through which God causes Ahijah's prophecy to be fulfilled.

16. *See to your house, O David!* The people's response, in two lines of poetry, vividly expresses the distance they now feel from the Davidic monarchy: Rehoboam's brutal language makes them realize that this recently founded dynasty has been a bad idea, and that they owe no fealty to it.

18. *Adoram*. Earlier, his name was given a longer form, Adoniram.

who was over the forced labor. It is precisely the forced labor that had been the people's chief complaint. Rehoboam, not yet realizing that his writ no longer extends over the whole people, sends out the chief overseer over the forced labor, unwittingly consigning him to his death.

Then King Rehoboam hastened to mount a chariot. Adoram's murder by the mob makes Rehoboam realize that his own life is in danger.

21. *the tribe of Benjamin*. Part of Benjamin remained loyal to the house of David.

the house of Israel. Henceforth, this phrase will refer to the northern tribes, in contradistinction to Judah.

22. *Shemaiah man of God*. He is clearly a prophet, precisely like Ahijah, but here an alternate designation is used.

24. *And they heeded the LORD's word*. It is not clear that they would automatically concede the divine authority of words pronounced by a particular prophet or man of God. In this instance, however, the prospect of a bloody civil war and of a military confrontation between two tribes and ten may have disposed them to accept the prophecy. It is noteworthy that "they"—the people—heed the prophecy, while no explicit mention is made of the king. It may be that the force of the prophetic injunction swayed the people, leaving Rehoboam no choice but to acquiesce.

25. *rebuilt Shechem . . . rebuilt Penuel*. Penuel was destroyed by Gideon to revenge the failure of its elders to give provisions to his troops (see Judges 8). In the case of Shechem, fortification may be what is indicated.

26. *Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David*. Jeroboam clearly understands what Josiah in the seventh century B.C.E. will understand, that possession of a cultic center is also a claim to centralized political authority. Thus he takes steps to create cultic places in the north.

28. *two golden calves . . . "Here are your gods, Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt."* The representation of Jeroboam's act as idolatrous—underscored by the use of "gods" in the plural—is tendentious. Calves or bulls were often conceived as a mount or a throne of God, precisely like those winged leonine figures, the cherubim. In all historical likelihood, Jeroboam's intention was not to displace the worship of YHWH but merely to create alternate cultic centers to Jerusalem with an alternate temple iconography. But the narrator pointedly represents all this in precisely the terms, with an explicit quotation, of Aaron's golden calf (Exodus 32).

29. *one in Bethel and the other . . . in Dan*. Bethel was a well-known cultic site, and archaeologists have uncovered the remnants of a substantial cultic site at Dan in the far north. Jeroboam's decision to create two cultic centers may be a concession on his part to the loose and disparate nature of the constellation of tribes that constituted his new kingdom.

30. *And this thing became an offense*. It is important for the Deuteronomistic writer to establish that the first king of Israel, despite the admonition of Ahijah, initiated idolatry in his realm, thus setting the stage for the eventual destruction of the northern kingdom.

and the people marched before the one in Bethel and the other in Dan. The Masoretic Text lacks "the one in Bethel," surely an inadvertent omission. One might have expected the phrase "to go after," the preposition used for idolatry in 11:2 and 4. Here "to go" is rendered as "to march," presupposing that the reference is to a procession before the cultic calves.

31. *he made buildings for the high places*. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "he made a house of high places." The reference may be to the erection of sanctuaries around the hilltop altars.

the pick of the people. This is what this Hebrew phrase indicates elsewhere, though others understand it in an opposite sense, "the common people." Jeroboam, however, would have had no motivation to enlist priests from the peasantry. His waywardness is rather reflected in bypassing the priestly caste. See Genesis 47:2, where this same expression appears to mean "the pick" or "the best."

32. *a festival in the eighth month*. Calendric differences have often been the lever of sectarian or political divisions among Jews. The festival referred to is

Succoth, the most densely attended of the three pilgrim festivals. Its designated date is on the fifteenth of the seventh month, so Jeroboam, by pushing it a month later, is marking a pointed difference between his realm and the southern kingdom.

to sacrifice to the calves that he had made. The wording again represents the cult Jeroboam had set up as sheer idolatry.

CHAPTER 13

[1]And, look, a man of God came from Judah through
the word of the LORD to Bethel, with Jeroboam
standing on the altar to burn incense. [2]And he called
out against the altar by the word of the LORD and
said, “Altar, altar! Thus says the LORD: ‘Look, a son
is to be born to the house of David, Josiah his name,
and he shall sacrifice upon you the priests of the high
places who burn incense upon you, and they shall burn
upon you human bones.’” [3]And he gave a portent on
that day, saying, “This is the portent, that the LORD
has spoken: look, the altar is about to be torn asunder,
and the ashes that are upon it will be spilled.” [4]And it
happened when the king heard the word of the man of
God that he had called out against the altar in Bethel,
Jeroboam reached out his hand, saying, “Seize him.”
And the hand he reached out against him withered,
and he could not pull it back. [5]And the altar was torn
asunder and the ashes were spilled from the altar
according to the portent that the man of God had
given by the word of the LORD. [6]And the king spoke

out and said to the man of God, “Entreat, please, the LORD your God and pray for me, that my hand come back to me.” And the man of God entreated the LORD, and the king’s hand came back to him and was as it had been before. [7]And the king spoke to the man of God, “Come into the house with me and dine, that I may give you a gift.” [8]And the man of God said to the king, “Should you give me half your house, I would not come with you and I would not eat bread and I would not drink water in this place. [9]For thus it was charged me by the word of the LORD, saying, ‘No bread shall you eat nor water shall you drink nor shall you go back on the way that you went.’” [10]And he went off on another way, and he did not return on the way that he had come to Bethel. [11]And a certain old prophet was dwelling in Bethel, and his sons came and recounted to him the whole deed that the man of God had done that day in Bethel, the words that he had spoken to the king, they recounted them to their father. [12]And their father spoke to them, “By what way did he go?” And his sons showed him the way on which the man of God who had come from Judah had gone. [13]And he said to his sons, “Saddle the donkey for me.” And they saddled the donkey for him and he mounted it. [14]And he went after the man of God and found him sitting under a terebinth. And he said to

him, “Are you the man of God who came from Judah?” And he said, “I am.” 15And he said, “Come home with me and eat bread.” 16And he said, “I cannot go back with you, nor will I eat bread nor will I drink water in this place. 17For a word came to me, by the word of the LORD, ‘You shall eat no bread nor shall you drink water nor shall you go back to go on the way that you went.’” 18And he said to him, “I, too, am a prophet like you, and a divine messenger spoke to me with the word of the LORD, saying, ‘Bring him back with you to your house, that he may eat bread and drink water.’” He lied to him. 19And he went back with him and ate bread in his house and drank water. 20And it happened as they were sitting at the table, that the word of the LORD came to the prophet who had brought him back, 21and he called out to the man of God who had come from Judah, saying, “Thus said the LORD: ‘Inasmuch as you have flouted the word of the LORD and not kept the command that the LORD your God commanded you, 22and you came back and ate bread and drank water in the place of which He spoke to you, Do not eat bread nor drink water, your carcass shall not come to the grave of your fathers.’” 23And it happened after he had eaten bread and after he had drunk water that the prophet who had brought him back saddled the donkey for him. 24And he went

off, and a lion found him on the way and killed him, and his carcass was flung down on the way with the donkey standing by him and the lion standing by the carcass. [25]And, look, people were passing by, and they saw the carcass flung down on the way and the lion standing by the carcass, and they came and spoke of it in the town in which the old prophet lived. [26]And the prophet who had brought him back from the way heard and he said, “It is the man of God who flouted the word of the LORD, and the LORD has given him over to the lion, and it has torn him apart and killed him, according to the word of the LORD that He spoke to him.” [27]And he spoke to his sons, saying, “Saddle the donkey for me,” and they saddled it. [28]And he went and found his carcass flung down on the way. The lion had not eaten the carcass and had not torn apart the donkey. [29]And the prophet lifted the man of God’s carcass and laid it on the donkey, and he brought him back to the town of the old prophet to keen for him and to bury him. [30]And he lay his carcass in his grave and keened for him, “Woe, my brother.” [31]And it happened after he had buried him that he said to his sons, saying, “When I die, bury me in the grave in which the man of God is buried; by his bones lay my bones. [32]For the word will surely come about that he called by the word of the LORD concerning the

altar which is in Bethel and concerning all the buildings of the high places that are in the towns of Samaria.” [33]Yet after this thing Jeroboam did not turn back from his evil way, and again he made priests from the pick of the people. Whoever desired was ordained and became one of the priests of the high places. [34]And this thing became an offense for the house of Jeroboam, to wipe it out and destroy it from the face of the earth.

CHAPTER 13 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *a man of God*. As before, this is an alternate designation for prophet. In this story, however, the man who comes from Judah to Bethel is consistently called a man of God, whereas the old man who will go after him and bring him home to dine is called a prophet. Verse 26 is the one seeming exception, but that may reflect a textual problem.

2. *Altar, altar!* This sort of apostrophe to an inanimate object is not a usual form of prophetic address. The man of God adopts it for shock effect, to direct attention to what he understands to be an entirely illegitimate altar and cult.

a son is to be born to the house of David, Josiah his name. Josiah was king of Judah three centuries after the time of this story, which thus was surely composed no earlier than the late seventh century B.C.E. The continuation of this story appears in 2 Kings 23, where Josiah is reported to have undertaken a sweeping campaign to destroy idols and the apparatus of pagan worship. In the course of that campaign, he slaughters the idolatrous priests and also

exhumes bones from graves and burns them on the altar of Bethel in order to make it forever ritually impure.

7. *Come into the house with me and dine*. Jeroboam, having seen the man of God's fearsome power both in the destruction of the altar and the paralyzing and restoring of his arm, seeks to make him an ally.

9. *No bread shall you eat nor water shall you drink*. This prohibition is understandable as an expression of God's absolute rejection of Jeroboam's wayward kingdom: the man of God must shun the king, not breaking bread with him or even drinking water in his house.

nor shall you go back on the way you went. This third prohibition is less transparent. Perhaps the fact that he must take a different route back to Judah is meant to indicate that the dire prophecy he has pronounced is irreversible, though it looks rather like the kind of arbitrary injunction one often encounters in folktales: if you fail to follow these precise stipulations for your mission, disaster will ensue.

11. *a certain old prophet*. The fact that the old prophet lies to the man of God (verse 18) may raise questions about his legitimacy as prophet, but in verse 21 he is represented as the authentic vehicle for the word of the LORD.

his sons. The Masoretic Text has a singular here, but two Hebrew manuscripts and three ancient versions show a plural, the form that appears in the rest of the verse and in the next one.

14. *And he went after the man of God*. The man of God, as the sons have reported to the old man, has just demonstrated his credentials by performing two spectacular portents. It would appear that, as a result, the old prophet wants to associate himself with the man of God from Judah, perhaps enhancing his own prophetic status in this fashion.

18. *He lied to him*. Although the lie has fatal consequences, it may have been impelled by a good intention. The old man might well have imagined that the stern prohibition was directed against the king's house but not against the house of a prophet like himself—a professional colleague of the man of God. Seeing how determined the man from Judah is to observe the prohibition, he permits himself to fabricate the story about the divine messenger.

20. *the word of the LORD came to the prophet*. The old man, now made the conduit of the prophecy of doom pronounced upon the man of God, is forced to see how drastically mistaken he was in bringing the man home with him under false pretences.

22. *your carcass*. The Hebrew *neveilah* usually refers to an animal carcass, not to a human corpse. Its repeated use here may emphasize the abject condition of the slaughtered man of God, his body flung down on the way.

23. *the prophet who had brought him back saddled the donkey for him*. The Masoretic Text reads: "and he saddled the donkey for the prophet which he had brought back." This reading is problematic because throughout the story only the old man is called a prophet, and the other is invariably referred to as the man of God. The emendation on which the translation rests involves the change of a single consonant, *hanavi*ʾ instead of *lanavi*ʾ with no alteration of the Hebrew word order.

24. *a lion found him on the way*. This part of the story is not miraculous because in ancient Israel there was an abundance of lions in the countryside, a fact reflected in the currency of five different terms for "lion" in biblical Hebrew.

his carcass was flung down on the way with the donkey standing by him and the lion standing by the carcass. It is in this bizarre tableau that the miraculous character of the event is manifested. As we learn in verse 28, the lion kills the man but does not eat him and does not harm the donkey. Moreover, he remains standing by the body and the donkey instead of going off, as one would expect.

26. *who flouted the word of the LORD*. It must be said that the old prophet plays a rather ambiguous role in this story. After all, it was his lie about having received instructions from a divine messenger that led the man of God to go back with him to his house and thus flout the word of the LORD. His pronouncement here does not appear to express any remorse or any sense of guilt about the death that he has caused. Perhaps he still feels that he acted out of good intentions and that the man of God should have strictly observed the divine prohibitions, whatever the persuasive force of an argument to the contrary.

31. *bury me in the grave in which the man of God is buried*. He had wanted to have communion with this prophetic colleague through an act of hospitality. Now he wants to have solidarity with him after his death through a common grave. In the completion of this story in 2 Kings 23, this joint burial will have a positive posthumous consequence for the old prophet because Josiah will spare the bones buried in the man of God's grave from being exhumed and burned on the Bethel altar.

32. *For the word will surely come about*. The old prophet appears to have foreseen the means by which human bones will be burned on this altar in order to render it impure—the exhumation of bones from local graves—and so he may be buying himself a kind of burial insurance by having his body buried together with the man who pronounced the dire prophecy about the altar. This entire story remains bizarre to the end.

34. *to wipe it out and destroy it from the face of the earth*. The late writer, formulating his story more than a century after the total destruction of the northern kingdom, has that historical catastrophe in mind (although the immediate reference is to the house of Jeroboam) and here offers a theological explanation, in keeping with his Deuteronomistic outlook—the offense of cultic disloyalty.

CHAPTER 14

[1]At that time Abijah son of Jeroboam fell ill. [2]And Jeroboam said to his wife, “Rise, pray, and disguise yourself, that they will not know you are Jeroboam’s wife, and go to Shiloh, for Ahijah the prophet is there, who spoke to me to become king over this people. [3]And take in your hand ten loaves of bread and cakes and a jar of honey and come to him. He will tell you what will happen to the lad.” [4]And so did Jeroboam’s wife do: she rose and went to Shiloh and came to Ahijah’s house, but Ahijah could not see, for his eyes had gone blind from old age. [5]And the LORD had said to Ahijah, “Look, Jeroboam’s wife is about to come to you to ask an oracle concerning her son, for he is ill, and thus and so shall you speak to her. And when she comes she will feign to be another.” [6]And it happened when Ahijah heard the sound of her footsteps coming through the entrance, he said, “Come in, wife of Jeroboam. Why should you feign to be another when I have been sent to you with harsh tidings? [7]Go, say to Jeroboam, ‘Thus said the LORD God of Israel:

Inasmuch as I have raised you up from the people and
made you prince over My people Israel, [8]and I have
torn the kingdom from the house of David and given it
to you, but you have not been like My servant David,
who kept My commands and who walked after Me
with all his heart to do only what was right in My eyes,
[9]and you have done evil more than all who were before
you and have gone and made yourself other gods and
molten images to vex Me, and Me have you flung
behind your back, [10]therefore am I about to bring evil
on the house of Jeroboam, and I will cut off from
Jeroboam every pisser against the wall, bondsman and
freeborn in Israel, and I will burn out from the house
of Jeroboam as one burns dung till it is gone.
[11]Jeroboam's dead in the town the dogs will eat, and
the dead in the field, the fowl of the heavens, for the
LORD has spoken.' [12]And you, rise, go to your house.
As your feet come into the town, the child will die.
[13]And all Israel shall keen for him and bury him, for he
alone of Jeroboam shall come to a grave inasmuch as
in him alone in the house of Jeroboam a good thing is
found before the LORD God of Israel. [14]And the
LORD will raise up for Himself a king over Israel who
will cut off the house of Jeroboam this day and,
indeed, even now. [15]And the LORD will strike Israel as
a reed sways in the water, and He will uproot Israel

from the good land that He gave to their fathers and will scatter them beyond the River inasmuch as they have made their sacred poles that vex the LORD.
16 And He will give Israel up because of the offenses of Jeroboam that he committed and that he led Israel to commit." 17 And Jeroboam's wife rose and went off and came to Tirzah. She was coming over the threshold of the house when the lad died. 18 And all Israel buried him and keened for him, according to the word of the LORD that He had spoken through His servant Ahijah the prophet. 19 And the rest of the acts of Jeroboam, wherein he did battle and whereby he reigned, why they are written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Israel. 20 And the time that Jeroboam reigned was twenty-two years. And he lay with his fathers, and Nadab his son was king in his stead.

21 And Rehoboam son of Solomon king of Judah was forty-one years old when he became king, and seventeen years he was king in Jerusalem, the city that the LORD chose to set His name there from all the tribes of Israel. And his mother's name was Naamah the Ammonite. 22 And Judah did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD, and they provoked Him more than all that their fathers had done in their offenses that they

committed. [23]And they, too, built high places and steles
and sacred poles on every high hill and under every
lush tree. [24]And male cult-harlots, too, there were in
the land. They did like all the abominations of the
nations that the LORD had dispossessed before Israel.
[25]And it happened in the fifth year of Rehoboam's
reign that Shishak king of Egypt came up against
Jerusalem. [26]And he took the treasures of the house of
the LORD and the treasures of the house of the king,
and everything did he take, and he took all the gold
bucklers that Solomon made. [27]And Rehoboam made
bronze bucklers in their stead and entrusted them to
the officers of the royal sentries who guarded the
entrance of the king's house. [28]And it happened, when
the king would come to the house of the LORD, the
royal sentries would carry them and bring them back
to the chamber of the royal sentries. [29]And the rest of
the acts of Rehoboam, and all that he did, are they not
written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Judah?
[30]And there was constant war between Rehoboam and
Jeroboam. [31]And Rehoboam lay with his fathers and
was buried with his fathers in the City of David. And
his mother's name was Naamah the Ammonite. And
Abijam his son reigned in his stead.

CHAPTER 14 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *At that time*. This particular temporal reference is a generalized formulaic phrase that does not indicate that what follows happened precisely at the same time as the preceding events in the narrative.

3. *ten loaves of bread and cakes and a jar of honey*. It was customary to bring gifts to a prophet or seer when seeking oracular counsel from him. These in effect constituted his professional income.

4. *but Ahijah could not see*. This is the first indication that Jeroboam's plan has gone awry. He has instructed his wife to go in disguise, but the disguise proves to be pointless because the prophet is blind. In any case, God will expose the disguise in speaking to the blind prophet. The blindness, a consequence of old age, is also an indication that a good deal of time has passed since Ahijah's fateful encounter on the road with Jeroboam.

5. *thus and so shall you speak to her*. This convention of using a phrase like this of summary without stipulation of the actual words is not infrequent in biblical dialogue and reflects its formal bias of stylization. In this case, it is a means of postponing the revelation of the prophecy of doom that Ahijah will pronounce against the house of Jeroboam.

6. *when Ahijah heard the sound of her footsteps*. This detail nicely captures the perspective of the blind man, who has to depend on his acute sense of hearing. Though sightless, he of course knows who has come, why she has come, and the fact that she is disguised, because God has told him all this.

7. *prince*. In God's words, the term *melekh*, "king," is avoided, and the vaguer term *nagid*, "prince" (etymologically, he who takes the place in front of others), is used instead for Jeroboam.

8. *My servant David, who kept My commands*. As before, this is an idealized image of David that does not square with the narrative in 1 and 2 Samuel.

9. *and you have done evil more than all who were before you*. In light of the fact that there is only one king between Jeroboam and David, the reference

here is probably to all the bad behavior of the people of Israel from the backslidings in the Wilderness stories onward.

10. *I will cut off from Jeroboam every pisser against the wall*. This coarse epithet for males, which David uses in vowing to destroy Nabal and all the males of his household (1 Samuel 25:22), may well have been formulaic in pronouncing resolutions of total destruction, so that even God uses it.

bondsman and freeborn. The meaning of these two Hebrew terms is much in dispute.

as one burns dung. The Hebrew verb can mean "root out," "eradicate," but since pieces of dried dung were used as fuel, it is fairly likely that the sense of burning is activated here, or that there is a punning relationship between rooting out the house of Jeroboam and burning dung. The simile of dung obviously conveys a withering sense of the value of the house of Jeroboam.

11. *Jeroboam's dead in the town the dogs will eat*. As in the Greek world, leaving a corpse to the degradation of scavengers was conceived as a fundamental violation of the sanctity of the human body.

12. *As your feet come into the town*. This slightly odd phrase for arrival picks up the sound of the woman's feet that the blind prophet heard as she came into his house.

13. *a good thing is found before the* LORD. The virtue in the sick child that earns him a proper burial is left unspecified.

14. *this day and, indeed, even now*. The Hebrew words—each of them perfectly ordinary—sound a little peculiar, but the gist seems to be that the end of the house of Jeroboam is very imminent.

15. *beyond the River*. The Euphrates.

19. *the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Israel*. As with the Book of the Acts of Solomon, this appears to be some sort of royal annals that was probably drawn on as a source by the author of our narrative.

20. *And he lay with his fathers*. Since, according to the terms of the curse on the house of Jeroboam, he was not supposed to come to a proper burial, this must be taken as a general idiom for dying.

21. *And Rehoboam son of Solomon king of Judah*. From this point onward, the narrative will switch back and forth between the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah.

22. *And Judah did*. In contrast to Jeroboam, Rehoboam is not said to be directly responsible, so he may have been seen as merely permissive about pagan practice.

23. *on every high hill and under every lush tree*. This is a formulaic phrase, obviously reflecting the writer's view that the only legitimate place for the cult was in the Jerusalem temple. But the phrase also marks what is seen as a dangerous intertwining between worship and nature: "high places" or shrines on hilltops, rituals under sacred trees, in some instances may have been associated with a fertility cult. There is an easy segue from the lush trees of this verse to the male cult-harlots in the next verse.

25. *Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem*. Finally, the biblical text gives us a Pharaoh with a name. An inscription at one entrance of a sanctuary at Karnak in fact offers a list of towns in Judah and Israel that Shishak attacked in the course of a sweeping military campaign in 926 B.C.E. Jerusalem, however, does not appear in the list. The language of the biblical text here is a little vague: Shishak "came up against Jerusalem" and "took the treasures." This leaves open the possibility that he besieged the city without conquering it and that he extorted the treasures from Rehoboam in return for lifting the siege.

27. *the royal sentries*. The Hebrew *ratsim* means "runners," but men put in charge of palace treasures would scarcely be couriers, and it is immediately stated that they served as guards. Perhaps the Hebrew term was used because they also had some function of running before the king's chariots in royal processions.

29. *the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Judah*. See the comment on verse 19.

30. *And there was constant war between Rehoboam and Jeroboam*. This brief notice suggests how selective the narratives of the kings are. Nothing is reported of the course of war between the two kingdoms. For Jeroboam, we get only his backsliding into idolatry and the consequent prophecies of doom for his house. For the shorter narrative about Rehoboam, again we are told of the spread of pagan worship, and of the surrender of the treasures to Shishak —nothing more. The story of the kings, in keeping with the Deuteronomistic perspective, is more focused on cultic dereliction, always seen as the cause of historical disaster, than on political history.

31. *and was buried with his fathers*. Pointedly, this phrase is absent from the report of Jeroboam's death in verse 20.

And his mother's name was Naamah the Ammonite. This verbatim repetition of the identification of Rehoboam's mother from verse 21 may seem a bit odd, and could be the result of an editorial glitch, though perhaps the writer meant to underscore both at the beginning and the end of Rehoboam's story the link of this king with the world of idolatry.

CHAPTER 15

[1]And in the eighteenth year of King Jeroboam son of
Nebat, Abijam was king over Judah. [2]Three years he
was king in Jerusalem, and his mother's name was
Maachah daughter of Absalom. [3]And he went in all the
offenses of his father that he had done before him, and
his heart was not whole with the LORD his God like
the heart of David his forefather. [4]For the LORD his
God for David's sake had given him a lamp in
Jerusalem to raise up his son after him and to make
Jerusalem stand, [5]as David had done what was right in
the eyes of the LORD and had not swerved from all
that He charged him all the days of his life, except for
the matter of Uriah the Hittite. [6]And there was war
between Rehoboam and Jeroboam all the days of his
life. [7]And the rest of the acts of Abijam and all that he
did, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of the
Kings of Judah? And there was war between Abijam
and Jeroboam. [8]And Abijam lay with his fathers, and
they buried him in the City of David, and Asa his son
was king in his stead.

[9]And in the twentieth year of Jeroboam king of Israel,
Asa king of Judah became king. [10]And forty-one years
he was king in Jerusalem, and his mother's name was
Maachah daughter of Absalom. [11]And Asa did what
was right in the eyes of the LORD like David his
forefather. [12]And he rid the land of male cult-harlots
and removed the vile idols that his fathers had made.
[13]And Maachah his mother, too, he removed from
being queen mother, as she had made a horror for
Asherah. And Asa cut down her horror, and burned it
in the Kidron Wadi. [14]But the high places did not
disappear, only the heart of Asa was whole with the
LORD all his days. [15]And he brought his father's
consecrated things and his own consecrated things into
the house of the LORD—silver and gold and vessels.
[16]And there was war between Asa and Baasha king of
Israel all their days. [17]And Baasha king of Israel came
up against Judah and built Ramah so as not to allow
anyone to come or go who belonged to Asa king of
Judah. [18]And Asa took all the silver and the gold
remaining in the treasuries of the house of the LORD
and the king's treasuries and put them in the hand of
his servants, and King Asa sent them to King Ben-
Hadad son of Tabrimmon son of Hezion of Aram,
who dwelled in Damascus, saying, [19]"There is a pact
between you and me, between your father and my

father. Look, I have sent you a payment of silver and gold. Go, revoke your pact with Baasha king of Israel, that he withdraw from me.” [20]And Ben-Hadad heeded King Asa and sent the commanders of the troops that he had against the towns of Israel, and he struck down Ijon and Dan and all Abel-Beth-Maacah and all Kinroth, with all the land of Naphtali. [21]And it happened, when Baasha heard, that he left off building Ramah, and he stayed in Tirzah. [22]And King Asa had mustered all Judah, none was exempt. And they bore off the stones of Ramah and its timbers with which Baasha had built, and King Asa built with them Geba-Benjamin and Mizpah. [23]And the rest of all the acts of Asa and all his valor and all that he did and the towns that he built, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Judah? Only in his old age he was ailing in his feet. [24]And Asa lay with his fathers and was buried with his fathers in the City of David his forefather. And Jehoshaphat his son was king in his stead.

[25]And Nadab son of Jeroboam had become king over Israel in the second year of Asa king of Judah, and he was king over Israel two years. [26]And he did evil in the eyes of the LORD and went in the way of his father

and his offense that he had led Israel to offend. [27]And Baasha son of Ahijah of the house of Issachar plotted against him, and Baasha struck him down in Gibethon, which was the Philistines', when Nadab and all Israel were besieging Gibethon. [28]And Baasha put him to death in the third year of Asa king of Judah, and he became king in his stead. [29]And it happened when he became king that he struck down the whole house of Jeroboam, he did not leave Jeroboam any breathing creature, until he destroyed him, according to the words of the LORD which He had spoken through His servant Ahijah the Shilonite, [30]for the offenses of Jeroboam that he committed and that he led Israel to commit, through the vexation through which he vexed the LORD God of Israel. [31]And the rest of the acts of Nadab and all that he did, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Israel? [32]And there was constant war between Asa and Baasha king of Israel. [33]In the third year of Asa king of Judah, Baasha son of Ahijah became king over all Israel in Tirzah, for twenty-four years. [34]And he did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and he went in the way of Jeroboam and in his offense that he had led Israel to commit.

CHAPTER 15 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *his mother's name was Maachah daughter of Absalom*. There is a problem in this notice because Maachah is also said (verse 10) to be the mother of the next king, Asa, who is Abijam's son, and there is no warrant for the use of "mother" to mean "grandmother." (In 2 Chronicles 13:2 it is reported that Abijam's mother was Michaiah, daughter of Uriel from Gibeah. It is unlikely that the Absalom mentioned here is the same person as David's son who usurped the throne.)

5. *except for the matter of Uriah the Hittite*. The murder of Uriah is David's great crime, but even this notation reflects a rather selective reading of his checkered history.

6. *And there was war between Rehoboam and Jeroboam*. This would have to mean the house of Rehoboam because it is the reign of Abijam that is being discussed. The repetition of this whole sentence at the end of the next verse looks redundant and may reflect a scribal error.

12. *vile idols*. The vocabulary of the Deuteronomistic writers, for understandable ideological reasons, is rich in invective terms for idols, some of them perhaps original coinages. The Hebrew *gilulim* is formed on a root that suggests "dung."

13. *he removed from being queen mother*. From this we may infer that the role of queen mother, *gevirah*, had certain ceremonial or perhaps even legal functions attached to it. See the comment on 11:19.

horror. The Hebrew *mifletset* is clearly derived from a verbal root that means to suffer spasms of horror. Its use as an epithet for "idol" is similar to *gilulim* in verse 12.

And Asa cut down her horror. Some sort of sacred pole was employed in the cult of Asherah—hence the verb "cut down."

14. *But the high places did not disappear*. The reason would be either that Asa regarded them as acceptable sites for the worship of YHWH or that they were spread across the countryside and hence resistant to royal control.

19. *I have sent you a payment*. The noun *shoḥad* in most other contexts means "bribe." Either the writer put this word in Asa's mouth to convey his own judgment that the payment to turn Ben-Hadad against Baasha was a nasty business, or—perhaps more likely—the semantic range of *shoḥad* extended to mean any payment offered in order to persuade someone to serve one's purposes.

20. *he struck down Ijon and Dan . . . with all the land of Naphtali*. Ben-Hadad's attack is to the north, whereas Baasha's troops are concentrated in the south. This would have the effect of making them withdraw from their positions around Ramah. (See the next verse.)

23. *Only in his old age he was ailing in his feet*. This notice of foot disease (or perhaps paralysis in the feet) is by no means essential to the story and so appears to reflect an actual historical memory about the later years of King Asa, perhaps made poignant by the fact that he had previously been a valiant military commander.

25. *And Nadab son of Jeroboam had become king over Israel*. Both the form of the verb and the content of the statement mark this as a pluperfect: the narrative now backtracks in order to explain how it came about that Baasha supplanted Jeroboam's son Nadab as king of Israel.

29. *he struck down the whole house of Jeroboam*. This liquidation of all the males in the house of Jeroboam is both the fulfillment of the prophet Ahijah's curse and common ancient Near Eastern practice when someone usurps a royal house. One recalls Macbeth's impulse to kill Banquo and any of his offspring in order to eliminate anyone who might lay claim to the throne.

CHAPTER 16

[1]And the word of the LORD came to Jehu son of
Hanani about Baasha, saying: [2]“Inasmuch as I have
raised you from the dust and have made you prince
over My people Israel, yet you went in the way of
Jeroboam and led My people Israel to offend, to vex
Me with their offenses. [3]I am about to root out Baasha
and his house, and I will make your house like the
house of Jeroboam son of Nebat. [4]The dogs will eat
Baasha’s dead in the town, and his dead in the field the
fowl of the heavens will eat.” [5]And the rest of the acts
of Baasha and that which he did and his valor, are they
not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of
Israel? [6]And Baasha lay with his fathers, and he was
buried in Tirzah, and Elah his son was king in his
stead. [7]And indeed through the prophet Jehu son of
Hanani the word of the LORD had come against
Baasha and against his house, because of the evil he
had done in the eyes of the LORD to vex Him by the
work of his hands, to become like the house of
Jeroboam, and because he had struck him down.

[8]In the twenty-sixth year of Asa king of Judah, Elah
son of Baasha became king over Israel for two years.
[9]And his servant Zimri commander of half the
chariotry plotted against him when he was in Tirzah in
a drunken stupor at the house of Arzah, who was
appointed over the palace, in Tirzah. [10]And Zimri
came and struck him down and put him to death in the
twenty-seventh year of Asa king of Judah, and he
became king in his stead. [11]And it happened when he
became king, when he took his seat on the throne, that
he struck down the whole house of Baasha, he did not
leave him a pisser against the wall, nor a blood-
redeemer or companion. [12]And Zimri destroyed the
whole house of Baasha according to the word of the
LORD that He had spoken against Baasha through
Jehu the prophet, [13]for all the offenses of Baasha and
the offenses of Elah his son, which they committed
and which they led Israel to commit, to vex the LORD
God of Israel with their empty idols. [14]And the rest of
the acts of Elah and all that he did, are they not written
in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Israel?

[15]In the twenty-seventh year of Asa king of Judah,
Zimri became king in Tirzah for seven days, while the
troops encamped at Gibethon, which was the

Philistines'. [16]And the encamped troops heard, saying, "Zimri has hatched a plot and actually struck down the king." And all Israel made Omri, commander of the army, king over Israel on that day in the camp. [17]And Omri, and all Israel with him, came up from Gibethon and besieged Tirzah. [18]And it happened when Zimri saw that that town was taken, he came into the palace, the king's house, and he burned down the king's house upon himself and died [19]for the offenses that he had committed to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, to go in the way of Jeroboam and in his offense that he had done to lead Israel to commit. [20]And the rest of the acts of Zimri and the plot that he had hatched, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Israel? [21]Then was the people of Israel divided in two —half the people followed Tibni son of Ginath to make him king and the other half followed Omri. [22]And the people who followed Omri were stronger than the people who followed Tibni son of Ginath, and Tibni died, and Omri became king.

[23]In the thirty-first year of Asa king of Judah, Omri became king over Israel for twelve years. In Tirzah he was king six years. [24]And he bought the Mount of Samaria from Shemer for two talents of silver and

built up the mount and called the name of the town
that he had built up after the name of Shemer master
of Mount Samaria. [25]And Omri did evil in the eyes of
the LORD, and he was more evil than all who were
before him. [26]And he went in all the way of Jeroboam
son of Nebat and in his offenses that he had led Israel
to commit, to vex the LORD God of Israel with their
empty idols. [27]And the rest of the acts of Omri and his
valor which he did, are they not written in the Book of
the Acts of the Kings of Israel? [28]And Omri lay with
his fathers and was buried in Samaria, and Ahab his
son was king in his stead.

[29]And Ahab son of Omri became king over Israel in
the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, and Ahab
son of Omri was king over Israel in Samaria twenty-
two years. [30]And Ahab son of Omri did evil in the eyes
of the LORD more than all who were before him.
[31]And it happened, as though it were a light thing for
him to follow in the offenses of Jeroboam son of
Nebat, that he took as wife Jezebel, daughter of
Ithbaal king of the Sidonians, and he went and served
Baal and bowed down to him. [32]And he set up an altar
to Baal in the house of Baal that he had built in
Samaria. [33]And Ahab made a sacred pole, and Ahab

continued to act so as to vex the LORD God of Israel more than all the kings of Israel who were before him.
[34]In his days Hiel the Bethelite built up Jericho. At the cost of Abiram his firstborn he laid its foundation and at the cost of Segib his youngest he put up its gates, according to the word of the LORD that He spoke through Joshua son of Nun.

CHAPTER 16 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *about Baasha*. The Hebrew preposition could also mean "against" and even "to." In any case, God's address in the words of the prophecy is directed to Baasha, not to the prophet.

4. *The dogs will eat Baasha's dead in the town*. For the force of this curse, which will recur in connection with Ahab and Jezebel, it should be kept in mind that in ancient Israel dogs were semiferal scavengers, not pets, and thus an apt match for "the fowl of the heavens," which would be vultures and related aerial scavengers.

7. *and because he had struck him down*. This clause is a little cryptic. The initial "he" has to be Baasha, and so the person he struck down is Jeroboam. Since the destruction of the house of Jeroboam for the offense of idolatry was announced in a divinely authorized prophecy, one might have thought that there was no sin in Baasha's killing Jeroboam and all the males of his house. Perhaps the writer means to suggest that ruthless murder, even if it is the enactment of deserved retribution, remains ruthless murder, especially if the motives of the killer are far from noble, as appears to be the case with Baasha. In all these reports, the writer manifestly struggles with putting forth a theological explanation for political upheavals. The history of the kingdom of Judah, whatever its vulnerabilities and cultic derelictions, reflects relative

stability: Asa's reign lasts forty years, while a series of kings in the rival kingdom of Israel are assassinated, with one regnal span as little as two years and another only seven days. One might infer that this instability goes back to the fact that the northern kingdom was established by a usurper, Jeroboam, in contrast to the Davidic dynasty in the south with its claim of divine election and the heroic figure of David as its iconic founder. The writer, however, feels constrained to explain that each murdered monarch perished because of his idolatrous ways.

9. *commander of half the chariotry*. The inevitable inference is that the royal chariotry was divided into two units, but the "half" here anticipates the hostile division between factions that will occur.

when he was in . . . a drunken stupor. Zimri shrewdly waits for this moment when Elah will be an easy target for attack.

who was appointed over the palace. More literally, "over the house." Elah is attending a feast at the house of his court official.

11. *blood-redeemer*. "Blood" is merely implied. The "redeemer" is a relative who in the code of vendetta justice has the obligation to avenge a murdered kinsman. No avenger is left alive by Zimri.

13. *for all the offenses of Baasha and the offenses of Elah his son*. As noted above, a theological explanation is offered for what appears to be a self-interested act of assassination on the part of a person who wants to seize power.

16. *And all Israel*. Since Israel is now clearly split into two warring factions, this formulaic phrase must mean all the Israelites present in the military encampment at Gibethon.

made Omri, commander of the army, king. One sees the rapidity with which people rise to, or claim, the throne. What this amounts to in this case is a military coup: the troops, seeing that Zimri has assassinated Elah son of Baasha, who himself assassinated the second monarch of the northern kingdom, decide to proclaim their own commander king. Omri prevails over Zimri because he has a large part of the army behind him.

18. *the palace, the king's house*. This is the first time in a narrative book that the term *ʾarmon*, "palace," appears. The only other occurrence in a narrative

text is in Chronicles, although it is frequently used in poetry. The usual narrative designation for "palace" is "the king's house," which here appears as an apposition or perhaps even as a gloss on *ʾarmon*.

21. *half the people followed Tibni son of Ginath*. No information is provided about Tibni, so it is unclear whether he is a follower of the dead Zimri or simply an opportunist who seeks to seize the kingship in a moment of political chaos.

22. *And the people who followed Omri were stronger*. Again, it appears that Omri prevails because he can muster more troops.

24. *Shemer . . . Samaria*. In Hebrew, the connection between the two names is more transparent because the Hebrew for Samaria is *Shomron*.

29. *Ahab . . . was king over Israel in Samaria twenty-two years*. Despite being the most flagrantly idolatrous of all the kings of Israel, he enjoys a relatively long reign, though he will come to an ignominious end.

31. *Jezebel, daughter of Ithbaal king of the Sidonians*. Her name and lineage proclaim her roots in the world of idolatry. She is a Phoenician (Sidon being a principal Phoenician city); her father's name contains the pagan theophoric element "Baal"; her name means "Where is the prince." The Masoretic Text polemically revocalizes the name of the Phoenician god Zebul as *zebel*, "dung."

he went and served Baal and bowed down to him. Ahab, outdoing his royal predecessors in Judah and Israel, does not merely tolerate the idolatry of a foreign wife but becomes an active worshipper of Baal, even establishing a temple and altar dedicated to Baal (the next verse) in his capital city.

34. *Hiel the Bethelite*. He appears to be a royal official.

built up Jericho. Joshua, after the destruction of Jericho, had pronounced a curse (Joshua 6:26) on whoever might presume to rebuild Jericho. The violation of that solemn prohibition by one of Ahab's people is of a piece with Ahab's building a site of worship to a pagan god.

At the cost of Abiram his firstborn he laid its foundation. The probable meaning is that according to the terms of Joshua's curse, his firstborn died when he laid the town's foundations and his youngest when the gates were put

up, marking the completion of the building. But the ghost of the ancient Near Eastern practice of a foundation sacrifice, in which a ruler sacrificed his firstborn to ensure the well-being of the city, flickers through this grim verse.

CHAPTER 17

[1]And Elijah the Tishbite, of the inhabitants of Gilead,
said to Ahab, “As the LORD God of Israel lives,
Whom I have served, there shall be no rain or dew
except by my word.” [2]And the word of the LORD
came to him saying, [3]“Go from here and turn you
eastward and hide in the Wadi of Cherith, which goes
into the Jordan. [4]And it shall be, that from the wadi
you shall drink, and the ravens have I charged to
sustain you there.” [5]And he went and did according to
the word of the LORD, and he went and stayed in the
Wadi of Cherith, which goes into the Jordan. [6]And the
ravens would bring him bread and meat in the morning
and bread and meat in the evening, and from the wadi
he would drink. [7]And it happened after a time that the
wadi dried up, for there was no rain in the land. [8]And
the word of the LORD came to him, saying, [9]“Rise, go
to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and stay there.
Look, I have charged a widow-woman there to sustain
you.” [10]And he rose and went to Zarephath and came
to the entrance of the town, and, look, a widow-

woman was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, “Fetch me, pray, a bit of water in a vessel that I may drink.” [11]And she went to fetch and he called to her and said, “Fetch me, pray, a crust of bread in your hand.” [12]And she said, “As the LORD your God lives, I have no loaf but only a handful of flour in the jar and a bit of oil in the cruse and I am about to gather a couple of sticks, and I shall make it for me and for my son and we shall eat it and die.” [13]And Elijah said to her, “Fear not. Come, do as you have spoken, only first make me from there a little loaf and bring it out to me, and for you and for your son make afterward. [14]For thus the LORD God of Israel has said, ‘The jar of flour will not go empty nor will the cruse of oil be drained until the day the LORD sends rain over the land.’” [15]And she went and did according to Elijah’s word, and she ate, she and he and her household, many days. [16]The jar of flour did not go empty nor was the cruse of oil drained, according to the word of the LORD that He spoke through Elijah. [17]And it happened after these things that the son of the woman, mistress of the house, fell ill, and his illness was very grave, till no breath was left in him. [18]And she said to Elijah, “What is between you and me, O man of God? You have come to me to recall my crime and to put my son to death.” [19]And he said to her,

“Give me your son.” And he took him from her lap
and brought him up to the upper chamber where he
was staying and laid him in his bed. 20And he called
out to the LORD and said, “LORD my God, have You
actually done harm to the widow with whom I sojourn
to put her son to death?” 21And he stretched out over
the child three times and called out to the LORD and
said, “LORD my God, let the life-breath, pray, of the
child go back into him.” 22And the LORD heeded
Elijah’s voice, and the child’s life-breath went back
into him, and he revived. 23And Elijah took the child
and brought him down from the upper chamber and
gave him to his mother, and Elijah said, “See, your son
is alive.” 24And the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know
that you are a man of God, and the word of the LORD
in your mouth is truth.”

CHAPTER 17 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Elijah the Tishbite*. Elijah springs into the narrative, like several previous prophets, with no introduction or explanation. Part of the role he will play is like that of his predecessors; another part is quite new, as we shall see.

Whom I have served. Literally, before Whom I have stood.

there shall be no rain or dew except by my word. A persistent drought is the background of the stories that follow. It will be broken only at the climax

of Elijah's confrontation with the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel. He tells Ahab that he has the power to bring a drought through his own word—a posture that previous prophets have not assumed. The implication appears to be that the drought is a punishment for Ahab's idolatry, but Elijah does not spell that out in his brief and peremptory speech.

3. *Go from here and turn you eastward*. God's instruction to Elijah presupposes that the prophet is in mortal danger after his harsh words to the king and so must take refuge in a wilderness region along the Jordan.

which goes into the Jordan. The literal sense is "which is by" or "which faces." This wadi, unidentified by scholars, is obviously a tributary of the Jordan.

4. *the ravens have I charged to sustain you*. This is the first in a series of miraculous notes that mark the Elijah story.

7. *after a time*. This elastic indication of time might also mean "at the end of a year."

9. *Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon*. The second place of flight for Elijah is in Phoenician territory, a little north of the Israelite border. Thus the widow for whom Elijah miraculously intervenes is not Israelite. Her coming to recognize the God of Israel is an ironic contrast to Ahab, Israel's king. The closeness of Phoenician to Hebrew (if the writer thought of such things) would have made conversation between them possible.

I have charged a widow-woman. God has not actually spoken to the widow, as will become evident, but rather has designated her to play this role.

10. *gathering sticks*. Her intention is to make a fire over which she can bake, Bedouin-style, the bit of flour she carries with her.

Fetch me, pray, a bit of water in a vessel that I may drink. This request is reminiscent of the request of Abraham's servant to Rebekah in Genesis 24. In this case, however, water would have to be scarce because of the extended drought.

12. *we shall eat it and die*. This telescoped clause is a vivid expression of the woman's desperation. The little flour that she possesses is scarcely enough to

sustain two starving people; it will provide no more than a teasing taste, a mere scrap of flatbread baked over embers.

13. *only first make me from there a little loaf*. The order of feeding he stipulates is deliberately perverse: first the prophet then the woman and last her son, instead of the other way around when there is not enough flour even for two. It challenges the woman to place implicit faith in the prophet.

14. *the LORD God of Israel*. This set phrase has special force in being addressed to a Phoenician woman: it is Israel's uniquely powerful God, YHWH, who has the power to perform these wonders.

The jar of flour will not go empty nor will the cruse of oil be drained. This is the point at which Elijah's role as a miracle worker becomes explicit. Unlike the figure cut by Nathan or Ahijah, Elijah looks very much like the protagonist of a cycle of folktales, providing sustenance in time of famine through supernatural means and reviving the dead. It is obviously Elijah, not Moses or Isaiah, who establishes the template for many of the stories about Jesus in the Gospels. It was also this aspect of Elijah as a miraculous and compassionate intervener on behalf of the wretched of the earth that was picked up by later Jewish folklore. His other role, as implacable reprover, was not embraced by folk-tradition.

until the day the LORD sends rain over the land. The inexhaustible jar of flour and cruse of oil thus provide continuing drought insurance for the widow and her son.

17. *till no breath was left in him*. The somewhat ambiguous phrasing in which the breath, *neshamah*, has gone out of the boy leaves it unclear whether he has actually died or whether he is in a comatose state in which breathing is barely detectable. In verses 21 and 22, it is the "life-breath," *nefesh*, that is said to return to the child. *Neshamah* and *nefesh* are close synonyms, though the former may be more closely associated with breathing and the latter with life itself.

18. *What is between you and me*. This idiom, rendered literally, could mean either What quarrel is there between you and me?, or What should I have to do with you?

You have come to me to recall my crime. One need not assume that she has actually committed any heinous crime. Ancient Near Eastern people, both

Israelites and their neighbors, usually assumed that affliction came as retribution for wrongdoing. The woman thus feels that the very presence of a man of God has exposed to God's attention some transgression, however inadvertent or unconscious, for which she is now punished by the death of her only son.

19. *the upper chamber where he was staying*. In a piece of delayed exposition, we are now informed that Elijah has not only miraculously provided flour and oil for the widow but has taken refuge—still hiding from Ahab's wrath—in the upper chamber of her house.

21. *he stretched out over the child*. Some interpreters see here, as in the parallel story about Elisha, an act of resuscitation through artificial respiration, though the writer probably conceived it as a miraculous intervention, the prophet imparting the supernatural vitality of his own body to the boy. Elijah's prayer to God obviously supports the notion of a divine miracle.

24. *Now I know that you are a man of God, and the word of the* LORD *in your mouth is truth*. She had previously addressed him as "man of God," but in anger. Now the positive force of this identity has been confirmed by his act. The two aspects of Elijah's mission—wonder worker and prophesier-reprover—are interdependent, the former demonstrating to skeptics the authority of the latter. This pattern, which will be picked up in the stories about Jesus, does not appear in the reports about the prophets before Elijah. Sometimes one detects a belief that the prophet has the power to project a kind of spiritual force-field as when Samuel zaps the messengers Saul sends to him (1 Samuel 19), but Samuel does not go around the countryside performing acts of resurrection and miraculous provision of food.

CHAPTER 18

[1]And it happened after a long time, that the word of
the LORD came to Elijah in the third year, saying,
“Go and appear before Ahab, that I may send rain over
the land.” [2]And Elijah went to appear before Ahab,
and the famine was severe in Samaria. [3]And Elijah
called to Obadiah, who was appointed over the palace,
and Obadiah feared the LORD greatly. [4]And it had
happened, when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the
LORD, that Obadiah had taken a hundred prophets,
fifty men to a cave, and sustained them with bread and
water. [5]And Ahab said to Obadiah, “Go through the
land to all the water-springs and to all the wadis.
Perhaps we shall find grass and we can keep horse and
mule alive and will not lose all our beasts.” [6]And they
divided up the land for them to pass through—Ahab
went one way by himself and Obadiah went another
way by himself. [7]And it happened, when Obadiah was
on the way, that, look, Elijah was coming toward him,
and he recognized him and fell on his face and said,
“Are you my lord Elijah?” [8]And he said to him, “I am.

Go and say to your lord, ‘Elijah is here.’” [9]And he said, “How have I offended, that you should place your servant in Ahab’s hands to put me to death? [10]As the LORD lives, there is no nation or kingdom to which my lord has not sent to seek you out, and they said, ‘He is not here,’ and he made the kingdom or nation swear that you were not found. [11]And now you say to me, ‘Go, say to your lord, Elijah is here’? [12]And so, I shall go away from you, and the LORD’s spirit will bear you off to I know not where, and I shall come to tell Ahab and he won’t find you, and he will kill me. And your servant has feared the LORD from his youth. [13]Why, it has been told to my lord what I did when Jezebel killed the prophets of the LORD, that I hid a hundred men of the prophets of the LORD, fifty men to a cave, and I sustained them with bread and water. [14]And now you say to me, ‘Say to your lord, Elijah is here,’ and he will kill me!” [15]And Elijah said, “As the LORD of Armies lives, Whom I have served, today I will appear before him.” [16]And Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah. [17]And it happened, when Ahab saw Elijah, that he said to him, “Is it you, troubler of Israel?” [18]And he said, “I have not troubled Israel but rather you and your father’s house in your forsaking the LORD’s commands and going after the Baalim. [19]And now,

send out, gather for me all Israel at Mount Carmel, and the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table." [20]And Ahab sent out among all the Israelites and gathered the prophets at Mount Carmel. [21]And Elijah approached all the people and said, "How long will you keep hopping between the two crevices? If it's the LORD God, go follow Him, and if it's Baal, go follow him." And the people answered him not a word. [22]And Elijah said to the people, "I alone remain a prophet of the LORD, and the prophets of Baal are four hundred fifty men. [23]Let them give us two bulls, and let them choose for themselves one bull and cut it up and put it on the wood, but let them set no fire, and I on my part will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood, but I will set no fire. [24]And you shall call in the name of your god, and I on my part will call in the name of the LORD, and it shall be that the god who answers with fire, he is God." And all the people answered and said, "The thing is good." [25]And Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of the bulls for yourselves and go first, for you are the many, and call in the name of your god, but set no fire." [26]And they took the bull that he had given them, and they prepared it and called in the name of Baal from morning to noon, saying, "O Baal, answer us!" But,

there was no voice and none answering, and they hopped about on the altar that he had made. [27]And it happened at noon that Elijah mocked them and said, “Call out in a loud voice, for he is a god. Perhaps he is chatting or occupied or off on a journey. Perhaps he is sleeping and will awake.” [28]And they called out in a loud voice and gouged themselves with swords and spears as was their wont till blood spilled upon them. [29]And it happened, as the morning passed, that they prophesied until the hour of the afternoon offering, but there was no voice and none answering and none hearing. [30]And Elijah said to all the people, “Draw near me.” And all the people drew near him, and he mended the wrecked altar of the LORD. [31]And Elijah took twelve stones, like the number of the tribes of Jacob’s sons, to whom the word of the LORD came saying, “Israel shall be your name.” [32]And he built with the stones an altar in the name of the LORD and made a trench wide enough for two *seahs* of seed around the altar. [33]And he laid out the wood and cut up the bull and put it on the wood. [34]And he said, “Fill four jugs with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood,” and he said, “Do it a second time,” and they did it a second time, and he said, “Do it a third time,” and they did it a third time. [35]And the water went round the altar, and the trench, too, was filled with

water. [36]And it happened at the hour of the afternoon
offering that Elijah the prophet approached and said,
“LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, this day
let it be known that You are God in Israel and I am
Your servant, and by Your word have I done all these
things. [37]Answer me, LORD, answer me, that this
people may know that You are the LORD God, and
that it is You Who turned their heart backward.” [38]And
the LORD’s fire came down and consumed the
offering and the wood and the dirt, and the water that
was in the trench it licked up. [39]And all the people saw
and fell on their faces and said, “The LORD, He is
God; the LORD, He is God.” [40]And Elijah said to
them, “Seize the prophets of Baal. Let no man of them
escape.” And they seized them and Elijah took them
down to the Wadi of Kishon and slaughtered them
there. [41]And Elijah said to Ahab, “Go up, eat and
drink, for it is the rumbling sound of rain.” [42]And
Ahab went up to eat and to drink, while Elijah had
gone up to the top of Carmel and stooped to the
ground and put his head between his knees. [43]And he
said to his lad, “Go up, pray, look out to the sea.” And
he went up and looked out and said, “There is
nothing.” And he said “Go back” seven times. [44]And it
happened on the seventh time that he said, “Look, a
little cloud like a man’s palm is coming up from the

sea.” And he said, “Go up, say to Ahab, ‘Harness and come down, and let not the rain hold you back.’” [45]And it happened, meanwhile, that the heavens grew dark with clouds, and there was wind, and there was heavy rain. And Ahab rode off and went to Jezreel. [46]And the hand of the LORD had come upon Elijah, and he girded his loins and ran before Ahab till you come to Jezreel.

CHAPTER 18 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *in the third year*. This is clearly the third year of the drought. Some interpreters think the story is evenly divided in thirds—a year at the Wadi of Cherith, a year in the house of the widow at Zarephath, and a year in which Elijah moves across the country, finally confronting Ahab—but there is no explicit indication of such a division.

3. *Obadiah, who was appointed over the palace, and Obadiah feared the* LORD *greatly*. Obadiah’s name means “servant of God,” a role he affirms in the risky business of hiding and sustaining the hundred prophets of the LORD. At the same time, he is a high official in Ahab’s court.

4. *a hundred prophets*. This large number suggests they are not prophets directly assigned a specific mission by God, like Elijah, but rather members of a kind of guild of prophets, probably figuring as ecstatics, like the prophets in the Saul story, though with the assumption that the ecstasy is inspired by YHWH. Ahab’s swerving from God, then, is seen to have taken a new deadly turn—not only does he foster the worship of Baal but also he takes violent steps to extirpate devotion to YHWH.

6. *And they divided up the land for them to pass through*. The cause of their separation is the pressing severity of the drought, but it is also important that they be separated—Obadiah would normally have remained in the palace—so that Elijah can speak to him in Ahab's absence.

7–8. *my lord Elijah . . . say to your lord*. There is an ironic interplay between this designation of two different men—Elijah, recognized by Obadiah as his lord through the force of his spiritual authority, and Ahab, who is Obadiah's lord in the political hierarchy as his king.

9. *How have I offended*. The exchange between Obadiah and Elijah is one of the most spectacular deployments of the biblical technique of contrastive dialogue, in which the two speakers are sharply differentiated by antithesis in tone and attitude and, often, by an opposition between brevity and prolixity (see, for example, Joseph and Potiphar's wife in Genesis 39). Elijah expresses a concise imperative, "Go and say to your lord, 'Elijah is here,'" and then the steely resolution at the end of the dialogue, "As the LORD of Armies lives, Whom I have served, today I will appear before him." Obadiah, on the other hand, terrified by the prospect of conveying this message to Ahab, spouts a stream of highly nervous volubility, anxiously repeating twice what he regards as Elijah's impossible order to him and at the same time defending his own record as a God-fearing man. The effect is almost comical: he is a good man and has incurred danger in his loyalty to the LORD, but he is also an ordinary man, susceptible to fear. The contrast to the iron-willed Elijah is striking. At the same time, Obadiah's terror vividly reflects Ahab's ruthlessness as a paganizing monarch.

12. *the LORD's spirit will bear you off to I know not where*. For nearly three years, Elijah has proven to be a successfully elusive fugitive from Ahab's wrath, and so Obadiah feels it is safe to assume that the prophet will continue on this path.

19. *And now, send out, gather . . . all Israel at Mount Carmel*. Ahab may be willing to accept this challenge instead of having Elijah killed on the spot because it presents itself as the opportunity for a grand public triumph. Nine hundred pagan prophets will surely overwhelm one prophet of the LORD in any contest, and even the place of confrontation is favorable to the pagan cause, Mount Carmel near the northern coast and close to the border of

Lebanon being in proximity to the Phoenician sphere and a place where an altar of YHWH lies in ruins, presumably replaced by Baal worship. The king's calculation is probably first to humiliate Elijah before the assembled people and then to kill him.

21. *How long will you keep hopping between the two crevices*? This is obviously an idiom that means trying to have it both ways. The Hebrew noun has three different meanings: *seʿif* can be a "thought" (hence "opinions" in the King James Version), a "branch," or a "crevice." This translation assumes that the idiom invokes a concrete image, and opts for "crevices" because of the physical evocation of a person awkwardly jumping between two cracks in a rock.

22. *I alone remain a prophet of the* LORD. The 100 prophets hidden in caves, who have no mission and are not standing on Mount Carmel confronting the 450 prophets of Baal, would not count.

four hundred fifty men. The 450 prophets of the goddess Asherah appear to be out of the picture.

25. *Choose one of the bulls for yourselves*. He creates the impression of giving them the advantage of, one might say, serving first.

26. *the bull that he had given them*. That is, he offered two bulls and allowed them to choose.

they hopped about on the altar. The verb here satirically picks up the "hopping between the two crevices" in verse 21.

27. *Perhaps he is chatting*. Though both the Prophets and Psalms denounce idols as having ears and mouth but without the capacity for hearing or speech, Elijah turns this notion into biting sarcasm in dialogue.

28. *gouged themselves*. This is an attested pagan cultic practice, prohibited in the Torah, and is either a gesture of self-immolation or an act of sympathetic magic (blood spurting to stimulate fire springing out from the wood).

29. *prophesied*. The reflexive conjugation of the verb associated with prophecy that is used here means to fling oneself into a state of ecstasy or frenzy.

none hearing. Literally, "no hearing."

34. *Fill four jugs with water*. Pouring water over the wood and the sacrificial animal magnifies the miraculous nature of the appearance of fire that is about to occur. Elijah, together with his gift of rhetoric and satire, is a grand stage manager at this event.

36. *at the hour of the afternoon offering*. This would be late afternoon.
approached. This is the same verb as "draw near" in verse 30 but here has the technical sense of approaching a sacred zone.

37. *it is You Who turned their heart backward*. The clause is ambiguous. It could mean, given the narrative context: it is You Who made them again realize that YHWH alone is God. But "backward," *aḥoranit*, often has a negative connotation, so the clause could mean: it was You Who allowed them to fall back into idolatry, for God causes all things.

39. *The LORD, He is God*. This awestruck proclamation of faith has, appropriately, been introduced into the Yom Kippur liturgy at the very end of the concluding service.

40. *Elijah . . . slaughtered them there*. The verb used is singular, so the slaughterer is Elijah. There are other verbs for killing—this particular verb is generally used for animals. Elijah is as ruthless in his zealotry for YHWH as Ahab in his pagan despotism.

41. *Go up, eat and drink*. Feasting is in order because the drought is about to come to an end.

42. *stooped*. Usually the verb *gahar* means to stretch out, but he could scarcely be stretched out if his head is between his knees.

44. *Harness and come down*. Ahab has "gone up" to eat and drink, perhaps somewhere on the slopes of Mount Carmel. Now he will descend by chariot into the Valley of Jezreel.

46. *he girded his loins and ran before Ahab till you come to Jezreel*. Some interpret Elijah's running ahead of Ahab's chariot as a gesture of alliance with

the king. More probably, he is again demonstrating a power superior to the king's: filled with the divine afflatus, he sprints ahead of the king's chariot all the way to Jezreel, outstripping the galloping horses.

CHAPTER 19

[1]And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done and
all about how he killed all the prophets by the sword.
[2]And Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah saying, “So
may the gods do to me, and even more, if by this time
tomorrow I do not make your life like the life of one
of them.” [3]And he was afraid, and he arose and went
off to save himself, and he came to Beersheba, which
is Judah’s, and he left his lad there. [4]And he had gone a
day’s journey into the wilderness, and he came and sat
under a certain broom-tree, and he wanted to die, and
he said, “Enough now, LORD. Take my life, for I am
no better than my fathers.” [5]And he lay down and slept
under a certain broom-tree, and look, a divine
messenger was touching him, and he said to him,
“Arise, eat.” [6]And he looked, and there at his head was
a loaf baked on hot coals and a cruse of water. And he
ate and he drank and he lay down once more. [7]And the
LORD’s messenger came back again and touched him
and said, “Arise, eat, for your way is long.” [8]And he
rose and ate and drank and walked in the strength of

that eating forty days and forty nights as far as the mountain of God, Horeb. [9]And he came into a cave and spent the night there, and, look, the word of the LORD came to him and said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” [10]And he said, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God of Armies, for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant—Your altars they have destroyed, Your prophets they have killed by the sword, and I alone remain, and they have sought to take my life.” [11]And He said, “Go and stand on the mountain before the LORD, and, look, the LORD is about to pass over, with a great and strong wind tearing apart mountains and smashing rocks before the LORD. Not in the wind is the LORD. And after the wind an earthquake. Not in the earthquake is the LORD. [12]And after the earthquake—fire. Not in the fire is the LORD. And after the fire, a sound of minute stillness.” [13]And it happened, when Elijah heard, that he covered his face with his mantle and he went out and stood at the entrance to the cave, and, look, a voice came to him and said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” [14]And he said, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God of Armies, for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant—Your altars they have destroyed, and your prophets they have killed by the sword, and I alone remain, and they have sought to

take my life.” [15]And the LORD said to him, “Go,
return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and
you shall come and anoint Hazael king over Aram.
[16]And Jehu son of Nimshi you shall anoint king over
Israel, and Elisha son of Shephat from Abel Meholah
you shall anoint prophet in your stead. [17]And it shall
be, that who escapes the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall
put to death, and who escapes the word of Jehu, Elisha
shall put to death. [18]And I shall leave in Israel seven
thousand, every knee that did not bow to Baal and
every mouth that did not kiss him.” [19]And he went
from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat while he
was plowing with twelve yokes of oxen before him,
and he was with the twelfth. And Elijah crossed over
to him and flung his mantle upon him. [20]And he
abandoned the cattle and ran after Elijah. And he said,
“Let me, pray, kiss my father and my mother and I
will come after you.” And he said to him, “Go, return,
for what have I done to you?” [21]And he turned back
from him and took the yoke of oxen and slaughtered
them, and with the wood from the gear of the oxen he
cooked the meat and gave it to the people, and they
ate. And he arose and went after Elijah and ministered
to him.

CHAPTER 19 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *all*. This word is repeated three times in the report of Ahab's speech to Jezebel, probably to suggest his emphasis in speaking to her of the enormity perpetrated by Elijah—all the things he did.

all the prophets. In this instance, the repeated phrase "the prophets of Baal" is not used. Moshe Garsiel has aptly observed that this usage reflects the viewpoint of Ahab and Jezebel, who see the prophets of Baal as prophets *tout court*, with no need of a qualifier.

3. *And he was afraid*. The received text reads "And he saw" (a difference of a single vowel in the Hebrew), but several Hebrew manuscripts and most of the ancient translations have "And he was afraid." One suspects that the Masoretic editors balked at the notion that the iron-willed Elijah could have shown fear. In fact, this turn in the narrative is by no means implausible: Elijah has spent two years or more hiding out from Ahab's wrath. He then decides to confront him in the conviction that a show of divine force on Mount Carmel will disabuse the king of his idolatrous illusions and make him bend to Elijah's spiritual authority. But Elijah has not reckoned with Jezebel's implacability, and now, finding that she seeks his life despite the spectacular public triumph on Mount Carmel, he is afraid and flees.

4. *Enough now, LORD. Take my life*. The fear for his life inspired by Jezebel is, here, followed by despair. If, after his tremendous performance publicly demonstrating that YHWH is God, the royal couple still seek to kill him and remain unrepentant in the idolatrous ways they have fostered in Israel, his prophetic mission has been a failure, and there is no point in his going on.

6. *a loaf baked on hot coals*. This is the immemorial Bedouin method of making flatbread (modern-day *pittah*).

7. *your way is long*. As the next verse explains, his journey on foot will take forty days, recalling Moses's forty days on the mountain.

9. *What are you doing here, Elijah*? This might be a challenge to Elijah for abandoning his people to flee to the wilderness, or it might mean, in view of the attention to the details of epiphany that will follow: what are you doing following in Moses's footsteps to Mount Horeb?

10. *and I alone remain*. As before, the hundred prophets hidden by Obadiah are not taken into account because they are not on a prophetic mission.

11. *Go and stand on the mountain before the* LORD. Elijah is commanded to assume the stature of Moses, but the epiphany he is vouchsafed vigorously revises the details of Moses's epiphany: God will reveal himself not in storm or fire or the shaking of the mountain but in a small, barely audible sound. On Mount Carmel, God spoke through fire; here at Horeb, he speaks in a more subtle language, for the deity is by no means limited to seismic manifestations.

13. *What are you doing here, Elijah*? These words, and Elijah's response, replicate the exchange between "the word of the LORD" and the prophet in verse 9. Either the repetition is intended to frame Elijah's encounter with God symmetrically, before and after the epiphany in a virtually still voice, or it reflects a duplication in scribal transmission.

15. *you shall come and anoint Hazael king over Aram*. Perhaps this act is meant to manifest God's sovereignty over all nations, but it seems strange, and historically altogether unlikely, that a Hebrew prophet could have taken upon himself to anoint an Aramean king.

16. *you shall anoint prophet in your stead*. The term "in your stead" is the same one used for royal succession. Elisha, then, is designated not merely as ministrant to Elijah but as his successor, so there is an intimation that Elijah's days are now numbered.

17. *who escapes the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall put to death*. The prophetic campaign against Ahab and Jezebel is now to take a new path. Since they have demonstrated that no proof of God's power will deflect them from the promotion of idolatry, they must be destroyed—first by a foreign enemy, then by an Israelite who will depose Ahab, and in the last instance by Elisha, who will follow Elijah's prophetic precedent in slaughtering Baal worshippers.

19. *twelve yokes of oxen*. This would make him a rather prosperous farmer, even though the number twelve is obviously symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel.

flung his mantle upon him. This act, which would produce an English idiom, is a clear indication that Elijah is passing on the authority of the prophet's role to Elisha. In the Samuel story, the prophet's vocation is similarly associated with a distinctive garment.

20. *Let me, pray, kiss my father and my mother*. This gesture of filial affection is a contrast to the idolatrous kissing of Baal icons mentioned in verse 18.

Go, return, for what have I done to you? It seems more plausible not to construe these words as a rebuke for hesitancy on the part of Elisha but as an assent: Why shouldn't you go back to take fond leave of your parents? I have made no unreasonable demands of you.

21. *the gear of the oxen*. That is, the plow. Elisha's turning the wooden plow into firewood is a sign that he is definitively putting behind him his life as a farmer to assume the role of prophet.

he cooked the meat and gave it to the people. The slaughtering of the two oxen, then, is not a sacrificial act, or at any rate not primarily a sacrificial act, but rather Elisha's means of providing a kind of farewell feast for his parents and kinsmen.

CHAPTER 20

[1]And Ben-Hadad king of Aram gathered all his
forces, and thirty-two kings were with him, and horses
and chariots, and he came up and besieged Samaria
and battled against it. [2]And he sent messengers to
Ahab king of Israel in the town and said to him,
[3]"Thus says Ben-Hadad: 'Your silver and your gold are
mine and your wives and your goodly sons are mine.'"
[4]And the king of Israel answered and said, "As you
have spoken, my lord the king. Yours am I and all I
have." [5]And the messengers came back and said,
"Thus says Ben-Hadad, saying: 'As I sent to you,
saying, "Your silver and your gold and your wives and
your sons are mine," give them over. [6]For at this time
tomorrow I will send my servants to you and they will
search your house and your servants' houses, and it
shall be that whatever is precious in their eyes they will
put in their hand and take.'" [7]And the king of Israel
called in all the elders of Israel and said, "Mark, pray,
and see that he intends this harm, for he has sent to me
for my wives and for my sons and for my silver and for

my gold, and I did not withhold them from him.” [8]And the elders and all the people said to him, “Do not listen, nor should you agree.” [9]And he said to the messengers of Ben-Hadad, “Everything concerning which you sent at first to your servant I will do, but this thing I cannot do.” And the messengers went off, and brought him the response. [10]And Ben-Hadad sent to him and said, “So may the gods do to me and even more, if the ground of Samaria will be enough for the footsteps of all the troops that are at my heels.” [11]And the king of Israel answered and said, “Let not the buckler of armor boast like the unfastener.”

[12]And it happened when he heard this thing he was drinking, he and the kings, at Succoth—that he said to his servants, “Set forth,” and they set forth against the town. [13]And, look, a certain prophet approached Ahab king of Israel and said, “Thus says the LORD: ‘Have you seen all this great throng? I am about to give it into your hand today, and you shall know that I am the LORD.’” [14]And Ahab said, “Through whom?” And he said, “Thus says the LORD, ‘Through the aides of the provincial commanders.’ “And he said, “Who will join battle?” And he said, “You.” [15]And he mustered the aides of the provincial commanders, and they came to

two hundred and thirty. And after them he mustered all the troops, all the Israelites, seven thousand. [16]And they sallied forth at noon while Ben-Hadad was in a drunken stupor at Succoth, he and the thirty-two kings aiding him. [17]And the aides of the provincial commanders sallied forth first. And they sent to Ben-Hadad and told him, saying, “Men have sallied forth from Samaria.” [18]And he said, “If in peace they have come forth, seize them alive, and if for war they have come forth, alive seize them.” [19]And these had sallied forth from the town, the aides of the provincial commanders and the forces that were behind them. [20]And each man struck down his man, and the Arameans fled and Israel pursued them, and Ben-Hadad escaped on a horse with horsemen. [21]And the king of Israel sallied forth and struck down the horses and the chariots, and struck a great blow against Aram. [22]And the prophet approached the king of Israel and said, “Go, summon strength, and mark and see what you should do, for at the turn of the year the king of Aram will be coming up against you.” [23]And the servants of the king of Aram said to him, “Their god is a mountain god. Therefore they prevailed over us. But when we do battle with them on the plain, we will surely prevail over them. [24]And this thing do: remove the kings each from his place and set governors in

their stead. [25]And as for you, assemble a force like
your force that fell, and horses like the horses and
chariots like the chariots, that we may do battle against
them on the plain. We will surely prevail over them."
And he heeded their voice and thus he did. [26]And it
happened at the turn of the year, that Ben-Hadad
mustered Aram and went up to Aphek for battle with
Israel. [27]And the Israelites had been mustered and had
been provisioned. And they went to meet them, and
the Israelites encamped opposite them like two little
flocks of goats, but the Arameans filled the land. [28]And
the man of God approached and said to the king of
Israel, "Thus says the LORD: 'Inasmuch as the
Arameans have said, The LORD is a mountain god
and not a valley god, I will give all this great throng
into your hand and you shall know that I am the
LORD.'" [29]And they encamped each opposite the other
seven days. And it happened on the seventh day that
the battle was joined, and the Israelites struck down a
hundred thousand Aramean foot soldiers in a single
day. [30]And the remaining ones fled to Aphek to the
town, and the wall fell on twenty-seven thousand men
of those remaining, and Ben-Hadad fled and came into
the town, to an inner chamber. [31]And his servants said
to him, "Look, pray, we have heard that the kings of
Israel are merciful kings. Let us, pray, put sackcloth on

our loins and ropes on our heads and go out to the king of Israel. Perhaps he will let us live.” [32]And they bound sackcloth on their loins and ropes on their heads and came to the king of Israel and said, “Your servant Ben-Hadad has said, ‘Let me, pray, live.’” And he said, “Is he still alive? He is my brother.” [33]And the men divined and quickly and firmly said, “Ben-Hadad is your brother!” And he said, “Come, fetch him.” And Ben-Hadad came out to him, and he put him up on a chariot. [34]And he said, “The towns that my father took from your father I will give back, and you may place markets for yourself in Damascus as my father placed in Samaria, and as for me, I will send you off with a pact,” and he sealed a pact with him and sent him off. [35]And a certain man among the followers of the prophets had said to his companion by the word of the LORD, “Strike me, pray,” but the man had refused to strike him. [36]And he said to him, “Inasmuch as you did not heed the voice of the LORD, you are now about to go away from me, and a lion will strike you.” And he went away from him and a lion encountered him and struck him down. [37]And he encountered another man and said, “Strike me, pray,” and he struck him, hitting and wounding him. [38]And the prophet went and stood before the king on the road and disguised himself with a scarf over his eyes. [39]And as the king was passing by,

he cried out to the king and said, “Your servant sallied forth in the midst of the battle, and, look, a man turned aside and brought me a man and said, ‘Guard this man. If he should indeed be missing, it is your life instead of his, or you will weigh out a talent of silver.’ [40]And it happened, as your servant was doing one thing and another that, look, he was not there.” And the king of Israel said to him, “So be your judgment. You yourself have decreed it.” [41]And he hastened to remove the scarf from over his eyes, and the king recognized him, that he was of the prophets. [42]And he said to him, “Thus says the LORD. ‘Inasmuch as you set free from My hand the man I condemned, it will be your life instead of his and your people instead of his people.’” [43]And the king of Israel went off to his house sullen and morose and came to Samaria.

CHAPTER 20 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *thirty-two kings were with him*. This large number suggests that these “kings” may have been no more than local warlords.

4. *the king of Israel*. From this point on in the story, he will be referred to only by this title and not as “Ahab.” It may be that the writer made this choice because in this entire episode of the conflict with Aram, Ahab plays a very different role from the one in which he has been seen up to now as Elijah’s

adversary. It is also possible that this entire episode, editorially set in the Ahab story, was originally about a different king.

As you have spoken, my lord the king. Ahab's absolute submission to Ben-Hadad's imperious demands is surprising. After all, the Aramaen king has asked him to hand over not only his treasure but his sons (presumably to be slaves) and his wives, including Jezebel (presumably to become Ben-Hadad's consorts). Perhaps he feels that the overwhelming numerical superiority of the Aramean forces leaves him no alternative.

6. *whatever is precious in their eyes*. The received text reads "your eyes." The translation here reflects the reading of the Septuagint. The added demand of Ben-Hadad that becomes a deal breaker is that the prized possessions of the king's servants—that is, his courtiers—are also to be expropriated. Ahab had been willing to sacrifice what was his own, but now everyone around him is asked to submit to the same exorbitant demands of the Aramean king.

9. *but this thing I cannot do*. Ahab will not agree to the confiscation of his courtiers' possessions. Surrendering what is his own would reduce him to a vassal king; surrendering the treasures of those around him might make him the object of a palace coup.

10. *if the ground of Samaria will be enough for the footsteps of all the troops that are at my heels*. English translations since the seventeenth century have rendered this as "if the dust of Samaria will suffice for handfuls." But the Hebrew word that means "handfuls" is *shoʿalim*, whereas the word here is *sheʿalim*, "footsteps." This actually yields a more coherent image: the troops commanded by Ben-Hadad are so numerous that there will scarcely be enough space on the soil of Samaria for all of them to stand. The use of "at my heels" (literally, "at my feet") reinforces this focus on feet.

11. *Let not the buckler of armor boast like the unfastener*. The Hebrew has a terrific compactness that, alas, is impossible in English: just four weighted words, *ʾal-yithalel ḥoger kemefateaḥ*. A very different side of Ahab is manifested here. In the face of Ben-Hadad's intimidating threat, he responds coolly with a pithy proverb: do not arrogantly presume before the battle is joined to know who will be the victor when the fighting is done.

12. *he was drinking, he and the kings*. The fact that Ben-Hadad is drinking with his allies just before the battle is a vivid expression of his overconfidence. In verse 16, we learn that he is in fact dead drunk when the Israelite forces attack.

17. *And they sent to Ben-Hadad*. The implied referent of "they" is presumably Aramean scouts.

18. *If in peace they have come forth*. This is the same verb, "to go out," which is rendered above as "sally forth," its technical sense in military contexts. But since Ben-Hadad is unsure whether they are coming out to surrender or to fight, the unambiguous "sally forth" would not make sense here. In either case, he unquestionably assumes he can take them as prisoners.

22. *for at the turn of the year the king of Aram will be coming up against you*. The same phrase is used in 2 Samuel 11:1 for the time of year when kings go forth to do battle. This would be the spring—the spring month Nissan is the first month in the biblical calendar—when the winter rains are over.

23. *Their god is a mountain god*. Their remark reflects the pagan view that different gods have jurisdiction over different realms of nature. But they are also making a strategic calculation: the Aramean chariots and cavalry will give them an advantage in fighting on the plain that they would lose on mountainous terrain.

24. *remove the kings . . . and set governors in their stead*. The governors might be military officials more directly answerable to Ben-Hadad as their commander than the kings.

26. *Aphek*. Located near the Jordan, this would be on more level land than Mount Samaria and in keeping with the courtiers' counsel.

27. *like two little flocks of goats*. The unusual Hebrew locution is a little uncertain in meaning (at least the "little flocks" component), though it clearly expresses the small size of the Israelite forces in relation to Aram, a theme throughout this story.

30. *Ben-Hadad fled and came into the town, to an inner chamber*. The boastful Ben-Hadad tries to hide in an inner chamber within a town that has already fallen to the Israelites.

32. *Is he still alive? He is my brother*. This expression of concern and solidarity is surely odd after Ben-Hadad has demanded Ahab to hand over all his treasure and his wives and children, and then promised to destroy him. Ahab appears to act out of political calculation—which will prove misguided. He may think that the Arameans are too numerous for him to hold them under long-term subjugation by occupying Aram, and that therefore he is better off showing generosity to Ben-Hadad while obliging him to relinquish the towns his father had taken from Israel.

34. *you may place markets for yourself in Damascus*. These would be something like trade missions. The implication is that in such a peace agreement the superior power is allowed to conduct trade on favorable terms in the territory of the other kingdom.

35. *Strike me, pray*. This bizarre exchange between two members of a guild of prophets, *beney hanevi'im*, proposes a rather loose analogy for Ahab vis-à-vis Ben-Hadad. If the word of the LORD prompts you to strike someone, even if you are disinclined, you must do it or face dire consequences.

36. *a lion will strike you*. Although "strike" is not a verb one would expect to be attached to a lion, it is used here to convey the idea of a quid pro quo: he who failed to strike will be struck down. Though the Hebrew verb does have the primary sense of delivering a blow, it has an extended meaning of "to kill."

37. *he struck him, hitting and wounding him*. The second person obeys the word of the LORD, but it may go against his better instincts.

38. *a scarf*. The Hebrew noun occurs only here, but it is clearly some sort of head cloth or scarf (perhaps the sort that Bedouins use in a sandstorm) that can be pulled down over the eyes.

39. *brought me a man*. The context would indicate that this is an enemy captive, which brings the parable close to the situation of Ahab and Ben-

Hadad.

or you will weigh out a talent of silver. This is an enormous amount, far more than the value of a captive slave. The silver is "weighed out" because this is an era before coinage, when payment is made in weights of silver and gold.

40. *So be your judgment. You yourself have decreed it*. The story of the captured enemy whom the man allows to escape functions quite like Nathan's parable of the poor man's ewe in 2 Samuel 12: the king, having condemned the reported act, does not realize until the prophet tells him that the tale is about his own malfeasance.

41. *the king recognized him*. Ahab evidently has had some personal acquaintance with the members of this group of prophets. It is even possible that they are the hundred prophets whom Obadiah hid in the caves.

42. *you set free from My hand the man I condemned*. The Masoretic Text reads "from a hand," but two ancient versions and a Hebrew manuscript have "My hand," which is more plausible. It is God Who has granted the victory to Ahab, and so the defeated king is in God's hand. It must be said that there has been no direct indication in the story until now that God has condemned Ben-Hadad to death or told Ahab he must kill him, though the prophet assumes that Ahab should have known this. Behind the theological reasoning lies a political calculation: allowing Ben-Hadad to go free will lead to a new attack on Israel.

CHAPTER 21

[1]And it happened after these things, that Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard that was in Jezreel near the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. [2]And Ahab spoke to Naboth, saying, “Give me your vineyard that I may have it as a garden of greens, for it is close to my house, and let me give you in its stead a better vineyard, or should it be good in your eyes, let me give you silver as its price.” [3]And Naboth said to Ahab, “The LORD forbid that I should give away the estate of my fathers.” [4]And Ahab came to his house sullen and morose over this thing that Naboth the Jezreelite had spoken to him and said, “I will not give away the estate of my fathers.” And he lay down on his couch and turned away his face and ate no food. [5]And Jezebel his wife came to him and said, “What is this? You are sullen in spirit and eat no food.” [6]And he spoke to her, “When I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him, ‘Give me your vineyard for silver, or if you wish, I shall give you a vineyard in its stead,’ he said, ‘I will not give you my vineyard.’” [7]And Jezebel his wife said

to him, “You, now, must act like a king over Israel! Rise, eat food, and be of good cheer. I myself will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.” [8]And she wrote letters in Ahab’s name and sealed them with his seal and sent the letters to the elders and the notables who were in his town, who dwelled with Naboth. [9]And she wrote in the letters, saying, “Proclaim a fast and seat Naboth at the head of the people. [10]And seat two worthless fellows opposite him, that they may bear witness against him, saying, ‘You have cursed God and king.’ And take him out and stone him to death.” [11]And the men of his town, the elders and the notables, who dwelled in his town, did as Jezebel had sent to them as was written in the letters that she had sent them, [12]“Proclaim a fast and seat Naboth at the head of the people.” [13]And the two worthless fellows came and sat opposite him, and the worthless fellows bore witness against Naboth before the people, saying, “Naboth has cursed God and king.” And they took him outside the town and stoned him to death. [14]And they sent to Jezebel, saying, “Naboth has been stoned and he is dead.” [15]And it happened when Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned to death, Jezebel said to Ahab, “Rise, take hold of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, who refused to give it to you for silver, for Naboth is not alive, for he is dead.” [16]And when Ahab

heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab rose to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite to take hold of it.
17 And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite saying, 18 "Rise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who is in Samaria. Look, he is in the vineyard of Naboth where he has gone down to take hold of it. 19 And you shall speak to him, saying, 'Thus says the LORD: Have you murdered and also taken hold?' And you shall speak to him saying, 'Thus says the LORD: Where the dogs licked Naboth's blood they will lick your blood, too.'" 20 And Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" And he said, "I have found you. Inasmuch as you have given yourself over to doing evil in the eyes of the LORD, 21 I am about to bring evil upon you, and I will root you out, and I will cut off every pisser against the wall of Ahab's, and ruler and helper in Israel. 22 And I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam son of Nebat and like the house of Baasha son of Ahijah for the vexation with which you have vexed Me, leading Israel to offend." 23 And for Jezebel, too, the word of the LORD came, saying, "The dogs shall devour Jezebel in the flatland of Jezreel. 24 Ahab's dead in the town the dogs shall devour, and the dead in the field the fowl of the heavens shall devour." 25 Surely there was none like Ahab, who gave himself over to doing

evil in the eyes of the LORD, as Jezebel his wife had
enticed him to do. [26]And he acted most loathsomely to
go after foul idols, as all that the Amorites had done,
whom the LORD had dispossessed before the
Israelites. [27]And it happened when Ahab heard these
words that he rent his garments and put sackcloth on
his flesh and fasted and lay down in the sackcloth and
walked meekly. [28]And the word of the LORD came to
Elijah the Tishbite, saying, [29]"Have you seen that Ahab
has humbled himself before Me? Because he has
humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the evil in
his days. In his son's days will I bring the evil upon his
house."

CHAPTER 21 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And it happened after these things*. As elsewhere, this vague temporal formula introduces a new narrative unit.

2. *Give me your vineyard*. The verb "give" sometimes means "to sell," as Ahab's subsequent words here make clear.

a better vineyard . . . silver as its price. Ahab initially offers fair value for the vineyard. The alternative of a better vineyard, stated first, is the more attractive because Naboth will still possess real estate (and a favorable possession), which was a prime consideration in Israelite society.

3. *The LORD forbid that I should give away the estate of my fathers*. Naboth is thinking in traditional tribal terms rather than in those of a fluid economy in which property is fungible for value. Hanging on to inherited land is conceived as a sacred obligation.

4. *sullen and morose*. This phrase is pointedly picked up from the last sentence of the previous episode.

And he lay down on his couch and turned away his face and ate no food. Ahab, who in the preceding episode had shown martial resolution against Ben-Hadad's threats, now acts like a petulant adolescent. He has a child's fixation on the desired object he can't have, but it does not occur to him to wield royal power in order to seize it.

6. *Give me your vineyard for silver*. In his repetition of his own words to Jezebel, he pointedly switches the order, representing himself as having made the lesser offer first.

I will not give you my vineyard. This seeming repetition is a drastic recasting of Naboth's actual words: there is no pious "The Lord forbid" and no mention of the sacred obligation to retain the estate of his fathers. In this version, for Jezebel's benefit, Naboth sounds merely obstinate.

7. *act like a king*. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "act [or do] kingship."

I myself will give you the vineyard of Naboth. She is careful not to explain the means by which she will effect this transaction.

8. *she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal*. She in effect usurps his royal power, "acting like a king" instead of him.

who were in his town, who dwelled with Naboth. The seeming redundancy underlines the idea that his own neighbors, alongside of whom he had always lived, will be complicit in betraying him.

9. *Proclaim a fast*. A common function of an ad hoc communal fast was to supplicate God when some ill had befallen the community because of an offense committed within the community. In all likelihood, the occasion of the fast, which would have been a reason for assembling the community, sets the stage for exposing the purported crime committed by Naboth.

10. *seat two worthless fellows opposite him*. Her written instructions, fully accepted by the elders, are candid about using scoundrels willing to perjure themselves in a false accusation against Naboth.

13. *the worthless fellows bore witness against Naboth*. Unlike the altered repetitions in Ahab's report of his interchange with Naboth, every item of Jezebel's murderous instructions is precisely carried out.

15. *for Naboth is not alive, for he is dead*. Her repetition at this point of what was first her written instructions, then the narrative report of their implementation, entirely omits reference to the stoning to death or to the false accusation that led to the stoning. The redundancy of her statement to Ahab is dramatically apt: she tells her fearful husband he is no longer alive, he's actually dead, so you have nothing to worry about and can seize the vineyard.

19. *Have you murdered and also taken hold*? The Hebrew evinces the power of compressed statement: *haratsaḥta wegam yarashta* is just three words. Though Ahab was unaware of Jezebel's scheme, these words of denunciation name him directly as the murderer.

Where the dogs licked Naboth's blood. We learn not only that Naboth was stoned to death on a false accusation but also that his body was left in the open to be desecrated by scavengers.

20. *Inasmuch as you have given yourself over to doing evil*. Ahab's previously condemned transgressions were all cultic. Now an act of moral turpitude is excoriated, and it will be this that dooms his royal line.

21. *I will cut off every pisser against the wall*. This coarse epithet for males is reserved for curses.

ruler and helper. The Hebrew term is somewhat obscure, but it appears to refer to political leadership. Compare Deuteronomy 32:36.

23. *flatland*. The received text reads *ḥel*, "rampart," not a likely place for the devouring of Jezebel's body, but many Hebrew manuscripts show *ḥeleq* (one additional consonant), which means something like "cultivated field."

26. *he acted most loathsomely to go after foul idols*. Here the chief reason for the condemnation of Ahab shifts back from ethical to cultic infraction.

29. *I will not bring the evil in his days*. This postponement of retribution proves to be rather qualified. In the event, Ahab does not die peacefully in his bed, as one might infer from these words, but, after the passage of some time, he is killed in battle, after which the dogs lick his blood, in keeping with the terms of the initial prophetic curse.

CHAPTER 22

[1]And they stayed three years with no war between
Aram and Israel. [2]And it happened in the third year
that Jehoshaphat king of Judah came down to the king
of Israel. [3]And the king of Israel said to his servants,
“Did you know that Ramoth-Gilead is ours? Yet we
refrain from taking it from the hand of the king of
Aram.” [4]And he said to Jehoshaphat, “Will you go
with me to battle at Ramoth-Gilead?” And
Jehoshaphat said to the king of Israel, “I am like you,
my people like your people, my horses like your
horses.” [5]And Jehoshaphat said to the king of Israel,
“Inquire, pray, now the word of the LORD.” [6]And the
king of Israel gathered the prophets, about four
hundred men, and he said to them, “Shall I go against
Ramoth-Gilead for battle or should I desist?” and they
said, “Go up, that the Master may give it into the
king’s hand.” [7]And Jehoshaphat said, “Is there no
prophet of the LORD left here, that we might inquire
of him?” [8]And the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat,
“There is still one man through whom to inquire of the

LORD, but I hate him, for he will not prophesy good about me but evil—Micaiah son of Imlah." And Jehoshaphat said, "Let not the king say thus." [9]And the king of Israel called to a certain eunuch and said, "Hurry here Micaiah son of Imlah." [10]And the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat king of Judah were sitting each on his throne dressed in royal garb on the threshing floor at the entrance gate of Samaria, and all the prophets were prophesying before them. [11]And Zedekiah son of Chenaanah made himself iron horns and said, "Thus says the LORD: 'With these shall you gore the Arameans until you destroy them.'" [12]And all the prophets were prophesying thus, saying, "Go up to Ramoth-Gilead and prosper, and the LORD shall give it into the hand of the king." [13]And the messenger who had gone to call Micaiah spoke to him, saying, "Look, pray, the words of the prophets as with one mouth are good for the king. Let your word, pray, be like the word of one of them, and you should speak good things." [14]And Micaiah said, "As the LORD lives, that which the LORD says to me will I speak." [15]And he came to the king and the king said to him, "Micaiah, shall we go up to Ramoth-Gilead to battle or shall we refrain?" and he said to him, "Go up and prosper, and the LORD shall give it into the hand of the king." [16]And the king said to him, "How many times must I

make you swear that you shall speak to me only truth in the name of the LORD?” [17]And he said, “I saw all Israel scattered over the mountains like sheep that have no shepherd. And the LORD said, ‘These have no master. Let each go back home in peace.’” [18]And the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “Did I not say to you, he will not prophesy good about me but evil?” [19]And he said, “Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on His throne with all the army of the heavens standing in attendance by Him at His right and at His left. [20]And the LORD said, ‘Who will entice Ahab, that he go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead?’ And one said this way and one said another way. [21]And a spirit came out and stood before the LORD and said, ‘I will entice him.’ [22]And the LORD said, ‘How?’ And it said, ‘I will go out and become a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ And He said, ‘You shall entice and you shall also prevail. Go forth and thus do.’ [23]And now, look, the LORD has placed a lying spirit in the mouth of all these prophets of yours, but the LORD has spoken evil against you.” [24]And Zedekiah son of Chenaanah approached and struck Micaiah on the cheek and said, “How has the spirit of the LORD passed from me to speak to you?” [25]And Micaiah said, “You are about to see on that day when you will enter the innermost chamber to hide.”

[26]And the king of Israel said, “Take Micaiah and bring
him back to Amon commander of the town and to
Joash the king’s son, [27]and say, ‘Thus said the king: Put
this fellow in the prison-house and feed him meager
bread and meager water until I return safe and sound.’”
[28]And Micaiah said, “If you really return safe and
sound, the LORD has not spoken through me.” And he
said, “Hear, all peoples!”[29]And the king of Israel went
up, and Jehoshaphat king of Judah with him, to
Ramoth-Gilead. [30]And the king of Israel said, “I will
disguise myself and go into battle, but you, don your
royal garb.” And the king of Israel disguised himself
and went into the battle. [31]And the king of Aram had
charged the commanders of his thirty-two chariots,
saying, “You shall battle against neither small nor great
but against the king of Israel alone.” [32]And it
happened, when the commanders of the chariots saw
Jehoshaphat, that they said, “He must be the king of
Israel,” and they swerved against him to do battle, and
Jehoshaphat cried out. [33]And it happened, when the
commanders of the chariots saw that he was not the
king of Israel, they turned back from him. [34]But a man
drew the bow unwitting and struck the king of Israel
between the joints of the armor. And he said to his
charioteer, “Turn your hand back and take me out of
the fray, for I am wounded.” [35]And the battle surged on

that day, and the king was propped up in the chariot facing Aram. And he died in the evening, and the blood of the wound spilled out onto the floor of the chariot. [36]And the rumor passed through the camp as the sun was setting, saying, “Each man to his town and each man to his land.” [37]And the king died, and they came to Samaria and buried the king in Samaria. [38]And they flushed out the chariot by the pool of Samaria, and the dogs licked his blood, and the whores had bathed, according to the word of the LORD that He had spoken. [39]And the rest of the acts of Ahab and all that he did, and the ivory house that he built and all the towns that he built, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Israel? [40]And Ahab lay with his fathers, and Ahaziah his son was king in his stead.

[41]And Jehoshaphat son of Asa had become king over Judah in the fourth year of Ahab king of Israel. [42]Jehoshaphat was thirty-five years old when he became king, and he was king in Jerusalem twenty-five years. And his mother’s name was Azubah daughter of Shilhi. [43]And he went in all the ways of Asa his father, he did not turn away from them, to do what was right in the eyes of the LORD. [44]Only the

high places were not removed. The people were still sacrificing and burning incense on the high places.
45 And Jehoshaphat made peace with the king of Israel.
46 And the rest of the acts of Jehoshaphat and his valor that he performed and with which he fought, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Judah? 47 And the rest of the male cult-harlots who were left in the days of Asa his father he rooted out from the land. 48 And there was no king in Edom but a royal governor. 49 Jehoshaphat had fashioned Tarshish ships to go to Ophir for gold, but they did not go, for the ships had broken up in Ezion-Geber. 50 Then did Ahaziah son of Ahab say to Jehoshaphat, “Let my servants go with your servants in ships,” but Jehoshaphat did not agree. 51 And Jehoshaphat lay with his fathers and was buried with his fathers in the City of David his father, and Jehoram his son became king in his stead. 52 Ahaziah son of Ahab had become king over Israel in Samaria in the seventeenth year of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, and he was king over Israel two years. 53 And he did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD and went in the way of his father and in the way of his mother and in the way of Jeroboam son of Nebat, who had led Israel to offend. 54 And he worshipped Baal and bowed down to him and vexed

the LORD God of Israel as all that his father had done.

CHAPTER 22 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Jehoshaphat king of Judah came down to the king of Israel*. The verb here is slightly odd for a movement from south to north. It could reflect the high elevation of the Judahite capital in Jerusalem.

3. *the king of Israel*. Throughout this long episode, with just one exception, the northern monarch is referred to as "king of Israel," not "Ahab," in a striking divergence from most of the preceding stories about Ahab. Some scholars, citing the contradiction of this need to retake Ramoth-Gilead when the king of Aram had agreed to return all Israelite towns in his terms of surrender, propose that the king of Israel here is Ahab's son Ahaziah, with that story then being attached to the Ahab narrative. The fact that it is not Elijah but a different prophet, Micaiah, who confronts the king, may support this view.

4. *Will you go with me to battle*. The northern and southern kingdoms had long been at war with each other, but now they become allies, perhaps because of the threat to both of Aram.

5. *Inquire, pray, now the word of the LORD*. As we have seen before, it was standard practice in the biblical world and throughout the ancient Near East to inquire of an oracle before a battle.

7. *Is there no prophet of the LORD left here*. The precise cultic identity of the four hundred prophets is ambiguous. Jehoshaphat's words here suggest that he does not regard them as prophets of the LORD. In their own words, they invoke "the Master," which could be YHWH or another deity. Three possibilities emerge: they are actually pagan prophets; they are syncretistic prophets, alternately turning to YHWH and to other gods; they are purported

prophets of the LORD, claiming to speak in the name of YHWH with no actual access to Him. It is plausible that this king of Israel, whether Ahab or his son, would keep a throng of dubious court prophets around him.

8. *Micaiah son of Imlah*. The king withholds this name until the very end of his speech, as though he could barely bring himself to utter it.

10. *each on his throne dressed in royal garb*. This display of royal regalia, rather odd in this threshing floor location, sets the stage for the battle scene, when one of the two will dress as a commoner in a futile effort to protect himself from harm.

11. *made himself iron horns*. This use of symbolic props to illustrate the prophecy is occasionally taken up by the Literary Prophets. Here, however, it is made to stand in contrast to Micaiah's mode of operation: he resorts to no symbols but simply reports his prophetic vision.

13. *Let your word, pray, be like the word of one of them*. The messenger is perfectly aware that the king anticipates only bad news from Micaiah, and he tries to ward off trouble by encouraging him to deliver a positive prophecy.

14. *that which the LORD says to me will I speak*. His words are reminiscent of the ones spoken by the pagan seer Balaam in Numbers 22:38. Balaam was summoned to pronounce doom on Israel but blessed them instead; Micaiah, when the king of Israel would like him to prophesy good, will deliver a message of doom.

17. *like sheep that have no shepherd . . . "These have no master*." In the first instance, evidently following the messenger's instructions, Micaiah prophesies victory, in a vague formulation. Now, pressed by the suspicious king, he couches his true prophecy in oblique terms, but the response of the king of Israel in the next verse indicates his clear understanding that the sheep without a shepherd is a prediction of his own death.

19. *And he said*. Jehoshaphat does not answer the rhetorical question of the king of Israel. Instead, Micaiah picks up the moment of silence by pronouncing a second prophecy of doom, far more explicit than the first.

I saw the LORD *sitting on His throne with all the army of the heavens standing in attendance*. There is a convergence between the visionary scene and the actual one. As armies assemble below, the celestial army stands in attendance on God (He is LORD of Armies, or LORD of Hosts). The two kings have been sitting on their thrones, which, as Moshe Garsiel has aptly observed, is precisely how Micaiah sees the LORD in his vision.

20. *Who will entice Ahab*. This story puts forth a theological explanation of false prophecy. A celestial spirit answers God's call and volunteers to lure Ahab to his destruction by putting a false message in the mouths of the four hundred prophets claiming to speak the word of the LORD. By means of this contrivance, everything in this story is seen to be determined by God, and the false prophecy is not merely the human initiative of prophets seeking to curry the king's favor. It is only here that the monarch is named as Ahab, not "king of Israel."

28. *And he said, "Hear, all peoples*!" The "he" is Micaiah speaking again. The repetition of the formula for introducing direct speech, with no intervening response from the king, suggests that the king is flabbergasted by the prophet's obduracy, even in the face of imprisonment. But the hortatory "Hear, all peoples!" is an odd thing for the prophet to say in this narrative context. In fact, these three words are borrowed from the beginning of Micah's prophecies (Micah 1:2) and are almost certainly an editorial interpolation intended to establish a link between Micaiah son of Imlah and the literary prophet Micah (the same name without the theophoric suffix, who lived a century later). Some versions of the Septuagint lack these three words.

30. *I will disguise myself*. The Masoretic Text reads "disguise yourself," which is flatly contradicted by the next clause, in which the king of Israel tells Jehoshaphat to wear royal garb. Three ancient versions have the king of Israel and not Jehoshaphat disguising himself, and this is surely the original reading.

34. *drew the bow unwitting*. He is simply targeting an Israelite in a chariot, unaware that the man in commoner's clothes is the king of Israel.

35. *the king was propped up in the chariot facing Aram*. His initial command to the charioteer to carry him away from the front is not carried out, either because the fighting is so thick that the chariot cannot get away or because the

charioteer decides on his own that the removal of the king would demoralize the troops. The dying king, propped up in the chariot, appears to be continuing to battle.

the floor of the chariot. The Hebrew uses an anatomical term, literally "bosom." The passage of several hours indicates that the king dies of loss of blood from the wound, so there would have been a considerable quantity of blood on the floor of the chariot.

36. *Each man to his town and each man to his land*. This flight of the troops on the news of the king's death is an explicit fulfillment of Micaiah's prophecy. "I saw all Israel scattered over the mountains like sheep that had no shepherd" and "Let each go back home in peace."

38. *And they flushed out the chariot by the pool of Samaria, and the dogs licked his blood*. This is only an approximate fulfillment of Elijah's prophecy to Naboth. Elijah had said the dogs would lick Ahab's blood in the place they had licked Naboth's blood, which would be in Jezreel, not Samaria. Also, the dogs evidently do not lick the blood from the corpse or from the chariot but from the bloodied water of the pool used to clean the chariot. This indirection was no doubt necessary because the royal attendants would not have allowed the king's body to be desecrated or the chariot to be invaded by dogs.

and the whores had bathed. Presumably, they used the pool to bathe and thus the king's blood, however diluted, passed over their bodies. This added indignity was not part of Elijah's prophecy of doom, at least not in the versions we have in the received text.

39. *ivory house*. This is a house with ivory panels or ornamentation, as ivory would have not been a suitable material for the structural elements of the building.

44. *Only the high places were not removed*. This refrain reflects the view of the Deuteronomist that the local altars were a kind of paganism, though they could well have been legitimate places for the worship of YHWH.

48. *but a royal governor*. The Hebrew lacks "but" and sounds a little crabbed.

49. *Tarshish ships*. Since the destination of the ships is on the Red Sea, it is clear at least in this instance that "Tarshish ships" refers to a particular design

of ship, not to a geographical location.

50. *Let my servants go with your servants in ships*. Perhaps the northern kingdom had greater proficiency in seafaring because of its proximity to Phoenicia. In any case, Jehoshaphat rejects the proposal, probably because he doesn't want to share the gold of Ophir.

54. *And he worshipped Baal*. If this scarcely seems a proper ending for the book, that is because Kings, like Samuel, was originally one book, the division into two reflecting merely the limits of the length of a scroll.

2 Kings

CHAPTER 1

[1]And Moab rebelled against Israel after Ahab's death.
[2]And Ahaziah fell through the lattice in his upper
chamber and became ill, and he sent messengers and
said, "Go, inquire of Baal-Zebub god of Ekron
whether I shall survive this illness." [3]But the LORD
had spoken to Elijah the Tishbite: "Rise, go up to meet
the messengers of the king of Samaria and speak to
them: 'Is it for lack of a god in Israel that you go to
inquire of Baal-Zebub god of Ekron?' [4]And therefore,
thus said the LORD: 'From the bed you mounted you
shall not come down, for you are doomed to die.'" And
Elijah went off. [5]And the messengers came back to
him, and he said to them, "Why have you come back?"
[6]And they said to him, "A man came up to meet us
and said to us, 'Go back to the king who sent you and
speak to him: Thus said the LORD—Is it for lack of a
god in Israel that he sent to inquire of Baal-Zebub god
of Ekron? Therefore, from the bed you mounted you
shall not come down, for you are doomed to die.'"
[7]And he said to them, "What is the manner of the man

who came up to meet you and spoke to you these words?” [8]And they said to him, “He is a hairy man, and a leather belt is bound round his waist.” And he said, “It is Elijah the Tishbite.” [9]And he sent to him a captain of fifty with his men, and he went up to him, and, look, he was sitting on the hilltop. And he spoke to him: “Man of God! The king has spoken—come down.” [10]And Elijah answered and spoke to the captain of the fifty: “And if I am a man of God, let fire come down from the heavens and consume you and your men!” And fire came down from the heavens and consumed him and his men. [11]And he persisted and sent him another captain of fifty with his men, and he spoke out and said to him, “Man of God! Thus said the king: ‘Quick, come down.’” [12]And Elijah answered and spoke to him: “If I am a man of God, let fire come down from the heavens and consume you and your men.” And fire came down from the heavens and consumed him and his men. [13]And he persisted and sent a third captain of fifty with his men, and the third captain of the fifty went up and came and kneeled before Elijah and pleaded with him: “Man of God! May my life, pray, and the lives of these fifty servants of yours be precious in your eyes. [14]Look, fire has come down from the heavens and consumed the two captains of the fifty and their men, and now, may my

life be precious in your eyes.” [15]And the LORD’s messenger spoke to Elijah: “Go down with him. Do not fear him.” And he rose and went down with him to the king. [16]And he spoke to him: “Thus said the LORD —‘Inasmuch as you have sent messengers to inquire of Baal-Zebub god of Ekron—is it for lack of a god in Israel?—to inquire of his word, therefore from the bed you mounted you shall not come down, for you are doomed to die.” [17]And he died according to the word of the LORD that Elijah had spoken, and Jehoram became king in his stead in the second year of Jehoram son of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, for he had no son. [18]And the rest of the acts of Ahaziah that he did, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Israel?

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Moab rebelled against Israel after Ahab’s death*. This notation locates the story temporally but is not otherwise linked to it, except to indicate that Israel’s dominance over vassal states was shaken in the political uncertainty after Ahab’s death.

2. *inquire*. The Hebrew verb *darash* is the technical term used for inquiring of an oracle. From the monotheistic point of view, it is of course outrageous that a king of Israel should go out of his way to inquire of a pagan oracle.

Baal-Zebub. This appears to mean "Lord of the flies," and in the New Testament Baal-Zebub, or Beelzebub, is demoted from pagan deity to demon. A plausible scholarly proposal is that the original name was Baal-Zebul, "Baal the Prince," and that the final consonant was changed by the Hebrew writers in order to make it a term of opprobrium.

3. *But the* LORD *had spoken to Elijah*. The entire episode is constructed through dialogue, with further cited speech nesting within the dialogue, and the verb "to speak" is repeated again and again.

the king of Samaria. This epithet diminishes the sphere of the king of Israel.

for lack of a god. The wording also could mean "for lack of gods."

6. *Go back to the king who sent you*. In the reiterated pattern of verbatim repetition in this story, this clause stands out as an added element that was not part of Elijah's speech to the messengers. The clause has the effect of underscoring the king's responsibility for sending the messengers to a pagan oracle.

8. *He is a hairy man, and a leather belt is bound round his waist*. This is the first indication in the whole cycle of stories of Elijah's appearance. There is something rough-hewn and perhaps forbidding in his distinctive look.

9. *with his men*. Literally, "with his fifty." The usage is repeated.

10. *let fire come down from the heavens*. Celestial fire is Elijah's prophetic medium. It came down to consume the sacrifice in the contest with the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel. At the end of his story, he will ascend to the heavens in a fiery chariot.

11. *And he persisted*. The literal sense is "and he went back."

Quick, come down. In the verbatim repetition, "quick" is added, suggesting a mounting urgency after the failure of the first contingent of fifty.

12. *spoke to him*. The Masoretic Text has "to them," but Elijah's answer ("you and your men") makes clear he is speaking to the captain, and two Hebrew manuscripts as well as the Septuagint and the Syriac show the singular.

13. *these fifty servants of yours*. The pleading captain is careful to address Elijah in deferential terms, as would a subject to his monarch, referring to his own troops as Elijah's servants.

15. *Do not fear him*. The captain's expressed terror of Elijah confirms that the prophet has nothing to fear from him.

16. *is it for lack of a god in Israel*? In the two preceding repetitions of this clause, it appeared at the beginning of the sentence, "Is it for lack of a god in Israel that you go . . .?" Here, instead, it appears as an outraged interjection in the middle of the sentence after the mention of Baal-Zebub.

therefore from the bed you mounted you shall not come down. The sentence of doom is an invariable element in the three repetitions, and always occurs at the end of the prophetic statement. The three repetitions of the prophecy are joined by the three repeated reports of a captain and his fifty men going up to Elijah. The folktale pattern, often deployed in the Bible, is used in which there are two identical repetitions and then a third that diverges from the first two (as in "Goldilocks and the Three Bears"),

17. *And he died according to the word of the* LORD. In the narrative report, nothing is allowed to intervene between Elijah's pronouncement of the prophecy of doom directly to the ailing king and the king's death.

and Jehoram became king . . . in the second year of Jehoram . . . king of Judah, for he had no son. The seeming confusion is the result of a historical coincidence: Jehoram, brother of the heirless Ahaziah, happened to have the same name as the king reigning in Judah at that time. In a culture that favored theophoric names, this one, which means "God is exalted," might have been fairly common.

CHAPTER 2

[1]And it happened, when the LORD was going to take
Elijah up to the heavens in a whirlwind, that Elijah,
and Elisha with him, went from Gilgal. [2]And Elijah
said to Elisha, “Stay here, pray, for the LORD has sent
me to Bethel.” And Elisha said, “As the LORD lives
and as you live, I will not forsake you.” And they went
down to Bethel. [3]And the acolyte prophets who were in
Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, “Did you
know that today the LORD is about to take your
master from over you?” And he said, “I, too, know. Be
still!” [4]And Elijah said to him, “Elisha, stay here, pray,
for the LORD has sent me to Jericho.” And he said,
“As the LORD lives and as you live, I will not forsake
you.” And they came to Jericho. [5]And the acolyte
prophets who were in Jericho approached Elisha and
said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD is
about to take your master from over you?” And he
said, “I, too, know. Be still!” [6]And Elijah said to him,
“Stay here, pray, for the LORD has sent me to the
Jordan.” And he said, “As the LORD lives and as you

live, I will not forsake you.” And the two of them
went. [7]And fifty men of the acolyte prophets had gone
and stood opposite at a distance, and the two of them
stood by the Jordan. [8]And Elijah took his mantle and
rolled it up and struck the water, and it parted on both
sides, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground.
[9]And it happened as they crossed over that Elijah said
to Elisha, “Ask, what may I do for you before I am
taken from you?” And Elisha said, “Let there be, pray,
a double portion of your spirit upon me.” [10]And he
said, “You have asked a hard thing. If you see me
taken from you, let it be thus for you, and if not, it will
not be.” [11]And it happened as they were going along
speaking, that, look, there was a chariot of fire, and
horses of fire, and they separated the two of them, and
Elijah went up to the heavens in a whirlwind. [12]And
Elisha was watching and he was crying out, “My
father, my father, Israel’s chariot and its horsemen!”
And he saw him not again. And he had clung to his
garments and torn them in two. [13]And he lifted up
Elijah’s mantle, which had fallen from him, and he
went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. [14]And
he took Elijah’s mantle that had fallen from him and
struck the water and said, “Where is the LORD, God
of Elijah?” And he, too, struck the water, and it parted
on both sides, and Elisha crossed over. [15]And the

acolyte prophets who were in Jericho saw him from the other side and said, “Elijah’s spirit has rested upon Elisha.” And they came to meet him and bowed down before him to the ground. 16And they said to him, “Look, pray, your servants have fifty stalwart men. Let them go, pray, and seek your master, lest the spirit of the LORD has borne him off and flung him down on some hill or into some valley.” And he said, “You shall not send.” 17And they urged him incessantly, and he said, “Send.” And they sent fifty men and sought him three days but did not find him. 18And they came back to him while he was still staying in Jericho, and he said to them, “Did I not say to you, do not go?”

19And the men of the town said to Elisha, “Look, pray, it is good to live in the town as my master sees, but the water is bad and the land bereaves.” 20And he said, “Fetch me a new bowl and put salt in it.” And they fetched it for him. 21And he went out to the water source and flung the salt there and said, “Thus said the LORD: ‘I have healed these waters. There will no longer be death and bereaving.’” 22And the waters have been healed to this day, according to the word of Elisha that he spoke. 23And he went up from there to Bethel, and as he was coming up on the road, young

lads came out from the town and jeered at him and said to him, “Away with you, baldy, away with you, baldy!” [24]And he turned behind him and saw them and cursed them in the name of the LORD, and two she-bears came out of the forest and ripped apart forty-two boys. [25]And he went from there to Mount Carmel and from there he came back to Samaria.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Stay here, pray, for the LORD has sent me to Bethel*. Elijah seems to have foreknowledge of his own departure from the earthly realm, and his initial sense is that this should be a private encounter between him and God, not to be witnessed by anyone else, not even by his disciple.

I will not forsake you. By this pronouncement, to be repeated twice, Elisha affirms that he is Elijah’s loyal follower and heir. In the event, his being able actually to see his master’s fiery ascension will justify his request of a double portion of the spirit investing Elijah.

3. *the acolyte prophets*. Literally, “the sons of the prophets.” The prefix “sons” suggests they are not full-fledged prophets, which means they are either acolytes or members of a professional guild of prophets rather than independent prophetic agents.

Did you know that . . . the LORD is about to take your master. Evidently, Elijah’s imminent departure has become general news, at least in prophetic circles.

from over you. The literal sense is “from your head.”

4. *stay here, pray, for the LORD has sent me*. This episode follows the folktale patterns manifested in the previous episode of three repetitions with verbatim restatements. Here, too, there is a swerve in the third repetition: in the third

instance, Elijah and Elisha do not go to a town but to the Jordan, so there is no group of acolyte prophets for them to encounter, and this third iteration concludes with Elijah's ascent to the heavens in a chariot of fire.

6. *the LORD has sent me to the Jordan*. The town of Jericho is close to the Jordan, as is clear in the next verse, when the fifty acolyte prophets can see Elijah and Elisha from a distance.

8. *and it parted on both sides*. This is, of course, a small-scale reenactment of the miracle performed by Moses in parting the waters of the Sea of Reeds. Here it is executed not with an upraised staff but with the rolled-up prophet's mantle, which Elisha will then inherit from Elijah. The point of crossing the Jordan is to have Elijah pass through this liminal zone and thus to be on the other side, beyond the land of Israel proper, when he is taken up into the heavens.

9. *a double portion of your spirit*. Though this may seem to be a presumptuous wish by Elisha to surpass his master, it could just as easily reflect a sense of inadequacy: feeling himself to be no more than an ordinary man, Elisha wants a supercharge of the spirit in order to be Elijah's successor.

10. *If you see me taken from you, let it be thus for you*. Elijah himself is not entirely sure that Elisha is worthy to bear a double portion of the spirit. If God unveils his eyes to witness Elijah's miraculous ascension, that will be proof of his worthiness.

11. *a chariot of fire, and horses of fire*. As noted above, fire has been an important instrument for Elijah's prophetic activities.

Elijah went up to the heavens in a whirlwind. This story takes us into new territory. Everywhere in the Hebrew Bible, death is the definitive end, Sheol, the underworld, a hole in the ground into which the once living person goes down. The single previous intimation of Elijah's ascension is the cryptic notation about Enoch's being "taken" by God in Genesis 5:24. Elijah does not die but rides up to the celestial sphere in a fiery chariot. His ascension prepares the way for the idea of Christ's resurrection in Christian Scripture, and it is significant that Elijah and Moses are represented in the New Testament as the two chief precursors of Jesus.

12. *My father, my father, Israel's chariot and its horsemen*. Elisha obviously refers to Elijah as his father because he is his master and mentor. The metaphor of the chariot and horsemen, suggested to him by the vision of the chariot of fire before his eyes, registers the idea that Elijah has been Israel's true power, as chariotry is the driving power of an army.

And he had clung to his garments and torn them in two. Since Elijah had removed his mantle, this would be the tunic worn beneath the mantle. Elisha's clinging to it reflects his impassioned desire not to part from his master. It seems that as Elijah left him for his ascent, part of the tunic tore away in Elisha's hands. This is an ironic reversal of the request for a double portion of the spirit because he now holds half a garment.

14. *Where is the LORD, God of Elijah*? If the LORD is now to be with him as He was with Elijah, He will enable Elisha to replicate the miracles that Elijah performed.

he, too. There is an evident glitch in the Hebrew syntax. These two words in the Hebrew should appear after "and he struck." The word order in the received text produces an odd bumpiness: "He too and he struck."

15. *And the acolyte prophets . . . saw him from the other side*. Elisha's parting of the waters, in full sight of the assembled Jericho prophets, becomes a public demonstration that he is Elijah's prophetic heir.

19. *Look, pray, it is good to live in the town*. Having recognized Elisha as Elijah's successor, endowed with his powers, the townsmen promptly turn to him with a request for help.

the water is bad and the land bereaves. This is cause and effect: the bad water contaminates the land, which then brings death to man and beast.

21. *he . . . flung the salt there*. The agency of the miracle is deliberately paradoxical. Salt water is not drinkable, but Elisha's salt purifies the spring of its blight.

Thus said the LORD: "I have healed these waters." Elisha pointedly attributes the purification of the spring to God's intervention, not to a magical act on his part.

23. *Away with you, baldy*. Literally, "Go up, baldy." We learn incidentally that Elisha is bald, in contrast to Elijah, who was a hairy man.

24. *two she-bears came out of the forest and ripped apart forty-two boys*. This murderous response to the boys' mockery is morally scandalous. Is it meant to suggest that Elisha does not make responsible use of his prophetic powers, that after turning death to life at the spring he now spreads death? The early rabbis were so outraged by this story that they felt constrained to assert it never really happened. Their formulation, "neither bears nor forest," became idiomatic in Hebrew for a cock-and-bull story.

CHAPTER 3

[1]And Jehoram son of Ahab had become king over
Israel in Samaria in the eighteenth year of Jehoshaphat
king of Judah. And he was king twelve years. [2]And he
did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD, though not
like his father nor like his mother, and he removed the
pillar of Baal that his father had made. [3]But he clung
to the offenses of Jeroboam son of Nebat, who had led
Israel to offend, he did not swerve from them. [4]And
Mesha king of Moab was a sheep-breeder and he
would bring back to the king of Israel the wool of a
hundred thousand lambs and of a hundred thousand
rams. [5]And it happened when Ahab died that the king
of Moab rebelled against the king of Israel. [6]And King
Jehoram sallied forth from Samaria on that day, and
he mustered all Israel. [7]And he went and sent to
Jehoshaphat king of Judah, saying, “The king of Moab
has rebelled against me. Will you go with me against
Moab to battle?” And he said, “I will go. I am like
you, my people like your people, my horses like your
horses.” [8]And he said, “By what way shall we go up?”

And he said, “The way of the Wilderness of Edom.”
9 And the king of Israel went, and the king of Judah
and the king of Edom with him, and they swung round
on the way seven days, and there was no water for the
camp or for the beasts that were at their heels. 10 And
the king of Israel said, “Woe, for the LORD has called
forth these three kings to give them into the hand of
Moab.” 11 And Jehoshaphat said, “Is there no prophet
of the LORD here, that we might inquire of the
LORD through him?” And one of the servants of the
king of Israel answered, “Elisha son of Shaphat is
here, who attended Elijah.” 12 And Jehoshaphat said,
“The word of the LORD is with him.” And the king of
Israel and Jehoshaphat and the king of Edom went
down to him. 13 And Elisha said to the king of Israel,
“What do you and I have to do with one another? Go
to your father’s prophets and to your mother’s
prophets.” And the king of Israel said to him, “Don’t!
For the LORD has called forth these three kings to
give them into the hand of Moab.” 14 And Elisha said,
“As the LORD of Armies lives, in Whose attendance I
have stood, were I not showing favor to Jehoshaphat
king of Judah, I would not so much as look at you nor
see you, 15 but now, fetch me a lyre player.” And it
happened, as the lyre player played, the hand of the
LORD was upon him, 16 and he said, “Thus said the

LORD: ‘Dig out this wadi into hollows.’ [17]For thus said the LORD: ‘You will not see wind and you will not see rain, but that wadi will fill with water, and you and your cattle and your beasts will drink.’ [18]And this is easy in the eyes of the LORD, and he shall give Moab into your hand. [19]And you shall strike every fortified town and every fine town, and every goodly tree you shall fell, and all the springs of water you shall stop up, and every goodly field you shall spoil with stones.” [20]And it happened in the morning, as the grain offering was being offered up, that, look, water was coming from the way to Edom, and the land was filled with water. [21]And all Moab had heard that the kings had come up to do battle with them, and every man of sword-wielding age was mustered, and they stood at the border. [22]And they rose early in the morning, and the sun had dawned over the water, and from a distance Moab saw the water red as blood. [23]And they said, “This blood is because the kings have surely been destroyed, each striking down his fellow, and they are now Moab’s booty.” [24]And they came into the camp of Israel, and Israel rose up and struck Moab, and they fled before them, and they struck Moab again and again. [25]And they laid waste the towns, and in every goodly field each of them flung stones and filled it, and every spring of water they stopped up, and every

goodly tree they felled, till they left only the stones of Kir-Hareseth, and the slingers swung round and struck it. [26]And the king of Moab saw that the battle was hard against him, and he took seven hundred sword-wielding men with him to break through to the king of Edom, but they were not able. [27]And he took his firstborn son, who would have been king after him, and offered him up as a burnt offering on the wall, and a great fury came against Israel, and they journeyed away from him and went back to the land.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

4. *he would bring back to the king of Israel*. The context suggests that the verb here has an iterative sense: this is the tribute that Mesha, as vassal to Israel, would give annually to the king of Israel. David had initially reduced Moab to vassal status. At some point, perhaps during the reign of Baasha, Moab drove out the Israelite overlords, but King Omri again subjugated it.

a hundred thousand lambs. As with the numbers given for troops and casualties in these narratives, the figures here are hyperbolic.

5. *when Ahab died*. Mesha exploits the political disorder following upon Ahab's death to rebel against Israel.

7. *I am like you, my people like your people*. This speech repeats almost verbatim Jehoshaphat's words to the king of Israel in 1 Kings 22:4. Verse 11 then repeats, with small variations, Jehoshaphat's words in 1 Kings 22:7. All this has the look of a story floating around in the scribal archives that was first

ascribed to Ahab (although, perhaps symptomatically, without using his name) and then, in different circumstances with a different enemy and a different prophet, to Jehoram (though here, again, in the body of the story, he is not referred to by name). It is possible that the original story was actually about a third king whose identity, however, remains conjectural.

8. *The way of the Wilderness of Edom*. The allied forces, instead of taking a direct route by crossing the Jordan and then driving south to Moab, swing round (that verb is used in the next verse) in a long arc through the Negeb and then the wilderness of Edom to the east of the Dead Sea, thus approaching Moab from the south. Their likely intention would have been to avoid Moabite troops stationed along the northern and western perimeters of Moabite territory. But this move takes them on a seven-day march through the desert, during which they run out of water.

11. *attended*. The literal sense of the Hebrew idiom is "poured water on the hands of."

13. *Go to your father's prophets and to your mother's prophets*. He is referring to the sycophantic court prophets or actually pagan prophets who surrounded Ahab and Jezebel.

14. *were I not showing favor to Jehoshaphat*. Elisha grudgingly agrees to seek a propitious oracle only for the sake of Jehoram's Judahite ally Jehoshaphat.

15. *as the lyre player played, the hand of the* LORD *was upon him*. The use of stringed instruments and percussion instruments to induce a vatic trance through their hypnotic rhythm is known in many different traditions of ecstatic religion. In the Bible, it is typically linked with bands of professional prophets (see, for example, 1 Samuel 10:5–6). What is unusual here is that an individual prophet feels he has to have recourse to these musical stimuli in order to gain access to God's word.

16. *Dig out this wadi into hollows*. In the rocky gulches in this region, rainwater would gather in the little hollows and crevices in the rock. In this miraculous instance, however, there will be no rain.

18. *this is easy in the eyes of the* LORD. Just as the LORD can easily provide water where there is no rain, He will be able to effect the defeat of the Moabites with no difficulty.

19. *every fine town*. The word for "fine" (or "choice"), *mivḥor*, is an odd formation (it should be *mivḥar*), and some scholars think it is an erroneous scribal duplication of the previous phrase, "every fortified town," *kol ʿir mivtsar*.

every goodly tree you shall fell. This is in direct contradiction to Deuteronomy 20:19, which prohibits cutting down an enemy's fruit trees.

22. *from a distance Moab saw the water red as blood*. The red look of the water is a result of the early light of dawn, perhaps reinforced, as many have proposed, by the reddish sandstone surrounding the wadi and its bed. God's miraculous providing of water, then, serves a double purpose: first it revives the troops and their animals after the long march in the desert, and then it sets a trap for the Moabites.

23. *each striking down his fellow*. The Moabites assume that the potentially fragile alliance put together by the king of Israel has fallen apart violently.

and they are now Moab's booty. They conclude that most, if not all, of the enemy are dead, and that they have no one to fight, only corpses to despoil.

24. *and they struck Moab again and again*. The Hebrew text looks defective at this point (with a confusing divergence between the consonantal text and the marginal correction), but this is the likely sense.

25. *Kir-Hareseth*. This is an alternate name for Kir-Moab, the Moabite capital.

26. *he took seven hundred sword-wielding men with him to break through to the king of Edom*. He musters an elite fighting unit in an attempt to break through the besieging forces, probably driving against the vassal king of Edom as the weakest element in the alliance of three kings. The attempt is foiled, and the Moabites are driven back into the town.

27. *he took his firstborn*. A king's sacrifice of his own child, in an effort to placate the gods at a moment of military emergency, was a familiar practice

in the ancient Near East.

and a great fury came against Israel. This denouement is surely perplexing from a monotheistic point of view. "Fury" (*qetsef*) is usually the term for God's devastating rage against Israel when the people has transgressed. Here, however, Israel has done no wrong. And the descent of the fury explicitly reverses Elisha's favorable prophecy. This turn of events might reflect an early tradition that accords Chemosh, the Moabite god, power that must be propitiated by human sacrifice, so that he will then blight the enemies of Moab. In any case, the story means to explain why Israel and its allies, after an initial victory, were obliged to retreat. A Moabite inscription on a stele, discovered in 1868, in which Mesha speaks in the first person, triumphantly proclaims a sweeping victory over Israel, though it is not altogether clear whether this victory is over Jehoram or his predecessor.

CHAPTER 4

[1]And a certain woman from the wives of the acolyte prophets had cried out to Elisha, saying, “Your servant, my husband, died. And you know that your servant was a LORD fearer. And the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves.” [2]And Elisha said to her, “What shall I do for you? Tell me, what do you have in the house?” And she said, “Your servant has nothing at all in the house except a cruse of oil.” [3]And he said, “Go, borrow vessels for yourself from outside, from all your neighbors—empty vessels, and not just a few. [4]And you shall come and close the door behind you and behind your sons, and you shall pour into these vessels, and the full ones you shall set aside.” [5]And she went from him and closed the door behind her and behind her sons. They were bringing the vessels to her and she was pouring. [6]And it happened when the vessels were full that she said to her son, “Bring me another vessel,” and he said to her, “There are no more vessels.” And the oil stopped. [7]And she came and told the man of God, and he said,

“Go, sell the oil and pay your debt, and you and your sons will live off what is left.”

[8]And one day Elisha was passing through Shunem, and there was a wealthy woman there. And she urged him to break bread, and so, whenever he passed through, he would turn aside there to break bread. [9]And she said to her husband, “Look, pray, I know that he is a holy man of God who always passes by us. [10]Let us make, pray, a little upper chamber and put a bed there for him and a table and chair and lamp, and so when he comes to us, he will turn aside there.” [11]And one day he came there and turned aside to the upper chamber and slept there. [12]And he said to Gehazi his lad, “Call this Shunammite,” and he called her, and she stood before him. [13]And he said to him, “Say to her, pray: ‘Look, you have gone to all this bother for us. What can be done for you? Shall a word be said for you to the king or to the commander of the army?’” And she said, “In the midst of my people I dwell.” [14]And he said, “What can be done for her?” And Gehazi said, “Why, she has no son, and her husband is an old man.” [15]And he said, “Call her,” and he called her, and she stood in the doorway. [16]And he said, “At this fixed time, at this very season, you will embrace a

son.” And she said, “Don’t, my lord, man of God, don’t mislead your servant.” [17]And the woman conceived and bore a son at that fixed time, at that very season, as Elisha had spoken to her. [18]And the child grew, and one day he went out to his father, to the reapers. [19]And he said to his father, “My head, my head!” And he said concerning the lad, “Carry him to his mother.” [20]And he was carried and brought to his mother, and he stayed on her knees till noon, and he died. [21]And she went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, and closed the door on him and went out. [22]And she called to her husband and said, “Send me, pray, one of the lads and one of the donkeys, that I may hurry to the man of God and come back. [23]And he said, “Why are you going to him? Today is neither new moon nor sabbath.” And she said, “Farewell.” [24]And she saddled the donkey and said to her lad, “Drive it and go. Do not hold me back in riding unless I say to you.” [25]And she went and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel, and it happened, when the man of God saw her from a distance, that he said to Gehazi, “Here is that Shunammite. [26]Now hurry to meet her, pray, and say to her, ‘Is it well with you? Is it well with your husband? Is it well with the child?’” And she said, “It is well.” [27]And she came to the man of God on the mountain and clung to his legs. And

Gehazi approached to push her back, and the man of God said, “Let her be, for she is deeply embittered, and the LORD has hidden it from me and not told me.” 28And she said, “Did I ask of my lord for a son? Did I not say, ‘You should not deceive me’?” 29And he said to Gehazi, “Gird your loins and take my staff in your hand and go. Should you meet a man, do not greet him, and should a man greet you, do not answer him. And you shall put my staff on the lad’s face.” 30And the lad’s mother said, “As the LORD lives and as you live, I will not forsake you.” And he rose and went after her. 31And Gehazi had gone before them and put the staff on the lad’s face, but there was no voice and no sound, and he turned back to meet him, and he told him, saying, “The lad has not awakened.” 32And Elisha came into the house, and, look, the lad was dead, laid out on his bed. 33And he came in and closed the door behind the two of them and prayed to the LORD. 34And he climbed up and lay over the child and put his mouth over his mouth and his eyes over his eyes and his palms over his palms and stretched out over him, and the child’s body grew warm. 35And he went back and walked in the house this way and that, and he climbed up and stretched out over him, and the lad sneezed a full seven times, and the lad opened his eyes. 36And he called to Gehazi and said, “Call this

Shunammite," and he called her, and she came to him, and he said, "Carry away your son." [37]And she came and fell at his feet and bowed to the ground, and she carried away her son and went out.

[38]And Elisha had gone back to Gilgal. And there was famine in the land, and the acolyte prophets were sitting before him. And he said to his lad, "Put the big pot on the fire and cook a stew for the acolyte prophets." [39]And one of them went out to the field to gather sprouts and found a field vine and gathered from it field gourds, as much as his garment could hold, and he came and sliced them into the stew pot, for they did not know. [40]And they poured for the men to eat, and it happened, as they were about to eat, they cried out, "Death is in the pot, man of God!" And they could not eat. [41]And he said, "Fetch flour." And he flung it into the pot, and he said, "Pour for the people, that they may eat." And there was nothing harmful in the pot.

[42]And a man had come from Baal-Shalishah, and he brought the man of God first fruits, twenty loaves of barley bread and fresh grain in his sack. And he said, "Give it to the people, that they may eat." [43]And his

attendant said, “What? Shall I set this before a hundred men?” And he said, “Give it to the people that they may eat. For thus said the LORD, ‘Eat and leave over.’” 44And he set it before them, and they ate and left over, according to the word of the LORD.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Your sevant, my husband*. Almost everyone in these stories addresses Elisha deferentially. In this case, Elisha may have actually been the master of this group of acolyte prophets. In the story of the almost poisoned stew in verses 38–41, he appears to take upon himself the responsibility of providing food for them.

3. *Go, borrow vessels*. All these stories about Elisha’s performing miracles to aid people in distress have a strong folkloric character. They would provide direct inspiration for the stories about Jesus’s miracles in the Gospels—the cruse of oil that is constantly full, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, the multiplication of the fish and loaves.

8. *a wealthy woman*. The usual sense of the Hebrew adjective is “great,” but it also has the meaning of “wealthy.” The fact that she has the means to add a room to her house and furnish it argues for the sense of “wealthy.”

9. *a holy man of God*. Throughout these stories, Elisha is referred to as a man of God, not prophet. That designation does not mean “clergyman,” as in modern English, but rather someone with divine powers, and those are manifested in the sundry miracles he performs.

12. *Gehazi his lad*. This is the first mention of him. Elisha’s elevated status is reflected in his having an attendant or factotum who performs sundry tasks for him and acts as his intermediary.

Call this Shunammite. This form of reference seems a bit condescending, and if he has taken the trouble to learn her name, he is not disposed to use it.

13. *Say to her, pray*. Even though the woman is now standing before Elisha, he does not address her directly but instead has Gehazi put the question to her on his behalf.

In the midst of my people I dwell. Though some understand this to mean that she has no need for royal favors because she has the support of people around her, the more likely meaning is that she views herself as an ordinary person, dwelling among the people, and thus wants no part of special treatment from the court.

14. *Why, she has no son*. It seems a little suspect that Elisha needs Gehazi to point out the fact of her childlessness. One wonders how much attention he has been paying to her.

and her husband is an old man. This might well be the source of her fertility problems. The phrase is a reminiscence of Sarah's words in Genesis 18:12.

16. *At this fixed time, at this very season, you will embrace a son*. These formulaic words signal the unfolding of the annunciation type-scene. This one differs from all the others in that the word from the man of God is not dictated from above but is his own initiative as recompense for the woman's kindness to him. This is also the only annunciation that does not lead to the birth of someone destined to play a significant role in the national story: the boy is never named, and he remains no more than the son of a prosperous farmer.

17. *And the woman conceived and bore a son*. In another divergence from the set pattern of the annunciation, there is no mention of the necessary fact that the husband "knew" his wife. Could there be further play here with the fact of his advanced age?

19. *My head, my head*! Like Isaac, another son born after an annunciation, this child is threatened with death out in the open.

20. *and he stayed on her knees till noon, and he died*. Her anguish is magnified by his still being alive when he is brought to her, then expiring as

she desperately tries to succor him.

23. *Why are you going to him? Today is neither new moon nor sabbath*. The husband is surely being obtuse, for it is obvious enough why she wants to hurry off to the man of God. Sabbaths and new moons were times when special sacrifices were offered, which one could bring to a man of God so that he might partake of the part of the animal not burned on the altar.

Farewell. The Hebrew is *shalom,* the same word Gehazi used when he asked whether it is "well" with her and her family. In saying farewell, she simply ignores her husband's obtuse question.

24. *Drive it and go*. The servant's job is to run behind the donkey on which she is riding and prod it to move quickly with a switch or goad.

26. *And she said, "It is well*." She says these words to Gehazi because she does not want to be detained in explaining the disaster but instead means to head directly to Elisha.

27. *and the* LORD *has hidden it from me*. Elisha is, after all, a prophet, but he seems in many respects out of touch with the woman's life.

29. *And you shall put my staff on the lad's face*. Elisha assumes that his staff is imbued with supernatural powers, but this effort to revive the child through an act of pure magic does not work.

30. *I will not forsake you*. She puts her trust not in magic staffs but in the person of Elisha and so wants him to stick with her and come back to Shunem with her, to which he agrees.

32. *laid out on his bed*. That is, laid out on Elisha's bed.

34. *and lay over the child and put his mouth over his mouth*. Although this detail may look to a modern reader like mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, the intention of the ancient writer was more likely that the prophet imparted his own vital warmth, fueled by prophetic aura, to the child, reviving him in this fashion.

39. *sprouts . . . field gourds*. As with many other flora mentioned in the Bible, the exact identification of these plants remains uncertain. What is clear is that instead of a plant that would have been a proper ingredient for the stew, the ignorant gatherer brings back a poisonous plant.

41. *Fetch flour*. It is highly unlikely that flour would have the property of neutralizing the poison, so one must take this as a purely miraculous act.

42. *sack*. This is the traditional rendering of the unique Hebrew term *tsiqalon*, from whence it has passed into general usage in the language. But some scholars, proposing a Ugaritic cognate, argue that it refers to a kind of grain.

CHAPTER 5

[1]And Naaman, commander of the army of the king of
Aram, was a great man in the presence of his master
and highly esteemed, for through him the LORD had
granted victory to Aram, and the man was a valiant
warrior stricken with skin blanch. [2]And Aram had
sallied forth in raiding parties and captured a young
girl from the land of Israel. [3]And she said to her
mistress, “Would that my master might come before
the prophet who is in Samaria. Then he could cure him
of his skin blanch.” [4]And he sent and told his master,
“Thus and so did the girl who is from the land of Israel
speak.” [5]And the king of Aram said, “Go forth, and I
shall send a letter to the king of Israel.” And he went,
and he took in his hand ten talents of silver and six
thousand pieces of gold and ten changes of garments.
[6]And he brought the letter to the king of Israel, saying,
“And now, when this letter comes to you, look, I have
sent to you my servant Naaman, and you shall cure
him of his skin blanch.” [7]And it happened when the
king of Israel read the letter, he rent his garments and

said, “Am I God, to deal death and life, that this person has sent to me to cure a man from his skin blanch? For you must surely know and mark, pray, that he is seeking a pretext against me.” [8]And it happened when Elisha, the man of God, heard that the king of Israel had rent his garments, he sent to the king, saying, “Why did you rend your garments? Let him come, pray, to me, that he may know there is a prophet in Israel.” [9]And Naaman came with his horses and his chariot and stood at the entrance to Elisha’s house. [10]And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go and bathe seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored, and you will be clean.” [11]And Naaman was furious, and he went off and said, “Look, I thought to myself, he will surely come out and stand and call in the name of the LORD his God and wave his hand toward the place and cure the skin-blanched person. [12]Are not Amanah and Parpar the rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not bathe in them and be clean?” And he turned and went off incensed. [13]And his servants approached and said, “Father! The prophet has spoken a great thing to you. Shall you not do it? How much more so as he said to you, bathe and be clean?” [14]And he went down and dipped in the Jordan seven times, according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh was restored,

like the flesh of a young lad, and he was clean. [15]And
he went back to the man of God, he and all his camp,
and he came and stood before him and said “Now,
pray, I know that there is no god in all the earth except
in Israel, and so, take, pray, a gift from your servant.”
[16]And he said, “As the LORD lives, in Whose
attendance I have stood, I will not take it.” And he
pressed him to take it but he refused. [17]And Naaman
said, “If not, let your servant be given two mules’ load
of soil, for your servant will no longer perform burnt
offering or sacrifice to other gods but to the LORD.
[18]For this thing may the LORD forgive me: when my
master comes to the house of Rimmon to worship
there and he leans on my arm and I worship in the
house of Rimmon, may the LORD forgive me in this
thing for my worshipping in the house of Rimmon.”
[19]And he said to him, “Go in peace.” And he went
away from him some distance. [20]And Gehazi, lad of
Elisha man of God, thought: “Look, my master has
held back Naaman the Aramean, not taking from his
hand what he brought. As the LORD lives, I will run
after him and take something from his hand.” [21]And
Gehazi chased after Naaman, and Naaman saw him
running after him and alighted from the chariot to
meet him and said, “Is all well?” [22]And he said, “It is
well. My master sent me, saying, ‘Look, just now two

lads from the high country of Ephraim of the acolyte prophets have come to me. Give them, pray, a talent of silver and two changes of garments.'" [23]And Naaman said, "Be so kind as to take two talents." And he pressed him, and he wrapped the two talents of silver in two bags, and the two changes of garments, and he gave them to his two lads, and they bore them off before him. [24]And he came to the citadel and took them from their hand and lay them aside in the house and sent away the men, and they went off. [25]And he had come and was standing by his master, and Elisha said to him, "From where have you come, Gehazi?" And he said, "Your servant has not gone anywhere." [26]And he said to him, "Did not my heart come along when a man turned back from his chariot to meet you? Is this the time to take silver and to take garments and olive trees and vineyards and sheep and cattle and slaves and slavegirls? [27]May Naaman's skin blanch cling to you and to your seed forever!" And he went out from before him skin-blanched as snow.

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *for through him the LORD had granted victory to Aram*. This clause establishes the universalist perspective of the story, in which a prophet of Israel will perform a wonder for a non-Israelite. From the viewpoint of the Hebrew writer, it is the LORD, the God worshipped by Israel, Who determines all events, though of course the Aramean general could not be aware that he owes his victories to YHWH.

2. *the land of Israel*. This designation is actually unusual and in all likelihood reflects the perception of the Arameans.

3. *Would that my master might come before the prophet*. The Hebrew has only the implied verb "be." To be or stand before someone implies a relationship of deference or even subservience, and the idiom recurs in the story. One notes that the captive Israelite girl appears to be on good terms with her Aramean mistress, evincing solicitude for her mistress's husband.

skin blanch. The Hebrew *tsaraʿat* is traditionally translated as "leprosy," but the leading symptom mentioned in this narrative and elsewhere is a complete loss of pigmentation, whereas leprosy involves lesions and lumps in the skin and sometimes a slightly paler color but not the ghastly whiteness of which the biblical texts speak. This is, then, a disfiguring skin disease that remains unidentified, and hence the present translation, here and elsewhere, coins a name not to be found in dermatological manuals that refers to the whiteness.

5. *I shall send a letter to the king of Israel*. The king of Aram decides to intervene on behalf of his general on the highest diplomatic level, king to king. He barely registers the advice that came from the captive girl to turn to the prophet because his letter to the king of Israel makes no mention of it, in consequence of which the Israelite king is panicked.

ten talents of silver and six thousand pieces of gold. This vast treasure is meant to be a gift or payment to the Israelite prophet.

7. *he is seeking a pretext against me*. Confronted with the bare request from the Aramean king in his very brief missive to cure Naaman, the Israelite king construes the entire maneuver as a trap: when he fails to cure Naaman, the king of Aram will attack him.

8. *when Elisha . . . heard that the king of Israel had rent his garments*. Word of this public gesture of mourning or grief would have quickly spread.

9. *And Naaman came with his horses and his chariot*. Now we learn that the general has come to Samaria with a full military retinue.

and stood at the entrance of Elisha's house. Nevertheless, the distinguished general does not presume to march into the house of the man of God, but stands at the entrance, awaiting word. The word comes to him only through an intermediary, a messenger (evidently not Elisha's personal attendant Gehazi).

11. *he will surely come out and stand and call in the name of the* LORD *his God and wave his hand*. Naaman had expected personal intervention by the prophet that involved invocation of the deity's powerful name and magical hand gestures, probably over the "place" of the disease.

12. *Are not Amanah and Parpar the rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel*? Damascus, after all, is situated at a fertile confluence of rivers, and to the Damascene eye, the Jordan is no more than a muddy rivulet. If simple bathing could cure the disease, he would have been better off doing it in Aram.

13. *The prophet has spoken a great thing to you*. They intuit that the ostensibly simple command to dip seven times in the Jordan is actually the direction for a miraculous cure.

How much more so. It is a great thing that can be effected through an easy act.

14. *like the flesh of a young lad*. There is an interesting echo of the phrase here, *naʿar qaton*, with the designation of the captive girl who gave the advice, *naʿarah qetanah*, "a young girl."

15. *stood before him*. The posture, as noted above, is deferential.

there is no god in all the earth except in Israel. The miraculous cure converts the Aramean general into a monotheist.

16. *I will not take it*. Elisha does not seek payment for services. His payment is in the triumph of Naaman's conversion.

17. *let your servant be given two mules' load of soil*. Naaman assumes that proper sacrifice to YHWH can be offered only on the soil of Israel, and so he requests permission to take some of it back with him to Aram. Some scholars see in this a reflection of the quandary of the Israelites exiled after 721 B.C.E., though that is not a necessary inference.

18. *the house of Rimmon*. This is the temple of the national god of Aram, evidently a storm god.

to worship. Literally, "to bow down," this gesture being a synecdoche for worship.

and he leans on my arm. Given Naaman's position as accompanier of the king in the temple, which would be an official duty, he can scarcely avoid going through the outward motions of Rimmon worship.

21. *Is all well?* Seeing Elisha's attendant running after him, Naaman is alarmed that something may be amiss as far as the prophet is concerned.

22. *My master sent me*. Gehazi is obliged to implement his greedy act by an outright lie: that his master needs some of the proffered gift for two newly arrived acolyte prophets. He does not dare ask for the whole splendid gift, though Naaman generously gives him twice the amount of silver he requested.

26. *Did not my heart come along*. At this juncture, for purposes necessary to the plot in which Gehazi's base act is exposed, Elisha exercises clairvoyance.

olive trees and vineyards and sheep and cattle and slaves and slavegirls. These items, of course, are not part of the gift Gehazi extracted from Naaman, but Elisha implies that the talents of silver could serve to purchase these standard markers of wealth in the agricultural-pastoral society.

27. *May Naaman's skin blanch cling to you*. In the final turn of the universalist screw in this story, the rapacious and dishonest Israelite is stricken with the disease of which the Aramean general, now a devout follower of the God of Israel, has been cured.

CHAPTER 6

[1]And the acolyte prophets said to Elisha, “Look, the
place where we dwell is too cramped for us. [2]Let us,
pray, go to the Jordan and each of us take from there
one beam and make us a place to dwell there.” And he
said, “Go.” [3]And one of them said, “Be so kind, pray,
as to go with your servants.” And he said, “I will go.”
[4]And he went with them, and they came to the Jordan
and cut down trees. [5]And it happened, as one of them
was felling the beam, that the iron blade dropped into
the water, and he cried out, “Woe, my master, it is
borrowed!” [6]And the man of God said, “Where did it
fall?,” and he showed him. And he cut off a stick and
flung it there, and the iron blade floated up. [7]And he
said, “Lift it up for yourself,” and he stretched out his
hand and took it.

[8]And the king of Aram had been battling against
Israel, and he took counsel with his servants, saying,
“At such-and-such a place is my encampment.” [9]And

the man of God said to the king of Israel, saying,
“Keep yourself from passing through this place, for the
Arameans are deployed there.” 10And the king of Israel
sent to the place of which the man of God had spoken
to him and warned about it, and he kept himself from
there more than once. 11And the king of Aram’s heart
stormed over this thing, and he called to his servants
and said to them, “”Will you not tell me? Who of ours
is for the king of Israel?” 12And one of his servants
said, “No, my lord the king! Rather, it is Elisha, the
prophet who is in Israel, who can tell the king of Israel
the very words you speak in your bedchamber.” 13And
he said, “Go, see where he is, that I might send and
fetch him.” And it was told to him, saying, “Look, he
is in Dothan,” 14and he sent horses there and chariots
and a heavy force, and they came by night and
surrounded the town. 15And the man of God’s
attendant woke early to rise up, and he went out, and,
look, a force was drawn round the town, and horses
and chariots. And his lad said to him, “Woe, my
master, what can we do?” 16And he said, “Do not fear,
for there are more with us than with them.” 17And
Elisha prayed and said, “LORD, open his eyes, pray,
that he may see.” And the LORD opened the lad’s
eyes, and he saw, and look, the mountain was filled
with horses and chariots of fire around Elisha. 18And

they came down to him, and Elisha prayed to the LORD and said, “Strike this nation with blinding light.” And he struck them with blinding light according to the word of Elisha. [19]And Elisha said to them, “This is not the way, and this is not the town. Come after me, that I may lead you to the man whom you seek.” And they went after him to Samaria. [20]And it happened, when they came to Samaria, that Elisha said, “LORD, open the eyes of these people, that they may see.” And the LORD opened their eyes and they saw, and, look, they were in the midst of Samaria. [21]And the king of Israel said to Elisha when he saw them, “Shall I indeed strike them down, my father?” [22]And he said, “You shall not strike. Whom you have captured with your sword and your bow you may strike. Set out bread and water before them, that they may eat and drink and go to their master.” [23]And he made a great feast for them, and they ate and they drank, and he sent them off, and they went to their master. And the raiding parties of Aram no longer came into the land of Israel.

[24]And it happened afterward that Ben-Hadad king of Aram gathered all his camp and came up and laid siege against Samaria. [25]And there was a great famine

in Samaria, and, look, they laid siege against it till a donkey's head cost eighty pieces of silver and a quarter of a *qab* of pigeon-droppings five pieces of silver.
[26]And as the king of Israel was passing on top of the wall, a woman cried out to him, saying, "Rescue me, my lord the king!" [27]And he said, "Don't! Let the LORD rescue you. From where can I rescue you, from the threshing floor or from the winepress?" [28]And he said to her, "What's the matter with you?" And she said, "This woman said to me, 'Give over your son, that we may eat him today, and my son we shall eat tomorrow.' [29]And we cooked my son and ate him and I said to her the next day, 'Give over your son, that we may eat him,' but she has hidden her son." [30]And it happened when the king of Israel heard the woman's words, he rent his garments as he was passing on top of the wall, and the people saw, and, look, sackcloth was on his flesh underneath. [31]And he said "So may God do to me and even more, if the head of Elisha son of Shaphat stays on him today." [32]And Elisha was sitting in his house and the elders were sitting with him. And he sent a man ahead of him before the messenger could come to him. And he had said to the elders, "Do you see that this murderer's son has sent to take off my head? See, when the messenger comes, close the door and squeeze him against the door. Is

that not the sound of his master's footsteps after him?"
[33]He was still speaking with them when, look, the king
came down to him and said, "This evil is from the
LORD. What more can I hope for from the LORD?"

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Look, the place where we dwell is too cramped for us*. From this petition, one may infer that Elisha as master prophet was responsible for decisions regarding the living arrangements of the acolyte prophets as well as for providing them with food. It also is evident that they constituted a sizable group.

3. *Be so kind, pray, as to go with your servants*. They feel dependent on his guidance and his sustaining presence.

5. *Woe, my master, it is borrowed*. An axehead was a valuable item, and we have already seen that the acolyte prophets were relatively poor.

6. *the iron blade floated up*. This particular intercession on behalf of a follower is, even more transparently than the previous one, an act of pure magic.

8. *And the king of Aram had been battling against Israel*. It is not possible to determine with any confidence which kings they are from these generalized terms. It also looks as if these episodes in sequence were originally independent stories collected and strung together editorially. There is no hint here that in the previous episode an Israelite prophet cured an Aramean general, who then went off happily, converted to monotheism.

his servants. The Hebrew term that has the general meaning of "servants" or "slaves" refers in royal contexts to the king's courtiers, who may well be high officials.

9. *Keep yourself from passing through this place*. Elisha again exercises prophetic clairvoyance, a power duly recognized by the Aramean king's courtiers in verse 12.

16. *Do not fear, for there are more with us than with them*. At this point, it is not yet clear that he is referring to supernatural forces. Elisha, more than any other of the early prophets, repeatedly resorts to miraculous powers. His master Elijah was obliged to flee for his life when Ahab sought to kill him, but Elisha when mortally threatened can immediately count on chariots of fire and mysterious cavalry.

17. *LORD, open his eyes, pray, that he may see*. Elisha, with his prophet's vision, has already seen the supernatural army on the mountains. The narrative will go on to play with a counterpoint of opening the eyes and blinding them with dazzling light.

18. *Strike this nation with blinding light*. Blinding light, *sanweirim*, is also what the divine messengers at Sodom (Genesis 19:11) use to disable the mob of would-be rapists, and a connection between these two groups impelled by nefarious intention may be suggested.

19. *the man whom you seek*. Your targeting of a man of God is misconceived. If you are Israel's enemy, let me show you Israel's king.

20. *And the LORD opened their eyes and they saw*. Unlike the opening of the servant's eyes, which enables him to see supernatural allies, what they see is that they are in the heart of the enemy capital, a potentially fatal place for them, as the king's words in the next verse make clear.

23. *And he made a great feast for them*. The king, taking Elisha's cue that these miraculously captured warriors are not legitimate prisoners of war, goes one better than the prophet's instructions and lays out a generous feast for the Arameans, not merely bread and water.

25. *And there was a great famine in Samaria*. Starvation in besieged towns cut off from all food supplies was one of the great terrors of ancient warfare, a fact reflected in many biblical texts. The famine here is a counterpoint to the royal feast at the end of the preceding episode.

till a donkey's head cost eighty pieces of silver and a quarter of a qab *of pigeon-droppings five pieces of silver*. The besieged population is so desperate for food that even the most inedible part of an unclean animal commands a prince's ransom. Some scholars understand the term for pigeon-droppings as a reference to carob pods, but that dilutes the hyperbolic power of the statement—that even animal filth was consumed by the starving people, and at a stiff price. *Qab* is a unit of dry measure, probably a little over a liter.

26. *Rescue me*. This cry, *hoshiaʿ*, was the set term in pleading for justice from the king.

27. *From where can I rescue you, from the threshing floor or from the winepress*? These are, of course, places where food and drink are produced, and they are inaccessible to anyone in the besieged town. Thus the king assumes she is pleading for food. The phrase has the ring of a set idiom.

28. *Give over your son, that we may eat him today*. Cannibalism in time of siege is invoked a number of times in Prophetic poetry, and it appears to have been a reality in the ancient world, but only here do we get a direct representation of the grisly act in dialogue, as part of a narrative.

30. *when the king of Israel heard . . . the woman's words, he rent his garments*. The situation of the two women, one asking for justice from the king after her child has been cannibalized, is reminiscent of the two whores with the dead child and the living child in 1 Kings 3. This king, however, has no option to exercise Solomonic wisdom after the woman's child has been eaten, and instead, despairing, he rends his garments in an act of mourning.

sackcloth was on his flesh underneath. The king is wearing some sort of royal robe, but it has now been torn open, and the sackcloth beneath is visible.

31. *So may God do to me and even more, if the head of Elisha son of Shaphat stays on him today*. The king's fury against Elisha may be triggered by his recognition of the prophet's supernatural powers. If the man of God is able to blind and capture a heavy force of Aramean warriors, his failure to intervene on behalf of the besieged town must be a deliberately hostile act.

32. *the elders were sitting with him*. The elders would constitute a political group outside the monarchy, and harking back to the premonarchic period.

They may even be a center of opposition to the king.

And he sent a man ahead of him. Again, he sees what is about to happen through clairvoyance.

the messenger. The term, which designates any agent, human or divine, here refers to an assassin, not to someone bringing a message.

this murderer's son. This could well refer to Jehoram, the son of Ahab, whom Elijah excoriated as a murderer, though some scholars prefer to understand it as "murderous person."

close the door and squeeze him against the door. Elisha reduces the would-be hit man to an object of farce, pinned between the door and the wall.

33. *the king came down to him*. The received text says "messenger," *malʾakh*, but the king has been following close after his messenger, his footsteps audible, and in the next moment in this scene (7:2), we see the king, who has just been addressed by Elisha, leaning on the arm of his official. *Malʾakh*, then, is in all likelihood a scribal error for *melekh*, "king." See the second comment on 2 Samuel 11:1, where the orthographic closeness of these two words is pointedly put into play.

CHAPTER 7

[1]And Elisha said, “Hear the word of the LORD. Thus
said the LORD: ‘At this time tomorrow, a *seah* of fine
flour will sell for a shekel, and two *seahs* of barley for
a shekel in the gate of Samaria.’” [2]And the official on
whose arm the king was leaning answered the man of
God and said, “Look, the LORD is about to make
casements in the heavens! Can this thing be?” And he
said, “You are about to see with your own eyes, but
you shall not eat from there.” [3]And four men stricken
with skin blanch were at the entrance to the gate, and
they said to one another, “Why are we sitting here till
we die? [4]Should we say, ‘Let us come into the town,’
with famine in the town, we would die there, and if we
stay here, we shall die. And now, come, let us slip off
to the camp of Aram. If they let us live, we shall live,
and if they put us to death, we shall die.” [5]And they
rose at twilight to go into the camp of Aram, and they
came to the edge of the camp of Aram, and, look,
there was no one there. [6]And the LORD had made the
sound of chariots, the sound of horses heard in the

camp of Aram, the sound of a great force, and every man said to his comrade, “Look, the king of Israel has hired against us the Hittite kings and the kings of Egypt to come against us.” [7]And they rose and fled at twilight, and they abandoned their tents and their horses and their donkeys in the camp just as it was, and they ran for their lives. [8]And these men stricken with skin blanch came to the edge of the camp and came into one tent and ate and drank and carried away silver and gold and garments, and they went off and hid them, and they returned and came into another tent and carried things away from there and went off and hid them. [9]And they said to each other, “We are not doing right. This day is a day of good tidings and we remain silent. If we wait till morning’s light, guilt will befall us. And now, come, let us go and tell it at the king’s house.” [10]And they came and called out to the gatekeepers of the town and told them, saying, “We came into the camp of Aram, and, look, there was no one there and no human sound, only horses tethered and donkeys tethered, and tents just as they had been.” [11]And the gatekeepers called and told it at the king’s house within. [12]And the king arose in the night and said to his servants, “Let me tell you, pray, what the Arameans have done to us: they knew we were starving, and they have gone out of the camp to

hide in the field, saying, ‘When they come out of the town we shall catch them alive and enter the town.’”
13 And one of his servants answered and said, “Let them take, pray, five of the remaining horses that are left in the town—look, they are like all the multitude of Israel who are left in it; look, they are like all the multitude of Israel who have come to an end, and let us send and see.” 14 And they took two teams of horses, and the king sent after the camp of Aram, saying, “Go and see.” 15 And they went after them to the Jordan, and, look, the whole road was filled with garments and gear that the Arameans had flung down in their haste, and the messengers came back and told the king.
16 And the people went out and plundered the camp of Aram, and so, a *seah* of fine flour sold for a shekel and two *seahs* of barley for a shekel, according to the word of the LORD. 17 And the king had appointed over the gate the official on whose arm he had leaned, and the people trampled him in the gate and he died, as the man of God had spoken, as he had spoken when the king came down to him. 18 And it happened when the man of God spoke to the king, saying, “Two *seahs* of barley will sell for a shekel and a *seah* of fine flour for a shekel at this time tomorrow in the gate of Samaria,”
19 the official answered the man of God and said, “And look, the LORD is about to make casements in the

heavens! Can such a thing be?" And he said, "You are about to see with your own eyes, but you shall not eat from there." [20]And so it happened to him, and the people trampled him and he died.

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *a* seah *of fine flour will sell for a shekel*. The prices stipulated here are the antithesis of the astronomic prices for virtually inedible stuff mentioned in 6:25. This is, then, a concrete way of saying that the deadly famine will suddenly come to an end. It should be kept in mind that in this early period, the shekel is not a coin but a weight of silver (about 11.5 grams). A *seah* is roughly 7.3 liters.

2. *the official on whose arm the king was leaning*. Since Naaman performs the same function for the king of Aram, one may infer that this was a set court duty for a high-ranking figure. But Naaman in mentioning this role of his has become a convinced believer in the power of YHWH, whereas this official is a doubter.

Look, the LORD *is about to make casements in the heavens*. This remark, which invokes a memorable phrase from the Flood story (Genesis 7:11), is obviously sarcastic, the idea being that Elisha imagines the LORD will somehow rain down food from the sky for the starving Israelites.

but you shall not eat from there. Elisha's words are veiled, ominously hinting at the dire fate that will befall the official.

3. *And four men stricken with skin blanch were at the entrance to the gate*. This disfiguring skin disease was thought to be contagious, requiring quarantine, according to the laws of Leviticus. (But the requirement of quarantine is ignored in the case of a high-ranking figure such as Naaman.) The diseased men are thus outside the town, in a liminal space between the

besieged city and the Aramean camp. The schadenfreude in this account of the flight of the Arameans is heightened by the fact that the discovery of their precipitous retreat is made by outcasts.

4. *If they let us live, we shall live*. Given that they are bound to die of starvation either inside the town or outside the walls, they decide that they may as well throw themselves on the mercy of the Arameans, who might just feed them and let them live rather than kill them.

6. *the king of Israel has hired against us the Hittite kings and the kings of Egypt*. If this story of an Aramean army renouncing a siege has a historical kernel, it would be here—that an alliance of kings induced the Arameans to retreat. In their fearful dialogue, they make the monarchs of both Egypt and the Hittites plurals.

7. *they . . . fled at twilight*. As in many languages, the Hebrew word for twilight, *neshef*, can refer either to sunset or dawn. Here the likely scenario is that the Arameans depart as the sun sets, their flight thus unseen from the town; the diseased men enter the camp just after the besiegers have fled; they then bring the report of what they have seen to the king in the middle of the night.

9. *guilt will befall us*. The Israelites will berate them, or worse, for not having brought the news at once of the flight of the Arameans.

10. *the gatekeepers*. The Hebrew shows a singular noun, but "to them" is unambiguously plural. In the next verse, "gatekeepers" has the plural ending. The gates of the town were of course bolted, and so the diseased men had to make a special plea to the gatekeepers to be admitted within in order to bring their great news to the king. The gatekeepers do not let them in, but carry the news to the king.

12. *Let me tell you, pray, what the Arameans have done to us*. True to the fearful character that the king of Israel exhibited when he received the letter from the king of Aram about curing Naaman, he now concludes that this is a trap the Arameans have set to lure the Israelites outside the town.

13. *five of the remaining horses that are left in the town*. The implication is that most of the horses have been eaten. Some scholars think that "five" does not indicate a precise number but means "a few."

look, they are like all the multitude of Israel. The repetition of this clause in immediate sequence might be an inadvertent scribal duplication (dittography), though it could equally be an expression of the speaker's emotional turmoil in contemplating the terrible fact that there are so few survivors in the town.

they are like all the multitude of Israel who have come to an end. In the first iteration of this clause, the verb is "who are left." Now it is "who have come to an end." There is a grim overlap between surviving and dying: if the horses are like the people, barely surviving and on the way to joining those who have already died, there is nothing lost in sending them out on this mission.

14. *two teams of horses*. This seems the likely sense of the Hebrew, which is literally "two chariots of horses."

15. *And they went after them to the Jordan*. What may be happening is that the horses are sent down the road, with the king's men driving them from behind with cries and perhaps long whips, ready to fall back if the horses are spotted by Aramean troops. They evidently bypass the empty camp, where they fear an ambush, and discover—a significant use of the presentative "look" to mark their visual point of view—evidence that the flight is real in the garments and gear strewn over the road.

17. *the people trampled him in the gate*. This is a credible detail: the people, on the point of death by starvation, stampede through the gate to get at the food and riches they have heard are available in the Aramean camp (or to get to those who have already expropriated the flour and are selling it at the prices announced in the previous verse), and so they inadvertently trample the official. Elisha's obscure prophecy is now violently fulfilled.

18. *two* seahs *of barley will sell for a shekel and a* seah *of fine flour for a shekel*. The story concludes with an elaborate verbatim repetition of Elisha's prophecy and the words of the official. The only variation is that here the barley is first, the fine flour second, and the particle that means "and" is added to the official's first word. In this instance, the point of the repetition with no

substantive changes is to underscore how the general prophecy, and then the prophecy specifically addressed to the official in rebuke of his skepticism, are literally and completely fulfilled.

CHAPTER 8

[1]And Elisha had spoken to the woman whose son he
revived, saying, “Arise and go, you and your
household, and sojourn wherever you would sojourn,
for the LORD has called forth famine and it actually
has come to the land for seven years.” [2]And the
woman arose and did according to the man of God’s
word, and she went, she and her household, and
sojourned in the land of the Philistines seven years.
[3]And it happened at the end of seven years that the
woman came back from the land of the Philistines,
and she went out and cried to the king for her house
and for her field. [4]And the king was speaking to
Gehazi, the man of God’s lad, saying, “Recount to me,
pray, all the great things that Elisha did.” [5]And it
happened as he was recounting to the king that Elisha
revived the dead, that, look, the woman whose son he
had revived came crying out to the king for her house
and for her field. And Gehazi said, “This is the
woman, and this is her son whom Elisha revived.”
[6]And the king asked the woman, and she recounted to

him, and he gave her a certain eunuch, saying, “Return all that is hers and all the yield of the field from the day she left the land till now.”

7 And Elisha came to Damascus, with Ben-Hadad king of Aram ill, and it was told to him, saying, “The man of God has come here.” 8 And the king said to Hazael, “Take tribute in your hand and go to meet the man of God and inquire of the LORD through him, saying, ‘Will I survive this illness?’” 9 And Hazael went to meet him and took tribute in his hand, from all the bounty of Damascus, a load of forty camels, and he came and stood before him and said, “Your son Ben-Hadad king of Aram has sent me to you, saying, ‘Will I survive this illness?’” 10 And Elisha said to him, “Go, say to him, ‘You will surely survive,’ but the LORD has shown me that he is doomed to die.” 11 And his face froze and he was dumbfounded a long time, and the man of God wept. 12 And Hazael said, “Why is my lord weeping?” And he said, “Because I know the harm that you will do to the Israelites. Their fortresses you will send up in flames, and their young men you will slay by the sword, and their infants you will smash, and their pregnant women you will split open.” 13 And Hazael said, “How could your servant, a dog, do this

great thing?" And Elisha said, "The LORD has showed you to me as king over Aram." [14]And he went from Elisha and came to his master, and he said to him, "What did Elisha say to you?" And he said, "He said, 'You will surely survive.'" [15]And it happened the next day that he took a cloth and soaked it in water and spread it over his face, and he died. And Hazael became king in his stead.

[16]And in the fifth year of Jehoram son of Ahab king of Israel—Jehoshaphat had been king of Judah—Jehoram son of Jehoshaphat became king, king of Judah. [17]He was thirty-two years old when he became king, and he was king in Jerusalem eight years. [18]And he went in the way of the kings of Israel, as the house of Ahab had done, for Ahab's daughter had become his wife, and he did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD. [19]But the LORD did not want to destroy Judah, for the sake of David His servant, as He had said to him to grant a lamp for his sons perpetually. [20]In his days did Edom rebel from under the hand of Judah, and they set a king over themselves. [21]And Jehoram crossed over to Zair, all the chariots with him, and it happened that as he arose in the night, the Edomites surrounding him struck him, and the

captains of the chariots, and the troops fled to their tents. [22]And Edom has rebelled from under the hand of Judah until this day. Then did Libnah rebel at that time. [23]And the rest of the acts of Jehoram and all that he did, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Judah? [24]And Jehoram lay with his fathers and was buried in the City of David, and Ahaziah his son became king in his stead. [25]In the twelfth year of Jehoram son of Ahab king of Israel, Ahaziah became king, king of Judah. [26]Ahaziah was twenty-two years old when he became king, and he was king one year in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Athaliah daughter of Omri king of Israel. [27]And he went in the way of the house of Ahab and did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD like the house of Ahab, for he was kin by marriage to the house of Ahab. [28]And Jehoram son of Ahab went to battle with Hazael king of Aram at Ramoth-Gilead, and the Arameans struck down Jehoram. [29]And King Jehoram came back to heal in Jezreel from the blows that the Arameans had struck him at Ramah when he did battle with Hazael king of Aram, and Ahaziah son of Jehoram king of Judah had gone down to see Jehoram son of Ahab in Jezreel, for he was ill.

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Elisha had spoken to the woman*. The syntax and the form of the Hebrew verb indicate a pluperfect, as reflected in the translation—a careful indication of tense because the action about to be reported unfolds seven years after Elisha's words to the woman. Oddly, in this episode she is never referred to as "the Shunammite."

4. *And the king was speaking to Gehazi*. There is no hint here that Gehazi has been stricken with a ghastly skin disease. This is one of several indications that the stories about Elisha brought together in this cycle probably originated independently. The fact that Gehazi is a presence in the court recounting the great acts of his master has led some interpreters to infer that in this particular story Elisha is assumed to have died.

5. *crying out to the king*. The Hebrew verb used here has a technical sense of making a plea for justice from the king.

for her house and for her field. These substantial possessions have obviously been seized by others during her seven years' absence.

6. *a certain eunuch*. Although this is the plain meaning of the Hebrew noun *saris*, it is possible that the term came to designate a particular kind of court official, without reference to genital mutilation.

all the yield of the field from the day she left the land till now. She is legally entitled not only to resume possession of the land but to receive all the profit made from it during her absence.

8. *Take tribute in your hand and go to meet the man of God*. If there is any continuity between this story and the story of Naaman, Elisha's powers would be well-known and respected in the Aramean court.

inquire of the LORD through him. Ben-Hadad does not assume that YHWH is the one and only God, but he has reason to think that this Hebrew deity served by Elisha has great potency.

9. *a load of forty camels*. This makes the tribute a very grand gift.

10. *Go, say to him, "You will surely survive," but the* LORD *has shown me that he is doomed to die*. Elisha's response is devious: you can tell him he will survive his grave illness, which will be technically true because he is to die from quite a different cause. Some interpreters imagine that Elisha is encouraging Hazael to assassinate Ben-Hadad, but this is implausible because Elisha foresees that when he becomes king, Hazael will ravage the people of Israel. What has happened is simply that God has revealed to him both Ben-Hadad's fate and the future course of war between Aram and Israel.

11. *And his face froze*. This is the likely sense of the somewhat obscure Hebrew, which is literally, "and he made his face stand [still]."

and he was dumbfounded. The received text shows *wayasem*, "and he put." But two Hebrew manuscripts and the Vulgate have *wayishom*, to be desolate or dumbfounded, which is much more likely. The subject of both these verbs must be Hazael, who is astounded, and at a loss, to hear Elisha's stark prophecy.

13. *How could your servant, a dog, do this great thing*? The humble self-designation reflects the fact that Hazael, though he is some sort of court official, is not of the royal line. In an inscription by the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III, Hazael is in fact referred to as "son of no one." One notes that he has no moral compunctions about the prospect of perpetrating the most barbaric cruelties on the men, women, and infants of Israel; on the contrary, these were common acts in military conquest and thus part of what constituted a "great thing" that he is not sure he is worthy to do.

The LORD *has showed you to me as king over Aram*. These words may not be intended to instigate the assassination, but they certainly have the effect of giving Hazael the idea.

15. *he took a cloth and soaked it in water and spread it over his face*. The subject of the verb is Hazael. He kills the king by suffocating him (there will be no blood visible and perhaps the courtiers will conclude that Ben-Hadad died of his illness). The king, of course, in his greatly weakened state is in no shape to resist the murderous act.

21. *as he arose in the night, the Edomites surrounding him struck him*. The Masoretic Text reads: as he arose in the night, he struck the Edomites surrounding him. This reading may reflect scribal wishful thinking. To begin

with, it is syntactically peculiar, and the clear indication is that the Israelites were defeated in a successful rebellion by the Edomites. Furthermore, the "troops," *ʿam*, who flee to their tents—that is, to their homes—is a term generally referring to Israelite troops, not, as it appears here in the received text, to Edomites.

26. *his mother's name was Athaliah daughter of Omri*. In verse 18 she is identified as Ahab's daughter, though perhaps the Hebrew *bat* could encompass granddaughter. In any case, the familial connection through marriage with the house of Ahab leads to trouble.

CHAPTER 9

[1]And Elisha the prophet had called to one of the
acolyte prophets and said to him, “Gird your loins and
take this cruse of oil in your hand and go to Ramoth-
Gilead. [2]And you shall come there and see there Jehu
son of Jehoshaphat son of Nimshi. And you shall come
and raise him up from the midst of his brothers and
bring him into the inner chamber. [3]And you shall take
the cruse of oil and pour it on his head and say, ‘Thus
said the LORD: I have anointed you king over Israel.’
And you shall open the door and flee and you shall not
wait.” [4]And the lad went, the prophet lad, to Ramoth-
Gilead. [5]And he came and, look, the commanders of
the force were sitting there, and he said, “I have a
word for you, commander.” And Jehu said, “For
whom among all of us?” And he said, “For you,
commander.” [6]And he rose and entered the house and
poured oil on his head and said to him, “Thus said the
LORD God of Israel: ‘I have anointed you king over
the LORD’s people, over Israel. [7]And you shall strike
down the house of Ahab your master, and I will be

avenged for the blood of My servants the prophets and
for the blood of all the LORD's servants from the
hand of Jezebel. [8]And all the house of Ahab shall
perish, and I will cut off from Ahab every pisser
against the wall and ruler and helper in Israel. [9]And I
will make the house of Ahab like the house of
Jeroboam son of Nebat and like the house of Baasha
son of Ahijah. [10]And Jezebel the dogs shall devour in
the field of Jezreel, with none to bury her.'" And he
opened the door and fled. [11]And Jehu had gone out to
his master's servants, and someone said to him, "Is all
well? Why did this madman come to you?" And he
said to them, "You know this man and how he talks."
[12]And they said, "It's a lie! Tell us, pray." And he said,
"Thus and so he said to me, saying, 'Thus said the
LORD: "I have anointed you king over Israel."'" [13]And
they hastened and each of them took his garment and
they put them beneath him on the top of the stairs, and
they blew the ram's horn and said, "Jehu is king."
[14]And Jehu son of Jehoshaphat son of Nimshi plotted
against Jehoram, and Jehoram had been on watch at
Ramoth-Gilead—he and all Israel—against Hazael
king of Aram. [15]And King Jehoram had gone back to
Jezreel to heal from the blows that the Arameans
struck him when he did battle with Hazael king of
Aram. And Jehu said, "If you agree, let no fugitive

come out of the town to tell in Jezreel." [16]And Jehu
mounted and went to Jezreel, for Jehoram was in bed
there, and Ahaziah king of Judah had gone down to
see Jehoram. [17]And the lookout was stationed on the
tower in Jezreel, and he saw Jehu's throng as it came,
and he said, "I see a throng." And Jehoram said, "Take
a horseman and send out to meet them and say, 'Do
you come in peace?'" [18]And the horseman went to
meet him and said, "Thus said the king: 'Do you come
in peace?'" And Jehu said, "What do you have to do
with peace? Turn round behind me!" And the lookout
told, saying, "The messenger came to them and has
not come back." [19]And he sent a second horseman, and
he came to them and said, "Thus said the king: 'Do
you come in peace?'" And Jehu said, "What do you
have to do with peace? Turn round behind me." [20]And
the lookout told, saying, "He came to them and has not
come back, and the driving is like Jehu son of
Nimshi's driving, for he drives madly." [21]And Jehoram
said, "Hitch up!" And his chariot was hitched up, and
Jehoram king of Israel, and Ahaziah king of Judah
went out, each in his chariot, and they went out to
meet Jehu and found him in the field of Naboth the
Jezreelite. [22]And it happened when Jehoram saw Jehu
that he said, "Do you come in peace, Jehu?" And he
said to him, "What do the whoring of Jezebel your

mother and her abundant witchcraft have to do with
peace?” [23]And Jehoram whipped round the reins and
fled, and he said to Ahaziah, “Treachery, Ahaziah!”
[24]And Jehu bent the bow in his hand and struck
Jehoram between his shoulders, and the arrow came
out through his heart, and he collapsed in his chariot.
[25]And he said to Bidkar his officer, “Bear him off, fling
him into the field of Naboth the Jezreelite. For
remember! You and I rode side by side after Ahab his
father, and the LORD delivered this message about
him: [26]‘I surely saw the blood of Naboth and his sons
last night,’ says the LORD, ‘and I will pay you back in
this field,’ says the LORD. And, now, bear him off,
fling him into the field according to the word of the
LORD.” [27]And Ahaziah king of Judah had seen, and
he fled on the road to Beth-Gan, and Jehu pursued him
and said, “Him, too, strike down.” And they struck
him in the chariot on the Ascent of Gur which is by
Jibleam, and he fled to Megiddo and died there. [28]And
his servants took him by chariot to Jerusalem and
buried him there in his grave with his fathers in the
City of David. [29]And in the eleventh year of Jehoram
son of Ahab, Ahaziah had become king over Judah.
[30]And Jehu came to Jezreel, and Jezebel had heard,
and she put kohl round her eyes and did up her hair
and looked out through the window. [31]And Jehu had

entered the gate, and she said, “Is all well, you Zimri, killer of his master?” [32]And he lifted his face toward the window and said, “Who is with me, who?” And two or three eunuchs looked down at him. [33]And he said, “Push her out.” And they pushed her out, and her blood splattered against the wall and on the horses, and they trampled her. [34]And he came and ate and drank, and he said, “Look to this cursed creature and bury her, for she is the daughter of a king.” [35]And they went to bury her, but they found of her only the skull and the legs and the palms of the hands. [36]And they came back and told him, and he said, “It is the word of the LORD that He spoke through His servant Elijah the Tishbite, saying, ‘In the field of Jezreel the dogs shall devour the flesh of Jezebel. [37]And Jezebel’s carcass shall be like dung upon the ground in the field of Jezreel, so that they cannot say, “This is Jezebel.”’”

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *you shall come there and see there Jehu son of Jehoshaphat.* All along, prophets have been involved in power struggles around the throne, but Elisha’s initiative in this instance is the most blatant of these involvements: he sends one of his people to anoint Jehu as king and to prompt Jehu to assassinate the reigning king, Jehoram.

bring him into the inner chamber. The actual anointment is clandestine, and the acolyte prophet is accordingly enjoined to flee once he has performed the act, lest there be an adverse reaction on the part of the military people around Jehu when they learn what has occurred.

8. *I will cut off from Ahab every pisser against the wall*. This pungent epithet for males, reserved for curses, is usually pronounced by human speakers but here is used by God in the momentum of the curse-formula.

11. *his master's servants*. There is an ironic point in the use of this designation for Jehu's fellow officers. "His master" would have to be the king, against whom Jehu is about to rebel, abetted by the other commanders of the army.

Why did this madman come to you? The groups of prophets, bonded together in a kind of guild, were known for working themselves into ecstatic states, often with the help of musical instruments, as the two stories of Saul among the prophets in 1 Samuel illustrate. Calling a prophet a madman, then, makes perfect sense, and that equation occurs elsewhere in biblical literature.

12. *It's a lie*. The other officers immediately see that Jehu's response to their question about the acolyte prophet ("You know this man and how he talks") is an evasion. Jehu then feels constrained to divulge the truth about his clandestine anointment, counting on their support.

13. *each of them took his garment*. What they appear to be doing is constructing a kind of improvised throne, seating him on the top of the stairs. This is a literal realization of Elisha's injunction regarding Jehu to "raise him up from the midst of his brothers."

the top of the stairs. The Hebrew *gerem hamaʿalot* is unique to this verse and its meaning has been inferred from the context. In modern Hebrew, *gerem* has been adopted for "stairwell."

14. *Jehu . . . plotted against Jehoram*. As the details of the narrative make clear, the conspiracy is a military coup whereby Jehu, as one of the army officers, seizes the throne after killing its occupant.

Jehoram. The Hebrew here and at several other points uses a shortened form, Joram, but the translation, to avoid confusion, shows the full form of the name throughout.

15. *If you agree*. This is probably no more than a polite way of delivering an order, though it is possible that Jehu does not fully trust his fellow officers to follow his commands in implementing the coup, despite their gesture of support in elevating him on the improvised throne.

17. *Jehu's throng*. The word choice is realistic: from the distance, the lookout is able to identify a crowd of advancing soldiers, which he correctly assumes to be led by Jehu.

18. *What do you have to do with peace*? Jehu's implacably hostile intentions are manifest in his dialogue.

Turn round behind me. He also makes clear that he is the stronger party, and that the messenger had better abandon Jehoram and join the usurper.

20. *the driving is like Jehu son of Nimshi's driving, for he drives madly*. The lookout is too far off to see Jehu's face but can recognize his wild style of driving a chariot. In this we get a new element of characterization of Jehu: he is known, at least in royal circles, for riding in his chariot at breakneck speed. This wild energy is of a piece with his quickness as an assassin, about to be manifested.

21. *And Jehoram said, "Hitch up*!" In still another instance of the pattern of two repetitions with a divergence in the third repetition, Jehoram, after the defection of the two messengers, goes out himself to parlay with Jehu, naïvely imagining they can come to terms.

and Ahaziah king of Judah went out. Exhibiting what will prove to be fatal imprudence, Ahaziah chooses to express his solidarity with Jehoram by joining him in going to meet Jehu.

22. *What do the whoring of Jezebel your mother and her abundant witchcraft have to do with peace*? In this switch from the twice-repeated formula, Jehu makes himself the mouthpiece of Elisha's prophetic wrath against the whole house of Ahab. "Whoring" may mean, as it often does elsewhere in the Bible, going after strange gods, although an innuendo of sexual promiscuity is distinctly possible—calling a man's mother a whore to his face is, after all, an especially blatant insult.

23. *whipped round the reins*. The literal sense is "turned over his hands."

24. *struck Jehoram between his shoulders*. There is no chivalry in this efficient killing: Jehu shoots the fleeing Jehoram in the back.

25. *You and I rode side by side after Ahab his father*. This is a piece of delayed exposition that sharpens our sense of Jehu's animus toward Jehoram: he and Bidkar were actually present when Ahab expropriated the field of Naboth after his judicial murder.

26. *the blood of Naboth and his sons*. No sons were mentioned in the story of the killing of Naboth. Either this detail reflects a variant version of the story, or the sons, fatherless and landless, are considered as good as dead.

27. *Him, too, strike down*. Jehu shows Machiavellian ruthlessness here. Ahaziah king of Judah was in no way involved in the egregious crimes, cultic and moral, of the house of Ahab, but he became Jehoram's ally, and, as such, he might be a potential threat to Jehu, who therefore makes sure to have him killed.

And they struck him. This phrase (a single Hebrew word) is absent from the received text but appears in three ancient versions as well as in two Hebrew manuscripts. Without it, the sentence is semantically and syntactically incoherent.

28. *buried him there in his grave with his fathers*. Unlike Jehoram, who is flung into the field his father stole, there to be devoured by scavengers, Ahaziah is granted a proper burial.

30. *she put kohl round her eyes and did up her hair*. Though some interpreters take this as an expression of her desire to show a noble appearance, it looks more like an effort at the very end to exhibit her female attractiveness, thus picking up the sexual sense of "the whoring of Jezebel."

31. *you Zimri, killer of his master*. Confronted by the man who has killed her son and who she must know is now determined to kill her, Jezebel remains fierce and contemptuous. Zimri (1 Kings 16:8–18) slaughtered the whole house of Baasha and usurped the throne but was himself killed seven days later.

32. *Who is with me, who*? As with Jehoram's two messengers, Jehu counts on the fact that the attendants of the house of Ahab, seeing his superior force, will turn against their masters. Pointedly, Jehu does not deign to answer Jezebel's biting words to him.

two or three eunuchs. As before, these may simply be court officials.

34. *Look to this cursed creature*. The Hebrew uses merely the feminine indicative *haʾarurah hazo't* ("this cursed one") to express contempt.

bury her, for she is the daughter of a king. Although Jehu despises Jezebel, he is conscious of the respect due to royal personages—perhaps out of self-interest since he has just become king himself. For the moment, he puts out of his mind the explicit prophecy that has been delivered to him (verse 10), "And Jezebel the dogs shall devour in the field of Jezreel, with none to bury her."

36. *It is the word of the* LORD. After the fact, Jehu, though he has just appeared to be concerned that Jezebel receive a proper burial, affirms her being consumed by canine scavengers as a fitting fulfillment of God's curse on her.

37. *so that they cannot say, "This is Jezebel*." There may be a political angle to this fulfillment of the curse: nothing recognizable of Jezebel's body is left, nothing for any potential loyalists to venerate (as the Bolsheviks reduced the murdered family of the Czar to ashes for just this reason).

CHAPTER 10

[1]And Ahab had seventy sons in Samaria. And Jehu
wrote letters and sent them to the rulers of Samaria, to
the elders of the town and to Ahab's tutors, saying,
[2]"And now, when this letter comes to you, and the sons
of your master are with you, and the chariots and the
horses are with you, and the fortified towns and the
weapons, [3]you shall see to the best and the most fitting
of your master's sons and put him on his father's
throne, and battle for your master's house." [4]And they
were very, very afraid, and they thought, "Look, two
kings could not stand up against him, and how can we
stand?" [5]And he who was appointed over the palace
and he who was appointed over the town and the
elders and the tutors sent to Jehu, saying, "We are your
servants, and all that you say to us we shall do. We
shall make no one king. Do what is good in your eyes."
[6]And he wrote them a letter again, saying, "If you are
mine and heed my voice, take off the heads of the men
who are your master's sons and bring them to me at
this time tomorrow in Jezreel." And the king's sons,

seventy men, were with the town's notables who had reared them. [7]And it happened, when the letter came to them, that they took the king's sons and slaughtered the seventy men and put their heads in baskets and sent them to him in Jezreel. [8]And the messenger came and told him, saying, "They have brought the heads of the king's sons." And he said, "Put them in two piles at the entrance of the gate until morning." [9]And it happened in the morning that he came out and stood and said to all the people, "Well, you are innocent! Look, I plotted against my master and killed him, but who struck down all these? [10]Know, then, that nothing will fail of the word of the LORD that He spoke against the house of Ahab, but the LORD has done what He spoke through his servant Elijah." [11]And Jehu struck down all who were left of the house of Ahab in Jezreel, and all his notables and his intimates and his priests, till he left him no remnant. [12]And he rose and went and came to Samaria. When he was at Beth-Eked-ha-Roim on the way, [13]Jehu encountered the kinsmen of Ahaziah king of Judah, and he said, "Who are you?" And they said, "We are the kinsmen of Ahaziah, and we are going down to see if all is well with the king's sons and the sons of the queen mother." [14]And he said, "Seize them alive," and they seized them alive, and they slaughtered them at the pit

of Beth-Eked, forty-two men, he did not leave a man of them. [15]And he went from there and encountered Jehonadab son of Rechab coming toward him, and he greeted him and he said to him, “Is your heart steadfast with me as my heart is with yours?” And he said to him, “It certainly is.” “Give me your hand.” And he gave him his hand, and he took him up to him in the chariot. [16]And he said, “Come with me and see my zeal for the LORD.” And he drove him in his chariot. [17]And he came to Samaria and struck down all who were left of Ahab in Samaria till he destroyed them, according to the word of the LORD that He spoke to Elijah. [18]And Jehu gathered all the people and said to them, “Ahab served Baal a little. Jehu will serve him abundantly. [19]And now, call to me all the prophets of Baal, all his servants and all his priests, let no one be missing, for I am about to have a great sacrifice to Baal—whoever is missing shall not live.” But Jehu dealt deviously in order to destroy the servants of Baal. [20]And Jehu said, “Call a solemn assembly to Baal,” and they called. [21]And Jehu sent out through all Israel, and all the servants of Baal came, and not a man remained who did not come. And they came to the house of Baal, and the house of Baal was filled from corner to corner. [22]And he said to the one appointed over the wardrobe, “Bring out garments for

all the servants of Baal," and he brought out garments for them. [23]And he came into the house of Baal, and Jehonadab son of Rechab with him, and he said to the worshippers of Baal, "Search and see if there are here with you any servants of the LORD besides the servants of Baal alone." [24]And they came to perform sacrifices and burnt offerings, and Jehu had set for himself eighty men outside. And he said, "Any man who escapes of the men whom I have brought into your hands—his life for that man's life!" [25]And it happened when he finished performing the burnt offering, that Jehu said to the sentries and to the captains, "Come, strike them down. Let no man get away." And they struck them down by the sword, and the sentries and the captains flung them out, and they went to the town of the house of Baal. [26]And they brought out the sacred pillars of the house of Baal and burned them. [27]And they smashed the sacred pillar of Baal, and they smashed the house of Baal and turned it into latrines, to this very day. [28]And Jehu destroyed Baal from Israel. [29]But Jehu did not swerve from the offenses of Jeroboam son of Nebat, who had led Israel to offend—the golden calves that were in Bethel and in Dan. [30]And the LORD said to Jehu, "Inasmuch as you have done well what is right in My eyes, according to all that was in My heart you have done to the house of

Ahab, four generations of your sons shall sit on the throne of Israel.” 31But Jehu did not watch out to go by the teaching of the LORD God of Israel with all his heart. He did not swerve from the offenses of Jeroboam, who had led Israel to offend. 32In those days the LORD began to trim away Israel, and Hazael struck them down through all the borderland of Israel, 33from the Jordan, where the sun rises, all the land of Gilead, the Gadites and the Reubenites and the Manassites, from Aroer, which is by the Wadi of Arnon, and Gilead and Bashan. 34And the rest of the acts of Jehu, and all that he did, and all his valor, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Israel? 35And Jehu lay with his fathers, and they buried him in Samaria, and Jehoahaz his son became king in his stead. 36And the time Jehu had been king over Israel in Samaria was twenty-eight years.

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Ahab had seventy sons*. The number is formulaic, as in the case of the seventy sons of Gideon in the story of Abimelech (Judges 9). “Sons” in this instance probably refers to all the descendants of Ahab, encompassing at least two generations.

Ahab's tutors. These are the tutors engaged by Ahab to look after the education and well-being of his sons and grandsons.

3. *you shall see to the best and the most fitting of your master's sons*. With characteristic deviousness, Jehu does not initially present the elders and tutors with a command but with an ostensible exhortation to elect a new king who can lead the loyalists of the house of Ahab against the forces of Jehu. He of course counts on their knowledge of his just manifested lethal efficiency that will make this proposal strike terror in their hearts.

6. *take off the heads of the men who are your master's sons*. After his oblique opening move, Jehu confronts them with the brutal command to commit mass murder on his behalf.

bring. The received text reads "come" (a different conjugation of the same verbal stem), but three ancient versions and a few Hebrew manuscripts show "bring," which is more plausible because the killers send the heads in baskets rather than coming themselves.

8. *Put them in two piles at the entrance of the gate*. This grisly detail is another stroke of Jehu's ruthless calculation: the bloody evidence of the elimination of the whole house of Ahab is set out for public exhibition. Presumably, no one will now dare to oppose Jehu.

9. *Well, you are innocent*. This declaration is of course sarcastic (and "well" has been added in the translation to intimate the tone). Jehu has managed to make the leaders of the Samaritan establishment his accomplices in murder: they can scarcely condemn him for killing the two kings when they are directly responsible for many more deaths.

10. *the LORD has done what He spoke through His servant Elijah*. Throughout the bloody trajectory Jehu traces, he justifies his acts as the fulfillment of the dire prophecy against the house of Ahab. At the same time, the ruthless elimination of any conceivable claimant to the throne from the line he has overthrown surely serves his political interests.

13. *kinsmen*. Though the Hebrew noun has the primary meaning of "brothers," the narrative context here suggests that the more extended sense of the word is being used.

we are going down to see if all is well with the king's sons and the sons of the queen mother. All of these sons have just been beheaded. The kinsmen of Ahaziah, perhaps because they have been on their way to visit the royal family of their allies in Samaria, appear not to have heard about the murder of Jehoram and Ahaziah, or they scarcely would be going to visit Jehoram's kinfolk.

14. *he did not leave a man of them*. Jehu is absolutely consistent in this.

15. *Jehonadab son of Rechab*. The Rechabites were known for their ascetic practice (see Jeremiah 35:6–7), so perhaps Jehu embraces Jehonadab as an ally because he feels he can count on Jehonadab's fanatic devotion to YHWH and his concomitant animosity toward the followers of Baal. Jehonadab is a variant form of "Jonadab"—the Hebrew sometimes uses one spelling and sometimes the other, as does this translation (cf. Jeremiah 35:4ff.).

Give me your hand. These words are evidently spoken by Jehu, even though there is no formula here for the introduction of speech.

17. *he . . . struck down all who were left of Ahab*. After the murder of the seventy sons, there evidently were still relatives of Ahab's left to eliminate, unless "of Ahab" refers more broadly to people loyal to Ahab.

19. *But Jehu dealt deviously*. The narrator wants to make sure the audience immediately understands that Jehu's proposal of a great sacrifice to Baal is mere subterfuge.

22. *Bring out garments for all the servants of Baal*. Extending the deception, Jehu presents festive garments to the followers of Baal, as if to enhance the pomp and ceremony of the occasion. "Servants" throughout this passage of course means "worshippers."

24. *his life for that man's life*. "That man" has been added for the sake of clarity.

25. *they went to the town of the house of Baal*. "Town" here is a little confusing because presumably the temple of Baal is in Samaria, where they all are (unless one assumes it was located in a nearby suburb). One proposed emendation is instead of *ʿir*, town, to read *devir*, inner sanctum.

27. *they smashed the sacred pillar*. There may be a textual confusion here, not only because of the switch from plural to singular pillar but also because a burnt pillar does not need to be smashed.

29. *the golden calves that were in Bethel and in Dan*. From the viewpoint of the Judahite writer, these cultic objects were pagan images, though in historical fact they were probably only an alternative iconography (in Judahite worship cherubim were used) to represent the sanctuary where YHWH dwelled. The failure to "swerve from the offenses of Jeroboam" mentioned earlier in this verse probably refers to the golden calves.

32. *trim away Israel*. The verb refers, quite accurately, to chopping off fringe areas.

through all the borderland of Israel. The noun *gevul* can mean either "border" or "territory." Since the incursions of the Aramean king were limited to the area east of the Jordan occupied by the two and a half tribes, the word as it is used here probably is intended to make us think of a border region.

CHAPTER 11

[1]And Athaliah, Ahaziah's mother, saw that her son
was dead, and she arose and destroyed all the royal
seed. [2]And Jehosheba, Ahaziah's sister, the daughter of
King Jehoram, took Joash, Ahaziah's son, and stole
him away from the king's sons who had been put to
death—him and his nurse—in the bedchamber, and
they hid him from Athaliah, and he was not put to
death. [3]And he was with her hiding in the house of the
LORD six years, while Athaliah was reigning over the
land. [4]And in the seventh year Jehoiada sent and took
the commanders of the hundreds of the Cherithites
and the sentries and brought them to him at the house
of the LORD and made a pact with them and imposed
a vow on them in the house of the LORD. And he
showed them the king's son. [5]And he charged them,
saying, "This is the thing that you must do: a third of
you, who begin your weekly duty, are to keep guard at
the king's house, [6]and a third in the Horse Gate and a
third in the gate behind the sentries, and you shall keep
watch over the house. [7]And the two contingents among

you, all who have finished their weekly duty, shall keep guard over the house of the LORD for the king. [8]And you shall draw round the king, every man with his weapons in his hand. And whosoever enters the colonnades shall be put to death. And be you with the king when he goes out and when he comes in." [9]And the commanders of the hundreds did as all that Jehoiada the priest had charged, and each took his men, those beginning their weekly duty with those finishing their weekly duty, and they came to Jehoiada the priest. [10]And the priest gave to the commanders of the hundreds the spears and the shields that were King David's, which were in the house of the LORD. [11]And the sentries stood, each with his weapons in his hand, from the south corner of the house to the north corner of the house, by the altar and by the house, all round the king. [12]And he brought out the prince and put the crown on him and the regalia, and he made him king and anointed him, and they clapped their hands and said, "Long live the king!" [13]And Athaliah heard the sound of the sentries and the people, and she came to the people at the house of the LORD. [14]And she saw, and, look, the king was standing by the pillar as was the custom, and the commanders and the trumpets were by the king, and all the people of the land were rejoicing and blowing the trumpets. And Athaliah rent

her garments and called out, “A plot, a plot!” [15]And
Jehoiada the priest charged the commanders of the
hundreds, the mustered men of the force, and said to
them, “Take her out from the colonnades, and put to
death by the sword whoever comes after her,” for the
priest said, “Let her not be put to death in the house of
the LORD.” [16]And they locked hands on all sides of
her, and she came into the king’s house by way of the
Horse Entrance and was put to death there. [17]And
Jehoiada made a pact between the LORD and the king
and the people to be a people of the LORD, between
the king and the people. [18]And all the people of the
land came to the house of Baal and smashed it, its
altars and its images they utterly shattered, and Mattan
priest of Baal they killed in front of the altars. And the
priest appointed guards over the house of the LORD.
[19]And he took the commanders of the hundreds and
the Cherithites and the sentries and all the people of
the land, and they brought the king down from the
house of the LORD, and they entered the king’s house
through the Gate of the Sentries, and he sat on the
royal throne. [20]And all the people of the land rejoiced,
while the town was quiet. And Athaliah they had put
to death in the king’s house.

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *saw*. The Masoretic Text shows, in defiance of Hebrew grammar, "and saw," but many Hebrew manuscripts omit the "and."

and destroyed all the royal seed. This shocking act, which makes Athaliah far more horrendous than Medea, is not explained. One should keep in mind that Athaliah appears to be the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, and she takes after her mother in viciousness. Seeing that her son Ahaziah has been killed, she ruthlessly grasps an opportunity for herself by murdering her sons and grandsons so that she can seize the throne without rivals.

2. *Jehosheba*. She is both the aunt of the infant Joash whom she saves and wife of Jehoiada the priest, who plots the overthrow of Athaliah.

3. *hiding in the house of the* LORD. Jehosheba's husband, as priest (evidently, high priest), would have had jurisdiction over the temple precincts and would have been able to devise a safe hiding place within the temple.

while Athaliah was reigning over the land. Given that she has violently usurped the throne, her reign is indicated only through a participial aside, and the formulaic statement ("and X was king/queen in his stead") is avoided.

4. *And in the seventh year Jehoiada sent*. Perhaps the initiative occurs in the seventh year merely because it is the formulaic number for several years, though seven years would have given Joash time to grow from infant to young boy, at which point he could be placed on the throne with a regent as political executive.

the Cherithites. The received text says "Charite," but this is in all likelihood a shortened form or error for Cherithites, Cretan warriors who served as a palace guard.

the sentries. This may be a designation for a particular group of palace guards. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "runners."

6. *the Horse Gate*. The Hebrew says the Sur Gate, but the meaning of *Sur* is obscure, and verse 16 speaks of "the Horse Entrance," *mevoʾ hasusim*. Thus,

sur may well be an error for *sus,* "horse."

8. *be you with the king when he goes out and when he comes in*. Jehoida pointedly refers to Joash as "the king," even before his coronation, in order to publicly confirm his royal status. Joash, after having been kept in hiding almost seven years, must be zealously protected in this moment of transfer of power.

10. *the shields*. Others interpret the Hebrew term as "quivers" or "lances."

12. *the regalia*. The Hebrew *ʿedut* usually means "covenant," but it is hard to imagine that any form of the covenant could be placed on the new king, so it seems more likely that the word here is a homonym, derived from *ʿadi*, "ornament."

14. *all the people of the land*. Some scholars contend that the Hebrew *ʿam haʾarets* refers to a particular group of Davidic loyalists in Jerusalem.

15. *Let her not be put to death in the house of the* LORD. Jehoiada, conscious of a cultic taboo, wants no blood shed within the Temple.

17. *between the king and the people*. Although this phrase sounds redundant, it may be that the repetition is deliberate, in order to emphasize the new solidarity between king and people that stands in contrast to Athaliah's autocratic seizure of power.

18. *the house of Baal*. This is new information: that during Athaliah's reign a functioning temple of Baal stood in Jerusalem. We are probably meant to infer that Athaliah, in addition to her murderous lust for power, followed the pagan ways of her mother Jezebel and encouraged a cult of Baal in Jerusalem.

Mattan priest of Baal. He has a good Hebrew name, so the functionaries of the cult of Baal in Jerusalem are Judahites, not foreign priests.

19. *they brought the king down from the house of the* LORD, *and they entered the king's house through the Gate of the Sentries*. With the vicious queen dead, they can now bring Joash from the Temple, where he was hidden, in a grand triumphal march to the palace.

20. *And Athaliah they had put to death in the king's house*. This concluding notice is not redundant. Cast in the pluperfect, it is a recapitulative statement of Athaliah's death that also reminds us that as Joash is brought into the palace, the usurper who occupied it for seven years has been eliminated.

CHAPTER 12

[1]Seven years old was Joash when he became king. [2]In
the seventh year of Jehu, Joash became king, and he
was king in Jerusalem forty years. And his mother's
name was Zibiah from Beersheba. [3]And Joash did
what was right in the eyes of the LORD all his days, as
Jehoiada the priest had taught him. [4]But the high
places were not removed—the people were still
sacrificing and burning incense on the high places.
[5]And Joash said to the priests, "All the silver of sacred
gifts that is brought to the house of the LORD, silver
currency for each person the value in silver, and any
silver that a man's heart prompts him to bring to the
house of the LORD—[6]let the priests take, every man
from his acquaintance, and they shall repair the
breaches of the house wherever a breach is found
there." [7]And it happened in the twenty-third year of
King Joash, that the priests did not repair the breaches
of the house. [8]And King Joash called to Jehoiada the
priest and to the priests and said to them, "Why are
you not repairing the breaches of the house? And now,

do not take silver from your acquaintances but give it for repairing the breaches of the house.” [9]And the priests agreed not to take silver from the people, and not to repair the breaches of the house. [10]And Jehoiada took a certain chest and bored a hole in its door and set it by the altar on the right. When a man came into the house of the LORD, the priests, guardians of the threshold, put into it all the silver brought to the house of the LORD. [11]And so, when they saw there was abundant silver in the chest, the king’s scribe came up, and the high priest, and they wrapped it in bundles and counted the silver that was found in the house of the LORD. [12]And they gave the silver that had been measured out to those performing the tasks, who were appointed for the house of the LORD, and they brought it out to the carpenters and to the builders working in the house of the LORD, [13]and to the masons and to the quarriers of stone to buy timber and quarried stone to repair the breaches of the house of the LORD, whatever was laid out for repair of the house. [14]But no silver bowls, snuffers, basins, trumpets, nor golden vessels nor silver vessels were made in the house of the LORD from the silver brought to the house of the LORD. [15]But they would give it to those performing the tasks, that with it they should restore the house of the LORD. [16]And they made no

reckoning for the men to whom they gave the silver, to those performing the tasks, as they worked in good faith. [17]Silver for guilt offerings and silver for offense offerings would not be brought to the house of the LORD. It would be for the priests.

[18]Then did Hazael king of Aram come up and do battle against Gath and take it. And Hazael set his face to go up against Jerusalem. [19]And Joash king of Judah took all the consecrated things that Jehoshaphat and Jehoram and Ahaziah his fathers, kings of Judah, had consecrated, all his consecrated things, and all the gold that was found in the treasuries of the house of the LORD and in the house of the king, and he sent them to Hazael king of Aram, and he went away from Jerusalem. [20]And the rest of the acts of Joash, and all that he did, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Judah? [21]And his servants rose up and hatched a plot and struck down Joash in Beth-Millo going down to Silla. [22]And Jozabad son of Shimat and Jehozabad son of Shomer his servants struck him down, and he died. And they buried him with his fathers in the City of David, and his son Amaziah became king in his stead.

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Seven years old*. In the King James Version this appears as verse 21 of chapter 11.

3. *as Jehoiada the priest had taught him*. This clause is an addition to the recurrent formula about the behavior of the virtuous kings. It surely reflects a political reality in which Jehoiada the high priest served as regent while the child-king was growing up.

4. *But the high places were not removed*. This repeated formula registers the view of the editor of the Book of Kings that worship on the high places constituted actual or at least potential paganism and violated the principles of the exclusive legitimacy of the cult in the Jerusalem temple. In point of historical fact, Jehoiada as regent could certainly have taken steps to eliminate the local altars on the high places if he regarded them as sinful, so we may infer that he, his priestly colleagues, and the king did not think worship on the high places was forbidden.

5. *All the silver*. Though many translations represent *kesef* as "money" (its later sense), in the ninth century B.C.E. there were no coins in Israelite society, and probably still not in the period when this narrative was composed. What the writer has in mind are small weights of silver.

silver currency for each person the value in silver. The exact meaning of the entire formulation about silver, persons, and sacred gifts is somewhat obscure, and widely different interpretations have been proposed.

6. *let the priests take, every man from his acquaintance*. The gist of this royal order is that the gifts in silver brought to the Temple are no longer to be passed on to the priests for their personal use but are to be dedicated to repairs of the temple building. These new instructions may reflect a power struggle between the king and the priests, with the adult Joash seeking to break loose from the domination of his guardian and uncle, Jehoiada, as his direct challenge to the high priest in verse 8 seems to suggest.

9. *and not to repair the . . . house*. This is only an ostensible contradiction. The idea is that Joash doesn't trust the priests to use the funds for the repair of the Temple. Instead, he will have all the collected silver placed in a chest, to be duly counted and paid out to the workers by a committee of two, one being the king's scribe and personal representative and the other the high priest. They in turn pass the silver on to an appointed group (verse 12) that pays it out to the work crews.

11. *they wrapped it in bundles and counted the silver*. There would probably be bundles of like weights of silver. One sees that all precautions are taken that none of the donated silver be diverted for any use except the repair of the Temple.

17. *It would be for the priests*. This verse indicates a compromise with the priests. They no longer have access to general donations, but silver given for guilt offerings and offense offerings still goes to them.

19. *And Joash king of Judah took all the consecrated things*. This amounts to the payment of a high ransom to Hazael in order that he abandon his siege of Jerusalem. The title "king of Judah" is perhaps added here to make an ironic point, for Joash is scarcely behaving in a kingly fashion in emptying out the royal and temple treasuries in order to persuade a hostile king to relinquish his attack.

21. *his servants*. As elsewhere in royal contexts, these are court officials.
hatched a plot and struck down Joash. No explanation is given here for the conspiracy and regicide. In the parallel passage in 2 Chronicles 24:25, the killing of Joash is said to be an act of revenge for his killing the son of the now deceased Jehoiada. It is hard to know whether the report in Chronicles has a historical basis, but it does suggest a tradition in which the conspiracy was motivated by a conflict between king and priests, and it is possible that the two assassins were priests. Joash's surrendering of the temple treasures and not just the royal treasures to the king of Aram could easily have alienated priestly circles.

CHAPTER 13

[1]In the twenty-third year of Joash son of Ahaziah king
of Judah, Jehoahaz son of Jehu became king over
Israel in Samaria, for seventeen years. [2]And he did
what was evil in the eyes of the LORD and went after
the offenses of Jeroboam son of Nebat, who had led
Israel to offend. He did not swerve from it. [3]And the
LORD's wrath flared up against Israel, and He gave
them continuously into the hand of Hazael king of
Aram and into the hand of Ben-Hadad son of Hazael.
[4]And Jehoahaz implored the LORD, and the LORD
heeded him, for He saw Israel's oppression, for the
king of Aram oppressed them. [5]And the LORD gave
Israel a rescuer, and they came out from under the
hand of Aram, and the Israelites dwelled in their tents
as in former days. [6]But they did not swerve from the
offenses of the house of Jeroboam, who had led Israel
to offend, the way in which he had gone, and the
asherah, too, stood in Samaria. [7]For Jehoahaz was left
no troops except fifty horsemen and ten chariots and
ten thousand foot soldiers, for the king of Aram had

destroyed them and made them like dust to be trampled. [8]And the rest of the acts of Jehoahaz and all that he did and his valor, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Israel? [9]And Jehoahaz lay with his fathers, and they buried him in Samaria. And Joash his son was king in his stead.

[10]In the thirty-seventh year of Joash king of Judah, Joash son of Jehoahaz became king over Israel in Samaria for sixteen years. [11]And he did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD, he did not swerve from all the offenses of Jeroboam son of Nebat, who had led Israel to offend, the way in which he had gone. [12]And the rest of the acts of Joash and all that he did, and his valor with which he battled against Amaziah king of Judah, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Israel? [13]And Joash lay with his fathers, and Jeroboam sat on his throne, and Joash was buried in Samaria with the kings of Israel.

[14]And Elisha had fallen ill with the illness of which he would die, and Joash king of Israel went down to him and wept in his presence and said, “My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and its horsemen!” [15]And Elisha said to him, “Fetch a bow and arrows.” And he

fetched him a bow and arrows. [16]And he said to the king of Israel, “Set your hand on the bow.” And he set his hand, and Elisha placed his hands over the king’s hands. [17]And he said, “Open the window to the east,” and he opened it. And Elisha said, “Shoot!” And he shot. And he said, “An arrow of rescue for the LORD, and an arrow of rescue against Aram! And you shall strike Aram in Aphek till its destruction.” [18]And he said, “Take the arrows.” And he took them. And he said to the king of Israel, “Strike to the ground!” And he struck three times and he stopped. [19]And the man of God was furious with him, and he said, “To strike five or six times—then you would have struck Aram till its destruction! And now, three times you shall strike Aram.” [20]And Elisha died and they buried him, and the raiding parties of Moab came into the land, they came for a year. [21]And as they were burying a man, they saw a raiding party and they flung the man into Elisha’s grave, and the man went and touched Elisha’s bones, and he revived and rose up on his feet. [22]And Hazael king of Aram oppressed Israel all the days of Jehoahaz, [23]and the LORD showed grace to them and pitied them and turned to them for the sake of His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and He did not desire to destroy them, He did not fling them away from His presence till now. [24]And Hazael

king of Aram died, and Ben-Hadad his son became king in his stead. [25]And Joash came back and took the towns from the hand of Ben-Hadad son of Hazael which he had taken from the hand of Jehoahaz his father in battle. Three times did Joash strike him, and he brought back Israel's towns.

CHAPTER 13 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

5. *the LORD gave Israel a rescuer*. The appearance of this familiar formula recurring in the Book of Judges is a little surprising here in the Book of Kings. It is unlikely that the formula would refer to an Israelite king. Though the "rescuer" might conceivably be an ad hoc military leader, it is doubtful that the political arrangements of the monarchy would have allowed the operation of such a Judge-like figure. One scholarly proposal is that the reference is to the Assyrian king, Adad-Nirari III, who assumed the throne in 810 B.C.E. and four years later launched a campaign against Aram. His incursions would have had the effect of loosening Aram's grip on Israel.

7. *ten thousand foot soldiers*. Because the cavalry and the chariots of Israel, which has become a vassal to Aram, are reduced to a symbolic number (fifty and ten, respectively), it is unlikely that so large a number of infantry as ten thousand would have been allowed by their conquerors. Perhaps the text originally read not *ʿaseret ʾalafim*, "ten thousand," but *ʾalpayim*, "two thousand."

10–13. These four verses are a striking testimony to the use of formulas in the Book of Kings. Except for the names, there is not a word in the four verses that is not part of the recurrent formula. But there may be an editorial glitch here because after Joash receives his formulaic burial, he becomes an

active figure in the narrative (13:14–25, 14:8–14), and then a second notice of his death is introduced (14:15–16).

14. *My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and its horsemen*. This evidently proverbial epithet for a leader, which Elisha himself had applied to Elijah when he was about to die (2 Kings 2:12), expresses Joash's perception that Elisha has been a source of power and guidance for his kingdom.

15. *Fetch a bow and arrows*. As the king despairs because he is about to lose Elisha, the prophet gives him a portent that Joash will continue to triumph after the death of the man of God.

16. *and Elisha placed his hands over the king's hands*. This looks like an act through which the prophet—repeatedly seen as a wonder worker—imparts something of his supernatural power to the king.

17. *An arrow of rescue for the* LORD. The shooting of the arrow thus becomes a prophetic symbol, a metonymy for the exercise of military might. The Hebrew *teshuʿah*, usually "rescue," can mean "victory" in military contexts, but because Israel has been subjugated by Aram, "rescue" may be the more salient meaning here.

19. *And now, three times you shall strike Aram*. Joash will drive back Aram three times but fail to destroy it utterly. This detail of the beating of the arrows on the ground is meant to explain a historical difficulty: Elisha, given his unique power, could have prophesied, and intended to prophecy, total victory over Aram. In point of historical fact, Israel's military success against Aram was partial and temporary. This failure is explained in folktale fashion as the failure of the principal agent to carry out the entire magical act expected of him by the man of God.

21. *and the man went and touched Elisha's bones, and he revived and rose up*. The first clause is formulated as a kind of prolepsis: instead of "the body," we have "the man"; and "he went and touched" makes the corpse sound as though it were already a living person. It should be noted that Elisha's miracle-working power is imagined to be invested in his body, so that even after death he is able to work wonders. The Elisha cycle began with a (scandalous) episode in which he summoned bears to kill forty-two boys.

Now, at the end of the cycle, his bones perform the opposite act of reviving the dead.

25. *Three times did Joash strike him*. The Elisha cycle concludes with two different manifestations of the posthumous power of the prophet. First, his bones impart life to the man who has died; then, the explicit terms of his prophecy to Joash, marked by the triple pounding of the arrows on the ground, are fulfilled on the battlefield.

CHAPTER 14

[1]In the second year of Joash son of Joahaz king of
Israel, Amaziah the son of Joash had become king,
king of Judah. [2]He was twenty-five years old when he
became king, and twenty-nine years he was king in
Jerusalem, and his mother's name was Jehoaddan from
Jerusalem. [3]And he did what was right in the eyes of
the LORD, but not like David his forefather; as all that
Joash his father had done he did do. [4]But the high
places were not removed—the people were sacrificing
and burning incense on the high places. [5]And it
happened, when the kingdom was firmly in his hand,
that he struck down his servants who had struck down
the king his father. [6]But the sons of the killers he did
not put to death, as it is written in the Book of the
Teaching of Moses, as the LORD charged, saying,
"Fathers shall not be put to death over sons, and sons
shall not be put to death over fathers, but each man
shall be put to death for his own offense." [7]He struck
down Edom in Salt Valley, ten thousand of them, and
he seized the Rock in the battle and called its name

Jokthel to this day. [8]Then did Amaziah send
messengers to Joash son of Jehoahaz son of Jehu king
of Israel, saying, “Come let us face each other down.”
[9]And Joash king of Israel sent to Amaziah king of
Judah, saying, “The thistle which is in Lebanon sent to
the cedar which is in Lebanon, saying, ‘Give your
daughter to my son as wife,’ and the beast of the field
which is in Lebanon came by and trampled the thistle.
[10]You indeed have struck down Edom, and you are
carried away by your own heart. Enjoy your glory, and
stay in your house. Why should you provoke evil, and
you will fall, you and Judah with you?” [11]But Amaziah
did not heed. And Joash king of Israel came up, and
they faced each other down, he and Amaziah king of
Judah, in Beth-Shemesh, which is Judah’s. [12]And
Judah was routed by Israel, and every man fled to his
tent. [13]But Joash king of Israel caught Amaziah son of
Joash son of Ahaziah king of Judah in Beth-Shemesh,
and he came to Jerusalem and breached the wall of
Jerusalem from the Gate of Ephraim as far as the
Corner Gate, four hundred cubits. [14]And he took all
the gold and the silver and all the vessels that were
found in the house of the LORD and in the treasuries
of the house of the king, and all the hostages, and he
went back to Samaria. [15]And the rest of the acts of
Joash that he did, and his valor with which he battled

against Amaziah king of Judah, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Israel? [16]And Joash lay with his fathers and was buried in Samaria with the kings of Israel. And Jeroboam his son became king in his stead. [17]And Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah lived fifteen years after the death of Joash son of Joahaz king of Israel. [18]And the rest of the acts of Amaziah, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Judah? [19]And they hatched a plot against him in Jerusalem, and he fled to Lachish, and they sent after him to Lachish, and they sent after him to Lachish and put him to death there. [20]And they bore him off on horses, and he was buried in Jerusalem with his fathers in the City of David. [21]And all the people of Judah took Azariah, when he was sixteen years old, and they made him king in Amaziah his father's stead. [22]He it was who built Elath and settled it for Judah after the king lay with his fathers.

[23]In the fifteenth year of Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam son of Joash became king, king over Israel, in Samaria, for forty-one years. [24]And he did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD, he did not swerve from all the offenses of Jeroboam son of Nebat, who had led Israel to offend. [25]He it was who

brought back the territory of Israel from Lebo-Hamath
to the Arabah Sea, according to the word of the
LORD God of Israel which He spoke through His
servant Jonah son of Amittai the prophet, who was
from Gath Hepher. [26]For the LORD had seen the very
bitter affliction of Israel, and there was no ruler or
helper, and none aiding Israel. [27]And the LORD had
not spoken to wipe out the name of Israel from under
the heavens, but He rescued them by the hand of
Jeroboam son of Joash. [28]And the rest of the acts of
Jeroboam and all that he did, and his valor with which
he battled and brought back Damascus and Hamath to
Judah in Israel, are they not written in the Book of the
Acts of the Kings of Israel? [29]And Jeroboam lay with
his fathers, with the kings of Israel, and Zachariah his
son became king in his stead.

CHAPTER 14 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

5. *when the kingdom was firmly in his hand*. After Amaziah's father, Joash, was murdered, the son was installed on the throne because evidently the quarrel of the conspirators was with Amaziah personally and not with the Davidic dynasty. (In the northern kingdom, where there was no authorized dynasty, one royal line was repeatedly replaced by another after a coup.) But, understandably, the new king did not feel safe to move against his father's killers until he had fully consolidated his power.

6. *the Book of the Teaching of Moses*. This designation almost certainly refers to Deuteronomy, which is here quoted almost verbatim (Deuteronomy 24:16). Deuteronomy, or its initial core, was not composed until around 621 B.C.E., so the comment here is an intervention in the older story of the Deuteronomistic editor. In point of political fact, Amaziah may have refrained from killing the offspring of the conspirators in order not to alienate the court circles from which they came.

8. *Come let us face each other down*. No reason is given for this provocative and imprudent military challenge. It has been suggested that Amaziah's success against Edom (verse 7) may have encouraged him to think he could right old wrongs—perhaps a territorial dispute—with the northern kingdom. Joash's words in verse 10 lend evidence to this interpretation.

9. *The thistle . . . the cedar*. This homey parable is vaguely reminiscent of the one declaimed by Jotham in Judges 9. As is often the case in biblical parables, the parabolic details match the situation to which they refer somewhat loosely. The request for the hand of the daughter does not entirely fit Amaziah's eagerness for military confrontation, and both the cedar and the wild beast have to refer, rather awkwardly, to Joash.

13. *Joash king of Israel caught Amaziah*. From the subsequent narrative, one must infer that he then returned Amaziah to his Judahite subjects, but it is not explained why. Perhaps Joash thought it sufficient to humiliate the king of Judah and strip him of his treasures but did not want to give cause for still further embitterment between the two kingdoms.

breached the wall of Jerusalem. This huge breach in the walls of the town would of course have left it entirely exposed to attack.

19. *And they hatched a plot against him*. Once again, no reason is given for the determination of the conspirators—presumably people in the royal court—to kill the king. One possibility would be simmering resentment over his rash military provocation of the northern kingdom and its disastrous results—the breaching of the wall, the emptying of royal and temple treasuries. As with the assassination of Amaziah's father, the hostility is directed against the king, not the dynasty, for his son is allowed to ascend the throne.

25. *Jonah son of Amittai*. The name of this prophet, about whom nothing is known beyond the mention of his prophecy here, is then picked up by a writer of the Second Commonwealth period for the central figure of the narrative Book of Jonah.

26. *For the LORD had seen the very bitter affliction of Israel*. The writer faces a quandary here: this Jeroboam is said to follow all the evil ways of Jeroboam I, yet the historical record evidently shows military triumphs in his reign. These are explained as God's compassion for suffering Israel and His promise not to allow them to be destroyed, even under an evil king.

27. *the LORD had not spoken to wipe out the name of Israel from under the heavens*. One cannot be sure exactly when these words were written. In effect, with the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom in 721 B.C.E. (just two decades after the end of Jeroboam's reign), Israel was wiped out, though perhaps one could say that its name remained.

28. *brought back Damascus*. The verb here is an extravagant flourish, for Damascus had not once been a possession of Israel. What is realistically indicated is some military success against the kingdom of Aram.

to Judah in Israel. This formulation of the Masoretic Text is enigmatic because only the most forced explanation could place Judah within Israel. The Peshitta lacks "to Judah" and reads "to Israel," and this could be what the original text had.

CHAPTER 15

[1]In the twenty-seventh year of Jeroboam king of
Israel, Azariah son of Amaziah became king, king of
Judah. [2]Sixteen years old he was when he became
king, and fifty-two years he was king in Jerusalem.
And his mother's name was Jecoliah from Jerusalem.
[3]And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD as
all that Amaziah his father had done. [4]But the high
places were not removed—the people were still
sacrificing and burning incense on the high places.
[5]And the LORD infected the king and he was stricken
with skin blanch till his dying day, and he dwelled in
the quarantine house, and Jotham the king's son was
appointed over the palace, judging the people of the
land. [6]And the rest of the acts of Azariah and all that
he did, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of
the Kings of Judah? [7]And Azariah lay with his fathers,
and they buried him with his fathers in the City of
David, and Jotham his son became king in his stead.

[8]In the thirty-eighth year of Azariah king of Judah,
Zachariah son of Jeroboam became king of Israel for
six months. [9]And he did what was evil in the eyes of
the LORD as his forefathers had done. He did not
swerve from the offenses of Jeroboam son of Nebat,
who had led Israel to offend. [10]And Shallum son of
Jabesh hatched a plot against him and struck him
down in the presence of the people and put him to
death, and he became king in his stead. [11]And the rest
of the acts of Zachariah, are they not written in the
Book of the Acts of the Kings of Israel? [12]This was the
word of the LORD that He spoke to Jehu, saying, “A
fourth generation of yours shall sit on the throne of
Israel.” And so it was. [13]Shallum son of Jabesh had
become king in the thirty-ninth year of Uzziah king of
Judah, and he was king in Samaria for a month. [14]And
Menahem son of Gadi came up from Tirzah and came
to Samaria and struck down Shallum son of Jabesh
and put him to death, and he became king in his stead.
[15]And the rest of the acts of Shallum and his plot that
he hatched, why, they are written in the Book of the
Acts of the Kings of Israel. [16]Then did Menahem strike
Tapuah and everything in it and its territories from
Tirzah, for it had not yielded, and he struck it, and its
pregnant women he ripped apart. [17]In the thirty-ninth
year of Azariah king of Judah, Menahem son of Gadi

became king over Israel in Samaria for ten years.
18 And he did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD.
He did not swerve all his days from the offenses of
Jeroboam son of Nebat who had led Israel to offend.
19 Pul king of Assyria came against the land, and
Menahem gave Pul a thousand talents of silver so that
his hand would be with him to make the kingdom firm
in his hand. 20 And Menahem exacted the silver from
Israel, from all the prosperous men, to give to the king
of Assyria, fifty shekels of silver from each man. And
the king of Assyria turned back and did not stay there
in the land. 21 And the rest of the acts of Menahem and
all that he did, are they not written in the Book of the
Acts of the Kings of Israel? 22 And Menahem lay with
his fathers, and Pekahiah his son became king in his
stead. 23 In the fiftieth year of Azariah, king of Judah,
Pekahiah son of Menahem became king over Israel in
Samaria for two years. 24 And he did what was evil in
the eyes of the LORD. He did not swerve from the
offenses of Jeroboam son of Nebat who led Israel to
offend. 25 And Pekah son of Remaliah his officer
hatched a plot against him and struck him down in the
king's house, with Argob and Arieh, and with him
were fifty men of the Gileadites. And he put him to
death and became king in his stead. 26 And the rest of

the acts of Pekahiah and all that he did, why they are written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Israel.

27 In the fifty-second year of Azariah king of Judah,
Pekah son of Remaliah became king over Israel in
Samaria, for twenty years. 28 And he did what was evil
in the eyes of the LORD. He did not swerve from the
offenses of Jeroboam son of Nebat, who had led Israel
to offend. 29 In the days of Pekah king of Israel,
Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria came and took Ijon
and Abel-Beth-Maacah and Janoah and Kedesh and
Hazor and Gilead and the Galilee, the whole land of
the Naphtalite, and he exiled them to Assyria. 30 And
Hosea son of Elah hatched a plot against Pekah son of
Remaliah and struck him down and put him to death,
and he became king in his stead in the twentieth year
of Jotham son of Uzziah. 31 And the rest of the acts of
Pekah and all that he did, why they are written in the
Book of the Acts of the Kings of Israel.

32 In the second year of Pekah son of Remaliah king of
Israel, Jotham son of Uzziah became king, king of
Judah. 33 Twenty-five years old he was when he became
king, and sixteen years he was king in Jerusalem. And
his mother's name was Jerusha daughter of Zadok.

[34]And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD
as all that Uzziah his father had done. [35]But the high
places were not removed. The people were still
sacrificing and burning incense on the high places. He
did build the Upper Gate of the house of the LORD.
[36]And the rest of the acts of Jotham that he did, are
they not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings
of Judah? [37]In those days the LORD began to let loose
against Judah Rezin king of Aram and Pekah son of
Remaliah. [38]And Jotham lay with his fathers and was
buried with his fathers in the City of David his father.
And Ahaz his son became king in his stead.

CHAPTER 15 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

5. *he was stricken with skin blanch till his dying day*. No reason is given for this terrible affliction: Azariah is said to have done what was right in the eyes of the LORD, apart from allowing worship on the high places to continue, as all his predecessors had done. One may conclude that we have here the report of a historical datum—that Azariah suffered from a disfiguring skin disease, presumed to be contagious, all his life. The fact that God is said to have done the afflicting simply reflects the general assumption of this and other biblical writers that all things are caused by God.

the quarantine house. The Hebrew name of this place appears to reflect a term that means "free." It is a "free house" either because the condition of freedom is associated, as in one Ugaritic text, with death (here, a living death), or because someone in such a place is free of all civic obligations.

Jotham the king's son was appointed over the palace. The Hebrew for "palace" is simply "house," but it is clearly the king's house, and here it is rendered as "palace" in order to avoid its seeming to refer to the quarantine house. In any case, Jotham becomes a kind of regent because of his father's illness. Upon his father's death (verse 7), he officially becomes king.

13. *he was king . . . for a month*. The northern kingdom by this point in history, in the eighth century B.C.E., exhibits extreme political instability—monarch after monarch is assassinated as coup follows coup. The Deuteronomistic editor makes some attempt to provide a theological explanation for these upheavals—"This was the word of the LORD that he spoke to Jehu"—but he cannot encompass all the rapid changes in this way. Thus no reason is given for the fact that Shallum reigns only a month before he is murdered by Menahem.

16. *Tapuah*. The received text reads "Tipsah," a city on the eastern bank of the Euphrates that Menahem surely could not have reached. One version of the Septuagint shows, more plausibly, Tapuah, a town in the tribal region of Ephraim and Manasseh.

for it had not yielded. The Hebrew wording, literally, "it had not opened," is a little odd.

and its pregnant women he ripped apart. This barbaric practice seems to have been embraced by several nations in the ancient Near East. See 2 Kings 8:13 and Amos 1:13, where it is vehemently denounced.

19. *Menahem gave Pul a thousand talents of silver so that his hand would be with him to make the kingdom firm in his hand*. Menahem pays a huge tribute to Pul, thus accepting vassal status. Having seized the throne by assassinating his predecessor, he could well need foreign support against opposing groups in the court.

25. *Pekah*. This actually is the same first name as Pekahiah, simply without the theophoric suffix.

with Argob and Arieh. These mystifying names have variously been interpreted as names of architectural structures within the palace, towns from which the killers came, and personal names.

29. *and he exiled them to Assyria*. Although the Assyrians sometimes merely reduced conquered kingdoms to vassal status, they followed a general imperial policy of exiling the conquered population in order to integrate the new territory as a province of the Assyrian empire. Assyrian inscriptions indicate that the westward thrust recorded here took place in 732 B.C.E., just a decade before the final destruction of the kingdom of Israel by Assyria and the exile of a large part of its population.

CHAPTER 16

[1]In the seventeenth year of Pekah son of Remaliah,
Ahaz son of Jotham became king, king of Judah.
[2]Twenty years old was Ahaz when he became king,
and sixteen years he was king in Jerusalem, and he did
not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD his
God like David his forefather. [3]And he went in the way
of the kings of Israel, and even his son he passed
through the fire like the abominations of the nations
that the LORD had dispossessed before the Israelites.
[4]And he sacrificed and burned incense on the high
places and on the hills and under every lush tree. [5]Then
did Rezin king of Aram and Pekah son of Remaliah
king of Israel come up to Jerusalem for battle, but they
were not able to battle against it. [6]At that time Rezin
king of Aram restored Elath to Aram and drove out
the Judahites from Elath, while the Edomites came to
Elath and dwelled there till this day. [7]And Ahaz sent
messengers to Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria saying,
“I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue
me from the hand of the king of Aram and from the

hand of the king of Israel, who are risen against me.”
[8]And Ahaz took the silver and the gold that were in the
house of the LORD and the treasuries of the king’s
house, and he sent them to the king of Assyria as a
bribe. [9]And the king of Assyria heeded him, and the
king of Assyria went up against Damascus and seized
it and exiled its people to Kir, but Rezin he put to
death. [10]And King Ahaz went to meet Tiglath-Pileser
in Damascus, and he saw the altar that was in
Damascus, and Ahaz sent to Uriah the priest the image
of the altar and its design in all its fashioning. [11]And
Uriah the priest built an altar according to all that King
Ahaz had sent from Damascus, so did Uriah the priest
do, until the return of King Ahaz from Damascus.
[12]And the king came from Damascus, and the king saw
the altar, and the king approached the altar and went
up on it. [13]And he turned his burnt offering and his
grain offering to smoke and poured out his libation and
cast the blood of his well-being sacrifices on the altar.
[14]And the bronze altar that was before the LORD he
moved forward from the front of the house, from
between the altar and the house of the LORD and set
it along with the altar to the north. [15]And King Ahaz
charged Uriah the priest, saying, “On the large altar,
turn to smoke the morning’s burnt offering and the
evening’s grain offering and the king’s burnt offering

and his grain offering and the burnt offering of all the people and their grain offering and their libations, and all the blood of the burnt offering and all the blood of the sacrifice you shall cast upon it, and the bronze altar shall be to gaze upon." [16]And Uriah the priest did as all that King Ahaz had charged him. [17]And King Ahaz cut off the frames of the laver stands and removed the lavers from them and took down the basin from the bronze oxen that were beneath it and set it on the stone pavement. [18]And the covered passage for the sabbath that they had built in the house and the king's outer entrance he took away from the house of the LORD—because of the king of Assyria. [19]And the rest of the acts of Ahaz that he did, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Judah? [20]And Ahaz lay with his fathers and was buried with his fathers in the City of David, and Hezekiah his son became king in his stead.

CHAPTER 16 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *and even his son he passed through the fire*. This expression, featuring the verb "to pass through" (or "pass over"), is used elsewhere in reference to the pagan cult of the Molech. It is unclear whether the expression refers to

actually burning the son as an offering to the god or to a symbolic act of passing him through or over the fire. The translation preserves the ambiguity of the Hebrew, avoiding a rendering such as "consigned to the fire" that some modern translators favor.

4. *under every lush tree*. This phrase, which recurs in a number of different biblical texts, evidently refers to the worship of nature deities.

6. *Rezin king of Aram restored Elath to Aram*. It is puzzling that Rezin, in the midst of laying siege against Jerusalem, should have gone on an expedition to Elath in the far south. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that the consonantal text has Arameans settling in Elath, but the Masoretic marginal gloss corrects this to Edomites. (The graphic difference in Hebrew between "Aram" and "Edom" is minimal because the letters *resh* and *dalet* are similar in appearance.) The original verse may have read: the king of Edom restored Elath to Edom. The Edomites could easily have taken advantage of the fact that the Judahite forces were distracted by the siege of Jerusalem.

7. *I am your servant and your son*. This is obviously an expression of subservience or vassaldom.

8. *Ahaz took the silver and the gold that were in the house of the* LORD. The mechanics of this act are spelled out in verses 17–18.

as a bribe. This amounts to protection money. The Hebrew *shoḥad* always has a negative connotation and it is a mistake to translate it as "gifts." Tiglath-Pileser was in any case engaged in a series of campaigns against Aram, Israel, Phoenicia, and the Philistines and thus scarcely needed encouragement, but the payment of silver and gold would have been an expression of Ahaz's fealty to Assyria.

9. *exiled its people*. The Hebrew merely says "exiled it," but since "it," although grammatically referring to the city, actually refers to its inhabitants, an expansion in translation is called for here.

10. *Ahaz sent to Uriah the priest the image of the altar and its design in all its fashioning*. In the present instance, this is not an attempt to adapt pagan practice, for the narrator makes no critical comment, and the new altar erected in Jerusalem is adapted for the cult of YHWH and is not subsequently

destroyed. Instead, Ahaz, a provincial monarch, comes to the metropolis of Damascus, where, as a kind of cultic tourist, he sees and marvels at the large and impressive altar constructed according to the most modern design, and he decides to adopt it for his own temple.

13. *he turned his burnt offering and his grain offering to smoke*. There are indications elsewhere that the king, on special ceremonial occasions such as the dedication of a new altar, officiated at the sacrifices, which otherwise were the province of the priests.

15. *the large altar*. This is the new altar, built according to the model of the altar in Damascus.

17. *cut off the frames of the laver stands*. As in the account of the sacred furnishings of Solomon's temple, it is difficult to reconstruct the details of the cultic vessels, but the general idea is that Ahaz stripped the precious metals from them to send as his tribute to Tiglath-Pileser.

CHAPTER 17

[1]In the twelfth year of Ahaz king of Judah, Hosea son
of Elah became king in Samaria over Israel, for nine
years. [2]And he did what was evil in the eyes of the
LORD though not like the kings of Israel who were
before him. [3]Against him did Shalmaneser king of
Assyria come up, and Hosea became vassal to him and
rendered tribute to him. [4]And the king of Assyria
discovered a plot of Hosea's, that he had sent
messengers to So king of Egypt and had not brought
up tribute to the king of Assyria as every year, and the
king of Assyria seized him and locked him in the
prison-house. [5]And the king of Assyria went up
through all the land and went up to Samaria and
besieged it for three years. [6]In the ninth year of Hosea,
the king of Assyria took Samaria and exiled Israel to
Assyria and settled them in Halah and in Habor by the
river of Gozan and in the towns of Media. [7]And so,
because the Israelites had offended the LORD their
God Who brought them up from the land of Egypt
from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and

they had feared other gods [8]and had gone by the statutes of the nations whom the LORD had dispossessed before Israel, and that the kings of Israel had made for them, [9]and the Israelites had done acts that were not right against the LORD their God and had built themselves high places in all their towns from watchtowers to fortress towns. [10]And they had set up for themselves pillars and sacred poles on every high hill and under every lush tree. [11]And they had burned incense there on all the high places like all the nations that the LORD had exiled before them, and they did evil things to vex the LORD. [12]And they had worshipped the foul idols about which the LORD said, "You shall not do this thing." [13]And the LORD had made every prophet, every seer, warn Israel, saying, "Turn back from your evil ways and keep My commands and My statutes, according to all the teaching that I charged your fathers, and that I sent to you through My servants the prophets." [14]But they did not heed, and they stiffened their necks like the necks of their fathers, who did not trust the LORD their God. [15]And they spurned His statutes and His covenant that He had sealed with their fathers, and His precepts that He imparted to them, and they went after empty breath and did empty things, and after the nations that were all round them, of whom the LORD had charged

not to do like them. [16]And they forsook the LORD
their God and made themselves a molten image of two
calves, and they made a sacred pole and bowed down
to all the array of the heavens, and they worshipped
Baal. [17]And they passed their sons and their daughters
through the fire and worked sorcery and divined, and
they gave themselves over to do what was evil in the
eyes of the LORD to vex him. [18]And the LORD was
greatly incensed against Israel, and He removed them
from His presence. None remained but the tribe of
Judah alone. [19]Judah, too, had not kept the commands
of the LORD their God, and they went in the way of
the statutes of Israel which they had done. [20]And the
LORD spurned all the seed of Israel, and He abused
them and gave them into the hand of plunderers, until
He flung them from His presence. [21]For He had torn
Israel from Judah, and they made Jeroboam son of
Nebat king, and he drove Israel away from following
the LORD and led them to commit a great offense.
[22]And the Israelites went in all the offenses of
Jeroboam that he had done, they did not swerve from
it, [23]until the LORD had removed Israel from His
presence, as He had spoken through His servants the
prophets, and He exiled Israel from its land to Assyria,
till this day. [24]And the king of Assyria brought people
from Babel and from Kirthah and from Ivvah and from

Hamath and from Sepharvaim and settled them in the towns of Samaria instead of the Israelites, and they took hold of Samaria and settled in its towns. [25]And it happened at the beginning of their settling there, that they did not fear the LORD, and the LORD sent lions against them, and they set about killing them. [26]And they said to the king of Assyria, saying, “The nations that you exiled and resettled in the towns of Samaria do not know the rules of the god of the land, and he sent lions against them, and here they are killing them, for they do not know the rules of the god of the land.” [27]And the king of Assyria charged, saying, “Bring there one of the priests whom you have exiled from there, and let him settle there and teach the rules of the god of the land.” [28]And one of the priests whom they had exiled from Samaria came and settled in Bethel, and he set about teaching them how they should fear the LORD. [29]And each nation would make its own god and put it in one of the houses on the high places that the Samaritans had made, each nation in the town in which it had settled. [30]And the people of Babel made Succoth-Benoth, and the people of Kith made Nergal, and the people of Hamath made Ashima. [31]And the Avvites made Nibhaz and Tirhak, and the Sepharvites were burning their children in fire to Adrammelech and Anammelech, the gods of

Sepharvaim. [32]And they were fearing the LORD, and they made priests for the high places for themselves from their pick, and they would officiate in the houses of the high places. [33]The LORD they would fear but their gods they would serve according to the practice of the nations from which they had been exiled. [34]Till this day they do according to their first practices. They do not truly fear the LORD and they do not act according to their statutes and their practice and the teaching and the commands that the LORD charged the sons of Jacob, whose name He set as Israel. [35]And the LORD sealed a covenant with them and charged them, saying, “You shall not fear other gods nor shall you bow down to them, nor shall you serve them nor shall you sacrifice to them. [36]But the LORD Who brought you up from the land of Egypt with great power and with an outstretched hand, Him shall you fear and to Him shall you bow down and to Him shall you sacrifice. [37]And the statutes and the laws and the teaching and the commands that He wrote for you, you shall keep to do always, and you shall not fear other gods. [38]And the covenant that I sealed with you, you shall not forget, and you shall not fear other gods. [39]But the LORD your God shall you fear, and He will save you from the hand of all your enemies.” [40]But they did not heed; rather, they went on doing according to their

first practice. [41]And these nations would fear the LORD and serve their idols. Their children too, and the children of their children, as their fathers had done, they do till this day.

CHAPTER 17 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *not like the kings of Israel who were before him*. The destruction of the northern kingdom, then, is not attributed to egregious behavior on the part of its last king but rather to the cumulative transgressions of its inhabitants, which are duly set forth in verses 7–23.

3. *Shalmaneser king of Assyria*. Though Shalmaneser in fact attacked Israel and other territories in Canaan-Phoenicia in 725 B.C.E., he died in 721 and, according to Assyrian royal inscriptions, the actual conquest was consummated by Sargon II. Either this information was not available to the Hebrew historian, writing perhaps a century and a half after the events, or he chose to simplify his narrative by speaking of a single "king of Assyria" invading Samaria.

4. *So*. No such royal name appears in Egyptian records, and this may be a distortion of an Egyptian title or of a different Egyptian name.

the king of Assyria seized him. If Hosea was the Assyrian emperor's prisoner, one must assume that the court officials in Samaria remained loyal to him (no replacement is mentioned) and thus continued the battle against the Assyrians during the three years of siege.

6. *the king of Assyria . . . exiled Israel to Assyria and settled them*. This was a general imperial policy of the Assyrians. They removed the native population of a conquered territory—though it is not clear whether in fact the entire Israelite population was exiled, as is implied here—and replaced it with

people from the existing empire in order to make the territory an Assyrian province. The sundry groups enumerated in verse 24 who are brought to Samaria are all inhabitants of territories conquered by the Assyrians, and so the verb "exiled" is properly applied to their displacement from their native lands to Samaria.

7. *because the Israelites had offended the* LORD *their God*. The catastrophic event of the utter destruction of the kingdom of Israel calls for a grand theological explanation, cast in Deuteronomistic terms, and so a ringing sermonic catalogue of the transgressions of the Israelites is introduced that runs all the way to verse 23. It is notable that all the transgressions are cultic —there is no mention of ethical failings or injustice.

feared. This is the core meaning of this reiterated Hebrew verb, although in cultic contexts it obviously refers to modes of worship rather than to the emotion of fear.

8. *and that the kings of Israel had made for them*. The syntactic connection of this clause to the rest of the sentence is ambiguous in the Hebrew. "For them" has been added in the translation as an interpretive guess, assuming that the clause refers to the two molten images of calves.

14. *like the necks of their fathers*. The reference is in all likelihood to the stubborn and rebellious Wilderness generation.

16. *a molten image of two calves*. As before, the writer construes this as idol worship, though these were very probably icons of the throne of YHWH, like the cherubim in the southern kingdom.

the array of the heavens. Worship of celestial deities was a prominent feature of the last phase of First Commonwealth history.

19. *Judah, too, had not kept the commands of the* LORD. Evidently, it was not destroyed—rather, not yet—because of God's promises to David. "Commands," here and below, is singular in the Hebrew but is in effect a collective noun.

25. *the* LORD *sent lions against them*. Lions were abundant in ancient Israel, a fact reflected in the five different terms for "lion" in biblical Hebrew; and so it is possible that the displacement of population, with hunting perhaps in

abeyance, created the circumstances for an incursion of lions. In any case, the lion attacks seem to be represented as a miraculous intervention against the new inhabitants of Samaria.

32. *they were fearing the LORD, and they made priests for the high places*. That is, they added YHWH to their cult while continuing to worship pagan gods.

34. *Till this day they do according to their first practices*. The whole account of the cultic practices of the Samaritans, as many scholars have inferred, looks suspiciously like the work of a post-exilic Judahite writer promoting a separatist view of the Samaritans. In this representation, the population of Samaria after 721 B.C.E. was entirely a foreign implant, and the cult performed in Samaria was not a legitimate worship of YHWH but a promiscuous mingling of pagan and Yahwistic practices. Historically, this perception may have been wrong both in regard to the composition of the Samaritan population and in regard to the nature of its cult.

They do not truly fear the LORD. The adverb "truly" has been added in the translation to spell out what the Hebrew implies because otherwise there might be a confusion—earlier the Samaritans are said to fear the LORD, that is, to perform the outward offices of the LORD's service.

they do not act according to their statutes and their practice. It would make better sense if this read "His statutes and His practice," though there is no textual warrant for this reading.

Jacob, whose name He set as Israel. This reminder of Jacob's portentous name change underscores the notion that the people of Israel have a grand divinely ordained destiny in which the paganizing Samaritans have no part.

35. *You shall not fear other gods nor shall you bow down to them*. This entire sentence is an approximate quotation of the first of the Ten Commandments.

38. *and you shall not fear other gods*. This prohibition against worshipping other gods is repeated here three times, strongly stamping the Samaritans as a showcase instance of dereliction from the God Who gave the Decalogue to Israel.

41. *fear the LORD and serve their idols*. The verbs "fear" and "serve" are clearly equivalent terms for performing acts of worship. In this instance, instead of the pejorative designation—*gilulim* ("foul idols") associated with

gelalim, “turds,” as in verse 12—the more neutral general noun, *pesilim*, “idols,” is used. This may be because when Israelites worship idols (verse 12), the act is especially disgusting, whereas one would expect benighted pagans to serve idols.

CHAPTER 18

[1]And it happened in the third year of Hosea son of
Elah king of Israel that Hezekiah son of Ahaz became
king, king of Judah. [2]Twenty-five years old he was
when he became king, and twenty-nine years he was
king in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Avi
daughter of Zachariah. [3]And he did what was right in
the eyes of the LORD as all that David his forefather
had done. [4]He it was who took away the high places
and smashed the pillars and cut down the sacred pole
and pulverized the bronze serpent that Moses had
made, for at that time the Israelites had been burning
incense to it, and it was called Nehushtan. [5]In the
LORD God of Israel he put his trust, and after him
there was none like him among all the kings of Judah
and among those that were before him. [6]And he clung
to the LORD, he did not swerve from Him, and he
kept His commands that the LORD had charged
Moses. [7]And the LORD was with him. Wherever he
sallied forth, he prospered. And he rebelled against the
king of Assyria and did not serve him. [8]He it was who

struck down the Philistines as far as Gaza and its territories, from watchtowers to fortress towns. [9]And it happened in the fourth year of King Hezekiah, which was the seventh year of Hosea son of Elah king of Israel, that Shalmaneser king of Assyria went up against Samaria and laid siege against it. [10]And he took it at the end of three years, in the sixth year of Hezekiah, which was the ninth year of Hosea king of Israel—Samaria was taken. [11]And the king of Assyria exiled Israel to Assyria and led them to Halah and Habor at the River of Gozan and to the towns of Media. [12]Because they had not heeded the voice of the LORD their God and had broken His covenant, all that Moses servant of the LORD had charged, yet they did not heed and they did not do it. [13]And in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria went up against all the fortified towns of Judah and took them. [14]And Hezekiah king of Judah sent to the king of Assyria at Lachish, saying. “I have offended. Turn back from me. Whatever you fix for me I will bear.” And the king of Assyria imposed upon Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. [15]And Hezekiah gave all the silver that was in the house of the LORD and in the treasuries of the house of the king. [16]At that time Hezekiah cut away the doors of the LORD’s temple

and the columns that Hezekiah king of Judah had overlaid, and he gave them to the king of Assyria.
[17]And the king of Assyria sent Tartan and Rabsaris and Rabshakeh from Lachish to King Hezekiah in Jerusalem with a heavy force. And they went up and came to Jerusalem, and they went up and came and took a stance at the conduit of the Upper Pool, which is by the road to the Fuller's Field. [18]And they called out to the king, and Eliakim son of Hilkiah who was appointed over the house came out to them, with Shebnah the scribe and Joah son of Asaph the recorder. [19]And Rabshakeh said to them, "Say, pray, to Hezekiah, Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria: 'What is this great trust that you show? [20]You thought, mere words are counsel and valor for battle. Now, in whom did you trust that you should have rebelled against me? [21]Now, look, you have trusted in this shattered reed, in Egypt, which when a man leans on it, enters his palm and pierces it. So is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who trust in him. [22]And should you say to me, In the LORD our God we trust, is it not He Whose high places and altars Hezekiah took away, and he said to Judah and to Jerusalem: Before this altar you shall bow down in Jerusalem?' [23]And now, wager, pray, with my master, with the king of Assyria, and I shall give you two thousand horses if you can give

yourself riders for them. [24]And how could you turn
away the agent of one of the least of my master's
servants and trust Egypt for chariots and horses?
[25]Now, was it without the LORD that I have come up
against this place to destroy it? The LORD said to me,
Go up against this land and destroy it." [26]And Eliakim
son of Helkiah, and Shebnah and Joah with him, said
to Rabshakeh, "Speak, pray, to your servants Aramaic,
for we understand it, and do not speak Judahite in the
hearing of the people who are on the wall." [27]And
Rabshakeh said to them, "Did my master send me to
you and to your master to speak these words? Did he
not send to these men sitting on the wall—to eat their
own turds and to drink their own urine—together with
you?" [28]And Rabshakeh stood and called out in a loud
voice in Judahite and spoke and said, "Listen to the
words of the great king, the king of Assyria. [29]Thus
said the king. 'Let not Hezekiah deceive you, for he
will not be able to save you from my hand. [30]And let
not Hezekiah have you trust in the LORD, saying, the
LORD will surely save us, and this city will not be
given into the hand of the king of Assyria.' [31]Do not
listen to Hezekiah, for thus said the king of Assyria:
'Make terms with me and come out to me, and eat
each man of his vine and each man of his fig tree, and
drink each man the water of his well, [32]until I come

and take you to a land like your land—a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and oil and honey. And live, and do not die, and do not listen to Hezekiah when he misleads you, saying, the LORD will save us. [33]Did the gods of the nations ever save each its land from the hand of the king of Assyria? [34]Where were the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where were the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena and Ivvah? And where were the gods of Samaria? Did they save Samaria from my hand? [35]Who is there of all the gods of the lands that saved their land from my hand, that the LORD should save Jerusalem from my hand?'" [36]And the people were silent and did not answer a word to him, for it was the king's command, saying, "You shall not answer him." [37]And Eliakim son of Hilkiah, who was appointed over the house, and Shebna the scribe and Joah son of Asaph the recorder with him, came to Hezekiah, their garments rent, and they told him Rabshakeh's words.

CHAPTER 18 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

4. *He it was who took away the high places*. Hezekiah is the first king to do this. As with Josiah a century later, the motive may have been political as well

as religious, for an exclusive cult in Jerusalem would clearly consolidate the power of the Judahite king. One can assume that there was some resentment against this new policy, for the high places were popularly viewed as legitimate—and convenient—locations for the worship of YHWH. In Rabshakeh's provocative speech, he appears to play to this resentment by describing the removal of the high places as an offense against YHWH.

the bronze serpent that Moses had made. The fashioning of the bronze serpent to counter the plague of serpents is reported in Numbers 21. Archaeologists have found numerous serpents, evidently cultic objects, and it looks as if these were objects of worship in popular religion, which were then retrojected on Moses in the story told in Numbers.

Nehushtan. The name is transparently derived from *neḥoshet*, "bronze," with a probable pun on *naḥash*, "serpent."

7. *he rebelled against the king of Assyria*. After the death of Sargon II, there was widespread rebellion against the Assyrian overlords in the northern regions of the empire, and Hezekiah evidently exploited the upheaval to reject his own vassal condition.

9. *Shalmaneser king of Assyria went up against Samaria*. The report beginning here and concluding in verse 12 is a recapitulation of 17:6ff. Evidently, the historical context of the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom needs to be recalled here as Judah is threatened with a similar fate.

13. *in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah*. Sennacherib's campaign in Phoenicia, Philistia, and Judah in 701 B.C.E. is elaborately documented in Assyrian annals and bas-reliefs.

all the fortified towns of Judah. According to the Assyrian annals, the imperial forces captured forty-six Judahite towns—which may be an imperial exaggeration. The principal one was Lachish, where Sennacherib is headquartered in the next verse. The Assyrians left a vivid bas-relief of their archers, in characteristic high-pointed caps, assaulting this town.

14. *Whatever you fix for me I will bear*. Hezekiah's act of submission, expressed in his readiness to pay whatever tribute Sennacherib imposes, is contradicted by the narrative episode that begins in verse 17, where Hezekiah is represented as part of an alliance with Egypt opposing the Assyrians. It

would appear that two different sources, for reasons that are unclear, have been spliced together rather than blended.

17. *And the king of Assyria sent*. This entire episode appears, with only minor variations, in Isaiah 36. That passage was evidently drawn from here.

Tartan and Rabsaris and Rabshakeh. Although these three terms are presented in the Hebrew text without definite articles, as though they were proper names, each is actually a title: vizier, high chamberlain (literally, "head eunuch"), and head steward. In any case, all are clearly high officials in the Assyrian court.

18. *who was appointed over the house*. That is, the palace.

21. *this shattered reed*. Reeds, of course, grow in abundance along the Nile.

which when a man leans on it, enters his palm and pierces it. The metaphor is quite realistic. The reed looks as if it could provide support, but it easily breaks when you lean on it, and the jagged edges of the break can pierce the skin.

23. *I shall give you two thousand horses if you can give yourself riders for them*. Hezekiah's attempted rebellion is so hopelessly pathetic, Rabshakeh says, that he could not even muster sufficient cavalrymen were he given the horses.

24. *agent*. The Hebrew aptly uses an Assyrian imperial administrative title, *paḥat* (compare the English "pasha," which has a shared linguistic background).

26. *Speak, pray, to your servants Aramaic*. Aramaic was the most widely shared language in the lands of the Assyrian empire east of the Jordan, and so by the late eighth century B.C.E. it had been adopted as the diplomatic lingua franca. Thus, an educated Judahite court official would have been fluent in Aramaic.

do not speak Judahite. "Judahite," of course, is Hebrew, but that term for the language never appears in the Bible. It is not explained how an Assyrian court official had a command of Hebrew.

27. *Did he not send to these men sitting on the wall*. The verb "send" is merely implied in the Hebrew. Rabshakeh makes clear that his entire speech—itself a brilliant deployment of political rhetoric—is precisely intended for the ears of the people. His purpose is to drive a wedge between the rebellious Hezekiah and the people, convincing them that the uprising is hopeless, and that, in fact, the fate of deportation to Assyria will be a happy one.

30. *let not Hezekiah have you trust in the* LORD. Rabshakeh appears to be shifting grounds. First he claimed that it was YHWH Who sent the Assyrians against Judah (verse 25), which was a way of conveying to the people the idea that their destruction was divinely ordained and irreversible. Now he takes a different tack: no national god has ever availed against the great king of Assyria.

31. *Make terms with me*. The literal sense is "make a gift [or blessing] with me," but in context, as Rashi and the King James Version after him understood, the expression means to offer terms of surrender.

eat each man of his vine and . . . his fig tree, and drink each man the water of his well. The vine and the fig tree appear in a repeated proverbial expression about peaceful and prosperous life. Eating from the vine and the fig tree and drinking well-water are a vivid antithesis to the representation of the starving besieged population eating its own excrement and drinking its own urine.

32. *a land like your land*. The catalogue of agricultural bounty that follows closely resembles the recurrent list of all the good things of the Land of Israel. Rabshakeh in this fashion depicts life in exile in Assyria as a new promised land.

34. *where were the gods of Samaria*. The Masoretic Text merely has "that they saved Samaria from my hand" immediately after the question about the sundry gods of the lands in the northern region of the empires. One version of the Septuagint and a fragment of Kings from the Cairo Genizah show the clause here translated, which makes the verse coherent.

CHAPTER 19

[1]And it happened when King Hezekiah heard, that he
rent his garments and covered himself in sackcloth and
went into the house of the LORD. [2]And he sent
Eliakim, who was appointed over the house, and
Shebna the scribe and the elders of the priest, covered
in sackcloth, to Isaiah the prophet son of Amoz. [3]And
they said to him, “Thus said Hezekiah: ‘A day of
distress and chastisement and insult is this day.

For children have come to the birth-
stool,
and there is no strength to give
birth.

[4]Perhaps the LORD will have heard all the words of
Rabshakeh, whom his master the king of Assyria sent,
to defame the living God, and He will chastise for the
words that the LORD your God heard, and you will
offer prayers for the remnant that still exists.’” [5]And

the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah. [6]And Isaiah said to them, “Thus shall you say to your master: ‘Thus said the LORD: Do not fear the words that you have heard, with which the flunkies of the king of Assyria reviled Me. [7]I am about to send an ill spirit into him, and he shall hear a rumor and go back to his land, and I shall make him fall by the sword in his land.’” [8]And Rabshakeh went back and found the king of Assyria battling against Libnah, for he had heard that he had journeyed on from Lachish. [9]And he heard about Tirhakah king of Cush, saying, “Look, he has sallied forth to do battle with you.” And he turned back and sent messengers to Hezekiah, saying, [10]“Thus shall you say to Hezekiah king of Judah, saying, ‘Let not your god in whom you trust deceive you, saying, Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.’ [11]Look, you yourself have heard what the kings of Assyria did to all the lands, annihilating them —and will you be saved? [12]Did the gods of the nations save them, when my fathers destroyed Gozan and Haran and Rezeph and the Edomites who are in Telassar? [13]Where is the king of Hamath, and the kings of Arpad and the king of Lahir, Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivvah?” [14]And Hezekiah took the letters from the hand of the messengers and read them, and Hezekiah went up to the house of the LORD and

spread them out before the LORD. [15]And Hezekiah
prayed before the LORD God of Israel enthroned on
the cherubim: “You alone are God of all the kingdoms
of the earth. You it was made heaven and earth.
[16]Incline Your ear and listen; open, LORD, Your eyes
and see; and listen to the words of Sennacherib that he
sent to insult the living God. [17]Indeed, LORD, the
kings of Assyria destroyed nations and their lands
[18]and consigned their gods to the fire—because they
are not gods but the work of human hands, wood and
stone, and they destroyed them. [19]And now, O LORD
our God, rescue us, pray, from his hand, that all the
kingdoms of the earth may know that You alone are
the LORD our God.” [20]And Isaiah son of Amoz sent
to Hezekiah, saying, “Thus said the LORD God of
Israel: ‘Of which you prayed to Me about Sennacherib
king of Assyria I have listened.’ [21]This is the word that
the LORD spoke about him:

‘She scorns you, mocks you,
the maiden, Zion’s daughter.
She wags her head at you,
Jerusalem’s daughter.
[22]Whom did you insult and revile,

and against whom have you lifted
your voice,
and raised your eyes up high
against Israel's Holy One.
[23]By your messengers you insulted
the Master
and thought, "When I ride in my
chariots,
I will go up to the heights of the
mountains,
the far reaches of Lebanon.
I will cut down its lofty cedars,
its choicest cypresses
and will come to its uttermost
heights,
and the woods of its undergrowth.
[24]It is I who have dug and drunk
the waters of foreigners,
and dried up with the soles of my
feet
all Egypt's rivers."
[25]Have you not heard from afar
that which I did from time of old?
I fashioned it, brought it to pass—
and fortified towns
have turned into heaps of ruins.

[26]Their inhabitants, impotent,
    are cast down and put to shame,
become the grass of the field
    and green growth,
thatch on the roofs
    by the east wind blasted.
[27]And your stayings and comings and
    goings I know
    and your raging against Me.
[28]Because of your raging against Me,
    and your din that came up in My
        ears
I will put My hook in your nose
    and My bit between your lips,
and will turn you back on the way
    on which you came.’

[29]“And this is the sign for you: eat aftergrowth this year, and in the second year stubble, and in the third year sow and harvest and plant vineyards and eat their fruit. [30]And the remnant of the house of Judah shall add root beneath and put forth fruit above. [31]For from Jerusalem shall come forth the surviving remnant from Mount Zion. The LORD’s zeal shall do this.
[32]Therefore, thus said the LORD about the king of

Assyria: ‘He shall not enter this city and he shall not shoot an arrow there, and no shield shall go before him, nor shall he raise a siege-work against it. [33]In the way he comes he shall go back, and he shall not enter this city, said the LORD. [34]And I will defend this city to rescue it, for My sake and for the sake of David My servant.’”

[35]And it happened on that night that the LORD’s messenger went out and struck down the Assyrian camp, a hundred eighty-five thousand. And when they rose early in the morning—look, they were all dead corpses. [36]And Sennacherib king of Assyria pulled up stakes and went off and returned to Nineveh. [37]And it happened as he was bowing down in the house of his god Nisroch, that Adrammelech and Sarezer struck him down with the sword, and they escaped to the land of Ararat. And Esharaddon his son became king in his stead.

CHAPTER 19 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *For children have come to the birth-stool*. The poetic style makes these words seem initially cryptic, but the obvious meaning is that the children about to be born cannot emerge because when the mothers come to the birth-

stool, they do not have the strength to push the babies out. The delegation from the king may want to speak to the prophet in his own characteristic language by first addressing him in a line of verse. In any case, the line forcefully frames their message to Isaiah with an image of desperate impotence that represents the plight of the people. As in the previous chapter, this entire episode is replicated, with only minor textual variants, in the Book of Isaiah (chapter 37). Isaiah in this narrative resembles Elijah and Elisha in being seen by others as a holy man who has the power to intercede on their behalf with God. Unlike them, however, he is a "literary prophet" who delivers his prophecies in the form of poetry, as he does here in the poem that runs from verse 21 to verse 28.

5. *And the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah*. Their arrival was clearly implied by the end of verse 2. Perhaps one should construe the verb as a pluperfect, although its form does not indicate that. The same seemingly redundant clause also appears in Isaiah 37:5.

6. *flunkies*. The Hebrew *neʿarim*, youths or people in a subservient status, is usually represented in this translation as "lads," but its use here by Isaiah, instead of the expected *ʿavadim*, "servants," has a pejorative connotation.

7. *an ill spirit*. The Hebrew says only "a spirit," but since it induces fear followed by flight, it appears to be a troubling spirit.

he shall hear a rumor. What this might be is never spelled out. If the prophecy is to be consistent with what is reported at the end of the chapter, it would be the news that his army has been stricken with a plague.

9. *king of Cush*. Cush is Nubia, just south of Egypt and politically linked with it. Egypt was a key player in the uprising against the Assyrian imperial forces, and so it is not surprising that the Nubian king would oppose Sennacherib. The connection of this report with the story of the siege against Jerusalem is not entirely clear. Perhaps Sennacherib is impelled to finish off Jerusalem quickly so that he can turn his forces to the south.

14. *spread them out*. The Hebrew reads "spread it out," but the first part of the verse speaks of multiple letters.

15. *You alone are God of all the kingdoms of the earth*. These words are a direct rebuttal of the arrogant words spoken by Rabshakeh in verse 12. Hezekiah will make his rejoinder to the Assyrian boast still more explicit in verse 17.

21. *She scorns you, mocks you*. The "you" is of course Sennacherib. Zion, scorned by Sennacherib's spokesman, has nothing but contempt for the presumptuous Assyrian king.

She wags her head at you. In biblical poetry, this is a conventional gesture of scorn.

22. *raised your eyes up high / against Israel's Holy One*. Isaiah ups the ante of denunciation: Sennacherib's presumption in declaring that he will destroy the Judahite kingdom is cast as an assault on the God of heaven and earth.

23. *I will go up the heights of the mountains, / the far reaches of Lebanon*. Although Sennacherib's imperial campaign did include Phoenicia, here he is besieging Jerusalem. The mountains of Lebanon, however, are the proverbial loftiest heights in biblical poetry, and *yarketey levanon*, "the far reaches of Lebanon," contains an echo of *yarketey tsafon*, "the far reaches of Tsafon," the dwelling place of the gods. Sennacherib's declaration at this point sounds rather like that of the overweening king who is brought down to Sheol in Isaiah 14. The cutting down of lofty cedars also figures in Isaiah 14:8.

its uttermost heights. The received text here reads *melon*, "night encampment," but the parallel phrase in Isaiah 37:24 as well as one Hebrew manuscript shows *merom*, "heights" (a singular rendered here as a plural for the sake of the English idiom).

the woods of its undergrowth. The Hebrew *karmel* usually means "farmland," which would be anomalous on the Lebanon heights, but as Yehuda Felix has noted, it can also mean "low shrubs" (compare Isaiah 29:17). This would be the sparse vegetation on the mountaintops above the treeline.

24. *the waters of foreigners*. The phrase, slightly opaque, is part of Sennacherib's boast of conquest: he has seized the territories of nations and even sunk wells to exploit their water resources.

and dried up with the soles of my feet / all Egypt's rivers. This is an antithetical act to the digging of wells—Egypt, blessed by the Nile, abounds

in water. Here the Assyrian king makes himself, at least through the hyperbole, a divine figure with the power to dry up rivers as he treads upon them.

26. *thatch on the roofs / by the east wind blasted*. The speech Isaiah attributes to Sennacherib concludes with a metaphor common in biblical poetry of the nations as mere grass, blasted by the hot wind blowing from the eastern desert.

28. *I will put My hook in your nose / and My bit between your lips*. Sennacherib had imagined himself a god. Now the God of Israel describes him as a dumb helpless beast to be driven where God wants.

turn you back. This is Isaiah's prophecy of Sennacherib's flight back to Assyria.

29. *eat aftergrowth this year*. The "you" now is Hezekiah, and the verbs will then switch to the plural, referring to the people. Because the invading army has laid waste to the countryside, there will be no crops for two years—and yet, as a "sign," the Judahites will survive.

35. *the LORD's messenger went out and struck down in the Assyrian camp, a hundred eighty-five thousand*. The lifting of the siege is a historical event, though the reason for it is uncertain. If the report here is authentic, it would be because a plague swept through the Assyrian camp. But one must say that the writer has a vested interest in representing this event as a miraculous intervention, demonstrating God's commitment to protect Jerusalem (in contrast to Samaria, destroyed by an Assyrian king twenty years earlier).

37. *Adrammelech and Sarezer struck him down with the sword*. The two figures named are Sennacherib's sons. One gets the impression from the narrative report that the assassination took place directly after the emperor's return to Nineveh. In fact, Sennacherib was murdered twenty years after the military campaign of 701 B.C.E. The writer, however, wants to present this killing in the temple of a pagan god as an immediate fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (verse 7) and a prompt retribution against the boasting conqueror depicted in Isaiah's poem.

And Esharaddon his son became king in his stead. Esharaddon had been Sennacherib's chosen successor. It was evidently this choice that led

Adrammelech, abetted by one of his brothers, to kill his father, hoping to seize the throne. One infers that he then discovered no support in the court for his claim to the crown and thus was obliged to flee with his brother to Ararat in the far north.

CHAPTER 20

[1]In those days Hezekiah fell mortally ill, and Isaiah son
of Amoz the prophet came to him and said to him,
“Thus said the LORD: ‘Charge your household, for
you are about to die and you will not live.’” [2]And he
turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD,
saying, [3]“Please, O LORD, recall, pray, that I walked
before You truthfully and with a whole heart and did
what was good in Your eyes.” And Hezekiah wept.
[4]And it happened that Isaiah had not gone out of the
central court, when the word of the LORD came to
him, saying, [5]“Go back, and you shall say to Hezekiah
prince of My people, ‘Thus said the LORD God of
David your forefather: I have heard your prayer, I have
seen your tears. I am about to heal you. On the third
day you shall go up to the house of the LORD. [6]And I
will add to your days fifteen years, and from the hand
of the king of Assyria I will save you and this city, and
I will defend this city for My sake and for the sake of
David My servant.’” [7]And Isaiah said, “Fetch a clump
of figs.” And they fetched it and put it on the burning

rash, and he revived. [8]And Hezekiah said to Isaiah,
“What is the sign that the LORD will heal me and I
will go up on the third day to the house of the
LORD?” [9]And Isaiah said, “This is the sign for you
from the LORD that the LORD will do the thing
which He spoke: should the shadow go down ten steps
or should it go back ten steps?” [10]And Hezekiah said,
“It is easy for the shadow to incline down ten steps and
not for the shadow to go backward ten steps.” [11]And
Isaiah the prophet called out to the LORD, and He
turned back the shadow that had gone down on the
Steps of Ahaz, backward ten steps. [12]At that time
Berodach-Baladan son of Baladan king of Babylonia
sent letters and a gift to Hezekiah, for he heard that
Hezekiah had fallen ill. [13]And Hezekiah heard of the
envoys and showed them all his house of precious
things, the silver and the gold and the spices and the
goodly oil, and his armory and all his treasuries. There
was nothing that Hezekiah did not show them in his
house and in his kingdom. [14]And Isaiah the prophet
came to King Hezekiah and said to him, “What did
these men say to you and from where did they come to
you?” And Hezekiah said, “From a distant land, from
Babylonia.” [15]And he said, “What did they see in your
house?” And Hezekiah said, “All that is in my house
they saw. There was nothing that I did not show them

of my treasuries.” [16]And Isaiah said, “Listen to the word of the LORD: [17]‘Look, a time is coming when everything that is in your house and that your fathers stored up till this day will be borne off to Babylonia. Nothing will remain,’ said the LORD. [18]‘And from your sons who will issue from you, whom you will beget, he will take and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylonia.’” [19]And Hezekiah said to Isaiah, “The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good.” And he thought, “Why, there will be peace and trust in my days.” [20]And the rest of the acts of Hezekiah and all his valor, and his making the pool and the conduit so that he could bring water into the town, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Judah? [21]And Hezekiah lay with his fathers, and Manasseh his son was king in his stead.

CHAPTER 20 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *In those days Hezekiah fell mortally ill*. The editor of the Book of Isaiah will continue to replicate material from 2 Kings—this passage occurs in Isaiah 38 and 39. Again, we have integral citation with only minor textual variants. The formulaic phrase at the beginning, “In those days,” is a noncommittal temporal indicator, and it is unclear whether Hezekiah’s grave

illness occurred before or after the siege of Jerusalem reported in the previous chapter.

5. *the LORD God of David your forefather*. This epithet serves as a reminder of God's commitment to preserve the Davidic dynasty, and Hezekiah is presented as a king who does what is right in the eyes of the LORD, like David his forefather.

6. *and from the hand of the king of Assyria I will save you*. This clause could be an indication that Hezekiah's illness preceded the siege of Jerusalem, but the inference is not entirely certain because even after the lifting of the siege, Assyria would have remained a potential threat.

7. *Fetch a clump of figs*. Isaiah here appears not to be performing a miracle but to be practicing folk medicine. Hezekiah, however, in the next verse requests a portent that he will be cured.

burning rash. Only here do we learn that *sheḥin*, burning rash, which is Job's affliction, is a potentially fatal disease.

and he revived. Given that Hezekiah in the next verse remains uncertain that he will recover, the sense of "revived" (literally, "lived") here is that after the application of the fig poultice he experienced some relief from the torment of the burning rash.

9. *should the shadow go down ten steps*. What is evidently in question is a kind of sundial, but one that is not a horizontal disk but rather a series of steps set into a wall, ten on the left side to show the shadow of the ascending sun and ten on the right side for the descending sun. A device of this sort has been found in Egypt. The King James Version and modern Hebrew understand *maʿalot* as "degrees," but these were probably actual steps, which is what the word usually means.

10. *It is easy for the shadow to incline down ten steps*. This would be the natural course of the shadow, so Hezekiah chooses instead the miraculous reversal of the progress of the shadow. That also becomes a figure for the reversal of his seemingly imminent death.

11. *the Steps of Ahaz*. The sundial in question proves to be a well-known marker in Jerusalem commissioned by King Ahaz.

12. *king of Babylonia*. The Babylonians were threatened by the Assyrian empire to the north and so were eager to make common cause with the kingdom of Judah.

13. *the envoys*. The received text has only "about them," and this identification is added in the translation for clarity.

17. *a time is coming when everything that is in your house . . . will be borne off to Babylonia*. This dire prophecy is presented as punishment for Hezekiah's imprudence in exposing all his treasures to the eyes of the Babylonian visitors. Many scholars think that the episode was added over a century later in an effort to explain the despoiling of Jerusalem during the reign of Jehoiakim in 597 B.C.E. or in the final destruction of the city in 586 B.C.E.

18. *they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylonia*. Although *sarisim* sometimes may refer to court officials who are not necessarily castrated, one suspects that the core meaning that involves castration is invoked here: there could be no greater curse for a king than to have his sons turned into eunuchs, incapable of begetting offspring.

19. *The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good*. This response by Hezekiah to the grim prophecy is astonishing. On the surface, he seems to be saying to Isaiah that he accepts the word of the LORD, that it must be good because it is God's will. In the next sentence, however, he thinks to himself that what is good about it is that the disaster will not happen in his lifetime—something that in fact Isaiah has not clearly told him. This self-centered view of national catastrophe puts the virtuous Hezekiah in a somewhat questionable light.

20. *his making the pool and the conduit so that he could bring water into the town*. The conduit is a remarkable engineering feat that one can walk through to this day. It is a tunnel sloping gradually down from outside to inside, devised to introduce water into the town in time of siege. It is roughly 550 yards in length, not at all in a straight line, and showing evidence that two teams of workers hewed the tunnel out of the underground rock from opposite directions, somehow managing to meet each other in the middle.

CHAPTER 21

[1]Twelve years old was Manasseh when he became
king, and fifty-five years he was king in Jerusalem, and
his mother's name was Hephzibah. [2]And he did what
was evil in the eyes of the LORD, like the
abominations of the nations that the LORDhad
dispossessed before the Israelites. [3]And he rebuilt the
high places that Hezekiah his father had destroyed, and
he made a sacred pole as Ahab king of Israel had
made, and he bowed down to all the array of the
heavens and worshipped them. [4]And he built altars in
the house of the LORD, of which the LORD had said,
"In Jerusalem I will set My name. [5]And he built altars
to all the array of the heavens in both courts of the
house of the LORD. [6]And he passed his son through
the fire and performed sorcery and divined and
conjured ghosts and familiar spirits. He did abundantly
what was evil in the eyes of the LORD, to vex Him.
[7]And he placed the statue of Asherah that he had made
in the house of which the LORD had said to David
and to Solomon his son, "In this house and in

Jerusalem, which I have chosen from all the tribes of Israel, will I set My name forever. [8]And I will no longer make Israel's foot go wandering from this land that I gave to their fathers—but only if they keep to do all that I have charged them and as all the teaching that My servant Moses charged them." [9]But they did not heed, and Manasseh led them astray to do what was evil more than the nations that the LORD had destroyed before the Israelites. [10]And the LORD spoke through His servants the prophets, saying, [11]"Inasmuch as Manasseh king of Judah has done these abominations, he has done more evil than all that the Amorites did before him, and he has led Judah, too, to offend with his foul idols. [12]Therefore, thus said the LORD God of Israel, I am about to bring an evil upon Jerusalem and Judah, about which any who hears of it, both his ears will ring. [13]And I will stretch over Jerusalem the line of Samaria and the weight of the house of Ahab, and I will wipe out Jerusalem as one wipes a bowl clean, wiping and turning it on its face. [14]And I will abandon the remnant of My estate and give them into the hand of their enemies, and they will become plunder and spoils for all their enemies. [15]Inasmuch as they have done what is evil in My eyes and have been vexing Me from the day their fathers came out of Egypt to this day." [16]And Manasseh also

had shed innocent blood in great abundance until he filled Jerusalem with it from one end to the other, besides his offense with which he led Judah to offend, to do what was evil in the eyes of the LORD. [17]And the rest of the acts of Manasseh and all that he did and his offense that he committed, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Judah? [18]And Manasseh lay with his fathers, and he was buried in the garden of his house, in the Garden of Uzza, and his son Amon became king in his stead.

[19]Twenty-two years old was Amon when he became king, and two years he was king in Jerusalem, and his mother's name was Meshullemeth daughter of Haraz from Jotbah. [20]And he did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD as Manasseh his father had done. [21]And he went in all the way in which his father had gone, and he worshipped the foul idols that his father had worshipped, and he bowed down to them. [22]And he forsook the LORD God of his fathers and did not go in the way of the LORD. [23]And Amon's servants hatched a plot against him and put the king to death in his house. [24]And the people of the land struck down the plotters against King Amon, and the people of the land made Josiah his son king in his stead. [25]And the

rest of the acts of Amon that he did, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Judah? [26]And they buried him in his grave in the Garden of Uzza, and Josiah his son became king in his stead.

CHAPTER 21 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *like the abominations of the nations*. The formulaic language for reporting the cultic divagations of an Israelite king is stepped up here, and it will continue to be intensified in the verses to follow. Manasseh, the son of one of the two most virtuous kings of Judah, is cast as the most egregious of evil kings. It is historically plausible that he would have encouraged pagan cults—he was a vassal to Assyria, a fact not mentioned in our text but registered in Assyrian inscriptions—but it appears that his religious and moral turpitude is stressed in order to explain how the kingdom of Judah was destroyed four generations later, despite Hezekiah and his virtuous grandson Josiah. This impending destruction is the burden of the dire prophecy in verses 11–15.

3. *he made a sacred pole*. The Hebrew *ʾasherah* can refer either to a special pole used in the pagan cult or to the goddess Asherah, depending on the context. In verse 7, the reference is clearly to Asherah because there could not be a statue of a sacred pole.

and he bowed down to all the array of the heavens. The worship of astral deities, not especially prominent in Canaanite religion, was widespread in Assyria, and the biblical literature produced in the last century of the First Temple period abounds in objections to it.

4. *And he built altars in the house of the* LORD. Introducing pagan worship into the Jerusalem temple was an especially heinous act, far worse than reestablishing the cult of the high places.

5. *both courts of the house of the* LORD. These are the inner and outer courts of the Temple.

6. *And he passed his son through the fire*. The ambiguity of the Hebrew wording, as noted earlier, allows one to construe this either as child sacrifice or as a nonlethal magical/cultic rite.

to vex Him. The object of the verb is merely implied in the Hebrew.

7. *Jerusalem, which I have chosen from all the tribes of Israel*. The language of the election of Jerusalem is emphatically Deuteronomistic.

9. *to do what was evil more than the nations that the* LORD *had destroyed*. Manasseh's offenses are so great that they even outdo those of the surrounding nations. A grim *a fortiori* notion is intimated here: if the Canaanite nations were dispossessed because of their evil acts, how much more so will this be the fate of Judah, which under their king surpassed the Canaanites in culpable behavior.

11. *foul idols*. As before, the writer uses an invented invective term, *gilulim*, coined from *gelalim*, "turds."

13. *the line . . . and the weight*. In the construction of buildings, in order to ensure that the walls would be vertical, walls were measured against a plumb line—a line with a weight attached to its bottom end. The line and the weight are thus a metaphor for the rigorous measuring of the integrity of Jerusalem. Ironically, it is not a correction in building that will ensue but destruction, as Samaria was measured and destroyed.

as one wipes a bowl clean, wiping and turning it on its face. This is a homey and vivid image of total destruction: when the last remnant of food is wiped from the bowl, leaving no drop or crumb, the bowl can be turned upside down.

15. *and have been vexing Me from the day their fathers came out of Egypt to this day*. In the explanation put forth here for the imminent national catastrophe, the evil Manasseh is not unique but rather the culmination of all the backsliding and rebellion of the Israelites from the generation of the wilderness wanderings onward.

16. *Manasseh also had shed innocent blood in great abundance*. Moral offense compounds the cultic offenses. The victims of these many murders are in all likelihood loyalists to YHWH, perhaps the prophets of the LORD just mentioned, who were slaughtered as Jezebel slaughtered the prophets of the LORD. It may have been this that led the Israeli biblical scholar Yehezkel Kaufmann to describe Manasseh as "the Jezebel of the South."

23. *And Amon's servants hatched a plot against him*. Whenever the connection is with a king, "servants" means "courtiers." The reason for the court conspiracy is not stated. Some have interpreted the regicide as a response to Amon's paganizing ways, and the fact that "the people of the land" (whether the phrase indicates the general populace or a particular political group within it) kill the conspirators and promote Josiah to the throne argues for this understanding. Josiah was only eight years old at the time, and given his later record of unflagging loyalty to YHWH and his devotion to the centrality of the Jerusalem cult, those who instated him and looked after his education must surely have themselves been loyalists to YHWH.

CHAPTER 22

[1]Eight years old was Josiah when he became king, and
thirty-one years he was king in Jerusalem, and his
mother's name was Jedidah daughter of Adaiah from
Bozkath. [2]And he did what was right in the eyes of the
LORD, and he went in all the way of David his
forefather and did not swerve to the right or to the left.
[3]And it happened in the eighteenth year of King Josiah
that the king sent Shaphan son of Azaliah son of
Meshullam the scribe to the house of the LORD,
saying, [4]"Go up to Hilkiah the high priest, that he melt
down the silver brought to the house of the LORD,
which the guards of the threshold had gathered from
the people. [5]And let them give it to those doing the
tasks appointed over the house of the LORD, that they
give it to those doing the tasks in the house of the
LORD, to repair the breaches of the house, [6]to the
carpenters and to the builders and to the masons, to
buy wood and quarried stone to repair the house. [7]But
the silver given them need not be accounted for, for
they deal honestly." [8]And Hilkiah the high priest said

to Shaphan the scribe, “I have found a book of teaching in the house of the LORD.” And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan and he read it. 9And Shaphan came to the king and brought back word to the king and said, “Your servants melted down the silver that was in the house and gave it to those doing the tasks appointed over the house of the LORD.” 10And Shaphan told the king, saying, “Hilkiah the priest gave me a book,” and Shaphan read it to the king. 11And it happened when the king heard the words of the book of teaching, that he rent his garments. 12And the king charged Hilkiah the priest and Ahikam son of Shaphan and Achbor son of Michaiah and Shaphan the scribe and Asaiah the king’s servant, saying, 13“Go, inquire of the LORD on my behalf and on behalf of the people and on behalf of all Judah concerning the words of this book that has been found, for great is the LORD’s wrath that is kindled against us because our fathers have not heeded the words of this book to do as all that is written in it.” 14And Hilkiah the priest went, and Ahikam and Achbor and Shaphan, and Asaiah with him, to Huldah the prophetess, wife of Shallum son of Tikvah son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe, and she was living in the Mishneh, and they spoke to her. 15And she said to them, “Thus said the LORD God of Israel: ‘Say to the

man who sent you to me, [16]Thus said the LORD: I am about to bring evil on this place and on its inhabitants, by all the words of the book that the king of Judah read, [17]in return for their forsaking Me and burning incense to other gods so as to vex Me with all their handiwork, and My wrath shall kindle against this place and will not be extinguished.' [18]And to the king of Judah who sends you to inquire of the LORD, thus shall you say to him: 'Thus said the LORD God of Israel: the words that you heard, [19]inasmuch as your heart quailed and you humbled yourself before the LORD when you heard what I said about this place and about its inhabitants, that they will become a desolation and a curse, and you rent your garments and wept before Me, I, too, have heard, said the LORD. [20]Therefore I am about to gather you to your fathers, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace, and your eyes shall not see all the evil that I am about to bring on this place.'" And they brought back word to the king.

CHAPTER 22 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *And he did what was right in the eyes of the* LORD. Since Josiah was a child when he became king, one must assume that his virtuous behavior at first must have been through the dictates of the regents who would have had to manage the affairs of state for the first eight to ten years of his reign.

3. *the scribe*. As elsewhere, this title, in court circles, designates not someone who copies manuscripts but a high royal official with administrative responsibilities.

4. *that he melt down the silver*. The verb as it appears here in the received text, *yatem*, is of uncertain meaning. When this same activity is reported in verse 9, a different verb is used, meaning "to melt down," suggesting that the original text here read *yatekh*. (The differing last consonants resemble each other in appearance in paleo-Hebrew script.) Several ancient versions show "melt down" at this point. People would have brought contributions to the Temple in the form of silver ornaments, and these then had to be melted down and broken into small weights of silver that could be used for payment of labor and materials.

5. *those doing the tasks appointed over the house of the* LORD *. . . those doing the tasks*. The first group, distinguished by the term "appointed," are administrators and foremen, probably part of the permanent staff of the Temple, and the second group are the sundry skilled workmen, in all likelihood brought into the Temple to perform these specific jobs.

8. *I have found a book of teaching*. The identical designation *sefer hatorah* occurs in Deuteronomy 30:10. The term *sefer* can mean "scroll" or "book" or indeed any written document, even a letter, but its force as "book" seems especially relevant here. For two centuries, the scholarly consensus, despite some dissent, has been that the found book is Deuteronomy. Although attributed to Moses, it would have been written in the reign of Josiah, perhaps drawing on some earlier materials. The book "found" in 621 B.C.E. was also not altogether identical with Deuteronomy as we have it, which almost certainly included some later elements, and was not edited in the form that has come down to us until the Babylonian exile. The major new emphases of the book brought to Josiah were the repeated stress on the exclusivity of the cult in Jerusalem ("the place that I shall choose") and the dire warnings of imminent disaster and exile if the people fail to fulfill its covenant with God.

11. *he rent his garments*. The most likely reason would be his hearing the grim warnings of impending catastrophe if Judah did not mend its ways. This reaction would then provide the impetus for Josiah's rigorous reforms.

13. *Go, inquire of the* LORD. This is the usual idiom for inquiring of an oracle.
for great is the LORD*'s wrath*. This sounds very much like a direct response to the great catalogue of hair-raising curses (see Deuteronomy 28:15–68) in the book read out to Josiah.

14. *Huldah the prophetess*. She is the only female prophet mentioned in the Book of Kings. She performs in every respect like the male prophets, quoting God's words directly with the introductory messenger-formula, "Thus said the LORD," and the large royal delegation that comes to her clearly accepts her authority as fully as they would that of a male prophet.
Mishneh. The term means "repetition" or "addition" and was a western addition in Jerusalem.

15. *Say to the man who sent you to me*. Pointedly avoiding in her initial speech reference to Josiah by name or title, she reduces him to a mere sender of messages. In verse 18, she refers to him as "the king of Judah" but continues to suppress his name.

16. *by all the words of the book that the king of Judah read*. Since the contents of the book at this point would be known only to Josiah and Shaphan and perhaps some courtiers who heard the reading of the text, Huldah must be presumed to know the book through her prophetic gifts.

17. *all their handiwork*. The reference is to idols, fashioned by human hands.

20. *you shall be gathered to your grave in peace*. In fact, Josiah will be killed in battle at Megiddo at the age of thirty-nine. Some scholars cite the discrepancy between Huldah's prophecy and what is reported in 23:29 as evidence that the terms of the prophecy are authentic, with Huldah's actual reassurance at the time to Josiah then contradicted by historical events.

CHAPTER 23

[1]And the king sent out, and all the elders of Judah and
Jerusalem gathered round him. [2]And the king went up
to the house of the LORD, and every man of Judah
and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem were with him,
and the priests and the prophets and all the people
from the least to the greatest. And he read in their
hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that
was found in the house of the LORD. [3]And the king
stood on a platform and sealed a covenant before the
LORD to walk after the LORD and to keep His
commands and His precepts and His statutes with a
whole heart and with all their being, to fulfill the words
of this covenant written in this book. And all the
people entered into the covenant. [4]And the king
charged Hilkiah the high priest and the assistant priests
and the guards of the threshold to bring out from the
LORD's temple the vessels made for Baal and Asherah
and for all the array of the heavens, and he burned
them outside Jerusalem in the Kidron fields and bore
off their ashes to Bethel. [5]And he put down the pagan

priests that the kings of Judah had set up to burn incense on the high places in the towns of Judah and in the environs of Jerusalem, and those burning incense to Baal and to the sun and to the moon and to the constellations and to all the array of the heavens. [6]And he took out the sacred pole from the house of the LORD outside of Jerusalem to the Kidron Wadi and burned it in the Kidron Wadi and ground it to dust and flung its ashes on the graves of the common people. [7]And he smashed the houses of the male cult-harlots that were within the house of the LORD where women would weave fabrics for Asherah.[8]And he brought all the priests from the towns of Judah and defiled the high places where the priests from Geba to Beersheba had been burning incense. And he smashed the high places of the gates that were at the entrance of the gate of Joshua commander of the town, which were to a man's left at the town gate. [9]Only, the priests of the high places would not go up to the LORD's altar in Jerusalem, but they ate flatbread in the midst of their kinsmen. [10]And he defiled the Topheth that was in the Valley of Hinnom, so that no man would pass his son or his daughter through the fire to Molech. [11]And he put down the horses that the kings of Judah would dedicate to the sun, from the entrance of the house of the LORD to the chamber of Nathan-Melech the

eunuch, which is in the precincts. And the chariots of the sun he burned in fire. [12]And the altars that were on the roof of the Upper Chamber of Ahaz, which the kings of Judah had made, and the altars that Manasseh had made in the two courts of the house of the LORD, the king smashed, and he hurried off their dust from there and flung it into the Kidron Wadi. [13]And the high places facing Jerusalem that were to the right of the Mount of the Destroyer, which Solomon king of Israel had built for Ashtoreth foulness of the Sidonians and Chemosh foulness of Moab and Milcom abomination of the Ammonites—the king defiled. [14]And he shattered the steles and cut down the sacred poles and filled their place with human bones. [15]And also the altar that was in Bethel, the high place that Jeroboam son of Nebat had made, who had led Israel to offend, that altar, too, and the high places he smashed and burned the high place, grinding it to dust, and he burned the sacred pole. [16]And Josiah turned and saw the graves that were there on the mountain, and he sent and fetched the bones from the graves and burned them on the altar and defiled it, according to the word of the LORD that the man of God called out, who had called out these words. [17]And he said, “What is that marker which I see?” And the townspeople said to him, “It is the grave of the man of God who came

from Judah, and who called out these things that you did on the Bethel altar." [18]And he said, "Let him be. Let no man touch his bones." And they rescued his bones, with the bones of the prophet who had come from Samaria. [19]And the structures, too, of the high places that were in the mountains of Samaria which the kings of Israel had made to vex, did Josiah remove, like all the acts that he had done in Bethel. [20]And he slaughtered all the priests of the high places who were there on the altars, and he burned human bones on them. And he went back to Jerusalem. [21]And the king charged all the people, saying, "Make a Passover to the LORD your God, as it is written in this book of the covenant. [22]For it has not been done like this Passover from the days of the judges who judged Israel and all the days of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah." [23]But in the eighteenth year of King Josiah this Passover to the LORD was done in Jerusalem. [24]And the ghosts, too, and the familiar spirits and the household gods and the foul idols and all the vile things that were seen in the land of Judah and in Jerusalem, Josiah rooted out, in order to fulfill the words of the teaching written in the book that Hilkiah the priest had found in the house of the LORD. [25]And like him there was no king before him who turned back to the LORD with all his heart and with all his

being and with all his might according to all the teaching of Moses, and after him none arose like him.
[26]Yet the LORD did not turn back from His great smoldering wrath, His wrath that had kindled against Judah, for all the vexations with which Manasseh had vexed Him. [27]And the LORD said, “Judah, too, will I remove from My presence, as I removed Israel, and I will spurn this city Jerusalem that I chose, and the house of which I said, Let My name be there.” [28]And the rest of the acts of Josiah and all that he did, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Judah? [29]In his days Pharaoh Neco king of Egypt had come up against the king of Assyria by the Euphrates River, and King Josiah sallied forth to meet him, and he put him to death at Megiddo when he saw him. [30]And his servants took him off dead on a chariot from Megiddo and brought him to Jerusalem and buried him in his grave. And the people of the land took Jehoahaz son of Josiah and anointed him and made him king in his father’s stead. [31]Twenty-three years old was Jehoahaz when he became king, and three months he was king in Jerusalem, and his mother’s name was Hamutal daughter of Jeremiah from Libnah. [32]And he did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD as all that his fathers had done. [33]And Pharaoh Neco put him in bonds at Riblah in the land

of Hamath, removing him as king in Jerusalem, and he imposed a levy on the land of a hundred talents of silver and talents of gold. [34]And Pharaoh Neco made Eliakim, son of Josiah, king in Josiah his father's stead, and changed his name to Jehoiakim. And he took Jehoahaz and brought him to Egypt, and he died there. [35]And Jehoiakim gave the silver and the gold to Pharaoh, but he assessed the land so as to give the silver according to Pharaoh's decree—every man according to his assessment, he wrested the silver and the gold from the people of the land to give to Pharaoh Neco. [36]Twenty-five years old was Jehoiakim when he became king, and eleven years he was king in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Zebudah daughter of Pedaiah from Rumah. [37]And he did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD as all that his fathers had done.

CHAPTER 23 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *with a whole heart and with all their being*. These are signature formulas of the Book of Deuteronomy. They occur again, expanded, in verse 25.

And all the people entered into the covenant. The received text here has the verb *wayaʿamed*, literally "stood," but this may be a scribal error for *wayaʾavor*, literally, "pass through."

4. *he burned them outside Jerusalem*. Because these objects of pagan worship are impure, they are taken outside Jerusalem to be destroyed in an open space where purity does not obtain.

and bore off their ashes to Bethel. Bethel was one of the two main sanctuaries of the northern kingdom. Scattering the ashes of the statues of Baal and Asherah on that site would be a way of confirming its illegitimacy or impurity. Josiah's access to Bethel and, later in this chapter, to other northern sites probably reflects the decline of Assyrian power in the latter part of the seventh century B.C.E. It would appear that the Assyrians at this point had vacated much of the northern kingdom that it conquered in 721 B.C.E. and that Josiah attached these regimes to his own kingdom. Many scholars suspect that his campaign to establish the absolute exclusivity of the Jerusalem cult was at least in part an effort to consolidate his rule over the entire country, in effect reviving the united kingdom that existed in the era of Solomon.

5. *put down*. The Hebrew verb *hishbit*, literally, "put an end to," is a little ambiguous (hence the translation choice), but the slaughter of pagan priests reported in verse 20 suggests that the verb in this context may mean "to kill."

to Baal and to the sun and to the moon and to the constellations. The worship of the old Canaanite god Baal is joined with the later fashionable worship of the astral deities, probably under Assyrian influence.

6. *dust . . . ashes*. Two processes of destruction are involved here, grinding down and burning. The Hebrew terms *ʿafar* and *ʾefer* exhibit a degree of interchangeability.

the graves of the common people. The context suggests a kind of potters' field, so that the casting of the ashes of the *ʾasherah* here would do further dishonor to it.

7. *fabrics for Asherah*. The Hebrew reads *batim*, "houses," probably a scribal error for *badim*, "fabrics," influenced by the appearance of "houses" at the beginning of this verse.

8. *the high places of the gates that were at the entrance of the gate of Joshua*. The Hebrew wording here is a little confusing and may reflect scribal scrambling of the text.

9. *Only, the priests of the high places would not go up to the* LORD'S *altar . . . but they ate flatbread in the midst of their kinsmen*. These priests had officiated in the worship of YHWH on the high places. Their involvement in a cult located in an unauthorized place disqualifies them from serving in the Jerusalem temple, but they are nevertheless entitled to receive sustenance—the flatbread—with other members of the priestly caste in Jerusalem.

11. *And he put down the horses that the kings of Judah would dedicate to the sun*. Horses were associated with worship of the solar deity, probably because the Hebrews, like the Greeks, imagined the sun riding across the sky in a chariot. The verb translated as "dedicate" is literally "gave," and probably indicates sacrificing the horses to the sun—an especial abomination in Israelite eyes because the horse is an impure beast, prohibited as food.

13. *the Mount of the Destroyer*. Many scholars infer that this designation, *har hamashḥit*, is a polemic distortion of *har hamishḥah*, the Mount of Anointment.

16. *fetched the bones from the graves*. Burning human bones on an altar would permanently defile it.

according to the word of the LORD. What follows is the fulfillment of the prophecy of the man of God from Judah reported in 1 Kings 13.

18. *with the bones of the prophet who had come from Samaria*. In the story in 1 Kings 13, he is a prophet who comes to Bethel from Judah, and the reference to coming from Samaria, evidently triggered by the phrase "who came from Judah," is not in keeping with the original story (which in fact occurred before the building of Samaria).

21. *Make a Passover to the* LORD *your God, as it is written in this book of the covenant*. Passover was the great rite that affirmed national purpose and belonging to the nation (compare Joshua 1). Josiah suggests that the exacting stipulations for observing Passover are made fully clear only in the book found in the Temple.

26. *Yet the* LORD *did not turn back from His great smoldering wrath*. The writer struggles with a dilemma: Josiah is in his view the supremely virtuous king, and yet three generations after him Judah is destroyed. The explanation

offered is that because of the cumulative offenses of the kings of Judah, with Manasseh the most egregious, Josiah's virtue cannot save the nation.

29. *In his days Pharaoh Neco king of Egypt had come up*. This two-verse notice of Josiah's death on the battlefield seems out of place, coming after the formulaic concluding statement about "the rest of the acts of Josiah." Perhaps it was tacked on at the end here because it was a historical fact that had to be reported but with which the historian was uncomfortable, contradicting as it does both Huldah's prophecy and Josiah's exemplary virtue.

against the king of Assyria. Something is awry here in regard to historical facts. We know from Babylonian annals that it was against Babylonia that Pharaoh Neco led his expeditionary force in 600 B.C.E., and Babylonia was aligned against Assyria, then in serious decline. Some scholars suggest reading "to," *'el*, instead of "against," *ʿal*.

and King Josiah sallied forth to meet him. Though the geopolitics of the confrontation at Megiddo may be a little obscure, it appears that Josiah sought to associate himself with Babylonia and block Neco's passage to the east. In the event, he proved no match for the Egyptians and was immediately killed.

30. *And the people of the land took Jehoahaz . . . and anointed him*. The action of *ʿam haʾarets*, "the people of the land," in this instance does make it look like a particular political force in the Judahite populace, capable of choosing kings.

33. *And Pharaoh Neco put him in bonds*. There were political divisions in Judah between a pro-Babylonian party (with which Josiah would have been linked) and a pro-Egyptian group. Neco, with commanding military force, saw to it that a pro-Egyptian king would be set on the throne.

in the land of Hamath. The location is northern Mesopotamia, conquered by the Egyptian forces.

he imposed a levy on the land. Neco has clearly reduced Judah to a vassal state.

34. *changed his name to Jehoiakim*. Name changing when someone assumed the throne was fairly common in the ancient Near East. The two names in this case are essentially the same name with different theophoric designations—*ʾel* and *yeho* (which is the same as *yah*/*Yahweh*).

35. *he wrested the silver and the gold*. The Hebrew verb has the connotation of extracting by main force.

CHAPTER 24

[1]In his days Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylonia came
up, and Jehoiakim was his vassal for three years, and
he turned back and rebelled against him. [2]And the
LORD sent against him the Chaldean brigades and the
Aramean brigades and the Moabite brigades and the
Ammonite brigades, and He sent them against Judah
to destroy it, according to the word of the LORD
which He had spoken through his servants the
prophets. [3]Only by the LORD's decree was this in
Judah, to remove it from His presence for the offense
of Manasseh, according to all that he had done. [4]And
also for the innocent blood that he had shed and filled
Jerusalem with innocent blood. And the LORD did
not want to forgive. [5]And the rest of the acts of
Jehoiakim and all that he did, are they not written in
the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Judah? [6]And
Jehoiakim lay with his fathers, and Jehoiachin his son
was king in his stead. [7]And the king of Egypt no
longer went out from his land, for the king of
Babylonia had taken all that was the king of Egypt's,

from the Wadi of Egypt to the Euphrates River.
[8]Eighteen years old was Jehoiachin when he became
king, and three months he was king in Jerusalem, and
his mother's name was Nehushta daughter of Elnathan
from Jerusalem. [9]And he did what was evil in the eyes
of the LORD, as all that his father had done. [10]At that
time the servants of Nebuchadnezzar king of
Babylonia went up against Jerusalem, and the city
came under siege. [11]And Nebuchadnezzar king of
Babylonia came against the city, and his servants were
besieging it. [12]And Jehoiachin king of Judah went out
to the king of Babylonia—he and his mother and his
servants and his commanders and his eunuchs—and
the king of Babylonia took him in the eighth year of
his reign. [13]And he took out from there all the treasures
of the house of the LORD and the treasures of the
house of the king, and he cut up all the golden vessels
that Solomon king of Israel had made in the temple of
the LORD, as the LORD had spoken. [14]And he exiled
all Jerusalem and all the commanders and all the
valiant warriors, ten thousand exiles, and no artisan
nor metalsmith remained, only the poor people of the
land. [15]And he exiled Jehoiachin to Babylonia, and the
king's mother and the king's wives and his eunuchs
and the nobles of the land he led into exile to
Babylonia. [16]And all the fighting men, seven thousand,

and the artisans and the metalsmiths a thousand, all of them battle-tested warriors. And the king of Babylonia brought them in exile to Babylonia. [17]And the king of Babylonia made Mattaniah his uncle king in his stead, and he changed his name to Zedekiah. [18]Twenty-one years old was Zedekiah when he became king, and eleven years he was king in Jerusalem, and his mother's name was Hamutal daughter of Jeremiah from Libnah. [19]And he did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD as all that Jehoiakim had done. [20]For because of the LORD's wrath, it was against Jerusalem and against Judah, till He flung them from His presence. And Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylonia.

CHAPTER 24 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *And the LORD sent against him*. According to the notion of historical causation promoted by the writer, all historical events are directly dictated by God. In point of fact, the sundry peoples of the trans-Jordan region mentioned here, all vassals to Babylonia, would have dispatched their troops against Judah at the behest of Nebuchadnezzar.

3. *was this in Judah*. The Hebrew preposition could also mean "against."

7. *And the king of Egypt no longer went out from his land*. Pharaoh Neco had sent a large expeditionary force against Babylonia in 609 B.C.E. that took up a position along the Euphrates. Now, a decade later, after the defeat at the battle of Carchemish, the Egyptians were compelled to retreat and remain within their own borders.

12. *he and his mother and his servants and his commanders and his eunuchs*. This retinue of notables, including not only military men but court officials and the queen mother, suggests that the king has come out in order to submit himself and those around him to Nebuchadnezzar.

14. *And he exiled all Jerusalem*. What this means is not the entire population but a substantial part of its elite and its skilled workers.

16. *all of them battle-tested warriors*. The syntactical position of this phrase is slightly confusing because it has to refer to the fighting men at the beginning of the sentence but not to the artisans and eunuchs who come afterward.

20. *And Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylonia*. As usual, the writer provides no political explanation—in this case, for the fact that Zedekiah, having been installed by Nebuchadnezzar as vassal king, now decides to rebel. From the Book of Jeremiah, from Ezekiel, and from extrabiblical sources, we know that there were sharp divisions within the kingdom of Judah between a pro-Egyptian faction and a pro-Babylonian faction. Zedekiah at this moment, counting on Egyptian support, joined an alliance of trans-Jordanian kingdoms plotting to overthrow Babylonian rule. In the event, Egypt did not provide support, and the rebellion failed to materialize. The consequence was Nebuchadnezzar's assault on Jerusalem and the destruction of the kingdom of Judah.

CHAPTER 25

[1]And it happened in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth of the month, that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylonia came—he and all his forces—against Jerusalem and camped against it and built siege-towers all around it. [2]And the city came under siege till the twelfth year of King Zedekiah. [3]On the ninth of the month the famine was severe in the city and there was no bread for the people of the land. [4]*In the eleventh year of Zedekiah in the fourth month on the ninth day* the city was breached. *And all the commanders of the king of Babylonia came and sat in the central gate, Nergal-Sarezer, Samgar-Nebo, Sarsechim*, the chief eunuch, Nergal-Sarezer the chief magus, and all the rest of the king of Babylonia's commanders. *And it happened when Zedekiah saw them* and all the men of war, *that they fled* by night through the gate between the double walls which is by the king's garden, and the Chaldeans were upon the city all around. And they went through the Arabah. [5]And the Chaldean force pursued the king and

overtook him on the plain of Jericho, and all his force
scattered from around him. [6]And they seized the king
and brought him up to the king of Babylonia at Riblah
and pronounced judgment against him. [7]And
Zedekiah's sons they slaughtered before his eyes, and
Zedekiah's eyes they blinded, and they bound him in
fetters and brought him to Babylonia. [8]And in the fifth
month on the seventh of the month, which was the
nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of
Babylonia, Nebuzaradan the high chamberlain, servant
of the king of Babylonia, came to Jerusalem. [9]And he
burned the house of the LORD and the house of the
king and all the houses of Jerusalem, and every great
house he burned in fire. [10]And the wall of Jerusalem all
around did the Chaldean force that was the high
chamberlain's shatter. [11]And the rest of the people
remaining in the city and the turncoats who had gone
over to the king of Babylonia and the rest of the
masses, Nebuzaradan the high chamberlain exiled.
[12]And of the poorest of the land the high chamberlain
left to be vine-dressers and field workers. [13]And the
bronze pillars that were in the house of the LORD and
the stands and the bronze sea that was in the house of
the LORD the Chaldeans smashed and bore off their
bronze to Babylonia. [14]And the pails and the scrapers
and the snuffers and the ladles and all the bronze

vessels with which one ministered they took. [15]And the
fire-pans and the sprinkling bowls, whatever was of
gold and whatever was of silver, the high chamberlain
took. [16]The two pillars, the one sea, the stands that
Solomon had for the house of the LORD—all these
vessels were beyond measure. [17]Eighteen cubits was
the height of one pillar with a bronze capital on its top,
and the height of the capital was three cubits, and
there were pomegranates on the capital all around of
bronze, and like these was the second pillar with the
meshwork. [18]And the high chamberlain took Seraiah
the head priest and Zephaniah the assistant priest and
the three guards of the threshold. [19]And from the city
he took one eunuch who was the official over the men
of war and five men of those who attended in the
king's presence and the scribe of the army commander
who mustered the people of the land, and sixty men
from the people of the land who were in the town.
[20]And Nebuzaradan the high chamberlain took them
and led them to the king of Babylonia at Riblah. [21]And
the king of Babylonia struck them down and put them
to death in Riblah in the land of Hamath. And he
exiled Judah from its land. [22]And as to the people
remaining in the land of Judah whom Nebuchadnezzar
king of Babylonia had left, he appointed over them
Gedaliah son of Ahikam son of Shaphan. [23]And all the

commanders of the forces, they and the men, heard that the king of Babylonia had appointed Gedaliah, and they came to Gedaliah at Mizpah—Ishmael son of Nethaniah and Johanan son of Kareah and Seraiah son of Tanhumeth the Netophahthite, and Jaazaniah son of the Maachite, they and their men. [24]And Gedaliah swore to them and to their men and said to them, “Do not be afraid to serve the Chaldeans. Stay in the land and serve the king of Babylonia, that it may go well with you.” [25]And it happened in the seventh month that Ishmael son of Nethaniah son of Elishama of the royal seed, and ten men with him, came and struck down Gedaliah, and he died, as well as the Judahites and the Chaldeans who were with him in Mizpah. [26]And all the people arose, from the least to the greatest, and the commanders of the forces, and they went to Egypt, for they feared the Chaldeans.

[27]And it happened in the twenty-seventh year of the exile of Jehoiachin king of Judah in the twelfth month, on the twenty-seventh of the month, that Evil-Merodach king of Babylonia, in the year he became king, lifted up the head of Jehoiachin king of Judah from the prison-house. [28]And he spoke kindly to him and gave him a throne above the thrones of the kings

who were with him in Babylonia. [29]And he changed his prison garments, and Jehoiachin ate bread perpetually in his presence all the days of his life. [30]And his provision was a perpetual provision given him by the king day after day, all the days of his life.

CHAPTER 25 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylonia came*. It appears that Nebuchadnezzar was so incensed by the betrayal on the part of his vassal king Zedekiah that he personally led the siege against Jerusalem. At some point, however, before the actual conquest of the city, he withdrew to a Mesopotamian outpost in Riblah (verse 5), leaving the completion of the siege to his military deputy, Nebuzaradan (verse 9ff.).

3. *bread*. As elsewhere, this word is probably a synecdoche for food in general.

4. *In the eleventh year of Zedekiah*. The text at this point is clearly defective, exhibiting a subject ("all the men of war") with no predicate and lacking some narrative information. The entire passage is replicated in Jeremiah 39, and so the translation incorporates, italicized, elements from the text in Jeremiah.

Nergal-Sarezer. This name occurs twice here (as well as in the corresponding list in Jeremiah), which must be a scribal duplication.

6. *pronounced judgment against him*. This would scarcely have been a proper trial but summary judgment of a vassal king who had proved himself a traitor.

7. *And Zedekiah's sons they slaughtered before his eyes*. In a pointed device of ancient Near Eastern barbarity, the last thing he is made to see before they

blind him is the slaughter of his sons. The act is political as well as sadistic: no one is left in the line of Zedekiah to claim the throne after him.

8. *the high chamberlain*. This is the same title attached to Potiphar in Genesis 39:1. The Hebrew *sar hatabaḥim* literally means "commander of the slaughter" ("slaughter" in the culinary sense). The title might have originally designated a head steward or chef, but it clearly came to mean someone exercising high authority in the political and military realm.

9. *every great house*. These are the houses of the nobility, as the Aramaic translation, *batey revavaia*, properly registers.

10. *And the wall of Jerusalem . . . did the Chaldean force . . . shatter*. Destroying the wall rendered the city totally indefensible, eradicating any possibility that it could continue to be the capital of an independent state.

11. *the turncoats*. Literally, "those who fell." One should recall that there was a strong group among the Judahites (including Jeremiah) who thought that the rebellion against Babylonia was greatly ill advised, and so it is not surprising that some of these should defect to the Babylonians.

the masses. The Hebrew *hamon*, which in biblical usage generally refers to a loud hubbub, may be doubtful. The parallel passage in Jeremiah 52:15 shows *haʾamon*, a collective noun for artisans, and that looks like the more likely reading.

12. *And of the poorest of the land*. The impression given here that only the poor agricultural workers were spared the fate of exile is probably misleading. Although the Babylonians appear to have exiled a large part of the nation's elite, both Gedaliah, who is appointed regent by the Babylonians, and the conspirators who kill him are from the nobility. The burial center at Katef-Hinnom, in western Jerusalem, which contains epigraphic and other evidence of having been in continuous use through the sixth century B.C.E., was clearly a burial place for Judahite aristocracy.

13. *And the bronze pillars*. It was common procedure in conquests to cart off the temple treasures of the conquered. At the same time, this catalogue of precious sacred vessels seized by the Babylonians reverses everything reported in 1 Kings 6–7 about the splendid furnishings for the Temple and

the palace that Solomon caused to be fashioned. Everything that the grand first king after David built or made is either reduced to rubble or taken off by the enemy,

the bronze sea. This is a large cast-metal pool, mentioned in 1 Kings 7:23 and elsewhere.

16. *beyond measure*. More literally, "beyond weighing."

18. *And the high chamberlain took Seraiah the head priest and Zephaniah the assistant priest*. The obvious intention is to prevent a renewal of the cult in Jerusalem. The usual term for high priest (in the Hebrew, "great priest") is not used but rather "head priest," *kohen haroʾsh*.

21. *And the king of Babylonia struck them down and put them to death*. No Geneva convention obtains for these ancient prisoners of war, and since they constitute the nation's military and sacerdotal elite, Nebuchadnezzar wants to eliminate them entirely,

24. *Do not be afraid to serve the Chaldeans*. Gedaliah is obviously a member of the pro-Babylonian faction among the Judahites who assumed that military resistance was not feasible and that cooperation would lead to kind treatment by the Babylonians. The men who come to see him clearly belong to the opposing faction, and they regard Gedaliah as a quisling and thus proceed to kill him.

25. *of the royal seed*. He may well have hoped to claim the throne after the death of Gedaliah.

as well as the Judahites and the Chaldeans who were with him in Mizpah. These killings are a mark of their ruthlessness and of their thoroughness as insurgents. They murder all of Gedaliah's attendants and staff as vile collaborators, and they also kill the Chaldeans stationed with him, perhaps to eliminate them as witnesses and certainly as an act of defiance against the conquerors.

26. *And all the people arose, from the least to the greatest*. This is again a patent exaggeration: the historical evidence argues strongly against the notion that the entire country was emptied of its Judahite population. The logic of

the flight to Egypt is that the Egyptians were the adversaries of Babylonia and the allies of the anti-Babylonian faction.

27. *Evil-Merodach*. He assumed the throne of Babylonia in 562 B.C.E. Granting pardons when one becomes king was a common ancient Near Eastern practice. Jehoiachin was taken into captivity in 597. His quarter century as prisoner may actually have been a form of house arrest because a Babylonian document from 592 records the provision of food for Jehoiachin king of Judah and his five sons, suggesting that some recognition of his royal status was accorded all along.

lifted up the head. This is the same idiom, intimating pardon, that is used for the imprisoned chief steward in the Joseph story (Genesis 40:13).

28. *gave him a throne above the thrones of the kings who were with him*. This is probably a nationalistic flourish of the writer's because it is unlikely that Jehoiachin would have been granted a higher status than other kings held in Babylonian captivity.

29. *And he changed his prison garments*. This detail is probably a deliberate reminiscence of the Joseph story: when Joseph is freed from prison, he is clothed by Pharaoh in fine garments.

Jehoiachin. The Hebrew says merely "he," and the proper name has been added in order to avoid confusion of pronominal reference.

30. *And his provision was a perpetual provision . . . day after day*. The historical event with which the Book of Kings ends is of course a complete catastrophe—the utter destruction of Jerusalem, including Temple and palace; the massacre of the royal line and the military and priestly elite; and the exile of a large part of the population. This concluding image, however, seeks to intimate a hopeful possibility of future restoration: a Davidic king is recognized as king, even in captivity, and is given a daily provision appropriate to his royal status. As he sits on his throne elevated above the thrones of the other captive kings, the audience of the story is invited to imagine a scion of David again sitting on his throne in Jerusalem.

ISAIAH

Introduction

The Book of Isaiah may well be the greatest challenge that modern readers will find in the biblical corpus to their notions of what constitutes a book. Isaiah son of Amoz, a Jerusalemite, began his career as prophet in the 730s B.C.E. He was still active and clearly regarded as an authoritative figure, as we learn from the account in 2 Kings 19, borrowed by the editor of our text, when the Assyrians besieged Jerusalem in 701 B.C.E. Like the other biblical prophets, he claimed, and very likely believed, that his pronouncements came to him on the direct authority of God. These included vehement castigations of social and economic injustices in Judahite society and of a corrupt and drunken ruling class, as well as the excoriation of paganizing practices. Isaiah also took political stances, objecting in particular to policies that favored an alliance with Egypt against Assyria.

The bewildering fact is that the prophecies of Isaiah son of Amoz have been editorially mingled with a welter of prophecies by other hands and from later periods. In an era millennia before printing and the concept of authorial claim to texts, all the books of the Bible are open-ended affairs, scrolls in which could be inserted, whether for ideological purposes or simply through editorial predilection, writings that came from other sources—as, for example, the Book of Job includes the Hymn to Wisdom (chapter 28) and the Elihu speeches (chapters 32–37), each exhibiting a different viewpoint and a different kind of poetry from the original book. But Isaiah is an extreme case of this phenomenon. One may surmise that texts of individual prophecies, or small clusters of his prophecies, circulated in scrolls during Isaiah's lifetime and afterward, whether in the hands of his followers or of private collectors of prophetic revelation. Chapters 1–39 in the book that has come down to us incorporate the prophecies of Isaiah but also include much disparate material that is clearly later, some of it reflecting the imminent or actual fall of the Babylonian empire to the Persians in 539 B.C.E. Nothing from chapter 40 to the end of the book is the work of Isaiah son of Amoz. The strong scholarly consensus is that chapters 40–55 were composed by a prophet of the

Babylonian exile, whose name is beyond recovery, prophesying a triumphant return of the exiles to Zion through the agency of the Persian emperor Cyrus (mentioned by name), who was poised to overwhelm the Babylonians. Even in this unit, however, it is far from clear that all the prophecies are from the same person. The so-called Second Isaiah is followed by a Third Isaiah in what is now the last eleven chapters of the book. The situation presupposed in these chapters is the predicament of the community in the Persian province of Yehud, or Judah, after the rebuilding of the Temple, so the historical setting would have to be the fifth century B.C.E., although probably before the decisive mission of Ezra and Nehemiah in the middle of that century. Especially in the texts grouped together as Trito-Isaiah, or Third Isaiah, scholars have detected the presence of several different writers rather than a single prophet. The claim that Third Isaiah is a disciple of Second Isaiah may be questioned because they are too far removed from each other in time—perhaps by as much as three generations. What can be safely said is that the later prophet was familiar with the poetry of his predecessor and consciously alluded to it, sometimes pointedly elaborating its imagery, just as both these prophets were familiar with

and sometimes built on the prophecies of Isaiah son of Amoz.

It is above all the vehicle of poetry in all these prophets that demands close attention. While there are occasional brief prose passages, the bulk of the prophecies are cast in poetry. There are two reasons for the use of poetry, one theological and the other pragmatic. In most of these texts, the prophet represents himself as the mouthpiece for God's words —"thus said the LORD" is the frequently invoked "messenger-formula" of introduction—and it is perfectly fitting that God should address Israel not in prose, which is closer to the language of everyday human intercourse, but in the elevated and impressive diction of poetry. The more pragmatic reason for the use of verse is that, as in all poetic systems, poetry is memorable in the technical sense: its formal devices facilitate committing the words to memory. In the case of biblical poetry, this mnemonic function is realized chiefly through the structuring of the line in semantically paired halves, or versets, usually reinforced by an equal number of stressed syllables in each half of the line: "Woe, offending nation, / people weighed down with crime" (1:4). Once the first half of this line has been registered in memory, the second half readily follows, with the more compact Hebrew

exhibiting three strong stresses in each of the two halves. And as usually is the case in lines of biblical poetry, the idea articulated in the first verset is driven home through a concretization of it in the second verset: the "offending nation" is realized *physically* as a "people weighed down with crime" (in the Hebrew, just three words, five syllables, *ʿam keved ʾawon*).

The poets assembled in this book are a good deal more than didactic versifiers of religious or ethical principles. To be sure, one encounters some stretches of boilerplate verse: Prophetic poetry, like other poetic genres, has its recurrent formulas and clichés. Nevertheless, this collection exhibits the work of at least three poets of the first order of originality, perhaps even more, depending on how one attributes authorship to certain individual poems.

Thus, the pounding rhythms and the powerful images of the book's opening poem (1:2–9) convey a riveting vision of Judah devastated by Assyrian incursion as divine punishment for its collective crimes. The trope of Israel as a second Sodom comes to seem through the poetry as a palpably realized historical fact. The relatively long poem in chapter 2 that runs from verse 6 to the end of the chapter evokes a scary picture of the day when God comes to exact retribution, playing on a complex series of images of

verticality in which all that is high will be brought low and God alone will loom on high. In counterpoint to such dire visions stand the luminous imaginings of an ideal age to come when the land will be governed in peace and justice and the nations will come to Zion to be instructed in the ways of God (2:2–5, 4:2–6, 9:1–6, 11:11–16, to cite the most famous of such passages). Second Isaiah preserves the memory of these glowing prophecies, but his poetry recasts the vision of a grand future in more national and historical terms, conjuring up a landscape in which a highway is cleared in the wilderness for the triumphant passage of the exiles back to their land. He is the most tender of biblical poets, tracing images of nursing mothers and dandled babes (upon which Third Isaiah will elaborate) and appropriately beginning his prophecies with the words "Comfort, O comfort My people."

All three of the principal poets in the Isaian corpus exhibit a good deal of technical virtuosity, and, of course, this will often not be visible in translation. Isaiah son of Amoz is particularly adept in thematically pointed wordplay. Thus, the scathing conclusion of the Parable of the Vineyard (5:7), has "justice," *mishpat*, flipped into *mispaḥ*, "blight," and "righteousness," *tsedaqah,* into *tseʿaqah,* "scream," to express the perversion of values by the Judahites. The

approximation of this effect in the present translation reads as follows: “He hoped for justice, and, look, jaundice, / for righteousness, and, look, wretchedness.” Other plays on words resist even approximation in English. More pervasively, in all of the Isaian poets, the expressive power of the line of biblical poetry, in which the second verset concretizes, intensifies, or focuses what is expressed in the first, is exploited with great resourcefulness.

Here is a line that evokes the day of divine retribution (13:9): “Look, the LORD’s day comes, ruthlessly, / *anger and smoldering wrath* [emphasis added],” in which the second verset makes vividly clear what is meant by the general notion of “the LORD’s day” introduced in the first verset. One sees a related but different deployment of poetic parallelism in 26:17: “As a woman with child draws near to give birth, / *she shudders, she shakes in her pangs* [emphasis added].” Here, as often happens in biblical poetry, there is narrative development as well as intensification in the move from the first verset to the second: first the woman has come to the end of pregnancy, perhaps experiencing the early signs of labor; then she writhes in the throes of the birth pangs.

Surely these prophecies continue to speak to us because of the ethical imperatives they embody, their

cries for social justice, their hopeful visions of a future of harmony after all the anguish inflicted through historical violence. But they also engage us through the power and splendor of the poetry. Perhaps the Israelites who clung to the parchment records of these sundry prophecies in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E. cherished them not only because they saw in them the urgent word of God but also because they somehow sensed that these were great poems.

CHAPTER 1

[1]The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz that he saw
concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah,
Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

[2]Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O
earth,
for the LORD has spoken.
Sons I have nurtured and raised
but they rebelled against Me.
[3]The ox knows its owner
and the donkey its master's stall.
Israel did not know,
my people did not pay heed.
[4]Woe, offending nation,
people weighed down with crime,
seed of evildoers,
sons acting ruinously.
They have forsaken the LORD,
scorned Israel's Holy One,

they have fallen behind.
[5]Why would you be beaten more,
still swerving from the way?
Every head is sick
and every heart in pain.
[6]From footsole to head
no place in him intact,
wound, bruise,
and open sore—
not drained, not bandaged,
nor soothed with oil.
[7]Your land is desolate,
your towns are burned in fire.
Your soil, before your eyes
strangers devour it,
and desolation like an upheaval
by strangers.
[8]And the daughter of Zion remains
like a hut in a vineyard,
like a shed in a patch of greens,
like a town besieged.
[9]Had not the LORD of Armies
left us a scant remnant,
we would be like Sodom.
We would resemble Gomorrah.

[10]Listen to the word of the LORD,
    O leaders of Sodom,
give ear to our God's teaching,
    O people of Gomorrah.
[11]"Why need I all your sacrifices?"
    says the LORD.
"I am sated with the burnt offerings
    of rams
    and the suet of fatted beasts,
and the blood of bulls and sheep and
    he-goats
    I do not desire.
[12]When you come to see My face,
    who asked this of you,
        to trample My courts?
[13]You shall no longer bring false
    grain offering,
    it is incense of abomination to me.
New moon and sabbath call an
    assembly—
    I cannot bear crime and
        convocation.
[14]Your new moons and your
    appointed times
    I utterly despise.
They have become a burden to me,

I cannot bear them.
15 And when you spread your palms,
I avert My eyes from you.
Though you abundantly pray,
I do not listen.
Your hands are full of blood.
16 Wash, become pure,
Remove your evil acts from My
eyes.
Cease doing evil.
17 Learn to do good,
seek justice.
Make the oppressed happy,
defend the orphan,
argue the widow's case."

18 "Come, pray, let us come to
terms,"
the Lord said.
"If your offenses be like scarlet,
like snow shall they turn white.
If they be red as dyed cloth,
they shall become like pure wool.
19 If you assent and listen,
the land's bounty you shall eat.

[20]But if you refuse and rebel,
by the sword you shall be eaten,
for the Lord's mouth has
spoken."

[21]How has the faithful town
become a whore?
Filled with justice,
where righteousness did lodge,
and now—murderers.
[22]Your silver has turned to dross,
your drink is mixed with water.
Your nobles are knaves
and companions to thieves.
[23]All of them lust for bribes
and chase illicit payments.
They do not defend the orphan,
and the widow's case does not
touch them.
[24]Therefore, says the Master, LORD
of Armies, Israel's Mighty One:
Oh, I will settle scores with my
foes
and take vengeance of my
enemies,

[25]and bring My hand back upon you
and take away all your dross
[26]and bring back your judges as
before
and your councillors as long ago.
Then shall you be called town of
righteousness,
faithful city.
[27]Zion shall be redeemed through
justice,
and those who turn back in her,
through righteousness.
[28]But the rebels and offenders
together are shattered,
and those who forsake the LORD
shall perish.

[29]For they shall be shamed of the
cult-trees
after which you lusted,
and be disgraced by the gardens
that you have chosen.
[30]For you shall be like an oak
whose leaf withers

and like a garden where there is
no water.
[31]And the strong shall turn into tow
and his deeds into a spark,
and both shall burn together,
with none to put it out.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The vision of Isaiah*. The true beginning of Isaiah's prophecies is chapter 6, the visionary scene in the Temple where he is first commissioned as a prophet. The prophecy that immediately follows here may have been set at the beginning of the book by its editors because of the invocation of heaven and earth as the formal beginning of a long poem—compare Deuteronomy 32, the Song of Moses, which begins with similar language.

3. *the donkey its master's stall*. This line is a neat illustration of the pattern of focusing or concretization in the movement from the first verset to the second in biblical poetry. The first verset puts forth the general relation of beast to owner; the second verset (with metrical room for an additional word in the parallelism because the verb "knows" does double duty for both halves of the line and need not be repeated) then focuses on the place of nurture connecting beast and master.

4. *Woe, offending nation*. The Hebrew for this verset has a pounding rhythmic insistence, three words, four syllables, three stresses, reinforced by an internal rhyme at the beginning: *hoy goy ḥotei'*.

5. *beaten*. The people has been suffering blows from its enemies as punishment for its evil ways (see verses 7–9), in which, however, it stubbornly persists.

7. *upheaval*. This word, strongly associated in Genesis with the destruction of Sodom, is the first hint of the equation between Israel and Sodom.

8. *like a town besieged*. This last verset of the two-line parallelism switches from the agricultural metaphors to the referent of the metaphors—a town encircled by enemies. This verse and the two preceding ones probably refer to the devastation wreaked by the Assyrian invading forces in 701 B.C.E.

10. *O leaders of Sodom*. This appears to be the beginning of a new prophecy, with the reference to Sodom at the end of the previous passage and at the beginning of this one providing an associative link between the two.

11. *Why need I all your sacrifices?* This is not a pitch for the abolition of sacrifice but rather an argument against a mechanistic notion of sacrifice, against the idea that sacrifice can put man in good standing with God regardless of human behavior. The point becomes entirely clear at the end of verse 15, when the prophet says that it is hands stained with blood stretched out in payer that are utterly abhorrent to God. Thus, the grain offering is "false" (or "futile") because it is brought by people who have oppressed the poor and failed to defend widows and orphans.

12. *to see My face*. As throughout the Masoretic Text, the verb for seeing the face of God—the original conception of the pilgrimage to the Jerusalem temple—has been piously revocalized as a passive form, "to be seen."

13. *crime and convocation*. The translation emulates the approximate alliteration in the Hebrew of *ʾawen weʿatsarah*.

14. *I utterly despise*. The Hebrew uses *nafshi* in what amounts to an intensive form of the first-person pronoun. This translation tries to suggest this intensity by adding the adverb "utterly."

15. *Your hands are full of blood*. This shocking detail is held back until the end of these two lines of poetry: the palms lifted up in prayer are covered with blood, and that is why God averts His eyes, because He can't bear looking at them. It should be noted that Isaiah's outrage, as it is spelled out in verse 17, is not chiefly with cultic disloyalty, as it would be for the writers in the school of Deuteronomy, but with social injustice—indifference to the

plight of the poor and the helpless, exploitation of the vulnerable, acts represented here as the moral equivalent of murder.

18. *scarlet . . . white*. Although this appears to be part of a new prophecy, the scarlet picks up the image of bloodstained hands from verse 15, and that could be the reason for the editorial placement of this prophecy here.

pure wool. "Pure" is merely implied in the Hebrew and has been added in the translation to exclude the possibility of dyed wool.

20. *by the sword you shall be eaten*. Though "devoured" might be more appropriate for the context, the translation preserves the pointed reversal in the Hebrew of eating the bounty of the land and being eaten by the sword. In biblical usage, the cutting edge of the sword is often referred to as a mouth, and thus the sword is said to devour or eat its victims.

21. *How has the faithful town / become a whore?* This prophecy begins with *ʾeikhah*, the word that conventionally starts lamentations or dirges. The prophet sees it as a reason to lament that the once just town has become a place where justice is perverted.

and now—murderers. As with the hands full of blood in verse 15, the shocking detail is reserved for the end.

23. *Your nobles are knaves*. The alliteration in the translation seeks to be an approximate equivalent of the fuller sound-play of the Hebrew, *sarayikh sorerim*. The point of the sound-play is that something turns into its opposite in a move from one word to an antithetical one that sounds like the first.

illicit payments. The unusual word *shalmonim* clearly means "illegitimate payments." "Payoff" in English might be an equivalent, but it is too colloquial for this poem, so the translation adds "illicit."

24. *Therefore, says the Master, LORD of Armies.* As is often the case in the poetry of the prophets, the clause for introducing divine speech is extrametrical and not strictly part of the poem.

settle scores. The verb *hinahem* usually means "to change one's mind" or "to regret" and can also mean "to be consoled." It is quite close phonetically to *hinaqem*, "to be avenged," which appears in the second verset, and the poet seems to have pushed the term here to mean something close to "vengeance."

my foes . . . my enemies. These terms commonly refer to the enemies of the people of Israel, but in a sharp polemic reversal, here they are addressed to the Israelites themselves, who through their perversion of justice have made themselves God's enemies.

26. *Then shall you be called town of righteousness, / faithful city*. This line obviously loops back to the opening line of this prophecy, verse 21, where the faithful city once filled with righteousness has become a den of murderers.

29. *the cult-trees*. The botanical genus stipulated by the Hebrew term is "terebinths." Pagan nature worship centering around sacred trees was widespread in Canaan. This is the first time that Isaiah inveighs against cultic rather than moral trespasses.

the gardens. This word, though it usually refers to gardens in an innocuously horticultural sense, in the present context palpably invokes the sacred gardens that were the site of pagan cults.

30. *oak . . . garden*. The poem picks up the tree and garden from the preceding line and turns them into metaphors of the dire end to which the miscreants will come.

31. *the strong*. Even though some interpreters understand this as "the treasure," the antithesis between strength and flimsy combustible tow makes good poetic sense, and there is philological warrant for construing *ḥason* as "strong."

his deeds into a spark. The image is a shrewd one: the reprehensible act of the paganizer is self-destructive, providing the spark that will destroy him.

CHAPTER 2

[1]The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw in a vision
concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

[2]And it shall happen in future days
that the mount of the LORD's
house shall be firm-founded
at the top of the mountains and
lifted over the hills.
And all the nations shall flow to it
[3]and many peoples shall go, and
say:
Come, let us go up to the mount of
the LORD,
to the house of Jacob's God,
that He may teach us of His ways
and that we may walk in His
paths.
For from Zion shall teaching come
forth

and the LORD's word from
Jerusalem.
[4]And He shall judge among the
nations
and be arbiter for many peoples.
And they shall grind their swords
into plowshares
and their spears into pruning
hooks.
Nation shall not raise sword against
nation
nor shall they learn war anymore.
[5]O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk in the LORD's
light.

[6]For you have abandoned your
people,
O house of Jacob.
For they are full of eastern things
and soothsayers like the
Philistines,
and they abound in children of
strangers.

[7]And his land is filled with silver and
gold
and no end to his treasures,
and his land is filled with houses
and no end to his chariots.
[8]And his land is filled with idols
to his handiwork he bows down,
to what his fingers made.
[9]And the human shall bow low,
and man shall be brought down.
And do not spare them!
[10]Come into the crag
and hide in the dust
for the fear of the LORD
and from His pride's glory.
[11]The eyes of human haughtiness are
brought down,
and men's righteousness is bowed
low,
and the LORD alone shall be raised
high
on that day.
[12]For it is a day of the LORD of
Armies,
over all the proud and lofty

and over all on high and lifted
up.
13 And over all the Lebanon cedars
that are lofty and raised high
and over all the Bashan oaks,
14 and over all the lofty mountains
and over all the raised-up
mountains,
15 and over every looming tower
and over every fortress wall,
16 and over all the Tarshish ships
and over all lovely crafts.
17 And human haughtiness shall bow
low
and men's loftiness be brought
down,
and the LORD alone shall be exalted
on that day.
18 And the ungods shall utterly vanish.
19 And they shall come into caves in
the crags
and into hollows in the dust
from the fear of the LORD
and from His pride's glory
when He rises to wreak havoc
on earth.

[20]On that day man shall fling away
his silver idols and his golden idols
that he made to bow before
to the hedgehogs and the bats.
[21]And they shall come into the
crevices in the crags
and into the clefts in the rocks
from the fear of the LORD
and from His pride's glory
when He rises to wreak havoc
on earth.
[22]Leave off from man,
who has breath in his nostrils.
For of what account is he?

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *in future days*. Older translations represent this Hebrew phrase as "in the end of days," giving it an emphatically eschatological meaning it does not have. The Hebrew *ʾaḥarit*, derived from the word that means "after," refers to an indefinite time after the present.

the mount of the LORD's house. Mount Zion in Jerusalem is here imagined as a kind of second Sinai, from which God's teaching will go out.

all the nations. The universalist note struck here is new. It will be elaborated and expanded in the visions of the anonymous prophet of the Babylonian exile whose writing is appended to the Book of Isaiah, beginning

with chapter 40. Some interpreters detect sixth-century B.C.E. themes throughout this prophecy.

4. *Nation shall not raise sword against nation*. God's teaching from Zion, then, is to have the effect of inaugurating a reign of universal peace. There is an imaginative boldness, or perhaps rather the courage of desperation, in this vision because Isaiah articulated it at a historical moment of continual warfare among imperial powers when the land of Israel itself, as 1:7–9 shows, was threatened with destruction by invading armies.

learn war. Fighting was a skill that required training, as noted in Psalms and elsewhere.

6. *For you have abandoned your people*. These words clearly signal the beginning of a new prophecy, one of castigation, after the utopian vision of verses 2–5. Abandoning the people means something like abandoning its own vital interests or precious values.

For they are full of eastern things. More literally, "they are full of the east." There is no reason to emend this, as some have proposed, to "full of sorcerers [*qosmim*] from the east" because poetry can surely deploy ellipsis.

and they abound in children of strangers. This clause is unclear, and the meaning of the verb is especially uncertain. Some notion of adopting foreign ways (the eastern things, the Philistines) would appear to be implied.

7. *silver and gold*. From divining and magic, the poet moves on to the accumulation of wealth and luxury items, which he sees as the royal road to idolatry (verse 8).

9. *shall bow low*. Although the sense is to be humbled, the Hebrew makes a point of using the same verb that expressed idolatry in the previous verse. This relatively long poem, running to the end of the chapter, is elaborately structured through a series of images of high things brought low and God's commanding height over all the earth. The poem makes use not only of repeated images but also of refrainlike devices.

10. *Come into the crag / and hide in the dust*. The landscape envisaged is harsh and pitiless: no forests or gardens or towns but dust and rocks, which offer terrified man inhospitable and inadequate shelter against God's wrath.

12. *lifted up*. This emends the Masoretic "lowly," which doesn't seem plausible. This whole clause is repeated as a refrain in verse 17, underscoring the high-low theme of the entire poem.

13. *the Lebanon cedars*. Throughout biblical poetry, the great cedars of Lebanon are iconic images of loftiness.

over all. The anaphora of "over all," *ʿal kol*, becomes a terrific drum-beat, making a crescendo that begins in verse 12 and runs on through verse 16, all a single sentence.

15. *fortress wall*. More literally, "fortified wall."

16. *Tarshish ships*. Tarshish is an undetermined port on the Mediterranean far to the west. But the mention in the Book of Kings of Tarshish ships plying the Red Sea suggests that it may also be a term for a kind of craft constructed for long voyages.

lovely crafts. The translation follows a scholarly proposal for the noun *sekhiyot*, but its meaning is obscure, and the conclusion about what it might be is dictated chiefly by the poetic parallelism.

18. *And the ungods shall utterly vanish*. This brief sentence looks like an orphan—a verset without a paired second verset, which might have somehow been dropped in scribal transmission. Nevertheless, it contains a nice poetic effect in the internal rhyme of *ʾelilim*, "ungods," immediately followed by *kalil*, "utterly."

19. *caves in the crags . . . hollows in the dust*. The crag/dust parallelism as places of hiding in verse 10 is further concretized here by the addition of caves and hollows, helping us imagine the pitiful plight of the people who attempt to flee, crawling into crevices in rocks and in the ground. This miserable effort at hiding somewhere down below is the culmination of the bringing-low of man that defines the entire prophecy.

to wreak havoc. The Hebrew verb used here, and again in the refrain at the end of verse 21, is strong and violent. It suggests terrorizing and it is related phonetically to a verbal stem that means "to smash."

20. *to the hedgehogs and the bats*. The idolators themselves have fled to the bleak wilderness. Now they throw away their precious idols to creatures of the

wilderness, though the precise identity of the first of these is uncertain.

22. *Leave off from man, / who has breath in his nostrils*. One might have expected, given the previous emphasis of this prophecy something like: leave off from your idols, / for they are insensate things. The point, however, is that idolatry, worshipping what man makes with his own hands, is itself an expression of human arrogance, man's assuming he can lift himself high, like his towers and battlements, through his own acts and artifacts. (One wonders whether the Tower of Babel may stand in the background of this poem.) The mention of the breath in the nostrils invokes the intrinsic fragility of human life: man is a vulnerable, ephemeral creature, his life-breath easily stopped in a moment, so how could one put trust in him?

CHAPTER 3

[1]For, look, the Master, LORD of
Armies,
is about to take away from
Jerusalem and from Judah
staff and stay,
every staff of bread
and every staff of water,
[2]warrior and fighting man,
judge and prophet and wizard and
elder,
[3]commander of fifty and notable
and councillor and craftsman and
caster of spells.
[4]And I shall make lads their
commanders
and babes shall rule them.
[5]And the people shall oversee each
other,
one man and his fellow.
The lad shall lord it over the elder,

and the worthless over the
honored.
[6]Should a man take hold of his
brother
in his father's house:
"You have a cloak. You shall be our
captain
and this stumbling block under
your hand."
[7]He shall speak out on that day,
saying,
"I will be no dresser of wounds
when there is no bread nor
cloak in my house.
You shall not make me the
people's captain."
[8]For Jerusalem has stumbled
and Judah has fallen.
For their tongue and their acts are
against the LORD
to defy His glorious gaze.
[9]The look of their face bears witness
against them,
and their offense is like Sodom.
They have told it, they did not
hide it.

Alas for them,
for they have paid themselves
back with evil.
[10]One says: it is good for the
righteous,
for the fruit of his deeds he
enjoys.
[11]Alas, for the wicked, there is evil,
for as his hands have done, it will
be done to him.
[12]My people's overseers are babes,
and women rule over them.
My people, those who guide you
mislead you
and the course of your paths they
confound.
[13]The LORD is stationed to plead in
court,
and stands to judge peoples.
[14]The LORD shall come in judgment
with His people's elders and
commanders.
As for you, you have ravaged the
vineyard,
what is robbed from the poor—in
your homes.

15 Why should you crush my people
and grind down the face of the poor?
Word of the Master LORD of Armies.

16 And the LORD said:
Since Zion's daughters are haughty,
and they walk with necks thrust forth
and with wanton eyes,
walking with mincing steps
and jingling with their feet,
17 the Master shall blight the pates of Zion's daughters
and expose their private parts.
18 On that day the Master shall take away
the splendid ankle bells and the headgear
19 and the crescents and the pendants
and the bracelets and the veils
20 and the necklaces and the armlets

and the sashes and the amulets
and the charms,
21 the finger-rings and the nose-rings,
22 the robes and the wraps and the
shawls and the purses,
23 and the gowns and the draped
cloths
and the turbans and the capes.
24 For instead of perfume, rot shall
be,
and instead of sashes, rope,
and instead of beaten-work,
baldness,
and instead of rich nobles, girding
of sackcloth,
for instead of beauty, shame.
25 Your men shall fall by the sword,
your valor, in battle.
26 And her gates shall mourn and
lament,
and stripped, she shall sit on the
ground.
4:1 And seven women shall take hold
of
one man on that day,
saying, “We shall eat our own bread,

we shall wear our own cloak.
Only let your name be called upon
us.
Gather in our shame."

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

4. *I shall make lads their commanders*. In the political chaos that God will trigger, with all the leaders taken away (verses 1–3), mere lads and babes will be left to lead the people.

6. *this stumbling block under your hand*. There might be a distant play on words between *makhshelah*, "stumbling block," and *memshalah*, "government." In the general state of political disarray, government has turned into a stumbling block.

8. *For Jerusalem has stumbled*. This line pointedly picks up "stumbling block" from verse 6.

12. *My people's overseers are babes, / and women rule over them*. This line reverts to the evocation of a comprehensive absence of leadership that was announced at the beginning of the prophecy. In the patriarchal view—despite the exceptional instance of Deborah in Judges 4–5—women are no fitter than babes to govern.

14. *As for you*. The emphatic use of the second-person plural pronoun, usually not stated before the conjugated form of the verb, is probably directed to the elders and commanders mentioned at the end of the preceding line of verse. This makes thematic sense of the removal of the leaders of the people that has been stressed from the beginning of the poem: these so-called leaders enrich themselves with goods robbed from the poor, grind down their faces, and so it is a leadership that must be revoked.

16. *with necks thrust forth*. The idea is that these elegant Jerusalemite women go about with their noses stuck up in the air.

jingling with their feet. They are wearing some sort of ankle bracelets, which jingle as they walk in their mincing, seductive gait.

17. *expose their private parts*. Though some modern translations understand the rare Hebrew word *pot* as "head," a word close to it occurs elsewhere in the sense of "aperture" or "socket," and here indicates an orifice, as the King James Version understood ("secret parts"), in keeping with traditional Hebrew commentators. The verb used is a term for the exposing of nakedness. *Pot* is the word for "vagina" in modern Hebrew.

18–23. *the splendid ankle bells and the headgear / and the crescents and the pendants. . . .* This long catalogue of items of apparel and jewelry includes quite a few terms occurring nowhere else that are of uncertain meaning as well as some others that occur elsewhere which can be confidently identified (for example, "armlets," "veils," "shawls"). To understand the prophet's rage at these aristocratic women flirtatiously parading about in their expensive finery, one might imagine a contemporary social critic, dismayed and indignant over the plight of the homeless of New York, who sees the rich matrons of Manhattan walking along Madison Avenue in their designer dresses and coats, with shopping bags filled with more of the same.

24. *instead of perfume, rot.* There is a verbal violence in the strong antithesis between perfume and stinking "rot," which in the Hebrew, as in the English, is a monosyllable: *maq*.

rope. The Hebrew *niqpah* occurs only here. Since Late Antiquity, it has been linked with a verbal root that means "to go around"—hence the translation "rope." But some translators see it in a different root and understand it to mean "blow."

instead of beaten-work, baldness. This is what the Hebrew says, but it is a little odd because one would expect "baldness" to replace something like "fine tresses," not an ornament made of metal. Perhaps this is a metal ornament worn in the hair.

for instead of beauty, shame. The Masoretic Text reads only "for instead of beauty." The Qumran Isaiah, however, as well as two ancient translations, shows a reading with the word "shame," which seems far more likely.

25. *Your men.* The Hebrew possessive suffix is a feminine plural, as the prophet is now angrily addressing the daughters of Zion directly, whereas until this point they have been referred to in the third person. He has announced that they will be stripped of their finery; now he tells them they will also be deprived of their men, who will perish in battle.

26. *stripped.* The Hebrew word is problematic. This form would ordinarily mean "she shall be clean."

4:1. The prophecy that began in 3:16 ends in this first verse of chapter 4.

seven women shall take hold of / one man. With much of the eligible male population wiped out on the battlefield, there are no longer enough men to go around. The women forcibly grab the man they find, afraid to let him get away.

We shall eat our own bread, / we shall wear our own cloak. We do not even ask, they say to the man, that you provide material support for us, according to the accepted practice. All we want is that you redeem us from our unmarried state, which is a "disgrace" for nubile women, and that you let us take your name.

CHAPTER 4

[2]On that day the LORD's shoot shall
become
beauty and glory,
and the fruit of the land
pride and splendor
for the remnant of Israel.
[3]And who remains in Zion
and who is left in Jerusalem,
"holy" shall be said of him
each who is written for life in
Jerusalem.
[4]The Master shall surely wash the
filth of the daughters of Zion,
and Jerusalem's bloodguilt He
shall cleanse from its midst
with a wind of justice and a
wind of rooting-out.
[5]And the LORD shall create over all
the sanctuary of Mount Zion
and over its solemn assemblies

a cloud by day
and an effulgence of flaming fire
by night,
for over all the glory there shall
be a canopy.
[6]And a shelter it shall be
as a shade by day from heat
and a covert and refuge from
pelting rain.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *On that day the* LORD*'s shoot shall become / beauty and glory.* Most translators and textual critics read this whole short chapter as prose, but the diction is manifestly poetic (*nogah*, "effulgence," for example, occurs elsewhere only in poetry), and it is possible to scan it as poetry, even though it is somewhat looser metrically than other Prophetic poems. "The LORD's shoot" would be the people of Israel to be redeemed after a period of devastation and tribulation that will leave a saving remnant ("who remains in Zion").

4. *the filth of the daughters of Zion.* The filth indicated by the Hebrew term is excremental. If this line does not directly refer to the prophecy about the daughters of Jerusalem that immediately precedes, it is at least an editorial warrant for placing this prophecy here.

bloodguilt. The plural form of the word for "blood," which is used here, refers to bloodguilt, though it retains the concrete image of blood staining the hands of the killer (compare 1:15).

justice . . . rooting-out. God will bring justice to the city, but the second term suggests that the implementation of justice involves purging the

miscreants. The violence, as Joseph Blenkinsopp argues, suggests that the term *ruaḥ* here is to be understood as a sweeping wind rather than as "spirit."

5. *a cloud by day / and . . . fire by night.* This is an obvious invocation of the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night that went before the Israelites in the wilderness: that miraculous divine protection is now to be re-created in the restored Jerusalem. The pillar of fire from Exodus here undergoes poetic elaboration as the writer adds both *nogah*, "effulgence," and *lehavah,* "flame."

for over all the glory. This phrase is somewhat obscure. The least strained construction is that "glory" refers to the Temple and its solemn assemblies. The canopy that is over all the glory, providing shade and shelter, as the next verse spells out, is clearly an image of divine protection.

6. *from pelting rain.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "from stream and from rain," but since there is no river in Jerusalem that could threaten it with a flood, this is probably a hendiadys meaning: rain that pounds down like a stream of water.

CHAPTER 5

[1]Let me sing to My beloved
the song of my lover for his vineyard.
A vineyard my beloved had
on a hillside rich in soil.
[2]And he hoed it and took off its stones,
and planted it with choice vines.
And he built a tower in its midst,
and a winepress, too, he hewed in it.
And he hoped to get grapes
but it put forth rotten fruit.
[3]And, now, O dweller of Jerusalem
and man of Judah,
judge, pray, between Me
and My vineyard.
[4]What more could be done for My vineyard
that I did not do?

Why did I hope to get grapes
and it put forth rotten fruit?
5 And now, let Me inform you, pray,
what I am about to do to My
vineyard:
take away its hedge, and it shall turn
to waste,
break down its fence, and it shall
be trampled.
6 And I will make it a wild field,
and it shall not be pruned nor
raked,
and thorn and thistle shall
spring up.
And I will charge the clouds
not to rain on it.
7 For the house of Israel is the
vineyard of the LORD of Armies
and the men of Judah are His
delightful planting.
He hoped for justice, and, look,
jaundice,
for righteousness, and, look,
wretchedness.

[8]Woe, who add house to house,
who put field together with field
till there is no space left
and you alone are settled, in the
heart of the land.
[9]In the hearing of the LORD of
Armies:
I swear, many houses shall turn to
ruin,
great and good ones with none
living in them.
[10]For ten acres of vineyard shall yield
a single *bat,*
and a *homer* of seed shall yield
but an *ephah.*
[11]Woe, who rise in the morning early
to chase after strong drink,
who linger late in twilight,
enflamed by wine.
[12]Whose banquets are lyre and lute,
timbrel and flute, and wine,
and who do not regard the
LORD's deeds,
and the work of His hands do
not see.
[13]Therefore is My people exiled

for lack of knowledge,
its honored men victims of famine
and its masses parched with thirst.
14 Therefore Sheol has widened its
gullet
and gaped open its mouth beyond
measure,
and her splendor and her hubbub
have gone down,
her noise and her revelers.
15 And humans are bowed low and
man brought down,
and the eyes of the haughty are
brought down.
16 And the LORD of Armies shall be
raised up in justice
and the Holy One hallowed in
righteousness.
17 And sheep shall graze as in their
meadows
and goats shall feed in the ruins of
the fatted.
18 Woe, who haul crime with the
cords of falseness
and like the ropes of a cart,
offense.

[19]Who say: “Let Him hurry, let Him
hasten His deed,
that we may see,
and let the counsel of the Israel’s
Holy One
draw near and come that we may
see.”
[20]Woe, who say “good” to evil
and “evil” to good,
who turn darkness to light
and light into darkness,
turn bitter into sweet
and sweet into bitter.
[21]Woe, wise in their own eyes
and in their own opinion
discerning
[22]Woe, mighty to drink wine
and men of valor to mix strong
drink,
[23]who declare the wicked innocent
because of bribes
and righteous men’s just cause
deny.
[24]Therefore, as a tongue of fire
consumes straw
and hay falls apart in flame,

their root shall be like rot
    and their flower go up like dust.
For they have spurned the teaching
    of the LORD of Armies,
    and the utterance of Israel's Holy
        One they despised.
[25]Therefore is the LORD incensed
    with His people,
    and has stretched out His hand
        and struck it.
And mountains have quaked,
    and their corpses are become like
        offal in the streets.
Yet His wrath has not abated
    and His arm is still stretched out.
[26]And He shall raise a banner for
    nations from afar
    and whistle to one at the end of
        the earth,
        and, look, swiftly, quick, he
            shall come.
[27]None tires, none stumbles among
    them,
    he does not slumber, does not
        sleep.

The belt round his loins does not slip
open,
and his sandals' thong does not
snap.
[28]His arrows are sharpened,
all his bows are drawn.
The hooves of his horses are hard as
flint
and his wheels like the whirlwind.
[29]He has a roar like the lion
he roars like the king of beasts.
He howls and seizes his prey,
whisks it off and none can save.
[30]And he shall howl against him on
that day
like the howling of the sea,
and he shall peer toward the earth
and, look, constricting darkness,
and the light shall go dark in its
clouds.

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Let me sing to My beloved.* This Parable of the Vineyard would become an early warrant for reading the Song of Songs as an allegory of the love

between God and Israel. The lover here is clearly God, and the vineyard over which the lover labors is the people of Israel. In the Song of Songs, the body of the beloved is represented metaphorically as a vineyard.

on a hillside rich in soil. The translation of this phrase, following the proposal of Bleckinsopp, is conjectural. The literal sense of the Hebrew word is: "in a corner [or beam of light] son of oil." The conjectured translation builds on the association of oil with fruitfulness and assumes that the word for "corner" might extend to a plot of land.

2. *a tower.* This would probably be a watchtower from which one could survey the vineyard and protect it from predators.

5. *take away its hedge, and it shall turn to waste.* The transparent referent of the unprotected vineyard that is trampled by wild beasts is the kingdom of Judah, shorn of defenses, which is overrun by invading armies.

6. *And I will charge the clouds / not to rain on it.* The weather conspires with wild beasts to destroy the vineyard.

7. *justice . . . jaundice . . . righteousness . . . wretchedness.* This translation proposes English equivalents for the Hebrew wordplay, where the meaning of the two second terms is somewhat different. The Hebrew is *mishpat,* "justice," *mispaḥ,* "blight," and *tsedaqah,* "righteousness," *tseʿaqah*, "scream."

8. *Woe, who add house to house, / who put field together with field.* The social injustice against which the prophet inveighs is the consolidation of real estate —houses and fields—in the hands of the exploitative rich, who thus drive the peasantry from their possessions.

9. *In the hearing of the* LORD *of Armies.* The literal sense is: in the ears of the LORD of Armies. One must assume that the prophet himself, not God, speaks the lines that follow, beginning with this formula because he is pronouncing, with God as his witness, a solemn vow about the destruction to come.

10. *a single bat . . . an* ephah. These are two small units of solid measure, against "ten acres" (literally, "ten yokes") and a large measure, the *ḥomer.*

11. *strong drink.* Since the Samson story appears to indicate that this drink, *sheikhar*, is derived from grapes but is different from wine, it probably means grappa. Archaeologists have discovered the apparatus for making grappa.

12. *who do not regard the LORD's deeds.* Since they spend their days drinking and carousing, from early morning until evening, they would be in a perpetual drunken stupor, scarcely in a condition to take note of the great things God has done.

13. *Therefore is My people exiled.* Verb tenses in ancient Hebrew poetry are fluid and at times ambiguous, and one suspects that the prophets purposefully exploited the ambiguity. The exile is so certain that it is as if it had already happened, or it is about to happen, or it will happen before too long.

14. *Sheol has widened its gullet.* Sheol, the underworld, often imagined as a great pit, is represented here as a kind of hungry monster swallowing those marked for destruction.

her splendor. The feminine possessive refers to the people.

15. *and humans are bowed low.* This line picks up the refrain from the prophecy in chapter 2.

17. *and goats shall feed.* The Masoretic Text here reads *garim*, "sojourners," but this translation follows the Septuagint, which appears to have used a Hebrew text that read *gedayim*, "goats." (The Hebrew letters for *r* and *d* look quite similar.)

in the ruins of the fatted. The Hebrew here is rather compressed, with *meiḥim*, "fatted," a word that generally refers to fatted animals, but the evident reference is to the overstuffed rich, who have gorged themselves on the resources of the poor.

19. *Let Him hurry.* This whole speech is an expression of the arrogant complacency of the evildoers: let God hurry and carry out His plans—we are not worried.

21. *in their own opinion.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "before their own faces." The phrase is clearly parallel in meaning to "in their own eyes" in the first verset.

22. *mighty to drink wine / and men of valor to mix strong drink.* The heavy sarcasm is palpable: in this vehement denunciation, the prophet scarcely aims for subtlety.

24. *as a tongue of fire consumes straw / and hay falls apart in flame.* The structure of this line is chiastic: in the first verset, fire is the grammatical subject, consuming the straw; in the second verset, the grammatical subject is the hay, disintegrating in the flame. The verb in the second verset usually means to go slack or become weak, but something like falling apart is required by the context.

26. *He shall raise a banner for nations from afar.* God is represented as a kind of general, giving the order for the invading armies to attack. The identity of the armies is left unstated, heightening the ominous effect, although Isaiah and his audience would surely have had the imperial forces of Assyria in mind.

27. *among them.* The Hebrew says "among him," but the sliding between singular and plural, especially for collective nouns, that is natural in Hebrew needs to be sorted out for English legibility.

28. *The hooves of his horses are hard as flint / and his wheels like the whirlwind.* This is one of many instances in which the poetic power of Prophetic verse pushes, perhaps not intentionally, in the direction of apocalypse. What the prophet means to do is to make frighteningly vivid through his poetry the terrible onslaught of foreign invaders that is about to overwhelm the kingdom of Judah. The hyperbolic force, however, of the language he uses is so strong that the attacking army begins to look apocalyptic—its troops unslumbering, the hooves of its horses like flint, the wheels of its chariots like the whirlwind.

29. *He has a roar like the lion.* The representation of martial fierceness in the image of the lion is conventional in ancient Near Eastern poetry, but the prophet makes the familiar trope vivid in the way he highlights the roaring and then links it to the roaring of the sea.

30. *And he shall howl against him on that day.* Hebrew usage has a certain propensity to multiply pronominal references: the initial "he" (merely

indicated through the conjugated form of the verb "shall howl") is of course the cruel enemy, whereas "against him" refers to the people of Israel.

and he shall peer toward the earth. Since what is seen is a dismaying landscape of disaster, "he" would again have the unstated antecedent of the people of Israel.

constricting darkness. The Hebrew is very compressed, but this is the most likely meaning.

and the light shall go dark in its clouds. Again, the poetic imagery is incipiently apocalyptic: it is dark on the earth and dark in the heavens as well. This is a reversal of the first moment of creation, when "let there be light" drives back the primordial darkness that is over the face of the abyss. The suffix indicating "its" in the Hebrew is feminine and so must refer to "the earth," the only feminine noun in this verse. The word for clouds, *ʿarifim*, appearing only here, is high poetic diction, a designation linked with a verbal stem that means to drip down, as the clouds yield rain.

CHAPTER 6

[1]In the year of the death of King Uzziah, I saw the
Master seated on a high and lofty throne, and the skirts
of his robe filled the Temple. [2]Seraphim were
stationed over him, six wings for each one. With two it
would cover its face, and with two it would cover its
feet, and with two it would hover. [3]And each called out
to each and said:

"Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of
Armies.
The fullness of all the earth is His
glory."

[4]And the pillars of the thresholds swayed from the
voice calling out and the house was filled with smoke.
[5]And I said,

"Woe to me, for I am undone,
for I am a man of impure lips,

and in a people of impure lips
do I dwell.
My eyes have seen the King LORD
of Armies."

6 And one of the seraphim flew down to me, in his hand
a glowing coal in tongs that he had taken from the
altar. 7 And he touched my mouth and said,

"Look, this has touched your lips,
and your crime is gone, your
offense shall be atoned."

8 And I heard the voice of the Master saying,

"Whom shall I send,
and who will go for us?"

And I said, "Here I am, send me."
9 And he said, "Go and say to this people:

'Indeed you must hear but you will
not understand,

indeed you must see but you will not
know.’
10 Make the heart of this people
obtuse
and block its ears and seal its eyes.
Lest it see with its eyes
and with its ears hear
and its heart understand
and it turn back and be healed.”

11 And I said, “Till when, O Master?”
And he said,
“Till towns are laid waste with no
dwellers
and homes with no man
and the land is laid waste, a
desolation.
12 And the LORD shall drive man far
away
and abandonment grow in the
midst of the land.
13 And yet a tenth part shall be in it
and turn back.
And it shall be ravaged
like a terebinth and an oak

which though felled have a stump
within them,
the holy seed is its stump.

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *In the year of the death of King Uzziah.* This might be 734 B.C.E., although the reignal chronology is disputed. In any case, the vision in the Temple in which Isaiah is commissioned as prophet is clearly the beginning of his prophetic mission, and this chapter would be the first thing he wrote.

I saw the Master seated on a high and lofty throne. Since it was believed that there was a correspondence between the Temple in Jerusalem and God's celestial palace, it is understandable that Isaiah should have a vision of God enthroned in the Temple. God apparently is imagined as having gigantic proportions, with the skirts of his robe filling the entire interior of the Temple. The word translated here as "Temple," *heikhal*, generally means "palace," and there appears to be a conflation between the two: the scene features both a throne and an altar. One should note that this episode begins in prose, probably because it is a narrative report rather than the prophetic message proper. When dialogue is introduced, the language switches to verse.

2. *Seraphim.* It is not entirely clear what these angelic attendants of God look like. Their name shows the verb that means "to burn," and they might be angels of fire, but then why would they need tongs to hold the burning coal? The root *saraf* is also associated with the burning venom of serpents, and the Book of Kings registers the fact that at one point there were icons of serpents in the Temple, leaving open the disquieting possibility that these seraphim are winged snakes.

cover its feet. Some think "feet" is a euphemism for the genitals, though that is not a necessary inference.

hover. The *piʿel* conjugation of the verb for flying, *ʿaf*, is used here, and this translation understands it to indicate hovering or fluttering without

forward motion, since the seraphim are, after all, "stationed," or "standing over" God. In verse 6, when one of the seraphim swoops down to Isaiah, the primary conjugation (*qal*) of this verb is used, suggesting a different movement.

5. *I am undone.* The Hebrew verb could also mean "I am struck dumb," and a pun is probably intended.

for I am a man of impure lips. As with Moses and Jeremiah, the prophet responds to the call to prophecy by stating his unworthiness for the task. But here, pointedly, his unworthiness is implicated in that of his people: "and in a people of impure lips do I dwell."

7. *he touched my mouth.* Remarkably, what is entirely elided here is the excruciating pain of having a burning coal pressed to the mouth. The role of pain in the initiation will be vividly evoked in Pushkin's "The Prophet," a poem based on this chapter, in which the seraph rips out the prophet's heart and replaces it with the burning coal.

8. *Here I am, send me.* The obvious implication is that, the prophet's lips having been cleansed, he is now ready to take up the mission. There is a linguistic note as well as a spiritual one in all of this: poetry, purportedly representing divine speech, is the prophet's vehicle; now, with his lips purified, he is in a condition to utter this elevated and powerful form of speech.

10. *Make the heart of this people obtuse / and block its ears and seal its eyes.* Since the heart is imagined as the seat of understanding, these are the three channels of perception. This particular message of God to the prophet is notoriously perplexing. Evidently, God does not want the people to understand, so that it will not change its ways and will not escape the dire punishment that it deserves. But if we see all this from Isaiah's point of view, the entire message is colored by his quite realistic fear that his prophetic mission is doomed to failure from the outset, that all his exhortations will not move the people to turn back from its evil ways. God's command, then, to make the heart of the people obtuse is a kind of preemptive justification by the prophet for the anticipated failure of prophecy.

11. *Till when, O Master?* The prophet is unwilling to contemplate the idea that the destruction will be total and final, and so he asks how long it will go on before God relents.

Till towns are laid waste with no dwellers. God answers not by indicating any period of time but by stating that first the land has to be devastated.

13. *a tenth part shall be in it and turn back.* This is an early articulation of the idea of the saving—perhaps rather "saved"—remnant. This small group of survivors will "turn back" to God, turn back from the disastrous acts of the majority.

And it shall be ravaged. The concluding clauses of this final verse are somewhat obscure. The "it" here would have to refer not to the tenth part that will be saved but to the people as a whole, who are destined to be ravaged.

like a terebinth and an oak / which though felled have a stump within them. Though *shalekhet*, the word represented here as "felled," comes to mean "leaf-fall" in modern Hebrew (it derives from a verb meaning "to fling away"), it most likely refers here to the cutting down of the tree: while most of it is chopped down, it can regenerate from the stump that remains, which would be the saving tenth part of the people.

the holy seed. In part because "holy seed," *zeraʿ qodesh*, is an exilic expression, many scholars conclude that this last clause, or even the entire final verse, is a later addition, referring to the community of exiles who remain faithful to the covenant and are destined to become the nucleus of the nation's regeneration.

CHAPTER 7

[1]And it happened in the days of Ahaz son of Jotham
son of Uzziah king of Judah that Rezin king of Aram
with Pekah son of Remaliah king of Israel went up to
Jerusalem to do battle against it, but he was not able to
battle against it. [2]And it was told to the house of
David: “Aram has joined with Ephraim and made its
heart and the heart of its people sway like the trees of
the forest before the wind.” [3]And the LORD said to
Isaiah, “Go out, pray, to meet Ahaz, you and Shear-
Jashub your son, to the edge of the conduit of the
Upper Pool, by the road of Fuller’s Field. [4]And you
shall say to him, ‘Watch yourself and be tranquil, do
not fear and let your heart not quail because of these
two smoking tails of firebrands, over the blazing wrath
of Rezin and Aram and the son of Remaliah
[5]inasmuch as Aram, with Ephraim and the son of
Remaliah, has devised evil counsel against you: [6]Let us
go up against Judah and shake it, and we shall break it
into pieces for ourselves. And we shall set up within it
the son of Tabeel as king.’

[7]Thus said the Master, the LORD:
It shall not happen and it shall not be,
[8]that the head of Aram is Damascus,
and the head of Damascus is Rezin.
[And in another sixty-five years
Ephraim as a people shall be smashed.]
[9]And the head of Ephraim is Samaria,
and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah.
If you trust not,
you shall not hold firm."

[10]And the LORD spoke again to Ahaz, saying, [11]"Ask for a sign from the people of the LORD your God, make it deep as Sheol or high above." [12]And Ahaz said, "I will not ask and I will not test the LORD." [13]And Isaiah said, "Listen, pray, O House of David! Is it not enough for you to weary men that you should weary my God as well? [14]Therefore the Master Himself shall give you a sign: the young woman is about to conceive and bear a son, and she shall call his

name Immanuel. [15]Curds and honey he shall eat till he
knows how to reject evil and choose good. [16]For before
the lad knows how to reject evil and choose good, the
land, whose two kings you despise, shall be
abandoned. [17]The LORD shall bring upon you and
your people and upon your father's house days that
have not come from the day Ephraim turned away
from Judah—the king of Assyria.

[18]And it shall happen on that day.
The LORD shall whistle to the
flies
that are on the edge of Egypt's
rivers
and to the bees that are in
the land of Assyria,
[19]and they shall all come and settle
in the wadis of the unplowed
fields,
and in the crevices of the rocks
and among all the thorns and
thistles.
[20]On that day the Master shall shave
with a hired razor along the
borders of the River Euphrates

with the king of Assyria,
the head and the pubic hair
and the beard, too, it shall cut
away.
[21]And it shall happen on that day,
a man shall nurture a calf and two
sheep.
[22]And it shall happen, from all the
making of milk,
he shall eat curds,
for all who are left in the midst of
the land
shall eat curds and honey.
[23]And it shall happen on that day,
every place where there will be
a thousand vines worth a
thousand silver shekels
shall turn into thornbush and
thistle.
[24]With bow and arrow one would
come there,
for thornbush and thistle the
whole land shall be.
[25]But the mountains that are worked
with the hoe,

there the fear of thornbush and
thistle shall not come,
and it shall be for oxen let loose
and the trampling of sheep.

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And it happened.* As the text moves into narrative, it shifts from poetry to prose.

Rezin king of Aram with Pekah son of Remaliah king of Israel went up to Jerusalem to do battle against it. The northern kingdom of Israel entered into an alliance with Aram to oppose Assyria, which was conducting a campaign (734–732 B.C.E.) in trans-Jordan, the eastern Galilee, and along the Mediterranean coast. Their purpose in attacking Ahaz was to force him to join their alliance.

but he was not able to do battle against it. The obvious sense is that the invading forces were unable to secure a decisive victory.

2. *made its heart . . . sway.* That is, struck terror in their hearts.

3. *Shear-Jashub.* Like other prophetic progeny, Isaiah's son has a symbolic name: it means "a remnant shall come back."

4. *the blazing wrath.* The Hebrew *ḥori-ʾaf* is a term for anger that suggests burning and thus picks up the image of the smoking firebrands.

6. *son of Tabeel as king.* This would clearly be a puppet king. His patronymic suggests that he was probably an Aramean.

7. *Thus said Master, the LORD.* As one would expect in a move to formal prophecy, the language now switches from prose to poetry.

8. *And in another sixty-five years / Ephraim as a people shall be smashed.* This prophecy of the destruction of the northern kingdom, which occurred in 721 B.C.E., looks very much like a later interpellation, invited by the momentum of the prophecy of the interruption of the reign of Rezin and of Pekah. The sixty-five-year span is nevertheless puzzling because this prophecy would have been enunciated perhaps a dozen years before Assyria overwhelmed the northern kingdom.

9. *If you trust not, / you shall not hold firm.* This cryptic declaration (the Hebrew involves wordplay) is a little enigmatic, though it probably means that if Ahaz does not trust Isaiah and hold out against Rezin and Pekah, he will come to a bad end.

13. *Isaiah said.* The Hebrew merely says "he said." The name has been substituted in order to avoid confusion.

to weary. The Hebrew verb sometimes means this, though it also means "to incapacitate," which is not appropriate in this context. The development of the dialogue appears to be as follows: Isaiah invites Ahaz to ask for a sign, however extravagant (verse 11); Ahaz is afraid to put God to the test (verse 12); Isaiah answers that Ahaz is exasperating God by his unwillingness to ask for a sign (verse 13); Isaiah further says that Ahaz will get a sign whether he likes it or not (verse 14).

14. *the young woman.* Although this verse generated many centuries of Christological readings emphasizing the virgin birth, the Hebrew *ʿalmah* does not mean "virgin," but rather "young woman," and in Proverbs the *ʿalmah* is represented engaged in sex. The "sign" here is the name she gives the child, which means "God is with us." Nevertheless, the identity of the young woman is unclear and has been much debated. She might be the prophet's wife because there is precedent for prophets begetting symbolic sons, or she might be a woman in the house of David.

15. *Curds and honey he shall eat.* From infancy, the child will be raised in sumptuous abundance, which, however, will be interrupted by the disaster that will sweep over the land.

17. *the king of Assyria.* This specification at the end of the sentence is syntactically awkward and may have been added as an explanatory gloss. In

any case, the prophecy of an Assyrian onslaught that is an unprecedented disaster for the nation much better suits Sennacherib's campaign against Judah in 701 B.C.E. than the events of 734–732 B.C.E. with which this segment began.

18. *the flies / that are on the edge of Egypt's rivers / and to the bees that are in the land of Assyria.* The swarms of insects—perhaps killer bees in the case of Assyria—are metaphors for the invading armies. There were moments of Egyptian alliance with Assyria, but not in 701 B.C.E.

20. *with the king of Assyria.* This translation construes the king as the "hired razor" God uses to wreak destruction.

the head and the pubic hair / and the beard. "Pubic hair" is literally "hair of the legs," but in this case "legs" does appear to be a euphemism for the genitals. Shaving of the head, beard, and pubic area is a way of humiliating prisoners, but here it also serves as a metaphor for destruction that is brutal and shaming but not total.

22. *for all who are left in midst of the land / shall eat curds and honey.* This sounds as though they are enjoying plenty, like the child Immanuel, but given the dire content of the three verses that follow, it probably means, in what may be an ironic twist, that they will live off the produce of their remaining livestock and what honey they can gather but will be unable to grow crops.

24. *With bow and arrow one would come there.* Vineyards will turn to brambles, and wild beasts will roam there—hence the need for bow and arrow.

25. *there the fear of thornbush and thistle shall not come.* Though some understand this to mean "you shall not come because of the fear of thornbush and thistle," the Hebrew lacks any proposition that could be construed as "because of." The more likely sense would be: unlike the flatlands, which will be covered with thornbushes and thistles, the mountain slopes, while not amenable to cultivation, will provide pasture for free-roaming cattle.

CHAPTER 8

[1]And the LORD said to me, “Take for yourself a large
parchment sheet and write on it with a man’s stylus:
for Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz.” [2]And I enlisted for
myself two trusty witnesses, Uriah the priest and
Zachariah son of Jeberechiah. [3]And I drew close to the
prophet-wife and she conceived and bore a son. And
the LORD said to me, “Call his name Maher-Shalal-
Hash-Baz. [4]For before the lad knows how to say
“father” and “mother,” the wealth of Damascus and
the spoils of Samaria shall be borne off to the king of
Assyria.” [5]And the LORD spoke to me once again,
saying: [6]“Inasmuch as this people has spurned the
quietly flowing waters of Shiloh and rejoiced in Rezin
and the son of Remaliah, [7]therefore, the Master is
about to bring up against them the great and mighty
waters of the Euphrates—the king of Assyria and all
his glory.

And it shall rise up over its channels

and go over all its banks
[8]and pass through Judah, flooding
and sweeping,
up to the neck it shall reach.
And its outstretched wings
shall fill your land, Immanuel.
[9]Take note, O people, and be terror-
stricken.
Give ear, all far reaches of the
earth.
Gird yourselves, and be terror-
stricken,
gird yourselves, and be terror-
stricken.
[10]Lay out counsel and it shall be
overturned,
speak a word and it shall not come
to be,
for God is with us."

[11]For thus said the LORD to me with a strong hand,
warning me not to go in the way of this people, saying:

[12]You shall not call a plot
to all that this people calls a plot,

nor fear what it fears nor be
terrified.
13 The LORD of Armies, Him shall
you hallow,
and He is your fear and your
terror.
14 And He shall be a snare and a stone
to strike against
and a rock for stumbling
for the two houses of Israel,
a trap and a snare for the
inhabitants of Jerusalem.
15 And many shall stumble against
them
and fall and be broken
and be snared and entrapped.

16 Wrap up the testimony, seal the teaching among My
disciples. 17 And I shall await the LORD, Who hides
His face from the house of Judah, and I shall hope for
Him. 18 Here I am, and the children that the LORD
gave me as signs and portents in Israel, from the
LORD of Armies Who dwells on Mount Zion. 19 And
should they say to you, “Inquire of the ghosts and the
familiar spirits who chirp and murmur, shall not a

people inquire of its gods, from the dead for the living,
[20]for instruction and guidance?" They indeed shall
speak according to this word that has no dawn. [21]And
he shall pass through it, stricken and hungry. And it
shall happen when he hungers that he shall be
infuriated and curse his king and his gods, and turn his
face upward [22]and to earth look down, and oh, distress
and darkness, swooping straits and uttermost gloom.
[23]For there is no swoop for him in straits. Now the
former has brought disgrace to the land of Zebulun
and to the land of Naphtali, and the latter brought
honor to the Way of the Sea, across from Jordan,
Galilee of the nations.

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *a large parchment sheet.* "Parchment" is merely implied in the Hebrew.
a man's stylus. This is a literal representation of the Hebrew, which sounds a little odd. Perhaps the phrase is meant to indicate an ordinary stylus used by human beings rather than some magical or supernatural writing implement.
Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. The name means "Hasten Booty Hurry Spoils." Hosea is another prophet enjoined to give his offspring a symbolic name. The dire portent of this name corresponds antithetically to the hopeful portent of the name Immanuel given to the child prophesied in 7:14.

2. *two trusty witnesses.* Their purpose is to confirm the validity of the document with the name that Isaiah has written.

3. *I drew close.* Isaiah, understandably, uses the most decorous of biblical idioms for sexual intimacy since it might be unseemly for him to say he "knew" his wife or "lay with" her.

the prophet-wife. Although the literal meaning of *neviʾah*, the feminine form of the word for "prophet," is "prophetess," she is given this designation only because she is the spouse of a prophet.

4. *Damascus . . . Samaria.* These are the two allies, Aram and the northern kingdom of Israel, that had attacked Jerusalem.

6. *and rejoiced.* The Hebrew syntax at this point is suspect: this single Hebrew word means, literally, "and rejoicing of." Proposed emendations remain unconvincing.

7. *the great and mighty waters of the Euphrates.* The antithesis with "the quietly flowing waters of Shiloh" is clear. The inhabitants of Jerusalem have not trusted in their own small kingdom, in the gentle brook Shiloh that flows through Jerusalem, but instead have turned to Samaria and Aram. For this, they will be overwhelmed by the mighty stream of the Assyrian empire.

8. *its outstretched wings.* The imagery of wings in the midst of flooding water is a little strange, but "wings" in biblical usage has a variety of metaphorical applications, and hence the loose application may not have seemed unnatural.

Immanuel. This designation, apparently for the people of Judah, is ironic because God is scarcely with the people as it is overcome by the Assyrian forces. If the word at the end of verse 10, *ʿimmanuel*, is a statement ("God is with us") and not a name, it would reflect a pivot in the prophet's discourse: Assyria will sweep down over Judah, but the nations of the earth (verse 9–10) will be fear-stricken because, nevertheless, God is with His people. Yet the subsequent verses go on with a prophecy of doom.

9. *Take note.* This translation reads *deʿu* instead of the Masoretic *roʿu*, which would seem to mean "smash" (though some interpreters, by a stretch, understand it as "band together").

14. *the two houses of Israel.* That is, both the northern and the southern kingdom.

16. *Wrap up the testimony, seal the teaching.* The evident reference is to the parchment scroll on which was written the child's name that is the dire portent. The Hebrew shows a strong alliteration between the two nouns, *teʿudah* and *torah*, which this translation tries to emulate.

among My disciples. The reference is a little obscure, and though this is the conventional rendering of the Hebrew noun, it could equally be translated as "My teachings."

19. *the ghosts and the familiar spirits who chirp and murmur.* Necromancy was, one may infer, a widespread practice in ancient Israel—so much so that King Saul was impelled to make it a capital crime (which he himself, in his last desperation, violated). It was believed that the spirits of the dead, when called up, emitted indistinct sounds, which the necromancer could then interpret as speech.

20. *this word that has no dawn.* The words of the purportedly murmurous dead are swathed in the dark of meaninglessness, and they will never have a dawn. This phrase became idiomatic in later Hebrew for anything hopeless or pointless.

21. *And he shall pass through it.* Given the grim fate of this person, "he" would refer to the inquirer of the spirits of the dead (or, alternately, to the "people" mentioned in verse 19). Although this sort of unmarked switch from plural to singular may be disorienting for the modern reader, it is fairly common in biblical usage. The "it" is feminine in the Hebrew and probably refers to the land, a feminine noun, though the term does not appear in the preceding verses.

22. *swooping straits.* The Hebrew of the received text, *meʿuf tsuqah*, sounds equally bizarre. The end of this verse and all of the next one, which concludes the chapter, look as though they have been mangled in scribal transmission, and neither the ancient versions nor scholarly emendations provide much help.

23. *For there is no swoop for him in straits.* The translation candidly reflects the unintelligibility of the Hebrew.

Now the former. Some interpreters think this is a reference to Pekah son of Ramaliah, but, in the general textual murkiness of this verse, that is no more than a guess.

the latter brought honor to the Way of the Sea. No convincing identification for "the latter" has been established. The verb rendered as "brought honor" might also mean "dealt heavily, oppressed," though if the previous verb in fact means "disgraced" (and not "was lenient"), one would expect *hikhbid* here to be its precise antonym—the two verbs derive, respectively, from roots that mean "light" and "heavy." In any case, no one has satisfactorily resolved the enigma of the geographical references here and the military actions performed in or on these regions.

CHAPTER 9

[1]The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light.
Those dwelling in the land of death's
shadow—
light has beamed on them.
[2]You have made great the nation
and heightened its joy.
They rejoiced before You
as the joy in the harvest,
as people exalt
when they share out the spoils.
[3]For its burdensome yoke
the rod on its shoulders,
the club of its oppressor—
You smashed, as on the day of
Midian.
[4]For every boot pounding loudly
and every cloak soaked in blood
is consigned to burning,
consumed by fire.

[5]For a child has been born to us,
a son has been given to us,
and leadership is on his
shoulders.
And his name is called wondrous
councillor,
divine warrior, eternal father,
prince of peace,
[6]making leadership abound and
peace without end
on the throne of David and over
his kingdom
to make it firm-founded and stay it
up
in justice and righteousness,
forever more.

The zeal of the LORD of Armies shall do this.

[7]A word has the Master sent out in
Jacob
and it has fallen in Israel.
[8]And all the people knew,
Ephraim and the dwellers of
Samaria,

in pride and with a swelling
heart, saying:
[9]Bricks have fallen, and we shall
build with hewn stone.
Sycamores are cut down, and we
shall replace them with cedars.
[10]But the LORD shall raise Rezin's
foes against him,
and his enemies He shall stir up.
[11]Aram from the east and Philistines
from the west,
and they shall devour Israel with
all their mouth.
Yet His wrath has not turned back.
and His arm is still outstretched.
[12]And the people has not turned back
to Him Who struck it,
and the LORD of Armies it has
not sought out.
[13]And the LORD shall cut off from
Israel head and tail,
branch and reed on a single day.
[14]Elder and honored, they are the
head,
prophet and false teacher, they are
the tail.

[15]And the people's guides have
misled,
and its guided are confounded.
[16]Therefore the Master shall not
rejoice over its young men,
and to its orphans and its widows
shall show no mercy.
For it is wholly tainted and evil,
and every mouth speaks scurrilous
things.
[17]For wickedness has burned like
fire,
thorn and thistle it has consumed.
And it has kindled the forest
thickets,
they went up in a surge of smoke.
[18]In the anger of the LORD of
Armies earth grew dark,
and the people became like
consuming fire,
no man spared his fellow.
[19]And they seized on the right and
hungered,
ate on the left and were not sated,
the flesh of their fellow man
they ate.

[20]Manasseh does it to Ephraim
and Ephraim to Manasseh,
together to Judah.
Yet His wrath has not turned back,
and His arm is still
outstretched.

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The people walking in darkness / have seen a great light.* This is one of the most arresting instances of antithetical parallelism in biblical poetry. The line is starkly simple yet haunting. Second Isaiah would pick up this contrast between light and darkness and develop it in a variety of elaborate ways. The line following here continues the light-darkness antithesis in an interlinear parallelism.

3. *as on the day of Midian.* The probable reference is to Gideon's defeat of the Midianite oppressors reported in Judges 6–8.

4. *every boot.* The Hebrew *seʾon* appears only here. A possible Akkadian cognate means "boot," and the parallelism with "cloak" argues for some item of apparel. Pounding boots and bloodied cloaks aptly serve as metonymies for a violently advancing army.

5. *a child has been born to us.* The child who is born with wondrous qualities and who is to assume leadership is the ideal king who will be a stay against all enemies and establish an enduring reign of peace.

and leadership is on his shoulders. This expression reverses the rod of the oppressor on the shoulders in verse 3.

wondrous councillor / divine warrior, eternal father, prince of peace. This string of epithets has been associated by many generations of Christian

commentators and readers with Christ. What the prophet has in mind, however, is not "messianic" except in the strictly political sense: he envisages an ideal king from the line of David who will sit on the throne of Judah and oversee a rule of justice and peace. The most challenging epithet in this sequence is *ʾel gibor*, which appears to say "warrior-god." The prophet would be violating all biblical usage if he called the Davidic king "God," and that term is best construed here as some sort of intensifier. In fact, the two words could conceivably be a scribal reversal of *gibor ʾel*, in which case the second word would clearly function as a suffix of intensification as it occasionally does elsewhere in the Bible.

6. *The zeal of the LORD of Armies shall do this.* This sentence is a kind of prose coda to the poetic prophecy. It underscores an important theological point: such an ideal ruler can come into being and sit on the throne of David only through God's zealous intervention.

8. *Ephraim and the dwellers of Samaria.* These are, of course, the inhabitants of the northern kingdom, who have allied themselves with Aram, as the mention of the Aramean king Rezin in verse 10 reminds us.

9. *Bricks have fallen, and we shall build with hewn stone.* There is probably an allusion to the Tower of Babel here. Babel was a byword for overweening human pride, as the story in Genesis 11 shows. These Israelites go beyond the builders of the Tower in their "pride and . . . swelling heart" by resuming their task of building after the brick structure has been razed and imagining that they can build it bigger and better with hewn stone (the building material of Canaan as against Mesopotamia).

cedars. These are the tallest trees known in the region; they are used elsewhere as a symbol of arrogance (see chapter 15).

12. *And the people has not turned back.* The verb plays against the use of the same verb in a different sense in the previous verse: divine wrath "has not turned back" means that it has not relented, has not been withdrawn, whereas here "turned back" means "to repent," "to turn back to God."

14. *Elder and honored.* Some scholars view this whole verse as a gloss, though it could be original to the prophecy.

prophet and false teacher. As the second phrase makes clear, the prophet referred to is a false prophet. This provides a bridge to the misleading leaders of the next line.

16. *the Master shall not rejoice over its young men.* The verb here should not be emended, as some have proposed. In biblical poetry, young men (and virgins) often appear as the apt object of rejoicing, just as orphans and widows are the proverbial object of merciful concern (second verset).

17. *went up.* The Hebrew verb used appears only here. Abraham ibn Ezra and others construe it as going up in a column or spume. The term translated as "surge," *geʾut*, supports this construction because when applied to water it means rising tide.

18. *grew dark.* This is still another term that occurs nowhere else, and so the meaning, proposed by many scholars, is necessarily conjectural.

the people became like consuming fire. In this time of national catastrophe, social order breaks down and every man turns against his fellow.

19. *the flesh of their fellow man they ate.* The Masoretic Text reads "each man eats the flesh of his own arm." This is possible as a hyperbolic expression but looks rather strange. The Septuagint and one Targum read *reʿo*, "his fellow man," instead of *zeroʿo*, "his arm," which sounds more likely and is also more in keeping with the previous verse. Cannibalism in times of siege is frequently mentioned in other biblical texts.

20. *Manasseh does it to Ephraim.* The Hebrew has no verb, only the accusative particle *ʾet*. But what is clearly indicated is that in this landscape of mutual savagery, such cannibalistic assault is what Manasseh does to Ephraim and vice versa. The reference is to civil strife within the northern kingdom and then to the war of the north on the south.

CHAPTER 10

[1]Woe, who inscribe crime's
    inscriptions
    and writs of wretchedness write,
[2]to tilt from their cause the poor
    and rob justice from My people's
        needy,
making widows their booty
    and despoiling orphans.
[3]And what will you do for the day of
    reckoning,
    for disaster that comes from afar?
To whom will you flee for help,
    and where will you leave your
        glory?
[4]Only, they shall kneel beneath the
    captive,
    and beneath the slain they shall
        fall.

[5]Woe, Assyria, rod of My wrath,

in whose hand is a club—My
fury.
6 Against a tainted nation I will send
him,
against the people of My anger I
will charge him
to take the booty and to seize the
spoils,
and to turn it to trampling like
mire in the streets.
7 But he shall not imagine so,
and his heart not so shall plot.
For destruction is in his heart,
to cut off nations, not a few.
8 For he shall say:
Are not my commanders all of
them kings?
9 Is not Calno like Carchemish?
Is not Hamath like Arpad?
Is not Samaria like Damascus?
10 As my hand has seized worthless
kingdoms,
and their idols more than
Jerusalem's or Samaria's,
11 why, as I have done to Samaria and
its ungods,

so I will do to Jerusalem and its
icons.
12 And it shall happen, when the
Master carries out all His acts
against Zion and against
Jerusalem,
I will reckon with the fruit of the
swollen heart of Assyria's king
and with the grandeur of his
haughty gaze.
13 For he has said:
"Through the power of my hand I
have done it,
and through my wisdom, for I
was discerning.
I have wiped out the borders of
peoples
and their riches I plundered
and brought down to the dust
those who dwelled there.
14 And my hand, as with a nest, has
seized
the wealth of peoples,
as one gathers abandoned eggs,
all the earth I have gathered,
and none fluttered a wing,

opened a mouth and peeped.”
15 Should the axe boast over its
wielder,
the saw vaunt over him who plies
it?
As though the rod had swung him
who raised it,
a club had raised the one not-
wood!
16 Therefore shall the Master, LORD
of Armies,
send a wasting into his fatness,
and in his glory’s stead a burning
shall rage
like the burning of fire.
17 And Israel’s Light shall turn to fire
and its Holy One to flame,
and it shall burn and consume his
thorns
and his thistles on a single day.
18 And the glory of his woods and his
farmland
from life-breath to flesh shall be
destroyed,
and shall be like a failing sick
man.

[19]And the remnant of his woods'
trees shall be so few
that a lad can write them down.

[20]And is shall happen on that day, the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob shall no longer lean on him who strikes them but shall lean on the LORD, Israel's Holy One, in truth. [21]A remnant shall come back, a remnant of Jacob, to mighty God. [22]For if your people Israel be like the sand of the sea, but a remnant within it shall come back. Decreed destruction sweeps down, vindication. [23]For it is irrevocably decreed: the Master, LORD of Armies, is about to do it in the midst of the land. [24]Therefore, this said the Master, LORD of Armies: "Do not be afraid, My people dwelling in Zion, of Assyria, who strikes you with the rod, and raises his club against you in the way he did to Egypt. [25]For in just a little while, My wrath and fury shall be utterly ended." [26]And the LORD of Armies shall rouse against him a scourge, like the striking down of Midian at the Rock of Oreb, and like His rod over the sea, and bear him off like the way of Egypt. [27]And it shall happen on that day,

his burden shall be removed from
your shoulder
and his yoke shall be shattered
from your neck.
He shall come up from the desert
[28]come up to Ajath,
pass through Migron
in Michmash place his gear.
[29]He shall pass over a ford,
Geva his lodging.
Ramah shall tremble,
Saul's Gibeah flee.
[30]With your voice give a piercing
call, Bath-Gallim,
Listen, O Laish, speak out,
Anathoth.
[31]Madmenah shall decamp,
Gebim's dwellers take refuge.
[32]That very day he shall stand at
Nob,
wave his hand against the Mount
of Zion's Daughter,
the hill of Jerusalem.
[33]Look, the Master, LORD of
Armies,

hacks away the treetops with an
axe,
and the lofty in stature are cut down
and the tall ones brought low.
[34]And he slashes the wood's thickets
with iron,
and Lebanon trees thunderously
fall.

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *writs.* Revocalizing the Masoretic *mekhatvim*, "indite," as *mikhtavim*.

2. *to tilt from their cause the poor.* The standard biblical idiom for perversion of justice is to tilt judgment or a case, but in this variation, the poor are the object of the verb, tilted away from their own legitimate cause or case.

3. *where will you leave your glory?* The interpretation sometimes proposed of the noun *kavod* as "body" is strained. The malefactors in their desperate flight must leave behind their "glory"—their fine houses and fields, all their accumulated substance.

4. *kneel beneath the captive.* Although emendations have often been proposed for this phrase, there is a coherent image here, if phrased a bit cryptically: these doomed people will be taken in captivity (presumably, by Assyrian invaders); some will fall under the feet of other captives in a forced march of those taken by the conquerors; others will perish among those killed in battles.

7. *But he shall not imagine so.* The Assyrians collectively, or their king, do not realize that they are merely God's instrument for punishing His people; as the lines that follow spell out, they arrogantly assume it is all the consequence of their power.

8. *Are not my commanders all of them kings?* This is a peerless army of warrior-noblemen, in which every field commander is a king.

9. *Calno . . . Carchemish . . . Hamath . . . Arpad.* These are all cities to the east that have fallen to the Assyrian onslaught. Aram is the westernmost of them, and if it is conquered, that will surely be the fate of its Israelite ally Samaria.

10. *worthless kingdoms.* This translation follows the scholarly consensus that *ʾelil* in the singular here means "without value" or "insignificant," and not "idol."

11. *ungods.* Here we have the plural of *ʾelilim*, which appears often in the Bible and is probably a polemic antipagan derogatory coinage, playing on *ʾel*, "god," and *ʾal,* "not," or perhaps rather a mocking diminutive, "godlet."

13. *brought down to the dust.* The received text reads *ka'bir*, of doubtful meaning. The translation supposes instead *beʿafar*, "into the dust." Bringing down into the dust is a recurrent biblical idiom and makes good sense here.

15. *Should the axe boast over its wielder.* These words begin God's rejoinder to the boast of the Assyrian king. The king is no more than a tool in God's hand, and the analogies of the axe and saw make the boasting transparently absurd.

the one not-wood. This sounds a little awkward (perhaps even in the Hebrew), but the phrasing is to make a point: the club is inert, insensate wood, not conscious flesh and blood like its wielder.

16. *a burning shall rage.* This is both metaphor and literal referent: the invading army puts fields and towns to the torch.

17. *Israel's Light.* In context, this is an epithet for God.

18. *from life-breath to flesh.* This phrase, literally representing the Hebrew, seems odd in connection with a forest, but it is in all likelihood an idiomatic expression for the whole thing, through and through (a little like the English "body and soul"), and so perhaps may be extended to inanimate objects.

20. *him who strikes them.* Here the striker is not God but foreign powers.

21. *to mighty God.* It should be noted that the Hebrew phrase here, *ʾel gibor*, is the same one attached to the ideal Davidic king in 9:5, but in this case the referent has to be God. It is possible that the occurrence of the epithet here may have triggered a scribal reversal of *gibor ʾel* in 9:5.

22. *if your people Israel be like the sand of the sea.* This is the language of God's repeated covenantal promise to Abraham in Genesis, but now only a small saving remnant is to survive.

26. *like the striking down of Midian at the Rock of Oreb.* The story is told in Judges 7:25.

His rod over the sea. The reference is to the parting of the Sea of Reeds (Exodus 14), and the rod is raised by Moses.

bear him off like the way of Egypt. In the account in Exodus, the entire Egyptian army is drowned in the Sea of Reeds.

like the way of Egypt. The Hebrew says merely "the way of Egypt." The reference appears to be the Assyrian defeat of Egypt in more than one battle, and not on Egyptian soil.

27. *He shall come up from the desert.* The received text is not intelligible at this point. It reads, literally, "a yoke from oil." The present translation supposes instead of these three Hebrew words, *ʿol mipney-shamen*, a text that showed *ʿalah miyeshimon.* This is necessarily conjectural but more likely than the garbled Masoretic version. These words would then mark the beginning of a new prophecy, the scary description of the advance of the Assyrian invaders through the land. Their itinerary is spelled out in the place-names of the next two verses. The Assyrian army swoops down from the north, arriving at the capital city of Judah in verse 32. There is scholarly debate as to which Assyrian expedition is invoked. Blenkinsopp opts for the one of 713–711 B.C.E., a decade after the destruction of the northern kingdom.

33. *treetops . . . the tall ones.* The imagery here picks up the theme of bringing down the high and mighty that is prominent in chapter 2. The Lebanon trees of the concluding verse are part of this same pattern.

CHAPTER 11

[1]And a shoot shall come out from the
stock of Jesse,
a branch shall bloom from his
roots.
[2]And the spirit of the LORD shall
rest on him,
a spirit of wisdom and insight,
a spirit of counsel and valor,
a spirit of knowledge and fear of
the LORD,
his very breath in the fear of
the LORD.
[3]And not by what his eyes sees shall
he judge,
and not by what his ears hear shall
he render verdict.
[4]And he shall judge the poor in
justice
and render right verdict for the
lowly of the land.

[5]And he shall strike the land with the
rod of his mouth,
with the breath from his lips put
the wicked to death.
And justice shall be the belt round
his waist,
faithfulness the belt round his
loins.
[6]And the wolf shall dwell with the
lamb,
and the leopard lie down with the
kid.
And the calf and the lion shall feed
together,
a little lad leading them.
[7]And the cow and the bear shall
graze,
together their young shall lie,
and the lion like cattle eat hay.
[8]And an infant shall play by a viper's
hole,
and on an adder's den
a babe put his hand.
[9]They shall do no evil nor act
ruinously
in all My holy mountain.

For the earth shall be filled with
knowledge of the LORD
as water covers the sea.
10 And on that day
the root of Jesse that is standing
shall become a banner for
nations.
Nations shall seek him out,
and his resting place shall be
glory.
11 And it shall happen on that day,
the Master shall pull in His hand
once more
to take back His people's remnant
that will remain from Assyria and
Egypt
and from Patros and from Cush and
from Elam
and from Shinar and from
Hamath and from the
coastlands.
12 And He shall raise a banner to the
nations,
and gather the banished of Israel
and the dispersed of Judah He shall
assemble

from the four corners of the earth.
13 And the envy of Ephraim shall
vanish,
and the foes of Judah be cut off.
Ephraim shall not envy Judah,
nor Judah be hostile to Ephraim.
14 And they shall swoop on the flank
of the Philistines by the sea,
together they shall plunder the
Easterners.
Edom and Moab shall be subject to
them,
and the Ammonites under their
sway.
15 And the LORD shall dry up the
tongue of Egypt's sea
and wave His hand over the
Euphrates with His fierce wind
and strike it into seven wadis,
that one may trod upon it dry-
shod.
16 And it shall become a highway for
His people's remnant
that will remain from Assyria,
as it was for Israel

on the day it came up from the
land of Egypt.

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *the spirit of the LORD shall rest on him.* There is a phonetic link between ruaḥ, "spirit," and *naḥah*, "rest," through the alliteration of the consonant *ḥet.* The choice of the verb is apt: the spirit descends gently on the ideal ruler to come. This noun is then repeated another three times in an emphatic anaphora.

his very breath. The Hebrew here is literally a verbal noun ("his breathing," "his smelling"?) that has somewhat perplexed interpreters, but the context indicates a sense like the one proposed in this translation. One should note that this verb reflects the same root as the reiterated word for "spirit."

3. *And not by what his eyes see.* This is reminiscent of God's words to Samuel, which have to do with making the right choice, that is, David, for the kingship: "For man sees with the eyes and the LORD sees with the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). The ideal king breathes the spirit of the LORD, and that, rather than appearances, guides him in judgment.

5. *he shall strike the land with the rod of his mouth.* The formulation is a pointed oxymoron: striking the land and (in the second verset) killing the wicked are violent acts, but this king will somehow realize these ends necessary to justice through speech, in keeping with the spirit of the LORD that has rested on him.

justice . . . the belt round his waist. This extends the idea of the preceding line because a firmly encircled belt round the waist is what one wears going into battle.

6. *And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb.* The famous lines that begin with this phrase are a vivid reflection of the fondness for hyperbole manifested in Prophetic poetry. It is unlikely that the prophet literally envisaged a radical

transformation of the order of nature in which carnivores would become pacific herbivores, but all this serves as a striking image for an ideal state when all violence will come to an end.

shall feed. The received text reads *umeriʾ*, "and a fatling," but two ancient versions provide warrant for *yimrʾu*, "shall feed," and the context seems to require a verb.

7. *hay.* The Hebrew *teven* generally means "straw" (as in its repeated use for brickmaking in the Exodus story), but since straw is not edible, "hay" would be the plausible English equivalent here.

8. *put his hand.* The Hebrew verb occurs only here, and so the translation is purely an inference from the context.

10. *the root of Jesse that is standing.* The apparent sense is "that is still standing," i.e., that still remains and can be regenerated. But the syntax of the line is a little confusing: in the Hebrew "shall become" immediately follows "And on that day" and thus is distant from its probable predicate, "a banner for nations."

his resting place. This Hebrew term is often used for a place of settlement that is safe from enemies. Its choice here might be intended to resonate with the spirit of the LORD that "shall rest" on the ideal king.

11. *pull in His hand.* The Masoretic Text says *yosif*, "he will again," but this needs to be followed by an infinitive, and there is none in this line. The translation emends the verb to *yeʾesof*, for which "hand" would be an idiomatic grammatical object.

from Assyria and Egypt. Although some scholars prefer to see this entire prophecy as a composition of the exilic period, it was Assyria and Egypt's hostility that were the concern of the Judahites in the later eighth century B.C.E.

12. *He shall raise a banner to the nations.* Earlier, God was raising a banner to far-off nations to attack Judah, but here the situation is reversed.

the banished of Israel / and the dispersed of Judah. This might be taken as evidence of an exilic setting for this prophecy, but if it were written any time after 721 B.C.E., the prophet could have had in mind the grim fate of the

northern kingdom as a signpost for what could happen imminently to the southern kingdom.

13. *Ephraim.* This is the northern kingdom of Israel.

14. *they shall swoop on the flank of the Philistines . . . / they shall plunder the Easterners.* The prophet envisages a united Israel and Judah striking enemies to the west, along the Mediterranean coast, and to the east, in Edom and Moab and perhaps even in Mesopotamia.

15. *the tongue of Egypt's sea.* This looks like an image for the Red Sea, which is tongue-shaped.

His fierce wind. The first word *baʿyam*, occurring nowhere else, has defied etymological explanation, but the context suggests a sense like fierceness or power. The same word, ruaḥ, which means "spirit" above, here means "wind," and the antithesis between a gentle spirit and a fierce devastating wind is pointed.

that one may trod upon it dry-shod. This clause completes a set of allusions to the miracle of the parting of the Sea of Reeds that runs through this and the next verse: the waving of the hand over the waters, the pushing back of the waters by a wind from God, walking where the sea was as on dry land. Here, of course, the drying up of the sea is a blight to the local inhabitants while the seabed becomes a highway for the saving remnant of Israel.

16. *that will remain from Assyria.* The Hebrew shows prominent sound-play: *ʾasher yishaʾer meʾashur*.

CHAPTER 12

[1]And you shall say on that day:
I acclaim You, O LORD, though
You raged against me,
Your wrath has withdrawn and
You comforted me.
[2]Look, God is my deliverance,
I trust and fear not.
For my strength and my power is
Yah,
and He became my deliverance.
[3]And you shall draw water joyously
from the springs of deliverance.
[4]And you shall say on that day:
"Acclaim the LORD, call
upon His name.
Make known His feats to the people,
proclaim that His name is exalted.
[5]Hymn to the LORD for He has
wrought proudly,
be it known through all the earth.

[6]Shout loud, sing gladly, Zion's
dweller,
for great in your midst is Israel's
Holy One."

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *I acclaim You, O LORD.* The language of this poem from the very beginning recalls the common formulas of the psalms of thanksgiving. The one important difference is that the thanksgiving psalms are usually recited by, or on behalf of, an individual—for example, after recovery from a grave illness—whereas in this poem the thanksgiving is collective or national. The editorial justification for inserting such a psalm at this point is that it comes immediately after the prophecy of national renewal and regeneration in chapter 11.

2. *my power.* This translation follows the scholarly consensus that *zimrah* means "power" or "might" and is a homonym for the more common word that means "song" or "hymn." It must be said, however, that in thanksgiving psalms the root *z-m-r*, which appears quite frequently, always has the sense of song. This entire line is a verbatim quotation from the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:2), which is appropriate because the earlier text is one of the great poetic celebrations of national triumph through God's aid.

3. *the springs of deliverance.* Water sources are always precious in this arid region, as we are reminded in Exodus by the bringing forth of water from the rock for the thirsty people. However, this vivid poetic coinage—"the springs of deliverance"—is original to this text.

5. *be it known through all the earth.* This is a recurrent theme in biblical literature: God's powerful intervention in history on behalf of the people of

Israel is a manifestation of His supreme dominion over all things, and the peoples of all the earth take note of it.

CHAPTER 13

[1]The portent about Babylon that Isaiah son of Amoz
saw in a vision.

[2]On a bald mountain raise a banner.
Lift up your voice to them, wave a
hand,
that they enter the gates of the
princes.
[3]I have charged the ones I have
summoned,
even called forth My warriors for
My wrath,
who exult in My pride.
[4]The sound of a crowd on the
mountains,
the likeness of a vast people,
the sound of the din of kingdoms,
nations assembling.
The LORD of Armies is mustering

an army for war.
[5]They come from a faraway land,
from the end of the heavens—
the LORD with His anger's
weapons,
to destroy all the earth.
[6]Howl, for the LORD's day is near,
as shattering from Shaddai it shall
come.
[7]Therefore all hands shall go slack,
every human heart shall quail.
[8]They shall panic, and birth pangs
shall seize them,
like a woman in labor they shall
shudder.
They shall gaze aghast at each other,
their faces in flames.
[9]Look, the LORD's day comes,
ruthlessly,
anger and smoldering wrath,
to turn the earth into desolation
and expunge its offenses from it.
[10]For the stars in the heavens and
their constellations
shall not shine with their light.
The sun shall go dark when it rises,

and the moon shall not send forth
its light.
[11]And I will single out the world for
its evil,
against the wicked for their crime,
and put an end to the pride of the
arrogant,
bring low the overweening of
tyrants.
[12]I will make man scarcer than gold,
human beings, than the gold of
Ophir.
[13]Therefore will I shake the heavens,
and the earth shall quake from its
base
in the anger of the LORD of
Armies,
on the day of His smoldering
wrath.
[14]And they shall be like a deer driven
off,
like sheep that are not gathered in.
Each man shall turn to his people,
and each man shall flee to his
land.
[15]All who are found shall be stabbed,

and all who are caught shall fall by
the sword.
16 Their babes shall be smashed as
they look,
their homes shall be looted and
their wives ravished.
17 I am about to rouse the Medes
against them,
who take no account of silver
and have no desire of gold.
18 And with bows young men shall be
pierced,
and they shall not pity infants.
Children they shall not spare.
19 And Babylon, splendor of
kingdoms,
the glorious pride of Chaldeans,
shall be as God's overthrowing
of Sodom and Gomorrah.
20 She shall remain without settlers
forever,
have no dwellers for time without
end.
And the Arab shall not pitch his tent
there,

nor shepherds bed their flocks
there.
[21]But wildcats shall lie down there,
and their homes shall be filled
with owls.
And ostriches shall dwell there,
and satyrs there shall dance.
[22]And hyenas shall shriek in her
palaces
and jackals in her mansions of
pleasure.
And it is close to come now.
Her days shall not draw on.

CHAPTER 13 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The portent about Babylon.* The word translated as "portent," *masaʾ*, has the literal sense of "burden," which is to say, a burden of prophetic pronouncement. Some render this as "oracle," though oracles tend to be murkier and also more strictly predictive. Babylon becomes an imperial power in the region that threatens, then destroys, the kingdom of Judah a century after Isaiah. Prophetic and other biblical books were conceived as open-ended affairs into which later materials could be introduced. Presumably, the editor felt that the portent about the doom of Babylon was in keeping with the outlook of Isaiah's prophecies concerning Assyria. The psalm placed as chapter 12 editorially marks the end of the first large unit of the book. The present chapter begins a series of prophecies about sundry

foreign nations. Most of this material is later, although it is difficult to sort out the chronology of the various units.

2. *that they enter the gates of the princes.* "They" are the troops of the army invading Babylon.

3. *the ones I have summoned, / . . . My warriors for My wrath.* The political reference is unclear, though in verse 17 the Medes are mentioned as the ruthless invading army, and it was in fact the Persians—conflated with Media—who toppled the Babylonian empire in the fifth century B.C.E. These warriors enacting God's wrath sound rather like an apocalyptic, or at least supernatural, army.

4. *The sound.* The Hebrew word could also be read as an interjection, "hark," although "sound" makes at least as good sense in context.

5. *They come from a faraway land, / from the end of the heavens.* This may be merely a hyperbolic representation of an army coming from beyond the immediate region, but it again gives the invaders an apocalyptic look.

6. *shattering from Shaddai.* The more literal sense is "havoc" or "despoiling," but the translation emulates the sound-play of the Hebrew, *shod mishaddai*.

10. *the stars in the heavens . . . / shall not shine with their light.* This is still another striking instance in which poetic hyperbole becomes incipient apocalypse: the catastrophe about to overtake Babylon is cosmic, with the stars and the moon in the sky going dark and the sun rising without light.

12. *the gold of Ophir.* Ophir, in the Red Sea region, was famous for its fine gold. In the Hebrew, a different word is used in this verset for "gold"; biblical Hebrew has several poetic synonyms for gold, but English has none.

14. *like a deer driven off, / like sheep.* These gentle and defenseless animals are the antithesis of the warriors that Babylonians once were, and by whom they are now overwhelmed.

15. *caught.* The meaning of the Hebrew verb is uncertain, and thus the translation is dictated by context. Elsewhere, this word means "swept away."

16. *babes . . . homes . . . wives.* The sheeplike men of Babylon are impotent to protect their most precious human and material possessions.

as they look. Literally, "before their eyes."

18. *And with bows young men shall be pierced.* The Hebrew verb means "to smash," but that is not an action performed with a bow.

20. *pitch his tent.* The Masoretic Text has *yahel*, "shine," but two manuscripts, followed by most scholars, show instead *yeʾehal*, "pitch a tent."

21. *wildcats.* The beasts in question have not been confidently identified; it is clear only that they are savage desert predators and probably emit a menacing sound.

satyrs. The blurring of lines between the zoological and the mythological is characteristic of biblical poetry. These creatures may be something like goat-gods.

22. *in her palaces.* The Masoretic Text, patently defective here, reads *beʾalmenotav*, "in his widows," but three ancient versions reflect a text that showed *beʾarmenoteyha*, "in her palaces."

CHAPTER 14

[1]For the LORD shall have pity on Jacob and again
shall choose Israel and set them down on their land,
and the sojourner shall join them and become part of
the house of Jacob. [2]And peoples shall take them and
bring them to their own place, and the house of Israel
shall own them on the LORD's lands as male slaves
and slavegirls, and their captors shall become their
captives, and they shall hold sway over their
taskmasters. [3]And it shall happen on the day the
LORD relieves you of your pain and of your trouble
and of the hard labor that was inflicted upon you, [4]that
you shall take up this theme concerning the king of
Babylon and say:

How is the taskmaster ended,
arrogance is ended!
[5]The LORD has broken the wickeds'
scepter,
the rod of rulers.

[6]He who struck down peoples in
anger
with unrelenting blows,
who held sway in wrath over nations,
pursued unsparingly.
[7]All the earth is calm and quiet,
bursts forth in song.
[8]The very cypresses rejoice over you,
the cedars of Lebanon:
“With you now laid low,
the woodsman won’t come up
against us.”
[9]Sheol below stirs for you
to greet your coming.
It rouses the shades,
all the chiefs of the earth.
It raises from their thrones
all the kings of the nations.
[10]They all call out and say to you:
“You, too, are stricken like us,
like us you become.
[11]Your pomp is brought down to
Sheol,
the murmur of your lutes.
Your bed is spread with worms,
and your covers are maggots.

[12]How are you fallen from the
heavens,
Bright One, Son of Dawn!
You are cut down to earth,
dominator of nations!
[13]And you once thought in your
heart:
‘To the heavens will I ascend.
Above the eternal stars
I will raise my throne
and sit on the mount of divine
council,
in the far reaches of Zaphon.
[14]I will climb to the tops of the
clouds,
I will match the Most High.’
[15]But to Sheol you were brought
down,
to the far reaches of the Pit.
[16]Those who see you stare,
they look at you:
‘Is this the man who shook all the
earth,
who made kingdoms shake,
[17]who turned the world to wilderness,
and its towns destroyed,

his prisoners never released?’
[18]All the kings of nations,
all lie honorably in their homes,
[19]but you were flung from your grave
like a loathsome branch
clothed with the sword-slashed slain
who go down to the floor of the
Pit
like a trampled corpse.
[20]You shall not join them in burial,
for your land you laid waste
your people you slayed.
Let there be no lasting name
for the seed of evildoers!
[21]Ready slaughter for his sons
for their father’s crime.
Let them not rise to take hold of the
earth,
and let the world be filled with
towns.”

[22]And I will rise against them,
says the LORD of Armies,
and I will cut off from Babylon name
and remnant,

kith and kin, says the LORD.
[23]And I will make it a dwelling for herons,
and pools of water.
And I will sweep it with a broom of destruction.
says the LORD of Armies.

[24]The LORD of Armies has vowed, saying:
As I have devised it, surely it shall be,
and as I have planned, it shall come about:
[25]To break Assyria in My land,
and on My mountains I will trample him.
And his yoke will be gone from upon them
and his burden gone from their back.
[26]This is the plan framed for all the earth
and this the hand outstretched over all nations.

[27]For the LORD of Armies has
devised it and who can thwart it?
His hand is outstretched and who
can turn it back?

[28]In the year of the death of King Ahaz this portent was.

Rejoice not, Philistia, all of you,
[29]that the rod of him who struck
you is broken.
For from the stock of a snake an asp
shall come out,
and its fruit a fiery flying serpent.
[30]And the poor shall graze in My
pastures,
and the needy shall lie down in
safety.
And I will kill your root with
famine,
your remnant it shall slay.
[31]Howl, O gate, scream, O town,
Philistia, all of you melts away.
For from the north smoke has come,
and none is alone in his ranks.

And what will he answer to a
nation's envoys?—
[32]that the LORD again has
founded Zion,
and His people's poor shelter
there.

CHAPTER 14 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *set them down on their land.* This formulation looks distinctly like the perspective of a prophet in the Babylonian exile.

sojourner. That is, the resident alien, someone from a different ethnic stock who lives in the community of Israelites. This notion of non-Israelites joining the community of God's people is a recurrent theme in the late chapters of Isaiah.

2. *own them on the LORD's lands as male slaves and slavegirls.* The idea that in the return to Zion the former captors of the Israelites will become their menial servants is still another emphasis of Second Isaiah.

4. *you shall take up this theme concerning the king of Babylon.* It is by no means clear that this prose passage concluded here is by the same hand as the poem that now follows. In any event, it is quite possible that the poem exulting over the fall of the king of Babylon was actually composed at the moment when the Persians defeated the Babylonians and put an end to their empire. But some scholars think the introductory attachment of the poem to the king of Babylon is merely editorial and that the monarch could be Sargon, who was not buried in a tomb, or Sennacharib, who was assassinated.

How is. The poem begins with the word *eikhah*, which usually signals the beginning of an elegy, but here instead it introduces an exultant poem celebrating the death of the tyrant.

5. *scepter / . . . rod.* The Hebrew terms can mean scepter, staff, rod, or even club, and this is a king who wielded his scepter like a club.

7. *All the earth.* The celebration of the tyrant's death is universal. This is the first of three senses in which the noun *ʾerets* will be used in the poem.

8. *the cedars of Lebanon / . . . you now laid low.* As elsewhere, the cedars of Lebanon are proverbial for their loftiness. These lines begin a thematic swinging between high and low that underlies the structure of the poem. The lofty trees are both literal and figurative. The tyrant cut down forests for his building projects and his siege-works, and, at the same time, the cedars and cypresses are metaphors for the great ones of the earth hacked down by the Babylonian king.

9. *It rouses the shades.* For the most part, Sheol in the Bible is imagined as a vast and deep pit that swallows those who have died, who thus know nothing but darkness and silence after their deaths. Here, however, the poet imagines an assembly of spirits of the dead, greeting the king, an idea loosely analogous to the representation of Hades in the sixth book of the Odyssey. It is hard to know if this whole picture reflects popular belief or is rather a useful—and vivid—poetic fiction.

all the chiefs of the earth. They may have been chiefs when they were on earth, but *ʾerets* also means "underworld," and so what they may be is chiefs of the kingdom of death.

11. *your covers are maggots.* The Hebrew shows a brilliant pun: *toleʿah*, "maggots," also means "crimson cloth." The monarch who was used to sleeping under sumptuous dyed fabric now has a blanket of worms.

12. *How are you fallen from the heavens.* This verset encapsulates the up-down spatial thematics of the poem.

Bright One, Son of Dawn. The appellation, of course, is heavily sarcastic; this is a sun that has set forever. The cosmic sweep of the language generated the idea among Christian interpreters that this figure is Lucifer (which means "light-bearer," in accordance with the Hebrew), that is, Satan.

cut down. In the Hebrew, this is a term used for chopping down trees.

13. *To the heavens will I ascend.* This arrogant presumption links the tyrant with the Tower of Babel and many other biblical texts.

the mount of divine council, / in the far reaches of Zaphon. In Canaanite mythology, Mount Zaphon was the place of the council of the gods, like Olympus in Greek tradition.

15. *brought down, / to the far reaches of the Pit.* Instead of up, he goes down; instead of Mount Zaphon, the Pit.

18. *in their homes.* Many understand "homes" as "tombs" (compare the reference in Qohelet 12:5 to death as man's "everlasting home") with an eye to a neat contrast between honorable burial and being flung from the grave. But the Hebrew word does almost always mean "house" or "home," and the contrast may be between kings sleeping peacefully in their homes and the tyrant not even sleeping in the grave. But one cannot exclude the possibility that "homes" could be a wry epithet for the grave.

19. *to the floor of the Pit.* The Masoretic Text has *ʾavney bor*, "the stones of the Pit," which is a little puzzling. This translation reads with Blenkinsopp, *ʾadney bor*. The emended noun means "sockets," and in Job 38:6 it is used for the foundations of earth.

20. *for your land you laid waste.* This is the third sense of *ʾerets* displayed in the poem.

21. *Ready slaughter for his sons / for their father's crime.* Here sons are punished for the sins of fathers. In political terms, what is envisaged is a massacre of the whole royal line, a not infrequent practice when a king is overthrown.

let the world be filled with towns. Once the destructive tyrant is gone, the world can be rebuilt.

22. *And I will rise against them.* This clearly begins a new prophecy, connected with the previous one by the theme of the destruction of Babylon.

kith and kin. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "offspring and grandchildren."

23. *herons.* The identification of the *qipod* is uncertain. Elsewhere it appears to mean “hedgehog” (as in modern Hebrew), but hedgehogs do not live in marshlands.

24. *The LORD of Armies has vowed.* This is the beginning of a third distinct prophecy in this chapter, directed to the destruction of Assyria and so perhaps composed by Isaiah son of Amoz.

25. *To break Assyria in My land, / and on My mountains.* The Assyrian empire will be broken in the Judahite territory it has attacked and sought to conquer.

26. *the plan framed for all the earth.* It is noteworthy that the poem imagines the opposition between the people of Israel and the Assyrians in a global perspective, a design affecting all the earth and all nations.

28. *In the year of the death of King Ahaz.* This brief prose introduction marks the fourth prophecy included in this chapter, this one directed against the Philistines.

29. *the rod of him who struck you is broken.* Several Assyrian kings carried out campaigns against the Philistines along the Mediterranean coast, and there is scholarly debate about which one is referred to here.

from the stock of a snake an asp shall come out. The probable reference is Assyria: though seemingly defeated, it will produce venomous successors. This understanding may be supported by the mention in verse 31 that destruction will come down from the north, the point of departure for the Assyrian forces.

fiery flying serpent. Here *saraf* appears to carry its full serpentine mythological weight. See the comment on verse 2 in chapter 6 regarding seraphim.

30. *in My pastures.* The received text shows *bekhorey*, “firstborn of” (the poor), which makes little sense. Some Hebrew manuscripts have *bekharay,* “in My pastures,” which works perfectly with the verb “graze.”

31. *smoke.* The clear implication is the cloud of smoke (and probably dust) over the heads of the vast invading army. It is best to understand this as an

evocative ellipsis: from the distance, as the enemy approaches, only the column of smoke is visible.

and none is alone in his ranks. The Hebrew here is somewhat obscure, and there are some odd textual variants. The word translated as "ranks," *moʿadim*, usually means "appointed time." Perhaps here it might indicate "appointed forces."

32. *the* LORD *again has founded Zion.* The Hebrew merely says "has founded," but the implication is a new founding of Zion after the exile, just as the verb "build" is sometimes used to mean "rebuild." These final words clearly place this text among the prophecies of national restoration composed in the Babylonian exile.

CHAPTER 15

[1]A portent concerning Moab.

Yes, in the night was Ar sacked,
Moab was undone.
Yes, in the night it was sacked,
Qir Moab was undone.
[2]They went up to the temple of
Dibon,
to the high places, to weep.
For Nebo and for Medbah
Moab wails.
Every head in it is shaved,
every beard is shorn.
[3]In its streets they are girt with
sackcloth,
on its roofs and in its squares.
All of them are wailing,
coming down in tears.
[4]Heshbon and Elealeh cry out,

as far as Jahaz their voice is heard.
Therefore Moab's picked warriors
cry,
their life-breath broken up.
[5]My heart for Moab cries out,
those who flee her as far as Zoar
and Eglath Shelishiyah.
For by the Ascent of Luhith,
in weeping they go up.
For on the road to Horanaim
they rouse disaster's cry.
[6]For the Nimrim waters
have become a desolation.
For the grass has withered,
the vegetation gone,
the green growth is no more.
[7]Therefore the gains they have made
and their stores
they bear off to the Wadi of
Willows.
[8]For screaming encircles
the region of Moab.
As far as Eglaim her wail,
to Beer Eilim her wail.
[9]For Dimon's waters are full of
blood,

yes, I will add still more against
Dimon:
for Moab's survivors, a lion,
for the remnant of the land.

CHAPTER 15 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *in the night.* The Hebrew *beleyl* announces a kind of phonetic theme because it both alliterates and virtually rhymes with *yeyeilil*, "wails," which appears in verses 2 and 3 and then twice (in noun-form) in verse 8.

Ar . . . Qir Moab. These are the first of a whole series of names of Moabite towns, invoked to suggest how sweeping is the destruction that overtakes the entire country.

2. *They went up to the temple of Dibon.* In their panic and despair, the Moabites spread out to their sundry cult-places in order to entreat their gods to help them.

Every head . . . is shaved. Shaving the hair is a sign of mourning.

4. *their life-breath broken up.* This verset is quite obscure, and the meaning of the Hebrew verb is especially doubtful.

5. *My heart for Moab cries out.* This is surely intended as sarcasm because the Israelite speaker is gladdened by the destruction of this traditional enemy of his people.

they go up. The Hebrew has "he goes up." Vacillation between singular and plural is one of several sources of confusion in this poem.

7. *Therefore the gains they have made and their stores.* The Hebrew of this verset is crabbed, and hence any translation somewhat conjectural. What seems to be depicted is the Moabites fleeing from their towns before an

unnamed enemy, carrying off whatever of their possessions they can manage to bring with them.

the Wadi of Willows. Like many of the place-names in this prophecy, the watercourse in question has resisted identification.

9. *yes, I will add still more against Dimon.* The Hebrew of this verset as well as its connection with the second verset is obscure. Here is a literal rendering: Yes, I will set against [or upon] Dimon and its things.

for Moab's survivors, a lion. Numerous emendations have been proposed here, especially for the last word, none very convincing. The language is certainly cryptic but may make sense as it stands in the received text. We know from multiple biblical sources that lions proliferated in this region in the ancient period and were a menace to people and to their flocks. What the writer may have had in mind is that when the desperate Moabites flee from their towns as those towns are sacked by invaders, in the very place where they sought refuge they encounter lions and become their prey. In this understanding, the lions are what God "add[s] still more against Dimon."

CHAPTER 16

[1]Send a lamb
to the ruler of the land,
from the wilderness crag
to the Mount of the Daughter of
Zion.
[2]And like a wandering bird
sent out from the nest,
the daughters of Moab shall be
at the fords of the Arnon.
[3]Take counsel,
weigh judgment.
Make your shade like the night
at high noon.
Shelter those driven out,
do not expose the displaced.
[4]Those driven from Moab
shall sojourn among you.
Be a shelter for them
against the marauder.
For oppression is over,

marauding has ended,
the tramplers are gone from the land.
[5]And a throne is set firm in kindness
and on it shall sit in truth
in the tent of David
one who judges and seeks justice
and is swift to do right.

[6]We have heard of Moab's pride,
so very proud,
his pride and his proud anger.
Not so are his lies.
[7]Therefore shall Moab wail for Moab,
all of it shall wail.
For the raisin cakes of Qir-Haresheth
you shall utter naught but moans.
[8]For the fields of Heshbon languish,
the vines of Sibmah.
The notables of nations
pounded her tendrils.
As far as Jazer they reached,
they strayed to the desert.

Her shoots they pulled out,
they passed on to the sea.
9 Therefore do I weep in the keening
of Jazer,
I drench you with my tears,
Heshbon and Elealeh.
For over your fig and grain harvest
a shout has fallen away.
10 Joy and delight are gone from
the farmland,
and in the vineyard no glad
song or cheers.
No wine is in the presses,
the treader does not tread,
the shout is stifled.
11 Therefore my heart moans like a
lyre for Moab,
my inward self for Qir-Heres.

12 And it shall happen that Moab will be seen
unavailing on the high place, and he will come to his
sanctuary and achieve nothing. 13 This is the word that
the LORD spoke concerning Moab in time past. 14 And
now the LORD has spoken, saying, “In three years,
like the years of a hired worker, Moab’s glory shall be

debased, despite all the great crowd, and what is left—
the smallest bit, of no account."

CHAPTER 16 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Send a lamb / to the ruler of the land.* The Hebrew is very cryptic. This translation is based on the guess that the ruler of the land is the governing power in Judah and that the fugitive Moabites are obliged to turn to the Judahites for help. The lamb would be some kind of tribute. But whatever historical circumstance may be invoked here is highly uncertain. Verses 3–4 appear to be an injunction to take in Moabite refugees.

3. *Make your shade like the night.* "Shade" here is used in its frequent metaphoric sense of "protection."

5. *a throne is set firm in kindness / and on it shall sit in truth.* This line shows the device of the "break-up pattern" in which the two terms of a hendiadys are separated and placed in the two halves of the line—here, *ḥesed*, "kindness" (or "loyalty") near the beginning of the first verset and *ʾemet*, "truth," at the end of the second verset. The apparent connection of this verse with the preceding lines is that with a king seeking justice sitting on the throne of Judah, the Moabite refugees can expect to receive succor.

6. *We have heard of Moab's pride.* Although this prophecy is linked with the previous one by the subject of Moab, the theme now is exulting over Moab's fall, with the keening for her disaster in verses 9–11 perhaps sarcastic.

Not so are his lies. The Hebrew noun here is problematic and many different solutions have been proposed.

7. *the raisin cakes.* Though some see these as an element in the cult, the mention in the next verse of the vineyards signifies where grapes for fine wine were grown and suggests that the raisin cakes, a different use of grapes, were simply part of the good times before disaster overtook Moab.

8. *The notables of nations.* Some interpreters understand *baʿaley goyim* as a place-name, which in terms of its form it could conceivably be. But since the lines that follow evoke an army wreaking havoc and sweeping down to the coast, it is more likely that the phrase, as rendered here, refers to invaders, or their commanders.

9. *Therefore do I weep.* It is ambiguous whether the speaker expresses sympathy for the plight of Moab or whether these lines are ironic.

a shout. This is an exclamation of joy, *heydad*.

12. *unavailing on the high place.* The Moabites will go to their site of worship, a hilltop altar and sanctuary, to entreat their gods for help, but it will be unavailing.

13. *This is the word that the LORD spoke concerning Moab in time past.* The reference seems to be to an earlier prophecy about the destruction of Moab (perhaps the one recorded in chapter 15) that was not fulfilled. In a kind of temporal revision, the prophet now says that the destruction will come in another three years.

14. *three years, like the years of a hired worker.* One might infer that there were contractual arrangements—in all likelihood, for indentured servants—that fixed the term of service for three years. Just as the hired worker awaits the end of his period of service and the recompense and liberation that come at the end, the Israelites await the promised destruction of Moab.

CHAPTER 17

[1]A portent concerning Damascus.

Damascus is to be no more a city
but shall become a heap of ruins.
[2]The towns of Aroer are abandoned,
become a place for flocks
that bed down there with none
troubling them.
[3]There is an end to the forts in
Ephraim
and of kingship in Damascus.
And the remnant of Aram
shall be like what Israel's glory has
become,
says the LORD of Armies.
[4]And it shall happen on that day,
Jacob's glory shall turn gaunt
and the fat of his flesh become
lean.

[5]And as he was like one who gathers
standing grain,
by armfuls gleaning,
he shall be like one gathering ears of
grain
in the Valley of Rephaim,
[6]only gleanings left him, as when an
olive tree is beaten,
two or three berries at the top of
the bough,
four or five on the branches of
the fruit-tree—
says the LORD God of Israel.

[7]On that day man shall turn to his Maker and his eyes shall look to Israel's Holy One. [8]And he shall not turn to the altars, his handiwork that his fingers made, and he shall not look to the cultic poles and the incense altars. [9]On that day his stronghold towns shall be like the abandoned sites of Horesh and Amir that were abandoned because of the Israelites, and it shall become a desolation.

[10]For you have forgotten the God of
your deliverance,

and you have not recalled the
Rock, your stronghold.
Therefore did you plant your
saplings for vegetal gods,
sow the slip of an alien god.
[11]The day you plant it, it will flourish,
in the morn your sowing will
blossom,
but the roots become a heap on the
ill-starred day,
and grievous pain.

[12]Woe, crowd of many peoples,
like the roar of the seas they roar.
and the clamor of nations
like the clamor of mighty waters
they clamor.
[13]Nations like the clamor of many
waters they clamor,
but He rebukes them and they flee
far away,
driven like chaff in the hills before
wind
and like tumbleweed in the
whirlwind.

[14]At eventide, look—terror!
Before morning it is no more.
This is the lot of our despoilers
and the fate of our plunderers.

CHAPTER 17 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Damascus.* This is the capital city of Syria, or Aram, with which the northern kingdom of Israel allied itself. Hence a prophecy of the destruction of both, as their bracketing in verse 3 emphasizes.

4. *Jacob's glory shall turn gaunt.* Some interpreters try to make this verset more "logical" by rendering *kavod* as "body," a sense it probably does not have, or "weight," again a dubious sense, even if the related adjective *kaved* does mean "heavy." Poetic expression need not have this kind of neat consistency.

5. *And as he was like one who gathers standing grain.* Although this is the clear sense of this clause, it must be said that the syntax of this entire verse and the next one is quite crabbed.

the Valley of Rephaim. One infers from the context that this was a place that produced meager crops. It may be relevant that the place-name means Ghost Valley.

7. *On that day man shall turn to his Maker.* What leads him to turn away from the sites of idolatry to God is, as verse 8 makes clear, the destruction that will be wreaked on Israel.

10. *the Rock.* Though this is a common epithet for God in Psalms, the hardness of rock also forms a nice antithesis to the saplings and slips planted as part of the cult of nature gods.

saplings for vegetal gods. The Hebrew seems to say "saplings of the pleasant ones," but *naʿaman* is probably a designation for Tammuz, the god who dies annually and is reborn each spring. Blenkinsopp is a bit too specific, and too Greek, in translating this as "Adonis."

11. *but the roots become a heap on the ill-starred day.* Of the four Hebrew words of this verset, the only one whose meaning is certain is *beyom*, "on the day."

12. *Woe, crowd of many peoples.* This marks a new prophecy, concerning not Damascus but the many nations that have despoiled Israel. The identification of a specific historical event has proved elusive. Although some scholars are inclined to attribute this prophecy to Isaiah, one reason to be skeptical about the attribution is that the poetry is in no way on the level of the great poetry of the book's first chapters: both the simile of the roar of the seas and the wind-driven chaff (verse 13) are biblical clichés, and the verbatim repetition of the second half of verse 12 in the first half of 13 seems inert.

CHAPTER 18

[1]Woe, land of the whirring wings
that is beyond the rivers of Nubia!
[2]That sends envoys into the sea,
in vessels of reeds on the face of the water.
Go, swift messengers,
to a rangy and smooth-skinned nation,
to a fearsome people from beyond,
a gibberish nation and sowing defeat,
whose land is cut through with rivers.
[3]All the world's inhabitants and
dwellers upon earth,
when a banner is raised in the mountains, you shall see,
and when the ram's horn blasts, you shall hear.
[4]For thus said the LORD to me:

I calmly look down from My
dwelling place
when the heat dazzles in the
light,
when the dew-cloud is in the
harvest heat.
5For before the harvest, when the
blossom is gone,
and the berry has ripened,
becomes the bloom,
He shall cut away twigs with pruning
hooks,
lop off, take away the slack
branches.
6They shall be left together for the
mountain vultures,
and for the beasts of the land.
The vultures shall summer on them
and all the beasts of the land
winter on them.

7All that time tribute shall be brought to the LORD of Armies from a rangy and smooth-skinned people from beyond, a gibberish nation, and sowing defeat, whose

land is cut through with rivers, to the place of the name of the LORD of Armies, Mount Zion.

CHAPTER 18 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *land of the whirring wings.* Nubia (Cush in the Hebrew), along the upper reaches of the Nile in equatorial Africa, was known for its abundance of insects, a phenomenon attested to by Herodotus. The vessels of reeds mentioned in the next verse are equally part of the poem's evocation of the realia of a kingdom along the Nile.

2. *Go, swift messengers.* The messengers (*mal' akhim*) are evidently a different group from the envoys (*tsirim*) of the preceding line. It is not clear where the Nubian envoys are heading, and different attempts have been made to line up this passage with a particular moment in the political history of the late eighth century B.C.E. The swift messengers appear to be sent out from the kingdom of Judah to announce to the Nubians the disaster about to overtake them.

a rangy and smooth-skinned nation. The Hebrew word translated as "rangy" is literally "pulled out" or "elongated," not the usual word for "tall." The term represented as "smooth-skinned" derives from a verbal stem that means either "polished" or "plucked." This would be an exoticizing way to describe the tall Africans with little body hair, even though their blackness is unmentioned.

a gibberish nation. The Hebrew says "a *qaw-qaw* nation," this being an onomatopoeia for unintelligible sounds, always a scary aspect of foreigners.

and sowing defeat. The Hebrew says merely "and defeat," but something like "sowing" or "inflicting" seems to be implied. This is in other words, a powerful nation.

3. *All the world's inhabitants.* The connection with the prophecy concerning Nubia may simply be that all the world's inhabitants are invited to witness the judgment God will wreak on Nubia.

banner . . . ram's horn. Both are signals for rallying armies.

4. *when the heat dazzles in the light.* This and all the seasonal indications that follow express the temporal imminence of God's judgment.

5. *cut away twigs.* The entire agricultural metaphor points to the decimation of Nubia that is to be inflicted by God.

7. *All that time.* It is unusual for a statement just expressed in poetry to be repeated verbatim in prose. This could reflect an editorial addition to the text. In any case, the tribute brought to the LORD is a prophecy that the Nubians will become subject to Judah.

the place of the name of the LORD of Armies. The insertion of the superfluous "the name of" reflects a Late Biblical tendency to qualify direct assertions about YHWH by introducing "the name of" as a kind of mediation. Thus it looks suspiciously like the intervention of a later redactor.

CHAPTER 19

[1]A portent concerning Egypt.

The LORD is about to ride on a
swift cloud
and come down to Egypt.
And the ungods of Egypt shall shake
before Him,
and Egypt's heart inwardly quail.
[2]And I will incite Egypt against
Egypt,
and each man shall battle his
brother, each man his fellow,
town against town, kingdom
against kingdom.
[3]And Egypt's spirit shall be sapped
within it,
and its counsel I will confound.
And they shall seek out the ungods
and the shades

and the ghosts and the familiar
spirits.
4 And I will hand Egypt over to a
harsh master,
and a fierce king shall rule over
them,
says the Master LORD of
Armies.
5 And water shall be drained from the
sea,
the river turn dry and parched.
6 And canals shall fall into neglect,
Egypt's watercourses drained and
dried up.
Rush and reed shall wither,
7 laid bare at the Nile,
alongside the Nile,
And all that is planted by the Nile
shall wither, blow away, be no
more.
8 And the fishermen shall lament and
keen,
all who cast hooks into the Nile,
and those spreading nets on the
water shall be forlorn.

[9]And the flax workers shall be
distraught,
carters and weavers turn pale.
[10]And her foundations shall be
crushed,
all who build dams be downcast.
[11]The princes of Zoan are but fools,
the wisest councillors of Pharaoh
give witless counsel.
How can you say to Pharaoh:
I am the son of sages,
the son of ancient kings?
[12]Where then are your sages?
Let them tell you, pray, and let
them know
what the LORD of Armies
devised against Egypt.
[13]The princes of Zoan have been
fools,
the princes of Noph are deceived.
The chiefs of her tribes have
led Egypt astray.
[14]The LORD has poured into her a
twisted spirit,
and they have led Egypt astray in
all it does,

as a drunkard strays into his
vomit.
15 And there shall be nothing to do
for Egypt,
neither head nor tail, palm branch
nor reed.

16 On that day, Egypt shall be like women, and tremble and fear from the raised hand that the LORD of Armies raises against it. 17 And the land of Judah shall become a terror to Egypt. Whoever mentions it to them shall be afraid because of the counsel of the LORD of Armies that He devises against them. 18 On that day, five cities in the land of Egypt shall speak the language of Canaan and shall swear to the LORD of Armies. The City of the Sun it shall be said of one of them. 19 On that day the altar of the LORD shall be in the midst of the land of Egypt and a pillar at its border to the LORD. 20 And it shall become a sign and a witness for the LORD of Armies in the land of Egypt that when they cry out to the LORD because of oppressors, He sends them a deliverer and one who contests for them, and He shall save them. 21 And the LORD shall become known to Egypt, and the Egyptians shall know the LORD on that day, and they

shall worship with sacrifice and grain offering and make a vow to the LORD and fulfill it. [22]And the LORD shall strike Egypt with plagues, plaguing and healing, and they shall turn back to the LORD, and He shall hear their entreaty and heal them. [23]On that day there shall be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria shall come into Egypt and Egypt into Assyria, and Egypt shall worship with Assyria. [24]On that day Israel shall be a third partner with Egypt and with Assyria, as a blessing in the midst of the earth. [25]Which the LORD of Armies conferred, saying, "Blessed are My people Egypt and My handiwork Assyria and Israel my estate."

CHAPTER 19 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *ride on a swift cloud.* The mythological image of the deity mounted on a cloud derives from Canaanite poetry and appears in several of the biblical psalms.

2. *kingdom against kingdom.* This is sometimes interpreted as a clash between the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Egypt. Others see here a reference to the different districts of Egypt ruled by different princes.

3. *the shades / and the ghosts.* Egypt was famous for its cult of the dead.

4. *the Master LORD of Armies.* The first epithet for God here aggressively picks up the "harsh master" at the beginning of the verse.

5. *And water shall be drained.* Biblical writers often look with envy on Egypt's abundant sources of irrigation from the Nile and elsewhere, which are a striking contrast to the land of Israel, dependent as it is on rainfall. This gives a special edge to the prophecy in the next verse of an Egypt "drained and dried up."

7. *laid bare at the Nile.* The translation reproduces the elliptic syntax of the Hebrew.

11. *the wisest councillors . . . give witless counsel.* A verb appears to have dropped out in the Hebrew, or perhaps "give" is meant to be implied. Egypt was renowned for exercising wisdom, but here the wisdom fails.

15. *neither head nor tail, palm branch nor reed.* These are two different idioms with the sense of through and through, from top to bottom, one expression referring to the human body and the other to a plant.

16. *On that day.* These words begin a series of five "on that day" prose prophecies, regarded by most scholars as later additions. One should keep in mind that the Prophetic books grew by a process of sedimentation, later writers responding to earlier texts and composing prophecies in their spirit.

17. *And the land of Judah shall become a terror to Egypt.* This bold statement of Judahite triumphalism reflects no known or ever likely historical reality.

18. *the land of Egypt shall speak the language of Canaan and shall swear to the LORD of Armies.* The language of Canaan is probably Hebrew. The notion that the Egyptians will become worshippers of the God of Israel might have been encouraged by a time when there was a large and vigorous diaspora community in Egypt, which would have been the case at least as early as the fifth century B.C.E. Proposals to locate any of these prophecies as late as the second century B.C.E. are unconvincing.

The City of the Sun. The Masoretic Text reads "the City of Destruction," *ʿir heres*, but some Hebrew manuscripts as well as several ancient translations read instead, more plausibly, *ʿir ḥeres*, "the City of the Sun," which is probably the Egyptian Heliopolis. The scribal error would have been caused by the fact that *ḥeres* is a rather rare synonym for "sun" and by the context of destruction created in the previous prophecy.

21. *And the LORD shall become known to Egypt.* Here the utopian fantasy of the Egyptians embracing the faith of Israel is made explicit.

22. *strike Egypt with plagues.* The writer of course has in mind the precedent of the Ten Plagues, though in this case the afflictions impel the Egyptians to turn to YHWH.

23. *there shall be a highway from Egypt to Assyria.* This idea of a royal road joining the two great warring empires that long threatened Israel and the creation of a God-fearing triple partnership of Egypt, Assyria, and Israel to be a blessing to all the earth is the most extravagant utopian fantasy of all the prophecies in this chapter. It is by no means clear whether it is relatively early or late, although Assyria might not have been much of an issue for a later writer.

CHAPTER 20

[1]In the year Tartan came to Ashdod when Sargon king
of Assyria sent him, and he battled against Ashdod
and captured it. [2]At that time the LORD spoke through
Isaiah son of Amoz, saying, “Go, and loosen the
sackcloth from your loins and take off your sandals
from your feet.” And so he did, going naked and
barefoot. [3]And the LORD said, “As my servant Isaiah
has gone naked and barefoot three years, it is a sign
and portent for Egypt and for Nubia. [4]Just so shall the
king of Assyria drive off the captives of Egypt and the
exiles of Nubia, lads and elders, naked and barefoot
with bare buttocks—the nakedness of Egypt. [5]And
they shall be dismayed and ashamed of Nubia, in
which they trusted, and of Egypt, their glory. [6]And the
dweller of this coastland shall say on that day: ‘Why, if
it is thus with those we looked to, to whom we fled for
help to be saved before the king of Assyria, how shall
we escape?’”

CHAPTER 20 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *In the year Tartan came to Ashdod when Sargon king of Assyria sent him.* This notation refers to an actual historical event. In 714 B.C.E. the coastal city of Ashdod rebelled against Assyria. Sargon dispatched a force against Ashdod under the command of Tartan, and in 711 the rebellion was suppressed, its leader taken prisoner, and the city reduced to subject status. All this leads one to suspect that precisely at this moment, Isaiah undertook the symbolic act spelled out in the following verses, even though it is directed to the fate of Egypt and Nubia, not Ashdod.

2. *going naked and barefoot.* This kind of symbolic act performed by the prophet at God's behest occurs a number of times in Hosea and Ezekiel, but this is the sole instance in Isaiah.

4. *Just so shall the king of Assyria drive off the captives of Egypt and the exiles of Nubia.* It should be kept in mind that this was a period of repeated armed confrontation between Assyria and Egypt, with inner divisions in Judah between pro-Egyptian groups and those who sought to pursue accommodation with Assyria.

captives . . . exiles. The Hebrew uses abstractions ("captivity," "exile") to indicate persons.

with bare buttocks. It was unclear how complete Isaiah's "nakedness" was. Now, however, this detail is added that strongly emphasizes the shameful exposure of the Egyptians.

the nakedness of Egypt. The term is used both literally and figuratively. The exiles stripped of their garments are literally naked, while "the land's nakedness," a phrase Joseph uses to his brothers referring to Egypt, means that which should not be exposed, or in this case, the shame of Egypt.

5. *in which they trusted.* The received text has *mabatam*, "their look," but the Qumran Isaiah reads *mivtaham*, "their trust." The scribal error was probably influenced by the appearance of *mabat* in the next verse.

CHAPTER 21

[1]A portent concerning the Desert of the Sea.

As storms sweep the Negeb
from the desert he comes, from a
fearsome land.
[2]A harsh vision has been told me:
the traitor betrays, the despoiler
despoils.
Go up, Elam, lay siege, Media,
all her groaning I have ended.
[3]Therefore my loins are filled with
shuddering.
Pangs have siezed me, like birth
pangs.
I am too contorted to hear,
too dismayed to see.
[4]My heart has gone astray,
spasms dismay me.
My evening of revels

has turned to terror.

[5]From “lay the table” to “let the
watchman watch,”
from “eat and drink” to “rise,
commander, burnish shield
with oil.”
[6]For thus said the Master to me:
Go, post a watchman
who will see and tell.
[7]And he shall see a rider,
a pair of horsemen,
a rider on a donkey,
a rider on a camel.
And he shall listen intently,
with great intentness.
[8]And the seer shall call out:
“On the Master’s lookout
I stand perpetually by day
and on my watch I am stationed
all through the nights.
[9]And look, it is coming—
a man riding, a pair of horsemen.”
And He answered and said:
“Babylon surely has fallen

and all its gods' idols He has
dashed to the ground.
10My threshing and what falls on the
granary floor!"

What I heard from the LORD of Armies, the God of Israel, I have told you.

11A portent concerning Dumah.
To me someone calls from Seir:
"Watchman, what of the night,
watchman, what of the night?"
12The watchman said: "The morning
comes,
and night as well.
If you would ask, do ask,
turn back, come."

13A portent in Arabia.
In the scrubland, in Arabia,
you lodge, Dedonite caravans.
14To meet the thirsty
bring water.
The dwellers of the land of Tema
greet the fugitives with bread.

[15]For they are fugitives before the
sword,
before the drawn sword
and before the bent bow
and before the crush of war.

[16]For thus did the Master say to me: “In another year, like the year of a hired worker, Kedar’s glory shall be gone. [17]And the remnant of the number of Kedar’s warrior bowmen shall dwindle, for the LORD God of Israel has spoken.”

CHAPTER 21 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the Desert of the Sea.* This sounds rather like an oxymoron, and attempts to explain it are uncertain. Perhaps the best scholarly guess is that it refers to a Mesopotamian marsh region, which would have been Assyrian territory at the time of Isaiah, or under Babylon later.

from the desert he comes. The one coming would be the invader.

2. *go up, Elam, lay siege, Media.* The historical reference of this prophecy being unclear, all one can say is that these are two Mesopotamian peoples. Since Media–Persia overwhelmed Babylonia, it could be that the object of attack is Babylonia. Babylon is in fact mocked in the last line of this poem.

all her groaning I have ended. The “her” would logically refer to Elam and Media, though those should have a plural referent (unless they are viewed collectively). Some scholars emend the Hebrew word for “groaning” to “joy,” which would then be attached more neatly to the object of the invasion.

3. *Therefore my loins are filled with shuddering.* Here and in what follows the speaker of the prophecy appears to identify imaginatively with the kingdom about to be devastated.

5. *From "lay the table" to "let the watchmen watch."* The Hebrew lacks both "from" and to." This translation follows the proposal of the New Jewish Publication Society version.

burnish shield with oil. The shields were leather, sometimes studded with metal. Rubbing the front surface with oil made them slippery and more of an obstacle to the enemy. In any case, the thrust of both lines is a switch from peaceful enjoyment to war.

6. *post a watchman.* Some interpreters take the watchman as a figure for the prophet, but this could as easily be an actual watchman who sees the mounted attackers approaching.

7. *a rider, / a pair of horsemen.* These lines pick up the point of view of the lookout, who first sees one rider, then more than one.

8. *And the seer shall call out.* The received text reads: "And he shall call out: A lion!" This is problematic if the danger is cavalry. The Qumran Isaiah has instead of "lion," *ʾaryeh*, "the seer," *haroʾeh*, which is merely a reversal of consonants, and that looks more likely.

10. *My threshing and what falls on the granary floor.* This line is enigmatic, but because threshing and separating the grain from the chaff are often used in biblical poetry as a metaphor for the destruction of the wicked, that may be the intention here.

What I heard from the LORD. This sentence is not part of the poem and functions as a prose epilogue to it.

11. *Dumah . . . Seir.* The kingdom referred to lies just to the east of ancient Israel: "Seir" is a poetic synonym for Edom, and "Dumah" could conceivably be a variation of Edom.

watchman, what of the night? The Hebrew has a haunting musicality, *shomer mah milaylah / shomer mah mileyl*, and, understandably, the phrase would often reappear in later Hebrew poetry. But one must concede that this entire short prophecy is far too fragmentary to allow us to guess what it is

about. The enigma is compounded by the last line of the prophecy, "If you would ask, do ask, / turn back, come." Linguistically, it should be noted that both the word for "ask" and the word for "come" are Aramaicisms, a usage that probably reflects a relatively late date, certainly well after the eighth-century B.C.E. setting of Isaiah.

13. *in Arabia.* It is puzzling that the chain of prophecies concerning foreign nations should reach as far to the southeast as Arabia (the vocalization of the name is peculiar), but Dedan and Tema, about to be mentioned, are definitely in the Arabian peninsula.

scrubland. The Hebrew *yaʿ ar* usually means "forest," but there are no forests in Arabia, and here it seems likely that what is meant is a region where low bushes grow.

15. *fugitives before the sword.* Unfortunately, it is not feasible to say precisely who these pathetic war refugees are.

the crush of war. The literal sense of the first of these two nouns is "heaviness," but surely something like "crush," or "brutal pressure" is meant.

16. *another year, like the year of a hired worker.* Earlier, it was three years like the years of a hired worker. Either there was an alternative for an indentured servant of a one-year contract, or there was a particular—perhaps, especially rigorous—way of computing the year in such arrangements with laborers.

Kedar's glory. Roughly, Kedar is a biblical designation for the Arab people.

17. *the number of Kedar's warrior bowmen.* The Masoretic Text reads: "The number of bow, warriors of the Kedarites." This translation supposes a scribal transposition of the original order of words, so that *mispar giborey qeshet beney qedar* was turned into the syntactically dubious *mispar-qeshet giborey beney qedar*, a syntactic string for which the present note has provided a literal translation above.

CHAPTER 22

[1]A Valley of Vision portent.

What is wrong with you that you go
up,
all of you, to the rooftops?
[2]The bustling town is filled with
shouts,
the reveling city.
Your slain are not slain by the sword
and not dead in battle.
[3]All your captains have gone off,
have fled far away.
All those of you who stayed have
been taken captive,
without bows have been taken
captive.
[4]Therefore have I said
turn away from me,
let me weep bitterly.

Do not rush to console me
for the ruin of my People's
Daughter.
[5]For it is a day of turmoil and
trampling and tumult
for the Master, LORD of Armies,
in the Valley of Vision Kir crashes
about
and Shoa on the mountain.
[6]And Elam bore the quiver
in chariots of horsemen,
and Kir bared the shield.
[7]And your choicest valleys
were filled with chariots,
and the horsemen pressed hard
against the gates,
[8]and the cover of Judah was
exposed.
And you looked on that day
to the weapon-store of the Forest
House.
[9]And the breaches of the City of
David
you watched as they grew many,
and you collected the waters of
the Lower Pool.

[10]And you counted Jerusalem's
houses
and demolished the houses to
fortify the wall.
[11]And a basin you made between the
double walls
for the waters of the Old Pool.
But you did not look to Him Who
did it,
and its Fashioner from afar you
did not see.
[12]And the Master LORD of Armies
called on that day
for weeping and keening
and shaved heads and the girding
of sackcloth.
[13]And, look—gladness and joy,
killing of cattle and slaughtering
of sheep,
eating of meat and drinking of wine
—
"Eat and drink, for tomorrow we
die."
[14]And in my ears the LORD of
Armies was revealed:

“This crime shall not be atoned
for you
until you die,” said the Master
LORD of Armies.

15 Thus said the Master LORD of
armies:
Go in to this steward,
Shebna, who is over the house.
16 What have you here and whom
have you here
that you hewed yourself here a
tomb?
Who hews a tomb on high
carves into the cliff an abode for
himself?
17 The LORD is about to shake you
as one shakes a garment, and wrap
you around,
18 He shall surely wind you round like
a turban
away to a spacious land.
There shall you die,
and there the chariots of your
honor

shall be the shame of your
master's house.
[19]And I will knock you away from
your station
and from your stand you shall be
torn.

[20]And on that day I shall call to my servant Eliakim son of Hilkiah. [21]And I shall clothe him with your robe and bind him with your sash and give your authority in his hand. And he shall become a father for the dwellers of Jerusalem and for the house of Judah. [22]And I shall place the key of the house of David on his shoulder, and when he opens, none shall lock, and when he locks, none shall open. [23]And I shall affix him as a peg in a solid place, and he shall be a seat of honor for his father's house. [24]And they shall hang upon him all the honor of his father's house, the offspring and the sprouts, all the smallest vessels, from the basins to every kind of bowl. [25]On that day, said the LORD of Armies, the peg affixed in a solid place shall give way and be cut down, and the load that was on it shall be destroyed, for the LORD has spoken.

CHAPTER 22 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Valley of Vision.* Attempts to identify this place have been unavailing, though since this prophecy concerns Jerusalem, it seems likely that this is a valley in the vicinity of Jerusalem.

What is wrong with you that you go up, / . . . to the rooftops. Going up to the rooftops, perhaps to conduct parties in the fine weather, is part of the reveling of the city, unmindful of the disaster about to overtake it.

2. *Your slain are not slain by the sword.* The reference is unclear. Perhaps, with the military commanders having run off (verse 3), there has been internecine fighting among the remaining population, resulting in deaths.

3. *without bows.* The Hebrew seems to say "from bows" or "by bows," but the prefix *mi* sometimes has the sense of "without." This would accord with "your slain are not slain by the sword."

4. *my People's Daughter.* People, city, and land are often figured as a "daughter" or "young woman."

5. *turmoil and trampling and tumult.* The translation emulates the strong alliteration (but not the rhyming) of the Hebrew *mehumah umevusah umevukhah*.

Kir crashes about. This is again sound-play in the Hebrew: *qir meqarqer*. Kir, Shoa, and Elam are far to the east, and perhaps they are imagined—whether accurately or not—as contingents in the attacking Assyrian army.

8. *the cover of Judah was exposed.* The term for "cover," *masakh*, is used for the cover of the Ark of the Covenant. This has led some scholars to a theological interpretation: God's protective cover has been taken away. Others see a reference to a fortress protecting the approach to Jerusalem.

the weapon-store of the Forest House. The Forest House was a cedar-paneled armory within the palace (see 1 Kings 7:2–5, where it is called the Lebanon Forest House). The weapons kept there appear to have been ornamental, but in the desperation of the siege, here they are taken up for use in combat.

9. *you collected the waters of the Lower Pool.* Under siege, maintaining a source of water was vital for survival. A tunnel was built—many still think, by Hezekiah, king at this time—to bring in the water of the Siloam brook into the city.

11. *Him Who did it, /. . . its Fashioner from afar.* The people who undertook these emergency measures in time of siege assumed it was their own doing and failed to recognize that God, unseen ("from afar"), was directing them.

12. *shaved heads.* Whether or not the Israelites made this pagan gesture of mourning part of their own practice, it is an inseparable part of the poetic language of mourning.

13. *And, look—gladness and joy.* The Jerusalemites, instead of recognizing that they are facing catastrophe, continue their revels (going up to the rooftops), making the famous declaration that would become proverbial, "Eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

14. *This crime shall not be atoned for you / until you die.* Many scholars conclude that this entire prophecy refers to Sennacherib's assault on Jerusalem in 701 B.C.E. After ravaging the countryside and destroying many of the towns (see chapter 1), his army laid siege against Jerusalem but then suddenly departed (see 2 Kings 19). If this is in fact the event in view here, Isaiah is taking the position that the city will yet feel the weight of a terrible divine justice.

15. *Thus said the Master LORD of Armies.* These words signal the beginning of a new prophecy, directed to Shebna, a high palace official ("who is over the house," that is, the house of the king or the palace). Shebna appears in the narrative of the siege in 2 Kings 19; however, there he is assigned a different title.

16. *hewed yourself here a tomb.* Tombs for the aristocracy were typically in niches or caves.

18. *wind you round like a turban.* Others understand this as "fling like a ball," but the Hebrew verb *ts-n-f* clearly means to wind round, not to fling, and the end of the previous line with the verb "to wrap" supports the sense of a

garment. In light of this context, the translation of verse 17 adopts a proposed emendation of the Masoretic *gever*, "man," which appears after "shakes," to *begged*, "garment."

19. *your station / . . . your stand.* These terms are a direct reference to Shebna's position in the palace bureaucracy.

21. *I shall clothe him.* The reference here to the robe and sash of royal office is surely meant to pick up the negative garment metaphors of verses 17–18.

a father. This is a term of political authority.

22. *the key . . . on his shoulder.* These ancient keys were very large, and usually wooden, so placing a key on a shoulder, perhaps held by a strap, would make sense.

the house of David. This is the royal palace.

23. *a seat of honor for his father's house.* These words are a pointed antithesis to the depiction of the exiled Shebna in verse 18, "the chariots of your honor / shall be the shame of your mother's house."

24. *the offspring and the sprouts.* There is some doubt about the meaning of both Hebrew nouns, especially the second one.

25. *the peg affixed in a solid place shall give way.* This entire verse is a blatant contradiction of the glowing prophecy concerning Eliakim's displacement of Shebna, and one must conclude that a later editor, aware of a disaster that had befallen Eliakim, added these dire words.

CHAPTER 23

[1]A portent concerning Tyre.

Wail, O Tarshish ships,
for their house is sacked.
When they came from the land of
Kittim,
it was revealed to them.
[2]Be still, you coastland dwellers,
traders of Sidon.
Your agents cross the seas
[3]over the many waters.
Grain of Shihor, harvest of the Nile,
her yield,
and she became the trade of
nations.
[4]Be ashamed, Sidon,
for the sea has said,
the stronghold of the sea:
“I did not labor, did not give birth,

and I did not nurture young men,
nor raise up virgin girls.”
5When Egypt heard of it,
they shook as when hearing of
Tyre.
6Pass on to Tarshish,
wail, you coastland dwellers.
7Is this your reveling one,
from days of yore, her ancient
past,
whose feet led her
to sojourn far away?
8Who has counseled this
against the crowned Tyre,
whose traders are nobles,
her merchants notables of the
land?
9The LORD of Armies counseled it
to profane the pride of all
splendor,
to debase all notables of the
land.
10Pass through your land like the
Nile,
O Daughter of Tarshish—
there is no more a harbor.

[11]His hand He stretched over the sea,
He made kingdoms quake.
The LORD has charged concerning
Canaan
to destroy her strongholds.
[12]And He said: You shall no longer
revel,
oppressed Virgin Daughter of
Sidon.
Rise, cross over to Kittim.
There, too, you shall have no
respite.
[13]Look, the land of the Chaldeans,
this is the people that is no more.
Assyria founded it for ships,
they put up their siege-towers,
laid waste its citadels,
turned it into ruins.
[14]Wail, O Tarshish ships,
for your stronghold has been
sacked.

[15]And it shall happen on that day that Tyre shall be forgotten for seventy years, like the days of a single

king. At the end of the seventy years it shall be with Tyre as the song about the whore:

[16]Take up a lyre, go round the town,
forgotten whore.
Play sweetly, many songs,
so that you remember.

[17]And it shall happen at the end of the seventy years that God shall single out Tyre, and she shall go back to her whore's pay and go whoring with all the kingdoms of the world on the face of the earth. [18]But her trade and her whore's pay shall be consecrated to the LORD. It shall not be stocked and shall not be stored, but her trade shall be for those dwelling before the LORD, eating their fill, and for rich attire.

CHAPTER 23 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *for their house is sacked.* The Masoretic Text reads *mibayit*, "from within" (or "from a house"). This translation assumes that a scribe inadvertently transposed a *mem* at the end of the word, which would be a possessive plural suffix, to the beginning, and that the original text had *beytam*.

When they came from the land of Kittim, / it was revealed to them. Some scholars identify the land of Kittim with Cyprus, although that is not entirely certain. In any case, the Phoenicians were great seafaring merchants, as this

poem repeatedly reminds us; what is envisioned here is that one such party of merchants, on their return from a Mediterranean voyage, discover that their city has been devastated.

2. *Be still.* Many interpreters argue that the meaning of this verb is "moan" or "howl," in consonance with "wail" at the beginning of the first line of the poem. A supposed Akkadian cognate is cited as evidence. But the word *domu* everywhere else means "to be still," or "silent," and there is no reason that the poet could not have imagined two antithetical responses to disaster—wailing and then dumbfounded silence.

Your agents. The translation emends *milʾ ukh*, "they filled you," to *malʾ akhayikh,* "your agents."

3. *Shihor . . . Nile.* Both names refer to the same river. The second might be an editorial gloss on the first or a simple poetic apposition.

4. *I did not labor, did not give birth.* The point of this speech is not entirely clear, but since in prophecies of destruction, young men (*baḥurim*) and virgins (*betulot*) are often said to be killed, they being the icons of a people's pride and joy, what the sea may be saying is: I had no part in bringing these young men and women into the world and rearing them, so if they have perished, it is not my affair.

5. *as when hearing of Tyre.* This probably means that "it" refers to the destruction of Sidon, the other chief Phoenician city, and that the report of the destruction of Tyre reached Egypt first.

7. *Is this your reveling one, / . . . whose feet led her / to sojourn far away?* Tarshish (verse 6) would have been one of the distant Mediterranean ports to the west plied by Phoenician ships. The Phoenicians in fact were great colonizers, establishing major centers in North Africa and as far away as Spain.

8. *crowned Tyre.* The Hebrew *maʿatirah* is, more literally, "crown-wearing."

10. *Pass through your land like the Nile.* This might mean: just as the Nile runs through all of Egypt, Tyre is enjoined to pass through all her land.

there is no more a harbor. The meaning of the word rendered as "harbor" is not entirely certain, but this sense seems likely. For Tyre, a coastal city dependent on seafaring trade, to be without a harbor is the ultimate sign of devastation.

11. *Canaan.* This reference may seem anomalous, but there is no textual warrant for changing it to the name of one of the Phoenician cities. It may simply be the case that the poet viewed the coastal stretch from Canaan north into Phoenicia as a single continuum, a notion echoed in the modern scholarly usage that speaks of a "Syro-Canaanite" culture.

12. *There, too, you shall have no respite.* The distant regions that were either trading partners or sites of colonization for the Phoenicians now can offer them neither refuge nor comfort.

13. *the land of the Chaldeans.* The switch of viewpoint to Mesopotamia is intended to offer an object lesson to Sidon and Tyre: just as the Chaldeans became a "people that is no more," so now will be the fate of the Phoenicians. It must be said that scholarly attempts to tie in this prophecy of the destruction of Tyre and Sidon with a particular historical event have not been convincing, and it could be that this is all a kind of prophetic fantasy rather than the report of an event.

15. *the song about the whore.* This is a rare moment when the prophet incorporates a piece of the popular culture of his times into his text, though from the two lines quoted, it is difficult to recover the narrative content of the song.

16. *forgotten whore.* The implication seems to be that she is a whore who has long been neglected by her clients, perhaps because she is past her prime.

Play sweetly many songs, / so that you remember. This image is clearly plaintive: the forgotten whore is enjoined to play the lyre and sing songs—perhaps love songs—that will help her recall the days gone by when she was much sought after.

17. *her whore's pay.* Despite the effort of most translations to bowdlerize this as "trade" or "free," the unambiguous meaning of the Hebrew *ʾetnan* is payment received by a prostitute for her sexual services. The Israelites, a

nation of farmers and pastoralists in the earlier biblical period, viewed the trade-based economy of their northern neighbors as an activity of shady dealing, a kind of prostitution. Tyre is imagined, after a canonical period of seventy years following her destruction, renewing her former trade ties, returning to her old whoring ways.

18. *But her trade and her whore's pay shall be consecrated to the* LORD. How this will come about is in no way explained. Somehow, the again prosperous Tyre will funnel her profits to Judah, enabling a life of luxury for the people dwelling in the LORD's presence (the sense of "before the LORD"), which is to say, in the vicinity of the Jerusalem temple.

CHAPTER 24

[1]The LORD is about to sap the earth
and strip it,
contort its face and scatter its
dwellers.
[2]And the plain people shall be like
the priest,
the slave like his master, the
slavegirl like her mistress,
the buyer like the seller, the lender
like the borrower,
the creditor like him who seeks
credit.
[3]Sapped, yes, sapped shall the land
be,
and plundered, yes plundered,
for the LORD has spoken this
thing.
[4]The earth is bleak, has withered,
forlorn, the world has withered,

the heights of the earth's folk
forlorn.
[5]And the earth is tainted beneath its
dwellers,
for they transgressed teachings,
flouted law,
broke the eternal covenant.
[6]Therefore has a curse consumed the
earth,
and all its dwellers are mired in
guilt.
Therefore earth's dwellers turn pale,
and but a few humans remain.
[7]The new wine is flat,
the vine forlorn,
all the merry-hearted groan.
[8]The gladness of timbrels is gone,
the revelers' clamor ended,
the lyre's gladness has gone.
[9]With no song do they drink wine,
strong drink turns bitter to its
drinkers.
[10]The futile city has been broken,
every house is closed to entrance.
[11]A scream over wine in the streets,
on all joy the sun has set,

the earth's gladness has gone
away.
12 In the town desolation remains,
and the gate is smashed to ruins.
13 For thus shall it be in the midst of
the earth,
in the heart of the peoples,
as olives are beaten,
like gleanings as the harvest is
done.

14 It is they who shall raise their
voice, sing gladly,
in God's grandeur they shall shout
out from the sea,
15 In the coastlands of the sea,
the name of the LORD, God of
Israel.
16 From the edge of the earth,
we have heard songs: splendor to
the righteous.
And I said: I have a secret, I have a
secret—woe is me.
Traitors betrayed, in betrayal
betrayed.

[17]Terror and pitfall and trap
against you, dweller of the land!
[18]And who flees from the sound of terror
shall fall into the pit
and who gets up from the pit
shall be caught in the trap.
[19]Shattered, the earth is shattered,
all broken to pieces the earth,
toppled, the earth has toppled.
[20]Reeling, the earth reels like a drunkard
and rocks back and forth like a hut.
And its crime lies heavy upon it—
it has fallen and no longer shall rise.
[21]And it shall happen on that day,
the LORD shall punish the
heavenly hosts on high
and the kings of earth on the earth.
[22]They shall be rounded up as prisoners in a pit
and locked up a dungeon,

and after many days shall be
punished.
[23]And the moon shall be shamed
and the sun disgraced,
for the LORD of Armies has
become king on Mount Zion and
in Jerusalem,
and before His elders is His glory.

CHAPTER 24 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The LORD is about to sap the earth and strip it.* After the series of prophetic pronouncements on the sundry foreign nations that began in chapter 13, these words mark the beginning of a new large unit that runs to the end of chapter 27. In the judgment of most scholars it is at the very least a century and a half later than Isaiah son of Amoz, but this prophet is also a strong poet. His perspective at points is incipiently apocalyptic but lacks some of the features of full-fledged apocalypse that one finds in the very late Daniel. Yet in keeping with this prophet's cosmic outlook, *ʾerets* here means "earth" rather than "land." This is a poet who exhibits a vigorous inventiveness in emphatic sound-play. Thus, "sap" and "strip" in this translation are only a pale approximation of *boqeq* and *bolqah* in the Hebrew.

2. *And the plain people shall be like the priest.* As the catastrophe descends, all social and economic distinctions are erased.

4. *the earth . . . / the world.* The poetic parallelism of *haʾarets* and *tevel* (the latter term designates all the inhabited world) is linguistic evidence that the former term is used by this poet to mean "earth," not "land."

5. *the earth is tainted beneath its dwellers.* This is a recurrent biblical notion—that corrupt behavior pollutes the earth. It is perhaps because of this that the earth must be broken to pieces (verses 19–20).

6. *earth's dwellers turn pale.* The received text appears to say "are incensed" (*ḥaru*), but turning pale in terror is the appropriate response here, not anger. This translation reads, with the Qumran Isaiah, *ḥawru*, which means "to turn pale."

10. *The futile city.* The qualifier of "city" here, *tohu*, can mean "chaos," but its meaning extends to formlessness, pointlessness, futility; and something like "futile city" seems the most likely sense. Attempts to identify this place with a particular historical city have themselves proved futile, and it may be rather a paradigmatic or symbolic city where the earth's dwellers are engulfed by the catastrophe their actions have brought upon them.

11. *A scream over wine in the streets.* Wine is supposed to gladden the heart, but in this dire moment, it has turned bitter in the mouth and instead of rejoicing, there is terror.

14. *It is they who shall raise their voice, sing gladly.* This line initiates a new prophecy: there will be another landscape of doom (verses 17ff.), but there is also a group in this scene that celebrates God's greatness.

16. *I have a secret.* While the meaning of this line is in dispute, the least strained construction is that *razi* is possessive declension of the Late Biblical *raz*, "secret." The secret would be the prophecy that follows.

Traitors betrayed. The wording is a little obscure, but apparently the reference is to the reprehensible behavior of all those subject to divine retribution in the lines that follow.

17. *Terror and pitfall and trap.* The rich sound-play of the Hebrew is paḥad wafaḥat wafaḥ. One could come closer to this in the English with "terror and trip wire and trap," but the middle term has to be something one falls into, as is evident in the next line.

18. *And who flees from the sound of terror.* The prophet now turns the three alliterative nouns of the previous line into a miniature narrative in which all

attempts to escape fail.

21. *the LORD shall punish the heavenly hosts . . . / and the kings of earth.* Here the incipient apocalyptic perspective is especially clear. There is no logical reason that the heavenly hosts should be punished but perhaps a poetic reason: the global catastrophe will engulf heaven and earth alike.

23. *And the moon shall be shamed / and the sun disgraced.* This may be part of the scenario of punishing the heavenly host. Alternately, when the LORD of Armies is enthroned in all His glory in Jerusalem, the refulgence of His presence will put the sun and the moon to shame.

on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem. This entire verset is metrically too long (with five or six stresses, depending on how one scans the Hebrew for "Mount Zion"). If one drops "Mount Zion," an acceptable four-stress verset emerges, and it could be that those two words were scribally inserted as a synonymous duplication of "Jerusalem."

CHAPTER 25

[1]LORD, You are my God,
I shall exalt You, acclaim Your name.
For You have performed wondrous counsel,
steadfast faithfulness from times long past.
[2]For You turned a town into rubble,
a fortified city to ruins,
the arrogants' citadel, from a town,
it will never be built again.
[3]Therefore a fierce people does You honor,
a city of cruel nations reveres You.
[4]For Your people a stronghold for the poor one,
a stronghold for the needy when in straits,

a shelter from the downpour, a shade
from the heat.
For the spirit of the cruel is like a
downpour on walls,
like heat in the desert.
[5]The arrogants' uproar You subdued,
the heat, with the shade of a
cloud.
The chant of the cruel ones He
answered.

[6]And the LORD shall prepare a banquet for all the peoples on this mountain, a banquet of rich food, a banquet of well-aged wines, rich food with marrow, well-aged wines fine strained. [7]And He shall swallow up on this mountain the veil that covers all the peoples and the mantle cast over all the nations. [8]He shall swallow up death forever, and the Master LORD shall wipe the tears from every face, and His people's disgrace He shall take off from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. [9]And it shall be said on that day:

Look, this is our God
in Whom we hoped, and He
rescued us,

This is our own God in Whom we
hoped,
Let us exult and rejoice in His
rescue.
[10]For the LORD's hand shall rest on
this mountain,
and Moab shall be threshed
beneath Him
as straw is threshed in a
cesspool.
[11]And he shall spread his arms within
it
as the swimmer spreads his arms
to swim
and his pride shall be brought
low
and his arms churn.
[12]The towering fortress of their walls
He shall bring down,
bring it low, level it with the
ground.

CHAPTER 25 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *I shall exalt You, acclaim Your name.* This is the formulaic language of a thanksgiving psalm. In keeping with the biblical literary practice, this may well have been editorially inserted here from another source. The psalm continues through verse 5.

from times long past. This Hebrew word would ordinarily mean "from afar," but the context invites construing it in a temporal, not spatial, sense.

2. *the arrogants'.* This translation reads, with two Hebrew manuscripts and the Septuagint, *zedim* for the Masoretic *zarim*, "strangers." The same correction is made in verse 5.

the arrogants' citadel, from a town. This translation follows the Hebrew. Either a phrase has dropped out, or "turned into rubble" from the previous line is meant to do double duty for this clause.

5. *The chant of the cruel ones He answered.* The received text is enigmatic here. Attempts to render the concluding verb as "has silenced" are questionable: *yaʿaneh* as it stands means "answer," and a revocalization as *yeʿaneh* doesn't work because that verb means "afflict," not "silence," and also requires a human object. Perhaps the "chant" is a battle chant, or a triumphal song.

6. *And the LORD shall prepare a banquet for all the people on this mountain.* Here begins a new, evidently eschatological section, first in prose. The mountain is probably Mount Zion, and, as several commentators have observed, the banquet may recall the sacred feast on the slopes of Mount Sinai with Moses and the seventy elders, which is marked by an epiphany.

a banquet of rich food. This passage is probably the ultimate source for the Midrashic idea of a grand banquet at the end of days in which the righteous will feast on the flesh of the Leviathan and drink wine preserved from the time of creation.

8. *He shall swallow up death forever.* It is hard to determine the status as literal belief of these ringing words. Standard biblical notions see death as inevitable and final. Prophetic discourse is given to extravagant hyperbole (the mountains dripping wine, the sower overtaking the reaper, and so forth), but then hyperbole may lead to new beliefs. Many generations of Jews and Christians have taken these words literally, and the exquisite tenderness of the

clause that follows—"and the Master LORD shall wipe the tears from every face"—remains deeply moving.

9. *And it shall be said.* The Hebrew appears to say "and he shall say," but the third-person singular verb (like the *on* construction in French) is often used as the equivalent of a passive.

10. *as straw is threshed in a cesspool.* Straw was soaked in animal excrement, and the soggy mixture was then trampled so that it could be used for fertilization. This is a deliberately repellent and humiliating image to depict the fate of Israel's traditional enemy Moab.

11. *And he shall spread his arms within it.* Even though the Hebrew word for "cesspool" is feminine and "within it" has a masculine ending, the reference seems to be to the cesspool. This yields a rather nasty image of the flailing Moab trying to swim in a cesspool.

churn. The Hebrew *ʾorbot* (what appears to be a noun attached to "arms") appears nowhere else, and links to purported cognates in other Semitic languages are not convincing. This is another instance in which one is compelled to surmise the sense from the context.

CHAPTER 26

[1]On that day this song will be sung in
the land of Judah:
A strong city is ours.
Victory will be set—walls and
ramparts.
[2]Open the gates
and let a righteous nation enter,
keeping faith.
[3]A steadfast nature You guard in
peace
for in You it trusts.
[4]Trust in the LORD forever,
for in Yah the LORD is an
everlasting Rock.
[5]For He has brought low the dwellers
on high,
the lofty city,
brought down, brought it down to the
earth,
leveled it with the dust.

[6]The foot tramples it,
the feet of the needy,
the poor man's footsteps.
[7]The path of the righteous is straight,
a straight course for the righteous
You pave.
[8]The path of Your judgments
we hoped for, O LORD.
For Your name and repute
are our utmost desire.
[9]With my life-breath I desired You
by night,
with my spirit within me I sought
You.
For when Your judgments are on
earth,
the world's dwellers learn
righteousness.
[10]Should the wicked be spared, he
does not learn righteousness,
on earth he twists what is straight,
and he does not see the
LORD's majesty.
[11]O LORD, when Your hand is
raised,
they do not look,

let them look and be shamed by the
zeal for the people,
by the fire consuming Your foes.
12 O LORD, grant peace to us,
for our every act You have
wrought for us.

13 O LORD our God,
masters besides You possess us.
Your name alone we invoke.
14 The dead shall not live,
nor shall the shades rise up.
Therefore have You singled them out
and destroyed them
and expunged all remembrance of
them.
15 You added to the nation, O LORD,
You added to the nation, were
honored.
You enlarged all the limits of
the land.
16 O LORD, in straits they sought
You out.
A whispered prayer of anguish
was Your chastisement to them.

17 As a woman with child draws near
to give birth,
she shudders, she shakes in her
pangs,
so we were before You, O
LORD.
18 We were with child, we shuddered,
as if birthing the wind,
no victories had we on earth,
and the world's dwellers did not
fall before us.
19 Your dead shall live, their corpses
rise,
the dwellers in the dust shall wake
and sing gladly.
For Your dew is a dew of brightness,
and the netherworld releases the
shades.
20 Go, my people, come into your
chambers
and shut your doors behind you.
Hide but a moment
until the wrath passes.
21 For the LORD is about to come out
from His place

to punish the crime of the
dwellers on earth,
and the earth shall lay bare its
bloodguilt
and no longer cover its slain.

CHAPTER 26 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *On that day this song will be sung.* The designation of the prophecy enunciated here as "song" signals from the beginning its celebratory, triumphalist character.

A strong city is ours. The nation, previously assaulted and overwhelmed, now possesses an impregnable city.

Victory will be set—walls and ramparts. The translation reproduces the rather crabbed formulation of the Hebrew. The verb appears to read "he will set," but third-person singular active verbs with no clear antecedent often serve in lieu of passives in biblical Hebrew. The general sense, despite the obscure wording, is clearly that the restored city will have strong ramparts that no enemy can conquer.

2. *Open the gates / and let a righteous nation enter.* This image looks as if it refers to the return to their city of a people who has been banished. In their righteousness, they are now worthy of this vindication and renewal.

4. *an everlasting Rock.* This metaphor, a stock image in Psalms, represents God as a stronghold and thus jibes with the references to powerful ramparts.

5. *brought low the dwellers on high, / the lofty city.* The lofty city that has been brought low is an obvious counterpoint to the strong city with its bristling ramparts.

6. *the needy, / the poor man's.* The rhetoric of prophecy in behalf of social justice is here intermingled with the prophecy of national renewal. Given the context, the "poor man" in this verse would appear to be a symbol of the people of Israel, weak and helpless in the face of powerful nations but now triumphing over them.

8. *For Your name and repute / are our utmost desire.* The practice of substituting God's "name" for the unmediated presence of the deity becomes especially pronounced in the Late Biblical period, but there are abundant precedents earlier. "Our" is added in the translation before "desire" for clarity.

10. *Should the wicked be spared, he does not learn righteousness.* What begins to emerge here is an eschatological differentiation between the wicked, who are beyond saving, and the righteous, who in a time to come will be singled out for renewal.

11. *when Your hand is raised.* Presumably, the divine hand is raised to punish the miscreants, but they pay no heed.

14. *The dead shall not live.* Although this is a standard biblical view, the emphasis here is on the dead who never heeded God in their lifetime: they have no hope of rising from the dust.

16. *A whispered prayer of anguish was Your chastisement to them.* This whole verset is opaque in the Hebrew, and hence any translation is no more than a guess. *Tsaqun laḥash*, rendered here as "a whispered prayer of anguish," is especially obscure, although in later Hebrew it becomes a frequently invoked idiom with the sense of "heartfelt whispered prayer."

17. *As a woman with child draws near to give birth, / she shudders, she shakes in her pangs.* These two versets vividly illustrate the tendency in many lines of biblical poetry to produce a miniature narrative from one verset to the next: first, the pregnant woman is nearing term; then, she is in the midst of violent labor. The third verset, as is often the case in triadic lines, strikes out in a new direction instead of continuing the parallelism—here, spelling out the referent of the simile. The next line then further develops the applicability of the simile to its referent.

18. *and the world's dwellers did not fall before us.* The Hebrew merely says, rather enigmatically, "did not fall." "Before us" has been added in the translation as an interpretive guess.

19. *Your dead shall live.* The entire line of poetry flatly contradicts the declaration in verse 14 that the dead shall not live. The operative term of distinction is "Your." Is the prophet introducing a doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, which is generally not thought to emerge until the Book of Daniel? This is at least a possibility, and this is certainly the way this verse was later understood by communities of believers. But given the theme of national renewal that informs this entire prophecy, it may be more likely that what the poet has in mind is a rebirth of the nation, like Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones.

their corpses. The Masoretic Text has "my corpse," but two ancient versions show the more likely "their corpses."

For Your dew is a dew of brightness. Dew is a component of the natural "irrigation" system in the land of Israel and hence an apt image for revivification.

the netherworld. In the context of "shades," *ʾarets* has its occasional sense of the realm of the dead, even though it usually means "earth" or "land."

releases. The Hebrew verb means "to drop" and is the second odd use of that verb in this chapter.

20. *come into your chambers.* The sometimes proposed notion that this refers to the chambers of death is far-fetched. God's people are urged to take shelter within the shut doors of their houses until the divine wrath finishes its work of destruction.

21. *to punish the crime of the dwellers on earth.* The perspective looks global and hence eschatological. All who are guilty of murderous acts will now feel the fierce force of divine justice.

lay bare its bloodguilt / . . . no longer cover its slain. The language reflects the biblical notion that wrongfully shed blood pollutes the earth and needs to be "redeemed" by an act of retributive justice.

CHAPTER 27

[1]On that day the LORD shall punish
with His fierce and great and
mighty sword
Leviathan the slippery serpent,
Leviathan, the twisting serpent,
and shall slay the dragon that is
in the sea.
[2]On that day,
a lovely vineyard, sing out to it!
[3]I, the LORD, watch over it,
moment by moment I watch it,
so that no harm come to it,
night and day I watch over it.
[4]No anger do I have.
Should one give Me thorns and
thistles,
I would stride out in battle against it.
I would set it on fire.
[5]If he clings to My stronghold,
he makes peace with Me

he makes peace with Me.

[6]In days to come Jacob shall take
root,
Israel shall bud and flower,
and the face of the world shall
fill with bounty.

[7]Has he been struck like the blow of
his striker?
Like the slaying of his slain was
he slain?
[8]In due measure, when He drove her
out, He contended with her,
He let loose His fierce blast on an
east-wind day.
[9]Therefore in this shall Jacob's crime
be atoned,
all this comes from removing his
offense:
When he turns all the stones of the
altar
into shattered stones of chalk—
no cultic poles or incense altars
shall stand.

[10]For the fortified town is solitary,
an abode deserted and abandoned,
like the desert.
There the calf grazes
and there it lies down and gnaws
away its boughs.
[11]When its branches are dry, they are
broken.
Women come, light fires with
them,
for they are not a discerning
people.
Therefore its Maker shall show it no
mercy,
and its Fashioner shall not grant
it grace.

[12]And it shall be on that day:
the LORD shall beat out the grain
from the stream of the Euphrates
to Egypt's river.
And you shall be gathered in
one by one, you Israelites.
[13]And it shall be on that day
a great ram's horn shall sound,

and those lost in the land of Assyria
shall come,
and the dispersed in the land of
Egypt
and bow down to the LORD
on the holy mountain, in
Jerusalem.

CHAPTER 27 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *On that day.* Some take this verse to be the conclusion of the last prophecy in the previous chapter. Given its strikingly mythological character, however, it could be an independent fragment.

Leviathan the slippery serpent. The Hebrew epithet bariaḥ is not certain in meaning. It could derive from the verbal stem that means "to flee," hence "slippery." It is also the ordinary word for the bolt of a gate and so could conceivably refer to the serpent held under lock and key. The entire line invokes the Canaanite cosmogonic myth of Leviathan as the primordial sea monster that the weather god Baal must subdue in order for dry land, safe from the raging sea, to come into being.

2. *a lovely vineyard.* This Song of the Vineyard is akin to the Parable of the Vineyard in chapter 5; in both cases, the vineyard is the people of Israel.

4. *Should one give Me thorns and thistles.* That is, if the people through its actions allow the vineyard to fall into ruins, God will burn out the noxious growths.

5. *If he clings to My stronghold.* The "he" would refer collectively to the people, and clinging to God's stronghold means keeping faith with Him. The result is peace with God instead of the battle mentioned in verse 4.

6. *In days to come.* The Hebrew says merely "coming" in the plural, but it is likely that "days" was inadvertently dropped from the text. This phrase is usually an introductory formula for a prophecy, which would make this verse a fragment, although it might also be taken as the conclusion of the prophecy that begins in verse 2.

8. *In due measure.* The Hebrew *besa'sa'h* is anomalous and its meaning is uncertain. This translation follows the Targum in relating it to *se'ah*, a dry measure.

He drove her out. Though it may be disconcerting to the English reader, the Hebrew slides readily from referring to the Israelites as a collective "he" (verse 7) to a feminine pronominal suffix here (because the nation is often imagined symbolically as a woman).

east-wind day. The east wind blowing from the desert generally signals disaster.

9. *all this comes.* More literally, "all the fruit of."

the altar. As the third verset of this line makes clear, this is an altar dedicated to pagan worship, which therefore has to be shattered.

10. *gnaws away its boughs.* The boughs are a metonymy for the deserted town. Now women foraging for fuel (verse 11) come to pick up the dry broken branches to use as kindling.

11. *for they are not a discerning people.* In consonance with a recurrent pattern in triadic lines, this third verset breaks away from the semantic parallelism and instead provides an explanatory summary not only of the whole line but of the whole prophecy: this disaster has befallen the people because of its failure to see and understand God's ways.

12. *And it shall be on that day.* Once again, this formula signals the beginning of a new prophecy, one of national restoration and the punishment of Israel's enemies.

from the stream of the Euphrates to Egypt's river. Assyria and Egypt were the two great imperial powers between which the kingdom of Judah was caught in Isaiah's time, the eighth century B.C.E.

13. *a great ram's horn shall sound.* The ram's horn was blown at coronations and to announce the jubilee year: here it inaugurates a grand period of renewal after national tribulations. Traditional interpreters associated this verse with the messianic age.

and those lost in the land of Assyria. The Hebrew verb equally means "to be lost" and "to perish." It is distinctly possible that Isaiah, writing a century after the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel and the exile of much of its population to Assyria, has that historical catastrophe in mind.

CHAPTER 28

[1]Woe, crown of the pride of
Ephraim's drunkards,
and a withered blossom his glory's
splendor
on the head of the fat-proud,
stunned by wine.
[2]Look, one powerful and strong for
the Master,
like a current of hail, a storm of
destruction,
like a current of mighty rushing
waters,
He brings down to the earth.
[3]Underfoot shall be trampled
the crown of the pride of
Ephraim's drunkards.
[4]And his glory's splendor shall
become a withered blossom
on the head of the fat-proud,
like a new fig before the harvest—

who sees it will swallow it still in
his hand.
5 On that day the LORD of Armies
shall become
a crown of splendor and a tiara of
glory to His people's remnant,
6 and a spirit of justice for him who is
seated in judgment
and valor for those who drive
back battle from the gate.
7 And these, too, blundered through
wine
and through strong drink went
astray.
Priest and prophet blundered
through strong drink,
were confounded through wine,
went astray through strong drink,
blundered with the seer,
juddered in judgment.
8 For all the tables were covered with
vomit,
filth, with no space left.
9 To whom will they teach knowledge
and to whom will they convey
lessons?—

to the milk-weaned,
    to babes pulled from the breast?
[10]For it is filth-pilth, filth-pilth,
    vomit-momit, vomit-momit,
        a little here, a little there.
[11]For in a barbarous tongue
    and in alien language
        He shall speak to this people
[12]to whom He said, “This is rest—
    leave it for the weary,
    and this is repose,” and they did
        not want to listen.
[13]And the word of the LORD
    became for them—
    filth-pilth, filth-pilth,
    vomit-momit, vomit-momit,
        a little here, a little here.
So that they should walk and stumble
    backward,
    and be broken, snared, and
        trapped.
[14]Therefore, hear the word of the
    LORD,
    men of mockery,
rulers of this people
    who are in Jerusalem.

15 For you said, “We have sealed a
covenant with Death,
and with Sheol we have made a
pact.
No sweeping scourge that passes by
will reach us,
for we have made falsehood our
refuge
and in lies we have taken shelter.”
16 Therefore thus said the Master the
LORD:
I am about to lay a foundation
stone in Zion,
the stone for a tower,
a precious corner, a solid foundation.
He who trusts shall have nothing
to fear.
17 And I will make justice the
measuring cord
and righteousness the plumb line.
And hail shall sweep away the refuge
of falsehood,
and the shelter, water shall wash
off.
18 And your covenant with Death
shall be canceled,

your pact with Sheol shall not
come about.
The sweeping scourge that passes by
—
you shall be crushed by it.
19 As it passes it shall take you
by day and by night,
and the conveying of lessons,
shall be naught but horror.
20 For the couch is too short to stretch
out on,
and the blanket too narrow to
cover one up.
21 For like Mount Perazim the LORD
shall arise,
like Gibeon Valley He shall rage
to do His deed, strange is His deed,
and to accomplish His work, alien
His work.
22 And now, do not mock,
lest your reins pull tight,
for direly decreed I have heard it
from the Master, the LORD
over all the earth.

[23]Give ear and hear My voice,
attend and hear My utterance.
[24]Does the plowman plow all day to sow,
break open and harrow his soil?
[25]When he levels its surface,
will he not scatter fennel and broadcast cumin
and set wheat in rows
and barley in plots
and spelt as a border?
[26]For He guides him rightly,
his God instructs him.
[27]For fennel is not beaten with a threshing sledge
nor does the cartwheel roll over cumin.
For fennel is beaten with a stick
and cumin with a stick.
[28]Grain for bread is pounded,
but the thresher does not thresh it forever.
He runs over it with his cartwheel
but his horses do not crush it.
[29]This too from the LORD of Armies issues forth,

He is wondrous in counsel, His
wisdom is great.

CHAPTER 28 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Woe, crown of the pride of Ephraim's drunkards.* Ephraim, the northern kingdom that was wiped out by Assyria in 721 B.C.E., is a somewhat puzzling presence at the beginning of this prophecy, which probably refers to the predicament of the southern kingdom, besieged by Assyria, twenty years later. Perhaps the complete desolation of Ephraim, whose leaders are seen as dissolute, is meant as a portent for Judah.

the fat-proud. The Hebrew spelling of *gey'* would lead one to understand it as "valley"—that is, "valley of the fat growth" or "valley of oils." It seems preferable to read it as *gei'*, "proud," in apposition with "stunned by wine" and referring to the drunkards.

2. *one powerful and strong for the Master.* The reference is probably Assyria, conceived as God's instrument for punishing Judah.

3–4. *the crown of the pride . . . / his glory's splendor.* There are evidently two idioms in this image—a crown which is trampled, and something like a floral wreath, which withers.

5. *a crown of splendor and a tiara of glory.* In these tightly woven lines, the undeserved or false crown adorning the drunkards is replaced by the true crown that God becomes for His people.

6. *a spirit of justice.* The drunkards, as the continuation of the prophecy makes vividly clear, pervert justice and distort values, and they are to be replaced by a just ruler.

those who drive back battle from the gate. The city gate would be assaulted by besiegers, who are here repelled by valiant defenders.

7. *And these, too, blundered through wine.* The Judahites resemble their counterparts in Ephraim.

strong drink. As elsewhere, *sheikhar*, which like wine is a product of the vine, probably indicates grappa.

the seer. The Hebrew term clearly means this, not "vision," as many translations here have it, and it jibes with the reference to prophet and priest gone astray.

juddered in judgment. The translation emulates the alliteration of the Hebrew, *paqu peliliyah*. The Hebrew verb does mean to shake, falter, be unsteady.

8. *For all the tables were covered with vomit.* The initial notion of drunkenness is now vividly joined by an evocation of the disgusting scene of wine-swilling debauchery.

filth. The Hebrew term indicates excremental filth, so the physical effect of the debauches comes out of the body at both ends.

9. *To whom will they teach knowledge.* The most likely referent of "they" is the drunken priests, prophets, and seers, whose incoherent teaching would scarcely be suitable for newly weaned babes.

10. *For it is filth-pilth, filth-pilth, / vomit-momit, vomit-momit.* Wildly divergent interpretations have been proposed for these words. The literal sense would seem to be: "precept precept, line line." But if precepts are at issue here, they are precepts that have been turned into gibberish by these drunkards. The phonetic kinship between *tsaw*, precept or command, and *tsoʾah*, filth or excrement, and between *qaw*, line, and *qiʾ*, vomit, is surely not accidental. The translation seeks to convey both this correspondence and the effect of gibberish.

11. *For in a barbarous tongue / and in alien language / He shall speak to this people.* This is measure-for-measure justice: they have reduced any instruction they might offer to drunken babbling, and God will address them through the incomprehensible language of the Akkadian-speaking Assyrian conquerors.

13. *And the word of the LORD became for them— / filth-pilth, filth-pilth.* God's very word, which as leaders of the people they had the responsibility to

convey to the people, has turned into grotesque nonsense syllables.

15. *We have sealed a covenant with Death.* The language here verges on the mythological (Mot, the word used here, is the Canaanite god of death). Some interpreters understand this as a reference to the party in Jerusalem that promoted an alliance with Egypt, known for its cult of the dead, against Assyria. That is possible, but the more evident point is that these perverse leaders have replaced God with the god of death, imagining that they will be safe from all dangers through these covenants with the deity of the netherworld.

16. *I am about to lay a foundation stone in Zion.* This may look like a switch in direction, but it is not necessary to declare this a later editorial intrusion. In place of a city ruled by drunken idiots, God will establish a just, firm-founded city, while those who made a covenant with death will be swept away (verses 17–21).

19. *the conveying of lessons.* This phrase refers back to verse 9 and to the reduction of teaching to babble in the lines that followed it. Now, instead of gibberish, there will be terror.

20. *For the couch is too short to stretch out on.* This homey image represents the acute discomfiting helplessness of the miscreants when they are overtaken by divine judgment: they can neither lie without being cramped in the bed nor cover themselves.

21. *like Mount Perazim / . . . like Gibeon Valley.* These were places of victory, respectively, for David and for Joshua where God intervened on their behalf. Now He will intervene instead to effect a dire defeat of His people.

23. *Give ear and hear My voice.* This formal opening injunction clearly signals the beginning of a new prophecy.

24. *Does the plowman plow all day to sow.* These words initiate an extended simile—or perhaps it is meant to be a parable—that would have spoken directly to the ancient audience because of its agricultural imagery. Unfortunately, not all of the terms and agricultural procedures are transparent

to modern readers. What compounds the difficulty is that the referent of the parable—the *nimshal* of the *mashal*—is barely hinted at.

25. *fennel.* This is one conjectural understanding of the Hebrew qetsaḥ.
in rows. This translation reads *shurah* for the opaque *sorah* of the Masoretic Text.

26. *For He guides him rightly.* This would be the evident referent of the parable: God imbues the farmer with understanding so that he can raise his crops in proper fashion. Perhaps there is a more general implication that God implants in humankind the requisite wisdom to conduct all of its affairs. But it must be said that the Hebrew verb used here generally means "to discipline," not "to instruct."

28. *Grain for bread.* "Grain for" is merely implied in the Hebrew.
He runs over it. The verb here generally means "to panic," and so the translation, somewhat conjecturally, is dictated by the context.

29. *He is wondrous in counsel, His wisdom is great.* This concluding line is evidently meant to point the moral that all practical wisdom, like the know-how of the farmer who is careful to thresh his grain without polluting it, comes from God. It remains something of a puzzle why the editors chose to introduce a text of this sort in a series of prophecies about the political fate of the people of Israel.

CHAPTER 29

[1]Woe, Ariel, Ariel,
the city where David camped.
Add year upon year,
let festivals make their round.
[2]And I shall cause distress to Ariel,
and it shall turn into keening and
crying,
and it shall be to me as Ariel.
[3]And I shall camp like David against
it,
and besiege it with a mound
and lay siege-works against it.
[4]And you shall be brought down,
from the ground you shall speak,
lower than the dust shall your
utterance be,
and your voice shall be like a ghost
from the ground,
and from the dust your speaking
shall chirp.

[5]And the crowd of your strangers
shall be like fine dust
and like chaff blowing past the
oppressors' crowd.
And it shall happen at once, in
a moment,
[6]she shall be singled out by the
LORD of Armies
in thunder and earthquake and a
great sound,
tempest and whirlwind and
tongues of consuming fire.
[7]And it shall be like a dream, a
night-vision—
the crowd of all the nations
arrayed against Ariel
and all her foes and the siege-works
against her
and those who distressed her.
[8]And it shall be as the hungry man
dreams he is eating,
and wakes with an empty throat,
and as the thirsty man dreams he is
drinking
and wakes and is faint and his
throat is parched,

so the crowd of all the nations shall
be,
arrayed against Mount Zion.
[9]Be dumbfounded, yes,
dumbfounded,
be blinded, yes, be blinded.
They are drunk and not from wine,
stagger, and not from strong
drink.
[10]For the LORD has poured over you
a spirit of deep slumber,
and closed your eyes—the prophets,
and covered your heads—the
seers.

[11]And the vision of all things shall become to you like the words of a sealed book that is given to one who can read, saying, “Pray, read this,” and he says, “I cannot, for it is sealed,” [12]and the book is given to one who cannot read, saying, “Pray, read this,” and he says, “I cannot read.”

[13]And the Master said,
Inasmuch as this people approached
with its mouth

and with its lips honored Me
but kept its heart far from Me,
and their reverence for Me
was a commandment of men
learned by rote,
14 therefore will I continue
to strike this people with wonder
upon wonder,
and the wisdom of its wise men shall
vanish
and the discernment of its
discerners disappear.

15 Woe to those who burrow deep
from the LORD
to hide their counsel,
and their deeds are done in darkness,
and they say, “Who sees us, who
knows of us?”
16 You are perverse!
Should the potter be reckoned as
his clay,
should the thing he made say of
its maker, “He did not make
me,”

and the thing fashioned say
of its fashioner, “He has
no skill”?
17 Surely in just a while,
Lebanon shall turn back into
farmland
and the farmland be reckoned
as forest.
18 And the deaf on that day shall hear
the book’s words,
and from darkness and gloom the
eyes of the blind shall see.
19 Once more shall the lowly have joy
in the LORD,
and the needy exult in Israel’s
Holy One.
20 For the oppressor shall vanish,
the mocker shall cease,
and all those devoted to crime
be cut off.
21 Who led people to offend through a
word,
ensnared the arbiter in the gate,
perverted the innocent man’s
cause with lies.

[22]Therefore thus said the LORD
Who redeemed Abraham to the
house of Jacob:
Not now shall Jacob be shamed,
and not now shall his face turn
pale.
[23]For when he sees his children,
My handiwork, in his midst,
they shall hallow My name
and hallow Jacob's Holy One,
and the God of Israel they shall
hold in awe.
[24]And those whose spirit strayed
shall know discernment,
and the grumblers shall learn their
lesson.

CHAPTER 29 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Ariel.* Although the second verset makes it clear that this is an epithet for Jerusalem, wildly disparate proposals have been made for the etymology of the name. Perhaps the least strained is that it means "lion of God," which is to say, not an ordinary lion but some sort of heraldic lion; and a good candidate for that would be the cherubs carved over the Ark of the Covenant, which are more or less winged lions. By synecdoche, then, this carved beast in the Temple might have become an epithet for the city in which the Temple stood.

2. *And it shall be to Me as Ariel.* This third verset is a little enigmatic. The possible sense is: Ariel, once My protected sacred city, will now be for Me an Ariel of keening and crying.

3. *camp.* This sometimes military term is pointedly chosen because the reference is not to David's residence in the city but to his attack on it when he conquered it for the Jebusites.

4. *from the dust your speaking shall chirp.* As several biblical texts suggest, there was a popular belief that the spirits of the dead communicated with the living by means of faint chirping sounds that might be interpreted by a necromancer.

5. *the crowd of your strangers.* These are the foreign armies attacking Jerusalem.

6. *she shall be singled out.* This verb *paqad* can mean to be singled out either for recompense, for benign attention, or for punishment. The storm imagery that immediately follows might lead one to apply the negative sense, but then in verse 7 it becomes clear that the people's enemies are the target of these foreign forces,

7. *And it shall be like a dream, a night-vision.* The horror of implacable enemies bent on the destruction of Jerusalem will vanish like a nightmare when the sleeper awakens. This image might accord with Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem in 701 B.C.E., which was suddenly withdrawn.

8. *the hungry man / . . . the thirsty man.* In a rather peculiar move, the dream simile is now reversed: it is not Israel dreaming the nightmare of its destruction but the Assyrians dreaming of consuming the city who now awake and find that their hunger and thirst have not been satisfied.

9. *dumbfounded, / . . . blinded.* The prophet assumes, in consonance with general ancient belief, that the people needs the guidance of prophets and seers in order to see where it must go. In this case, false prophets have assumed the prophetic role, which is understood as a punishment from God sent against the people, causing general blindness.

11. *the words of a sealed book.* Some interpreters propose that this is the scroll of Isaiah's own prophecies. In any case, the book is sealed so that even the literate cannot read it, and how much more so the illiterate.

14. *wonder upon wonder.* While this word often has a positive sense of God's miraculous intervention in behalf of the people, here it obviously is used negatively for the perpetuation of a state of hopeless ignorance in the people.

15. *Woe.* As elsewhere, the introduction of this word, *hoy*, announces a new prophecy.

Who sees us, who knows of us? These words express the delusion that it is possible to hide from God's all-seeing eyes.

16. *He has no skill.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "He did not understand." The translation here, which makes the intention clear, is borrowed from Joseph Blenkinsopp.

17. *Lebanon shall turn back into farmland.* A day soon to come will witness radical transformations: the heavily forested Lebanon will become farmland, and the farmland a forest. These antithetical changes set the stage for what transpires in the human landscape in the verses that follow.

18. *the deaf . . . / the blind.* Especially because of the reference to hearing the book's words, which surely harks back to verse 11, the deaf and the blind are probably meant metaphorically: those who could neither hear nor read the words of the true prophet will now understand them.

19. *the lowly . . . / the needy.* The focus of this prophecy is not an attack by hostile armies but the perversion of social justice, which will now be restored.

21. *through a word.* Given the reference to courts of justice in the next two versets, the "word" here would be false testimony or perjury that deprives the innocent of his rightful cause.

23. *they shall hallow My name.* It is noteworthy that the prophet conceives the hallowing of God's name not as a cultic act but as a restitution of social justice. Jacob's face no longer turns pale with shame because his society is no longer something to be ashamed of, and this is the true sanctification of God's

name. The arc of this argument is completed in the next verse. The people that had been blind, that lacked the discernment to see the difference between right and wrong, will now come to its senses, again be discerning.

CHAPTER 30

[1]Woe, you wayward sons,
said the LORD,
devising counsel, and not from Me,
clinging to molten images—
and not to My spirit,
so as to compound
offense with offense.
[2]Who head down to Egypt,
and have not asked My word,
to shelter in Pharaoh's stronghold,
and take refuge in Egypt's shade.
[3]And Pharaoh's stronghold shall turn
into shame for you,
and the shelter in Egypt's shade
into disgrace.
[4]Though his commanders were in
Zoan,
and his messengers reached
Hanes,

[5]whoever shames a people shall not
avail them,
neither for help nor for availing,
but shall be shame and sheer
disgrace.

[6]The portent of the Beasts of the
Negeb.
In a land of straits and stress,
a lion and maned beast from
among them
viper and flying serpent.
On the back of donkeys their wealth
is borne
and on camels' humps their
treasures
to an unavailing people.
[7]And Egypt's help shall be useless
and void.
Therefore I call this:
Her Arrogance Ended.

[8]Now, come write it on a tablet with
them
and on a scroll its inscription,

and let it stand till the last day
as a witness forever.
9For it is a rebellious people,
deceitful sons,
sons who did not want to heed
the teaching of the LORD.
10Who said to the seers, “You shall
not see,”
and to the visionaries, “You shall
not envision for us true things.
Speak smooth talk to us,
envision illusions.
11Swerve from the way,
turn aside from the path.
Rid us of
Israel’s Holy One.”
12Therefore, thus Israel’s Holy One
has said:
Inasmuch as you have spurned this
word
and placed your trust in oppression
and perversion
and leaned on it,
13therefore this crime shall become
for you

like a breach spreading down a
high wall,
where all of a sudden the
breaking point comes.
14 And its breaking like the breaking
of a potter's jar,
relentlessly shattered,
and no shard will be found in its
fragments
to carry fire from a hearth
or scoop water from a puddle.
15 For thus said the Master, the
LORD, Israel's Holy One:
In quiet and stillness you shall be
rescued,
in calm and trust shall your
valor be,
but you did not want it.
16 And you said, "No, on a horse we
shall flee."
Therefore shall you flee.
"And on a swift steed we shall ride."
Therefore shall your pursuers be
swift.
17 A thousand before the shout of
one,

before the shout of five shall you
flee,
till you are left like a flagpole on a
mountaintop,
and like a banner on a hill.

18 And therefore the LORD shall wait
to grant you grace,
and therefore He shall rise to
show you mercy,
for a God of justice is the LORD.
happy all who wait for Him.
19 For the people shall dwell in
Jerusalem,
nevermore shall weep.
He shall surely grant you grace at the
sound of your crying,
when He hears it, He shall answer
you.

20 And the Master shall give you
bread of straits and water of
oppression.
But your Teacher shall no longer be
concealed,

and your eyes shall see your
Teacher,
[21]and your ears shall hear a word
behind you, saying:
This is the way, go upon it,
whether you turn to the right or
the left.
[22]And you shall defile the overlay of
your silver idols
and the plating of your molten
images of gold.
You shall scatter them like a woman
in her uncleanness.
Go out! You shall say to it.
[23]And He shall give rain for your
seed
that you sow in the soil,
and bread, the yield of the soil,
and it shall be rich and fat.
Your cattle shall graze on that day
in a spacious pasture.
[24]And the oxen and the donkeys that
till the soil
shall eat salted fodder
that is winnowed with shovel
and fan.

[25]And there shall be on every high
    mountain
    and on every lofty hill
        streams, brooks of water,
on the day of the great slaughter
    when towers fall.
[26]And the light of the moon shall be
    like the light of the sun,
    and the light of the sun shall be
        sevenfold
        like the light of the seven days
when the LORD binds up the
    breaking of His people
    and heals its smashing blow.

[27]The LORD's name is about to
    come from afar,
    burning His wrath, heavy His
        burden,
His lips are filled with fury,
    His tongue, consuming fire.
[28]His breath a sweeping stream
    crossing upward to the neck—
to shake nations in a ruinous sieve

and a bridle on the jaws of
peoples, leading them astray.
29 The song shall be for you
like the night a festival is
sanctified
and heart's joy like one who walks
with the flute
to come to the LORD's mountain,
to Israel's Rock.
30 And the LORD shall sound His
voice's majesty
and show the downsweep of His
arm
in furious wrath and tongues of
consuming fire,
cloudburst and torrent and
hailstones.
31 For by the LORD's voice shall
Assyria be terrified
as He strikes with the rod.
32 And each swing of the club is
punishment
that the LORD shall lay down
upon him
to the sound of timbrels and with
lyres and with dance—

in a swoop He does battle against
her.
[33]For Topheth was laid out long ago,
it, too is readied for Molech,
its fire pit deep and wide,
much fire and firewood.
The LORD's breath is like a torrent
of brimstone
burning within it.

CHAPTER 30 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *clinging to molten images.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "making [or pouring] molten images."

2. *Who head down to Egypt.* Although the prophecy begins by inveighing against idolatry, it quickly switches to a political theme, and Isaiah may have associated the pursuit of foreign alliances with the worship of pagan gods. In any case, one should note that the prophet here and elsewhere assumes a vehement stance in a political debate: in the last years of the eighth century B.C.E., there was a party in Jerusalem that advocated an alliance with Egypt against the imminent military threat of the Assyrian empire, and Isaiah viewed this policy as a catastrophic error.

Egypt's shade. As elsewhere, "shade" has the idiomatic sense of "protection."

4. *Though his commanders were in Zoan, / and his messengers reached Hanes.* Both these are Egyptian cities. A Judahite delegation actually traveled to Egypt to discuss a possible anti-Assyrian alliance.

6. *The portent of the Beasts of the Negeb.* The picturesque title of this prophecy (perhaps an editorial invention) invokes the beasts of the great southern desert through which the emissaries journey in order to reach Egypt. The first animals named are beasts of prey and thus suggest the dangers that the foolish delegates are running in order to conduct negotiations that will lead to nothing good.

their wealth . . . / their treasure. The emissaries are bringing tribute—or perhaps rather a diplomatic bribe—in order to persuade Egypt to provide military assistance to Judah.

7. *Arrogance Ended.* The Masoretic Text reads *rahav hem shevet*, which would be literally: "arrogance [or Rahab] they to-sit." This cannot be right. The translation reads with many scholars *rohabam moshbat*, which is merely a respacing of the letters and a revocalization. The first word could either mean "arrogance" or be the proper name Rahab, a ferocious Canaanite sea beast, possibly here referring to Egypt.

8. *as a witness.* The received text reads *laʿad*, "forever," the same meaning as the next word in the text, but two Hebrew manuscripts and several ancient versions show *laʿed*, "as a witness."

13. *like a breach spreading down a high wall.* This image mingles metaphor with metonymy: a hidden flaw reaches a point where it suddenly causes a total breakdown, but the wall is also the actual structure that protects the city from invaders, who will now overrun it.

14. *like the breaking of a potter's jar.* The shift in metaphor is pointedly effective: the solid stone wall turns into a fragile earthenware jar that is easily broken to pieces. The smashing of the vessel into tiny fragments is vividly represented in the next line.

17. *before the shout of one, / before the shout of five.* Though it is more spectacular for a thousand to flee before the shout of a single person than five, the line follows the convention of biblical parallelism, where when a number is introduced in the first verset, it has to be increased in the second verset.

20. *your Teacher.* While other understandings are conceivable, the most likely reference is to God.

concealed. The verb *yikanef* is anomalous, but it may be related to the noun *kanaf*, the corner of a garment or a wing, perhaps suggesting a condition of lying under a fold.

21. *and your ears shall hear a word behind you.* The word coming from behind is a little puzzling, especially since the eyes that see the Teacher imply that He stands in front of the people. Perhaps God is in front and His prophet, to whom at last the people listens, urges them on from behind.

22. *And you shall defile.* That is, you shall make them unfit for worship.

You shall scatter them like a woman in her uncleanness. The verb "scatter" works better for the destroyed idols than for the menstruant woman, who in biblical law is certainly not "scattered" but rather kept at a distance in order to avoid physical contact with her.

25. *streams, brooks of water, / on the day of the great slaughter / when towers fall.* In a fusion of two motifs unusual in prophecies of redemption, the people restored to its glory will enjoy an abundance of fructifying freshets of water even as military catastrophe overwhelms the enemies that have dominated them.

26. *And the light of the moon shall be like the light of the sun.* This spectacular increase of natural light is a motif taken up by Second Isaiah and has led some scholars to conclude that at least this line was composed by him, which is a possible but not necessary inference. In any case, the striking hyperbole has invited eschatological readings, and "the light of the seven days" is clearly a mythological reference to the seven days of creation during which, according to some understandings, the light was more perfect. Creation begins with God's summoning light to replace the primordial darkness, so national restoration is imagined in cosmic terms as a kind of renewal of creation.

27. *The LORD's name.* The phrasing reflects a verbal practice that becomes pronounced in the Late Biblical period of interposing God's name as the active agent in order to avoid anthropomorphism.

His tongue, consuming fire. These words concretize and intensify the "fury" of the first verset. They also incorporate a pun because of the intimations of tongues of fire.

28. *crossing upward to the neck.* The verb employed here is usually the one for a person crossing a stream, but here it indicates the water cutting the body in half and moving on upward to the neck.

in a ruinous sieve. Some interpreters, striving to make the parallelism neat, cite a purported Arabic cognate for *nefet* that means "yoke." But this noun elsewhere clearly means "sieve," and the verb "to shake up" scarcely accords with a yoke. Biblical poetry sometimes switches metaphors between the first and second verset of a line.

29. *The song shall be for you.* This is the song of triumph and celebration when the enemy is destroyed and the people restored.

like one who walks with the flute. This is the joyous procession at a pilgrim festival, in which the celebrants march up to the Temple mount to the accompaniment of musical instruments.

30. *tongues of consuming fire.* This is not the same Hebrew word as "tongue" in verse 27. The literal sense is "A flame of consuming fire."

32. *to the sound of the timbrels and with lyres.* As in verse 25, the joy of national restoration is mingled with a depiction in the second verset here of God's fearsome destruction of the enemy.

and with dance. The Masoretic Text has *ʿuvemilḥamot*, "and with battles." The translation follows a commonly proposed emendation *uvemeḥolot*, "and with dances" (the plural has been changed to a singular in the translation for reasons of rhythm), a difference of one Hebrew letter. Another possibility would be to move the word as it appears in the Masoretic Text to the second verset and have it read: "and in swooping battles He does battle against it." That, however, would produce a rhythmic imbalance of two stresses in the first verset and four in the second.

33. *Topheth.* This is the Valley of Ben-Hinnom in Jerusalem, where human sacrifice was offered. In later Hebrew usage, it became a term for "hell."

Molech. The Masoretic Text is vocalized to read *melekh*, "king," but it almost certainly is Molech, the pagan god to whom human sacrifices (usually children) were made.

The LORD's breath is like a torrent of brimstone / burning within it. The imagery aptly concludes the prophecy of the destruction of Israel's enemies:

on the altar of Molech, human beings were devoted to the consuming flames; now God's fiery breath will burn up the Assyrians.

CHAPTER 31

[1]Woe, who go down to Egypt for
help,
who rely on horses
and trust in chariots because they are
many,
and in horsemen because they
greatly abound,
and they have not looked to Israel's
Holy One,
nor have they sought out the
LORD.
[2]But He, too, is wise and will bring
about harm,
and His word He does not revoke.
And He shall rise up against the
house of the evil ones
and against those who help
wrongdoers.
[3]And Egypt is human and not a god,

and their horses are flesh and not
spirit.
And the LORD shall reach out His
hand,
and the helper shall stumble, the
one helped shall fall,
and both of them perish
together.
[4]For thus said the LORD to me:
As the lion growls,
the maned beast over its prey,
when a shepherds' band
gathers against it,
it fears not their voice
nor is cowed by their clamor,
thus shall the LORD of Armies
come down
to marshal forces on Mount Zion
and on its slope.
[5]As birds fly above,
so shall the LORD of Armies
protect Jerusalem,
protecting and saving, sparing
and rescuing.

[6]Turn back to Him from Whom you swerved far away,
O Israelites. [7]For on that day every man shall spurn his
ungods of silver and his ungods of gold that your
hands have made as offense.

[8]And Assyria shall fall by a sword
not of man's,
and a sword not a human's shall
devour him.
And he shall flee from the sword,
and his young men be put to
forced labor.
[9]And his rock from terror shall
crumble,
and his commanders panic-
stricken by the banner.
Thus said the LORD,
Who has a fire in Zion
and a furnace in Jerusalem.

CHAPTER 31 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Woe, who go down to Egypt for help.* The prophet continues the vehement argument against seeking an alliance with Egypt that was put forth in the previous chapter. While *ʿezrah* is a general term for "help," it often occurs in

military contexts, and that connotation is obviously relevant here. The prophet will play sardonically on this word in the next two verses.

who rely on horses / and trust in chariots. Egypt was renowned for its horses and active in exporting them. There is probably also a reminiscence of the Exodus story, in which all of Pharaoh's horsemen with their chariots are engulfed in the Sea of Reeds.

2. *But He, too, is wise.* There is an implied opposition between God's wisdom and power and the purported sages and soothsayers of Egypt.

4. *As the lion growls.* The lion is a stock image for martial fierceness in ancient Near Eastern poetry. Here it is applied to God, as the end of this verse makes clear.

to marshal forces on Mount Zion. This whole line is ambiguous because the preposition *ʿal* could mean either "on" or "against" (for the latter construction, see the New Jewish Publication Society rendering, "to make war against the mount and hill of Zion"). But the idea of God's assaulting Mount Zion is hard to sustain because in the very next verse He is represented hovering protectively over Jerusalem. The marshaling of divine forces, then, would be God's driving off the enemies besieging Jerusalem. This might be a reference to the sudden departure of the besieging army in 701 B.C.E., though that is not certain.

5. *As birds fly above.* The switch of similes is pointed: if God is a fearless lion confronting Israel's enemies, He is also a gentle bird hovering protectively over His people.

8. *And Assyria shall fall by a sword not of man's.* The formulation, evoking the idea of a miraculous defeat of the Assyrian army, appears to accord with the account of the sudden flight of the Arameans (not the Assyrians) offered in 2 Kings 7.

9. *And his rock from terror shall crumble.* There are difficulties in the wording of this verset and the next one. The metaphor of rock or crag is often attached to God in Psalms, but it is not elsewhere linked with a human leader, as many interpreters of this verse claim. Perhaps here it is meant to designate the military power in which the Assyrians place their trust. The verb that is

translated here as “crumble” because of the context actually means “to pass on,” which does not sound appropriate for “rock.”

his commanders panic-stricken by the banner. The wording is cryptic and many scholars have proposed emending the text. The text as we have it could be correct: the Assyrian commanders, seeing the banners of the army attacking them, are terrified.

a fire in Zion / and a furnace in Jerusalem. Given the defeat of the Assyrians that has just been evoked, this is a destructive fire: the Assyrians assaulting Jerusalem imagined they had surrounded a city that they would overwhelm, but God tends a blazing furnace within the city that consumes its enemies

CHAPTER 32

[1]Yes, a king shall reign in
righteousness,
and princes shall govern in justice.
[2]Each shall be like a refuge from
wind
and a shelter from the torrent,
like freshets of water on parched
earth,
like the shade of a great rock
in an arid land.
[3]And the eyes of those who see shall
not be sealed,
and the ears of those who hear
shall listen,
[4]and the heart of the rash shall come
to understand,
and the tongue of the stammerers
speak eloquence.
[5]The scurrilous man shall no longer
be called noble,

nor the villain named high-born.
[6]For the scurrilous man speaks
scurrility,
and his heart performs misdeeds,
to carry out foul acts
and speak wrongly of the LORD,
to leave the hungry man's throat
empty
and withhold drink from the
thirsty.
[7]The villain, his vessels are vile,
he devises infamous things,
to do harm to the poor with lying
speech,
when the needy speak in court.
[8]But the nobleman plans noble acts,
and on noble acts he stands.

[9]Women at ease, stand up,
hear my voice.
Complacent young women,
to my words give ear.
[10]For within but a year,
the complacent shall quake,
for the vintage is done with,

no harvest shall come.
[11]Tremble, you women at ease,
quake, complacent ones.
Strip yourselves bare,
put a cloth round your loins,
[12]Beating on breasts
over lovely fields,
over fruitful vines.
[13]On My people's soil
thorn and thistle shall spring up,
for on all the houses of revelry,
the merrymaking town,
[14]the villa is abandoned,
the town's hubbub left behind.
The citadel and the tower
become bare places for all time,
wild asses' revelry,
pasture for the flocks.
[15]Till a spirit is poured on us from above,
and the desert turns to farmland
and farmland is reckoned as forest,
[16]And justice abides in the desert,
and righteousness dwells in the farmland.

17 And the doing of righteousness
shall be peace,
and the work of righteousness,
safe and quiet forever.
18 And My people shall dwell in
abodes of peace,
in safe dwellings and tranquil
places of rest.
19 And it shall come down as the
forest comes down,
and in the lowland the town shall
come low.
20 Happy, you who sow near all
waters,
who let loose the ox and the
donkey.

CHAPTER 32 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *a king shall reign in righteousness.* The theme of the just king instituting a reign of perfect harmony is picked up from chapter 11, whether by Isaiah himself or, as some scholars prefer to think, by a later prophet in the "Isaian tradition."

and princes shall govern in justice. The prophet envisages not only a righteous king but an entire royal bureaucracy of noblemen enacting justice.

3. *And the eyes of those who see shall not be sealed.* This whole line is an obvious reversal of the situation delineated in God's words to Isaiah in his dedication to the prophetic mission (6:9–10), when the prophet is enjoined to seal the eyes and stop up the ears of the people.

5. *The scurrilous man.* It is not entirely certain whether the Hebrew *naval* refers to turpitude or stupidity, or perhaps rather to a combination of the two. Blenkinsopp neatly describes this condition as "moral imbecility."

7. *The villain, his vessels are vile.* The translation emulates the wordplay in the Hebrew: *kelay kelaw raʿim*. More strictly, the initial noun means "miser."

to do harm to the poor with lying speech. Although the thematic unity of this entire prophecy looks loosely associative, the connective logic is as follows: the just princes and monarch are to bring about a just judicial order that is very much lacking in a society where villains pervert justice; thus the nobleman with his noble acts invoked in the next verse has a crucially necessary role to play.

9. *Women at ease . . . / Complacent young women.* A female audience is addressed both because it is these women of Jerusalem who egregiously have been leading a self-satisfied life of luxury (compare chapter 3) and because it is the role of women to take up public keening in a time of disaster, which is about to come. The first of the two terms here is *nashim*, the second *banot*, and while *banot* (literally, "daughters") are definitely young women, there is no persuasive basis for the scholarly claim that *nashim* means "married women."

10. *the vintage is done with, / no harvest shall come.* Blenkinsopp suggests that this may refer to the devastation of the countryside of Judah by Sennacherib's invading army in 701 B.C.E.

11. *Strip yourselves bare, / put a cloth round your loins.* As the second verset clarifies, what the prophet has in mind is not a state of complete nakedness but the putting aside of fine clothing (again, see chapter 3) and binding sackcloth round the loins as a sign of mourning.

12. *Beating on breasts.* This is of course a gesture of mourning. The Hebrew participle is a masculine plural where it should be feminine. This may be a

scribal error influenced by the word for “breasts,” which is a masculine plural.

13. *for on all the houses.* The preposition here does not seem right for “houses” but may have been pulled into the discourse by its use with “soil” in the previous verse. It also might be an ellipsis for something like “curse.”

15. *Till a spirit is poured on us from above.* This is the pivotal point of the prophecy: after the catastrophe in which the land is laid waste, God’s spirit will envelop the people, instituting an era of justice and fructifying the devastated countryside.

farmland is reckoned as forest. Though the forest does not produce crops, it is a place of dense verdant growth, and so it becomes hyperbolic of the efflorescence of the farmland. Throughout these lines, the prophet imagines a fusion of justice with the flourishing renewal of the land.

19. *And it shall come down as the forest comes down.* This entire verse appears to be damaged beyond repair. The first word in the received text is *barad*, “hail” (though the vowel-points make it look like a verb), which makes no sense; it has been emended here in accordance with one Hebrew manuscript and two ancient versions to *yarad*, “shall come down,” which at least yields semantic parallelism in the line. Even so, it is unclear what is being said, and attempts to explain the line or recover an original version that lies behind it have been unavailing.

20. *who let loose the ox and the donkey.* This is in keeping with the idea of planting alongside streams that provide abundant irrigation: there will be green pastures all around over which the oxen and donkeys may roam.

CHAPTER 33

[1]Woe, plunderer, and you are not
plundered,
traitor, and they did not betray
you.
When you are done plundering, you
shall be plundered,
when you finish betraying, they
shall betray you.

[2]O LORD, show us grace, in You we
hope,
be our arm every morning,
yes, our rescue in a time of
distress.
[3]From the sound of a tumult peoples
have fled,
from Your loftiness nations have
scattered.
[4]And the spoil was gathered as
locusts are gathered,

like grasshoppers whirring, they
whir over it.
[5]Lofty is the LORD, for He dwells
on high,
He has filled Zion with justice and
righteousness.
[6]And He shall be the trust of your
times,
power to rescue, wisdom and
knowledge,
fear of the LORD, that is his
treasure.

[7]Look, the Arielites screamed in the
streets,
messengers of peace wept bitterly.
[8]The highways are desolate,
no wayfarer comes.
He has broken the treaty,
spurned the witnesses,
made no account of man.
[9]Mourning, forlorn, is the land
He has shamed Lebanon, it
withers.
Sharon has become like a desert

and Bashan and Carmel stripped
bare.
[10]Now will I rise, says the LORD,
now will I loom, now be raised.
[11]You shall conceive chaff, give birth
to straw—
My breath shall consume you in
fire.
[12]And peoples shall be burnings of
lime,
thorns cut down that go up in fire
[13]Hear, you who are far off, what I
have done,
and mark, you who are close, My
might.

[14]Offenders have feared in Zion,
trembling has seized the tainted.
Who of us can abide the consuming
fire,
who of us can abide the eternal
flames?
[15]He who walks in righteousness,
speaking truth,
spurning oppression's profit,

who shakes his hands clean from
holding a bribe,
stops up his ears from hearing
blood-schemes
and shuts his eyes from looking
at evil.
16 It is he who dwells on the heights,
the fortress of crags his
stronghold,
his bread provided, his water
secure.

17 A king in his beauty your eyes shall
behold,
they shall see a land stretched out
to the distance.
18 Your heart shall murmur in awe,
“Where is he who counts, where
is he who weighs,
where is he who counts the
towers?”
19 A fearsome people you shall not
see,
a people with a tongue too
unfathomable to grasp,

a barbaric language beyond
understanding.
[20]Behold Jerusalem, our festival city,
the tranquil dwelling, a tent not to
be moved.
Its pegs are not pulled up ever
and all its cords never are
snapped.
[21]For there the LORD is mighty for
us
a place of rivers, wide streams,
where no sailing craft can go
nor mighty vessels pass,
[22]For the LORD is our judge, the
LORD our leader,
the LORD is our king, He rescues
us.
[23]Your ropes have come loose,
they cannot hold up their mast,
they cannot unfurl the sail.
Then were great spoils shared out,
the very lame have taken plunder.
[24]And he who dwells there won't say,
"I am ill."
The people who live there are
pardoned of crime.

CHAPTER 33 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Woe, plunderer.* Some scholars take this verse to be the conclusion of the prophecy that runs to the end of chapter 32, but it may be an isolated fragment. The plunderer could refer to the Assyrian invader, whose destruction is prophesied in verses 10–13.

2. *O LORD, show us grace.* This initial formula, as many scholars have noted, is reminiscent of the psalms of supplication, but what follows in this poem scarcely constitutes a psalm.

4. *as locusts are gathered, / like grasshoppers whirring, they whir over it.* This appears to be the general sense of the Hebrew even though the syntax is rather crabbed.

7. *the Arielites.* While some commentators understand this as a term for "messengers," it probably designates Jerusalemites, as in 29:1. The screaming and weeping, followed in the next verse with the evocation of the desolate countryside, reflect a moment when Jerusalem is sorely threatened by besiegers, and the best candidate for such a moment would be Sennacherib's assault on the city in 701 B.C.E. In that case, the one who has broken the treaty in the next verse would be Sennacherib.

8. *spurned the witnesses.* The Masoretic Text reads "spurned the cities [*ʿarim*]," but cities would be an odd object for the verb "spurned." The Qumran Isaiah reads *ʿedim*, "witnesses," and the translation adopts that reading.

10. *Now will I rise.* This is the turning point when God summons His power to rout the Assyrian forces

11. *You shall conceive chaff, give birth to straw.* The "you" (plural in the Hebrew) refers to the Assyrians. Conceiving chaff and giving birth to straw is an image of utter futility, and since these are both highly combustible

materials, the metaphor also represents their absolute vulnerability to God's consuming fire.

14. *Offenders have feared in Zion.* This turn to the miscreants within Jerusalem marks the beginning of a new prophecy. It is possible that the appearance of consuming fire at the end of this verse led to the editorial decision to place this text here, after a prophecy that ends with consuming fire.

15. *He who walks in righteousness, speaking truth.* This list of ethical attributes has a catechistic look that recalls two different psalms in which similar questions are asked of the pilgrim ascending the Temple mount.

16. *he who dwells on the heights.* As the next verset makes clear, this would be a position of fortified security, although it is conceivable that there is also a kind of punning reference to the Temple mount.

17. *A king in his beauty.* This new prophecy harks back to Isaiah's evocation of an ideal king in chapter 11 and elsewhere.

a land stretched out to the distance. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "a land of distances." The idea is that the divinely restored Zion will be a vast country.

18. *Where is he who counts.* It is quite unnecessary to suppose, as some scholars have done, that a census is envisaged. What the prophet has in mind is the splendid abundance of buildings and towers in the restored city, precisely as in Psalm 48:13—"Go around Zion, encircle it. / Count its towers"—which is also a poetic celebration of triumph over enemies who have attacked Jerusalem.

19. *a tongue too unfathomable to grasp, / a barbaric language beyond understanding.* Repeatedly in biblical poetry, one of the terrifying aspects of the enemy is that he speaks an unintelligible language.

20. *a tent not to be moved.* Even though Jerusalem is built up with stone houses, the traditional equation between "tent" and "habitation" is so strong that it can be introduced here, albeit with the pointed emphasis that this tent is as solid and permanent as a building.

21. *a place of rivers, wide streams.* There are no broad rivers in the land of Judah, but this is a kind of utopian fantasy. One recalls a line by the great Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai, “Jerusalem is the Venice of God.”

where no sailing craft can go. The context suggests that this means no invading fleets can enter.

23. *Your ropes have come loose.* The “you” would have to be Israel’s enemies. This may explain why no sailing craft can enter these waters: the rigging of the ships is in disarray, and they cannot sail.

the very lame have taken plunder. “Very” is added in the translation for clarification. The evident idea is that the defeat of the enemy will be so devastating that not just warriors but even the lame will plunder the armor and weapons that have been abandoned in panicked flight. This could accord with the description of the sudden flight of the Assyrian army that appears in 2 Kings 19.

CHAPTER 34

[1]Draw near, O nations, to hear,
and you peoples, hearken.
Let the earth and its fullness hear,
the world and all its offspring.
[2]For fury has the LORD against all
nations,
and wrath against all their army.
He has destroyed them,
consigned them to slaughter.
[3]And their slain shall be flung away,
their corpses shall give off a
stench,
and mountains shall melt from
their blood.
[4]All the heavens' array shall molder,
and like a scroll the heavens roll
up,
and all their array shall wither
as the leaf withers on the vine

and the withered fruit on the fig
tree.

[5]For My sword slaked its thirst in the
heavens,
look, on Edom it comes down,
and on the people I doomed to
destruction.
[6]The LORD's sword is covered with
blood,
greased with suet
from the blood of sheep and he-
goats,
from the suet of kidneys of rams.
For a sacrifice the LORD has in
Bozrah
and a great slaughter in the land of
Edom.
[7]And wild oxen shall come down
with them,
and bulls with the steers.
And their land shall slake its thirst
with blood,
and their soil shall be greased with
suet.

[8]For a day of revenge has the
LORD,
a year of retribution for Zion's
cause.
[9]And its rivers shall turn to pitch,
its soil to brimstone,
and its land turn to burning
pitch.
[10]Night and day it shall not go out,
forever its smoke shall rise.
For all generations it shall lie in
ruins,
for time without end none pass
through it.
[11]The hawk and the hedgehog shall
take hold of it,
and the owl and the raven shall
dwell there,
and He shall stretch over it the
line of welter, the weight-
stones of
waste.
[12]Its nobles shall call out, "There is
no kingship,"
and all its princes be naught.

13 And thorns shall spring up in her
citadels,
in her fortresses nettle and briers,
and it shall turn into an abode of
jackals,
a courtyard of ostriches.
14 And wildcats shall meet hyenas,
and the satyr shall call to its mate.
There Lilith shall rest
and find repose for herself.
15 There the adder shall nest and lay
eggs,
hatch and brood in its shade.
There the buzzards shall gather,
each one with its mate.
16 Inquire of the LORD's book and
read,
not one of these is absent,
not one has missed its mate,
for the LORD's mouth has
commanded,
and His spirit has gathered them.
17 And He has cast for them a lot,
His hand shared it out to them by
measuring line.
Forever they shall take hold of it,

for all generations they shall dwell
there.

CHAPTER 34 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *For fury has the LORD against all nations.* Although a specific national target of divine wrath will emerge in verse 5, the initial perspective is global and, in effect, apocalyptic: all the earth is summoned to listen to the dire prophecy (verse 1), and God's devastating judgment sweeps across the whole world.

3. *and mountains shall melt from their blood.* Other translations render the verb as "be drenched" or "flow," but it is worth retaining the literal sense of the Hebrew, which constitutes a strong hyperbole: the tide of blood, vast and corrosive, will melt the mountains.

4. *All the heavens' array shall molder.* The apocalyptic scope of the poetry is strikingly evident here: the swath of divine fury will encompass the very heavens, withering the stars, which as the army or host of the heavens correspond to the armies subjected to God's wrath in verse 2.

as the leaf withers. The agricultural simile brings the distant and seemingly unassailable stars down to the familiar reality of transient things on earth, where a leaf or a date can wither overnight.

5. *Edom.* The appearance of Edom as the hated archenemy to be devastated by divine wrath suggests a relatively late date for this prophecy. Edom notoriously collaborated with the Babylonian invaders of Judah in 586 B.C.E., as Psalm 137 bitterly recalls.

the people I doomed to destruction. The Hebrew noun rendered as "destruction" has a homonym that means "net," so the phrase might conceivably mean "the people caught in My net for judgment."

6. *For a sacrifice the LORD has.* In the poetic equivalent of a cinematic *faux raccord*, the verse that appears to begin with the sacrifice of sheep and he-goats now converts them into a metaphor for the slaughter of the Edomites.

sacrifice . . . slaughter. As Blenkinsopp notes, the poet plays on the phonetic closeness between the two Hebrew terms, zevaḥ and tevaḥ.

Bozrah. This is a prominent Edomite city.

7. *And wild oxen shall come down with them.* While the general sense of a massacre is clear, the formulation of this whole verse is rather opaque: the verb "come down" sounds odd; the reference of "with them" (the Edomites?) is uncertain; and given that the prophet has moved on from slaughtered animals to slaughtered Edomites, it is puzzling that he should revert here to animals.

9. *its rivers.* The land referred to here is clearly Edom.

11. *The hawk and the hedgehog.* In this verse and in verses 13–15 the only animals that can be identified confidently are the jackals and ostriches of verse 13. In any case, all these are beasts whose habitat is the desolate wilderness.

the line of welter, the weight-stones of waste. The invocation of the "welter and waste" (*tohu wabohu*) of Genesis 1:2 is pointed: an activity of building will be undertaken but with the aim of irreversible destruction, restoring this land to the condition of primordial chaos.

12. *Its nobles shall call out, "There is no kingship."* Some scholars conclude that there is a missing clause here. This translation seeks to rescue the received text, deleting an initial "and" before "there."

13. *a courtyard of ostriches.* This translation reads *ḥatseir*, "courtyard," for the Masoretic *ḥatsir*, "grass." In this sense, it becomes an effective irony: a palace would have a courtyard; now, with the Edomite palaces in ruins, ostriches make these places their courtyard.

14. *the satyr . . . / Lilith.* As happens not infrequently in biblical poetry, there is an overlap between zoological and mythological entities: in the midst of the hyenas and jackals, goat-demons and a demonic goddess of the night make an appearance.

16. *Inquire of the LORD's book.* The most plausible reference, given the context of this prophecy, is to neither a celestial book nor a canonical text but the prophecy itself, which, after all, is presented to its audience as the word of God.

not one of these is absent, / not one has missed its mate. "These" must be the noxious beasts listed in the preceding catastrophe. Every one of them will appear on the site of desolation where Edom once stood; every one will have its feral mate. The absolute fulfillment of the prophecy of the beasts in turn implies that every item in the prophecy of destruction set down in God's book will surely come about.

17. *And He has cast for them a lot, / His hand shared it out to them by measuring line.* The effect of the imagery is literally sarcastic: dividing up an inheritance by lot (as in the Book of Joshua), measuring out plots of land with a line, are actions appropriate to carefully assigning property for human possession. Here, however, these actions are meant to give everlasting "property rights" in what once was Edom to all these wild beasts.

CHAPTER 35

[1]The deserts and parched land shall
rejoice,
the wilderness exult and bloom
like the rose.
[2]It surely shall bloom and exult,
yes, exult and sing out in gladness.
Lebanon's glory is given to it,
the splendor of Carmel and
Sharon.
They shall behold the LORD's glory,
the majesty of our God.
[3]Strengthen the slackened hands,
bolster the tottering knees.
[4]Say to the fearful of heart:
Be strong, do not fear.
Look, your God in vengeance shall
come,
God's retribution shall come and
rescue you.

[5]Then shall the eyes of the blind be
opened,
and the ears of the deaf be
unstopped.
[6]Then shall the lame skip like a stag,
and the tongue of the mute sing in
gladness.
For water shall break forth in the
desert
and brooks in the wilderness.
[7]The heat-scorched ground shall
become a lake
and the thirsty soil, springs of
water.
Where a jackal's abode was, its lair
—
a courtyard for reeds and rushes.
[8]And a highway shall be there,
a holy way it shall be called.
No unclean one shall pass over it,
but it shall be for him who goes
on the way,
and fools shall not wander
there.
[9]No lion shall be there,
nor wild beasts go up on it.

There the redeemed shall go.
[10]Those ransomed by the LORD
shall return
and come to Zion with glad song,
joy everlasting on their heads,
delight and joy they attain,
and sorrow and sighing shall
flee.

CHAPTER 35 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The desert and parched land shall rejoice.* This prophecy of a transformation of the desert into a lush land of blossoming flowers is a metaphor for the grand restoration of the defeated people of Israel. It is tempting to conclude, in particular because of the image of a highway in the wilderness (verse 8) that this prophecy is the work of Second Isaiah. That is not entirely certain, even though the notion (verse 10) of "those ransomed by the LORD" returning to Zion on a holy highway is certainly in accord with the language and themes of Second Isaiah.

the rose. As with other biblical flora, the identity of this flower is uncertain (both crocus and asphodel have been proposed). This translation preserves the equivalent for *ḥavatselet* used by the King James Version both here and in the Song of Songs.

3. *Strengthen the slackened hands.* This entire exhortation to the people to be of good cheer, continuing in the next verse after having been downcast, speaks to the condition of exiles.

7. *The heat-scorched ground.* The Hebrew *sharav* actually means something like "heat scorch," but ground is metonymically implied as it is the ground,

not the scorching air, that turns into a lake.

8. *but it shall be for him who goes on the way.* This clause and the next look textually suspect in the Hebrew, and so any translation is conjectural. A literal rendering here would be: and it is for them who goes [*sic,* singular verb] on the way.

and fools shall not wander there. These are obviously meant to stand in contrast to the pure ones—Israel's exiles?—who are destined to go on the highway through the wilderness, but the use of the term "fools" is rather odd.

10. *come to Zion with glad song.* The invocation at the end of this prophecy of "glad song" (*rinah*, verbal stem *r-n-n*) and rejoicing marks a clear envelope structure with the beginning in verses 1–2. At the beginning, the desert is filled with glad song because it is blooming; now at the end, the exiles returning to Zion sing gladly as they walk on the highway through the desert.

CHAPTER 36

[1]And it happened in the fourteenth year of King
Hezekiah, that Sennacherib king of Assyria went up
against all the fortified towns of Judah and took them.
[2]And the king of Assyria sent Rabshakeh from Lachish
to Jerusalem to King Hezekiah with a heavy force.
And he took a stance at the conduit of the Upper Pool,
on the road to the Fuller's Field. [3]And Eliakim son of
Hilkiah who was appointed over the house came out to
him, together with Shebnah the scribe and Joah son of
Asaph the recorder. [4]And Rabshakeh said to them,
"Say, pray, to Hezekiah: Thus said the great king, the
king of Assyria: 'What is this great trust in which you
place trust? [5]You thought, mere words are counsel and
valor for battle. Now, in whom did you trust that you
should have rebelled against me? [6]Why, you have
trusted in this shattered reed, in Egypt, which when a
man leans on it, enters his palm and pierces it. So is
Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who trust in him. [7]And
should you say to me, In the LORD our God we trust,
is it not He Whose high places and altars Hezekiah

took away, and he said to Judah and to Jerusalem:
Before this altar you shall bow down in Jerusalem?’
[8]And now, wager, pray with my master, king of
Assyria, and I shall give you two thousand horses if
you can give yourselves riders for them. [9]And how
could you turn away the agent of the least of my
master’s servants and trust Egypt for chariots and
horses? [10]And now, was it without the LORD that I
have came up against this land to destroy it? The
LORD said to me, Go up against this land and destroy
it.” [11]And Eliakim, and Shebnah and Joah with him,
said to Rabshakeh, “Speak, pray, to your servants
Aramaic, for we understand it, and do not speak
Judahite in the hearing of the people who are on the
wall.” [12]And Rabshakeh said, “Did my master send me
to you and to your master to speak these words? Did
he not send me to these men sitting on the wall—to eat
their own turds and to drink their own urine—together
with you?” [13]And Rabshakeh stood and called out in a
loud voice in Judahite and said, “Listen to the words
of the great king, the king of Assyria. [14]Thus said the
king, ‘Let not Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be
able to save you. [15]And let not Hezekiah have you trust
in the LORD, saying, the LORD with surely save us,
this city will not be given into the hand of the king of
Assyria.’ [16]Do not listen to Hezekiah, for thus said the

king of Assyria: ‘Make terms with me and come out to me, and each man eat of his vine and each man of his fig tree, and each man drink the water of his well.
17 Until I come and take you to a land like your land—a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards. 18 Lest Hezekiah mislead you, saying the LORD will save us. Did the gods of the nations ever save each its land from the hand of the king of Assyria? 19 Where were the gods of Hammath and Arpad? Where were the gods of Sepharvaim, and did they save Samaria from my hand? 20 Who is there of all the gods of these lands that saved their land from my hand, that the LORD should save Jerusalem from my hand?’” 21 And they were silent and did not answer a word to him, for it was the king’s command, saying, “You shall not answer him.” 22 And Eliakim son of Hilkiah, who was appointed over the house, and Shebnah the scribe and Joah son of Asaph the recorder with him, came to Hezekiah, their garments rent, and they told him Rabshakeh’s words.

CHAPTER 36 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And it happened in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah.* The prose narrative that begins here and runs to the end of chapter 39 replicates 2 Kings 18:13 through 2 Kings 20:19 with, for the most part, only minor textual differences and one added unit, 38:9–20. Although some scholars have argued that the Book of Isaiah is the primary source, copied by the editors of Kings, the reverse seems more likely. One indication that the Isaiah text is secondary is that at quite a few points it slightly abbreviates the text in Kings, dropping out a word, phrase, or even a clause that was not deemed strictly necessary. The editorial decision to insert this narrative segment here at the end of the prophecies of Isaiah son of Amoz (however much these include later writings) was evidently motivated by a desire to round out the prophecies with some detailed historical context. The fourteenth year of Hezekiah's reign is 701 B.C.E. Sennacharib's campaign in Phoenicia, Philistia, and Judah in that year is elaborately documented in Assyrian annals and bas-reliefs.

all the fortified towns of Judah. According to the Assyrian annals, the imperial forces captured forty-six Judean towns—which may be an imperial exaggeration. The principal one was Lachish, where Sennacharib is headquartered in the next verse. The Assyrians left a vivid bas-relief of their archers, in characteristic high-pointed caps, assaulting this town.

2. *Rabshakeh.* Although this word is presented in the Hebrew text without a definite article, as though it were a proper name, it is actually a title, "head steward." In Kings, this figure is accompanied by two other Assyrian court officials who also have titles as names.

3. *who was appointed over the house.* That is, the palace.

6. *this shattered reed.* Reeds, of course, grow in abundance along the Nile.

which when a man leans on it, enters his palm and pierces it. The metaphor is quite realistic. The reed looks as if it could provide support, but it easily breaks when you lean on it, and the jagged ends of the beak can pierce the skin. Rabshakeh's words neatly jibe with Isaiah's political opposition to an alliance with Egypt.

8. *I shall give you two thousand horses if you can give yourself riders for them.* Hezekiah's attempted rebellion is so hopelessly pathetic, Rabshakeh says, that he could not even muster sufficient cavalrymen were he given the horses.

9. *agent.* The Hebrew aptly uses an Assyrian imperial administrative title, *paḥat* (compare the English "pasha," which has a shared linguistic background).

11. *Speak, pray, to your servants Aramaic.* Aramaic was the most widely shared language in the lands of the Assyrian empire east of the Jordan, and so by the late eighth century B.C.E. it had been adopted as the lingua franca. Thus, an educated Judahite court official would have been fluent in Aramaic.

do not speak Judahite. "Judahite," of course, is Hebrew. It is not explained how an Assyrian court official had a command of Hebrew.

12. *Did he not send me to these men sitting on the wall.* The verb "send" is merely implied in the Hebrew. Rabshakeh makes clear that his entire speech —itself a brilliant deployment of political rhetoric—is precisely intended for the ears of the people. His purpose is to drive a wedge between the rebellious Hezekiah and the people, convincing them that the uprising is hopeless, and that, in fact, the fate of deportation to Assyria will be a happy one.

15. *let not Hezekiah have you trust in the LORD.* Rabshakeh appears to be shifting grounds. First he claimed that it was YHWH Who sent the Assyrians against Judah (verse 10), which was a way of conveying to the people the idea that their destruction was divinely ordained and irreversible. Now he takes a different tack: no national god has ever prevailed against the great king of Assyria.

16. *Make terms with me.* The literal sense is "make a gift [or blessing] with me," but in context, as Rashi and the King James Version after him understood, the expression means to offer terms of surrender.

each man eat of his vine and each man of his fig tree. The vine and the fig tree appear in a repeated proverbial expression about peaceful and prosperous life. Eating from the vine and the fig tree and drinking well-water are a vivid antithesis to the representation of the starving besieged population eating its own excrement and drinking its own urine.

17. *a land like your land.* The catalogue of agricultural beauty that follows resembles the recurrent list of all the good things of the Land of Israel. Rabshakeh in this fashion depicts life in exile in Assyria as a new promised land.

CHAPTER 37

[1]And it happened when King Hezekiah heard, that he
rent his garments and covered himself in sackcloth and
went into the house of the LORD. [2]And he sent
Eliakim, who was appointed over the house, and
Shebnah the scribe and the elders of the priests,
covered in sackcloth, to Isaiah the prophet son of
Amos. [3]And they said to him, “Thus said Hezekiah: ‘A
day of distress and chastisement and insult in this day.

For children have come to the birth-
stool,
and there is no strength to give
birth.

[4]Perhaps the LORD will have heard the words of
Rabshakeh, whom his master the king of Assyria sent,
to defame the living God, and He will chastise for the
words that the LORD your God heard and you will
offer prayers for the remnant that still exists.’” [5]And

the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah. [6]And Isaiah said to them, “Thus shall you say to your master: Thus said the LORD: ‘Do not fear the words that you have heard, with which the flunkies of the king of Assyria reviled Me. [7]I am about to send an ill spirit into him, and he shall hear a rumor and go back to his land, and I shall make him fall by the sword in his land.’” [8]And Rabshakeh went back and found the king of Assyria battling against Libnah, for he had heard that he had journeyed on from Lachish. [9]And he heard about Tirhakah king of Cush, saying, “Look, he has sallied forth to do battle with you.” And he heard, and he sent messengers to Hezekiah, saying, [10]“Thus shall you say to Hezekiah king of Judah, ‘Let not your god in whom you trust deceive you, saying, Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. [11]Look, you yourself have heard what the kings of Assyria did to all the lands, annihilating them—and will you be saved? [12]Did the gods of the nations save them, when my fathers destroyed Gozan and Haram and Rezeph and the Edomites who are in Telassar? [13]Where is the king of Hammath, and the kings of Arpad and the king of Lair, Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivvah?’” [14]And Hezekiah took the letters from the hand of the messengers and read them, and he went up to the house of the LORD, and Hezekiah spread them

out before the LORD. [15]And Hezekiah prayed to the
LORD, saying: [16]“LORD of Armies, enthroned on the
cherubim, You alone are God of all the kingdoms of
earth. You it was made heaven and earth. [17]Bend Your
ear and listen; open, LORD, Your eyes and see; and
listen to the words of Sennacherib that he sent to insult
the living God. [18]Indeed, LORD, the king of Assyria
destroyed all the nations and their lands [19]and
consigned their gods to fire, for they are not gods but
the work of human hands, wood and stone, and they
destroyed them. [20]And now, O LORD our God, rescue
us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth
may know that You alone are the LORD our God.”
[21]And Isaiah son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah, saying,
“Thus said the LORD God of Israel: ‘Of which you
prayed to Me about Sennacherib king of Assyria, [22]this
is the word of the LORD concerning him:

She scorns you, mocks you,
the maiden, Zion’s Daughter.
She wags her head at you,
Jerusalem’s Daughter.
[23]Whom did you insult and revile,
and against whom have you lifted
your voice,

and raised your eyes up high
against Israel's Holy One?
[24]By your messengers you insulted
the Master
and thought, "With my many
chariots
I will go up to the heights of the
mountains,
the far reaches of Lebanon.
I will cut down its lofty cedars,
its choicest cypresses,
and will come to its uttermost
heights,
and the woods of its undergrowth.
[25]It is I who have dug and drunk
the waters of foreigners
and dried up with the soles of my
feet
all Egypt's rivers.
[26]Have you not heard from afar
that which I did from time of old?
I fashioned it, brought it to pass—
and fortified towns
have turned into heaps of ruins.
[27]Their inhabitants, impotent,
are shattered and put to shame,

become the grass of the field
    and green growth,
thatch on the roofs
    by the east wind blasted.”
28 And your stayings and comings and
    goings I know
    and your raging against Me.
29 Because of your raging against Me
    and your din that came up in My
        ears
I will put My hook in your nose
    and My bit between your lips,
and will turn you back on the way
    on which you came.

30 And this is the sign for you: eat aftergrowth this year,
and in the second year stubble, and in the third year
sow and harvest and plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
31 And the remnant of the house of Judah shall add root
beneath and put forth fruit above. 32 For from
Jerusalem shall come forth the surviving remnant from
Mount Zion. The LORD’s zeal shall do this.’
33 Therefore, thus said the LORD about the king of
Assyria: ‘He shall not enter this city and he shall not
shoot an arrow there, and no shield shall go before

him, nor shall he raise a siege-work against it. [34]In the way he came he shall go back, and he shall not enter this city, said the LORD. [35]And I will defend this city to rescue it, for My sake and for the sake of David My servant.'" [36]And the LORD's messenger went out and struck down in the Assyrian camp, a hundred eighty-five thousand. And when they arose early in the morning—look, they were all dead. [37]And Sennacherib king of Assyria pulled up stakes and went off and returned to Assyria and stayed in Nineveh. [38]And it happened as he was bowing down in the house of his god Nisroch, that Adrammelech and Sarezer struck him down with the sword, and they escaped to the land of Ararat. And Esharaddon his son became king in his stead.

CHAPTER 37 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *For children have come to the birth-stool.* The poetic style makes these words seem initially cryptic, but the obvious meaning is that the children about to be born cannot emerge because when the mothers come to the birth-stool, they do not have the strength to push the babies out. The delegation from the king may want to speak to the prophet in his own characteristic language by first addressing him in a line of verse. In any case, the line forcefully frames their message to Isaiah with an image of desperate impotence that represents the plight of the people. The prophet in this

narrative resembles Elijah and Elisha in being seen by others as a holy man who has the power to intercede on their behalf with God.

5. *And the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah.* Their arrival was clearly implied by the end of verse 2. Perhaps one should construe the verb as a pluperfect, though its form does not indicate that.

6. *flunkies.* The Hebrew *neʿarim*, youths or people in a subservient status, is usually represented in this translation as "lads," but its use here by Isaiah, instead of the expected *ʿavadim*, "servants," has a pejorative connotation.

7. *an ill spirit.* The Hebrew says only "a spirit," but since it induces fear followed by flight, it appears to be a troubling spirit.

he shall hear a rumor. What this might be is not spelled out. If the prophecy is to be consistent with what is reported at the end of the chapter, it would be the news that his army has been stricken with a plague.

9. *king of Cush.* Cush is Nubia, just south of Egypt and politically linked with it. Egypt was a key player in the uprising against the Assyrian imperial forces, and so it is not surprising that the Nubian king would oppose Sennacherib. The connection of this report with the siege against Jerusalem is not entirely clear. Perhaps Sennacherib is impelled to finish off Jerusalem quickly so that he can turn his forces to the south.

14. *read them . . . spread them out.* The Hebrew has a singular object for these two verbs, but the first part of the verse speaks of multiple letters.

16. *You alone are God of all the kingdoms of earth.* These words are a direct rebuttal of the arrogant words of Rabshakeh in verse 12. Hezekiah will make his rejoinder to the Assyrian boast still more explicit in verses 18–19.

18. *destroyed all the nations.* The received text has "lands," which looks like a dittography, triggered by "land" at the end of the verse. The parallel passage in 2 Kings and some Hebrew manuscripts show "nations."

22. *She scorns you, mocks you.* The "you" is of course Sennacherib. The personified Zion, scorned by Sennacherib's spokesman, has nothing but contempt for the presumptuous Assyrian king.

She wags her head at you. In biblical poetry, this is a conventional gesture of scorn.

23. *raised your eyes up high / against Israel's Holy One.* Isaiah ups the ante of denunciation: Sennacherib's presumption in declaring that he will destroy the kingdom of Judah is cast as an assault on the God of heaven and earth.

24. *I will go up to the heights of the mountains, / the far reaches of Lebanon.* Although Sennacherib's campaign did include Phoenicia, here he is besieging Jerusalem. The mountains of Lebanon, however, are the proverbial loftiest heights in biblical poetry, and *yarketey levanon*, "the far reaches of Lebanon," contains an echo of *yarketey tsafon*, "the far reaches of Tsafon," the dwelling place of the gods. Sennacherib's declaration at this point sounds rather like that of the overweening king of Babylonia brought down to Sheol in chapter 14, which may allude to the text here. The cutting down of lofty cedars also figures in chapter 14.

the woods of its undergrowth. The Hebrew *karmel* usually means "farmland," which would be anomalous on the Lebanon heights, but as Yehuda Feliks has noted, it can also mean "low shrubs." This would be the sparse vegetation in the mountaintops above the treeline.

25. *the waters of foreigners.* The Masoretic Text here says only "waters," and the translation follows the version of this line in 2 Kings 19:24. The phrase, slightly opaque, is part of Sennacherib's boast of conquest: he has seized the territories of nations and even sunk wells to exploit their water resources.

and dried up with the soles of my feet / all Egypt's rivers. This is an antithetical act to the digging of wells—Egypt, blessed by the Nile, abounds in water. Here the Assyrian king makes himself, at least through hyperbole, a divine figure with the power to dry up rivers as he treads upon them.

all Egypt's rivers. The translation reads *kol yeʾor mitsrayim* instead of the Masoretic *kol yeʾor motsar*, "all the waters of siege," which does not make much sense.

27. *thatch on the roofs / by the east wind blasted.* The speech Isaiah attributes to Sennacherib concludes with a metaphor common in biblical poetry of the nations as mere grass, blasted by the hot wind blowing from the eastern desert.

29. *your din.* The received text has *shaʾ anenekha*, "your complacent one," for which this translation reads, with several ancient versions, *sheʾ onkha*, "your din."

I will put My hook in your nose / and My bit between your lips. Sennacherib has imagined himself as a god. Now the God of Israel describes him as a dumb helpless beast to be driven where God wants.

turn you back. This is Isaiah's prophecy of Sennacherib's flight back to Assyria.

30. *eat aftergrowth this year.* The "you" now is Hezekiah, and the verb will then switch to the plural, referring to the people. Because the invading army has laid waste to the countryside, there will be no crops for two years—and yet, as a "sign," the Judahites will survive.

36. *And the LORD's messenger went out.* The parallel text in Kings begins with the phrase, "And it happened on that night."

struck down in the Assyrian camp. The lifting of the siege is a historical event, though the reason for it is uncertain. If the report is authentic, it might be because a plague swept through the Assyrian camp. But one must say that the historian in 2 Kings has a vested interest in presenting the event as a miraculous intervention, demonstrating God's commitment to protect Jerusalem (in contrast to Samaria, destroyed by an Assyrian king twenty years earlier).

38. *Adrammelech and Sarezer struck him down with the sword.* The two figures named are Sennacherib's sons. One gets the impression from the narrative report that the assassination took place directly after the emperor's return to Nineveh. In fact, Sennacherib was murdered twenty years after the military campaign of 701 B.C.E. The writer, however, wants to present this killing in the temple of a pagan god as an immediate fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (verse 7) and a prompt retribution against the boasting conqueror depicted in Isaiah's poem.

And Esharaddon his son became king in his stead. Esharaddon had been Sennacherib's chosen successor. It was evidently this choice that led Adrammelech, abetted by one of his brothers, to kill his father, hoping to seize the throne. One infers that he then discovered no support in the court

for his claim to the crown and thus was obliged to flee with his brother to Ararat in the far north.

CHAPTER 38

[1]In those days Hezekiah fell mortally ill, and Isaiah son
of Amoz the prophet came to him and said to him,
“Thus said the LORD: ‘Charge your household, for
you are about to die, and you will not live.’” [2]And
Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the
LORD. [3]And he said, “Please, O LORD, recall, pray,
that I walked before You truthfully and with a whole
heart and did what was good in Your eyes.” And
Hezekiah wept copiously. [4]And the word of the LORD
came to Isaiah, saying, [5]“Go and say to Hezekiah,
‘Thus said the LORD God of David your forefather: I
have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears. I am
about to add to your days fifteen years. [6]And from the
hand of the king of Assyria I will save you and this
city, and I will defend this city. [7]And this is the sign
for you that the LORD will do this thing which He has
spoken. [8]I am about to turn back the shadow on the
steps that has gone down on the Steps of Ahaz with
the sun ten steps backward.’” And the sun turned back
ten steps on the steps where it had come down.

[9]A writ for Hezekiah king of Judah when he fell ill
and revived from his illness.

[10]I thought, in the prime of my days I
will pass away.
To the gates of Sheol am I consigned
for the rest of my years.
[11]I thought, I will not see Yah in the
land of the living,
I will no more look on man, with
the dwellers of the world.
[12]My abode is pulled up and taken
from me
like the tent of a shepherd.
I have rolled up my life like a
weaver,
from the loom He cuts me away,
from day to night You finish
me.
[13]I cried out until morning.
Like a lion He broke all my bones,
from day to night You finish
me.
[14]Like a swallow or swift I chirp,
I moan like a dove.

My eyes are worn out looking high.
O Master, I am oppressed, be my
surety.
15What can I speak, and He has said
to me and done it?
I toss fitfully all my years
for the bitterness of my being.
16O Master, for them who will live
and all among them is my spirit's
life,
and You healed me and gave
me life.
17Why, instead of peace, it was bitter
for me, bitter,
but You held back my life
from destruction's pit.
For You flung behind Your back all
my offenses.
18For Sheol will not acclaim You,
nor will Death praise You.
Those who go down to the Pit
cannot hope for Your faithfulness.
19The living, the living, he will
acclaim you,
like me on this day.
Father will make known to sons

Your faithfulness.
[20]The LORD is here to rescue us,
and let us play music
all the days of our life
in the house of the LORD.

[21]And Isaiah said, “Let them fetch a clump of figs and smear it on the burning rash, that he may revive.”
[22]And Hezekiah said, “What is the sign that I will go up to the house of the LORD?”

CHAPTER 38 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *In those days Hezekiah fell mortally ill.* This chapter replicates 2 Kings 20, though with more extensive abridgment than in the preceding replication of Kings and with the interpolation of a psalm of supplication not in 2 Kings 20.

5. *the LORD God of David your forefather.* This epithet serves as a reminder of God’s commitment to preserve the Davidic dynasty, and Hezekiah is presented as a king who does what is right in the eyes of the LORD, like David his forefather.

6. *from the hand of the king of Assyria I will save you.* This clause could be an indication that Hezekiah’s illness preceded the siege of Jerusalem, but the inference is not entirely certain because even after the lifting of the siege, Assyria would have remained a potential threat.

7. *And this is the sign.* At this point in the text in 2 Kings, Isaiah carries out what looks like an act of folk medicine by applying a clump of figs to

Hezekiah's rash. Here that act is moved to the end of the chapter, where it appears to be out of place.

8. *I am about to turn back the shadow on the steps.* What is evidently in question is a kind of sundial, but one that is not a horizontal disk but rather a series of steps set into a wall, ten on the left side to show the shadow of the ascending sun and ten on the right side for the descending sun. A device of this sort has been found in Egypt. The King James Version and modern Hebrew understand *maʿa lot* as "degrees," but these were probably actual steps, which is what the word usually means in biblical Hebrew.

the Steps of Ahaz. The sundial in question proves to be a well-known marker in Jerusalem commissioned by King Ahaz.

9. *A writ for Hezekiah.* What follows is actually a psalm of supplication. Inserting poems from different sources was a common practice in biblical narrative or in the hands of the editors. The intention here is to give dramatic expression to the desperation of the king at death's door. While this psalm exhibits many of the formulaic features of supplications, the text that has come down to us is manifestly damaged, especially in its second half, sometimes reducing translation to guesswork, as will be duly noted at the relevant points.

10. *I will pass away.* Literally, "I will go," sometimes a euphemism for dying in biblical Hebrew.

12. *I have rolled up.* The verb *qiped* occurs only here, and so one is obliged to guess from the context what it might mean.

You finish me. The verb, derived from a root that means "whole," looks as though it should have a positive connotation, but here it has to be negative.

13. *I cried out.* The received text reads *shiviti*, "I imagined," "I depicted," but the Targum reads *shivaʿti*, "I cried out," as does this translation.

14. *I am oppressed.* The received text has an imperative, "oppress me," which does not make sense.

15. *What can I speak, and He has said to me and done it?* Each of the Hebrew words here is understandable, but how they fit together is not entirely unclear.

16. *O Master, for them who will live / and all among them is my spirit's life.* The translation frankly mirrors the stubborn unintelligibility of both these clauses, which defy reconstruction.

18. *For Sheol will not acclaim You.* The declaration in this verse and the next is one that appears with some frequency in Psalms: only the living have the capacity to praise God, and so the speaker entreats God to sustain him in the land of the living.

20. *The LORD is here to rescue us.* The Hebrew says merely "The LORD to rescue us."

let us play music. Given that the music is to be played in the house of the LORD, this would be the music accompanying the singing of psalms of thanksgiving that would recount God's beneficence in rescuing the speaker from death.

21. *Let them fetch a clump of figs.* In Kings, this act of folk healing is performed immediately after Isaiah comes to visit the ailing Hezekiah. The fact that a textual displacement has occurred is reflected in the king's asking what the sign will be in the next verse. In the present chapter, this question should have occurred just before Isaiah's response to it in verse 7, "And this is the sign for you." That is precisely the order in 2 Kings 20.

22. *that I will go up to the house of the LORD.* Hezekiah is bedridden, so what he means by this question is: what is the sign that I will recover and again be able to participate in worship at the Temple? The version in 2 Kings 20:8 in fact makes this perfectly explicit: "What is the sign that the LORD will heal me and I will go up on the third day to the house of the LORD?"

CHAPTER 39

[1]At that time Merodach-Baladan son of Baladan king
of Babylonia sent letters and a gift to Hezekiah, for he
had heard that Isaiah had fallen ill and regained
strength. [2]And Hezekiah rejoiced over the envoys and
showed them all his house of precious things, the silver
and the gold and the spices and the goodly oil and his
armory and all that was found in his treasuries. There
was nothing that Hezekiah did not show them in his
house and in all his kingdom. [3]And Isaiah the prophet
came to Hezekiah and said to him, “What did these
men say to you, and from where did they come to
you?” And Hezekiah said, “From a distant land, from
Babylonia.” [4]And he said, “What did they see in your
house?” And Hezekiah said, “All that is in my house
they saw. There was nothing that I did not show them
of my treasuries.” [5]And Isaiah said, “Listen to the
word of the LORD: [6]‘Look, a time is coming when
everything that is in your house and that your fathers
stored up till this day will be borne off to Babylonia.
Nothing will remain,’ said the LORD. [7]‘And of your

sons who will issue from you, whom you will beget, they will be taken, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylonia.'" [8]And Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good." And he thought, "For there will be peace and trust in my days."

CHAPTER 39 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *At that time.* The narrative continues to replicate the text from the Book of Kings, with some minor divergences. The name Merodach-Baladan appears as Berodan-Baladan in the parallel passage in 2 Kings 20:12–19.

king of Babylonia. The Babylonians were threatened by the Assyrian empire to the north and so would have been eager to make common cause with the kingdom of Judah.

for he had heard. The translation reproduces the version in 2 Kings 20:12. The text here reads, illogically, "and he heard."

2. *the envoys.* The received text has only "over them," and this identification is added in the translation for clarity.

6. *a time is coming when everything that is in your house . . . will be borne off to Babylonia.* This dire prophecy is presented as punishment for Hezekiah's imprudence in exposing all his treasures to the eyes of the Babylonian visitors. Many scholars think that the episode was added over a century later in an effort to explain the despoiling of Jerusalem during the reign of Johaiakim in 597 B.C.E. or in the final destruction of the city eleven years later, in 586.

7. *they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylonia.* Although *sarisim* sometimes may refer to court officials who are not necessarily castrated, one suspects that the core meaning of castration is invoked here: there could be no greater curse for a king than to have his sons turned into eunuchs, incapable of begetting offspring.

8. *The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good.* This response by Hezekiah to the grim prophecy is astonishing. On the surface, he seems to be saying to Isaiah that he accepts the word of the LORD, that it must be good because it is God's will. In the next sentence, however, he thinks to himself that what is good about it is that the disaster will not happen in his lifetime—something that in fact Isaiah has not clearly told him. This self-centered view of national catastrophe puts the virtuous Hezekiah in a somewhat questionable light. The narrative material taken from 2 Kings breaks off abruptly at this point, and the book resumes with the soaring poetry of the anonymous prophet of the Babylonian exile called by scholars Second Isaiah. The editorial placement of chapter 39 serves as a bridge to Second Isaiah because it involves a prophecy of the Babylonian conquest: after the devastating conquest and the exile of a large part of the Judahite population, the comforting words of Second Isaiah announce a glorious return from exile.

CHAPTER 40

[1]Comfort, O comfort My people,
says your God.
[2]Speak to the heart of Jerusalem
and call out to her,
for her term of service is ended,
her crime is expiated,
for she has taken from the LORD's
hand
double for all her offenses.
[3]A voice calls out in the wilderness:
Clear a way for the LORD's road,
level in the desert a highway for
our God!
[4]Every valley shall be lifted high
and every mountain brought low,
and the crooked shall be straight,
and the ridges become a valley.
[5]And the LORD's glory shall be
revealed,
and all flesh together see

that the LORD's mouth has
spoken.

6 A voice calls out, saying: "Call!"
And I said, "What shall I call?"—
All flesh is grass
and all its trust like the flowers of
the field.
7 Grass dries up, the flower fades,
for the LORD's wind has blown
upon it.
The people indeed is grass.
8 Grass dries up, the flower fades,
but the word of our God stands
forever.

9 On a high mountain go up,
O herald of Zion.
Raise your voice mightily,
raise it, do not fear.
Say to the towns of Judah:
here is your God.
10 Look, the Master LORD shall
come in power,
His arm commanding for Him.

Look, His reward is with Him,
His wages before Him.
[11]Like a shepherd He minds His
flock
in His arm He gathers lambs,
and in his lap He bears them,
leads the ewes.

[12]Who with his hand's hollow has
measured the waters,
the heavens has gauged with a
span,
and meted earth's dust with a
measure,
weighed with a scale the
mountains
and the hills with a balance?
[13]Who has gauged the LORD's spirit,
and what man told then His plan?
[14]With whom did He counsel, who
informed Him,
who taught Him the path of
justice,
taught Him knowledge

and the way of discernment
informed Him?
15 Why, nations are a drop from the
bucket,
like the balance's dust are
reckoned.
Why, the coastlands He plucks
up like dust.
16 Lebanon has not enough fuel,
and its beasts not enough for burnt
offering.
17 All the nations are as naught before
Him,
as nothing and void they are
reckoned by Him.
18 And to whom would you liken
God,
and what likeness for Him
propose?
19 The craftsman has shaped the idol,
and the smith overlays it with gold
and forges the links of silver.
20 Mulberry wood for the gift,
wood that won't rot he chooses.
A skilled craftsman he seeks for
himself

to ready an idol that will not
topple.
[21]Do you not know,
have you not heard?
Was it not told to you from the first,
have you not grasped how the
earth was founded?
[22]He is enthroned on the rim of the
earth,
and its dwellers are like
grasshoppers.
He spreads out the heavens like
gauze
and stretches them like a tent to
dwell in.
[23]He turns princes into nothing,
earth's rulers He makes as naught.
[24]Hardly planted, hardly sown,
hardly their stem rooted in earth,
When He blows on them, they
wither,
and the storm bears them off like
chaff.
[25]And to whom would you liken Me
that I be compared, says the Holy
One?

[26]Lift up your eyes on high,
and see, who created these?
He Who musters their host by number
and all of them calls by name.
Through abundant strength and mighty power,
no one lacks in the ranks.

[27]Why should you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel:
My way is hidden from the LORD,
my cause is ignored by my God?
[28]Do you not know,
have you not heard?—
an eternal God is the LORD,
Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not tire, is not weary,
His discernment cannot be fathomed.
[29]He gives vigor to the weary,
and great power to those sapped of strength.
[30]Lads may grow weary and tire,

and young men may badly
stumble.
[31]But who wait for the LORD shall
renew vigor,
shall grow new pinions like the
eagles,
shall run and shall not tire,
walk on and not be weary.

CHAPTER 40 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Comfort, O comfort My people.* The prophecies of Second Isaiah begin abruptly, with no introductory formula such as "The word of the LORD came to me, saying." If such introductory matter once existed, it would have been editorially deleted in order to encourage the perception that these prophecies are a direct continuation of what has preceded. Scholars have long puzzled over who is being addressed in the first verse. A prevalent view that it is the members of the divine council seems unlikely because there are no hints in the entire passage of a celestial setting. Others have proposed that these (the Hebrew verb is a plural) are a group of prophets exhorted to comfort Israel, but there are no such groups in the texts of the literary prophets. Groups of prophets appear only in the narrative books, where they are wandering bands of ecstatics. Perhaps it is simplest to assume that those addressed are people in general, or even the nations, enjoined to comfort Israel. In any event, the key word "comfort" at the very beginning of Second Isaiah sounds the great theme of Second Isaiah's prophecies.

2. *her term of service.* The exile is imagined as a term of indentured servitude, or even a prison sentence, which is now completed.

4. *the crooked shall be straight.* The power of this stark formulation is worth preserving literally, even though the phrase might mean "the rugged ground shall be leveled." The poet, conjuring up the expanse of arid land, abounding in ravines and ridges and rough terrain, that stretches between Babylonia and Judah, imagines a miraculous smoothing out of the ground as a great highway is laid down for the return of the exiles.

5. *all flesh together see.* This universalizing phrase might be taken as an indication that all humanity is addressed at the beginning of the prophecy.

6. *A voice calls out.* This could well be a truncated version of the divine call to the prophet to take up his mission.

trust. The Hebrew *ḥesed* here carries its sense of faithfulness or loyalty in meeting an obligation.

8. *Grass dries up, the flower fades.* The fondness of this poet for evocative repetition is evident here. In this case, it amounts to an incremental repetition, in which the increment is a strong antithesis to what has been repeated: "but the word of the LORD our God stands forever."

9. *here is your God.* God's vivid presence is manifest in the power and love with which He brings the exiles back to their land.

11. *Like a shepherd He minds His flock.* This simile makes a lovely counterpoint to the previous verse: first God shows overwhelming force ("His arm commanding for Him") and now tender solicitude as the shepherd gathering lambs in His lap.

12. *Who with his hand's hollow has measured the waters.* With this prophecy, soaring poetry becomes the vehicle to convey God's magisterial role over all creation. It is perhaps at this point, most likely in the later sixth century B.C.E., that the universalist potential of biblical monotheism is fully realized. As several commentators have noted, there is a certain affinity here with the Voice from the Whirlwind in Job 38, though one cannot assume that either poet knew the other's work.

weighed with a scale the mountains. Throughout these lines, there is a yawning gap between the paltry instruments of human measurement and the vastness of creation.

14. *With whom did He counsel.* This excludes not only puny humankind but also perhaps any traditional notion of a divine council from playing any part in creation.

15. *the balance's dust.* This strikingly picks up the imagery of measuring instruments from verse 12, pushing it further by likening humankind to the dust left on the pans of a balance after it has been used—which is to say, something that has no weight at all.

17. *as nothing and void.* The second of the two Hebrew terms, *tohu*, takes us back to the primordial chaos (*tohu wabohu*) before creation.

19. *The craftsman has shaped the idol.* This would be a woodworker carving the idol, which would then be overlaid with precious metals. The focus on the manufacturing process that produces idols vividly conveys the futility of fashioning such material images of purported deities and stands in contrast to God, Who has no likeness (verse 18).

20. *Mulberry wood.* The Hebrew *mesukan* is obscure. This translation adopts one scholarly proposal, assuming that attention to craft materials fits in with the preceding verse, but there is no consensus on this.

22. *He spreads out the heavens like gauze.* This verset and the next are reminiscent of the splendid depiction of the grandeur of the Creator in Psalm 104.

26. *He Who musters their host by number / and all of them calls by name.* This is a beautiful instance of the focusing or heightening that takes place between the first verset and the second in a line of biblical poetry: first, God musters the host of the heavens, the stars, as their supreme commander; then, going beyond what any terrestrial general could do, He is able to name each one of the vast multitude of the stars.

31. *grow new pinions like the eagles.* The phenomenon of molting and getting new feathers is here extended, probably as a deliberate hyperbole, to the growing of new wings. The Hebrew *ʾever* is clearly a poetic term for "wing," and does not mean "feather," as some translations have it.

shall run and shall not tire. God's inexhaustible nature is transferred to those who wait or hope for Him. If the prophet still has in mind his previous vision of a miraculous return to Zion, this idea here of a spectacular infusion of strength in the faithful would serve a double function: it would link up with the idea of a renewal of national strength after the crushing ordeal of the exile, and it could suggest that those marching over the long highway through the wilderness will not weary on the way.

CHAPTER 41

[1]Be still for me, you coastlands,
and let nations renew their vigor.
Let them draw near, then let them
speak.
Together let us come to trial.
[2]Who has stirred up victory from the
east
called it to His feet?
He sets down before Him nations
and holds sway over kings,
turns their sword into dust,
like driven chaff their bow.
[3]He pursues them, moves on safe and
sound,
He touches no path with His feet.
[4]Who has enacted and done it,
calling the generations from the
first?—
“I the LORD am the first,
and with the last ones it is I.”

[5]The coastlands have seen and
feared,
the ends of the earth have
trembled,
they have drawn near and have
come.
[6][Each man helps his fellow
and to his brother says, “Be
strong.”
[7]And the craftsman strengthens the
smith,
the hammer wielder—the anvil
pounder.
He says to the glue, “It is good,”
and strengthens it with nails that it
not totter.]

[8]As for you, O Israel, My servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen,
seed of Abraham My friend,
[9]whom I took up from the ends of
the earth
and called forth from its nobles
and said to you, “You are My
servant,

I have chosen you and have not
despised you.
10 Do not fear, for I am with you,
do not be frightened, for I am
your God.
I have sustained you, also have
helped you,
also have stayed you up with My
triumphant right hand.
11 Look, they shall be shamed and
disgraced,
all who are incensed against you,
they shall be as naught and shall
perish,
those who contend with you.
12 You shall seek them and shall not
find them,
those who battle with you.
They shall be as naught and as
nothing,
those who war against you.
13 For I am the LORD your God,
holding your right hand,
saying to you, Do not fear,
I am helping you.
14 Do not fear, O worm of Jacob,

men of Israel.
I am helping you, says the LORD,
and your Redeemer, Israel's Holy One.
15 Look, I have made you a threshing board
a new one, with double edges.
You shall thresh mountains and grind them to dust,
and turn hills into chaff.
16 You shall winnow them—the wind shall bear them off,
and the storm shall scatter them.
But you shall be glad in the LORD,
in Israel's Holy One you shall exult.
17 The poor and the needy seek water and there is none,
their tongues are parched with thirst.
I the LORD will answer them,
God of Israel, I will not forsake them.
18 I will open rivers on the peaks
and wellsprings in the valleys.
I will turn desert into ponds of water

and parched land into water
sources.
[19]I will put cedars in the desert,
acacia and myrtle and wild olive
tree.
I will put cypress in the wilderness,
box tree and elm together.
[20]So they may see and know
and take to heart and grasp
together,
that the hand of the LORD has done
this,
and Israel's Holy One has created
it."

[21]Bring out your case, says the
LORD,
make your brief, says Jacob's
King.
[22]Let them bring out and tell us
that which will come about,
the first things, what are they, tell,
that we may pay heed and know
the future,
what is to come make us hear.

[23]Tell the signs in advance
that we may know that you are
gods.
Do either good or evil,
that we may be frightened and
fear as well.
[24]Why, you are as naught
and your deeds are as nothing—
an abhorrence, who would
choose you?
[25]I have roused him from the north,
he has come,
from sunrise he invokes my name,
and he stomps on governors like
mud,
as a potter tramples clay.
[26]Who has told from the first that we
might know,
from beforehand that we might
say, he is right?
But none has told, none has
announced,
but none has heard Your sayings.
[27]First for Zion, here they are,
and for Jerusalem will I set a
herald.

[28]I looked but there was no man,
among them none gave counsel,
whom I could ask and have
them answer.
Their deeds are nothing,
mere wind and void their idols.

CHAPTER 41 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *and let nations renew their vigor.* This second verset is scarcely a parallel member to the first verset of this line. The general scholarly hypothesis that this is an inadvertent scribal duplication of 40:31a seems quite likely. Perhaps this was originally a triadic line, that is, "Be still for me, you coastlands," directly followed by "Let them draw near" and then "Together let us come. . . ."

come to trial. The trial, which is between advocates of the pagan gods and the one true God, runs through the chapter but will be followed explicitly in verses 21–24.

2. *Who has stirred up victory from the east.* Because of what is said in verse 4, this translation understands the reference to be to God, not to a king whom God is using as His instrument. But in all likelihood the historical event in view is the conquest of the Medes by Cyrus II in the years leading up to Persia's capture of Babylon in 539 B.C.E. That imminent victory is something this prophet would have looked forward to eagerly.

4. *calling the generations from the first.* This somewhat unusual characterization of God establishes an important theological theme for the whole prophecy: God has been present from the very beginnings of history; nations, caught up in their internecine struggles in what is no more than a fleeting historical moment, have by comparison no value or substance. Thus

God goes on to make the ringing declaration of the next line: "I the LORD am the first, / and with the last ones it is I."

6–7. *Each man helps . . . it not totter.* The evocation of the enterprise of idol manufacture in this verse and the next seems out of place, and it is plausible that these lines were scribally misplaced from 40:18–20. These verses therefore are enclosed with brackets here.

9. *whom I took up from the ends of the earth.* Abraham was called by God to make his way from his native Mesopotamia to the land of Canaan. The prophet envisages a similar trajectory for the descendants of Abraham, exiled to Mesopotamia.

10. *My triumphant right hand.* The noun *tsedeq*, which usually means "righteousness" in either the judicial sense (the just cause in court) or the ethical sense, here and in verse 2 means "triumph" or "victory." In verse 2 the term is linked with God's feet, here with His mighty arm.

12. *as naught and as nothing.* These prophecies abound in synonyms for nothingness to represent the nonentity of both nations and their gods—*ʾayin*, *ʾefes*, *tohu*, and *ʾefa* (verse 24)—although the anomalous last term may be a scribal error for *ʾefes* (in modern Hebrew, "zero").

14. *worm of Jacob.* This ostensibly insulting designation is used to represent Israel in defeat and exile as lowly and downtrodden.

15. *double edges.* The Hebrew term is commonly used to characterize a double-edged sword (a sickle-shaped sword with only one cutting edge was more common), and so this word turns the threshing board into a weapon.

17. *The poor and the needy.* This verset is too long metrically (it has five accents where the general limit is four), and so it seems likely that one of these two synonyms is a scribal interpolation.

18. *I will open rivers on the peaks.* The desert landscape envisioned here that is about to be transformed into a verdant garden is probably not the wilderness to be crossed on the return to Zion but rather the land of Judah

itself, devastated by the Babylonian conquerors and then at least partly left uncultivated because much of the population was exiled.

19. *box tree and elm.* The identification of these botanical items is a matter of guesswork.

20. *created.* The choice of verb is somewhat surprising, but "create" is probably used to suggest that the renewal of the land, after it has reverted to a state of chaos, is a kind of new creation.

21. *your brief.* The Hebrew noun derives from a root suggesting strength, so it might be taken to mean something like "strong arguments."

22. *Let them bring out and tell us / that which will come about.* What is at issue in this court case is a conflict between false, pagan prophets and the true prophets that God alone can inspire.

that we may pay heed and know the future. This is sarcastic, a jibe directed at the false prophets: if you really have the gift of prophecy, tell us what the future will be.

24. *as naught / . . . as nothing.* A more literal reading would be "from naught . . . from nothing."

25. *I have roused him from the north.* This new prophecy introduces a set of more strictly historical references. The Persian army threatening Babylonia in the sixth decade of the sixth century B.C.E. was advancing from the north, and the "he" in question is Cyrus II, the Persian emperor.

from sunrise. This could be a geographical indication, but since the east conflicts with the just mentioned north, it is perhaps used in a temporal sense: from the beginning of each day this king invokes God's name.

26. *Who has told from the first.* These lines appear to pick up the theme of the failure of pagan prophecy from verses 21–24.

27. *First for Zion, here they are.* The Hebrew is rather cryptic here and may reflect a faulty text.

28. *among them none gave counsel.* This last verse continues the theme of the impotence and the abysmal ignorance of all pagan facsimiles of prophecy.

mere wind. The use of "wind" to designate what is without body or substance is close to an anticipation of Qohelet ("herding the wind").

CHAPTER 42

[1]Look, My servant, I have stayed him up,
My chosen one, I have greatly favored.
I have set My spirit on him,
he shall bring forth justice to the nations.
[2]He shall not cry out nor raise his voice
nor let his voice be heard abroad.
[3]A shattered reed he shall not break
nor a guttering wick put out.
In truth he shall bring forth justice.
[4]He shall not gutter nor shall he be smashed
till he sets out justice on earth
and the coastlands yearn for his teaching.

[5]Thus said God, the LORD,
Creator of the heavens, He
stretches them out,
lays down the earth and its
offspring,
gives breath to the people upon it
and life-breath to those who
walk on it.
[6]I the LORD have called you in
righteousness
and held your hand,
and preserved you and made you
a covenant for peoples and a light
of the nations,
[7]to open blind eyes,
to bring out the captive from
prison,
those sitting in darkness from
dungeons.
[8]I am the LORD, that is My name,
and My glory I will not give to
another
nor My acclaim to the idols.
[9]The first things, look, they have
happened,
and the new things I do tell,

before they spring forth I
inform you.

[10]Sing to the LORD a new song,
His acclaim from the end of the
earth,
you who go down to the sea in its
fullness,
you coastlands and their dwellers.
[11]Let the desert and its towns raise
their voice,
the hamlets where Kedar dwells.
Let the dwellers of Sela sing gladly,
from the mountaintops let them
shout.
[12]Let them pay honor to the LORD,
and His acclaim in the coastlands
let them tell.
[13]The LORD sallies forth as a
warrior,
as a man of war he stirs up fury.
He raises the battle cry, even
bellows,
over His enemies He prevails.

14 “I have been silent a very long
time,
kept my peace, held Myself in
check—
like a woman in labor now I shriek,
I gasp and also pant.
15 I will wither mountains and valleys,
and all their grass will I dry up.
And I will turn rivers into islands,
and ponds will I dry up.
16 And I will lead the blind on a way
they did not know,
on paths they did not know I will
guide them.
I will turn darkness before them to
light,
and rough ground to a level plain.
These things will I do, I will not
abandon them.
17 They have fallen back, are utterly
shamed,
who trust in idols,
who say to molten images:
you are our gods.
18 O deaf ones, hear,
O blind ones, look and see.

[19]Who is as blind as My servant,
as deaf as My messenger whom I send?
Who is as blind as Meshullam,
as deaf as the servant of the LORD?
[20]You have seen much but do not watch,
opened your ears but do not hear.
[21]The LORD desires his vindication,
that He make teaching great and glorious.
[22]Yet it is a plundered and looted people,
all of them trapped in holes,
and hidden away in dungeons,
[23]subject to plunder with none who can save,
despoiled, and none says, “Give back.”
Who among you gives ear to this,
attends and heeds henceforth?
[24]Who has subjected Jacob to plunder
and Israel to despoilers?

Is it not the LORD against Whom
they offended
and did not want to walk in His
ways
and did not heed His teaching?
25 And He poured out upon them His
fury,
His wrath and the fierceness of
battle,
and it seared them all round but they
knew not,
it burned them—they did not take
it to heart.

CHAPTER 42 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *My servant.* The servant of the LORD, *ʿeved YHWH*, will become an important motif in the prophecies of Second Isaiah. Although some scholars have proposed that the reference here is to Cyrus II, it seems more likely, and more in keeping with later uses of this designation, that the servant is Israel, or perhaps an exemplary leader who will arise from the people. The idea in verses 2–3 that the servant will not raise his voice or so much as break an already shattered reed scarcely accords with Cyrus commanding a powerful conquering army.

greatly favored. The adverb is added to intimate the intensifying effect of *nafshi*, not just "I" but "my very self."

2. *raise his voice.* The Hebrew merely says raise, but this is surely elliptical for "raise his voice," a common biblical idiom.

4. *nor shall he be smashed.* This received text appears to say "nor shall he run," *welo' yaruts*, but the verb is probably mistakenly vocalized and should be read *yeirots*, "be smashed."

6. *a covenant for peoples.* Literally, this should be a "people's covenant" as the received text shows, but the phrase is a little peculiar. The Qumran Isaiah instead of the Masoretic *brit-'am* reads *brit-'olam*, "an everlasting covenant."

7. *to open blind eyes.* This is not an eschatological granting of vision to the sightless but rather the imparting of the gift of sight to those who have been plunged in the darkness of a dungeon.

to bring out the captive from prison. Here and elsewhere, prison is probably used metaphorically as an image of exile.

9. *The first things, look, they have happened, / and the new things I do tell.* Divinely inspired prophecy predicted the destruction of Zion and the consequent exile; now it will foretell a return from exile.

10. *Sing to the LORD a new song.* The beginning of this prophecy sounds like a psalm of acclamation or thanksgiving.

11. *Kedar.* These are Arab tribes whose habitat is in the desert area east of the Jordan.

Sela. This is an Edomite town, also east of the Jordan.

13. *The LORD sallies forth as a warrior.* Like a good deal of biblical poetry, this line and the next draw on an old Canaanite poetic tradition that represents warrior-gods. In the present context, the God of Israel is about to do battle on behalf of His people, routing its enemies and restoring its grandeur.

14. *I have been silent a very long time, / . . . held Myself in check.* These words answer a theological quandary that would have plagued the exiles: where is the God of Israel, why does He allow us to be reduced to this lowly state?

What God says is that He has chosen to be silent and hold back, but that moment is now past.

like a woman in labor now I shriek. This simile marks the startling transition from God's silence and self-occultation to the moment when a new era is born, with birth pangs like a human birth. The verb here, *ʾefʿeh*, appears nowhere else, and so the translation is inference from context.

16. *I will lead the blind.* It is best to understand the blindness as entirely metaphorical.

rough ground to a level plain. This picks up the image in chapter 40 of a leveled highway in the desert.

19. *Who is as blind as My servant.* Again, this looks as if the reference is to the people of Israel or to a leader of the people. The servant has been blind until now because he has not been able to see the way of the LORD.

Meshullam. There is considerable dispute about the meaning of this word. It could conceivably be a noun meaning "the complete one" or "the one who is paid." It also has some currency elsewhere as a proper name, though no identification with any Meshullam mentioned in the Bible is plausible. As a poetic parallel to "My servant" and "My messenger," it most probably is a designation of the people, perhaps linked with the place-name "Shalem," a shortened form of Jerusalem.

20. *do not hear.* The received text has a third-person verb, but it is preferable to render this as a second-person verb, in keeping with the beginning of the line.

21. *that He make teaching great and glorious.* The teaching—*torah*, or law—is God's teaching, which the now vindicated Israel will be able to promulgate.

22. *Yet it is a plundered and looted people.* Even as the prophet announces a glorious national restoration, he is aware that the present condition of the people is that of a population which has been stripped of its precious possessions and driven into exile.

24. *Who has subjected Jacob to plunder.* Lest anyone imagine that the catastrophe of defeat and exile reflects some failure on the part of God, the

prophet stresses that it is precisely God Who has brought all this about (a notion in keeping with the outlook of Deuteronomy).

they offended. The Masoretic Text has "we offended," but the rest of the verse shows a third-person plural. This is a scribal error that may have been influenced by the frequent recurrence in biblical texts of "we offended against the LORD" or "we offended against You."

25. *upon them.* The Hebrew here and in the next verse has "him," such switches from plural to singular being fairly common in biblical usage.

fury, / His wrath. The Masoretic cantillation markings put these two nouns together ("fury His wrath"), but both metrically and in regard to semantic parallelism, "His wrath" belongs at the beginning of the second verset.

it seared them all round but they knew not. There is an instructive element of shock in this image: the people is burning alive, suffering divine retribution, but it is so blind that it doesn't even realize it is on fire.

CHAPTER 43

[1]And now, thus said the LORD,
your Creator, Jacob, and your
Fashioner, Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed
you.
I have called you by name, you
are Mine.
[2]Should you pass through water, I am
with you,
and through rivers—they shall not
overwhelm you.
Should you walk through fire, you
shall not be singed,
and flames shall not burn you.
[3]For I am the LORD, your God,
Israel's Holy One, your Rescuer.
I have made Egypt your ransom,
Nubia and Saba in your stead.
[4]As you are precious in My eyes,
you are honored, and I love you.

And I put people in your stead
and nations instead of your life.
[5]Do not fear, for I am with you.
From the east I will bring your seed,
and from the west I will gather
you.
[6]I will say to the north, “Give them
up,”
and to the south, “Do not
withhold.
Bring my sons from afar
and my daughters from the end of
the earth,
[7]all who are called by My name
and for My glory I created them,
I fashioned them, yes, I made
them.”

[8]Bring out a blind people that yet has
eyes
and the deaf that yet have ears.
[9]All the nations have gathered
together,
and the peoples have assembled.
Who among them will tell this

and make us hear the first things?
Let them offer their witnesses and let them be right,
let them hear and say the truth.
[10]You are My witnesses, said the LORD,
and My servant whom I have chosen,
so that you may know and trust in Me
and understand that I am the One,
before Me no god was fashioned,
and after Me none shall be.
[11]I, I am the LORD,
and besides Me there is no rescuer.
[12]I Myself told and rescued and made it heard,
and there is no foreign god among you,
and you are My witnesses, said the LORD.
[13]From the very first day I am the One,
and none can save from My hand.
I act, and who can reverse it?

[14]Thus said the LORD,
your Redeemer, Israel's Holy One:
For your sake I have sent to Babylon
and brought down all the bars
and turned the glad song of
Chaldeans to laments.
[15]I am the LORD, your Holy One,
Israel's Creator, your King.

[16]Thus said the LORD,
Who makes a way in the sea
and a path in fierce waters,
[17]Who leads out chariot and horse to
destruction,
all the fierce forces.
They lay down to rise no more,
flickered out like a wick, were
extinguished.
[18]Do not recall the first things,
and what came before do not
consider.
[19]I am about to do a new thing,
now it will spring forth and you
shall know it.
I will make a way in the desert,

paths in the wasteland.
[20]The beast of the field shall honor
Me,
the jackals and the ostriches,
for I have put water in the desert,
rivers in the wasteland
to give drink to My people, My
chosen.
[21]The people that I fashioned for Me,
My acclaim they shall recount.

[22]But not Me did you invoke, O
Jacob,
for you are wearied of Me, O
Israel.
[23]You have not brought Me sheep for
your burnt offerings
and with your sacrifices you have
not honored Me.
I did not burden you with grain
offerings
nor weary you with frankincense.
[24]You did not buy for Me cane with
silver

nor sate me with the fat of your
sacrifices.
But you burdened Me with your
offenses,
wearied Me with your crimes.
[25]I, I wipe away your transgressions
for My sake,
and your offenses I do not recall.
[26]Help Me recall, let us join in
judgment,
you, recount it, that you be proven
right.
[27]Your first father offended,
and your spokesmen transgressed
against Me.
[28]So I profaned the sanctuary's
princes
and gave Jacob to destruction
and Israel to reviling.

CHAPTER 43 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *your Creator . . . and your Fashioner.* The prophet picks up the two terms for creation used, respectively, in the P version of the Creation story (Genesis 1–2:3), and in the J version (Genesis 2:4ff), the first, a word for creation *tout*

court, the second a more anthropomorphic term for the fashioning of clay by a potter.

2. *Should you pass through water . . . / Should you walk through fire.* This image of coming out unscathed from extreme dangers speaks to the plight of an audience that has undergone the trauma of exile and captivity. The continuing power of these words of assurance is attested by Shmuel Hanagid, the great eleventh-century Hebrew poet of Granada, who was addressed with this verse in a dream and held it close as a kind of talisman during his dangerous campaigns as commander of Granada's army.

3. *For I am the LORD, your God.* This prophecy abounds in declarations like this one of God's name and identity as the only God. These may be a deliberate echoing of God's declaration to Moses at the burning bush.

I have made Egypt your ransom, / Nubia and Saba in your stead. The people of Israel until now has been captive to Babylonia. The prophet anticipates that the conquering Cyrus will liberate them now and that these other peoples will be taken captive in their stead. This idea of one prisoner substituted for another is continued in the next verse: "I put people in your stead / and nations instead of your life."

5–6. *From the east / . . . from the west / . . . / to the north / . . . to the south.* Attempts to give these lines a set of precise historical referents are misplaced. It is true that there were diaspora communities not only in Mesopotamia to the east but also in Egypt and elsewhere. But the point of invoking the four points of the compass is the sweep of poetic hyperbole: wherever God's people have been scattered, even at "the end of the earth," He will now gather them in.

8. *blind / . . . the deaf.* The metaphorical use of these terms is consistent with their previous use (see 42:16, 18–20); their figurative sense is made explicit here by the addition of "that yet has eyes / . . . that yet have ears."

10. *I am the One.* This could also be rendered as "I am He." It is perhaps the strongest of God's declarations of His uncontested status as God because of its sheer directness and simplicity.

11. *I, I am the LORD, / and besides Me there is no rescuer.* God is said to prove His divinity by rescuing His downtrodden people.

12. *I Myself told and rescued and made it heard.* These verbs indicate a process that probably refers in the first instance to the exodus from Egypt: God first assured Moses, "I am with you" (the verb "told" here), then carried out His promise by rescuing the Israelites from Egypt, then made sure that the story of liberation would be passed on to future generations.

14. *brought down all the bars.* The meaning of the Hebrew noun *barihim* is disputed, but given the fact that exile is repeatedly represented by this prophet as imprisonment, the most likely sense is the bars that bolt the doors of a prison. Although the verbal stem *b-r-h* does mean "to flee," there is no attested use in the Bible of *bariah* as "fugitive" (a mere grammatical possibility), a sense claimed by some for the word here.

turned the glad song of Chaldeans to laments. The Masoretic Text has *ʾoniyot*, "ships," which does not make much sense, and the Chaldeans were scarcely a seafaring people. The translation revocalizes that noun as *ʾaniyot*, "laments."

16. *Who makes a way in the sea / and a path in fierce waters.* This is clearly a reference to the parting of the Sea of Reeds in Exodus 14–15. That recollection is continued in the next verse in God's leading chariot and horse to destruction.

17. *to destruction.* The Hebrew says only "leads out" (or "brings out"), but with the background of the story in Exodus, destruction is surely implied.

flickered out like a wick, were extinguished. In Exodus 15, the Egyptians sink in the water like a stone or like lead. Here the poet appears to be playing with similes, likening the sinking of the Egyptian in water to the contrasting image of a smoldering wick going out.

18. *Do not recall the first things.* Given the immediate context, these may be the events that occurred at the Sea of Reeds. Those were, it is implied, great signs and wonders, but the miracle God is about to perform is a wholly new thing.

19. *I will make a way in the desert.* The great highway in the desert that God will lay down for the return from exile is a symmetrical antithesis to the "way in the sea" (v. 16) He made for Israel in its first liberation from servitude. History is thus seen in a pattern of cyclical recurrences, with differences.

20. *The beast of the field shall honor Me.* That is, the miraculous nature of the return to Zion through the desert is to be confirmed by the fact that the very beasts of the wilderness will look in awe as God causes water sources to spring up in parched land for the sake of His people, and predators will not attack the returning exiles.

22. *But not Me did you invoke, O Jacob.* These words of castigation mark the beginning of a new prophecy.

23. *You have not brought Me sheep for your burnt offerings.* This statement would most plausibly refer to the time when the Temple was still standing. But it is an unusual reference: more characteristic of the prophets in the idea (see 1:11–15) that the people offer sacrifices mechanically while persisting in acts of turpitude.

I did not burden you with grain offerings. Grain offerings and incense would be the easiest kind of offering. God has not imposed anything burdensome on the people in requiring sacrifices, and yet they have neglected all these obligations.

24. *cane.* This is aromatic cane, *qaneh*, mentioned as an element of the incense used in the temple cult and also as one of the fragrances in the Song of Songs.

25. *I wipe away your transgressions.* This declaration of absolute remission of sins contradicts the castigation in the verses that precede and follow it. Conceivably, an editor introduced this line in an effort to mitigate the harshness of the condemnation. The contrast between "I do not recall" and the immediately following "Help me recall" might signal such an editorial effort.

27. *Your first father offended.* The reference is probably meant to be general and not to invoke Abraham: from as far back as can be recalled, your people has offended.

spokesmen. The term probably means advocates in a trial.

28. *the sanctuary's princes.* These would be the priests in the national cult. What the entire line recalls is the destruction of Jerusalem.

CHAPTER 44

[1]And now, listen, Jacob, My servant,
and Israel whom I have chosen.
[2]Thus said the LORD your Maker,
your Fashioner in the womb, Who
helps you:
Do not fear, My servant Jacob
and Jeshurun whom I have
chosen.
[3]As I pour water on thirsty land
and rivulets on dry ground,
I will pour My spirit on your seed
and My blessing on your
offspring.
[4]And they shall sprout among the
grass
like willows by brooks of water.
[5]This one shall say, “I am for the
LORD,”
and another shall call upon Jacob’s
name,

and another shall write with his hand
for the LORD
and Israel's name he shall invoke.

6 Thus said the LORD King of Israel
and its Redeemer, the LORD of
Armies.
I am the first and I am the last—
and besides Me there is no god.
7 Who is like Me? Let him call out,
let him tell it and lay it out to Me.
Who has made known from of old
the signs
and what is to come has told?
8 Do not be afraid and do not
tremble.
Have I not informed you and told?
—
And you are My witnesses.
Is there any god besides Me?
Is there any Rock? None have I
known.
9 Fashioners of idols, they are all
mere wind,

and their cherished things cannot
avail,
and their witnesses cannot see
nor know, and hence they are
shamed.
[10]Who fashioned a god and cast an
idol
to no avail?
[11]Look, all his fellow workers shall
be shamed,
and the craftsmen, they are but
men.
Let them all gather and stand,
they shall fear and all be shamed.
[12]The ironsmith with an adze
works it with coals
and with hammers fashions it
and works it with his strong arm.
Should he hunger, his strength will
fail,
should he not drink, he will grow
faint.
[13]The carpenter stretches a line,
marks the outline with a stylus,
he makes it with a plane,
marks the outline with a compass,

and makes it in the form of a man,
    human splendor to set in a temple,
[14]cutting down cedars for it,
    taking plane trees and oak,
he picks from the trees of the forest,
    plants cedar, and the rain makes it
        grow.
[15]And it turns into fuel for man,
    and he takes it and warms
        himself.
        He lights it and bakes bread and
            is sated.
He also makes a god and bows
    down,
    makes it an idol and worships it.
[16]Half of it he burns in fire,
    on half he eats meat, he roasts it,
also warms himself, saying,
    “Hurrah!
    I have warmed myself, seen the
        fire.”
[17]And the rest he makes as a god, as
    his idol.
    He worships it and bows down
and prays to it and says,
    “Save me, for you are my god.”

[18]They do not know and do not
discern,
for their eyes are plastered over
from seeing
and their hearts from
understanding.
[19]None takes to heart,
with no knowledge or discernment
to say:
“Half of it I burned in fire
and also baked bread on its coals,
I roasted meat and ate it.
And the rest as an abhorrence I
made,
a block of wood I worshipped.”
[20]He herds ashes, a mocked heart has
led him astray,
and he shall not save his life,
and he shall not say, “This is a
sham in my right hand.”

[21]Recall these, O Jacob,
and Israel, for you are My servant.
I fashioned you, you are My servant,
Israel, do not forget Me.

[22]I have wiped away your crimes like
a cloud,
and like the sky's mist your
offenses.
Turn back to Me, for I have
redeemed you.
[23]Sing gladly, O heavens, for the
LORD has done it,
shout out, you deeps of the earth.
Burst forth in glad song, you
mountains,
the forest and all trees within it,
For the LORD has redeemed Jacob,
and shall glory in Israel.
[24]Thus said the LORD your
Redeemer,
Who fashioned you in the womb:
I am the LORD, Maker of all,
stretching out the heavens, I alone,
laying down earth—who is with
Me?
[25]Overturning the omens of lies,
making fools of soothsayers,
setting sages back on their heels
and thwarting their devisings.
[26]Confirming the word of His servant

and fulfilling His messengers'
counsel.
He says to Jerusalem, "You shall be
settled,"
and to Judah's towns, "You shall
be rebuilt,
and I will raise up her ruins."
[27]He says to the Deep, "Dry up,
and your streams I will make dry."
[28]He says to Cyrus, "My shepherd!
And all I desire he shall fulfill."
He says of Jerusalem, "It shall be
rebuilt,"
and to the Temple, "Your
foundation shall be laid."

CHAPTER 44 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Jeshurun.* This is a synonym for "Israel" used only in poetic texts. Although the name appears to derive from a root that means "straight," there are scholarly debates about its etymology.

5. *write with his hand for the* LORD. The received text says merely "write his hand," but several ancient translations show a preposition. Perhaps the phrase indicates signing a pledge of loyalty, but some interpreters understand it to mean that he shall write the name of the LORD on his hand.

7. *Who is like Me?* The context gives this rhetorical question a different meaning from "Who is like You among the gods" in the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15:11. There the implication is that there are other gods but that they scarcely measure up to the God of Israel. Here, God has just emphatically declared, "I am the first and I am the last— / and besides Me there is no god." The rest of the line, beginning with "Let him call out," clearly indicates that there is none capable of calling out.

Who has made known from of old the signs. The received text here looks garbled. It reads literally: "From My placing an everlasting people and signs." This translation accepts a widely proposed emendation, reading *mashmiʿa meʿolam ʾotiyot* instead of the Masoretic *misumi ʿam-ʿolam we ʾotiyot*. The "signs" are the omens of things to come: God's divinity is demonstrated by His power to tell future events through His prophets.

8. *Is there any Rock?* "Rock" (*tsur*) is a recurrent epithet for God in Psalms, based on God's role as a stronghold for His believers.

9. *Fashioners of idols.* The lengthy polemic against the manufacturers of idols that begins with these words is a hallmark of our prophet. No other biblical writer so scathingly reduces paganism to mere absurd fetishism. In the mid-twentieth century, the Israeli Bible scholar Yehezkel Kaufman used such prophecies to argue that the Israelites were so far removed from paganism that they failed to understand that idols were conceived merely as symbols of the gods they represented. One may question that view because polemic or satire is a literary vehicle that thrives on exaggeration: the prophet, in order to show vividly that idolators worship imagined entities, not real gods, represents them absurdly carving gods out of wood, using the leftover wood for fuel, and bowing down to their wooden carvings as to gods.

12. *with an adze.* The precise identity of several of the tools mentioned in this catalogue is uncertain.

Should he hunger. That is, the craftsman fashioning the idol is palpably subject to the human weakness of hunger and thirst, and hence it is preposterous to imagine that the image he produces is a god.

13. *human splendor to set in a temple.* By itself, the phrase "human splendor" sounds rather grand, but mere human splendor sitting in a temple as though it were a god becomes a satiric barb.

14. *plants cedar.* In this instance, the satire takes the process of manufacturing idols, all the way back to the planting of the tree that will later be cut down to provide wood for the statue.

15. *bakes bread . . . / makes . . . an idol.* This pairing is virtually a zeugma, the syntactic yoking together of disparate items: the same wood from which fuel is taken to bake bread also furnishes the material for an idol.

19. *the rest as an abhorrence I made.* This is, of course, a polemic revision of the pagan's speech. The idol worshipper would never call his god an "abhorrence," but that is precisely the term, *toʿevah*, that biblical writers frequently use to designate idols.

a block of wood. The first verset uses an abstraction, "abhorrence"; now, in keeping with the general procedure of poetic parallelism, the second verset lets us know concretely what the abhorrence is.

20. He herds ashes. This is a pointed oxymoron: ashes cannot be herded, and if a wind blows on them, they fly away. The image is an anticipation of "herding the wind" in Qohelet.

22. the sky's mist. The Hebrew is simply another word for "cloud," but English has scant synonyms for "cloud," and the rare ones that come to mind (e.g., "thunderhead") are not right for this context.

23. *Sing gladly.* This entire verse, which evokes a cosmic celebration of God's glorious deeds in behalf of Israel, is reminiscent of quite a few psalms, and it is likely that the prophet-poet is remembering Psalms here.

24. *Who fashioned you in the womb / . . . stretching out the heavens.* The bold movement of the poetry here from the tight confinement of the womb to the vast expanse of the heavens beautifully conveys God's magisterial power as Creator from the smallest things to the largest.

25. *the omens of lies.* The meaning of the second term, *badim*, is in dispute, although it could derive from the root *b-d-h*, which means to falsely invent or fabricate. In any case, here as above, the incapacity of pagan sages to forecast future events (which was a Babylonian specialty) is taken as a token of the nullity of their gods.

their devisings. The literal sense is “their knowledge.”

26. *His servant / . . . His messengers.* The reference is in all likelihood to God’s prophets. Unlike the pagan soothsayers, the prophets have an authentic channel through which they can foretell future events.

28. *Cyrus.* For the first time, the Persian emperor whose armies are threatening Babylonia is mentioned by name. In the earlier prophetic poetry there are generalized references to foreign kings—those of Assyria in particular—serving as God’s instrument, the rod of His wrath, but this text introduces a new order of specificity: a momentous change in history is unfolding, with the Babylonian empire, which destroyed the kingdom of Judah, under the shadow of destruction; and the Persian Cyrus is seen as God’s shepherd, fulfilling a divine plan. The endgame of this plan is the return to Zion and the rebuilding of the Temple, invoked in the second half of this verse and in fact to be implemented by another Persian emperor, decades after the probable time of this prophecy.

CHAPTER 45

[1]Thus said the LORD to His
anointed one,
to Cyrus, whose right hand I
grasp,
to hold sway over nations,
and the loins of kings will I
loosen,
to open before him double doors,
and the gates shall not be closed.
[2]I will go before you,
and rough places I will level,
doors of bronze I will smash
and iron bolts I will hack down.
[3]And I will set before you treasures
of darkness
and hidden stores,
so that you may know that I am the
LORD
Who calls your name, the God of
Israel.

[4]For the sake of My servant Jacob
and Israel My chosen one,
I called you by name,
I named you when I had not
known you.
[5]I am the LORD and there is no
other,
besides Me there is no god.
[6]So they may know from the sun's
rising place to its setting,
that there is none beside Me,
I am the LORD and there is no
other.
[7]Fashioning light and creating
darkness,
making peace and creating evil.
I am the LORD, making all
these.
[8]O, heavens, drip down from above,
and skies, stream justice.
Let the earth open that it be fruitful
with rescue
and bring forth righteousness with
it.
I am the LORD. I created it.

[9]Woe, who disputes with his
Fashioner,
a shard from the shards of the
earth.
Shall the clay say to its Fashioner,
“What are you doing?,
and Your work has no hands.”
[10]Woe, who says to the father, “What
did you beget?,”
and to the woman, “Why do you
labor?”
[11]Thus said the LORD,
Israel’s Holy One and its
Fashioner:
The signs have inquired of Me about
My sons,
and about the work of My hands
they have charged Me.
[12]I made the earth
and the humans upon it I created.
It is I, My hands stretched out the
heavens,
and all their array I commanded.
[13]It is I who roused him in justice
and all his ways I made straight.
He it is shall rebuild My city

and release My exiles,
not for a price and not for a payment,
said the LORD of Armies.

14 This said the LORD:
The profit of Egypt and Nubia's trade
and the Sabeans, men of stature,
shall pass over to you and be yours.
They shall walk behind you, pass on in chains,
and to you they shall bow,
to you they shall pray:
"In you alone is God,
and there is none other save God."
15 Indeed, You are a God Who hides,
God of Israel, Rescuer.
16 They were shamed and also disgraced
all of them together,
they walk in disgrace,
the crafters of idols.
17 Israel is victorious through the LORD,

an everlasting victory.
You shall not be shamed and shall
not be disgraced
forever more.
[18]For thus said the LORD,
Creator of the heavens, He is
God,
Fashioner of earth and its
Maker, He founded it.
Not for nothing did He create it,
to dwell there He fashioned it.
I am the LORD and there is no
other.
[19]Not in secret have I spoken
in the place of a land of darkness.
I did not say to Jacob's seed,
"In vain have you sought Me."
I am the LORD speaking justice,
telling uprightness.

[20]Gather and come,
draw together,
survivors of nations!
Those who bear the wood of their
idols

do not know
and who pray to a god
that does not rescue.
21 Tell it and bring it forth,
even let them counsel together.
Who made this known of yore,
from of old told it?
Am I not the LORD
and there is no god beside Me,
a righteous God and a Rescuer,
there is none save Me.
22 Turn to Me and be rescued,
all you ends of earth,
for I am God and there is no
other.
23 By Myself have I sworn,
from My mouth has issued justice
a word that will not be revoked:
For to Me every knee shall bend,
every tongue shall vow.
24 But through the LORD—of Me it
was said—
victory and strength!
To Him shall they come and not be
shamed,

all who were incensed against
Him.
[25]Through the LORD shall they be
victorious and praised,
all the seed of Israel.

CHAPTER 45 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *to His anointed one.* Some readers may find it startling that a Persian emperor should be designated God's "anointed one" (*mashiah*). One should keep in mind that in the first instance this is a political title, not a theological or eschatological one. Cyrus is God's anointed because he is a king whose legitimacy is confirmed or underwritten by God and as such a ruler who will play a role God has defined for what is to happen in history.

the loins of kings will I loosen. One again can detect the common pattern of biblical poetic parallelism: first the general concept ("hold sway over nations") and then in the parallel verset a concrete image—loosening the loins would be ungirding the loins that should be girded for battle, which is to say, disabling these royal enemies.

3. *treasures of darkness / and hidden stores.* The darkness here is pragmatic, not symbolic—the treasures have been hidden or buried in deep dark places, but now they will be brought to light to be appropriated by the conquering Cyrus.

4. *For the sake of My servant Jacob.* It is, of course, a peculiarly Israel-centered view of the world that Cyrus's conquests are imagined as coming about strictly to rescue the people of Israel from its exile.

I called you by name. Here this idiom has the sense of "to summon," as in the previous verse.

when I had not known you. As a foreign ruler, Cyrus would not have had any intimate relationship (the force of "to know" in the Hebrew) with

YHWH.

7. *Fashioning . . .creating.* These are the two terms used for creation at the beginning of Genesis, respectively, in the J version (Genesis 2) and the P version (Genesis 1). The former term, *yotser*, is more concrete and, indeed, anthropomorphic, its primary reference being to the work of the potter with clay. This is a connotation that this poet repeatedly plays on, as in verse 9 below.

8. *O, heavens, drip down from above.* In this semiarid region dependent on rainfall, it is usually rain as a source of blessing that comes down from the sky in poetry, but here there is a metaphorical transformation of this primary notion: it is justice that rains down, fructifying human life.

9. *Shall the clay say to its Fashioner.* This line clearly harks back to Genesis 2, where God fashions the first human from the clay of the earth.

10. *Woe, who says to the father.* This line relates to the preceding one in a kind of *a fortiori* logic: just as it would be absurd for a person to deny that his father and mother had begotten him, it is even more preposterous that any human creature should deny that God is his Creator.

11. *The signs have inquired of Me.* It is unclear what these signs are. The Hebrew is as opaque as this translation and may reflect a defective text.

12. *I made the earth.* Just as God is the cosmic Creator, bringing into being heaven and earth, He also determines the direction of history, as the next verse will assert.

13. *It is I Who roused him in justice.* The "him" is Cyrus, who in this version is led to the conquest of Babylonia for the sole purpose of returning Israel from exile. As a matter of historical fact, the return to Zion took place eight decades after the fall of the Babylonian empire to the Persians.

14. *shall pass over to you and be yours.* "You" in this passage is feminine singular and so must refer to Zion, often represented in poetry as a woman.
to you they shall bow, / to you they shall pray. This wording may sound somewhat suspect from a monotheistic point of view. It should probably be

taken as an extravagant hyperbole—these peoples of the south will be so abjectly enslaved to the Israelites that they will prostrate themselves before them and worship them as though they were gods.

In you alone is God. These words are best understood as the speech of the captives addressed to Israel and offering an explanation for their bowing down to their captors.

15. *Indeed, You are a God Who hides.* Many scholars view this verse as an interpolation, unrelated to what precedes or follows. If there is a connection it might be this: it is hard to detect the presence or earthly manifestation of God, but He dwells (or perhaps hides) within the people of Israel, where foreigners now discern Him through His conquering power.

17. *victorious . . . / victory.* Given the context of the subjugation of foreign peoples, the root *y-sh-*ʿ—elsewhere, "rescue"—probably has its military sense.

18. *Not for nothing.* The use of *tohu* amounts to a pun. Adverbially, it can mean "for nothing," "futilely," as it clearly does in the next verse. But as a noun, it designates the primordial chaos (in this translation of *tohu wavohu*, "welter and waste") that preceded creation, so what is also being asserted is that God did not create the earth to be mere chaos or void.

20. *Those who bear the wood of their idols.* The formulation glances back to the representation of idol manufacture in chapter 44, suggesting an image of the pagans carrying the wood out of which they will fashion their idols.

22. *all you ends of earth.* As elsewhere, ʾ*afsey* ʾ*arets* is a metonymy since the object of the prophet's address is clearly the inhabitants of the ends of the earth.

23. *For to Me every knee shall bend, / every tongue shall vow.* This line would be incorporated in the *Aleinu* prayer at the end of the morning service, which affirms God's kingship over all things.

24. *of Me it was said.* There is no need to emend this clause, as has frequently been proposed. Although the verb appears to say "he said," the third-person singular is often used as the equivalent of a passive form of the verb.

To Him shall they come and not be shamed. Even though "be shamed" is very often used for a condition of being defeated, here there is an image of those who have set themselves up as God's enemies ("all who were incensed against Him") obliged to come before God and accept His admonition in shame.

25. *victorious.* The root *ts-d-q* is associated with justice because its primary sense is winning a just case in court. But the concept of winning in a conflict also leads to its use to indicate winning in battle, which would appear to be the sense here.

CHAPTER 46

[1]Bel has knelt,
Nebo has cowered.
Their images you bore aloft
become burdens for beasts and animals
loaded to exhaustion.
[2]They cowered, they knelt together,
could not free the burden,
and they themselves went into captivity.
[3]Listen to me, O house of Jacob
and all the house of Israel's remnant,
loaded heavy from birth,
burdened from the womb.
[4]And till old age it is I,
till gray hair comes I Myself will bear it.
I have made it and I will carry,
I will bear it and I will rescue.

[5]To whom would you liken Me and
make Me equal,
compare Me that I be likened?
[6]Who lavish gold from the purse
and silver weigh out on the scale,
hire a goldsmith that he make a god,
they worship it, even bow down.
[7]They carry it on shoulders, they
bear it
and set it down, it stands
unmoving in its place.
Though one cries out to it, there is
no answer,
from straits it does not rescue.

[8]Recall this and be shamed,
take it to heart, O criminals,
[9]recall the first things of yore.
For I am God, there is none other,
God, and none is like Me.
[10]Who tells from the beginning the
end,
and from old what is not yet done,
Who says, “My counsel will be
realized,

and all My desire will I do.”
[11]Who calls the bird of prey from the east,
from a distant land, the man of My counsel.
I have spoken and even will bring him,
I have fashioned it, even will do it.
[12]Hear Me, O bull-hearted,
who are distant from victory.
[13]I have brought My victory close—it is not distant,
and My triumph shall not delay.
And I will set triumph in Zion,
for Israel, my splendor.

CHAPTER 46 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Bel has knelt, / Nebo has cowered.* These are Babylonian deities, and the cowering marks the defeat of Babylonia by Persia.

Their images you bore aloft / become burdens for beasts and animals. In the defeat, the images that once were worshipped are loaded onto the backs of animals to be carried off in order to make use of any precious metals with which the idols may be overlaid.

2. *they themselves went into captivity.* This is a mocking representation of the Babylonian gods, impotent to save themselves (or their adherents), borne off

as captives like a subjugated human population.

3. *loaded heavy from birth, / burdened from the womb.* These phrases obviously pick up the image of the beasts burdened with plundered idols from the previous verse. However, it is not clear with what the house of Jacob has been burdened from the womb. God's assertion in the next verse that He will now carry the burden suggests that it is the heavy load of national suffering, most recently manifested in the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of a large part of its inhabitants.

4. *till old age.* God is with Israel from birth (verse 3) to old age.

5. *To whom would you liken Me.* These words sound a central theme of this prophet (compare 44:18ff). The verb of likening (*tedamyuni*) suggests *demut*, "image" or "likeness," which leads the poet in the following lines to evoke, as he has done before, the absurdity of manufacturing images that are then worshipped.

8. *be shamed.* The verb in the received text, *hitʾoshashu*, appears to be based on a root that suggests strength, hence the New Jewish Publication Society rendering "stand firm." But that makes no sense in the context of a castigation. This translation adapts an emendation that has been proposed by several scholars, *hitboshashu*, which involves the changing of one consonant.

take it to heart, O criminals. The denunciation appears to be a new note in these prophecies of Second Isaiah, which are predominantly prophecies of consolation. Joseph Blenkinsopp proposes that the prophet may have encountered resistance to his message and that these words reflect an element of antagonism between him and his audience.

9. *For I am God, there is none other.* The rejoinder to the doubts of the prophet's audience is an absolute theological truth: the deity in whose name the prophet speaks is the one and only God; this fundamental fact is what is entailed in "the first things of yore."

10. *Who tells from the beginning the end.* As before in these prophecies, the manifest evidence of YHWH's status as the one and only God is His proven power to predict the future through what is revealed to His true prophets. Thus God provides authorization for the authenticity of the words of His

human spokesmen. It seems likely that what the exiled audience has doubted is the grand prediction of the restoration of Zion, which the prophet here goes on to affirm will be implemented through God's chosen instrument, Cyrus.

11. *the bird of prey from the east, / from a distant land, the man of My counsel.* Persia is actually to the northeast, but the poem need not be entirely precise about points on the compass. Cyrus is the man of God's counsel in the sense that he has been designated to carry out God's counsel or plan.

12. *bull-hearted.* The sense is "stubborn," but the strong image of "bull" implicit in the Hebrew *ʾabirim* is worth retaining. The audience of exiles, refusing to believe they will be returned to their land, are "bull-hearted." God now assures them through His prophet that the moment of national triumph is imminent and not distant, as the exiles may imagine.

CHAPTER 47

[1]Go down and sit in the dust,
Virgin Daughter of Babylon.
Sit on the ground with no throne.
O Daughter of Chaldeans.
For no longer shall they call you
tender and delicate.
[2]Take up a hand mill and grind flour.
Bare your tresses, strip your train.
Bare your thigh, cross the
rivers.
[3]Your nakedness shall be bared,
your shame shall now be seen.
Vengeance will I take
and no man shall intercede.
[4]Our Redeemer, the LORD of
Armies is His name,
Israel's Holy One.
[5]Sit mute and come into the
darkness,
O Daughter of Chaldeans,

for no longer shall they call you
the mistress of kingdoms.
[6]I was furious with My people,
I profaned My estate
and gave them into your hand.
You showed them no mercy,
on the elder you made your yoke
very heavy.
[7]And you thought, “Forever shall I be
the mistress.”
You did not take these things to
heart
nor remember its outcome.
[8]And now, hear this, pampered
woman,
dwelling secure,
who says in her heart,
“It is I and none besides me.
I will not dwell a widow
and will not know bereavement.”
[9]These two shall come upon you,
in a flash, on a single day—
bereavement and widowhood
shall come upon you in full
measure
despite your many incantations

and the great power of your spells.
[10]But you trusted in your evil,
you said, “No one sees me.”
Your wisdom and your lore,
it was this that made you stray.
And you said in your heart,
“It is I and none besides me.”
[11]And evil shall come upon you,
you shall never know dawn,
and disaster shall fall upon you,
you shall not know how to ward it
off,
and ruin shall suddenly come upon
you,
with you unwitting.
[12]Stay, pray, with your spells
and with your many incantations
with which you toiled from
your youth.
Perhaps you may avail,
perhaps still tyrannize.
[13]You are disabled despite all your
counsels.
Let the sky scanners, pray, stand
and rescue you,

those who see visions in the
stars,
announcing them month after
month,
what is to come upon you.
14Look, they have become like straw,
fire burns them up,
they cannot save themselves
from the flame.
This is no coal to warm oneself,
no hearth by which to sit.
15This have they become for you,
with which you toiled,
your traders since your youth:
each man wanders on his own way,
there is no none to save you.

CHAPTER 47 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Virgin Daughter of Babylon.* Others render this as "maid of Babylon." The personification of a people or a city as a woman is widespread in the Bible, especially in poetry. The term denoting virginity is worth retaining in translation because humiliating sexual exposure will follow.

Sit on the ground with no throne. Not only is she to be forced to sit in the dust, but now we are reminded that she was formerly seated on a throne as "mistress of kingdoms" (verse 5). This dire evocation of the crushing and

stripping of Babylon is integral to this prophet's vision of the hated Babylonian empire falling to Persia.

2. *Take up a hand mill.* The once splendid queen is now to perform menial tasks.

Bare your tresses. Many interpreters insist that *tsamah* here and in the Song of Songs 4 means "veil," but Chana and Ariel Bloch have persuasively argued in their commentary on the Song that the verb used for "bare," *gali*, applies only to body parts, not to items of apparel, and *tsamah* in Song of Songs 4:1, 3 is part of a catalogue of body parts.

strip your train. Here a different verb is used, *ḥasaf*, which in fact applies to things worn.

Bare your thigh, cross the rivers. Blenkinsopp observes that she would have to hitch up her robes, thus exposing her thighs, in order to wade across rivers. The implied image is of a woman driven into exile.

3. *Your nakedness shall be bared.* This is an explicitly sexual term, referring to the pudenda.

no man shall intercede. The Masoretic Text has "I will intercede," but the appropriate third-person form of the verb with the negative is reflected in the Septuagint.

4. *Our Redeemer.* This verse may be out of place.

6. *I was furious with My people / . . . You showed them no mercy.* This verse performs a theological balancing act. God was furious with Israel and punished them by allowing the Babylonians to defeat them, but the Babylonians enacted this historical role mercilessly, tormenting Israel with a heavy yoke, treating even the aged savagely. For this, Babylonia will now suffer severe retribution.

8. *bereavement.* The Hebrew word has the special sense of being bereaved of children. If Babylonia is personified as a woman, her people are her children.

9. *despite your many incantations / and the great power of your spells.* The Babylonians were famous for their expertise in soothsaying and divination, which is attested by the many texts of divination and spell casting that have been discovered.

10. *But you trusted in your evil.* "Evil" here is probably a denigrating summarizing term for all the skills of sorcery and divination ("Your wisdom and your lore") in which Babylonia placed its trust.

11. *You shall never know dawn.* The Hebrew says "its dawn," a feminine suffix with no clear referent. This is best taken as a follow-up to "come into the darkness" (verse 5)—the disaster about to overtake Babylonia is one long night of darkness without a dawn.

12. *Stay, pray, with your spells.* This is obviously sarcastic, with the introduction of the polite particle *naʾ*, "pray," heightening the sarcasm.

13. *the sky scanners.* This translation adopts the solution for *hovrey shamayim* proposed by both the New Jewish Publication Society version and Blenkinsopp. It should be noted that the Babylonians were not only astrological diviners but also rather sophisticated astronomers.

14. *they have become like straw.* "They" here would have to refer either to the astrologers or to the lore they deploy.

This is no coal to warm oneself, / no hearth by which to sit. There is no longer any question of domesticated fire for human benefit; instead, raging flames will consume everything.

CHAPTER 48

[1]Hear this, house of Jacob,
who are called by the name of Israel
and came out from Judah's womb,
and who invoke the God of Israel
neither in truth nor in righteousness.
[2]For from the holy city they have been called
and on Israel's God they have leaned—
the LORD of Armies is His name.
[3]The first things of old have I told,
from My mouth they issued, I announced them,
of a sudden I did it and they came about.
[4]For I knew that you were hard,

and your neck was iron sinews
and your forehead brazen.
5 And I told you of old,
before it came, I announced it to you,
lest you should say, “My idol did these.
My carved and molten images ordained them.”
6 You have heard—behold it all,
and you, will you not tell?
I announced to you new things from hence
and hidden things you did not know.
7 Now are they created and not long ago,
before this day, and you have not heard.
Thus you say, “Why, I did not know them.”
8 You have never heard, you have never known,
of old, your ear was never open.
For I knew you would surely betray,

and from the womb you were
called a rebel.
[9]For My name's sake I will hold back
My wrath
and for My glory I will be
restrained toward you
so as not to cut you off.
[10]Look, I have refined you but not as
silver,
I have purged you in the forge of
affliction.
[11]For My sake, for My sake, I do it,
for how could I be profaned?
And My glory I will not give to
another.

[12]Listen to Me, O Jacob,
and Israel, whom I have called.
I am He, I am the first,
and I am the last as well.
[13]Indeed, My hand founded the
earth,
and My right hand spread out the
heavens
I summon them,

they stand together.
[14]Gather, all of you, and listen!
Who among you has told these
things?
The LORD loves him, shall do his
desire.
against Babylonia, and his arm
against the Chaldeans.
[15]I, I have spoken, even called him,
I have brought him and made his
way prosper.
[16]Draw close to me, and hear this:
Not from the first did I speak in
secret,
from when it came into being,
there I was.
And now, the Master, the LORD,
has sent me with His spirit.
[17]Thus said the LORD, your
Redeemer,
Israel's Holy One:
I am the LORD your God,
Who teaches you to avail,
guides you on the way you
should go.
[18]Had you heeded My commands,

your well-being would have been
like a river
and your bounty like the waves
of the sea.
19 And your seed beyond number like
sand
and the offspring of your loins like
its grains.
Its name before Me
would not be cut off and not be
destroyed.

20 Go out from Babylonia,
flee from the Chaldeans.
With a sound of glad song tell,
make this heard:
They have brought him out to the
end of the earth.
Say—the LORD has redeemed
His servant Jacob.
21 And they did not thirst in the
parched land where He led them.
Water from a rock He made flow
for them.

There is no well-being, said the
LORD, for the wicked.

CHAPTER 48 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *house of Jacob, / who are called by the name of Israel.* Although it is a regular procedure in poetic parallelism to use "Jacob" (the primary term) in the first verset and "Israel" (the name to which "Jacob" was changed) in the second verset, the wording here looks as if it may be a gloss on the two names. Formerly "Israel" designated the northern kingdom, but since that kingdom was destroyed, the name has been attached to the Judahites as well, who now constitute the entire people. This adoption of the national name is further explained by the third verset, "who came out from Judah's womb."

and who invoke the God of Israel / neither in truth nor in righteousness. The end of this whole two-line sentence is a barbed reversal: the people of Judah, now calling itself "Israel," invokes the God of Israel—but falsely and hypocritically.

3. *The first things of old have I told.* As earlier, YHWH's authenticity as the one overmastering God is manifested in His power to foretell what will happen in the future through His prophets.

4. *For I knew that you were hard.* The essential element of God's knowledge is His recognition of Israel's stubborn recalcitrance to live up to its covenantal obligations, which will inexorably bring about the national disasters predicted by the prophets.

7. *Now are they created.* The historical eventualities long predicted by the prophets are even now being shaped and happening.

8. *your ear was never open.* The reiterated theme of spiritual deafness and blindness is a notion that this prophet appears to have picked up from Isaiah 6.

9. *For My name's sake I will hold back My wrath.* The prophet invokes a recurrent biblical idea: that God's reputation in the world would suffer if He allowed Israel to be utterly destroyed, and for that reason He in the end spares Israel, despite its disloyalty.

10. *I have purged you in the forge of affliction.* This is the other component of God's plan for Israel: the people's treacherous behavior earns it punishment, and the punishment has a purging function, bringing the people to its senses about what it has done and leading it to change its ways.

11. *for how could I be profaned.* This whole line picks up the idea of verse 9: if God were to allow Israel to perish in exile, His name would be profaned, His glory surrendered, and so He is now prepared to intercede on behalf of his people.

14. *The* LORD *loves him.* The pronominal object of the verb here is Cyrus. It may seem extravagant to say that the LORD loves a foreign emperor, but the sense in context is that God, using Cyrus as the instrument in a divine historical plan, has chosen to give full support to Cyrus's imperial ambitions and to enable him to subdue Babylonia.

15. *even called him.* As often in biblical Hebrew, the multipurpose verb "call" has the sense of "summon," "single out for a mission."

16. *Not from the first did I speak in secret.* While there is no introductory formula, the next line of poetry makes it clear that the speaker of these words is the prophet, not God. From the moment of his dedication as prophet, he has spoken openly and plainly about what God has set out to do in history. These two lines of poetry constitute a kind of coda or closing frame to the prophecy spoken by God that begins in verse 12.

has sent me with His spirit. The Masoretic Text reads "has sent me and His spirit," emended in this translation by substituting for the initial particle w^e ("and") the particle b^e ("with" or "in"). More elaborate emendations have been proposed but seem unnecessary.

18. *bounty.* The Hebrew *tsedaqah* has at least three meanings: "righteousness," "victory," and "bounty." In the present context, the third of these seems most likely.

19. *beyond number.* This idiom, often attached to “sand,” is merely implied in the Hebrew.

20. *Go out from Babylonia.* This new prophecy makes explicit the vision of a return to Zion. That event in fact did not occur until almost a century later, and many of the exiles chose not to return.

21. *Water from a rock He made flow for them.* Though this line clearly invokes the miraculous providing of water to the Israelites in their wanderings in the wilderness, that divine intervention long ago is envisaged here as a miracle to be reenacted when the exiles make the long trek back from Babylonia to Judah.

There is no well-being, said the LORD*, for the wicked.* The logical link of this third verset to the two preceding ones is weaker, and this may well be an interpolated sentence.

CHAPTER 49

[1]Hear me, O coastlands,
and listen, faraway nations.
The LORD called me forth from the womb,
from my mother's belly He invoked my name.
[2]And He made my mouth a sharp sword,
in the shadow of His hand He hid me,
and He made me a well-honed arrow,
in His quiver He sheltered me.
[3]And he said to me, "You are My servant,
Israel, in whom I glory."
[4]And I had thought, "In vain have I toiled,
for naught, for mere breath, my strength have I sapped.

Yet my cause is with the LORD
and my wages with my God.”
[5]And now the LORD has said,
my Fashioner from the womb as a servant to Him,
to bring back Jacob to him,
and Israel shall be gathered to Him,
and I shall be honored in the eyes of the LORD
and my God shall be my strength.
[6]And He said, “It is too little a thing
that you are My servant,
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and bring back Israel’s survivors.
I shall make you a light for the nations,
that My rescue reach the end of the earth.”
[7]Thus said the LORD,
Israel’s Redeemer, its Holy One,
to the despised one, reviled by nations,
to the slave of rulers.
Kings shall see and rise,

princes, and bow down,
for the sake of the LORD, Who is faithful,
Israel's Holy One Who has chosen you.
[8]Thus said the LORD:
In an hour of favor I answered you
and on a day of rescue I aided you.
And I fashioned you and made you a people's covenant
to raise up the land,
to inherit desolate estates.
[9]Saying to the captives, Go out!
to those in darkness, Come into the open!
Along the roads they shall feed
and on all the heights—their pasture.
[10]They shall not hunger and shall not thirst,
and hot wind and sun shall not strike them
for He Who shows mercy to them shall lead them

and by springs of water guide
them.
[11]And I will make all My mountains
a road,
and My highways shall rise.
[12]Look, these shall come from afar,
and, look, these from the north
and the west,
and these from the land of
Sinim.
[13]Sing gladly, heavens,
and rejoice O earth,
shout out, O mountains, gladly.
For the LORD has comforted His
people
and shown mercy to His afflicted.
[14]Yet Zion says, “The LORD has
forsaken me,
and the Master has forgotten me.”
[15]Does a woman forget her babe,
have no mercy on the child of her
womb?
Though she forget,
I will not forget you.
[16]Why, on My palms I have inscribed
you,

your walls are before Me always.
[17]Your children hasten.
Those who ravaged you, destroyed you,
shall leave you.
[18]Lift up your eyes all around and see —
they all have gathered, have come to you.
As I live, says the LORD,
all of them like a jewel you shall wear
and tie them on like a bride.
[19]As to your ruins and your desolate places
and your ravaged land—
now you shall scarcely have room for dwellers,
and your destroyer shall go far away.
[20]Yet shall they say in your hearing,
the children of whom you were bereaved:
“The place is too crowded for me,
make me room that I may dwell.”
[21]And you shall say in your heart:

“Who gave birth for me to these,
when I was bereaved and barren,
exiled and cast aside,
and these, why, who has raised?
Why, I was left alone,
these, from where have they
come?”
[22]Thus said the LORD:
Look, I will raise My hand to the
nations,
and to the peoples I will lift My
banner,
and they shall bring your sons in
their laps,
and your daughters shall be borne
on their shoulders.
[23]And kings shall be your attendants
and princesses your wet nurses.
Face to the ground they shall bow to
you
and lick the dust of your feet.
And you shall know that I am the
LORD,
all who hope for Me shall not be
shamed.

[24]Shall prey be taken from a warrior
or captives of a tyrant be freed?
[25]For thus said the LORD:
even a warrior's captive shall be
taken away
and a tyrant's prey freed.
And with your contender will I
contend,
and your children I Myself will
rescue.
[26]And I will feed your oppressors
their own flesh,
and as with wine they shall be
drunk on their blood.
And all flesh shall know
that I am the LORD, your
Rescuer,
and your Redeemer, the strong
one of Jacob.

CHAPTER 49 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *And He made my mouth a sharp sword.* The assertion in this line and the next that the prophet's discourse is a potent weapon may be a little surprising because the chief burden of his prophesies is a message of consolation.

Perhaps, speaking in a situation of painful political powerlessness, he wants to assert that his poetry has power, even the power to devastate those who would resist it. One should note that there is a counterpoint between the first and second verset in each of these two lines: the first verset expresses the weaponlike power of the prophet's discourse, the second, his enjoyment of shelter provided by God, with the image of the quiver neatly combining shelter and weapon.

3. *You are My servant, / Israel.* The poem segues from the prophet to the people whose conscience and representative he is.

6. *I shall make you a light for the nations, / that My rescue reach the end of the earth.* The unheard-of act of bringing the exiled people of Israel back to its land is imagined as taking place in a cosmic arena: this spectacular intervention on behalf of the defeated people will be seen throughout the earth.

9. *Along the roads they shall feed.* This is a reprise of Second Isaiah's central vision of a grand journey through the wilderness back to Zion. Although in verse 11 it picks up the theme from chapter 40 of the rough terrain transformed into a level highway, the special emphasis here is on providing food and water for the returning exiles—something that would have been a practical concern for those anticipating a trek through desert-land over hundreds of miles.

12. *the land of Sinim.* Some read this as "the land Syene" (Aswan?), but the identification remains uncertain.

14. *Yet Zion says.* Zion is imagined as a woman (the verb is feminine), a common convention in biblical poetry for representing cities and countries. The poet, as we shall see, develops this feminine figure in an original way.

The LORD has forsaken me. This verb is one that would be used for a wife abandoned by her husband. The metaphor of God as husband and Israel as beloved wife is vividly articulated in Jeremiah 1; the poet here taps into this conventional trope.

15. *Does a woman forget her babe.* God assures Zion, who feels she has been rejected by Him, that His feelings for her are even stronger than those of a

mother for her child. The elaboration of the simile leaves it ambiguous as to whether Zion is God's daughter or His bride. At the same time, the invocation of a mother's attachment to her baby lays the ground for the vision of restored children in verses 17–21.

17. *Your children hasten. / Those who ravaged you . . . / shall leave you.* This is a panorama of two-way traffic. The conquerors of Zion flee as Zion's children rush back.

18. *all of them like a jewel you shall wear.* The somewhat unusual image of children worn like a jewel may be motivated by a literary allusion. Benjamin Sommer has proposed that Second Isaiah explicitly has in mind Jeremiah 2:32: "Does a virgin forget her jewels, / a bride her knotted sash?" In our text, the forgetting is transferred from jewels to children, and "jewel"—the same Hebrew word, *ʿadi*—becomes a metaphorical representation of the children. Since producing children was imagined in this culture as a woman's greatest fulfillment, it logically follows that they are her chief ornament, what she can glory in before the eyes of the world.

20. *the children of whom you were bereaved.* This is an eloquent poetic paradox: as in a fairy-tale happy ending, the children who Zion had thought were lost forever now appear before her and announce that because there are so many of them, there is scarcely room for them all to dwell in the land to which they have returned.

21. *Who gave birth for me to these.* The poignant force of Second Isaiah's poetry of consolation is beautifully felt here. Zion had thought herself bereaved of all her children and hopelessly barren, never to replace them. Now she finds them swarming around her, and she expresses her amazement in simple, almost naïve exclamation: did some mysterious surrogate mother give birth to all of these for me, "these, from where have they come?" The last sentence is still more pared down in the Hebrew: "these, where are they?" One should note that the Hebrew verb for "gave birth" is, against biology, masculine. Either the final feminine *heh* was dropped in scribal transmission, or this is an instance in which the masculine singular verb serves as a passive ("by whom were these given birth").

22. *I will raise My hand to the nations.* In Isaiah 5:26, God raises a banner to marshal the armies from the ends of the earth that will attack Judah. In the reversal here, the military signal inaugurates the return from exile, which is wholly pacific, with the sons and daughters of Zion carried in the laps and on the shoulders of the rulers of nations.

23. *attendants.* The Hebrew *ʾomen* suggests "tutor," or perhaps even a kind of glorified babysitter.

Face to the ground they shall bow to you. After the humiliation of the subjugation in exile, the prophet puts forth a grand reversal in which kings and noblewomen lick the dust at the feet of the people of Israel.

24. *tyrant.* The Masoretic Text reads *tsadiq,* "righteous man" (or according to some, "victor"), but the Qumran Isaiah as well as two ancient versions have *ʿarits*, "tyrant," and this reading is supported by the fact that the terms "warrior" and "tyrant" recur in the next line of poetry in a pointed repetition.

25. *even a warrior's captive shall be taken away.* The terms of comparison are now made to refer directly to the condition of the people of Israel: though experience tells us that no one can snatch captives from a fierce warrior or prey from a tyrant, you, who have been captives and the prey of tyrants, will be freed.

I Myself will rescue. For both verbs here ("contend" and "rescue"), the Hebrew introduces the personal pronoun "I," usually not needed for conjugated verbs, as a gesture of emphasis.

26. *And I will feed your oppressors their own flesh.* In the immediately preceding prophecy, the kings and princes of nations were reduced to nursemaids and attendants. Here, in an angrier turn of vengeful thinking, they are condemned to hideous starvation leading to cannibalism.

all flesh shall know. In a move characteristic of both biblical poetry and biblical narrative prose, a word that has just been used in one sense—"flesh" as what constitutes together with "blood" the human body—is repeated in a very different sense: "all flesh" as a designation of all humankind.

CHAPTER 50

[1]Thus said the LORD:
Where is the divorce writ of your
mother,
whom I have sent away,
or to which of My creditors did
I sell you?
Why, for your crimes you have been
sold,
and for your offenses your mother
was sent away.
[2]Why did I come and there was no
one there,
I called out and no one answered?
Is My hand too short to redeem,
and is there no power in Me to
save?
Why, when I roar, I dry up the sea,
I turn rivers into desert.
Their fish stink where there is no
water

and die on parched ground.
[3]I will clothe the heavens with
blackness
and make sackcloth their garment.

[4]The Master, the LORD, has given
me
a skilled tongue,
knowing how to proffer a word
to the weary.
Morning after morning, He rouses
my ear
to listen as do the disciples.
[5]The Master, the LORD, has opened
my ear,
for I, I did not rebel,
nor did I fall away.
[6]My back I gave to the floggers
and my cheeks to those who
plucked my beard.
My face I did not hide
from abasement and spittle.
[7]But the Master, the LORD, has
helped me,
and so I was not disgraced,

and so I set my face like flint
and knew I would not be shamed.
[8]My Vindicator is close.
Who would contend with me, let
us confront one another.
Who would be my accuser in court,
let him approach me.
[9]Why, if the Master, the LORD,
helps me,
who can declare me wrong?
Why, they all shall wear out like a
garment,
the moth shall eat them away.
[10]Who among you fears the LORD,
heeding the voice of His servant,
who has walked in darkness,
no radiance for him,
let him trust in the name of the
LORD
and lean upon his God.
[11]But all you who glow hot with fire,
girded with firebrands,
walk by the blaze of your fire
and by the firebrands you have lit.
From My hand this has come to you:
in pain shall you lie down.

CHAPTER 50 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the divorce writ of your mother, / whom I have sent away.* The trope of the people of Israel as God's bride is now extended to the alienation of Israel from God, which is represented as divorce. The wife has been "sent away" (the technical verb used for divorcing a woman) because she has misbehaved—implicitly, because she has betrayed YHWH with other lovers, other gods. As the metaphor is developed, we see that she has been not only divorced but sold into slavery, a condition that jibes with that of the subjugated exiles.

2. *Why, when I roar, I dry up the sea.* Out of context, it may appear unseemly that God should boast of His divine powers. In the present context, the point is that Israel somehow has failed to take note of God's all-powerful nature: He certainly would have been able to save them, had they been worthy of it, and He also has the power to wreak devastating destruction, turning rivers into dry desert and enveloping the bright sky with darkness.

4. *has given me / a skilled tongue.* The prophet now speaks autobiographically. He has been granted the gift of language—he is after all a fine poet, and he is surely conscious of his ability. The phrase "a skilled tongue" is literally "the disciples' tongue," that is, a tongue that has been rigorously trained. The same Hebrew word appears in conjunction with "testimony" at the end of this verse, where it has been translated as "disciples."

to proffer. The anomalous Hebrew verb is understood only by context here.

5. *for I, I did not rebel.* Having been vouchsafed revelation ("the Master, the LORD, has opened my ear"), the prophet does not shirk the burden of his mission, even if he knows that his message will encounter harsh resistance.

6. *My back I gave to the floggers.* There is a long tradition of Christian interpretation that refers this entire verse to Christ. What the prophet is speaking about is his own experience: while most of his prophetic message has been a discourse of consolation, it is easy enough to imagine that his

soaring vision of a splendid restoration to Zion would have been seen by many in his audiences as an outrageous pipe dream, an insult to their continuing plight as exiles, and some would have responded by mocking, insulting, even roughing up the prophet as he tried to address them.

plucked my beard. "Beard" is merely implied in the Hebrew by the verb used and the reference in the Hebrew to "cheeks."

7. *and so I was not disgraced.* The prophet, knowing that he speaks for God and is supported by God, does not feel really shamed even in the midst of public humiliation, and he can set his face hard as flint even as it is spat upon and his beard torn.

8. *My Vindicator is close.* The prophet now represents his suffering vilification at the hands of his audience through a legal metaphor: whoever accuses him will be found wrong in a court of law.

10. *Who among you fears the* LORD. Now, in a kind of peroration to this prophecy, the prophet turns back to his audience.

who has walked in darkness. Darkness and light are obviously archetypal images, but this prophet is especially fond of them and rings the changes on them in his poetry. This particular verset might be a deliberate allusion to Isaiah 9:1: "The people walking in darkness / have seen a great light."

radiance. The Hebrew *nogah* is strictly poetic diction and suggests something grander than mere "light," which is the English equivalent used in most previous translations.

11. *But all you who glow hot with fire.* The poet now turns around the imagery of the light 180 degrees. Instead of the radiance God provides that liberates from darkness, there are those who prefer the light generated by their own fire. Whether this is simply arrogant self-reliance or the false light of fabricated gods is not clear. But this is a destructive source of light, its burning rather than its illumination salient in the language of these lines.

CHAPTER 51

[1]Listen to me, pursuers of justice,
seekers of the LORD.
Look to the rock you were hewn from
and to the quarry from which you were cut.
[2]Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who spawned you.
For he was the one whom I summoned,
and I blessed him and made him many.
[3]For the LORD has comforted Zion,
brought comfort to all her ruins
and made her desert like Eden,
her wasteland like the garden of the LORD.
Gladness and joy are within her.
thanksgiving and the sound of song.

[4]Hearken to Me, My people,
and My nation, give ear to Me.
For teaching from Me shall go out
and My justice as a light to the
peoples.
[5]In an instant My triumph draws
near,
My rescue comes forth,
and my arm shall rule over
peoples.
The coastland shall wait for Me
and count on My strong arm.
[6]Lift up your eyes to the heavens,
and look on the earth below.
Though the heavens be scattered like
smoke,
and the earth worn out like a
garment,
and its dwellers like gnats die
out,
My rescue shall be forever,
and My triumph shall not be
shattered.
[7]Listen to Me, knowers of justice,
a people with My teaching in its
heart.

Do not be afraid of the insults of
men,
and from their mockery do not
quail.
[8]For like a garment the moth shall
consume them,
and like wool the grub shall
consume them.
But My triumph shall be forever
and My rescue for ages to come.

[9]Awake, awake, put on strength,
O arm of the LORD.
Awake as in days of yore,
ages long past.
Was it not You who hacked apart
Rahab,
who pierced the Beast of the Sea?
[10]Was it not You who dried up the
sea,
the waters of the great deep,
Who turned the sea's depths into a
road
for the redeemed to go over?

[11]And the LORD's ransomed shall
return
and come to Zion with glad song,
everlasting joy upon their heads,
gladness and joy they shall attain,
and sorrow and sighing shall
flee.

[12]I, I am He Who comforts you.
What troubles you that you should
fear man who dies
and the son of man who is no
more than grass,
[13]and you forget the LORD your
Maker,
Who stretches out the heavens and
founds the earth,
and you are in constant fear, all day
long,
of the oppressor's wrath, as he
aims to destroy?
But where is the oppressor's
wrath?
[14]He who crouches shall quickly be
freed,

and shall not die in the Pit,
and his bread shall not lack.
15 As for Me, the LORD your God,
Who treads the sea and its waves roar,
the LORD of Armies is His name.
16 I have put My word in your mouth
and in the shadow of My hand have covered you,
stretching out the heavens and founding the earth
and saying to Zion, “You are My people.”

17 Awake, awake,
rise up, Jerusalem,
you who have drunk from the hand of the LORD
the cup of His wrath,
the chalice of poison you drank to the dregs.
18 There is none to guide her
of all the sons she bore,
and none to hold her hand

of all the sons she raised.
[19]Two did I call down upon you—
who will grieve for you?—
wrack and ruin, famine and sword
how can I comfort you?
[20]Your children have fainted, are lying
at the head of every street
like an antelope in a net,
filled with the wrath of the LORD,
the rebuke of your God.
[21]Therefore, pray hear this, afflicted woman,
drunk but not from wine.
[22]Thus said your Master the LORD
and your God Who contends for His people:
Look, I have taken from your hand
the cup of poison,
the chalice of My wrath.
You shall no longer drink from it,
[23]and I will put it in the hand of your oppressors
who said to you, “Bow, that we may walk over you.”

and you made your back like the
ground,
like a street for passersby.

CHAPTER 51 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Look to the rock you were hewn from.* Although "rock" (*tsur*) in biblical poetry is often an epithet for God, the reference to Abraham and Sarah in the next verse suggests that the poet has in mind here the human forefather and foremother of the people of Israel. "Quarry" is never an epithet for God, and the fact that a rock juts up (and is a masculine Hebrew noun) while a quarry is a cavity in the ground (and a feminine Hebrew noun) further aligns the two metaphors with Abraham and Sarah respectively.

3. *like Eden.* The references of this prophecy of national restoration keep moving back in time—first to the couple who were the founders of the nation and now to the lushness of the primordial garden.

5. *In an instant.* This phrase reflects in English the Hebrew verb *ʾargiʿa*, which can mean to do something in an instant (*regaʿ*). In the Masoretic Text, this verb appears at the end of the previous verse, but it almost certainly serves here as part of a sequence of two successive verbs, the first in effect adverbially modifying the second—that is, *ʾargiʿa ʾaqriv*, "I will [do] in an instant, I will draw near."

my arm shall rule over peoples. The arm in biblical idiom is repeatedly a metaphor for power, although the use of the plural here is unusual. The Hebrew here uses a plural, but the translation avoids "arms" in order not to suggest the sense of "weapons." At the end of this verse, "arm" occurs in the singular, and the translation has added "strong" in order to convey the idiomatic sense of the Hebrew.

6. *Lift up your eyes to the heavens, / and look on the earth below.* The poem now pushes its movement back in time from the Garden of Eden to the

heavens and the earth that emerged at the very beginning of creation. Through all these eons, from Abraham and Sarah to Eden to the first moment of creation and forward to the imagined end of creation, God's beneficent power remains steadfast.

like gnats. The Hebrew *kemo-khen* appears to say "also thus," a dubious phrase before "die out" and after two strong similes ("like smoke," "like a garment") in the two preceding versets. This translation assumes a scribal error for *kemo kinim,* "like gnats."

7. *Do not be afraid of the insults of men.* These words attributed to God, spoken through the prophet, appear to assume a situation in which an embattled minority listen to the prophet and embrace his vision of a return to Zion. Others whom he may address either cynically dismiss his message as mere illusion or perhaps even show themselves ready to discard their national identity and deity and assimilate to the surrounding culture.

9. *Awake, awake.* As the feminine second-person verbs make clear, this new discourse is an apostrophe to the arm of the LORD, which, as we have seen, means His militant power.

Rahab, / . . . the Beast of the Sea. These names locate the "days of yore" in the primordial era before creation came about. The Creation myth invoked, at least for the expressive purposes of poetry, is Canaanite, although this prophet of the sixth century B.C.E. would have been several centuries removed from its active circulation. In the Canaanite myth, the weather god Baal, replaced in Hebrew poetry by YHWH, subdues a ferocious sea monster, variously called Rahab, Leviathan, Yamm, or Tanin (rendered here as "the Beast of the Sea") in order for creation to take place.

10. *Was it not You who dried up the sea.* This verse ostensibly continues the archaic Creation story (and "the sea" could also be understood as Yamm, one of the names of the Beast of the Sea). That impression is reinforced by the use of "the great deep," a designation that refers to the primordial abyss. But in the next line of poetry, that Creation myth merges, in an effect like cinematic *faux raccord*, with the drying up of the Sea of Reeds—"Who turned the sea's depths into a road / for the redeemed to go over."

11. *And the LORD's ransomed shall return.* In a second doubling of imagery with a leap forward in time, the "LORD's ransomed" at the Sea of Reeds are

turned into a precursor for the people of the prophet's own time who are about to be ransomed from captivity and led not between walls of water but over desert terrain in the return to Zion.

13. *the oppressor's wrath.* While many scholarly attempts have been made to identify a specific historical oppressor, it is prudent to read this as a generalized reference to the oppression of the Babylonian exile.

14. *He who crouches shall quickly be freed.* The translation of this verse is somewhat conjectural, and the meaning of the initial verb is especially doubtful. The general sense, however, of someone—surely the people of Israel—suffering subjugation who is now to be liberated seems clear.

15. *Who treads the sea.* The Masoretic Text has as the verb here *rogaʿ*, but despite the contention of some scholars that this means "stir up," it actually means the opposite, "to quiet" or "to be subdued," (compare the occurrence of precisely this phrase in Job 25:12). The present translation reads instead *roqaʿ*, "to tread or stomp."

16. *stretching out the heavens.* The received text shows *lintoʿa*, "to plant," but this is surely a mistake for *lintot*, "to stretch out."

17. *the chalice of poison.* The usual translation of the term *tarʿeilah* is "reeling" or "staggering" but it is more plausibly related to *raʿal*, which definitely means "poison" in postbiblical Hebrew, as it may also do in Zechariah 12:2. This understanding is supported by the fact that the word for "wrath" in "the cup of His wrath" also means "venom." The Hebrew for "chalice" is two words, literally, "the cup of the chalice," and some think "cup" is a gloss on the rare word for chalice, *qubaʿat*, but joining two synonyms in a construct form is elsewhere a means to intensify or heighten the sense of the noun, and that may be the case here.

20. *like an antelope in a net.* The identity of the beast is uncertain.

22. *the cup of poison, / the chalice of My wrath.* In an elegant reversal of terms, "cup" is now linked with "poison" and "chalice" with "My wrath," whereas in verse 17 it is the other way around.

23. *and you made your back like the ground, / like a street for passersby.* The second and third verset of this line vividly illustrate the impulse in biblical poetry to concretize semantic material introduced in the first verset as the line unfolds: first the oppressors command their victors to prostrate themselves so that they can step on them; then we get the concrete—and painful—image of the backs of the victims turned into a roadway upon which passersby tread.

CHAPTER 52

[1]Awake, awake,
don your strength, O Zion.
Don the garments of your glory,
O Jerusalem, holy city.
For no longer shall they enter you,
the uncircumcised
and the unclean.
[2]Shake yourself from the dust, arise,
sit on your throne, O Jerusalem.
Loose the bonds round your neck,
captive Daughter of Zion.

[3]For thus said the LORD: For nothing were you sold and for no silver shall you be redeemed. [4]For thus said the Master LORD: To Egypt My people at first went down to sojourn there, and then Assyria oppressed them for no payment. [5]And now, what do I have here, says the LORD, for My people was taken for nothing. Those who ruled them howled, said the LORD, and constantly all day long was My name reviled.

[6]Therefore shall My people know My name. Therefore
shall they know on that day that it is I Who speak to
them.

[7]How lovely on the mountains
the steps of the bearer of good
tidings,
announcing peace, heralding good
things,
announcing triumph,
saying to Zion: Your God
reigns.
[8]Hark! Your watchmen raise their
voice,
together they sing gladly.
For with their very eyes they shall
see
when the LORD comes back to
Zion.
[9]Burst out in song, sing gladly
together,
O ruins of Jerusalem,
for the LORD has comforted His
people,
He has redeemed Jerusalem.

[10]The LORD had bared His holy arm
to the eyes of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth have
seen
the triumph of our God.

[11]Turn aside, turn aside, come out
from there,
no unclean thing do touch.
Come out from its midst,
bearers of the LORD's vessels.
[12]For not in haste shall you come out,
nor in flight shall you go,
for the LORD goes before you,
and your rearguard is Israel's God.

[13]Look, My servant shall prosper,
be lofty, exalted, and very high.
[14]As many were appalled by him,
so marred beyond human his
looks
and his features unlike
humankind's,
[15]so he shall astound many nations,

kings shall seal their lips because
of him,
for what was never told them they
shall see,
and what they never heard they
shall behold.

CHAPTER 52 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Awake, awake.* This unit of text includes two prophecies, this one at the beginning and another near the end, that begin with a twice-repeated imperative verb in the second-person feminine singular addressed to Zion (the other is "Turn aside, turn aside," verse 11ff.). The repetitions are dictated by a powerful impulse of exhortation: Zion, long sunk in the dust and plunged in captivity, is urged to forget her sorrows and bestir herself to embrace her triumphant restoration.

2. *sit on your throne.* The Masoretic Text says only "Sit, O Jerusalem." The transition follows the Targum, which adds "on your throne," two Hebrew words that in all likelihood were dropped in a scribal error.

3. *For nothing were you sold.* You were sold into slavery (this is the verb generally used for enslavement), but nobody paid a price for you—your captors simply took you into slavery. Enslavement here amounts to a hyperbole because the exiled Judahites were not necessarily enslaved, or, in any case, surely not all of them.

4. *To Egypt . . . then Assyria.* There is, then, a history of being subject to slavery that goes back to the beginnings of the nation: first Egypt, then Assyria (which "enslaved" the northern kingdom), and now Babylonia.

5. *howled.* The Hebrew verb suggests a kind of derisive yelp.

6. *shall they know on that day.* The repetition of the verb "know" either has been scribally omitted or is meant to be implied.

7. *How lovely on the mountains / the steps of the bearer of good tidings.* The poet makes a boldly poignant choice in using "lovely," the same word that is attached to the beautiful features of the beloved in the Song of Songs, for this is surprising in a reference to the feet of a messenger. The focus on the feet is because the messenger is running across the mountains to bring the good tidings.

8. *Your watchmen.* This probably continues the idea of the preceding verse—the watchmen, no doubt stationed on towers, see from afar the approach of the bearer of good tidings.

10. *and all the ends of the earth have seen / the triumph of our God.* As before, the return to Zion is imagined as an event enacted in a global theater, the restoration of an exiled people to its land being, at least as the prophet sees it, an unprecedented historical event that manifests God's power.

11. *come out from there.* "There" has to be the condition of exile.

12. *for the LORD goes before you, / and your rearguard is Israel's God.* This is a purposeful paradox: as you march back to Zion, God both leads the way as vanguard and protects you from behind as rearguard.

14. *so marred beyond human his looks / and his features unlike humankind's.* This whole line vividly demonstrates the power of personification and hyperbole. Collective Israel is imagined as a person. In point of historical fact, the exiles, undergoing a fate that was by no means unprecedented, would scarcely have been perceived as having lost their humanity. In the poetic hyperbole, personified Israel, deprived of sovereignty, homeland, and place of worship, is envisaged as someone so degraded, humiliated, and abused by his condition in history that those who see him are appalled and can scarcely recognize a human form in this disfigured person.

15. *he shall astound many nations.* This is another instance in which the verb is anomalous, and so the translation is based on context.

kings shall seal their lips. The literal sense of the Hebrew is “kings shall purse their mouths closed.”

CHAPTER 53

[1]Who could believe what we heard,
and to whom was the LORD's
arm revealed?
[2]He sprung up like a shoot before
Him
and like a root from parched land.
He had no features nor decent
appearance—
we saw nothing in his looks that
we might desire.
[3]Despised and shunned by people,
a man of sorrows and visited by
illness.
And like one from whom the gaze is
averted,
despised, and we reckoned him
naught.
[4]Indeed, he has borne our illness,
and our sorrows he has carried.
But we had reckoned him plagued,

God-stricken and tormented.
[5]Yet he was wounded for our crimes,
crushed for our transgressions.
The chastisement that restored our
well-being he bore,
and through his bruising we were
healed.
[6]All of us strayed like sheep,
each turned to his own way,
and the LORD brought down upon
him
the crimes of all of us.
[7]Afflicted and tormented,
he opened not his mouth.
Like a lamb led to the slaughter
and like an ewe mute before her
shearers
he opened not his mouth.
[8]By oppressive judgment he was
taken off,
and who can speak of where he
lives?
For he was cut off from the land of
the living
for My people's crime, bearing
their blight.

[9]And his grave was put with the
wicked,
and with evildoers his death,
for no outrage he had done
and no deceit in his mouth.
[10]And the LORD desired to crush
him, make him ill.
Would he lay down a guilt
offering,
he would see his seed, have
length of days,
and the LORD's desire would
prosper through him,
[11]from his toil he would see light,
be sated in his mind.
My servant shall put the righteous in
the right for many,
and their crimes he shall bear.
[12]Therefore I will give him shares
among the many,
and with the mighty he shall share
out spoils,
for he laid himself bare to death
and was counted among the
wrongdoers,

and it is he who bore the offense of
many
and interceded for the
wrongdoers.

CHAPTER 53 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *He sprung up like a shoot before Him.* This crucial prophecy carries over the representation of the Servant of the LORD in the third person that began with the last three verses of the previous chapter. Earlier, the Servant spoke of himself in the first person.

like a root from parched land. The objection that roots don't grow in parched land fails to see the context of the poetry. The point is that the Servant managed to flourish and carry out his prophetic mission in the most unpromising circumstances, addressing a hostile audience in the bleak condition of exile.

3. *Despised and shunned by people, / a man of sorrows and visited by illness.* Famously, these words and what follows were embraced by Christian interpreters from the formative period of Christianity onward as a prophecy of the Passion narrative and the Crucifixion. The emphasis on the Servant's bearing the sins of the people and becoming a kind of sacrificial lamb seemed especially relevant to the idea of Christ's dying for the sins of humankind. Illness, however, is not part of the story of Jesus. Virtually no serious scholars today see this as a prediction of the Passion, but it certainly provided a theological template for interpreting the death of Jesus. Debate persists about the identity of the Servant. A recurrent Jewish view sees him as a representation of collective Israel, but the details of the passage argue for the biography of an individual, and already in the Middle Ages Abraham ibn Ezra proposed that the Servant was the prophet himself. The speaker, then, would be one of the prophet's disciples, as Blenkinsopp suggests, eulogizing him

after his death (see verse 8) on behalf of himself but also of a group of disciples (the "we" that is invoked here).

6. *and the LORD brought down upon him / the crimes of all of us.* This reiterated idea, which later would nourish the central Christian story, is the solution to a psychological dilemma on the part of the speaker. He sees the Servant as a devoted and true prophet of God, yet the Servant has suffered unspeakably—plagued with illness, somehow physically disfigured, reviled and rejected by society, and finally condemned to an early death. The explanation for all this unwarranted suffering is that the Servant has acted as a surrogate for the people, taken upon himself the burden of the people's crimes. Thus, in a culture in which misfortune and sickness were usually seen as manifestations of divine punishment for wrongdoing (the view of Job's comforters), the wrongdoing is transferred to the people, and the righteousness of the prophet is actually confirmed by his suffering.

8. *By oppressive judgment he was taken off.* Textual obscurities begin to proliferate. "By oppressive judgment" is a somewhat conjectural translation, although "was taken off" probably refers to death. The translation of the second verse of this line is also by no means certain.

bearing their blight. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "a blight for them," and "bearing" has been added as an interpretive guess.

9. *and with evildoers his death.* The received text has "and with a rich man" (*ʿashir*), which makes no sense either thematically or as a poetic parallelism. The translation is based on an emendation to *ʿosey raʿ*. The word for "death" is an odd-looking plural form, but a proposed emendation from *bemotow* to *bamotow* is dubious because there is scant evidence that the latter term ever means "sepulchers," as scholars have claimed. In any case, the point of the line is that he was given a disgraceful burial.

10. *Would he lay down a guilt offering.* Again, the Hebrew is crabbed and the translation conjectural. It is also puzzling that after the Servant has been reported dead and buried, and a surrogate for Israel's sins, this conditional possibility of a long and happy life should be offered. Could this verse be a textual intrusion?

11. *see light.* There is no “light” in the Masoretic Text, but it appears both in the Qumran Isaiah and in the Septuagint.

be sated in his mind. The meaning of the two Hebrew words here is obscure.

My servant. The perspective now shifts, and it is God, not the disciple, who is speaking, but the idea that the Servant has borne the sins of the many is continued.

12. *Therefore I will give him shares among the many.* This is another somewhat perplexing declaration because the Servant is dead, and “he laid himself bare to death” appears to be a reiteration of that fact. Perhaps the reference is to a posthumous restoration of his reputation and to a posthumous acceptance of his prophecy by the many, though it is just conceivable that the words refer to reward in the afterlife. That was not an available alternative in previous biblical literature, but the beginnings of such an idea might be emerging at this late moment, as the polemic against it in Job and Qohelet appears to attest.

CHAPTER 54

[1]Sing gladly, O barren one who has
not given birth,
burst out in glad song, exult, who
has not been in labor,
for the desolate one's children
number more
than the children of the one with a
husband.
[2]Spread wide the place of your tent,
and let the curtains of your
dwelling stretch out—
do not stint.
Lengthen your cords
and strengthen your tent pegs.
[3]For to the north and the south you
shall burst forth,
and your seed shall take hold of
nations
and shall settle desolate towns.

[4]Do not fear, for you shall not be
shamed,
and you shall not be disgraced, for
you shall not be dishonored.
For the shame of your youth you
shall forget,
and the dishonor of your
widowhood you shall no longer
recall.
[5]For he who takes you to bed is your
Maker,
the LORD of Armies is His
name,
and your redeemer is Israel's Holy
One,
God of all the earth He is called.
[6]"For as a forsaken woman
and pained in spirit the LORD
called you
and a wife of one's youth who is
spurned,"
said your God.
[7]"In a brief moment I forsook you
but with great compassion will I
gather you in.

[8]In surge of fury I hid My face from
you,
but with everlasting kindness I
have compassion for you,”
said your redeemer, the LORD.
[9]“For as Noah’s waters is this to Me,
as I vowed not to let Noah’s
waters go over the earth again,
so have I vowed
not to be furious with you nor to
rebuke you.
[10]For though the mountains move
and the hills totter,
My kindness shall not move from
you
nor My pact of peace totter,”
said He Who has compassion
for you, the LORD.

[11]Afflicted, storm-tossed woman,
uncomforted,
I am about to lay your stones with
turquoise.
And I will set your foundations with
sapphires

[12]and make your battlements
rubies
and your gates of beryl
and all your walls of precious
stones.
[13]And all your children—disciples of
the LORD,
and great the well-being of your
children.
[14]In righteousness shall you be firm-
founded.
Keep far from oppression that you
need not fear
and from terror that it not draw
near you.
[15]Why, none shall strike fear if it is
not from Me,
who would strike fear in you,
before you shall fail.
[16]Why, it is I Who created the smith,
who fans the charcoal fire
and makes the weapons for his deeds
—
but it is I Who created the
Destroyer to wreak havoc.

[17]Any weapon fashioned against you
shall fail,
any tongue that contends with you
in court you shall show wrong.
This is the estate of the LORD's
servants,
and their triumph through Me,
says the LORD.

CHAPTER 54 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Sing gladly.* Although the natural association of song and joy is virtually idiomatic in biblical poetry, this prophet's repeated emphasis on song implicitly points to his own use of the medium of poetry to conjure up a joyous vision of the people restored to its land.

the one with a husband. The passive form *beʿulah* designates a woman who has a husband, *baʿal*, but it also has a sexual connotation because the active verb showing this root means "to cohabit," "to possess sexually." Thus, the *beʿulah* is the woman who has a bedmate, unlike "the desolate one." Compare verse 5, where the active verbal form *boʿalayikh* is translated as "he who takes you to bed."

2. *your tent.* While the actual habitations would of course have been stone houses, poetry, with its intrinsic attachment to archaic language, invokes the tent as the archetypal dwelling.

4. *the shame of your youth . . . / the dishonor of your widowhood.* As is often the case in biblical poetry, there is an implied temporal progression from the first verset to the second. First, Israel was a young bride who shamefully betrayed her husband. As a result, the bitter fate of widowhood was inflicted

on her (God was "dead" to Israel), a condition that in this society was a humiliation because the woman was left without the sustaining support of the husband.

5. *he who takes you to bed . . . / your redeemer.* The widow again has a husband, who provides the "desolate one" with the gratification a woman needs. The parallel term "redeemer" is used here less in a theological sense than in a social one—the "redeemer," *goʾel*, is the man who marries the widow, thus redeeming her from her condition of abandonment. The Book of Ruth uses *goʾel* precisely in this sense.

8. *with everlasting kindness.* The Hebrew noun *ḥesed* is a nexus of several related meanings. It can mean "kindness" or, as some render it, "love" (and the King James Version joins the two with "loving kindness"). It also suggests the "loyalty" or "faithfulness" of one party to another in a covenantal or conjugal relationship, and that sense is also obviously in play here. The connotation of "faithfulness" may be especially strong when "kindness" is used again in verse 10.

11. *I am about to lay your stones with turquoise.* Although this new prophecy begins with "Afflicted, storm-tossed woman," the focus of the vision of national restoration now shifts from the widowed and/or childless wife to the buildings of the city. The resplendent restored Jerusalem is to be built not out of stones but with precious jewels. The reader should be alerted that the precise identification of most of these precious stones, as elsewhere in the Bible, is uncertain. The dazzling bejeweled Jerusalem is obviously a poetic hyperbole, but it lays the ground for eschatological imaginings of Jerusalem as the glorious City of God.

15. *none shall strike fear if it is not from Me.* The Hebrew syntax is ambiguous, and the verb *gor* is anomalous, though it probably is related to the more familiar noun, *magor*, "terror," as this translation assumes.

16. *the weapons.* The all-purpose *keli* can also mean vessel, tool, or gear, but it is used in the very next verse in the sense of "weapon," and that is probably what it means here as well.

the Destroyer to wreak havoc. The "Destroyer" would be the mythological agent who stalks through the land of Egypt in the terrible tenth plague, killing

the firstborn. The intended relation of this verset to the preceding one is oppositional: man—himself created by God—forges his weapons in the workshop of the metalsmith, but God has the power to create a Destroyer who has an incomparably more devastating instrument of destruction. The image of God defending Israel with insuperable force complements the image of the jewel-studded Zion that precedes it: God promises to rebuild Jerusalem as a city of supernal splendor, and He then guarantees that no enemy will be able to assail the city.

CHAPTER 55

[1]Oh, every one who thirsts go to the
water,
and who has no silver,
buy food and eat.
Go and buy food without silver
and at no cost, wine and milk.
[2]Why should you weigh out silver for
what is not bread
and your substance for what does
not sate?
Listen well to Me and eat goodly
things,
and you shall enjoy lavish fare.
[3]Bend your ear and come to Me,
listen and be revived,
and I will make with you a perpetual
pact,
the faithful kindness shown to
David.

[4]Look, I made him witness to the
peoples,
prince and commander of the
peoples.
[5]Look, to a nation you knew not you
shall call,
and a nation that did not know
you shall run to you,
for the sake of the LORD your God
and Israel's Holy One, for He
made you glorious.
[6]Seek the LORD where He is found,
call to Him where He is near.
[7]Let the wicked forsake his way
and a wrongdoing man his
devisings
and turn back to the LORD, and He
will show mercy to him;
and to his God, for He abundantly
pardons.
[8]For My devisings are not your
devisings
and your ways are not My ways,
says the LORD.
[9]For as the heavens are high over
earth,

so My ways are high over your
ways
and My devisings over your
devisings.
10For as the rain comes down upon
earth
and the snow from the heavens,
and there it does not return
but waters the earth
and brings forth growing things
and gives seed for the sower and
bread to eat,
11so is My word that comes out of
My mouth,
it does not return empty to Me
but does what I desire,
and makes prosper what I have
sent.
12For in joy shall you go out,
and in peace you shall be led.
The mountains and hills shall burst
forth in glad song before you,
and all the trees of the field shall
clap their hands.
13Instead of the thornbush a cypress
shall grow.

Instead of the nettle a myrtle shall
grow.
And it shall be a testimony for the
LORD,
a perpetual sign that shall not be
cut off.

CHAPTER 55 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Go and buy food without silver.* The water, food, milk, and wine are all metaphorical. What the metaphors suggest is that God's beneficence to His people will be unstinting and freely given with no price exacted for it. The Hebrew *kesef* is translated as "silver," not "money" as in other versions, because coins were not yet in general usage, and the use of the verb "weigh out" for "silver" in the next verse clearly indicates that what is imagined is silver weights. There is some question about the relation of this chapter to the fifteen preceding chapters of Second Isaiah. Joseph Blenkinsopp thinks that it is by a different hand and that it is intended as a bridge to the rest of the book, which, at least according to scholarly consensus, is the work of still another prophet. The evidence, however, is somewhat tenuous: the supposed stylistic differences of this chapter from the earlier ones are by no means clear-cut, and the claimed affinities with the Book of Proverbs are debatable.

3. *the faithful kindness shown to David.* The Hebrew says merely "the faithful kindness of David," but the clear sense is the faithful kindness, or staunch commitment to the divine promise, that God has shown to David. The poet is not necessarily speaking of a revival of the Davidic dynasty but is invoking God's commitment to David and his descendants as a model for how He remains committed to His exiled people.

4. *witness to the peoples, / prince and commander of the peoples.* This would have to be a reference to David's military dominance, his success in establishing a mini-empire (which biblical writers tend to exaggerate). As David was once a triumphant leader of the nation, Israel will again be triumphant. That notion is perfectly in keeping with the previous prophecies of a restored Israel to which kings and princes will be subservient. This idea is continued in the next verse, where nations from afar run to do Israel's bidding.

6. *Seek the* LORD *where He is found.* That is, you may have imagined that God was distant, hiding His face from you, but He is there close by, if only you seek Him.

10. *For as the rain comes down upon earth / and the snow from the heavens.* The metaphor elaborated in this verse and then carried on to its referent in the next implies two ideas at once: just as the rain and snow cannot be turned back to the sky from which they come, God's pronouncements, once issued, cannot be reversed; but the rain and the snow fructify the earth, irrigating it so that it can yield life-sustaining produce, and in this prophecy of restoration, the word God issues is a word of bountifulness, with an effect like the rains of blessing, making things "prosper."

12. *For in joy shall you go out.* The going out clearly refers to going out from exile. This entire verse, with the mountains and hills bursting forth in song, as well as the initial poetic line of the next verse, is quite in keeping with earlier prophecies by Second Isaiah of a jubilant return to Zion.

13. *a testimony for the* LORD. The literal meaning of the noun used here is "name." The idea is that Israel's grand restoration will be a visible manifestation to all the nations of God's power and His loyalty to Israel.

a perpetual sign that shall not be cut off. Once the people of Israel is again firmly established in Zion, there will be no further threats to the well-being of the nation, and this very continuity will bear lasting witness to God's greatness.

CHAPTER 56

[1]Thus said the LORD:
Keep justice and do righteousness,
for My rescue is soon to come
and My triumph to be revealed.
[2]Happy the man who does this
and the son of man who holds fast
to it,
keeping the sabbath, not profaning it
and keeping his hand from doing
all evil.
[3]And let not the foreigner say,
who joins the LORD, saying,
“The LORD has kept me apart from
His people,”
nor let the eunuch say, “Why, I
am a withered tree.”
[4]For thus said the LORD:
Of the eunuchs who keep My
sabbath,
and choose what I desire

and hold fast to My covenant,
[5]I will give them in My house and
within My walls
a marker and a name better than
sons and daughters,
an everlasting name will I give
them that shall not be cut off.
[6]And the foreigners who join the
LORD
to serve Him and to love the
LORD's name,
to become servants to Him,
all who keep the sabbath, not
profaning it
and hold fast to My covenant,
[7]I will bring them to My holy
mountain
and give them joy in My house of
prayer.
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices
shall be welcome on My altar.
For My house a house of prayer
shall be called for all the peoples.
[8]Thus said the Master the LORD,
Who gathers Israel's dispersed:

Still more will I gather for him
besides those gathered.

[9]All beasts of the field, come to
devour,
all beasts of the forest.
[10]His watchmen are all of them
blind,
they do not know.
All of them are mute dogs
who know not how to bark.
Dazed, they lie about,
lovers of slumber.
[11]But the dogs are fierce in appetite,
they are never sated,
and they are the shepherds
who know not understanding.
They all turn to their own ways,
to their own gain, each and all.
[12]"Come, let me take wine,
and let us swill strong drink.
And it will be like this tomorrow,
even still more than this."

CHAPTER 56 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Keep justice and do righteousness.* This moral exhortation, coupled with the urging to observe the sabbath in the next verse, strikes a new note in the Isaiah collection, one that some commentators have characterized as "sermonic." It is the strong consensus of biblical scholarship, with only a few dissenters, that Isaiah 56–66 is a later composition than Isaiah 40–55, and almost certainly the work of more than one prophet. The frequent allusions to the imminent Persian conquest of Babylonia in chapters 40–55 enable us to date it, or at least much of it, to the time just before the conquest in 539 B.C.E. The situation presupposed in chapters 56–66 is of the exiles already returned to their homeland—there are no further prophecies of the people triumphantly crossing the desert to Zion, and the issues engaged are the behavior of the people in their land and the nature of the community they constitute. The probable period for these prophecies is the early decades of the fifth century B.C.E., before the arrival from Babylonia of Ezra and Nehemiah in the middle of the century. Those responsible for these texts appear to have been familiar with Second Isaiah, but the often asserted claim that they were his disciples seems a little off the mark because they were separated from him by at least two generations.

3. *And let not the foreigner say.* This is another new note. There were foreigners living in the province of Judah, whether people who had settled there after the Babylonian conquest in 586 B.C.E. or those who may have been drawn to accompany the returning exiles from Mesopotamia. Some of these were attracted to the faith of the Judahites, and the prophet argues that such people should be freely admitted to the ranks of Israel. (At this point in time, there was nothing like a formal conversion ceremony.)

nor let the eunuch say, "Why, I am a withered tree." This declaration extends the prophet's program of inclusion. Eunuchs and men otherwise sexually maimed were prohibited from participation in the Temple cult. One therefore may infer that the "joining" the LORD envisaged here is not limited to the cultic (though sacrifices are mentioned in verse 7) but involves entering a community of observance—in particular, observance of the sabbath. The eunuch can produce no biological offspring, but in adhering to the covenant, he becomes part of a community vouchsafed the covenantal promise of a destiny to be as multitudinous as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand on

the shore. This notion is spelled out in verse 5, "I will give them in My house and within my walls / a marker and a name better than sons and daughters." Offspring means permanence; here permanence is being part of the covenanted people.

7. *For My house a house of prayer / shall be called for all the peoples.* Solomon's dedication of the First Temple also emphasized prayer, but the designation here of the new Temple as a house of prayer is noteworthy. The phrase "for all the peoples" reflects a universalist perspective, but what it means in the context of foreigners joining the LORD is that God's house becomes the house of prayer for all people when they embrace His laws.

8. *Still more will I gather for him.* Either this whole verse is a fragment, predicting another wave of returned exiles and hence unconnected with what has preceded, or the clause refers to the foreigners and eunuchs who are added to the community of Israel.

9. *All beasts of the field, come to devour.* These words mark the beginning of a new prophecy, one of castigation. It is usually assumed that the devouring beasts are a metaphorical representation of Israel's enemies.

10. *His watchmen are all of them blind.* The watchmen are the leaders of the people or, more specifically, its (false) prophets. The motif of the blind leadership is picked up from Second Isaiah.

mute dogs. "Dogs" in biblical language is always a term of opprobrium—truly insulting for leaders or prophets. The muteness refers to their failure to rebuke the people as they should have done. There is scant evidence that watchdogs were used in ancient Israel; most of the biblical references to dogs conceive them as feral scavengers, not domesticated animals.

Dazed. The verb *hozim* appears only here. In later Hebrew, based on an unlikely understanding of the meaning here, it suggests something like "to hallucinate" or "to entertain idle visions." Blenkinsopp proposes a possible pun on *ḥozim*, "to see visions."

11. *they are the shepherds.* Throughout the Bible and elsewhere in ancient Near Eastern literature, "shepherd" is a stock metaphor for "ruler."

12. *Come, let me take wine, / and let us swill strong drink.* The evocation of drunken leaders may allude to chapter 28. The word for "come" is an Aramaicizing usage that reflects the relatively late period of this text. In poetic parallelism, the more common term, *yayin*, "wine," always occurs in the first verset and *sheikhar*, "strong drink," in the second. But since *sheikhar* —in all likelihood, grappa—has a higher alcohol content, this order also follows the principle of intensification of parallel terms from the first verset to the second.

CHAPTER 57

[1]The righteous one perishes,
and no man takes it to heart,
and loyal men are taken off
with no one noticing,
for through evil the righteous is
taken off.
[2]Yet he shall come in peace,—
they shall rest on their couches—
who walks straight before him.

[3]As for you, draw near,
sons of the sorcerer,
seed of an adulterer and a
whore.
[4]Over whom are you gleeful,
over whom do you gape with your
mouth
and stick out your tongue?
Are you not children of crime,
seed of lies?

[5]Who go into heat over gods
under every lush tree,
slaughtering children in wadis
under crevices in the rocks.
[6]Your share is in the stones of the
wadi,
it is they that are your portion.
Even to them you poured libation,
offered up grain offerings.
Over these should I relent?
[7]On a high and lofty mountain
you put out your couch.
Even there you went up
to offer sacrifice.
[8]Behind the door and doorpost
you have put your mark.
For away from Me you bared
yourself,
climbed up, made room on your
couch.
And you sealed a pact with them,
you loved bedding down with
them,
lust did you behold.
[9]And you gave gifts of oil to Molech,

and profusely put on your
perfume,
and sent your envoys far off,
as far down as Sheol.
10 On all your ways you wore yourself
out,
yet you never said, “I give up.”
You found your own vigor
and so you did not weaken.
11 Whom did you dread and fear
that you should lie,
and Me you did not recall,
you paid no heed?
Did I not keep silent and avert My
gaze,
yet Me you did not fear?
12 I will tell of your “triumph”
and of your deeds,
and they shall not avail for you.
13 When you cry out, let those
gathered round you save you.
But all of them the wind shall
bear off,
a mere breath take them away.
But who shelters in Me shall inherit
the land

and take hold of My holy
mountain.

14 And He said, Build up, build up,
clear a road,
take away stumbling blocks from
My people's road.
15 For thus said the lofty and high
One,
Who dwells forever and holy His
name:
Lofty and holy do I dwell
and with him who is crushed and
lowly in spirit,
to revive the spirit of the lowly
and to revive the heart of those
crushed.
16 For not for all times will I quarrel
nor forever will I rage.
Though a spirit grows faint before
Me,
the life-breath—it is I Who made
it.
17 For their crime of greed I raged

and I struck them, hiding as I raged,
and they went astray in the way of their heart.
[18]Their ways will I see and heal them,
will guide them and grant comfort to them and their mourners.
[19]Creator of fruit of the lips,
"Peace, peace, to the far and the near!"
said the LORD, "And I will heal them."
[20]But the wicked are like a roiled sea,
for it cannot be still,
and its waters roil with mud and muck.

[21]"There is no peace," said my God,
"for the wicked."

CHAPTER 57 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *taken off.* More literally, "gathered," in all probability a euphemism for dying, perhaps an elliptical form of the idiom "gathered to his fathers."

2. *they shall rest on their couches.* The Hebrew switches from singular to plural and then back to singular (hence the bracketing off of this clause with dashes in the translation). These words became part of the Jewish prayer for the dead.

3. *seed of an adulterer and a whore.* This verse, set in conjunction with verses 5–9, makes a double use of sexual promiscuity. The prophet seems to assume that dabbling in pagan magical rites is associated with violating the constraints of sexual morality, perhaps because orgiastic rites are practiced. At the same time, promiscuity, as elsewhere in the Bible, is a metaphor for abandoning YHWH, Israel's true husband, for dalliance with foreign gods. For "a whore," the Masoretic Text shows a verb "and she went whoring," but several ancient versions reflect the noun, *zonah.*

5. *Who go into heat over gods / under every lush tree.* See the previous comment on the double use of sexuality. The phrase "under every lush tree" occurs in Jeremiah and elsewhere to indicate abandonment to paganism, and what may be in view here is the practice of fertility cults under sacred trees.

slaughtering children in wadis. The inveighing against child sacrifice, which began to be widespread in the eighth century B.C.E., picks up the purely metaphorical aspect of the language of sexual promiscuity just introduced.

6. *Your share is in the stones of the wadi.* Although the meaning is not certain, this may refer to sacred steles, *matseivot*, made of piles of stones. The wadis are where the abomination of child sacrifice is performed. It should be noted that throughout this passage, "you" is feminine singular: the female personification of the people, which also accords with the motif of sexual betrayal.

8. *you have put your mark.* The noun usually means "memorial." It would appear to be some sort of ritual marker of pagan worship, analogous to the words of Torah to be affixed to the doorpost according to the injunction in Deuteronomy.

away from Me. The sense of the Hebrew preposition is not certain.

climbed up, made room on your couch. "Climbing up" is the verb used in biblical idiom for getting into bed. The adulterous Israel is getting into bed with alien gods.

lust did you behold. The Hebrew appears to say "a hand did you behold." Blenkinsopp's claim that *yad*, "hand," means "penis" is dubious: he cites two purported proof texts, Isaiah 56:5, where *yad* clearly means "memorial" or "marker," and Song of Songs 5:4–5, where *yad* clearly means "hand." This translation follows the proposal of the New Jewish Publication Society version that relates *yad* here to the verbal stem *y-d-d,* which means "to love." But this verset is metrically defective, having only two accents, so one suspects that there was originally a longer word here derived from *y-d-d* that a scribe contracted to *yad* either because he was unfamiliar with an unusual term or because of prudery.

9. *gave gifts.* The Hebrew *tashuri* ordinarily means "to espy," but that makes no sense here. This translation links it with the noun *teshurah*, "gift."

Molech. The Masoretic Text shows *melekh*, "king," but the original text almost certainly read "Molech," the pagan deity to whom children were sacrificed.

as far down as Sheol. The reference to the netherworld may be more than a hyperbole for great distances because it could refer to the worship of Mot, the Canaanite god of death.

13. *let those gathered round you save you.* This is another ambiguous reference. "Those gathered round" could mean the gods that the paganizing Israelites have collected, or it could refer to the adherents of the pagan cult. In all this, the denunciation of paganism in the Judahite community is a very different theme from what one finds in Isaiah 40–55. The aim of this later prophet is to purge the community of its wayward elements. A sharp division in the Judahites community is envisioned: those who have exerted themselves to go after strange gods (verses 9–10) will be borne off by the wind, while those who have been steadfast in their loyalty to YHWH will "inherit the land," which is to say, they will be the legitimate possessors of the Persian province of Yehud, now restored to the people of Israel.

14. *And He said.* Since the Hebrew of course has no capital letters, the verb here could refer to God, or it might be the prophet who is speaking.

build up, clear a road. In Second Isaiah, the road or highway is a thoroughfare through the desert on which the exiles will pass on the way back to their land. It looks as though this later prophet, clearly familiar with both Isaiah and Second Isaiah, has picked up this image and turned it into a metaphor—as "road" or "way" often is used in the Bible—for the right way before God. The "stumbling block" would thus be the sort of scandalous behavior that has just been scathingly denounced.

15. *crushed.* Most translations render this as "contrite," but the Hebrew *daka'* is in the first instance a physical term: the condition of being pushed down.

16. *the life-breath—it is I Who made it.* The proposed understanding of this verse is as follows: a spirit may be on the point of failing, but I, God, as the Creator of all spirits, will show compassion and revive it.

19. *fruit of the lips.* This appears to be a kenning for "speech," though it does not occur elsewhere. The idea is that God, the Creator of the faculty of speech, has the power to pronounce these healing words of peace.

20. *But the wicked are like a roiled sea.* The prophet continues his notion of a radical split in the people between the faithful and the derelict. This divide has an incipiently sectarian look, preparing the way for the Book of Daniel and the Qumran texts.

21. *There is no peace.* This verse does not scan as a line of poetry and could be a kind of epilogue to the prophecy added editorially.

CHAPTER 58

[1]Call out with full throat, do not
stint,
raise your voice like a ram's horn,
and tell to My people its crime,
and to the house of Jacob their
offense.
[2]And Me day by day let them seek,
let them desire the knowledge of
My ways
like a nation that does what is right
and its God's rule it does not
forsake.
Let them ask of Me rules of
righteousness,
God's closeness let them desire.
[3]"Why did we fast and You did not
see?
We afflicted ourselves and You
took no note?"
In your fast-day you found pleasure

while all your affairs you pursued?
[4]For quarrel and strife you fasted
and to strike with a wicked fist?
Your fasting this day
will not make your voice heard on high.
[5]Will like this be the fast that I choose,
the day a man afflicts himself,
to bow his head like a reed
and bed down in sackcloth and ash?
Is it this that you call a fast,
and a day pleasing to the LORD?
[6]Is not this the fast that I choose—
to unlock the shackles of wickedness,
and loosen the bonds of the yoke,
to set the downtrodden free—
and to break every yoke?
[7]Yes, to offer your bread to the hungry,
and bring the wretched poor into your house.

When you see someone naked, you
should clothe him,
and your own flesh do not ignore.
8 Then shall your light break forth
like the dawn
and your healing quickly spring
up.
And your vindication shall march
before you,
the LORD's glory shall be your
rearguard.
9 Then shall you call and the LORD
shall answer,
cry out, and He shall say, "Here I
am."
If you remove the yoke from your
midst,
the mocking finger and vicious
speech.
10 And you proffer your bread to the
hungry,
and sate the appetite of the
afflicted.
Then your light shall dawn in the
dark,

and your gloom shall be like the
noon.
[11]And the LORD shall guide you
always
and sate your appetite in arid land,
and your bones He shall strengthen,
and you shall be like a well-
moistened garden
and like a water source
whose waters do not fail.
[12]And from among you they shall
rebuild the ancient ruins,
foundations laid in times past you
shall raise.
And you shall be called repairer of
the breach,
restorer of paths for dwellers.
[13]If you refrain from journey on the
sabbath,
from pursuing your affairs on My
holy day,
and call the sabbath a delight,
the LORD's holy day, respected,
and honor it by not following your
ways,

nor pursuing your affairs and
speaking in vain.
[14]Then shall you delight in the
LORD,
and I will mount you on the
heights of the earth,
and make you thrive with the estate
of Jacob your father,
for the mouth of the LORD has
spoken.

CHAPTER 58 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Call out with full throat.* This injunction is directed to the prophet, and what follows is the content of his clarion call.

2. *let them seek.* Verb tenses and verbal modes in biblical poetry are notoriously ambiguous. Many interpreters understand the verbs in this verse as present tense, but since what is stated contradicts the preceding proclamation of Israel's "crime" and "offense," translations based on this understanding have to preface the verse with "yet" or "to be sure," for which there is no warrant in the Hebrew. It makes better sense to construe all the verbs in this verse as cohortatives: would that they would seek God and the knowledge of His ways, in contrast to what they are actually doing.

3. *Why did we fast and You did not see?* Communal fasts were instituted in times of crisis—for example, during a famine or a plague—as one can see in Psalm 90. Members of the community not only refrained from eating but also adopted mourning practices such as the wearing of sackcloth and sprinkling

ashes on the head. The underlying idea was that such practices of mortification would engage the compassion of the deity, and the disaster would end.

afflicted ourselves. This idiom, *ʿinuy nefesh*, is a synonym for fasting, and in rabbinic Hebrew the first of these two words would generate another noun for "fast," *taʿanit*.

In your fast-day you found pleasure / while all your affairs you pursued. The consideration of sincere versus hypocritical fasting led to the apt selection of this chapter to be chanted in the morning service for Yom Kippur, the great fast-day.

4. *to strike with a wicked fist.* The inveighing here and in the lines that follow against social injustice may reflect, as some scholars contend, the dire state of Judahite society in the early decades of the fifth century B.C.E., but it is difficult to link any of this to specific historical circumstances. Exploitation of the poor, after all, and indifference to suffering are prevalent enough in virtually all societies, including affluent twenty-first-century America. That is precisely what imparts a sense of timeless relevance to this prophecy.

5. *afflicts himself.* A more idiomatic rendering would be "mortifies himself," although that, unfortunately, is rhythmically ponderous.

6. *the downtrodden.* The Hebrew *retsutsim* is usually translated as "oppressed," but the term requires a more physical English equivalent because the literal sense of the Hebrew is "smashed," "shattered."

7. *your own flesh.* The sense is "your fellow human being," who shares your condition as a creature of flesh and blood.

9. *Then shall you call.* The obvious antithesis is to the fasting supplicant who goes through the motions of prayer and calls to God while ignoring injustice.

the mocking finger. The literal meaning is "extending of the finger." This idiom is not attested elsewhere, and so the translation is based on the context.

12. *they shall rebuild the ancient ruins.* This formulation does seem to be directed to the challenges facing the Judahites in the early years of the return from exile.

restorer of paths for dwellers. The Hebrew uses an infinitive, "to dwell," but since paths are not places of habitation, "for dwellers" may be the intended meaning.

13. *If you refrain from journey on the sabbath.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "If you draw back your foot from the sabbath." This translation follows Blenkinsopp's proposal that "foot" stands in for "traveling," even though others think it suggests trampling the sabbath. In this period, the sabbath was becoming increasingly important, and prohibitions were evolving that would eventually issue in the elaborate rabbinic laws of the sabbath.

speaking in vain. The Hebrew says, cryptically, "speaking a word." Since conversation on the sabbath was obviously not forbidden, the phrase may suggest something like what is indicated in this translation, though others think it has to do with business pronouncements.

14. *make you thrive.* The literal sense of the Hebrew verb is "feed you."

CHAPTER 59

[1]Why, the LORD's hand is not too
short to rescue,
nor His ear too dull to hear.
[2]But your crimes have parted
you from your God,
and your offenses have hidden His
face
from you, so He does not hear.
[3]For your palms are stained with
blood
and your fingers with crime.
Your lips speak lies,
and your tongue utters wrong
doing.
[4]There is none who sues in
righteousness
or comes to court in good faith.
They trust in emptiness and speak
falsehood,

conceive trouble and bring forth
vice.
[5]Viper's eggs they hatch,
and a spiderweb they weave.
Who eats their eggs will die,
and when crushed an asp is
hatched.
[6]Their webs become no garment,
and none covers up with what they
make.
What they make are deeds of vice,
and the work of outrage in their
palms.
[7]Their feet run to evil
and hurry to shed innocent blood.
Their devisings, devisings of vice,
wrack and ruin upon their paths.
[8]The way of peace they do not know,
and there is no justice where they
go.
They make their courses crooked—
who treads on them knows not
peace.

[9]Therefore is justice far from us,

and vindication does not reach us.
We hope for light, but, look,
darkness,
for brightness, but we go in
gloom.
[10]We grope the wall like blind men,
like the eyeless we grope.
We stumble at noon as at twilight,
among the robust like dead men.
[11]All of us growl like bears,
and like doves we ever moan.
We hope for justice but there is
none,
for rescue,—it is far from us.
[12]For many are our crimes before
You,
and our offenses bear witness
against us.
For our crimes are with us,
and our misdeeds, we know them.
[13]Rebelling and denying the LORD
and falling back from our God,
speaking oppression and
waywardness,
conceiving in the heart and
uttering lying words.

[14]And justice is made to fall back,
and vindication stands off afar,
for truth stumbles in the square,
and honesty cannot come in.
[15]And truth is not to be found,
who turns from evil is despoiled.
And the LORD saw, and it was evil
in His eyes,
for there was no justice.
[16]And He saw that there was no man,
and He was appalled, for none
intervened.
But His own arm gave Him victory,
and His triumph stayed Him up.
[17]And He donned triumph as His
armor
and victory's helmet on His head.
And He donned clothes of
vengeance as a garment,
and wrapped round zeal like a
robe.
[18]As for their deserts, as for that, He
requites,
wrath for His foes, just deserts for
His enemies,

to the coastlands He exacts just
deserts.
[19]And they shall fear from the west
the LORD's name,
and from the sun's rising His
glory.
For He shall come like a pent-up
river,
for the LORD's breath drives it
on.
[20]And a redeemer shall come to
Zion,
and to those who turn back from
crime in Jacob—
said the LORD.

[21]"As for Me, this is My covenant with them," said the LORD, "My spirit that is upon you and My word that I put in your mouth—they shall not depart from your mouth and from the mouth of your seed and from the mouth of the seed of your seed," said the LORD, "from now and for all time."

CHAPTER 59 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *hidden His face.* The Hebrew merely says "face," but the clear reference is to God. The first two verses of this chapter are a strong articulation of a basic idea of prophetic theology: if you want to know why God appears to be absent, allowing the people of Israel to suffer grievously at the hands of its enemies, the explanation is that God has withdrawn His presence because of the people's offenses. Thus, one should not imagine that God in any way lacks the capacity to rescue Israel or to hear its prayers (verse 1); rather, the lack of divine intervention is solely the consequence of the people's own actions.

4. *There is none who sues in righteousness.* While the verb used generally means "to call" or "to call out," the parallel term in the second verset, *nishpat*, "comes to court," suggests a judicial meaning, and that is the understanding of most biblical scholars.

5. *Viper's eggs . . . / a spiderweb.* These two metaphors drawn from two of the more disagreeable members of the animal kingdom suggest two different negative consequences of the miscreant's acts—respectively, lethally poisonous effects and flimsy, useless insubstantiality.

7. *Their feet run to evil.* The function of the two lines of poetry that constitute this verse is to spell out in explicit moral terms the meaning of the metaphors of viper and spiderweb.

9. *Therefore is justice far from us.* These words initiate a new prophecy. Instead of the preceding castigation of the evildoers first in the second person and then in the third person, this text speaks in the first-person plural on behalf of a people plunged in disaster, for whom God will dramatically intervene (verses 16–20). The hook, surely visible to the eye of the editor, that connects the two prophecies is the pronouncement about the lack of justice at the beginning of the second prophecy.

10. *like blind men, / like the eyeless.* This line neatly illustrates how in the second verset in lines of biblical poetry some sort of epithet (or often metaphor) is substituted for the standard term (here, "blind") that appears in the first verset. "Eyeless" (more literally, "no-eyes") concretizes the condition of blindness. The line is also an elegant chiasm: we grope—blind men—the eyeless—we grope.

the robust. The Hebrew *ʾashamnim* appears only here, so the proposed meaning, linking it with the root *sh-m-n*, which can mean either "healthy" or "fat," is conjectural.

12. *For many are our crimes before You.* This, and what follows to the end of verse 15, is perfectly in accord with the theological notion of alienating God through evil actions that is expressed in verses 1–2, but here it constitutes a collective confession of sin.

14. *for truth stumbles in the square.* Since the square is the chief public place of the ancient city, usually facing the gates where courts of justice were held, the implication is that the entire society has violated the principles of justice.

16. *And He saw that there was no man.* At this point the prophet offers a new notion of God's saving power: the society is so thoroughly given over to injustice that there is scarcely hope that anyone will emerge who can turn things around, and consequently God Himself decides that He must intervene.

17. *And He donned triumph as His armor.* The prophet now draws on the ancient Canaanite imagery of the warrior-god, which appears with some frequency in biblical poetry.

18. *As for their deserts, as for that.* The Hebrew preposition *keʿal* is unusual, but the sense reflected in the translation seems likely, if not certain.

wrath for His foes, just deserts for His enemies. All this continues the representation of God as a fierce warrior. If elsewhere in the Isaian corpus the enemies of Israel are conceived as God's instrument, they have, after all, devastated, exiled, and subjugated the covenanted people, and in doing so they have become God's enemies, on whom He will now wreak vengeance.

19. *they shall fear.* This translation agrees with Blenkinsopp that the verb is stronger than "revere," the choice of several modern versions: God the warrior, sweeping over vast regions like a torrential river, inspires fear from east to west.

20. *to those who turn back from crime in Jacob.* Despite the idea of a unilateral divine initiative of rescue articulated in verses 16ff., here at the end

the prophecy asserts that the redemption will come only for those who turn back to God.

said the LORD. This attribution of divine speech is introduced here to mark the end of the prophecy.

21. *As for Me.* What follows the prophecy is a prose epilogue. Some understand it as a formal conclusion to the whole section running from chapter 56 through chapter 59.

My spirit that is upon you. The "you" is singular, but the claim that it refers to the prophet, with "your seed" indicating his disciples, is questionable. Similar formulations in Deuteronomy and elsewhere clearly indicate the spirit of God that will continue to invest the covenanted people for all time, and there is no warrant for the use of "seed" in the sense of "disciple" rather than as a term for biological offspring. "Seed" in precisely this sense repeatedly figures in the covenantal promises to Abraham.

CHAPTER 60

[1]Rise, O shine, for your light has
come,
and the glory of the LORD has
dawned over you.
[2]For, look, darkness covers the earth,
and thick mist, the peoples,
[3]but nations shall walk by your light,
and kings by your dawning
radiance.
[4]Raise your eyes all round and see—
they all have gathered, come to
you.
Your sons shall come from afar
and your daughters dandled on the
hip.
[5]Then shall you see and gleam,
and your heart shall throb and
swell,
for the sea's bounty shall be yours,

the wealth of nations shall come
to you.
6 A tide of camels shall cover you,
dromedaries from Midian and
Ephah,
they all shall come from Sheba.
Gold and frankincense they shall
bear,
and the LORD's praise they shall
proclaim.
7 All Kedar's flocks shall be gathered
to you,
Nebaioth's rams shall serve you.
They shall be welcome offerings on
My altar,
and the house of My splendor I
will make splendid.
8 Who are these who fly like a cloud
and like doves to their cotes?
9 For Me the coastlands wait,
and Tarshish ships are at the head
to bring your children from afar,
their silver and their gold are with
them,
for the name of the LORD your
God,

and Israel's Holy One, Who
makes you splendid.
10 And foreign sons shall build your
walls,
and their kings shall serve you.
For in My fury I did strike you
and in My favor I have
compassion for you.
11 And they shall open your gates
perpetually,
night and day they shall not close,
to buy you the wealth of nations,
and their kings as captives driven.

12 For the nation and the kingdom that does not serve
you shall perish, and the nation shall surely be
destroyed.

13 Lebanon's glory shall come to you,
cypress, fir, and box tree all,
to make splendid the place of My
sanctuary,
and I will honor the resting place
of My feet.
14 And they shall go to you bent over,

the sons of your afflictions,
and all your revilers bow at the soles of your feet.
And they shall call you City of the LORD,
Zion of the Holy One.
15 Instead of your being forsaken,
rejected, with none passing through,
I will make you an everlasting pride,
a rejoicing for all times.
16 And you shall suckle the milk of nations,
royal breasts you shall suckle,
and you shall know I am the LORD your Rescuer,
and your Redeemer, Jacob's Mighty One.
17 Instead of bronze I will bring gold,
and instead of iron I will bring silver
and instead of wood, bronze,
and instead of stone, iron.
And I will set as your governance
Peace

and your overseers,
Righteousness.
[18]No more shall “outrage” be heard
in your land,
“wrack and ruin” within your
borders.
And you shall call your walls
Deliverance
and your gates Praise.
[19]No more shall the sun be your light
by day,
nor the moon’s radiance shine for
you,
but the LORD shall be your
everlasting light
and your God become your
splendor.
[20]No more shall your sun set,
your moon shall not go down.
But the LORD shall be your
everlasting light,
and your mourning days shall be
done.
[21]And your people, all of them
righteous,
shall forever possess the land,

the shoot I have planted,
My handiwork in which to glory.
22 The least shall become a thousand,
the smallest, a mighty nation.
I, the LORD, in its due time I
will hasten it.

CHAPTER 60 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Rise, O shine for your light has come.* Often thought of, with the next two chapters, as the core of Trito-Isaiah, this poem picks up the motif of transcendent light from Second Isaiah and transforms it into an enthralling poetic vision of Zion magnificently restored. This vision is dramatically developed in the next two verses, in which the whole earth is imagined engulfed in darkness, and Zion's brilliant dawn offers light for humankind.

3. *your dawning.* The Hebrew verbal stem z-r-ḥ does not mean merely "to shine," as several translations show, but the breaking light of dawn, a pointed word choice because Zion's light is to come after the long dark night of the nations.

4. *Your sons shall come from afar.* The entire line builds on the image of Zion's sons and daughters being brought back to their homeland in Isaiah 49:14–21.

dandled. The Hebrew verb, *ʾaman*, suggests caring for or tending to a child.

6. *A tide of camels.* The first noun here, *shifʿah*, indicates a flow or spate. The poetic image is of an endless flow of caravans of camels that is like a stream or tide.

7. *the house of My splendor I will make splendid.* This is not a redundancy. The Temple by rights is the house of God's splendor, but only when it is completely rebuilt and grandly refurbished will it achieve its status as the house of God's splendor.

8. *Who are these who fly like a cloud.* The obvious reference is to the exiles flocking back to their land. Although this and the next two verses reflect a clear connection with the sundry prophecies of the return to Zion in chapters 40–55, the difference is that the point of view here appears to be that of someone in Zion watching the crowd of returned exiles as it approaches.

9. *Tarshish ships.* This is an exercise of poetic license to convey the idea of the exiles being brought from afar because in fact they would be coming overland from Mesopotamia, not from the west by sea.

10. *And foreign sons shall build your walls, / and their kings shall serve you.* This fantastic flourish is another motif picked up from chapters 40–55.

11. *And they shall open your gates perpetually.* As the next poetic line makes clear, the gates are open to bring in the wealth of nations. But normally, the gates of a city would be closed at least at night to guarantee its security, so what is envisaged here is a perfectly peaceful city that will never be attacked. This is still another instance in which the poem builds on hyperbole.

their kings as captives driven. The verb for "drive" is usually attached to animals or prisoners, so "as captives" is implied though not stated.

12. *For the nation and the kingdom.* This entire verse, which is in prose, looks like an editorial intervention meant to point the moral of the poem.

16. *And you shall suckle the milk of nations.* In 49:23 foreign princesses were to become the wet nurses of Judahite infants; here, that extravagant image is rerun metaphorically.

royal breasts. The Masoretic Text is vocalized to read *shod*, "booty," but the original word was almost certainly *shad*, "breast," either mistakenly vocalized by the Masoretes or altered by them because the image troubled them.

17. *governance.* The Hebrew *pequdah* is one of those biblical terms that can mean half a dozen different things, but in context, and with regard to the parallelism, this is the most likely sense here. Abraham Ibn Ezra sees it as an ellipsis for *ʾanshey pequdah*, "men of governance."

18. *outrage . . . / wrack and ruin.* These are conventional outcries in response to a disaster—for example, a person attacked by marauders.

19. *No more shall the sun be your light by day.* At the beginning of the poem, Israel's radiance lit up the world. Now, the heavenly luminaries are to be replaced by God, as an everlasting source of light. Again, poetic hyperbole points the way to eschatological vision.

21. *your people . . . / shall forever possess the land.* The land in question is of course the Land of Israel, and this is an especially pointed promise to a people that little more than a century earlier had been violently uprooted from its land.

22. *a mighty nation.* The Hebrew adjective can equally mean "multitudinous."

in its due time I will hasten it. The entire prophecy has conjured up the idea of a glorious national restoration. At the time it was delivered, in the early or middle decades of the fifth century B.C.E., the Judahite community was in disarray, the rebuilding of Jerusalem proceeding fitfully, inner divisions manifesting themselves, fears of armed attacks hovering over the Judahites. Thus the prophet is constrained to have God say that He will hasten the arrival of the grand restoration, but only in its due time.

CHAPTER 61

[1]The LORD's spirit is upon me
as the LORD has anointed me
to bring good tidings to the poor,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom to the captives,
to the prisoners, release,
[2]to proclaim a year of favor for the
LORD
and a day of vengeance for our
God,
to comfort all who mourn,
[3]to set out for the mourners of Zion,
to give them turbans instead of
ashes,
joy's oil instead of mourning,
a glorious wrap instead of gloomy
spirit.
And they shall be called oaks of
victory,
God's planting in which to glory.

[4]And they shall rebuild the ancient
ruins,
the desolate places of yore they
shall raise up,
and renew the ravaged towns,
and the desolate places of times
long past.
[5]And foreigners shall stand and tend
your flocks
and strangers be your farmers and
keepers of your vineyards.
[6]As for you, the LORD's priests you
shall be called,
our God's ministrants it shall be
said of you.
The wealth of nations you shall
enjoy
and in their glory revel.
[7]Instead of the shame twice over and
disgrace
they shall exult in their lot.
Therefore they shall possess their
land twice over,
everlasting joy shall be theirs.
[8]For I, the LORD, love justice,
hate robbery and vice,

and I will truly pay their wages,
    an everlasting pact I will seal with
        them.
[9]And their seed shall be known in
    the nations,
    and their offspring among the
        peoples.
All who see them shall recognize
    that they are the seed the LORD
        has blessed.
[10]I shall greatly rejoice in the LORD,
    my very being exult in my God.
For He has clothed me with
    garments of triumph,
    has wrapped me with victory's
        cloak,
as a bridegroom dons, priestlike, a
    turban
    and as a bride is adorned in fine
        clothes.
[11]For as the earth brings forth its
    growth
    and a garden makes its plants
        flourish,
so shall the LORD make victory
    flourish

and praise before all the nations.

CHAPTER 61 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The LORD's spirit is upon me . . . / to bring good tidings to the poor.* This prophet of the fifth century B.C.E. announces at the outset of the prophecy that he has been commissioned to bring a message of comfort, not castigation.

the poor. While many understand *ʿanawim* as "the humble," it can also be a variant form of *ʿaniyim*, "poor," and the prophet appears to be referring to people in a state of wretchedness.

to proclaim freedom to the captives. The first verb and noun here echo the language concerning the jubilee year in Leviticus 25:10, where Israelite slaves were restored to freedom. Efforts to link these lines with specific conditions in the fifth-century Judahite community are, however, no more than conjectures. Captivity is a recurrent poetic image for all sorts of states of subjugation, including its frequent use in chapters 40–55 as a metaphor for exile.

3. *turbans instead of ashes.* The Hebrew features sound-play: "turban" (often the word means "splendor") is *peʾeir* and "ashes," *ʾeifer*, the same Hebrew consonants in a different order.

joy's oil instead of mourning. Rubbing oneself with oil was part of the enjoyment of the good life, and mourners would refrain from this practice. Putting ashes on the head was a mourning rite.

4. *ancient ruins.* The ruins were made when Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 B.C.E., well over a century before this prophecy, and from the poet's perspective these ruins are "ancient," from "times long past."

6. *the LORD's priests you shall be called.* One should not take this declaration literally. The point is that all the people will now enjoy an intimate relationship with God in the Temple, rather in the spirit of all Israel's being "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6).

7. *they shall possess their land twice over.* This is a hyperbolic flourish: the people dispossessed of their land will now hold on to it with doubled security. The phrase might also refer to a second taking-possession of the land after the first one in Joshua's conquest.

8. *robbery and vice.* The Masoretic Text reads for the second noun *beʿolah*, "in burnt offering," but this should be revocalized as *beʿawlah*.

10. *For He has clothed me with garments of triumph.* The clothing metaphor, continued here until the end of the verse, picks up the "turban" and the "glorious wrap" from verse 3.

as a bridegroom dons, priestlike, a turban. The Hebrew uses a verb, *yekhahein*, that literally means "to minister as a priest." The priests wore turbans and splendid robes and so serve as a model for fine attire.

as a bride is adorned in fine clothes. "Fine" is implied in the Hebrew because the verb used is one for putting on ornaments.

CHAPTER 62

[1]For Zion's sake I will not be still,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not
be quiet,
till her triumph emerges like
radiance
and her deliverance burns like a
torch,
[2]and nations see your triumph
and all kings, your glory.
And you shall be called a new name
that the mouth of the LORD shall
fix.
[3]And you shall become a crown of
splendor in the hand of the LORD
and a regal diadem in the palm of
your God.
[4]No more shall be said of you
"Forsaken"
and of your land no more be said
"Desolation."

For you shall be called “My Delight
Is in Her”
and your land, “The One
Bedded.”
For the LORD delights in you
and your land shall be bedded.
[5]As a young man beds a virgin,
your sons shall bed you,
and a bridegroom’s rejoicing over
the bride
shall your God rejoice over you.
[6]On your walls, O Jerusalem,
I have stationed watchmen.
Through the day and through the
night,
they are never still.
You invokers of the LORD,
do not fall silent,
[7]and do not let Him fall silent
till He sets Jerusalem firm, praise
in the earth.

[8]The LORD has vowed by His right
hand
and by His powerful arm:

I will no more give your grain
    to your enemies as food,
and foreigners shall not drink your
    new wine
    over which you toiled.
[9]But those who garner it shall eat it,
    and they shall praise the LORD,
and those who gather it shall drink it
    in My holy courts.

[10]Pass through, pass through the
    gates,
    clear the people's way.
Build up, build up the highway,
    clear away the stones,
        raise a banner over peoples.
[11]Look, the LORD has made it heard
    to the end of the earth:
Say to Zion's Daughter,
    look, your rescue comes.
Look, His recompense is with Him,
    and His wages are before Him.
[12]And they shall call them "Holy
    People,"

"The Redeemed Ones of the
LORD."
And you shall be called "The One
Sought Out,"
"The City Unforsaken."

CHAPTER 62 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *And you shall be called a new name.* In the biblical world, as in many other cultures, the name was conceived as incorporating the essence of the person or object. The most striking illustration of this notion is Jacob's wrestling with the mysterious stranger in Genesis 32. He is given a new name, Israel, instead of his old one ("Jacob" is etymologically associated with crookedness or deception), while the stranger refuses to reveal his own name, saying it is a mystery. The prophet of these chapters is particularly preoccupied with changing names: Israel's disastrous destiny is about to be transformed into triumph, and the poetry marks this transformation by assigning a cluster of new names.

4. *My Delight Is in Her.* A transliterated version of the Hebrew for this name, Hephzibah, at one time had some currency among Bible-reading speakers of English.

The One Bedded. Again, the transliteration, Beulah, became an English name. Most translations render it as "espoused," but that is too formal and too decorous. This passive form of the verb *baʿal* does indicate a woman who has a husband (the noun *baʿal*), but it has a sexual connotation: Zion, the woman who has been forsaken, will now enjoy consummation again. The sexual implication of the term is clearly suggested in verse 5: "and a bridegroom's rejoicing over the bride / shall your God rejoice over you."

5. *your sons shall bed you.* This sounds inadvertently like incest (in the next line of poetry, it is rather God's relationship with Israel that is analogous to

the bridegroom's relationship with the bride), but the intended idea is that the desolate land, personified as a woman, will be plowed and cultivated by its sons, as a young man is intimate with a virgin and makes her fruitful.

6. *watchmen.* Some take this to be a figure for the prophet and his disciples, but they may well be literal watchmen.

9. *those who gather it shall drink it / in My holy courts.* The point of this verse and the preceding one is not only that the people will no longer have the fruit of their agricultural labors stripped from them by invaders, but also that they will bring their grain and wine to celebrate God in His Temple. This is a sentiment very much in keeping with many of the Psalms.

10. *Build up, build up the highway.* This, like several other lines in the poetry of this prophet, is a pointed variation on the language of Second Isaiah (especially 40:3–4).

11. *Say to Zion's Daughter.* These are the words grandly confirming the restoration of Zion that God is about to proclaim throughout the earth.

His recompense . . . / His wages. That is to say, God carries with Him the recompense He will now give to Israel.

12. *And they shall call them "Holy People."* In the fervor of this vision, all the nations of the earth are caught up in this movement of assigning new names to the people of Israel because they see and attest to its splendid transformation.

CHAPTER 63

[1]Who is this coming from Edom,
in ensanguined garments from
Bosra?
The One glorious in attire,
striding in His great power.
“I speak out in triumph,
great for granting victory.”
[2]“Why is there red on your garments
and your clothes like one treading
a winepress?”
[3]“In the vat I have trodden alone
—
of the peoples, no one was with Me,
and I trampled them in My wrath,
stomped on them in My fury,
and their lifeblood splattered My
garments,
all My clothes I have befouled.
[4]For it is vengeance day in My heart

and My vindication's year has
come.
[5]And I looked, and there was no
helper,
and I stared—and there was no
sustainer.
But My own arm made Me triumph,
and My wrath, it was this
sustained Me.
[6]And I trampled peoples in My
wrath
and made them drunk with My
fury,
and shed their lifeblood on the
ground."

[7]The LORD's acts of kindness I
recall,
the praises of the LORD.
As for all that the LORD requited
us,
and the great bounty to the house
of Israel
whom He requited with His mercy

and with His many acts of
kindness.
[8]And He said, “Why, they are My
people,
children who do not betray,”
and He became their rescuer.
[9]In all their distress was He
distressed,
and the agent of His presence
rescued them.
In His love and in His compassion
He redeemed them,
plucked them up and bore them
all the days of yore.
[10]But they rebelled and pained
His Holy spirit,
and He became an enemy to them,
He fought against them.
[11]But He recalled the days of yore,
drawing His people out from the
water:
Where is He Who brought them up
from the sea,
the shepherds of His flock?
Where is He Who put in their midst
His holy spirit?

[12]Who led at the right hand of Moses
with His glorious arm,
split the waters before them
to make Him an everlasting name,
[13]leading them through the deep;
like a horse in the desert they did
not stumble.
[14]Like cattle in the valley You guided
them,
the LORD's spirit guided them.
So you led Your people
to make You a glorious name.
[15]Look from the heavens and see,
from Your holy and glorious
abode.
Where are Your zeal and Your
might?
Your deep feeling and your
compassion
are held back from me.
[16]Though Abraham did not know us
nor Israel recognize us,
You, LORD, are our Father,
our Redeemer of yore is Your
name.

[17]Why should You make us stray,
LORD, from Your ways,
why make our hearts callous to
the fear of You?
Turn back for the sake of Your
servants,
the tribes of Your estate.
[18]For a brief time Your holy people
had possession—
our foes trampled Your sanctuary.
[19]We become like ones You never
ruled,
on whom Your name was not
called.
Would that You tore open the
heavens, came down,
that the mountains melted before
You,

CHAPTER 63 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Who is this coming from Edom, / is ensanguined garments from Bosra?* The first six verses of this chapter are the most vivid—and grisly—representation in biblical poetry of YHWH as a warrior-god. The image of God trampling the vineyard would be picked up in the Book of Revelation and then would be used at the beginning of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

Edom. If one may judge by Psalm 137, Edom took an eager role in collaborating with the Babylonian invaders in 586 B.C.E. and was thus singled out by the Judahites as a particular object of hatred. It is conceivable that this prophecy was composed not long after 586.

ensanguined. The adjective *ḥamuts* is unusual, and it is not the ordinary word for "red." It nevertheless refers through the color to the name "Edom," which is associated with *ʾadom*, "red," as one clearly sees in the naming of Esau in Genesis 25:30. In the story of the stealing of the blessing (chapter 27), Jacob puts on the "finery" that belongs to his brother Esau, but Yair Zakovitch proposes that the Hebrew word used for these, *ḥamudot*, is a scribal or editorial substitution for *ḥamatsot*, the adjective that occurs here.

glorious in attire. In a provocative leap, the blood-splattered garments are glorious attire.

2. *Why is there red on your garments.* The form of question and response between an anonymous observer (perhaps the prophet but not necessarily) and God is quite unusual in biblical poetry.

like one treading a winepress. The association between wine and blood is not only because of the color red but also because a kenning for wine in biblical poetry, inherited from the Ugaritic, is "blood of the grape" (see Genesis 49:11).

5. *But My own arm made Me triumph.* This is a very different view from that of Second Isaiah, in which Cyrus acts as God's agent in history, but this prophecy may antedate the advent of Cyrus by a century or more.

6. *made them drunk with My fury.* The metaphor of drunkenness is enhanced by the fact that the word for "fury" has a homonym that means "venom," a lethal liquid that can be imbibed.

7. *The LORD's acts of kindness I recall.* These words signal the beginning of a new poem with an entirely different theme. If we recall that "the LORD's acts of kindness," *ḥasdey YHWH*, is a recurrent motif in Pslams, the composition that begins here looks very much like a psalm—in this instance, a collective supplication that rehearses God's bounty to Israel in times past and prays for the renewal of divine intervention to save the people.

11. *But He recalled the days of yore.* The recalling is stated as a completed fact, but that is somewhat confusing because in what follows God is repeatedly asked why He does not now come to the aid of Israel as He once did.

drawing His people out from the water. The Hebrew *mosheh ʿamo* should not be construed as "Moses his people," which would make little sense. Instead, *mosheh* is used as a verb here, the verb with which the name of Moses is etymologized. This usage is clear because of the next line, "Where is He Who brought them up from the sea." But the poet interprets the Moses story as he invokes the miracle at the Sea of Reeds: the infant Moses drawn from the water is a prefiguration of Israel saved from the waters as the sea is split open.

13. *like a horse in the desert.* The odd-looking simile again alludes to the story of the Sea of Reeds: the Egyptian horses all drowned in the waters of the sea, whereas a horse on the dry surface of the desert—the antithesis of the sea—does not stumble.

14. *Like cattle in the valley You guided them.* The Masoretic Text reads "as cattle goes down in the valley," but three ancient versions have "You guided them" instead of "[it] goes down."

15. *Your deep feeling.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "the stirring [or roaring] of your innards." The innards or bowels were thought to be the seat of compassion, and for this odd reason, "bowels" in eighteenth-century English came to mean, through the literalism of the King James Version, "compassion."

16. *Though Abraham did not know us.* This is a rhetorical hypothesis contrary to fact: even if it were the case that Abraham did not know us, God would still be our Father.

17. *Why should You make us stray.* The theological reasoning is: since God causes all things, if we have strayed it must be somehow because He has decreed it, and so we are not entirely to blame.

18. *For a brief time Your holy people had possession.* The meaning of this whole verset is in doubt. Scholars have performed radical surgery on the

received text, but their results are equally doubtful.

19. *the mountains melted before You.* The chapter ends on a comma because this sentence continues through the first verse of chapter 64, and the entire prophecy begun in verse 7 goes on until the end of chapter 64.

CHAPTER 64

[1]as fire catches in brushwood,
as fire makes water seethe,
to let Your name be known to Your foes,
before You nations quake.
[2]When You did fearsome things we had not hoped for,
You came down, and before You the mountains melted.
[3]They never had seen,
they never gave ear,
no eye has seen a God besides You.
He acts for those who wait for Him.
[4]You struck him who delights in doing justice,
who recalls You in Your ways.
Look, You raged, and so we offended,

when You hid Yourself we
transgressed.
[5]We become all of us like an unclean
thing,
and like a filthy rag, all our merits.
And we all of us shriveled like leaves
and our crimes bore us off like the
wind.
[6]And none called Your name
nor roused himself to hold fast to
You,
for You hid Your face from us,
and gave us over to our crimes.
[7]Yet now, LORD, You are our
Father,
we are the clay and You the
Potter,
and Your handiwork all of us
are.
[8]Do not, O LORD, be so furious,
and do not forever recall crime.
Oh, look, pray, to Your people, all
of us.
[9]Your holy towns have become a
desert,

Zion has become a desert,
Jerusalem a desolate place.
10 Our holy house and our glory
in which our fathers praised You
has been consumed by fire
and all our precious things
become a ruin.
11 For these will You hold back, O LORD,
be silent and gravely afflict us?

CHAPTER 64 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *brushwood.* The Hebrew term appears only here, but the context suggests this sense.

to let Your name be known to Your foes. God's omnipotence is manifested on earth as He descends amid seismic upheavals in all His power.

2. *before You the mountains melted.* The language is reminiscent of the Song of Deborah. Compare Judges 5:5.

3. *He acts for those who wait for Him.* The switch from second-person to third-person reference to the same subject is characteristic biblical usage.

4. *You struck him who delights in doing justice.* This appears to be an abrupt transition on the argument of the poem. In times past, God showed His fearsome power in acting on behalf of Israel. Now, however, even those who pursue justice are the victims of His wrath. This negative construction of the

verb *paga*ʿ, which can mean either "to strike" (usually fatally) or "to encounter," is supported by the report of divine rage in the next line.

You raged, and so we offended, / when You hid Yourself we transgressed. This line extends the theological understanding of 63:17: Israel's transgressions are the consequence of God's rage and the hiding of His face rather than their cause.

5. *a filthy rag.* The Hebrew ʿ*idim* is another word unique to this text, and the translation simply reflects the understanding of interpretive consensus.

6. *gave us over.* This translation reads instead of the Masoretic *watemugeinu* ("you melted us") *watemageinu*, a reading reflected in three ancient versions.

10. *Our holy house . . . / consumed by fire.* The language here clearly indicates that the Temple has not yet been rebuilt, and this poem may well have been written shortly after the destruction of 586 B.C.E. Scholars have noted several points of similarity in the language of this prophecy with Lamentations.

11. *For these will You hold back, O LORD.* This plea concludes the collective supplication: in light of the terrible devastation—Jerusalem turned into a desolate place, the Temple in ruins, the whole people cast off like a filthy rag—God must surely relent His fury and restore Zion. All this is very far from the upbeat vision of national redemption articulated by Second Isaiah and almost certainly reflects an earlier historical moment.

CHAPTER 65

[1]I yielded oracles when they did not
inquire,
I was found when they did not
seek Me.
I said, “Here I am, here I am”
to a nation not called by My
name.
[2]I spread out My hands all day long
to a wayward people
that walked on a way not good
after its own devisings.
[3]The people that vexes Me
to My face perpetually,
offering sacrifice in the gardens,
burning incense on the bricks,
[4]sitting among the graves,
in vigil stations passing the nights,
eating the flesh of pigs
and broth of foulness in their pots,
[5]saying, “Keep off,

do not approach me, for I am not
to be touched by you.”
These are smoke in my nostrils,
smoldering fire all day long.
6 Look, it is written before Me:
I will not be still
till I have paid back,
paid back into their laps,
7 their crimes and their fathers’
crimes together—
said the LORD—
that they burned incense on the
mountains
and on the hills reviled Me,
I will measure out their wages
first in their lap.

8 Thus said the LORD:
As new wine is found in the cluster,
and they say, “Do not destroy it
for there is blessing in it,”
so will I do for My servants,
not destroying everything.
9 And I will bring out seed from
Jacob

and from Judah as heir to My
mountains,
and My chosen ones shall take hold
of it,
and My servants shall dwell there.
10 And Sharon shall become a pasture
for flocks
and the Achor Valley a bedding-
down for cattle—
for My people who seek Me.
11 As for you, who forsake the
LORD,
neglecting My holy mountain,
who lay out a table for the good luck
god
and fill bowls of mixed wine for
the god of fate.
12 I have destined you for the sword,
and you all shall kneel to be
slaughtered,
since I called and you did not
answer,
I spoke and you did not hear,
and you did what was evil in My
eyes,

and what I did not desire you
chose.
[13]Therefore, thus said the LORD:
Look, My servants shall eat
and you shall hunger.
Look, My servants shall drink
and you shall thirst.
Look, My servants shall rejoice
and you shall be shamed.
[14]Look, My servants shall sing gladly
with a cheerful heart,
and you shall cry out for heart's pain
and from a broken spirit howl.
[15]And you shall leave your name as
an oath to My chosen ones:
"May the Master, the LORD, put
you to death!"
And My servants He shall call
by another name.
[16]Who blesses himself in the land
shall bless himself by the God of
trust,
and who vows in the land
shall vow by the God of trust,
for the former troubles have been
forgotten

and are hidden from My eyes.
17 For I am about to create new
heavens
and a new earth,
and the former things shall not be
recalled
and shall not come to mind.
18 But rejoice and exalt for all times,
that I am creating,
for I am about to create in Jerusalem
exultation and with it rejoicing.
19 And I will exult in Jerusalem
and rejoice in My people,
and no longer shall be heard within it
the sound of weeping and the
sound of screams.
20 There shall not be there a tender
babe or elder
who will not live out his days.
For like a lad he shall die at a
hundred,
and who misses a hundred shall be
thought accursed.
21 And they shall build houses and
dwell in them

and plant vineyards and eat their
fruit.
[22]They shall not build for another to
dwell
and shall not plant for another to
eat,
for like the days of a tree My
people's days,
and the work of their hands shall
My chosen outlive.
[23]They shall not toil for naught
nor give birth in panic,
for they are the seed blessed of the
LORD,
and their offspring are with them.
[24]And it shall be, before they call, I
will answer,
while they still speak, I will hear.
[25]The wolf and the lamb shall graze
as one,
and the lion like cattle eat hay
and the serpent—dust, its food.
They shall do no evil and do no harm
on all My holy mountain, said the
LORD.

CHAPTER 65 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *I yielded oracles.* The literal sense of the passive verb *nidrashti* is "I was sought out." But *darash* is the verb that has the technical sense of "inquire of an oracle," and that appears to be the meaning here: even though the people did not seek Me in any sense, including inquiry of My oracles, I was ready to vouchsafe them revelation.

2. *I spread out My hands.* This phrase continues the paradox of the previous verse because spreading out the hands is a gesture of prayer, and it is as though God, not the people, were praying.

3. *offering sacrifice in the gardens.* These are sacred gardens where nature gods, or fertility goddesses such as Asherah, were worshipped.

burning incense on the bricks. We have no specific information about this cultic practice, although setting out incense on bricks for burning sounds plausible, and thus emending the received text seems unwarranted.

4. *sitting among the graves.* This looks like some sort of ancestor worship.

vigil stations. The Hebrew *netsurim* is opaque, but it derives from a verbal stem that means to watch, or guard, hence this conjectural translation. What appears to be invoked is a practice of waiting through the night for some sort of epiphany of a god, perhaps a chthonic god because of the nocturnal setting.

eating the flesh of pigs. This is, of course, prohibited, but the point is probably not just the dietary restriction but the consumption of pork in a pagan ritual.

broth. The Masoretic Text shows *peraq*, a term not attested elsewhere, and this translation reads instead *meraq*. The vehement inveighing against a whole set of paganizing practices does not appear in the previous chapters, and pagan or syncretistic worship does not seem to have been an urgent issue either in Babylonian exile or in fifth-century B.C.E. Judah. One is led to the tentative inference that this is a prophecy dating from the last years of the

Judahite monarchy, a time when, as other sources show, pagan practices were widespread.

5. *I am not to be touched by you.* The Hebrew *qedashtikha* is problematic. The reasoning behind this translation is: to be *qadosh*, "holy," is to be unapproachable except by designated priests. The speaker may be saying that I have assumed a condition of *qedushah*, holiness, by my participation in these rites, and so no profane person is allowed to come near me.

6. *Look, it is written before Me.* These introductory words are extrametrical. In the next verse, "said the LORD" is also extrametrical.

7. *on the mountains / . . . on the hills.* Though these terms are a formulaic word-pairing in the parallel structure of biblical poetry, their use here again points to nature worship, like the gardens in verse 3.

first. The meaning of the Hebrew *ri'shonah* is unclear, and the translation mirrors that opaqueness.

8. *so will I do for My servants.* Here and in what follows, there is a distinction between those who are God's "servants" or His "chosen ones" and the rest of the people. Presumably, the servants are those who have not been spending their time burning incense in sacred gardens and sitting among graves. They are thus like the cluster of healthy grapes on the vine that also bears rotten fruit. Blenkinsopp sees in all this the beginnings of a sectarian perspective. Later, both the Book of Daniel and a good many of the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit this division between those who will be saved and those who are irrevocably lost.

10. *for My people who seek Me.* This qualification is important: the splendidly restored countryside will not be for everyone but for those who seek God.

11. *neglecting My holy mountain.* The holy mountain is the site of the Temple. "Neglecting" (or, more literally, "forgetting") it means going to sacred gardens and graveyards to worship there.

the good luck god. The Hebrew refers to him by name, Gad. The worship of Gad is attested in inscriptions in Phoenicia and in its North African colonies over many centuries.

the god of fate. Again, a name is given in the Hebrew, Meni, and variations of this name for a god of fate or destiny appear in many extrabiblical sources.

12. *destined.* The Hebrew verb *maniti* plays sardonically on the just mentioned "Meni."

I called and you did not answer. Normally, it is man's place to call out to God, but this reversal of roles is in keeping with the reversal in verses 1–2.

13. *Therefore, thus said the* LORD. This introduction is again extrametrical.

My servants shall eat / and you shall hunger. This sharp antithesis between the fate of God's servants and the audience of paganizers that is rebuked vividly illustrates the split between those in the people who will be saved and those destined to come to a disastrous end.

15. *And you shall leave your name as an oath.* What the miscreants will leave behind them is a name that will become the byword of a curse (in contrast to what is said in Genesis of Abraham, whose name is to be a blessing invoked by all). The words that follow here, "May the Master, the LORD, put you to death!," are the words of the curse, and they may have been completed by a name, "like So-and-so."

My servants He shall call by another name. Either there is a collective name for this group of paganizers that now must be replaced, or the individual paganizers bear names in general currency, and so new names are required.

16. *the God of trust.* This could be rendered as "the God of amen," but the word *ʾamen* derives from a root that suggests trust, dependability, confirmation.

17. *I am about to create new heavens / and a new earth.* Many interpreters read this literally as an eschatological statement, but it may be more plausible to understand it as poetic hyperbole: it is not that the order of nature will be radically transformed but that, in this Jerusalem now filled with joy and exultation, there will be a general sense of sweeping renewal.

20. *like a lad he shall die at a hundred.* Not only will a person have an extravagantly long life span (easily two or three times the actual average

longevity in ancient society), but he will come to his end after a century in all the vigor of his youth.

22. *They shall not build for another to dwell.* This of course would happen when the land was conquered. It is not, however, an inevitable inference that this prophecy is post-586 B.C.E., because the imminent prospect of being conquered and dispossessed was ominously evident through the last century and a half of the Judahite monarchy as Assyrian and then Babylonian armies threatened Jerusalem and other Judahite cities.

and the work of their hands shall My chosen outlive. The verb used here means to "wear out," but the obvious sense is that they will live beyond the point where the things they make have fallen apart. Based on the formulation here, this verb would become idiomatic precisely in this sense in later Hebrew.

25. *The wolf and the lamb shall graze as one.* This entire verse is an obvious abbreviated reprise of Isaiah 11:6–9. Many scholars assume it is an editorial addition, though it is perfectly plausible that the prophet could choose to quote the earlier prophecy in order to round out his own picture of the ideal age.

and the serpent—dust, its food. The serpent will no longer sink its fangs into human flesh or that of other animals. But these words also recall the curse on the primordial serpent, "and dust shall you eat" (Genesis 3:14).

CHAPTER 66

[1]Thus said the LORD:
The heavens are My throne
and the earth is My footstool.
What house would you build for Me
and what place for My resting,
[2]when all these My hand has made
and Mine all these are?—
said the LORD—
But to this do I look, to the poor
man
and to the broken of spirit who
trembles at My word.

[3]Who slaughters an ox, who strikes
down a man,
sacrifices the sheep, breaks the
neck of a dog,
brings up in offering the blood of a
pig,

burns incense in token, blessing
strange gods—
they, too, have chosen their ways,
in their abominations they have
delighted.
4I, too, will choose their rank acts
and what they fear I will bring
upon them.
Because I called and none answered,
I spoke and they did not listen,
and they did what was evil in My
eyes,
and in what I did not delight they
chose.

5Listen to the word of the LORD,
you who tremble at His word.
Your brothers who hate you have
said,
who scorn you for the sake of My
name:
“Let the LORD be honored,
and we shall see your joy,”
but they shall be shamed.
6The sound of uproar from the town,

a sound from the Temple,
the sound of the LORD,
dealing punishment to His
enemies.

7 Before she labors, she gives birth,
before the birth pangs come upon
her, she delivers a male.
8 Who heard the like of this,
who has seen things like these?
Can a land go through birth in a
single day,
can a nation be born in a single
breath?
For Zion went into labor,
gave birth to her children.
9 Shall I cause labor and not bring
about birth?
said the LORD.
Shall I bring about birth and block
the womb?
said your God.

10 Rejoice with Jerusalem
and all who love her exult in her.

Be glad with her in gladness,
all who mourn for her,
[11]that you suck and be sated
from her comforting breast,
that you drink deep and know
pleasure
from her glorious teat.
[12]For thus said the LORD:
I am about to stretch out to her
well-being like a river,
and like a rushing brook
the glory of nations,
and your babes shall be borne on the
hip,
and on knees they shall be
dandled.
[13]As a man whose mother comforts
him,
so I Myself will comfort you,
and you shall be comforted in
Jerusalem.
[14]And you shall see, and your heart
shall rejoice,
and your bones shall flourish like
grass,

and the LORD's hand shall be
known to His servants,
and He shall rage against His
enemies.
15For, look, the LORD shall come in
fire,
and like the whirlwind His
chariots,
to bring His anger to bear in fury
and His rebuke in flames of fire.
16For the LORD exacts justice in fire
and with His sword against all
flesh,
and the slain by the LORD
shall be many.

17Those who consecrate themselves and purify themselves to enter the gardens, following one in the center, eating the flesh of pigs, reptiles, and mice, they shall come to an end together, says the LORD. 18As for Me, [I know] their acts and their devisings.

[A time] is coming to gather all nations and tongues, and they shall come and see My glory. 19And I will set a sign upon them and send from them survivors to the

nations, to Pul and Lud, who draw the bow, Tubal and Javan, the distant coastlands that have not heard of Me and have not seen My glory, and they shall tell My glory among the nations. [20]And they shall bring your brothers from all the nations as an offering to the LORD on horses and chariots and covered wagons and on mules and on dromedaries to My holy mountain in Jerusalem, said the LORD, as the Israelites bring a grain offering in a pure vessel to the house of the LORD. [21]And from them, too, I shall take to be priests and Levites, said the LORD.

[22]For as the new heavens and the new
earth
that I am making stand before
Me, said the LORD
so shall stand your seed and
your name.
[23]And it shall be, from one month to
the next
and from one sabbath to the next,
all flesh shall come
to bow before Me, said the
LORD.
[24]And they shall go out and see

the corpses of the people who
rebelled against Me,
for their worm shall never die
and their fire shall not go out,
and they shall be a horror to all
flesh.

CHAPTER 66 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The heavens are My throne . . . / What house would you build for Me.* These words are in keeping with a theme of Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple (1 Kings 8), which may well have been composed in this post-exilic period. The point, as in Solomon's prayer, is not a categorical rejection of the Temple but resistance to the popular idea that it was literally God's house.

2. *to the poor man / and to the broken of spirit who trembles at My word.* The argument here is clearly against materialist notions of closeness to the deity. What a compassionate God wants is not a grand building but suffering humanity that is attuned to the divine word.

3. *Who slaughters an ox, who strikes down a man.* These words begin a new prophecy, which is a castigation of those given over to syncretistic or pagan forms of worship. The entire concluding chapter of Isaiah is made up of brief textual units only imperfectly connected with each other. This somewhat fragmented character may be the consequence of editorial process, in which remaining fragments of writing were drawn together at the end, as is the case in the last chapter of the Song of Songs. Some commentators think that the offensive rites listed here took place within the precincts of the Temple itself, although that is not altogether clear. In any case, all four versets here are structured as pairings of contradictions: a person slaughters an ox, which is

acceptable, but kills a man (some think, in ritual slaughter); conducts the acceptable sacrifice of a sheep but also breaks the neck of a dog in a sacrificial rite; brings up in offering—a term usually set aside for grain offering—the blood of a pig.

strange gods. The Hebrew *ʾawen* has the basic meaning of "wrongdoing" but is sometimes used as a pejorative epithet for pagan gods.

5. *you who tremble at His word.* This recurrent designation of the pious, as Blenkinsopp plausibly contends, probably refers to a sect or at least a group of true believers who resist the repellent practices of the paganizers enumerated in verse 3. The sense of a deep schism within the people is brought out in the next line, "Your brothers who hate you."

Let the LORD be honored, / and we shall see your joy. These words are uttered in biting sarcasm to those "who tremble at His word" by the people who hate them.

7. Before she labors, she gives birth. This begins still another prophecy. The "she" is Zion, and the image of childbirth is one picked up from Second Isaiah. To give birth without labor is to reverse the curse on Eve in Genesis, and it also suggests the miraculous swiftness with which the redemption is to be realized.

8. *in a single breath.* Literally, "in one time."

11. *that you suck and be sated / from her comforting breast.* The metaphor of nursing infants builds on the birth imagery of the previous passage. The received text reads *shod*, "spoils," but this is certainly a scribal bowlderization of *shad*, "breast," just as it is in 60:16.

teat. The Hebrew *ziz* occurs in only one other place in the Bible, but in a sense that is inappropriate here. Both the poetic parallelism and a proposed Arabic cognate suggest that it means "breast" or "nipple."

12. *the glory of nations.* The context would indicate that "glory" here implies "wealth."

your babes shall be borne on the hip, / and on knees they shall be dandled. This line is a virtual citation of 60:4.

13. *comforts . . . / comfort . . . / comforted.* The triple insistence on this verb, following "her comforting breast" is an explicit allusion to the comforting, "Comfort. O comfort My people," at the beginning of chapter 40, bringing all of 40–66 to closure in an envelope structure.

14. *the LORD's hand.* As often elsewhere, "hand" suggests "power."

16. *His sword against all flesh.* The phrase "all flesh," as in the Flood story (which may be a relevant linguistic and thematic background here), means "all humankind." The objects, then, of divine fury in this passage are by no means restricted to the paganizers in the Judahite population but extend to all the nations that have violated God's law, whether by oppressing Israel or in other ways.

17. *Those who consecrate themselves.* As the text moves from poetry to prose, the objects of God's wrath again are those who engage in pagan rituals. One suspects that this verse did not originally belong with what precedes it. "Consecrate" means to prepare oneself ritually—perhaps through ablution and other acts of purification—to engage in the pagan worship.

following one in the center. Though "one" in the consonantal text is masculine, the Masoretic marginal note changes it to a feminine. This might be a priestess ministering in the cult, or it might be a vision of Asherah, the Canaanite fertility goddess, here worshipped by those gathered round her in the sacred gardens.

19. *I will . . . send from them survivors to the nations.* In Second Isaiah, there is a vision of acceptance of proselytes. This prophecy at the end goes a step further, imagining that those among the nations who have finally seen God's glory wish to be sent out to the far reaches of the known earth, as far as North Africa (Lud) and Greece (Javan) to bring the good news of YHWH's universal dominion. This comes close to the project of a mission of conversion in Acts and in the Pauline Epistles.

20. *they shall bring your brothers . . . as an offering.* "Offering," minhaḥ, which means either "grain offering" or "tribute," is used here metaphorically: the gentiles who bring back the exiles to Zion will be as if bringing an offering to the Temple.

as the Israelites bring a grain offering. This clause explains the metaphor.

21. *I shall take to be priests and Levites.* This declaration, unless it is somehow figurative, is a radical departure from earlier tradition, in which it is stipulated that only men from the tribe of Levi are allowed to perform these functions, and certainly not proselytes.

22. *For as the new heavens and the new earth.* The book now concludes with an eschatological prophecy, again in poetry, that reprises the idea of a new creation put forth in 65:17.

23. *all flesh.* Once again, this expression means "all humankind," and so we have a universalist vision of all humanity coming to Jerusalem to worship God there. The precursor to this prophecy is Isaiah 2:2–5.

24. *And they shall go out and see / the corpses of the people who rebelled against Me.* This gloating—a sense implied by the verb "to see" followed in the Hebrew, as here, by the preposition that means "in"—over the corpses of God's enemies, whether they are Judahite paganizers or those of the nations who resisted God's word, is hardly an edifying note on which to conclude the Book of Isaiah, as various commentators have noted. When these verses were taken up as the prophetic reading or *haftarah* for the sabbath that falls on the new moon, verse 23 was repeated after verse 24, in part to stress the conjunction of sabbath and new moon but probably also to conclude the reading on an upbeat.

JEREMIAH

Introduction

Of all the prophets, Jeremiah is the one who conveys to us the most vivid sense of the man behind the words. For other prophets, we get at best a minimal notation of vocation (arborist, priest) and town of origin. However, Jeremiah, a priest from the town of Anathoth near Jerusalem who was active from the 620s B.C.E. until after the destruction of the kingdom of Judah in 586, tells us a good deal about himself because of his continual anguish over his prophetic calling. Many episodes of his life, moreover, are reported in narrative detail, for the most part probably by his amanuensis Baruch son of Neriah.

This was a trying moment for anyone to bring what he imperatively felt was God's word to the people of Israel. A century before the beginning of Jeremiah's mission, the northern kingdom of Israel had been overwhelmed by Assyrian invaders. A large part of the

population was deported to sundry locations elsewhere in the Assyrian empire—this was when the so-called ten lost tribes were "lost"—and all vestiges of national sovereignty in the area once governed by the northern kingdom were eradicated. The extirpation of the northern kingdom was a national catastrophe that haunted its southern counterpart throughout the century and more that followed, since—given powerful military threats from foreign powers (for the first part of this period, the principal threat continued to be Assyria, then superseded by Babylonia)—the fate that had overtaken Israel could easily overtake Judah as well. In some of his prophecies, Jeremiah harbors the hope of a restored Israel reunited with a restored Judah, but one may justly describe this as a utopian fantasy, because by the late seventh century B.C.E. and early in the next century there were no visible remnants of the kingdom of Israel that could serve as the ground for such a restoration.

The other major event that stamped a strong mark on Jeremiah's prophecies was the sweeping religious reforms instigated by King Josiah beginning around 622 B.C.E. The playbook for these reforms was the text purportedly discovered during Josiah's renovation of the Temple and referred to in the account of its discovery in Kings as "the book of teaching [*torah*],"

which is to say, the Book of Deuteronomy. The virtually unanimous scholarly consensus is that the book in question, or at least its core, was actually composed at this time to provide a textual warrant for the Josianic reforms. Its agenda incorporated two main points, one cultic and the other a theologically driven theory of historical causation. The previous four Books of Moses had assumed the legitimacy of the worship of God of Israel throughout the land; Deuteronomy now insisted that the cult could be practiced only "in the place that I will choose," which clearly meant Jerusalem. Sacrifice to YHWH on the "high places," the rural shrines, was excoriated as sheer paganism. The exclusive centralization of the cult was thus associated with Deuteronomy's persistent preoccupation with backsliding into paganism and with the notion that the worship of strange gods would lead directly to national disaster and exile as punishment for the people's failure to honor the covenant with its God.

All this is translated into Jeremiah's central message. While, like the other prophets, he on occasion castigates his audiences for egregious acts of social injustice and perversion of the legal system, his most repeated concern is with Judah's whoring after strange gods (the sexual metaphor is often flaunted)

and the devastation of the nation that it will inevitably bring about. The English language aptly coined the noun “jeremiad”—a “complaining tirade,” in the definition of the Oxford English Dictionary—because so often Jeremiah’s prophecies are bitter denunciations of the people’s wayward behavior accompanied by dire predictions that this will lead to scorched earth for the kingdom of Judah and exile for its inhabitants.

This sort of message, delivered at a time when Babylonian forces (597 B.C.E. and again in 587–586) were besieging Jerusalem, could not have made Jeremiah a very popular figure. The priests of his hometown of Anathoth, according to his own account, threatened to kill him. Zedekiah, the reigning monarch, had the scroll of his prophecies burned. (Jeremiah would promptly direct Baruch to make another copy.) Jeremiah was imprisoned more than once; in Jerusalem, his captors cast him into a deep, dried-up cistern with muck at the bottom, in the clear intention of leaving him there to die.

Against this background, one readily understands that Jeremiah saw his prophetic mission as a source of unending personal torment. Several of the prophets, beginning with Moses himself, express a sense of unworthiness to take up the prophetic calling. Thus Jeremiah: “Alas, O Master, LORD, / for, look, I know

not how to speak, / for I am but a lad." (1:6). The reasonable inference is that Jeremiah was quite young when he first received the call, but in contrast to other prophets, tormented reluctance persists throughout his career. If at first he felt unworthy for the task, as he goes on to carry it out, subjected to vilification, death threats, and imprisonment, he repeatedly wishes he could free himself from the burden of prophecy; nevertheless, the searing consciousness that God demands it of him will not allow him to relinquish the prophetic role. The most striking expression of this dilemma is the great poem in chapter 20 that begins, "You have enticed me, O LORD, and I was enticed. / You are stronger than I, and You prevailed," and goes on to say, memorably, "I thought, 'I will not recall Him, / nor will I speak anymore in His name.' / But it was in my heart like burning fire / shut up in my bones." Jeremiah figures as a kind of prisoner of conscience: he is acutely aware that conveying his message of scathing castigation and impending doom at the very moment the Babylonian army is descending on Jerusalem will bring him nothing but humiliation and angry rejection, yet he feels he has no alternative other than to tell his people the bitter truth.

The lines in chapter 20 evoking Jeremiah's anguish over his prophetic calling are great poetry, and there

are other strong and moving poems in the book. It must be said, however, that as a poet he does not exhibit a great deal of either the verbal virtuosity of Isaiah son of Amoz or the metaphoric brilliance of Second Isaiah. He is so intently focused on the message that artful articulation of the medium often seems less of a concern for him. Many of the poems use stereotypical phrases, and a considerable portion of the prophecies is delivered in prose. The prose seems especially prone to formulaic wording and to repetition, both within a single prophecy and between one prophecy and another. Jeremiah, like the other prophets, certainly exhibits a gift for elevated speech: it is the case for all the prophets that rhetorical power is inescapably part of effectively reporting the words of God to their audiences. But, by and large, one comes away from the collection of Jeremiah's prophecies not with a sense of deftly wrought verbal artifacts but rather with the existential and historical urgency of this particular prophet. Dark clouds of disaster lower over the kingdom of Judah. In Jeremiah's understanding, the disaster cannot be averted, for it is the ineluctable consequence of the people's violation of its covenant with God, its reckless infatuation with the gods and goddesses of a pagan cult, and the

commission of acts of promiscuity and even human sacrifice entailed by that cult.

Politics is deeply implicated in this prophetic stance. The idea that Judah can parry the Babylonian threat by an alliance with Egypt is, in Jeremiah's eyes, a hopeless delusion. (This would prove to be an accurate political judgment.) The devastation of its towns, the exile of many of its inhabitants—the grim message that Jeremiah's countrymen did not want to hear—will surely come, and very soon. As a counterpoint, Jeremiah is also able to envisage a time when Babylonia itself will be destroyed and the people of Judah once more settled in peace and prosperity in its land. God would establish, in Jeremiah's pregnant phrase, a "new covenant" with His people. That upbeat message was dictated by an underlying theological assumption on the part of this harbinger of doom that, although God chastises Israel, His commitment to His people is for all time. But the vision of a radiant future remains a secondary emphasis in the somber prophecies of Jeremiah. The grand expression of such a vision would come a few decades after Jeremiah's lifetime in the poetry of the anonymous poet of the Babylonian exile whom scholars call Second Isaiah.

CHAPTER 1

[1]The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, of the priests
who were in Anathoth in the region of Benjamin, [2]to
whom the word of the LORD came in the days of
Josiah son of Amon king of Judah, in the thirteenth
year of his reign. [3]And it continued in the days of
Jehoiakim son of Josiah until the end of the eleventh
year of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, until
Jerusalem went into exile in the fifth month. [4]And the
word of the LORD came to me, saying:

[5]Before I fashioned you in the belly I
knew you,
and before you came out of the
womb, I consecrated you.
A prophet to the nations I made
you.
[6]And I said, “Alas, O Master,
LORD,

for, look, I know not how to
speak,
for I am but a lad.”
7 And the LORD said to me,
Do not say, “I am but a lad,”
for wherever I send you, you shall
go,
and whatever I charge you, you
shall speak.
8 Do not fear them,
for I am with you to save you,
said the LORD.

9 And the LORD reached out His hand and touched my mouth, and the LORD said to me, “Look, I have put My words in your mouth. 10 See, I have appointed you this day over nations and over kingdoms to uproot and to smash and to destroy and to lay waste, to build and to plant.” 11 And the word of the LORD came to me, saying: “What do you see, Jeremiah?” And I said, “An almond-tree wand do I see.” 12 And the LORD said to me, “You have seen well, for I am vigilant with My word to do it.” 13 And the word of the LORD came to me a second time, saying: “What do you see?” And I said, “A seething pot I see, and it is turned to the

north.” [14]And the LORD said to me, “From the north
shall the evil be broached on all the dwellers of the
land. [15]For I am about to call forth all the clans of the
kingdoms of the north,” said the LORD, “and they
shall come and each set his throne at the entrance of
the gates of Jerusalem and against its walls all round
and against all the towns of Judah. [16]And I will speak
out My judgments against them, for all their evil in
that they forsook Me and burned incense to other gods
and bowed down to the work of their hands. [17]As for
you, you shall gird your loins and rise and speak to
them all that I charge you. Do not be broken-spirited
before them, lest I break you before them. [18]As for
Me, look, I have made you today a fortress town and
an iron pillar and walls of bronze against all the land,
against the kings of Judah and its nobles, against its
priests and the people of the land. [19]And they shall
battle against you but shall not prevail over you, for I
am with you,” said the LORD, “to save you.”

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

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1. *The words of Jeremiah.* The term for “words,” *devarim*, could also mean “acts,” though a continuity with “the word of the LORD” in the next verse might argue against that sense here.

Anathoth. This is a village near Jerusalem. Although Jeremiah is identified as a member of the priestly caste there, what follows does not indicate that he was an officiant in the Temple.

2. *in the thirteenth year of his reign.* This would be 626 B.C.E., four years before Josiah's sweeping cultic reforms followed the purported discovery of the Book of Teaching (Deuteronomy) in the Temple. While some scholars have wondered why there is no direct reflection of the Josianic reforms in Jerusalem's prophecies, it is noteworthy that he begins with an indictment of imported pagan practices (see verse 16), unlike Isaiah, whose initial emphasis is on social injustice. This stress on pagan practices may bespeak a Deuteronimistic context.

3. *until Jerusalem went into exile.* This occurred in 586 B.C.E., roughly four decades after the inauguration of Jeremiah's mission. There are, moreover, indications that he was not entirely silent in the years immediately following the exile.

5. *I knew you, / . . . I consecrated you.* The sequence of verbs reflects the general pattern of focusing in the second verset of a line of biblical poetry: first God has an intimate relationship with Jeremiah ("knew"); then He consecrates him as prophet. The third verset spells out the nature of the consecration.

6. *I know not how to speak.* Jeremiah conforms here to a virtual *topos* of biblical prophecy. Moses and Isaiah before him first professed their inability to speak when God charged them with the prophetic mission.

but a lad. The chronological range of the Hebrew *naʿar* slides from small child to young man. If Jeremiah is perhaps in his early twenties in 526 B.C.E., this would bring him into his sixties at the end of his career.

7. *And the LORD said to me.* Jeremiah's prophecies strikingly begin with a series of exchanges in dialogue between God and him, a feature that will continue in the prose section of this chapter.

8. *Do not fear them.* From the very start, a bitter antagonism is anticipated between Jeremiah and his audience. This theme will be developed in the military imagery of the concluding verses of the chapter.

9. *touched my mouth.* This dedication or empowering gesture is clearly reminiscent of Isaiah 6, where the seraph touches the prophet's mouth with a burning coal.

10. *to build and to plant.* After the prophecies of destruction, which will be preponderant as the items of destruction are preponderant in this sentence, there will be prophecies of restoration.

11. *What do you see, Jeremiah?* The question about the riddling vision resembles the question at the beginning of Amos. Both hinge on a pun (see the next note).

11–12. *An almond-tree wand . . . I am vigilant.* "Almond-tree" is *shaqed*; "vigilant" is *shoqed*.

13. *it is turned to the north.* More literally, "it is facing the north." This wording has puzzled interpreters because a pot has no front. Perhaps the least strained suggestion is Yair Hoffman's: the pot is sitting over a fire in a three-sided hearth, with the open side facing north.

14. *From the north shall the evil be broached.* The ominous nature of this prediction is enhanced by the vagueness of the formulation. The enemy in the later sixth century B.C.E. would have to be Babylonia, which is definitely more to the east than to the north, though perhaps a northern invasion route is envisaged. The destroyer from the north also invokes the dire memory of Assyria, which a century earlier descended from the north and annihilated the kingdom of Israel.

15. *each set his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem.* These are thrones because kings command these daunting forces; what emerges is a rather surrealistic picture of kings on their thrones sitting in siege against Jerusalem. It should be noted that many scholars, including the editors of the *Biblia Hebraica*, read all or most of the section beginning with verse 14 as poetry. To this translator, however, all these verses do not seem to be sufficiently tight metrically to qualify as verse; however, as is often the case with high-rhetorical prose, they exhibit loose approximations of the parallel structures of poetry.

16. *against them.* As the next clause makes clear, “them” refers to the Judahites, not to the invading kings.

17. *Do not be broken-spirited.* The basic meaning of this verb is “to be afraid” but the next clause plays on its other sense, “to be broken.”

18. *a fortress town and an iron pillar and walls of bronze.* Here the military metaphor of Jeremiah’s oppositional stance is spelled out: God will make him an impregnable city, with pillars not of stone but of iron and walls not of stone but of bronze. All this suggests a prophet who is apprehensive from the start of a fierce struggle with those to whom he has been sent.

CHAPTER 2

[1]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[2]“Go and call out in the hearing of Jerusalem, saying,
Thus said the LORD:

I recalled for you the kindness of
your youth,
your bridal love,
your coming after Me in the
wilderness,
in an unsown land.
[3]Israel is holy to the LORD,
the first fruits of His harvest.
All who eat it bear guilt,
evil shall come upon them,
said the LORD.

[4]Listen to the word of the LORD,
House of Jacob,

and all the clans of the House of
Israel.
[5]Thus said the LORD:
What wrong did your fathers find in
Me
that they grew distant from Me
went after mere breath and
turned into mere breath?
[6]And they did not say, “Where is the
LORD,
Who brought us up from the land
of Egypt
and led us through the wilderness
in a land of desert and pits,
in a land of parched earth and
death’s shadow,
in a land where no man had gone,
and where no human dwelled?”
[7]And I brought you to a country of
farmland
to eat its fruit and its bounty,
and you came and defiled My land
and My estate you made
abhorrent.
[8]The priests did not say, “Where is
the LORD?”

And those skilled in the Teaching
did not know Me,
and the shepherds rebelled
against Me,
and the prophets prophesied for
Baal,
and after what cannot avail they
went.
[9]Therefore will I yet dispute with you
—
said the LORD—and with the
sons of your sons will I dispute.
[10]For pass through the isles of the
Kittites and see,
send out to Kedar and look
carefully
and see, has there been the like
of this?
[11]Has a nation given up its gods
though they are ungods?
But My people exchange its Glory
for what cannot avail.
[12]Be appalled, O heavens, for this,
be shocked, altogether, desolate—
said the LORD.
[13]For two evils My people has done:

Me they forsook, the source of
living waters,
to hew for themselves cisterns,
broken cisterns,
that cannot hold the water.
[14]Is Israel a slave, is he home-born
chattel?
Why has he become plunder?
[15]Lions roar over him,
lift up their cry,
and they have made his land a
desolation,
his towns are ravaged with no
dweller there.
[16]The men, too, of Noph and
Tahpanes
shall smash your pate.
[17]Is not this how you fare
for forsaking the LORD your God
when He led you on the way?
[18]And now, why go in the way of
Egypt
to drink the waters of the Nile,
and why go in the way of Assyria
to drink the Euphrates' waters?
[19]Let your evil chastise you

and your rebellion reprove you,
and mark and see that it is evil and bitter,
your forsaking the LORD your God.
The fear of Me is not upon you
said the Master, LORD of Armies.
[20]For of old you broke your yoke,
you tore apart your bands,
and you said, “I will not serve.”
For on every high hill
and under every lush tree
you lean back, a whore.
[21]And I, I planted you as a choice vine,
a wholly true seed,
and how have you turned against Me
into a wayward alien vine?
[22]Though you scrub with natron
and use abundant lye,
your crime is stained before Me,
said the Master, the LORD.
[23]How can you say, “I was not defiled,
after the Baalim I have not gone”?

See your way in the valley,
know what you have done.
A swift she-camel threading her way,
[24]a wild ass at home in the wilderness,
sniffing wind in the lust of her appetite,
her desire cannot be turned back.
All who seek her will not tire,
in her season they will find her.
[25]Keep your feet from walking bare
and your throat from going dry.
And you give up hope, saying,
"No, I love strangers,
and after them I will go."
[26]Like the shame of a thief when he is caught,
thus the house of Israel acted shamefully,
they, their kings, and their nobles,
and their priests, and their prophets.
[27]They say to a tree, "You are my father,"

and to a stone, “You gave birth to
me.”
For they have turned their backs to
Me
and not their faces.
And when disaster befalls them, they
say,
“Arise and rescue us.”
[28]And where are your gods that you
made for yourself?
Let them rise and rescue when
disaster befalls you.
For as the number of your towns
were your gods, O Judah.
[29]Why do you dispute with Me?
All of you rebelled against Me,
said the LORD.
[30]In vain did I strike your sons,
they did not accept reproval.
Your sword has consumed your
prophets
like a ravaging lion.
[31]O you generation, see the word of
the LORD!
Was I a wilderness to Israel,
a land of deep darkness?

Why did My people say, “We have
broken loose,
we will no longer come to you”?
[32]Does a virgin forget her jewels,
a bride her knotted sash?
Yet My people has forgotten Me,
days without number.
[33]How you make your way fair
to seek love!
Thus, even to wicked women
you have taught your ways.
[34]In your skirts, as well, is found
the lifeblood of the innocent poor.
Not in a hideout did I find them,
but upon all of these.
[35]And you said, “I am innocent.
Why, His wrath has turned back
from me.”
I am about to exact judgment from
you,
for your saying, “I did not offend.”
[36]Why do you cheapen yourself so
much
to change your way?
By Egypt, too, you shall be shamed
as you were shamed by Assyria.

[37]For from this you shall come out
with your hands upon your head.
For the LORD spurns the ones you
trust,
and you shall not succeed through
them.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *the kindness of your youth.* As elsewhere, the Hebrew *ḥesed* equally implies loyalty in a relationship.

your bridal love. This image of Israel as bride, God as her spouse, later provided a powerful warrant for the allegorical reading of the Song of Songs.

your coming after Me in the wilderness, / in an unsown land. In the interlinear parallelism between this line and the preceding one, we are now given a concretization of the bride Israel's loyalty and love: she did not hesitate to follow after her divine husband even in the forbidding landscape of the Sinai desert.

3. *Israel is holy to the LORD.* The Hebrew also suggests something like "dedicated," "the special possession of." Having shown her devotion in the wilderness, she becomes "holy to the LORD."

4. *the house of Israel.* It is by no means necessary to conclude, as some scholars have, that those words are addressed to the remnants of the northern kingdom of Israel, destroyed a century earlier. With the northern kingdom gone forever, "Israel" began to be an alternative designation for the people of Judah, at least in literary usage. One sees the term used this way in verse 14.

5. *went after mere breath and turned into mere breath.* "Mere breath," *hevel*, the term reiterated in Qohelet, is here a pejorative epithet for foreign gods,

who have no real existence. The cognate verb that is coined in this line expresses the idea that those who worship emptiness turn themselves into emptiness.

6. *led us through the wilderness.* This clause plays back on Israel's going after God in the wilderness in verse 2.

7. *you came and defiled My land.* The formulation reflects an understanding that the land belongs to God, Who has bestowed it on the people as a bounty.

8. *those skilled in the Teaching.* The literal sense is "those who hold on to the Teaching," but that verb is used for anyone adept at a particular profession or skill.

the shepherds. This is a fixed epithet for "rulers."

what cannot avail. This is still another epithet for the nonentity of pagan gods.

9. *dispute.* The verb implies contestation in a court of law.

10. *the isles of the Kittites.* Many scholars think the reference is to Cyprus, though this may well be a more general invocation of the Greek islands far to the west of the Land of Israel.

send out to Kedar. "Kedar" refers to Arab tribes, and so the line swings broadly from west to east and from sea to land.

11. *Has a nation given up its gods / though they are ungods?* The prophet here frames an *a fortiori* argument: in new lands that are known, from west to east, has a people switched gods, even though the gods they worship are not real? Yet Israel has exchanged its own glorious God for a set of illusions.

12. *Be appalled, O heavens.* The Hebrew strengthens the emphasis through sound-play, *shomu shamayim*.

13. *cisterns, broken cisterns.* A cistern hewn in rock is a receptacle for the storage of water (perhaps rainwater) and not a water source or spring that continually flows. Its sides might be plastered but would be subject to cracks and breaks through which the water could leak out.

14. *Is Israel a slave.* Given the people's subjugation to foreign powers ("become plunder"), the prophet asks why such a fate should have befallen a freeborn people.

15. *Lions.* The Hebrew *kefirim* is the "young lions" of the King James Version, but that is merely part of the translators' desperate attempt to coin different terms for the five biblical synonyms for "lion." Presumably, the lions are a metaphor here for the invading foreign armies.

16. *Noph and Tahpanes.* These are prominent Egyptian cities. Jeremiah follows his predecessor Isaiah in thinking that any alliance with Egypt will in the end prove disastrous.

18. *why go in the way of Assyria.* We can infer that this prophecy was proclaimed before the final destruction of Assyria in 612 B.C.E. or shortly thereafter, at a moment when some circles in Judah imagined that an alliance with Assyria could save them from the onslaught of the Babylonians.

19. *Let your evil chastise you.* Some translators understand the noun *raʿah* here as "misfortune," but the parallelism with *meshuvotayikh*, which can only mean "rebellion" or "backsliding," argues against that construction. What the line rather says is: you have committed yourself to your wayward path, and that will eventually bring upon you dire consequences that may compel you to reflect on what you have done.

it is evil. This phrase picks up on "evil" at the beginning of the verse.

20. *on every high hill / and under every lush tree.* These are places for worshipping nature gods, often in fertility rites, as the third verset suggests.

you lean back, a whore. Jack R. Lundbom is probably right in proposing that the verb suggests a sexual position. The verset blends literal statement with metaphor: whoring is a recurrent metaphorical representation of idol worship (Israel's betrayal of her divine spouse), but literal sexual acts were performed in pagan rites in those bucolic settings.

22. *natron.* This is an English cognate, by way of the Greek, of the Hebrew *neter*, a sodium carbonate compound used in laundering.

your crime is stained before Me. The image of the stain reverses Isaiah 1:18, "If your offenses be like scarlet, like snow shall they turn white."

23. *after the Baalim I have not gone.* This is a pointed antithesis to "your going after Me in the wilderness" in verse 2.

See your way in the valley. Since Antiquity, many interpreters have seen here a reference to the Valley of Hinnom in Jerusalem, where child sacrifice was practiced.

23–24. *A swift she-camel . . . / a wild ass.* The image of idolatrous Israel as a whore is made more extreme now by likening the wayward people to animals in heat.

24. *sniffing wind in the lust of her appetite.* The female wild ass in heat sniffs for the scent of the male.

All who seek her will not tire. In heat, she is easily accessible to any male that wants to couple with her.

in her season. The literal sense is "in her month." The Septuagint shows "season," but that may be merely a translator's interpretation of "month."

25. *Keep your feet from walking bare / and your throat from going dry.* The probable reference is to lubricious Israel (throughout personified as a woman, with feminine grammatical forms used here), who runs barefoot after her lovers and cries out in lust until she is hoarse.

you give up hope. Literally, "you say 'despair.'"

27. *to a tree, "You are my father," / and to a stone, "You gave birth to me."* Although trees were part of the cult of Asherah, the fertility goddess, and stones were often used for making the images of sundry male gods, the line is guided by grammatical gender—in Hebrew, "tree" is masculine and "stone" feminine.

turned their backs. Literally, "turned their nape."

30. *Your sword has consumed your prophets.* One may recall the slaughter of the prophets of YHWH by Ahab, and the murder of prophets by paganizing monarchs probably occurred in later reigns as well.

33. *How you make your way fair.* Literally, this could be "make your way good" or "do well in your way." This translation follows Rashi, who understands this as the woman primping and adorning herself in order to attract lovers.

34. *the lifeblood of the innocent poor.* Remarkably, this is the very first reference in the book to a sin of perpetrating injustice rather than a cultic trespass.

a hideout. This is actually a tunnel dug in order to break into a house.

but upon all of these. The reference is a little obscure. Perhaps the meaning is "all of these skirts," which would be splattered with the blood of the innocent.

36. *to change your way.* That is, to change your way from following the God of Israel to going after strange gods.

37. *For from this you shall come out.* In light of the immediately preceding line, "this" would have to be Egypt.

with your hands upon your head. This is a gesture of despair or mourning.

CHAPTER 3

[1][And the word of the LORD came
to me], saying:
Look, should a man send away his
wife,
and she go from him and become
another man's,
can he go back to her again?
Would not that land be wholly
polluted?
And you, you have whored with
many lovers,
and would you come back to
Me? said the LORD.
[2]Lift up your eyes to the bare heights
and see.
Where have they not lain with
you?
On the roads you sat waiting for
them
like an Arab in the desert,

and you polluted the land
through your whoring and through
your evil.
3 And the showers were held back,
and the latter rains did not come,
and a whore-woman's brow you had,
you refused to be shamed.
4 Have you now not called Me, "My
father,"
You are the guide of my youth.
5 Will He bear a grudge forever,
will He keep it for all time?
Look, you spoke and did evil things,
and will you prevail?

6 And the LORD said to me in the days of King Josiah, "Have you seen what Rebel Israel has done? She goes on every high mountain and under every lush tree and plays the whore there. 7 And I thought, after she has done all those, she will come back to Me, but she did not come back, and her sister, Judah the Treacherous, saw. 8 And she saw that because Rebel Israel had committed adultery I sent her away and gave her a bill of divorce, yet Judah the Treacherous did not fear, and she, too, went and played the whore. 9 And it happened

that from all her whoring the land was polluted, and she committed adultery with stone and with tree.
[10]And yet, despite all this, Judah the Treacherous did not turn back to Me with a whole heart but falsely," said the LORD. [11]And the LORD said to me, "Rebel Israel has shown herself more in the right than Judah the Treacherous. [12]Go and call out these words to the north and say, Turn back, Rebel Israel, said the LORD, and I will not set My face against you, for I am faithful, said the LORD. I will not bear a grudge forever. [13]But know your crime, for against the LORD your God you have rebelled, and you have scattered your ways among strangers under every lush tree, and My voice you have not heeded, said the LORD. [14]Turn back, rebellious sons, said the LORD, for I have claimed possession of you and have taken you, one from a town and two from a clan, and brought you to Zion. [15]And I have given you shepherds after My own heart, and they have shepherded you with knowledge and discernment. [16]And it shall happen when you multiply and are fruitful in those days, said the LORD, that they no longer shall say 'the Ark of the LORD's Covenant' nor shall they bring it to mind nor shall they recall it nor seek it out, nor shall it again be made. [17]At that time they shall call Jerusalem 'Throne of the LORD,' and all the nations shall gather in it in the

name of the LORD, in Jerusalem, and they shall not
go after the willfulness of their evil heart. [18]In those
days the house of Judah shall go with the house of
Israel, and they shall come together from the land of
the north to the land that I gave in estate to your
fathers."

[19]As for Me, I said,
How shall I place you among
children?
I gave you a land of delight,
an estate of the greatest splendor
of nations,
and I said, You shall call Me "my
Father,"
and you shall not turn back from
Me.
[20]Yet, as a woman betrays her
companion,
you have betrayed Me, O house of
Israel,
said the LORD.
[21]A voice is heard on the bare
heights,

the weeping supplications of
Israel's children.
For they have made their way
crooked,
forgotten the LORD their God.
22 Turn back, rebellious children—
I will heal your rebellion.
"Here we are, we have come to you,
for You are the LORD and God.
Indeed, falsehood is from the hills,
the clamor of the mountains.
Indeed, in the LORD our God
is Israel's rescue.
23 And the shameful thing
consumed
the toil of our fathers from our
youth,
their sheep and their cattle,
their sons and their daughters.
24 Let us lie down in our shame,
and our disgrace be our cover,
for the LORD our God we have
offended,
we and our fathers from our youth
to this very day,

and we did not heed the voice
of the LORD our God."

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *saying.* This single word begins the Hebrew text of this chapter. Either it should be deleted, or, more likely, the introductory formula here presented in brackets was inadvertently omitted in scribal transmission.

send away. This is the set term for divorce.

can he go back to her again? According to the law in Deuteronomy 24:1–4, a man is not permitted to remarry his divorced wife.

lovers. Though the Hebrew *reʿim* usually means "companions," as it clearly does below in verse 20, the immediate context suggests the sense of "lovers," the same association for this noun clearly indicated in Hosea 3:1.

2. *to the bare heights.* These are probably the same locations as "the high hills" where fertility rites were conducted.

Where have they not lain with you? The passive Hebrew verb in the consonantal text, *shugalt*, is evidently a ruder term, euphemistically corrected in the Masoretic marginal note to the verb that means "to lie." Lundbom gets the flavor of the rudeness by translating the phrase as "where have you not been laid," but that expression sounds too colloquially modern.

On the roads you sat waiting for them. "Waiting for" is elliptically implied in the Hebrew, as Rashi notes. The story of Tamar and Judah in Genesis 38 leads one to infer that prostitutes often stationed themselves by the roadside to ply their trade.

like an Arab in the desert. The Arab is perhaps imagined sitting in his tent waiting for passing caravans in order to conduct commerce. Others see a reference to Arab marauders waiting to attack travelers.

4. *Have you not called Me, "My father."* These are the self-deluded words of Judah (still imagined in the second-person feminine singular as a woman),

who has not truly turned back to God yet fancies that she has an intimate relationship with Him and that He will bear her no grudge.

5. *will you prevail?* The received text seems to say "And she will prevail," which does not make much sense. This translation emends the verb to a second-person feminine singular, like the two preceding verbs in this sentence, and construes it as a rhetorical question.

8. *And she saw.* The Masoretic Text has "And I saw," but both the Septuagint and the Peshitta show this more plausible reading, "And she saw."

I sent her away and gave her a bill of divorce. The prophet, continuing his favored metaphor of the turn to pagan worship as sexual betrayal, represents the exile of the northern kingdom as God's divorcing Israel.

9. *from all her whoring.* The received text seems to say "from the voice of her whoring," *miqol zenutah*. Many scholars emend this to *miqal zenutah*, claiming it means "from her casual [or easy] whoring," but *qal* is an adjective that does not make syntactical sense as a construct form with *zenutah*. This translation reads instead *mikol zenutah.*

11. *Rebel Israel has shown itself more in the right than Judah the Treacherous.* In this continuing allegory of the two sister-kingdoms, Judah is even worse than Israel—either because she has the monitory example of exiled Israel before her eyes yet does not pay heed, or because Jeremiah represents her as actually exceeding Israel in her paganizing promiscuity.

12. *call out these words to the north.* The likely location is not the kingdom of Israel, long destroyed and its population largely replaced by people brought in from elsewhere in the Assyrian sphere, but the northern reaches of the Assyrian empire, to which the inhabitants of Israel have been exiled. This prophecy, enunciated a century after the destruction of the northern kingdom, surely expresses what is no more than a utopian hope, for by Jeremiah's time the exiles would have been assimilated into the surrounding peoples and would have lost their national identity.

Turn back, Rebel Israel. The Hebrew, *shuvah meshuvah yisraʾel*, exhibits sound-play (roughly like "turn back, backsliding Israel" in English). Verses 14 and 22 show a related sound-play, *shuvu banim shovavim*, "Turn back, rebellious sons."

13. *you have scattered your ways.* The phrasing sounds a little odd, but the probable reference, as the medieval Hebrew commentator David Kimchi proposes, is to the many different gods that promiscuous Israel chose to worship.

14. *one from a town and two from a clan.* This looks like a version of the notion of the saving remnant articulated by Isaiah. Only a small minority will be saved and brought back to Zion.

15. *shepherds.* As before, these are the rulers of the people.

16. *they no longer shall say "the Ark of the LORD's covenant."* The Ark Narrative in 1 Samuel 5–7 suggests that a fetishistic conception of the Ark as a magical object had currency among the people.

nor shall it again be made. These words may indicate that the supposed original Ark had been removed from the Temple and lost, which one may infer from some biblical texts but not from others.

17. *they shall call Jerusalem "Throne of the LORD."* The Ark, crowned with carved cherubim, was in fact conceived as God's throne. In the new age, however, all Jerusalem will be a manifestation of God's presence, and hence there will be no need for a material cult-object like the Ark.

18. *the house of Judah shall go with the house of Israel.* This culminates the utopian fantasy that the northern kingdom will be restored—"from the land of the north," which is to say Assyrian exile—and will live in harmony with the southern kingdom.

21. *the weeping supplications of Israel's children.* They have realized the dire straits into which their actions have brought them.

22. *I will heal your rebellion.* This is best understood as an ellipsis: I will heal the terrible consequences of your rebellion. What follows is a confession of wrongdoing by the penitent rebels.

falsehood is from the hills, / the clamor of the mountains. The hills are where the pagan gods were worshipped. The clamor would refer to the throng of celebrants on the heights, raising their voices in the performance of their rites.

23. *the shameful thing.* The noun *boshet*, "shame" or "shameful thing," is regularly used as a pejorative substitution for "Baal." One sees this in theophoric names, where the *baal* suffix has been editorially changed to *boshet*, as in "Mephibosheth," originally "Mephibaal."

consumed / the toil of our fathers. As the next line makes clear, the wealth of the fathers, their sheep and their cattle, has been eaten up in sacrifices to Baal, and, what is worse, their sons and daughters have been offered in sacrifice as well.

CHAPTER 4

[1]If you turn back, Israel, said the
LORD,
to Me you shall turn back,
and if you remove your foul things
from before Me and do not
waiver,
[2]I vow, as the LORD lives, in truth,
in justice, and in righteousness,
that nations shall bless themselves
through you,
and through you shall they be
praised.
[3]For thus said the LORD to the men
of Judah and Jerusalem:
Till for yourselves tilled ground,
and do not sow among thorns.
[4]Be circumcised to the LORD
and remove your hearts' foreskins,
men of Judah and dwellers of
Jerusalem,

lest My wrath come forth like fire
and burn with none to quench it
because of the evil of your acts.
5 Tell it in Judah,
and in Jerusalem make it heard
and say,
blow the ram's horn in the land,
call out with full voice and say:
Assemble and let us come
to the fortified towns.
6 Raise a banner toward Zion,
take refuge, do not stand,
for I am about to bring harm from
the north
and a great disaster.
7 A lion has sprung from its thicket,
and the ravager of nations has
journeyed,
he has come forth from his place
to make your land desolate.
Your towns shall be ruined with
no dweller.
8 For this gird sackcloth,
keen and howl,
for the wrath of the LORD
has not turned back from him.

[9]And it shall happen on that day, said
the LORD,
the heart of the king shall fail
and the heart of the nobles,
and desolate the priests shall be,
and the prophets shall be
dumbfounded.
[10]And I said, “Alas, O Master,
LORD!
Surely You have misled this
people and Jerusalem,
saying, ‘You shall have peace,’
but the sword has touched the
throat.”
[11]And at that time it shall be said
to this people and to Jerusalem:
a parching wind from the bare
heights in the desert
going through My People’s
Daughter—
neither to winnow nor to sift.
[12]A full wind from these comes
against Me.
Now will I speak judgments
against them.
[13]Look, he comes up like the clouds

and like the whirlwind his
chariots.
His horses are swifter than eagles—
woe to us, for we are destroyed!
14 Cleanse your heart of evil,
Jerusalem,
so that you may be rescued.
How long will there lodge in your
midst
your wicked devisings?
15 For a voice proclaims from Dan
and announces disaster from
Mount Ephraim.
16 Make it known to the nations, look!
Announce it concerning
Jerusalem.
Watchers are coming from a faraway
land,
and they shall raise their voice
against Judah's towns.
17 Like guards of the field they are
against her all round,
for she has rebelled against Me.
18 Your way and your deeds
have done these to you,
this evil of yours, which is bitter,

for it has touched your very heart.
[19]My gut, my gut—I writhe,
the walls of my heart,
my heart moans in me,
I am not still,
for the ram's horn's sound I have heard,
the blare of war.
[20]Disaster upon disaster is called forth,
for all the land is destroyed,
all at once my tents are destroyed,
in a moment, my tent curtains.
[21]How long shall I see the banner,
hear the ram's horn's sound?
[22]For My people are fools,
Me they did not know.
Ignorant children are they,
and they are not discerning,
they are wise to do evil,
but they know not how to do good.

[23]I saw the earth, and, look, welter
and waste,

the heavens, and their light was
gone.
[24]I saw the mountains and, look, they
quaked,
and all the hills broke apart.
[25]I saw, and look, there was no
human there,
and all the fowl of the heavens
had gone away.
[26]I saw, and, look, the farmland was
desert,
and all its towns were ruined
before the LORD and before
His blazing wrath.
[27]For thus said the LORD:
A desolation shall all the earth be
but I will not wreak utter
destruction.
[28]For this all the earth shall mourn,
and the heavens above shall
darken,
for I have spoken, I have laid plans,
and I did not repent nor turn back
from it.
[29]From the sound of the horseman
and archer

all the town flees.
They have entered the crannies,
gone up to the cliffs,
all the town is abandoned,
and no man dwells in it.
30 As for you, the destroyed one, what
have you done,
that you dress up in scarlet,
that you put on bangles of gold,
that you set off your eyes in kohl?
For naught you make yourself
lovely.
Your lovers despise you,
your life they seek.
31 For I have heard a sound like a
woman in labor,
distress like one giving birth the
first time,
the voice of Zion's Daughter
panting,
she stretches out her hands:
"Woe to me, for my being goes
faint before the killers!"

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *nations shall bless themselves through you.* This echoes God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 22:18.

and through you shall they be praised. This probably means, as Rashi observes, that they will consider it a merit for themselves to be associated with Israel

3. *Till for yourselves tilled ground.* As a prudent farmer cultivates cleared and tillable ground, you should guide your acts in accordance with God's teaching and not give yourself over to the futility of strange gods (the implicit referent of "thorns").

4. *Be circumcised to the LORD / and remove your hearts' foreskins.* This image anticipates Paul's idea about the circumcision of the heart. Since the heart was thought of as the seat of understanding, a membrane covering it would mean an unperceptive heart.

5. *blow the ram's horn.* One function of blowing the ram's horn was as a military signal, either to assemble the troops or, as here, to sound a retreat.

6. *Raise a banner toward Zion.* The banner in this instance points to the direction to flee to Zion as a fortified city.

7. *A lion has sprung from its thicket.* As elsewhere in biblical poetry, the lion is a set metaphor for a warrior or an army.

9. *and desolate the priests shall be, / and the prophets shall be dumbfounded.* The translation reproduces the chiasm of the Hebrew, which has the expressive effect of sandwiching the priests and prophets between "desolate" and "dumbfounded."

10. *You shall have peace.* Although this could also mean "All will be well with you," the antithesis with the sword against the throat suggests that *shalom* here has the force of "peace."

11. *a parching wind.* The adjective tsaḥ in this instance does not mean "bright," as it does in the Song of Songs, but derives from *tseḥah* and *tsaḥiah*, terms that indicate a state of being parched.

neither to winnow nor to sift. This devastating wind blowing from the eastern desert—what is called from the Arabic the *khamsin*—allows nothing to grow and be harvested.

12. *from these.* The reference is obscure, and this single (Hebrew) word is not reflected in the Septuagint.

16. *Watchers.* The use of this term is ironic—the "watchers" are the invaders who have come to encircle Judah. The Hebrew *notsrim* may also pun on the verb *tsur*, "to besiege."

17. *Like guards of the field.* This simile continues the irony of "watchers"—people who guard a field to protect it from incursions—but these "guards" are besiegers.

19. *My gut, my gut.* Even though this is inelegant in English, it faithfully represents the Hebrew *meʿai meʿai*. The gut or intestine (the King James Version's "bowels") was thought to be the seat of emotion or compassion, but the expressive thrust here is that the prophet's innards and heart are pounding within him as he envisages the unfolding disaster.

21. *How long shall I see the banner.* This is the banner held aloft by the attacking army. There were no national flags in the ancient period, but military contingents had banners, like the armies in Japan's samurai era.

23. *I saw the earth, and, look, welter and waste.* This powerful prophecy is one of the most striking instances in which the hyperbole of Prophetic poetry pushes it toward apocalyptic vision, almost despite itself. What Jeremiah is imagining is the devastation of the land by foreign invaders, but by invoking the language of creation from Genesis 1, he conjures up a vision of reversing the very act of creation: if the world was once created out of welter and waste, when primordial darkness reigned over all, the process might be turned backward, everything reverting to its uncreated state. This vision is all the more vivid because the prophet reports it as though it were something he had

actually witnessed with his own eyes, as he repeatedly insists on "I saw, and, look."

the heavens, and their light was gone. This reverses the "Let there be light" of Genesis 1. This is an anticipation of the apocalyptic note at the end of Alexander Pope's *Dunciad:* "Light dies before thy uncreating word."

25. *there was no human there.* In Genesis 1, the human—male and female—is the culminating product of creation.

all the fowl of the heavens. This is still another phrase from the Creation story. The vision has the effect of a science-fiction fantasy: not only is the earth turned back to primordial chaos with no remnant of human presence, but when the prophet looks up to the sky, it is mere vacancy, without birds.

26. *the farmland was desert, / and all its towns were ruined.* At this point, the vision segues from the global picture of the catastrophic reversal of creation to the historical picture of the land devastated by invaders. For this reason, *haʾarets* in this next verse could mean either "the earth" in consonance with the incipiently apocalyptic vision of verses 23–25, or "the land," in consonance with this verse, and perhaps a double meaning is intended. It is noteworthy that "all the earth shall mourn, / and the heavens above shall darken" in verse 28 reverts to the grim picture of the negation of creation.

30. *the destroyed one.* The evident sense is "the one destined to be destroyed," foreseen and imagined as though it were already an accomplished fact. The Hebrew term is masculine but a feminine form is required, which may simply reflect a scribal lapse.

that you set off your eyes in kohl. The literal sense of the verb is "tear open." Rashi is probably right in proposing that outlining the eyes in dark kohl makes them appear to be larger (one is tempted to attribute his perception to the knowingness of an early French observer).

Your lovers. The Hebrew *ʿogvim* has a strong sexual connotation, and so the meaning is close to "those who lust for you."

31. *a woman in labor, / . . . one giving birth the first time.* While the writhing of a woman in birth pangs is a conventional trope for suffering, it ends up being ironized here because the verse concludes in death instead of birth. The word "killers" is held back until the very end of the next poetic line.

CHAPTER 5

[1]Roam through the streets of
Jerusalem,
and see, pray, and mark,
and seek in her squares.
If you find a man,
if there be a man doing justice,
seeking faithfulness,
I shall forgive her.
[2]But if, “as the LORD lives,” they
say,
they swear falsely.
[3]O LORD, Your eyes look for
faithfulness.
You struck them but they did not
flinch,
You made an end of them, they
refused to take reproof.
They made their faces harder than
rock,
they refused to turn back.

[4]As for me, I said, they are but poor
people,
they are foolish,
for they know not the way of the
LORD,
their God's justice.
[5]Let me go to the great ones,
and let me speak with them,
for they know the way of the LORD,
the justice of their God.
But they together broke the yoke,
they tore apart the bonds.
[6]Therefore has the lion from the
forest struck them,
the wolf of the steppes destroys
them,
the leopard lies in wait at their
towns,
all who come forth from there are
ripped up.
For their crimes are many,
numerous their rebellions.
[7]"Why, for this should I pardon you?
Your sons have forsaken Me
and sworn by ungods.

I sated them, yet they were
adulterous,
and to the whore's house they
trooped.
[8]They were horses in heat rising
early,
each man for his fellow's wife
neighed.
[9]For these shall I not exact
judgment," said the LORD,
"and against a nation such as this
not wreak vengeance?
[10]Go up against her vine rows and
ruin them,
but an utter end do not bring
about.
Strip off her trailing branches,
for they are not the LORD's.
[11]For the house of Israel and the
house of Judah
have surely betrayed Me," said the
LORD.
[12]"They have been false to the
LORD
and said, 'Not He.
And no harm will come upon us

and the sword and famine we shall
not see.
13 And the prophets are but wind,
and there is no Word in them—
thus shall be done to them.’
14 Therefore thus said the LORD God
of Armies:
Because you spoke this word,
I am about to put My words in
your mouth like fire
and this people shall be wood it
consumes.
15 I am about to bring against you a
nation from afar,
O house of Israel,” said the
LORD.
“It is a nation of unfailing strength,
a nation from of old,
a nation whose tongue you do not
know,
nor understand what it speaks.
16 Its quiver—an open grave,
all of them are warriors,
17 It shall devour your harvest and
your bread,

devour your sons and your
daughters,
devour your sheep and your cattle,
devour your vines and your fig
trees.
I shall slash with the sword your
fortress towns
in which you trusted."

18"And even in those days," said the LORD, "I will not
make an end of you. 19And it shall happen when they
say, 'For what has the LORD our God done all these
things to us?' You shall say to them, 'Because you
forsook Me and served alien gods in your own land,
thus shall you serve strangers in a land that is not
yours.'"

20Tell this in the House of Jacob,
and let it be heard in Judah,
saying:
21Hear this, pray,
ignorant, mindless people.
Eyes they have but they do not see,
ears they have but they do not
hear.

[22]Is it Me you do not fear, said the
LORD,
before Me you do not quake?
For I set sand a boundary to the sea,
an everlasting limit not to be
crossed—
the waves tossed but could not
prevail,
they surged but could not cross it.
[23]And this people had a wayward
rebellious heart,
they swerved away and went off.
[24]And they did not say in their heart,
“Let us fear, pray, the LORD our
God,
Who gives rain, early and late rain in
its season,
the set weeks of harvest He keeps
for us.”
[25]Your crimes turned aside these
things,
and your offenses withheld the
bounty from you.
[26]For among My people wicked men
are found,
they watch as in a fowler’s blind,

they set out an ambush,
they capture men.
[27]Like a cage full of fowl,
so their homes are filled with
deceit,
therefore have they prospered,
become rich.
[28]They have fattened, have thickened,
even passed beyond words of evil.
They did not judge a just case—
the orphan's case, that he should
do well,
and the needy's judgment they
did not judge.
[29]For these shall I not exact
judgment, said the LORD,
against a nation such as this not
wreak vengeance?
[30]A frightful and fearsome thing
has come about in the land:
[31]The prophets have prophesied
falsely,
and the priests held sway
alongside them,
and My people loved it so.
But what will you do for its end?

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *If you find a man, / if there be a man doing justice.* Yair Hoffman detects an echo here of Abraham's dialogue with God in Genesis 18 over whether Sodom can be spared if ten just men can be found in it. That allusion mobilizes the trope of Israel as Sodom (compare Isaiah 1) and also makes the terms more generous: God would forgive Jerusalem if a single just man could be found there.

2. *But if, "as the LORD lives."* The habit of swearing in the LORD's name persists, even as the people abandon God.

swear falsely. The Hebrew could also be rendered as "swear by a lie." Lundbom proposes that this "lie" refers to Baal.

3. *Your eyes look for faithfulness.* "Look" is merely implied.

5. *the great ones.* The Hebrew term suggests high social status and, probably, wealth.

6. *the lion . . . / the wolf . . . / the leopard.* All three beasts of prey are metaphors for an invading army.

7. *I sated them, yet they were adulterous.* Though God bestowed great bounty on the people, they betrayed Him. Since Israel is thought of as God's spouse, the adultery is its infatuation with alien gods, but the evocation of rampant lust in the next three lines is so vivid that one may see here a segue into a condemnation of actual sexual promiscuity.

8. *They were horses in heat rising early.* Two words in the Hebrew here are obscure, although the general reference to rampant sexuality is clear. The term *meyuzanim*, "in heat," does not appear elsewhere; some interpreters take it to refer to large sexual organs. *Mashkim*, "rising early," looks odd because it is singular and a plural form is required. If the present translation is correct, it

would point to an eagerness of lust that impels these men to get up early in order to hop into bed with the wives of their fellow men.

12. *Not He.* These two words could also mean, "That's not it."

13. *And the prophets are but wind.* The Hebrew puns on ruaḥ, which means both "spirit"—what is supposed to imbue the prophets—and "wind."

thus shall be done to them. This clause is best understood as the conclusion of the arrogant words of the people: having said that the prophets have no divine word to convey, they now curse them.

14. *Because you spoke this word.* This is the false word dismissing the prophets, saying that "there is no Word in them." The measure-for-measure retribution will be a word of consuming fire placed by God in their mouths.

15. *a nation whose tongue you do not know.* As elsewhere in prophecies of assault by foreign forces, the terror is sharpened by the fact that the invaders speak an unintelligible language.

16. *Its quivers—an open grave.* This is a powerfully compressed image. The quiver is a grave because it holds death-dealing arrows, and its open cavity is a foreshadowing of the grave.

17. *devour your sons and your daughters.* The insistence through anaphora on "devour" conveys a strong sense of the comprehensiveness of the destruction. When "harvest" and "bread" are the object of this verb, it literally refers to eating. When the object is "your sons and your daughters," it means killing them. One should recall that in biblical Hebrew, the sword is said to "devour" or "eat" its victims.

slash with the sword. The Hebrew verb more literally means "smash" or "shatter."

19. *thus shall you serve strangers in a land that is not yours.* Here the prophecy of exile—an imminent threat throughout Jeremiah's career—is made explicit. Serving strangers is measure-for-measure retribution for serving alien gods.

21. *mindless.* Literally, “with no heart,” the heart conceived as the seat of understanding.

Eyes they have but they do not see, / ears they have but they do not hear. This is a direct citation of Psalm 115:5–6. In the psalm, the reference is to idols, but here, after the condemnation of the people’s ignorance and mindlessness, it probably refers to the people, who are too stupid to see that YHWH is the sole God of creation, as the next verse spells out.

22. *I set sand a boundary to the sea.* This is a recurring motif in biblical poetry, appearing often in Psalms and also in the Voice from the Whirlwind in Job. It ultimately harks back to the Canaanite creation myth in which Yamm, the sea god, is subdued and restrained from encroaching on the land.

23. *they swerved away and went off.* Again and again in biblical idiom, betraying God is represented as swerving from a straight path.

26. *they watch as in a fowler’s blind.* Of the three Hebrew words here, *yashur keshakh yequshim*, the only one that is certain in meaning is the last, “fowler’s.”

27. *their homes are filled with deceit.* Many interpreters understand the last word here to refer to what is gained through deceit, but the prophet wants to underline the actual activity of deception.

28. *have thickened.* The meaning of the unusual Hebrew verb is in dispute.

30. *A frightful and fearsome thing.* The idea is stronger in the Hebrew through the more pronounced alliteration, *shamah weshaʿarurah.*

CHAPTER 6

[1]Seek shelter, you Benjaminites,
from within Jerusalem,
and in Tekoa sound the ram's horn,
and on Beth Hakerem raise a signal fire,
for evil is in sight from the north
and a great disaster.
[2]Lovely and delicate
did I imagine Zion's Daughter.
[3]Against her came shepherds with their flocks,
they pitched their tents all round,
each shepherded his charge.
[4]"Ready battle against her,
arise and let us go up at noon.
Woe to us, for the day declines,
for the shadows of evening stretch out!
[5]Arise and let us go up by night,

and let us lay waste to her
citadels.”
[6]For thus said the LORD of Armies:
Cut down the trees
and build a siege-ramp against
Jerusalem.
She is the city singled out,
naught but oppression is in her
midst.
[7]As a well flows with water,
so she has flowed with her evil.
“Outrage” and “plunder” are heard
within her
before Me perpetually sickness
and plague.
[8]Accept reproof, O Jerusalem,
lest I loathe you,
lest I make you a desolation,
an uninhabitable land.

[9]Thus said the LORD of Armies:
They shall wholly glean as a vine
the remnant of Israel.
Bring back your hand like a picker
of grapes

to the baskets.
[10]To whom should I speak,
and bear witness that they might heed?
Look, their ear is uncircumcised,
and they are unable to listen.
Look, the word of the LORD has become for them
a disgrace in which they do not delight.
[11]And with the wrath of the LORD I am filled,
I cannot hold it in.
Pour it on the babe in the street,
and on the gathering of young men together,
for both man and woman shall be caught,
the elder with the one full of years.
[12]And their homes shall be turned over to others,
fields and wives together,
for I will stretch out My hand
against the land's dwellers, said the LORD.

13 For from the least of them to their
greatest
all of them chase gain,
and from prophet to priest
all of them work lies.
14 And they would heal My people's
wound easily saying,
"All is well, all is well," but it is
not well.
15 They acted shamefully, for they
performed abominations.
They were not even ashamed,
they did not even know how to
be disgraced.
Therefore shall they fall among those
who fall.
When I exact judgment from
them, they shall stumble—
said the LORD.

16 Thus said the LORD:
Stand by the ways and see,
ask for the paths of old,
what is the good way, and go on it,
and find rest for yourselves.

And they said: “We will not
go.”
17 And I set up watchmen for you—
listen to the ram’s horn’s sound.
And they said: “We will not
listen.”
18 Therefore, hear O nations,
and note the testimony against
them.

19 Hear, O earth, I am about to bring evil against this people, the fruit of their devisings, for they did not listen to all My words, and My teaching they have spurned. 20 Why do I need frankincense that comes from Sheba and the goodly fragrant cane from a faraway land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, and your sacrifices do not please Me.

21 Therefore, thus said the LORD:
I am about to bring upon this people
stumbling blocks, and they shall
stumble on them.
Fathers and sons together,
a neighbor and his fellow shall
perish.

[22]A people is about to come from a
land of the north,
and a great nation is roused from
the far corners of the earth.
[23]Bow and javelin they grasp,
they are ruthless and show no
mercy.
Their voice roars like the sea
and on horses they ride,
arrayed as one man for battle
against you, O Zion's Daughter!
[24]We heard the report of him—our
hands went slack.
Distress seized us, pangs like a
woman in labor.
[25]Do not go out to the field,
and on the road do not walk,
for the enemy's sword
is terror all round.
[26]My People's Daughter, gird
sackcloth
and wallow in the dust.
Observe mourning as for an only
child,
a bitter keening.
For the destroyer shall come

all of a sudden against us.
[27]An assayer I made you in My
people [a fortress],
that you should know and assay
their way.
[28]They all are wayward rebels,
slanderers—bronze and iron—
they all act ruinously.
[29]The bellows puff, from the fire lead
is consumed.
In vain the refiner works,
the impure matter is not drawn
out.
[30]Rejected silver they have been
called,
for the LORD has rejected them.

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Seek shelter . . . from within Jerusalem.* The Benjaminites have fled from adjacent territory to Jerusalem as a fortified city, but now Jerusalem itself is about to be assaulted, and they must flee elsewhere.

in Tekoa sound the ram's horn. The Hebrew makes an untranslatable pun, *beteqoʿa tiqʿu*.

Beth Hakerem. Like Tekoa, this is a village near Jerusalem. The literal translation, "House of the Vineyard," indicates it is a site of viticulture.

2. *did I imagine.* Though some interpreters understand the verb *damiti* to mean either "I destroyed" or "I silenced," the prophet is not the one doing the destruction, and so it is best to construe this verbal stem in the sense it has in the Song of Songs, "to imagine" or "to liken." That is, the speaker once thought Jerusalem to be a fair city, but matters have turned out differently.

3. *Against her came shepherds.* The "shepherds" are the kings commanding the divisions of the invading army. There is pointed irony in the elaboration of this pastoral metaphor to represent armed besiegers.

his charge. This is a guess at the meaning of the obscure Hebrew phrase, which literally means "his [or, perhaps, with his] hand."

4. *Ready battle against her.* These words and what follows are the speech of the invading forces.

Woe to us, for the day declines. They fear they will not have enough daylight to complete the taking of the city. But in the next verse, they resolve to go ahead and carry out a night attack.

6. *the trees.* The Hebrew *ʿetsah,* without a dot in the final *heh* that would indicate a possessive, is a collective noun for "trees."

build a siege-ramp. These were constructed from timber and packed-down earth.

7. *"Outrage" and "plunder."* These two Hebrew words, *ḥamas* and *shod*, were exclamations that a person attacked or robbed would cry out, hence the verb "heard" here.

9. *They shall wholly glean as a vine / the remnant of Israel.* The subject of the verb is the invaders of Judah. The gleaning refers to going back and plucking whatever grapes are left over after the initial harvesting—these would be the remnant of Israel.

10. *their ear is uncircumcised.* As with the uncircumcised heart, the image is of an interfering membrane that prevents perception.

11. *I cannot hold it in.* This is a kind of confessional statement of the prophetic imperative: the prophet, identifying with God's perspective in

observing the acts of his people, feels himself so overflowing with God's wrath that he is driven to express it angrily in his prophecies.

Pour it on the babe in the street. It of course sounds cruel to make toddlers playing in the street the object of divine wrath, but what the prophet has in mind is that the invading army, as was often the case, will perpetrate a general massacre: men, women, and even small children.

the elder with the one full of years. The wording suggests some distinction between the two. Interpreters at least as far back as Rashi have understood "full of years" to mean "extreme old age," which is possible but not certain.

13. *chase gain.* A more literal indication of the Hebrew idiom would be "cut their slice," the probable origin of the expression being the cutting off of slivers of silver from an ingot.

16. *the ways . . . / the paths of old.* The prophet again invokes the standard Hebrew trope of the way as the regimen of proper conduct. The expression "paths of old" suggests that the right way has always been known, even though now the people neglects it, defiantly proclaiming, "We will not go."

17. *watchmen.* As elsewhere, these are the prophets.

18. *note the testimony.* The Hebrew is rather obscure, but *ʿedah* probably does not mean "congregation" but "testimony."

20. *Why do I need frankincense.* This sounds rather like Isaiah 1:11.

that comes from Sheba. Frankincense was an expensive imported item brought from southern Arabia.

22. *from a land of the north.* Jeremiah repeatedly imagines the destruction descending from the north. Here, that direction takes on an implicitly mythological coloration. "The far corners of the north [Zaphon]" is a repeated designation in biblical poetry for the Canaanite mountain of the gods (Zaphon is both a proper name from the mountain and the direction north). In a break-up pattern in the parallelism, *zaphon* appears at the end of the first verset and "far corners of" at the end of the second.

23. *and on horses they ride.* The use of cavalry was relatively limited among the Israelites, hence the mounted attackers seem all the more fearsome.

25. *the enemy's sword.* The translation follows Hoffman, who notes that the construction noun-to-noun often indicates a possessive, as here: *ḥerev leʾoyev.*

27. *[a fortress].* This word is bracketed in the translation because it is probably an intrusive gloss. The word for "assayer" is close in form to a word that means "fortress," and the person responsible for the gloss probably understood it that way because God had promised to make Jeremiah a fortress against his enemies in 1:18. What is clear is that the image from here to the end of the chapter is of assaying and refining idolators, not of fortification.

28. *bronze and iron.* While the syntax seems a bit muddled, the idea is that the rebellious people is iron and bronze rather than silver.

29. *from the fire lead is consumed.* The received text reads *meʾeshtam*, which would mean "from their fire," although the vocalization and grammar are wrong. This translation is based on an emendation to *meʾesh titom,* literally "from the fire it [lead] comes to an end." Silver is found in lead ore; here the refining process doesn't work, and the silver is not separated from the lead.

the refiner works. Literally, "the refiner refines."

the impure matter. This could also mean "the evil ones."

30. *Rejected silver.* At the end of the refining, the silver has not been separated from the lead and so it must be rejected, as God rejects a people that has not cleansed itself of its human impurities.

CHAPTER 7

[1]The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD
saying: [2]“Stand in the gate of the house of the LORD,
and you shall call out there this word and say: ‘Listen
to the word of the LORD, all of Judah who come
through these gates to bow to the LORD. [3]Thus said
the LORD of Armies, God of Israel: Make your ways
and your acts good, and I will have you dwell in this
place. [4]Do not put your trust in lying words, saying:
The LORD’s temple, the LORD’s temple, the LORD’s
temple are these. [5]Rather, if you truly make your ways
and your acts good, if you truly do justice between a
man and his fellow, [6]if you do not oppress orphan and
widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place
nor go after other gods to your own harm, [7]I will have
you dwell in this place in the land that I gave to your
fathers for all time. [8]Look, you put your trust in lying
words that cannot avail. [9]Would you steal and murder
and commit adultery and swear by a lie and burn
incense to Baal and go after other gods that you did
not know, [10]and come and stand before Me in this

house upon which My name has been called and say, We are saved, only to do all these abominations? [11]Has this house, on which My name has been called, become an outlaws' cave in your eyes? I Myself have even seen it, said the LORD. [12]For go, pray, to My place which is in Shiloh, where I first made My name dwell, and see what I have done to it because of the evil of My people Israel. [13]And now, inasmuch as you have done all these deeds, said the LORD, and I spoke to you constantly and you did not listen, and I called you, and you did not answer, [14]I will do to this house on which My name has been called, in which you put your trust, and to the place that I gave to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh. [15]And I will fling you from My presence as I flung all your brothers, all the seed of Ephraim.' [16]As for you, [Jeremiah,] do not pray for this people, and do not lift up for them a chant of prayer, and do not entreat Me, for I do not hear you. [17]Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? [18]The children gather wood, and the fathers light the fire, and the women knead the dough to make cakes for the Queen of the Heavens and to pour libations to other gods, so as to vex Me. [19]Is it Me they vex, said the LORD. Is it not themselves, to their own shame? [20]Therefore, thus said the Master, the LORD: My anger and My wrath are

about to pour forth upon this place, upon man and beast and upon the trees of the field and the fruit of the soil, and it shall burn and not be quenched. [21]Thus said the LORD of Armies, God of Israel: Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices, and eat meat. [22]For I did not speak to your fathers nor did I charge them when I brought them out from the land of Egypt about matters of burnt offering and sacrifice. [23]With this word did I charge them saying, Heed my voice and I will be your God and you shall be a people for Me and go in all the way that I charged you, so that it be well with you. [24]But they did not heed and they did not bend their ear, and they went by their own counsels, in the willfulness of their evil heart, and they went backward and not forward, [25]from the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day. And I sent you all My servants, the prophets, day after day. [26]But they did not heed Me and did not bend their ear, and they stiffened their necks, did more evil than their fathers. [27]And you shall speak to them these words and they shall not listen to you, and you shall call to them, and they shall not answer you. [28]And you shall say to them, This is the nation that would not heed the word of the LORD its God and would not accept reproof. Faithfulness is gone and cut off from their mouths.”

[29]Shear your locks and fling them
away,
and raise a lament on the bare
heights,
for the LORD has rejected and
abandoned
the stock that called forth His
fury.

[30]For the sons of Judah have done evil in My eyes, said the LORD, they have placed their foul things in the house upon which My name was called, to defile it. [31]And they built the high places of Topheth, which are in the Valley of Ben-Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in fire, what I never charged them and what never came to My mind. [32]Therefore, look, a time is coming said the LORD, when “Topheth” shall no longer be said nor “Valley of Ben-Hinnom” but “Valley of the Killing,” and they shall bury in Topheth until there is no room. [33]And the carcasses of this people shall be food for the fowl of the heavens and for the beasts of the earth, with none to frighten them away. [34]And I will put an end in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem to the voice of gladness

and the voice of joy, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, for a ruin the land shall become.

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Stand in the gate of the house of the* LORD. The position is strategic: crowds of worshippers, presumably having a fetishistic notion of the intrinsic efficacy of the Temple (verse 3), would pass through this gate on their way to worship, "to bow to the LORD."

3. *Make your ways and your acts good, and I will make you dwell in this place.* The people's tenure in Jerusalem (and, implicitly, in Judah) is conditional upon honest behavior. This idea is a Deuteronomistic emphasis.

4. *The* LORD*'s temple, the* LORD*'s temple, the* LORD*'s temple.* The triple repetition reflects something like a mantra recited by the people: this is the *LORD*'s temple, and hence those who enter it to worship have nothing to fear.

are these. This phrase is a little obscure but probably refers to the multiple structures of the Temple.

6. *if you do not oppress orphan and widow . . . nor go after other gods.* The prophet now concretely defines "making your ways good," combining an imperative of social justice with one of cultic loyalty.

7. *the land that I gave to your fathers for all time.* The last adverbial phrase shows a grand flourish in the Hebrew—literally, "from everlasting to everlasting." This notion of an eternal gift of the land stands in dialectic tension with the idea that the gift is conditional.

8. *you put your trust in lying words.* These words, of course, are the triple "the LORD's temple."

9. *swear by a lie.* This would be to swear by a pagan god, most probably, Baal.

11. *an outlaws' cave.* Most translations render the word for the place as "den" in the interest of English idiomatic usage. But the Hebrew term clearly means "cave," and caves, especially abundant in the cliffs overlooking the Dead Sea, were favored sites for hideouts. There is surely an intended contrast between the Temple, celebrated in the Book of Kings as a magnificent architectural structure erected by Solomon, and a dark hollow in a cliff used as a refuge by criminals.

12. *go, pray, to My place which is in Shiloh . . . and see what I have done to it.* Shiloh, which figures importantly in the early chapters of the Book of Samuel, was a significant northern sanctuary in the early Israelite occupation of the land. It was probably destroyed by the Philistines in the middle of the eleventh century B.C.E.

14. *I will do to this house . . . as I did to Shiloh.* This is an especially bold and stark prophecy. Jeremiah, speaking scant years after Josiah's radical cleansing of the Temple and his confirmation of its exclusive centrality, announces that the Temple, in which the people complacently trust, is about to be destroyed.

15. *And I will fling you from My presence.* God's presence is in Zion, so this is a prophecy of exile.

as I flung all of your brothers, the seed of Ephraim. "Ephraim" indicates the northern tribes, which were exiled by the Assyrians in 721 B.C.E.

16. *As for you.* The Hebrew here switches from a plural "you" to a singular, indicating that God is now no longer addressing the people but rather the prophet. Hence "Jeremiah" has been added in brackets.

18. *The children gather wood, and the fathers light the fire, and the women knead the dough.* This language represents idol worship as a family project, with both genders and all generations implicated.

to make cakes for the Queen of the Heavens. The Queen of the Heavens is the Assyro-Babylonian fertility goddess Ishtar, associated with the evening star Venus. The Canaanite equivalent is Astarte. The cult of astral deities was especially popular in the last two centuries of the First Temple period. There

is archaeological evidence that sweet cakes, shaped in the image of the goddess, were used in the cult of Ishtar. One should note that the Masoretic Text has *melekhet*, "work of," instead of *malkat*, "queen of," but that is almost certainly a pious euphemistic alteration by the Tiberian grammarians in order to avoid the suggestion that there could be a Queen of the Heavens.

20. *and it shall burn and not be quenched.* The Hebrew exploits the implication of heat in the word for "wrath," *ḥamah*. The image of wrath pouring forth suggests something like a tide of hot lava.

21. *eat meat.* Part of the sacrificial animals was reserved for human consumption.

22. *For I did not speak to your fathers nor did I charge them.* Some interpreters think these words reflect a view that sacrifices were not enjoined in the wilderness, only in the settled Land of Israel. But the main point seems to be in what the prophet goes on to say in the next verse, that any obligation of sacrifice was always secondary to heeding God's voice.

25. *And I sent you all My servants, the prophets, day after day.* Jeremiah repeatedly stresses the crucial spiritual authority of the prophets. It is with them that he identifies himself. Although he was born in the priestly caste, he accords no special weight of authority to the priests.

30. *they have placed their foul things in the house upon which My name is called.* There are several reports in the Book of Kings that sundry Judahite monarchs—most egregiously, Manasseh—actually introduced idols and a pagan cult into the Jerusalem temple.

their foul things. As elsewhere, this is a scornful designation for idols.

31. *the high places of Topheth, which are in the Valley of Ben-Hinnom.* All that is known about Topheth is that he is a god to whom child sacrifices in fire were offered. The vocalization of the name in Hebrew follows that of *boshet*, "shame," and so is probably an alteration of the original pronunciation. The Valley of Ben-Hinnom is just to the west of what was the ancient city of Jerusalem. The Hebrew name, *gei hinom*, through the Greek of the New Testament, *gehenna*, came to be a term for hell. "Topheth" in later Hebrew equally was used for hell.

32. *Valley of the Killing.* Because of the reference to piled-up unburied corpses, this name records not the child sacrifice practiced in this place but the ghastly measure-for-measure retribution to come, in which the masses of pagan sacrificers will be slaughtered.

34. *for a ruin the land shall become.* This movement of the prophecy—it will continue with another movement in the next chapter—ends on a grim note of destruction: not only will the Valley of Ben-Hinnom be piled up high with the corpses of the slaughtered, but the entire land will be turned into a desolation.

CHAPTER 8

[1]At that time, said the LORD, they shall take out from
their graves the bones of the kings of Judah and the
bones of its nobles and the bones of the priests and the
bones of the prophets living in Jerusalem. [2]And they
shall spread them out before the sun and before the
moon and before all the array of the heavens that they
loved and that they worshipped and after which they
went and that they sought out and to which they bowed
down. They shall not be gathered in nor shall they be
buried. Manure on the face of the soil they shall be.
[3]And death shall be preferable to life for all the
remnant of those remaining from this evil clan in all
the remaining places where I will drive them, said the
LORD of Armies. [4]And you shall say to them, thus
said the LORD:

If they fall, will they not rise?
If they turn back, will they not
turn?

[5]Why is this people a rebel,
Jerusalem, everlasting rebellion?
They have clung to deception,
refused to turn back.
[6]I listened closely and have heard—
no honesty do they speak.
No man regrets his evil,
saying, “What have I done?”
They all go in their headlong course
like a horse rushing forward in
battle.
[7]Even the stork in the heavens
knows its seasons,
and the turtledove, the swift, and the
crane
keep the time of their coming.
But my people does not know
the justice of the LORD.
[8]How could you say, “We are wise,
and the LORD’s teaching is with
us”?
Why, look, but a lie
has the scribes’ lying pen made it.
[9]The wise shall be shamed,
they shall fear and be caught.

Look, the word of the LORD they
rejected,
and what wisdom do they have?
10 Therefore will I give their wives to
others,
their fields to dispossessors,
for from the least to the greatest
they all chase gain,
from prophet to priest
all of them work lies.
11 And they would heal the wound of
My People's Daughter easily,
saying, "All is well," but it is not
well—
12 They are shamed,
for abominations they have
performed.
Therefore shall they fall among those
who fall,
in their time of reckoning they
shall stumble,
said the LORD.
13 I will surely sweep them up, said
the LORD,
There are no grapes on the vine
nor figs on the fig tree,

and the leaf is withered,
    and I will give them to those they
        shall serve.
14 “Why are we sitting here?
    Gather, that we may enter the
        fortified towns
        and be silent there,
    for the LORD our God has
        silenced us
and made us drink venom-water,
    for we have offended the LORD.”
15 Hope for peace and there is nothing
    good,
    for a time of healing, and, look,
        terror!
16 From Dan is heard his horses’
    snorts,
    from the sound of his chargers’
        neighing
        the whole earth shakes.
And they shall come and consume
    the land and its fullness,
    the town and the dwellers within
        it.
17 For I am about to send against you

viper-serpents that cannot be
charmed,
and they shall bite you, said the
LORD.
18 I catch my breath from sorrow,
my heart within me aches.
19 Look, the sound of My People's
Daughter crying out
from a faraway land:
"Is the LORD not in Zion,
is her King not within her?"—
Why did they vex Me with their
idols,
with alien empty breath?
20 "The harvest has passed, the
summer has ended,
and we have not been rescued."
21 Over the breaking of my People's
Daughter I am broken,
I plunge in gloom, desolation has
gripped me.
22 Is there no balm in Gilead,
is there no healer there?
For why has no mending come
to my People's Daughter?
23 Would that my head were water

and my eye the font of tears,
that I might weep day and night
for the slain of my People's
Daughter.

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *they shall take out from their graves the bones.* Disinterring the bones is a violation of the sanctity of the buried body and hence a shaming act.

the kings . . . its nobles . . . the priests . . . the prophets. This sort of cumulative emphatic series is often favored in Jeremiah's prose style. The prophets in question are false prophets, and the kings, nobles, and priests are the ones who have been guilty of reprehensible practices.

2. *the sun . . . the moon . . . the array of the heavens.* This constitutes another cumulative series. These are all objects of astral worship.

They shall not be gathered. That is, gathered into the grave.

3. *all the remnant of those remaining . . . in all the remaining places.* Although many scholars attribute the repetitions here to inadvertent scribal duplication (dittography), it is at least as likely that the prophet wants to insist on the idea of "remaining" in order to convey a sense of a scant few survivors, whose lot is even worse than that of all who have perished.

4. *If they turn back, will they not turn?* The formulation is reminiscent of a riddle; the probable sense is: if they turn back to offend, will they really turn back to God? The verb "turn back" will be picked up with a negative attached to it in the next verse.

7. *Even the stork in the heavens.* The Land of Israel to this day is a place to which migratory birds from the north came during the cold season. Thus God is seen to have implanted in these birds the instinctual knowledge of when to

migrate, but Israel lacks all knowledge of the proper order of things set by God.

8. *but a lie / has the scribes' lying pen made it.* The prophet is referring either to written teachings that are turned into lies because they are ignored or, more likely, to false doctrines—perhaps reflecting pagan influences—that the scribes have written down.

10. *for from the least to the greatest.* Everything from this point to the end of verse 12 replicates 6:13–15, with a few minor variations.

13. *I will surely sweep them up.* The Hebrew involves a pun: first the infinitive *ʾasof*, which can mean "to gather," as in a harvest, a sense developed in the rest of the verse, and then *ʾasifeim*, "I will make an end of them."

those they shall serve. The translation reads *yaʿavdum*, with one Hebrew manuscript, instead of the Masoretic *yaʿavrum* ("they will pass them"). But the syntax is still suspect.

14. *Why are we sitting here?* These are the words of the Judahites who now find their land under assault and must seek refuge in fortified towns.

16. *From Dan is heard his horses' snorts.* Dan is in the far north of the Land of Israel—as elsewhere, the invading army descends from the north, its terrifying aspect heightened by its mounted troops attacking the Judahites, who have scant cavalry.

17. *viper-serpents that cannot be charmed.* There is a double meaning in the Hebrew. The word for "charm," *laḥash*, means "whisper" or "hiss," indicating the whispered formula recited to subdue the snake. But there are also vipers that have no hiss, and that thus issue no warning before they bite.

18. *I catch my breath from sorrow.* The verb here, *mavligiti*, is much in doubt, and many have proposed emendations. If the text is correct, it refers to the rare verb *havleig*, which appears in Job and in Psalms and may mean something like "to catch one's breath," although that is in no way certain. In any case, the form of the word is anomalous and seems ungrammatical.

19. *Why did they vex Me with their idols.* This is God's rejoinder to the people: if you want to know why neither the LORD nor the Davidic king is in Zion, consider your idolatry.

20. *The harvest has passed.* The people continues its desperate lament: time passes, and there is no sign of their being rescued from the plight of exile.

21. *Over the breaking of my People's Daughter.* The prophet now speaks in his own voice, not castigating the people but expressing his distress over the disaster that has befallen them. There is a certain oscillation in Jeremiah between angry denunciation of his fellow Judahites for their appalling acts and compassionate identification with them as they suffer the consequences of those acts

22. *Is there no balm in Gilead.* Scholars surmise that in the region of Gilead, to the northeast of the country, medicinal herbs were cultivated.

no healer. The Masoretic *rofeiʾ*, "healer," though it makes sense, may be a mistake through haplography (the preceding word ends in a *mem*, which could have been dropped here) for *marpeiʾ*, "healing." That would make a neater parallel to "balm."

mending. The evident sense of the Hebrew idiom is the formation of a scab over a wound.

CHAPTER 9

[1]Would that I were in the wilderness,
at a wayfarers' camp.
I would forsake my people and go
off from them.
For they are all adulterers,
an assembly of traitors.
[2]They have drawn their tongue back
on their bow of lies and not of
truth.
They have prevailed in the land,
for they have gone on from evil to
evil,
and Me they have not known,
said the LORD.
[3]Each man, beware of his fellow,
and trust not in any brother,
for every brother deals crookedly,
and every fellow man spreads
slander.
[4]And each man tricks his fellow,

and truth they do not speak.
They have taught their tongue to
speak lies,
they are worn out from
wrongdoing.
[5]Your dwelling is in the midst of
deceit.
In deceit they refused to know
Me, said the LORD.
[6]Therefore, thus said the LORD of
Armies:
I am about to smelt them and
assay them,
for what else would I do
because of my People's
Daughter?
[7]Their tongue is a well-honed arrow,
deceit they speak with their
mouths.
Peace a man speaks to his fellow,
and inwardly lays an ambush.
[8]For these shall I not reckon with
them, said the LORD,
from a nation like this shall I not
be avenged?

[9]Over the mountains I raise weeping
and wailing,
and over the wilderness pastures,
lament,
for they are laid waste, with no man
passing through,
and they do not hear the sound of
cattle.
From the fowl of the heavens to the
beasts,
all have wandered off, gone away.
[10]And I will make Jerusalem heaps
of stones,
a den of jackals,
and the towns of Judah I will make a
desolation
with no dweller there.

[11]Who is the wise man who would understand this,
what the mouth of the LORD spoke to him, that he
might tell it?

Why is the land destroyed,
laid waste like the wilderness with
none passing through?

[12]And the LORD said, “Because they forsook My
teaching that I set before them and did not heed My
voice and did not go according to it. [13]And they went
after the stubbornness of their heart and after the
Baalim that their fathers had taught them. [14]Therefore,
thus said the LORD of Armies, God of Israel: I am
about to feed this people wormwood and make them
drink venom-water. [15]And I will scatter them among
nations that neither they nor their fathers have known,
and I will send the sword after them until I have made
an end of them.”

[16]Thus said the LORD of Armies:
Look to it and call to the keening
women that they come
and to the wise women send
that they come.
[17]Let them hurry and raise wailing
for us,
and let our eyes shed tears
and our eyelids flow with water.
[18]For the sound of wailing is heard in
Zion:
“How we are ruined,
we are gravely shamed!

For we forsook the land,
they have flung us from our dwellings.”
19For hear, O women, the word of the LORD,
and let your ear catch the word of His mouth,
and teach your daughters wailing,
and each woman her friend teach lament.
20For death has come up through our windows,
has entered our citadels,
to cut off the babe from the street,
the young man from the squares.
21Speak thus, said the LORD:
And the human corpses shall fall like manure on the face of the fields,
and like the sheaf behind the reaper with none to gather it.

22Thus said the LORD,
Let the wise man not boast of his wisdom,

nor the warrior boast of his
might.
Let the rich man not boast of
his riches.
[23]But in this may he who boasts
boast:
understanding and knowing Me,
for I am the LORD doing kindness,
justice and righteousness in the
land,
for in these I delight, said the
LORD.

[24]Look, a time is coming, said the LORD, when I will make a reckoning with all who have circumcised foreskins, [25]with Egypt and with Judah and with Edom and with the Ammonites and with Moab and with all the desert dwellers who have trimmed beards. For all the nations are uncircumcised, but the house of Israel has an uncircumcised heart.

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *I would forsake my people.* Jeremiah now expresses the other pole of his oscillating feelings toward his people. He had been devastated by the disaster befalling them; now he is so disgusted by their behavior that he wants to be as far away from them as possible.

For they are all adulterers. Adultery is seized on as a kind of paradigm for all sorts of disloyalty and cheating—hence the parallelism with "betrayers."

2. *They have drawn their tongue back / on their bow of lies.* The tongue as the instrument of vicious or lying speech is often thought of in biblical idiom as a weapon. The spreading of slander in the next verse develops this idea

4. *they are worn out from wrongdoing.* The two Hebrew words translated by this clause look textually suspect, and so the meaning is not certain.

5. *Your dwelling is in the midst of deceit.* The "your" is singular and thus refers to the prophet, who is condemned to live among a deceitful people.

6. *because of my People's Daughter.* This appears to be an ellipsis for "because of the crimes of my People's Daughter."

7. *with their mouths.* This seemingly unneeded specification after "speak" is introduced as a paired term with "tongue" in the first verset.

9. *they do not hear the sound of cattle.* The wilderness pastures are personified through the verb—the desolation is made more acute by the idea that the empty pastures can hear no sound of living things.

11. *Why is the land destroyed.* A line of poetry is inserted in the middle of the prose prophecy because this plaintive question amounts to a lament for the destroyed land.

13. *the Baalim that their fathers had taught them.* Instead of God's teaching, there was teaching of idolatry. The indication that it was taught by the forefathers means that it goes back a long way in the history of the nation.

15. *nations that neither they nor their fathers have known.* The fact that these are utterly alien nations, scarcely heard of in Judah, makes the condition of exile all the more terrifying.

16. *the keening women.* There are many indications in the Bible that there was a class of professional keening women, *meqonenot*, in ancient Israelite society, as in many other cultures, who performed public rites of wailing at times of bereavement and perhaps also led the general populace in mourning, as the next verse may suggest. The "wise women" of the second verset are the keeners, and one may recall that "wise" in biblical idiom often means "skilled in a craft," which here would be mourning.

18. *they have flung us from our dwellings.* The translation emends the Masoretic Text, which reads, literally, "they have flung our dwellings," *hishlikhu mishkenoteinu*, to *hishilikhunu mimishekenoteinu.*

20. *For death has come up through our windows.* Many commentators detect a mythological reference here to Mot, the Canaanite god of death. That would certainly make the entrance through the windows scarier.

to cut off the babe from the street, / the young man from the squares. The preposition "from" here does not indicate the place where the cutting off is done. Rather, since death has climbed into the homes through the windows, the babes and young men perish in their homes and will no longer be outside, where ordinarily small children might play and young men congregate.

21. *like the sheaf behind the reaper / with none to gather it.* In the ordinary agricultural process, the reaper would bind up the harvested ears of grain in sheaves, and afterward these would be gathered up. In this field full of corpses, there is no one to do any gathering.

24. *with all who have circumcised foreskins.* This phrase has caused some consternation among interpreters because what follows is a list of nations in which Judah appears after Egypt and before other traditional enemies. Circumcision may well have been practiced, at least in certain circles, by these sundry peoples—there is evidence, for example, that Egyptian priests were circumcised. But the writer seems to assume that many of these people were uncircumcised: "For all the nations are circumcised." The point, then, is that God will make no distinction between the uncircumcised and the circumcised in exacting retribution for offending behavior.

25. *the desert dwellers who have trimmed beards.* The "desert dwellers" are in all likelihood Arabs. Many translators conclude that the descriptive epithet

refers to cut-off sidelocks, but the noun *peʾah* can equally refer to "sidelock" and to "beard" (in an ellipsis for *peʾat zaqan*, "edge of the beard").

but the house of Israel has an uncircumcised heart. This is an idea that Jeremiah has already invoked (4:4)—that however obligatory circumcision may be as a mark of belonging to the community of Israel, what is more crucial is the circumcision of the heart, which is to say, possessing a capability of perception that responds to the demands of justice and sees the imperative truth of God's teaching.

CHAPTER 10

[1]Listen to the word that the LORD has spoken about
you, house of Israel. [2]Thus said the LORD:

The way of the nations do not learn,
and from the signs of the heavens
be not terrified,
for the nations are terrified by
them.
[3]For the nations' practices are mere
breath,
for the tree he cuts down from the
forest,
the craftsman's handiwork with
an axe.
[4]In silver and gold he embellishes it,
with nails and hammer
he secures it that it not totter.
[5]Like a scarecrow in a patch of
greens

they do not speak, they are
carried,
for they cannot walk.
Do not fear them, for they do no
harm,
nor is doing good any part of
them.
[6]Because none is like you, O LORD,
great are You
and great Your name in might.
[7]Who would not fear You,
King of nations?
For to You it is fitting.
For among all the nations' wise men
and in all their regal state
there is none like You.
[8]And as one they are stupid and
foolish,
a doctrine of mere breath—it is
but wood.
[9]Hammered silver brought from
Tarshish
and gold from Uphaz,
the craftsman's work and the hands
of the smith,
indigo and purple, their raiment,

the work of skilled men, all of them.
[10]But the LORD is the God of truth,
He is the living God and eternal King.
From His fury the earth is shaken,
and nations cannot contain His wrath.

[11]Thus shall you say to them: gods that have not made the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from beneath these heavens.

[12]He makes the earth through His power,
firmly founds the world through His wisdom,
and in His discernment stretches out the heavens.
[13]As He sounds His voice—a roar of water in the heavens,
and He brings up clouds from the end of the earth.
Lightning for the rain He makes,

and He brings out wind from His
storerooms.
[14]Every human is too stupid to know,
every smith is shamed by the idol,
for the molten image is a lie,
and there is no spirit in them.
[15]Mere breath are they, a work of
mockery,
in their judgment time they shall
perish.
[16]Not like these is Jacob's Portion,
for He is the Fashioner of all
things,
and Israel is the tribe of His estate,
the LORD of Armies is His
name.

[17]Gather from the ground your
wares,
you who dwell under siege.
[18]For thus said the LORD:
I am about to sling away the land's
dwellers
this time and bring them in straits,
that they may find out.

[19]Woe is me for my disaster,
the blow against me is grievous,
and I had thought:
this is but illness and I shall bear
it.
[20]My tent is ruined and all my cords
are ripped,
my children have left me and are
gone,
no one pitches my tent again
or sets up my tent curtains.
[21]For the shepherds are stupid,
and they have not sought the
LORD.
Therefore they have not prospered,
and all their flock is scattered.
[22]Hark, a sound, look, it comes
and a great tumult from the land
of the north,
to make the towns of Judah
a desolation, a jackals' den.
[23]I know, O LORD,
that a person's way is not for him
and not for a man walking to
direct his own steps.

[24]Correct me, LORD, but with
justice,
not in Your anger, lest You
diminish me.
[25]Pour out Your wrath on the nations
that do not know you
and on the clans
that do not call upon Your name.
For they have devoured Jacob and
made an end of him,
and have devastated his home.

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *and from the signs of the heavens be not terrified.* Astrology was a powerful presence in this period, in Babylonia and elsewhere. The prophet urges his audience to dismiss all supposed celestial portents.

3. *practices.* The Hebrew *ḥuqot* elsewhere means "statutes," but the context requires something on the order of "practices."

for the tree he cuts down from the forest. Jeremiah now imagines a kind of representative idolator (hence the singular form) who cuts down the tree, carves wood from it, and overlays it with silver and gold. The absurdity of attributing divinity to a material object fashioned through human craftsmanship would be picked up by Second Isaiah.

6. *Because none is like you, O LORD.* In antithesis to the absurdity of idol worship, the prophet launches on a kind hymn to God's greatness. The phrase "none is like you, O LORD" echoes the "Who is like You among the gods, O

LORD" of the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:11), but, significantly, "among the gods" is deleted because Jeremiah, at this relatively late moment, no longer imagines that there may be other, punier gods alongside YHWH.

7. *For to You it is fitting.* That is, to You is fear or reverence fitting.

8. *a doctrine of mere breath—it is but wood.* The doctrine, or guiding principle, is totally empty because it is based on the hopeless idea that wood can be a god.

9. *indigo and purple, their raiment.* The idols were often dressed in fine clothing resembling royal raiment.

skilled men. The Hebrew seems to say "wise men," but *ḥakhamim* is often a designation for people skilled in a craft, which is the likely sense here.

11. *Thus shall you say to them.* This entire verse is in Aramaic, being the only complete sentence in Aramaic in the Hebrew Bible apart from the Aramaic sections of Nehemiah and Daniel. There have been suggestions from Late Antiquity onward that Jeremiah is addressing the group of Judahites exiled to Babylonia in 597 B.C.E., who would have been constrained to speak in Aramaic to their pagan captors.

12. *He makes the earth through His power.* This celebration of God as Creator is reminiscent of many of the psalms.

14. *Every human is too stupid to know.* The prophet now swings back from the praise of God's mastering of the cosmic forces of the heavens to the foolishness of idol worship.

there is no spirit in them. The Hebrew noun also means "breath," and both senses are probably intended here.

16. *Jacob's Portion.* In the present context, this has to be an epithet for God. There is a reciprocity: God is Jacob's Portion and Israel is "the tribe of His estate."

17. *Gather from the ground your wares.* These words begin a new prophecy, a vision of destruction and exile. The word represented as "wares," *kinah*, is

understood in this translation as deriving from *kenaʿani,* "merchant," though others, proposing an Arabic cognate, think it means "bundle."

18. *this time.* The implication is that until now God has held back from condemning the people to exile but will no longer forbear.

20. *no one pitches my tent again.* This extending of the metaphorical image of destruction intimates that since the children are all gone, there is no one to set up the flattened tent.

21. *the shepherds.* As elsewhere, these are the leaders of the people.

23. *a person's way is not for him.* The slightly puzzling formulation is best explained by assuming that the verb "to direct" (or, more literally, "to make firm") just before the end of the second verset does double duty for both parts of the line, yielding the sense "is not for him to direct." The notion that a man's destiny is beyond his control fits in with the monotheistic idea of an omnipotent God, but it has also often been articulated by ancient and modern writers without any theistic assumption.

25. *Pour out Your wrath on the nations.* While the speaker—evidently the prophet identifying with the people—asks to be spared God's wrath in whatever punishment he may have to suffer, he invites the full measure of divine fury to be administered to the nations that have wreaked havoc on the people of Israel. It should be noted that "anger," *ʾaf*, in the previous verse and "wrath," *ḥeimah*, in this verse constitute a break-up pattern because the two nouns are often idiomatically joined in a construct form, *ḥamat-ʾaf*.

For they have devoured Jacob and made an end of him. The Masoretic Text reads, "For they have devoured Jacob and devoured him and made an end of him," but the second "devoured" is in all likelihood a scribal duplication (dittography). It is absent in the parallel to this verse in Psalms 79:7 and also in the Septuagint and some Hebrew manuscripts.

CHAPTER 11

[1]The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD,
saying: [2]“Listen to the words of this covenant, and you
shall speak to the men of Judah and to the dwellers of
Jerusalem. [3]And you shall say to them, Thus said the
LORD God of Israel: Cursed be the man who does not
heed the words of this covenant [4]with which I charged
your fathers on the day I brought them out from the
land of Egypt from the iron’s forge, saying, Heed My
voice and do as all that I charge you, and be My
people, and I will be your God, [5]so as to fulfill the vow
that I made to your fathers to give them a land flowing
with milk and honey as on this day.” And I answered
and said, “Amen, O LORD.” [6]And the LORD said to
me, “Call out all these words in the towns of Judah
and in the streets of Jerusalem, saying, Listen to the
words of this covenant and do them. [7]For I have surely
warned your fathers time after time, saying, Listen to
My voice. [8]But they did not listen and they did not
bend their ear, and they went each in the stubbornness
of his evil heart, and I brought upon them all the

words of this covenant that I charged to do and they
did not do.” [9]And the LORD said to me, “A plot has
been found out among the men of Judah and among
the dwellers of Jerusalem. [10]They have turned back to
the crimes of their first fathers who refused to listen to
My words, and they have gone after other gods to
serve them. The house of Israel and the house of
Judah have breached the covenant that I sealed with
their fathers. [11]Therefore, thus said the LORD, I am
about to bring upon them an evil from which they will
not be able to escape, and they shall cry out to Me, but
I will not listen to them. [12]And the towns of Judah and
the dwellers of Jerusalem shall go and cry out to the
gods to whom they burn incense, but they shall surely
not rescue them in the time of their evil. [13]For as the
number of your towns the number of your gods has
been, O Judah, and as the number of the streets of
Jerusalem you put up altars to the Shame, altars to
burn incense to Baal. [14]As for you, do not pray for this
people and do not raise up for them a chant of prayer,
for I do not listen when they call to Me in the time of
their evil.”

[15]Why is My beloved in My house
when she carries out her schemes?

The many, despite sacral flesh, shall
pass on from you.
For in your evil you then exult.
16 A lush olive tree, lovely in fruit and
shape—
the LORD called your name.
With a great roaring sound
He has set fire to it
and its branches have fallen
apart.

17 And the LORD of Armies Who planted you has spoken evil of you because of the evil of the house of Israel and the house of Judah that they did to vex Me, to burn incense to Baal.

18 And the LORD informed me and I
knew,
then did You show me their acts.
19 And I was like a docile lamb led to
the slaughter,
and I did not know that they had
laid plans against me:
“Let us destroy the tree with its sap

and cut him off from the land of
the living.
And his name will no more be
recalled.”
[20]But, LORD of Armies, righteous
Judge,
Who tests the conscience and the
heart,
let me see Your vengeance upon
them
for to You I lay out my case.

[21]Therefore, thus said the LORD concerning the men of Anathoth who seek your life, saying, “You shall not prophesy in the name of the LORD, or you shall die by our hand.” [22]Therefore, thus said the LORD of Armies: “I am about to exact judgment from them. The young men shall die by the sword, their sons and their daughters shall die by famine, [23]and there shall be no remnant of them, for I will bring evil upon the men of Anathoth, in the year of their judgment.”

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *this covenant.* This word and this concept figure importantly in the prophecies of Jeremiah. It is possible that in this he is influenced by the Book of Deuteronomy, which is conceived as a kind of renewal of Israel's covenant with God.

4. *from the iron's forge.* This phrase appears in Deuteronomy 4:20, and Jeremiah is probably quoting that text.

5. *Amen, O LORD.* Since God has just been cited pronouncing the words of a solemn vow, the response of "amen"—that Hebrew term has the sense of "it is true"—is appropriate.

7. *For I have surely warned your fathers.* As elsewhere, Jeremiah sees the betrayal of the covenant as behavior that goes all the way back to the early generations of the nation.

8. *And I brought upon them all the words of the covenant.* Part of the covenant, as Deuteronomy spells out, is a series of disastrous outcomes if the covenant is violated, and it is this that is invoked in these words.

9. *A plot.* The Hebrew *qesher* usually refers to a political conspiracy, as in a plot to overthrow the legitimate king. Here it is the divine King whom the plotters scheme to displace with an alien god.

10. *the crimes of their first fathers who refused to listen to My words.* This amplifies the notion of the guilt of the early generations introduced in verse 7.

11. *they will not be able to escape.* The literal sense of the verb is "go out."

13. *you put up altars to the Shame.* The Hebrew *boshet*, "shame," is repeatedly used as a pejorative designation for Baal. Here this is especially clear because "the Shame" and "Baal" appear in apposition.

14. *in the time of their evil.* The Masoretic Text reads "for [*beʿad*] their evil," but several Hebrew manuscripts a well as four ancient versions read "in the time of [*beʿet*]". The scribal error was probably triggered by the use of *beʿad* earlier in the verse ("do not pray for this people"). "Evil" in this phrase

suggests “disaster” but is worth retaining as “evil” because of the pointed reiteration of the term as the prophecy continues.

15. *Why is My beloved in My house.* The two lines of poetry that constitute this verse swarm with difficulties, and the text is almost certainly corrupt, so any translation is conjectural. As S. D. Luzatto, the eighteenth-century Italian Hebrew commentator wrote, “There are many interpretations of this text, and they are all strained and unlikely.” What can be said with confidence is that the “house” is the Temple, and the “beloved” is Israel. But “beloved” is masculine, whereas the rest of the line and the next line use feminine singular forms.

The many, despite sacral flesh, shall pass on from you. The translation is no more than a guess. The “sacral flesh” refers to the flesh of the animal sacrifices offered in the Temple. “Despite” does not appear in the Hebrew and has been added interpretively. The idea then would be that however many sacrifices you offer, crowds of your people will pass on from you—perhaps, in exile.

in your evil. There is no “evil” in the Hebrew, and it has been added in an attempt to give syntactic coherence to the phrase.

16. *A lush olive tree, lovely in fruit and shape.* This was Israel in its pristine state, or perhaps as God first wanted to imagine it.

17. *Who planted you.* The verb used harks back to the metaphor of the olive tree.

18. *And the* LORD *informed me and I knew*. These words begin a new prophecy, which is autobiographical in context, dealing with the hostility toward Jeremiah exhibited by the people of his hometown, Anathoth.

19. *Let us destroy the tree with its sap.* The received text reads *laḥmo*, “its bread,” which by a long stretch might be understood to refer to the fruit of the tree. It seems likely that the original reading was *leiḥo*, “its sap,” which involves the deletion of one consonant from the Masoretic version. We need not doubt that Jeremiah is registering here an actual scheme of the men of Anathoth to kill him. Anathoth was a town with a population of priests, and perhaps, as Lundbom has proposed, they resented Jeremiah’s upholding the

exclusivity of the Jerusalem cult. Or, they may have been catering to the paganizing bent of this populace, which Jeremiah fiercely denounces.

20. *the conscience.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "the kidneys," which were thought to be the seat of the conscience.

to You I lay out my case. Having addressed God as "righteous Judge," the prophet goes on to use the language of judicial process.

CHAPTER 12

[1]Righteous are You, O LORD.
When I dispute with you,
my brief I will speak against
You.
[2]Why does the way of the wicked
prosper,
all who deal treacherously rest
tranquil?
You plant them, what's more, they
strike root,
they spread out, what's more, they
yield fruit.
Near are You in their mouth
and distant from their conscience.
[3]As for You, LORD, You know me,
You see me,
and You probe my heart that is
with You.
Draw them out like sheep to the
slaughter,

set them aside for the day of
killing.
[4]Till when will the land be bleak,
and the grass of every field
wither?
From the evil of its dwellers
beasts and fowl are swept away,
for they thought, “He will not
see our end.”
[5]For if you run with foot soldiers and
they tire you,
how will you compete with
horses?
And if in a peaceful land you flee,
what will you do in the Jordan’s
thickets?
[6]For even your brothers and the
house of your fathers,
even they betrayed you,
they call after you in full voice.
Trust them not
when they speak to you good
things.
[7]I have forsaken My house,
abandoned My estate,
I have given My dearest one

into her enemies' hands.
[8]My estate has become for Me
like a lion in the forest.
She raised her voice against Me,
therefore I do hate her.
[9]Is My estate a blood-splattered
vulture?
Are the vultures circling round
her?
Go gather all beasts of the field,
bring them to the devouring.
[10]Many shepherds despoiled My
vineyard,
they trampled My plot.
They made My precious plot
a desolate wilderness.
[11]They have made her a desolation,
she mourns to Me, desolate.
All the land is desolate,
for no man pays it heed.
[12]On all the bare heights in the
wilderness
despoilers have come,
for the LORD's sword has devoured
from the end of the land
to the end of the land.

There is no peace for all flesh.
[13]They have sown wheat, and thorns
they have reaped.
They fall ill to no avail.
Be shamed by your harvests,
by the smoldering wrath of the
LORD.

[14]Thus said the LORD: “Concerning all My evil neighbors who encroach on the estate that I conferred on My people Israel—I am about to uproot them from their land, and the house of Judah I will uproot from their midst. [15]And it shall be after I uproot them that I will turn back and show mercy to them and bring them back each to his estate and each to his land. [16]And it shall be, if they indeed learn the ways of My people to swear by My name—‘as the LORD lives’—as they taught My people to swear by Baal, they shall be built up in the midst of My people. [17]But if they do not heed, I will uproot that nation, uprooting and destroying,” said the LORD.

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *my brief I will speak against You.* Even though the Hebrew word rendered as "against You" might be understood as "with you," the metaphorical context of an adversarial legal argument invites one to construe it as "against You."

2. *Why does the way of the wicked prosper?* This entire verse sounds rather like an early anticipation of Job, not only in its content but even in its language.

they spread out. The Hebrew verb here would usually mean "they go," which is not right in context. The Septuagint, reading one consonant differently, shows, "they give birth." The idea that the wicked are a deep-rooted, fruit-bearing tree is an exact reversal of the imagery in Psalms (see Psalm 1), where that is the state of the righteous whereas the wicked are wind-blown chaff.

their conscience. As before, the literal sense of the Hebrew is "their kidneys."

3. *Draw them out like sheep to the slaughter.* These are the wicked, the prophet imploring God to reverse matters and bring retribution upon the wrongdoers. Since he has just implicitly invoked his own innocence ("You know me, You see me"), it may be that Jeremiah has in mind his own predicament with the wicked—the men of Anathoth who have sought to kill him.

4. *He will not see our end.* The implication of these words is that God will pay no attention to the future condition of the speakers, which is to say, will never bring them to judgment.

5. *foot soldiers.* This is what the Hebrew *ragli* (here in the plural, *raglim*) always means elsewhere. The image, then, is of battle: if you can't keep up with foot soldiers on the battlefield, how will you contend with cavalry?

flee. The received text has boteaḥ, "trust," which does not work in the *a fortiori* relation of the first verset to the second. An old exegetical tradition, going back to the Aramaic Targum and several medieval commentaries and picked up by some modern scholars, understands the verb to mean "fall," which makes the meaning neat but for which there is slim philological evidence. This translation adopts a proposed emendation, reading boreaḥ, "flee," instead of boteaḥ.

the Jordan's thickets. The Hebrew says "Pride of the Jordan," and this appears to be the name for a twisting stretch of the river where there is dense overgrowth and so where one can easily stumble. The phrase occurs twice elsewhere in Jeremiah in this sense, 49:19 and 50:44.

7. *My house, / . . . My estate.* The house is the Temple and the estate is the Land of Israel.

9. *a blood-splattered vulture.* This phrase is a famous crux. The word *tsavuʿa* does mean "painted," as some understood it in later Hebrew, but is not used in this sense elsewhere in the Bible, and painting birds of prey would be a strange practice. Lundbom finesses this by translating it as "speckled." Others link it with the Hebrew word for "finger" and suggest that it refers to sharp claws. This translation follows Rashi and Kimchi, assuming that the relentlessness of the bird as a scavenger is emphasized. In later Hebrew, the phrase became a term for "hypocrite," with *tsavuʿa* by itself having that meaning. This usage was based on the idea that the bird was actually painted, passing itself off as something it was not.

10. *Many shepherds.* Elsewhere, "shepherds" refers to the leaders of the Judahite people, but some interpreters take it here as a reference to the generals of the allied armies that invaded Judah.

11. *desolate / . . . desolate.* Some form of this word is repeated four times in two verses in order to convey an emphatic sense of utter desolation.

13. *Be shamed by your harvests.* The harvests are metaphorical, in keeping with the wheat sown and the thorns reaped—they are the dire consequences of the people's actions.

14. *all My evil neighbors.* These are the sundry nations bordering on Judah, many of whom collaborated with the invading Babylonians. God calls them "My neighbors" because the Land of Israel is God's.

I am about to uproot them from their land, and the house of Judah I will uproot from their midst. These are opposite actions: the hostile "neighbors" will now suffer the fate of exile, and the exiled Judahites will be plucked up and returned to their land.

16. *learn the ways of My people to swear by My name.* What the prophet envisages is a turning of the cultic tables. Previously, the Judahites had learned from their neighbors to invoke the name of Baal. Now, if those nations are not to undergo continuing exile, they must learn to invoke the name of YHWH, which implies accepting the God of Israel as the legitimate God of all.

CHAPTER 13

[1]Thus said the LORD to me, “Go and buy yourself a
loincloth of linen and put it round your loins, and do
not enter water.” [2]And I bought the loincloth according
to the word of the LORD and put it round my loins.
[3]And the word of the LORD came to me a second
time, saying, [4]“Take the loincloth that you bought,
which is round your loins, and rise, go to Perath and
hide it there in a crevice of the rock.” [5]And I went and
hid it in Perath as the LORD has charged me. [6]And it
happened at the end of many days that the LORD said
to me, “Rise, go to Perath and take from there the
loincloth that I charged you to hide there.” [7]And I went
to Perath and dug out and took the loincloth from the
place where I had buried it, and, look, the loincloth
was ruined, it was not good for anything. [8]And the
word of the LORD came to me, saying, [9]“Thus said
the LORD: So will I ruin the pride of Judah and the
great pride of Jerusalem. [10]This evil people who refuse
to heed My words, who go after the stubbornness of
their heart and go after other gods to serve them to

bow down to them, they shall be like the loincloth that
is not good for anything. [11]For as the loincloth clings to
a man's loins, so have I made all the house of Israel
and all the house of Judah cling to Me, to be a people
for Me, and for fame and for praise and for splendor,
but they did not heed. [12]Thus said the LORD God of
Israel, Every jar will fill with wine. And they shall say
to you, 'Do we not know that every jar will fill with
wine?'[13]And you shall say to them, 'Thus said the
LORD: I am about to fill all the dwellers of this land
and the kings sitting on the throne of David and the
priests and the prophets and all Jerusalem's dwellers
with drunkenness. [14]And I will smash them, each man
against his brother and the fathers and the sons
together, said the LORD. I will not spare and will not
have pity and will show no mercy in ruining them.'"

[15]Listen and give ear, do not be
haughty,
for the LORD has spoken:
[16]Give glory to the LORD your God
before He brings dark down
and before your feet are bruised
on the twilight mountains.

And you shall hope for light, and He
shall make it death's darkness,
He shall turn it into thick gloom.
17 And if you do not heed it,
my inmost self will secretly weep,
because of pride, will
constantly shed tears,
and my eyes will run with tears,
for the LORD's flock is taken
captive.
18 Say to the king and to the queen
mother,
sit down low,
for the diadem of your splendor
has came down from round your
heads.
19 The Negeb towns are shut,
and there is none to open.
Judah is exiled, all of it,
is exiled utterly.
20 Raise your eyes and see
the ones coming from the north.
Where is the flock that was given to
you,
your splendid sheep?

[21]What will you say when he
appoints over you—
and it was you who taught them—
leaders to be a head?
Will not pangs seize you
like a woman in labor?
[22]And should you say in your heart,
“Why do these things befall me?”
Through your many crimes your
skirts were stripped,
your heels ripped back.
[23]Can a Nubian change his skin,
a leopard its spots?
Then you, too, might be able to do
good,
you who are learned in doing evil.
[24]And I will scatter them like floating
chaff
to the desert wind.
[25]This is your lot, your measured
portion from Me,
said the LORD,
since you forgot Me,
and put your trust in the lie.
[26]And I, too, stripped back your
skirts over your face

and your shame was seen,
[27]Your adulteries and your neighings,
the depravity of your whoring,
on hills in the field
I have seen your vile things.
Woe, to you, Jerusalem, you are not
clean.
How much longer will it be?

CHAPTER 13 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Go and buy yourself a loincloth of linen.* Jeremiah is now enjoined to carry out a symbolic performative act, following the precedent of Hosea and to be continued by Ezekiel. These might be regarded as dramatic visual illustrations of the prophecies. A loincloth that has fallen apart, as this one will do, exposes the genitals, and in the poetic prophecy that follows this prose prophecy, the skirts of the personified people will be hitched up to expose her shame.

and do not enter water. This slightly puzzling item in the instructions may be to ensure that nothing in the fabric of the loincloth is in any way damaged before it is hidden in the crevice.

4. *Perath.* This is a wadi located about two miles northeast of Anathoth.

9. *pride.* There is a certain disparity between the symbol and its referent because a loincloth is scarcely a person's "pride." The prophet may be thinking of the antithesis of pride, shame, which is what a person suffers without a loincloth to cover his nakedness. In the next verse, the disintegrated loincloth becomes the metaphor of the people itself, and the body to which it once clung but no longer clings is God's.

12. *Every jar will fill with wine.* This bit of the prophecy is presented as a kind of riddle. The people responds by saying that, of course, jars are made to be filled. God's rejoinder (verse 13) is to explain the jar as a riddling symbolic reference to the people, who will be filled with drunkenness—which is to say, a condition of mental confusion and physical tottering that is a prelude to collapse.

14. *I will smash them.* This verse carries forward the metaphor of the jar, since the jar would be earthenware and easily smashed.

15. *Listen and give ear.* Exhortations to listen are a conventional beginning of Prophetic and other kinds of biblical poems.

16. *the twilight mountains.* This beautiful phrase continues the idea of darkness falling: as the mountains are enveloped in the shadows of evening, one runs the danger of colliding with rocks or stumbling into pitfalls in the mountainous terrain.

17. *because of pride.* The Hebrew *geiwah* is obscure. Though this translation links it with *gaʾawah*, "pride," that is no more than a guess. Others connect it with a rare word in Job that might possibly mean "community."

18. *sit down low.* That is, descend from your exalted thrones.

20. *the ones coming from the north.* As elsewhere, these are the invading armies.

Where is the flock that was given to you. The "you" throughout this passage is feminine singular and so refers to the nation personified as a woman.

21. *What will you say when he appoints over you.* The reference is ambiguous. Rashi understood the appointer as God; Kimchi thought "he" refers to the enemy who, having conquered Jerusalem, chooses local governors for his own purposes, and that may be more likely.

and it was you who taught them. The most plausible meaning of this opaque clause is that if you resent these disagreeable leaders with whom you are saddled, you have only yourself to thank for fastening the administration

of your society on morally dubious figures who can now be exploited by your conquerors.

22. *your heels ripped back.* The focus on the heels may seem puzzling. Women would have worn long robes, everything covered all the way down to the heels. The exposure of the heels then becomes a synecdoche for the exposure of the legs and most of the body. It should be noted that the verb here, *neḥmesu*, indicates a violent act or the perpetration of an outrage.

23. *Can a Nubian change his skin, / a leopard its spots?* This formulation—in traditional translations, *kushi* is rendered as "Ethiopian"—expresses a profound moral pessimism: just as these bodily features are ineradicable, your propensity for evil will never change, and so a national catastrophe is inevitable.

24. *like floating chaff.* Although *qash* usually means "straw," straw is not easily windblown, and so there seems to be a semantic slide from "straw" to "chaff." The image is akin to that of Psalms 1:4, where a different Hebrew word, *mots*, is used.

25. *the lie.* This may be, as some scholars have proposed, a pejorative epithet for Baal.

26. *stripped back your skirts over your face.* The relatively elliptical image of a woman stripped in verse 22 now becomes brutally explicit: her face covered by her own hitched up skirts, her entire naked body is exposed, and this looks like the sad condition of a woman about to be raped.

27. *your adulteries and your neighings.* While the latter term is often used for the noises made in revelry, it is also the word for a horse's neighing, and that is a metaphor adopted by Jeremiah to represent unbridled lust (see 5:8).

the depravity. The Hebrew *zimah* is strongly associated with sexual depravity.

on the hills in the field / I have seen your vile things. As elsewhere, the sexual imagery mingles literal and figurative senses. Idolatry is conceived as adultery, the betrayal by Israel of her divine Spouse, and the "vile things" are a fixed epithet for idols. But this pagan activity on the hilltops often involved a fertility cult with orgiastic rites.

How much longer will it be? Though this is the evident sense of the final clause of the prophecy, the Hebrew syntax is rather crabbed. A literal rendering of the three Hebrew words would be: “after when still.”

CHAPTER 14

[1]That which was the word of the LORD to Jeremiah
concerning matters of the droughts.

[2]Judah moans,
and her gates languish,
they grow dark on the ground,
and the scream of Jerusalem rises.
[3]And their nobles sent their young
ones for water.
They came to the hollows, found
no water,
went back with empty vessels,
were shamed and disgraced and
covered their heads.
[4]Because the soil cracked open,
for there was no rain in the land,
the farmers were shamed,
they covered their heads.

[5]For even the doe in the field gives
birth then forsakes,
for there is no grass.
[6]And wild asses stand on the bare
heights,
they sniff the wind like jackals,
their eyes go dead,
for there is no herbage.
[7]If our crimes bear witness against
us,
O LORD, act for the sake of Your
name,
for our rebellions are many,
against You we offend.
[8]Hope of Israel,
its Rescuer in time of disasters,
why should You be like a stranger in
the land,
like a wayfarer stopped for the
night?
[9]Why should you be like a man
overwhelmed,
like a warrior unable to rescue?
Yet you are in our midst, O LORD,
and Your name is called upon us.
Do not leave us.

[10]Thus said the LORD to this people: “So did they love
to stray. They did not restrain their feet, and the
LORD did not accept them with favor. Now shall He
recall their crime and make account of their offense.”
[11]And the LORD said to me: “Do not pray for this
people for good things. [12]Should they fast, I will not
listen to their chant of prayer, and should they offer up
burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept
them with favor, for by the sword and by famine and
by plague I will make an end of them.” [13]And I said,
“Alas, O Master, LORD, look, the prophets say to
them, ‘You shall not see the sword, nor famine shall
you have, but true well-being will I give you in this
place.’” [14]And the LORD said to me, “Lies do the
prophets prophesy in My name. I did not send them
nor did I charge them nor did I speak to them. A
vision of lies and a groundless divination and their own
heart’s deceit do they prophesy to you. [15]Therefore,
thus said the LORD concerning the prophets who
prophesy in My name when I did not send them, and
they say, ‘Sword and famine there shall not be in this
land,’ by the sword and by famine these prophets shall
perish. [16]And the people to whom they prophesy, they
shall be flung into the streets of Jerusalem because of
the famine and the sword, and there will be no one to
bury them—them, their wives and their sons and their

daughters—and I will pour out upon them their own
evil. [17]And you shall say to them this word:

Let my eyes shed tears,
    night and day let them not cease
for in a great disaster is the Virgin
    Daughter of My people broken,
    a very grievous blow.
[18]If I go out to the field,
    look, those slain by the sword,
and if I come to the town,
    look, those sickened by famine.
For prophet and priest as well
    go round the land and know not
        where.
[19]Have you wholly rejected Judah,
    by Zion are You repelled?
Why have You struck us and we
    have no healing,
    we hope for peace and there is no
        good,
        for a time of healing, and, look,
            terror?
[20]We know, LORD, our wickedness,

the crime of our fathers, for we
offended against You.
[21]Do not spurn, for the sake of Your
name,
do not debase the throne of Your
glory.
Recall, do not breach Your
covenant with us.
[22]Can the empty breath of the
nations yield rain,
and the heavens, can they give
showers?
Are not You the one, O LORD,
our God, and we hope in You?
For it is You Who made all
these."

CHAPTER 14 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *That which was the word.* The wording of this introductory formula is somewhat different from the usual "the word of the LORD came to."

2. *her gates . . . / grow dark on the ground.* "Gates" is a synecdoche for "towns." The verb "grow dark" (or "be dark"), *qadru,* is associated with mourning, and one sits on the ground in mourning.

3. *their nobles sent their young ones.* The "nobles" (in other contexts, "mighty ones") send their "young ones," that is, their subalterns.

the hollows. These are natural concavities in rock where rainwater would collect, when there is rain.

covered their heads. This is a sign of grief. But the phrase is absent from the Septuagint, and it may be a scribal duplication of the phrase at the end of verse 4.

5. *For even the doe in the field gives birth then forsakes.* Lacking sustenance, the doe abandons her newborn faun.

6. *their eyes go dead.* More literally, "their eyes are finished." Later Hebrew traditions made this an idiom for pining or longing, and that could conceivably be its meaning here. But the sense may rather be that the eyes of the wild asses, faint with hunger, go dead as part of their failing state. Lundbom proposes that the lack of vegetal nutrients in fact leads to blindness in such animals.

8. *a stranger in the land / . . . a wayfarer stopped for the night.* The land is imagined to be God's land, His earthly abode, with the Jerusalem temple as God's house, but He has now come to seem alienated from the land and its people.

9. *Yet you are in our midst.* In the face of the perception of God's withdrawal, the prophet, on behalf of the people, asserts the traditional conviction that God dwells in the midst of His people.

13. *Alas, O Master, LORD, look, the prophets say to them.* Jeremiah reverts here to one of the central themes that preoccupies him, false prophecy. One may reasonably suppose that this is a reflection of autobiographical reality. People in this culture sought the guidance of prophets, and there appear to have been a good many such prophets in Jeremiah's time who told their audiences what they wanted to hear.

18. *If I go out to the field, / look, those slain by the sword.* This entire verse reflects an arresting switch from the generalized symbolic image to concrete observation. First, we have the quasi-allegorical figure of the Virgin Daughter of my people who has been shattered by disaster. Then the meaning of the

disaster is spelled out as the prophet goes out to the field and sees it strewn with corpses, then enters the town and sees all around people dying of famine.

and know not where. Prophet and priest are supposed to be guides for the people. Now, in the national catastrophe, they wander through the land, dazed, scarcely knowing where they are going.

21. *Do not spurn . . . / do not debase.* Both verbs have as their object "the throne of Your glory." That throne would be Jerusalem, or, more specifically, the Temple, so this is an argument that God should not allow His own throne to be debased.

22. *the empty breath.* As elsewhere, this is a pejorative epithet for the idols or pseudo-gods of the nations.

yield rain. The reference reminds us that the entire prophecy addresses the disaster that has befallen the land through a drought.

the heavens, can they give showers? As a parallel to the first verset, this means: can the heavens on their own, without God's action, produce showers?

CHAPTER 15

[1]And the LORD said, “Even if Moses and Samuel
were to stand before Me, I would have nothing to do
with this people. Send them away from Me and let
them go out. [2]And should they say to you, ‘Where shall
we go out?,’ you shall say to them: Thus said the
LORD:

Who for death—to death,
and who for the sword—to the
sword,
and who for captivity—to
captivity.

[3]And I will set over you four clans, said the LORD, the
sword to kill and the dogs to drag and the fowl of the
heavens and the beasts of the earth to devour and to
destroy. [4]And I will make them a horror for all the
kingdoms of the earth because of Manasseh son of
Hezekiah, for what he did in Jerusalem.”

[5]For who will pity you, O Jerusalem,
    and who will console you,
and who will turn aside to ask
    how you fare?
[6]You abandoned Me, said the
    LORD,
    backward you did go,
and I reached out My hand against
    you and destroyed you,
    I could not relent.
[7]And I winnowed them with a
    winnowing fork
    in the gates of the land.
I bereaved, destroyed My people—
    from their ways they did not turn
        back.
[8]Its widows were more numerous to
    Me
    than the sand of the seas.
I brought upon them, on mother and
    young man as well,
    a despoiler at noon.
I let fall on them all of a sudden
    alarm and panic.
[9]Forlorn is she who bore seven,
    she has gasped out her life-breath.

Her sun has gone down while it was
still day.
She was shamed and disgraced.
And their remnant to the sword I
will give
before their enemies, said the
LORD.

[10]Woe to me, my mother, that you
gave birth to me,
a man of quarrel and a man of
strife to all the land.
I have not loaned nor did they lend
to me,
yet all of them curse me.
[11]Said the LORD: “Have I not
bolstered you for good?
Have I not made the enemy plead
for your intercession
in a time of evil and a time of
distress?
[12]Can iron shatter iron
from the north, or bronze?
[13]Your wealth and your treasures
I will turn to spoils, cost-free,

for all your offenses, through all
your regions.
[14]And I will make you serve your
enemies
in a land you do not know.
For fire rages in My nostrils,
against you it burns.”
[15]It is You Who knows, O LORD.
Recall me and take account of me
and avenge me of my pursuers.
Do not take me back in Your anger’s
slowness.
Know that I bore disgrace for
You.
[16]Your words were found and I ate
them,
and your words became gladness
for me
and my heart’s rejoicing, for Your
name was called upon me—
the LORD God of Armies.
[17]I did not sit in the gathering of
revelers to make merry.
Because of Your hand, alone I sat,
for with wrath You filled me.
[18]Why is my pain everlasting

and my blow grievous, resistant to
healing?
You have surely been to me a dried-
up spring,
waters not to be trusted.
19 Therefore thus said the LORD:
"If you turn back, I will bring you
back,
before Me you shall stand.
And if you bring out what is
precious from trash,
you shall be as My mouth.
It is they who shall turn back to
you,
and you shall not turn back to
them.
20 And I will make you for this people
a fortified wall of bronze.
And they shall do battle against you
and shall not prevail over you.
For I am with you
to rescue you and to save you, said
the LORD.
21 And I will save you from the hand
of the wicked,

and redeem you from the clutch
of the ruthless."

CHAPTER 15 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *I would have nothing to do with this people.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is: "My inward self [*nafshi*] is not toward this people."

2. *Where shall we go out?* Confronted with a decree of banishment—exile appears to be implied—the people ask where they should go. The grim answer is: to death or captivity.

Who for death—to death. The fate of the banished people is spelled out in lapidary fashion, with the dire words repeated in quick sequence: death, sword, captivity.

3. *clans.* The word choice looks a little odd, though the prophet might have in mind the set phrase "all the clans of the earth."

the dogs to drag. One should recall that dogs in biblical Israel were semiferal scavengers, not pets.

4. *because of Manasseh son of Hezekiah.* Manasseh was one of the most notorious of the Judahite kings for instituting idol worship in the Temple ("for what he did in Jerusalem"). See 2 Kings 21.

7. *in the gates of the land.* As before, this is probably a synecdoche for the towns of the land, though it should be noted that attacking forces would storm the gates.

8. *on mother and young man as well.* The Hebrew syntax is crabbed. It reads literally: "on mother young man." The Syriac shows "on mother and on young man." It is possible that the particle meaning "and" originally appeared before "young man" and was scribally omitted. That would yield the sense reflected in this translation.

alarm. The translation, assuming a connection with the verbal stem that means "to rouse," is conjectural. The Hebrew *ʿir* elsewhere always means "town."

10. *Woe to me, my mother, that you gave birth to me.* These words mark the beginning of another autobiographical passage. (The translation, in order to distinguish between Jeremiah's first-person speech and God's words, puts the latter in quotation marks.) More than any other prophet, Jeremiah repeatedly complains about the destiny of bitter contention that his calling has imposed upon him. It were better, he says here, had he never been born.

I have not loaned nor did they lend me. The giving and taking of loans could easily turn into a source of strife between lender and borrower. The prophet has done no such thing, yet he finds himself in perpetual conflict with those around him.

11. *bolstered . . . / made the enemy plead for your intercession.* Both verbs here are problematic and have generated wildly different understandings. This translation links the first term, *sheiritakha*, to a root associated with "armor," but that is at best an educated guess.

12. *iron / from the north.* Asia Minor was known for its high-quality iron. But in general, invaders in Jeremiah come from the north. The menacing note of this verse and what follows is a pointed antithesis to the positive declaration in verse 11: I stood by you against the enemy, but you failed to change your ways, and now I will bring disaster upon you.

14. *I will make you serve your enemies.* The received text has "I will make your enemies pass," *wehaʿavarti*, but the duplication of this verse in 17:4 as well as in many Hebrew manuscripts show *waʿavadti,* "I will make you serve." One should recall that the letters *resh* and *dalet* are close in form.

15. *Do not take me back in Your anger's slowness.* The force of the verb "take" here is unclear, but the gist of the line is that God should not be slow to anger in reversing Israel's fortunes and exacting retribution from its enemies.

16. *I ate them.* This prophetic eating of God's words looks like an anticipation of Ezekiel, who is enjoined to eat a scroll with God's words on it.

17. *Because of Your hand, alone I sat, / for with wrath You filled me.* This is still another vehement expression of Jeremiah's pained sense of isolation because of his prophetic mission.

19. *If you turn back.* The "you" is masculine singular and so must refer to Jeremiah. Nevertheless, the meaning of the verb repeated here in two different conjugations is not entirely clear. Usually, "to turn back" means "to repent," but the prophet has no need to repent. Perhaps the reference is to his sense of distraught alienation because of his prophetic mission. That mission is clearly invoked in "you shall be as My mouth."

20. *a fortified wall of bronze.* The image of fortification, used twice before, reflects Jeremiah's sense of being embattled by enemies.

CHAPTER 16

[1]And the word of the LORD came to me saying:
[2]"You shall not take you a wife nor shall you have sons and daughters in this place. [3]For thus said the LORD concerning the sons and concerning the daughters born in this place and concerning their mothers who bore them and concerning their fathers who begat them in this land. [4]Deaths by illness shall they die. They shall not be lamented and shall not be buried. Manure on the face of the soil they shall become, and by the sword and by famine they shall come to an end, and their carcasses shall be food for the fowl of the heavens and the beasts of the earth. [5]For thus said the LORD: Do not go to the house of a wake and do not go to lament and do not console them, for I have taken away My well-being from this people, said the LORD, the kindness and the mercy. [6]And great and small shall die in this land. They shall not be buried and shall not be lamented, nor shall one gash himself or shave his head for them. [7]They shall not break bread for them in mourning to console him for the dead, and they shall

not give him the cup of consolation for his father or
for his mother. [8]Nor to the house of feasting shall you
come to sit with them to eat and to drink. [9]For thus
said the LORD of Armies, God of Israel: I am about
to stifle from this place before your eyes and in your
days the sound of gladness and the sound of joy, the
sound of the bridegroom and the sound of the bride.
[10]And it shall be when you tell this people all these
things and they say to you, 'For what did the LORD
speak about us all this great evil, and what is our crime
and what is our offense that we have offended against
the LORD our God?' [11]You shall say to them, 'Because
your fathers forsook Me, said the LORD, and went
after other gods and served them and bowed down to
them, and Me did they forsake and My teaching they
did not keep. [12]As for you, you did more evil than your
fathers, and here you are going each after the
stubbornness of his evil heart so as not to heed me.'
[13]And I will cast you from this land to a land you do
not know, neither you nor your fathers, and you shall
serve there other gods day and night, as I will show
you no mercy. [14]Therefore, look, days are coming, said
the LORD, when it shall no longer be said, 'As the
LORD lives, Who brought up the Israelites from the
land of Egypt.' [15]But rather, 'As the LORD lives, Who
brought up the Israelites from the land of the north and

from all the lands into which He drove them,' and I will bring them back to their country that I gave to their fathers. [16]I am about to send many fishermen, said the LORD, and they shall fish them, and afterward I will send many hunters and they shall hunt them down from every mountain and from every hill and from the crevices in the rocks.

[17]For My eyes are on all their ways. They are not hidden from Me, and their crime is not concealed from My eyes. [18]And I will first pay back double for their crime and their offense, for their profaning My land with the carcasses of their vile things. And their abominations have filled My estate."

[19]The LORD is my strength and my
stronghold,
and my refuge on a day of
distress.
To You the nations shall come
from the ends of the earth and
shall say:
But to lies our fathers were heir,
mere breath that cannot avail.
[20]Can a human make him a god,
when these are not gods?

[21]Therefore, I am about to show
them,
this time will I show them,
My hand and my power,
and they shall know that My name
is the LORD.

CHAPTER 16 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *You shall not take you a wife.* This is perhaps the most drastic of the symbolic-prophetic acts that Jeremiah is asked to perform: the future will be so bleak that he must refrain from marrying and begetting children, for all will perish.

4. *illness . . . sword . . . famine.* Death comes from all directions—from the plague, from warfare, and from starvation.

5. *the house of a wake.* There is evidence—from the Ugaritic, from the Septuagint rendering of this term, and from rabbinic literature—that the beyt marzeaḥ (etymology uncertain) was a place where mourners gathered to drink and revel in celebration of the life of the deceased. “Wake” seems the best modern English equivalent of this custom.

6. *nor shall one gash himself or shave his head.* These are actually pagan mourning practices forbidden in the Torah. Either they survive as an archaic gesture in poetry, or they were still widely practiced, despite the prohibition.

7. *They shall not break bread for them.* The reference is to a special meal for the mourner, what in rabbinic Hebrew would be designated *seʿudat havraʾah*.

him. In keeping with common usage in biblical Hebrew, the passage switches back and forth between singular and plural.

the cup of consolation. This looks very much like a ritual cup of wine offered to the mourner.

8. *the house of feasting.* This is an antithesis of "the house of a wake," although drinking—for different purposes—characterized both. The Hebrew term for "feasting" in fact primarily suggests drinking, as in the Book of Esther.

13. *I will cast you.* Here Jeremiah, who writes at the end of the First Temple period, uses what amounts to a Late Biblical word, *hitil,* though in general his language is classical Hebrew.

14. *it shall no longer be said.* Commentators are divided as to whether the replacement of "Egypt" by "the land of the north" is a prophecy of consolation—which is to say, the redemption from exile will be even grander than the redemption from slavery in Egypt—or a threat: that is, you are doomed to go into exile, a more bitter fate even than slavery in Egypt. The prophet may well intend to suggest both these meanings.

16. *many fishermen . . . many hunters.* These are the troops of the invading army who will pursue and kill the Judahites.

they shall hunt them down . . . from every hill and from the crevices of the rocks. The metaphor of the hunt now becomes literal fact as we see the fleeing Judahites running off to the mountains and hills and, most vividly, hiding in crevices.

17. *They are not hidden from Me.* This picks up the hiding in crevices and caves: divine surveillance sees all of Israel's crimes and all the places where they attempt to flee, and directs their pursuers to hunt them down.

18. *the carcasses of their vile things.* Again, the "vile things" are idols, and they are represented pejoratively as "carcasses" because there is no life in them.

19. *The LORD is my strength and my stronghold.* The chapter now concludes with a psalm celebrating God, here recognized as the true deity by the sundry nations. This poem could be either a composition by Jeremiah in the spirit of Psalms or a noncanonical psalm that has been inserted in the text.

21. *Therefore, I am about to show them.* The psalm incorporates three voices: first the speaker who proclaims that God is his stronghold; then the nations who confess the errors of their fathers and the futility of idol worship; and now at the end, God, announcing that he will manifest His power.

CHAPTER 17

[1]Judah's offense is written
with a pen of iron,
incised with an adamantine
point
on the tablet of their hearts
and on the horns of their altars,
[2]as their sons recall their altars and
their sacred poles
by lush trees,
on high hills, on mountains in
the open.
[3]Your wealth, all your treasures,
I will turn into booty,
your offending high places in all
your regions.
[4]And you shall let your estate slip
away, on your own,
that I gave to you.
And I will make you serve your
enemies

in a land you did not know.
For fire rages in My nostrils,
forever shall it burn.

5 Thus said the LORD:
Cursed be the man who trusts in humans,
and makes mortal flesh his strong arm.
6 And he shall be like an arid shrub in the desert,
and he shall not see when good things come.
And he shall dwell in scorched places in the wilderness,
a barren land that cannot be settled.
7 Blessed be the man who trusts in the LORD,
and the LORD becomes his trust.
8 And he shall be like a tree planted by waters,
and by a stream it sends forth its roots,

and it shall not see when the heat
    wave comes,
    and its leaves shall be lush,
and in a drought year it shall have no
    care
    and never cease from yielding
        fruit.
[9]More crooked the heart than all
    things,
    it is grievously ill and who can
        fathom it?
[10]I am the LORD who probes the
    heart,
    testing the conscience
and allotting to a man according to
    his ways
    according to the fruit of his deeds.
[11]A partridge that hatched but did
    not lay
    is he who makes wealth but not in
        justice.
In the midst of his days it forsakes
    him,
    and at his end he becomes an
        abject man.
[12]—The throne of glory is on high,

from the first, the place of our
sanctuary.—
[13]Israel's hope is in the LORD.
All who forsake You shall be
shamed.
And those who swerve from You
shall be cut off,
for they forsook the source of
living water, the LORD.
[14]Heal me, O LORD, that I may be
healed,
rescue me, that I may be rescued
for You are my praise.
[15]Look, they say to me:
Where is the LORD's word? Let
it come.
[16]As for me, I did not urge to be a
shepherd following You,
nor did I long for a day of
disaster.
You Yourself knew my lips'
utterance,
in Your presence it was.
[17]Do not become a terror to me.
You are my refuge on an evil day.

[18]Let my pursuers be shamed and I
be not shamed.
Let them be terrified and let not
me be terrified.
Bring upon them an evil day
and break them with a double
breaking.

[19]Thus said the LORD to me: “Go and stand in the People’s Gate, through which the kings of Judah come in and go out, and in all the gates of Jerusalem. [20]And you shall say to them, ‘Listen to the word of the LORD, O kings of Judah, and all Judah, and all the dwellers of Jerusalem who come in through these gates.’ [21]Thus said the LORD: Take care at the risk of your lives and do not carry a burden on the sabbath day and bring it through the gates of Jerusalem. [22]And you shall not bring out a burden from your homes on the sabbath day, nor any task shall you do. And you shall hallow the sabbath day as I charged your fathers. [23]But they did not listen and did not bend their ear, and they made their necks stiff so as not to listen and not to take reproof. [24]And it shall be, if you indeed listen to me, said the LORD, not to bring your burden through the gates of this city on the sabbath day, not to

do on it any task, [25]kings and nobles shall enter the gates of this city, who sit on the throne of David and who ride in chariots or on horses, they and their nobles, the men of Judah and the dwellers of Jerusalem, and the city shall be dwelled in for all time. [26]And they shall come from the towns of Judah and from the environs of Jerusalem and from the land of Benjamin and from the lowlands and from the hill country and from the Negeb bringing burnt offering and sacrifice and grain offering and frankincense and bringing thanksgiving offering to the house of the LORD. [27]And if you do not listen to me to hallow the sabbath day and not to carry a burden when you come through the gates of Jerusalem on the sabbath day, I will light a fire in its gates and it shall consume the citadels of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched."

CHAPTER 17 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *written / with a pen of iron, / incised with an adamantine point.* The writing in question is incised on a stone or clay tablet. The pen of iron has a point of very hard stone, *shamir*, for this purpose; *shamir* is perhaps diamond, though that identification is not certain.

on the tablet of their hearts / and on the horns of their altars. Inwardly, the consciousness of their offense is indelible, whatever they outwardly profess. The altars should be sacred places but have been profaned by their acts, which

would involve performing pagan rites on the altars. The altars usually had protuberances at their four corners, referred to as "horns." The received text has "your altars" but many Hebrew manuscripts show "their altars."

2. *as their sons recall.* The phrase is somewhat obscure and has been construed by some antithetically, making "sons" the object of the recalling. In the understanding of this translation, the verse is a direct continuation of the previous one: Judah's offense is manifested in the pagan altars and in the sons, perniciously taught by their fathers, who cling to all the paraphernalia of pagan worship.

4. *And you shall let your estate slip away, on your own.* The wording is not entirely transparent, but this translation hews to the received text.

And I will make you serve your enemies. These two lines of poetry replicate 15:14, with minor variations.

5. *humans.* Although *ʾadam* can be translated as "man," it is the generic term either for "person" or for "humankind" and is not limited to the male gender.

strong arm. The Hebrew says merely "arm," an epithet for "strength."

6. *an arid shrub.* The exact identity of the plant named is not certain, but it should be noted that this Hebrew term *ʿarʿar* clearly evokes *ʿariri,* "barren," and alliterates with the next word in the Hebrew text, *ʿaravah,* "desert."

barren land. Literally, "a salt land."

8. *And he shall be like a tree planted by waters.* The kinship of this entire verse with Psalm 1 has often been noted, though it is unclear whether Jeremiah was alluding to that psalm or simply deploying a stock comparison shared by his poem and the psalm.

9. *More crooked the heart than all things.* While the adjective *ʿaqov* certainly suggests "deceitful," as many translations reflect, the root meaning of "crooked" is worth preserving. This is an etymology of Jacob's name, as the angry Esau reminds us in Genesis 27:36.

it is grievously ill. The crooked human heart is the manifestation of a pathological condition. Though Jeremiah may sometimes seem a ranter, on occasion he shows himself to be a shrewd moral psychologist.

10. *I am the LORD who probes the heart.* No human can fathom the deviousness of the heart, but God can.

conscience. As before, the literal sense is "kidneys."

11. *A partridge that hatched but did not lay.* At least in ancient understanding, the male partridge sits on the eggs (the noun and verb here are both masculine), which of course he could not have produced.

it forsakes him. The logical antecedent is "wealth."

an abject man. The Hebrew *naval* does not really mean "fool," as most translations continue to represent it. A *naval* is a scoundrel, a base fellow, someone in an abject state, and that is surely the dire end predicted for the person with ill-gotten wealth, not the condition of foolishness.

12. *The throne of glory.* This verse appears to be a fragment not directly connected with what proceeds or what follows and so it is marked off with dashes in the translation.

13. *those who swerve from You.* The translation reads *wesurekha* for the Masoretic *yesurey,* "torments of."

shall be cut off. The translation reads *yikareitu* for the Masoretic *yikateivu,* "shall be written."

15. *Look, they say to me.* These mockers are obviously the hostile Judahites to whom Jeremiah refers frequently.

16. *I did not urge to be a shepherd following You.* Although the translation proposed here is a viable understanding of the Hebrew, the meaning of this clause has been disputed. "Shepherd" would refer to the role of prophet. But a frequently proposed emendation of that Hebrew word yields: "I did not urge to evil"—that is, the evil fate predicted for Israel.

18. *Let them be terrified.* The verb used can also mean "be shattered."

21. *do not carry a burden on the sabbath day and bring it through the gates of Jerusalem.* Some scholars have claimed that the emphasis here on observance of the sabbath reflects a sixth-century B.C.E. exilic setting, as in the late chapters of Isaiah. This is by no means a necessary inference because the sabbath is, after all, part of the Decalogue, and its violation in the Book of

Exodus is considered to be a capital crime. The “burden” brought through the gates would be produce from the surrounding countryside and perhaps also merchandise transported from abroad.

22. *nor any task shall you do.* Both the verb and the noun are the ones used in the prohibition of work on the sabbath in the Decalogue.

25. *who sit on the throne of David and who ride in chariots and on horses.* The translation follows the Hebrew wording, which is distributive—that is, only the kings sit on the throne whereas the nobles ride in chariots and on horses.

26. *the lowlands.* This refers to the coastal plain. Thus the four points of the compass in the land are invoked: Benjamin to the north of Jerusalem, the hill country of its eastern region, the Negeb to the south, and the lowlands to the west.

CHAPTER 18

[1]The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD,
saying, [2]“Rise and go down to the potter’s house, and
there I shall let you hear My words.” [3]And I went down
to the potter’s house, and there he was, attending to
the task on the wheel. [4]And if the vessel that he was
making in clay in the potter’s hand was spoiled, he
would go back and make another vessel as it was fit in
the eyes of the potter to make. [5]And the word of the
LORD came to me saying: [6]“Like the potter cannot I
do with you, house of Israel? said the LORD. Look,
like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in My
hand, house of Israel. [7]One moment I speak about a
nation and about a kingdom, to uproot and to smash
and to destroy. [8]And if that nation about which I spoke
turns back from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I
planned to do to it. [9]And another moment I speak
about a nation and about a kingdom to build and to
plant, [10]and if it does what is evil in My eyes, not
heeding My voice, I will repent of the good that I
intended to bestow on it. [11]And now, pray, say to the

men of Judah and to the dwellers of Jerusalem, saying, Thus said the LORD: I am about to fashion evil against you and devise a plan against you. Turn back, pray, each from his evil way and make your ways and your actions good. [12]But they said, 'It is hopeless, for after our devising we will go and each of us will act in the stubbornness of his evil heart.'"

[13]Therefore thus said the LORD:
Ask, pray, among the nations,
    Who has heard things like these?
A great frightfulness she has done,
    the Virgin Israel.
[14]Does the snow of Lebanon
    leave the rock of the highland
        field?
Do foreign waters dry up,
    the cold flowing streams?
[15]For My people has forgotten Me,
    to a lie they burn incense.
And they stumble in their ways,
    the paths of old,
to walk on paths
    of an unpaved way.
[16]To make their land a desolation,

an everlasting hiss.
Who passes over it shall be desolate
and shall shake his head.
17 Like the east wind will I scatter
them
before the enemy.
The nape, not the face, I will see of
them
on the day of their disaster.

18 And they said, “Come, let us devise plans against Jeremiah, for teaching shall not cease from the priest nor counsel from the wise man, nor oracle from the prophet. Come, let us strike him with the tongue, and let us not hearken to all his words.”

19 Hearken, O LORD, to me,
and listen to the sound of my
quarrel.
20 Shall evil be paid back for good?
For they have dug a pit for my
life,
Recall my standing before You
to speak good of them,
to turn back Your wrath from them.

[21]Therefore, consign their children to famine,
make them bleed from the sword,
and let their wives be bereaved and widowed
and their husbands slain by the sword,
their young men struck down by the sword in battle.
[22]Let screams be heard from their houses
when You bring against them a sudden troop,
for they dug a pit to trap me,
and snares they laid for my feet.
[23]And You, O LORD, You know
all their counsel against me for death.
Do not atone for their crime,
and their offense before You do not blot out,
and let them be made to stumble before You,
in the hour of Your wrath act against them.

CHAPTER 18 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *go down to the potter's house.* As many commentators have observed, the verb used suggests that the potter's house was located in a lower part of the city, perhaps in a valley, near a water source.

6. *like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in My hand.* This entire sentence was imported for an impressive liturgical poem in the Yom Kippur service. The symbolic use of the potter harks back to the version of the creation of humankind in Genesis 2, where God fashioned—the potter's verb *yatsar* is used—the human creature from the soil.

11. *to fashion.* Pointedly, the verb used is *yotser*, which as a verbal noun is the word for "potter" that appears in the first part of this prophecy.

12. *It is hopeless.* The sense of the statement is: There is no point in hoping we will change our ways, for we are set on them. Lundbom, amusingly but also relevantly, proposes that the phrase means something like "we couldn't care less."

14. *Does the snow of Lebanon / leave the rock of the highland field?* As we are frequently reminded in biblical poetry, there are mountains in the region of southern Lebanon bordering on the Land of Israel. On the heights, snow would be the equivalent of permafrost. The point of the rhetorical question, then, is that the highland snow never leaves the rocks on which it has accumulated, yet Israel has forsaken its God (also called "the Rock") to which it should have clung.

Do foreign waters dry up, / the cold flowing streams. This line has engendered conflicting interpretations. The verb that appears in the received text, *yinatshu,* "be smashed," is scarcely appropriate for water and this translation accepts a widely used emendation, *yinashtu,* which involves merely a reversal of two consonants. The poet is evidently still thinking of Lebanon: its cold mountain streams never dry up, just as the snow on these slopes never

melts from the rocks. One detects a polemic thrust in the idea that these foreign waters continue to flow faithfully whereas Israel has betrayed its God.

15. *to a lie they burn incense.* The word translated as "to a lie" could also mean "in vain," but the context suggests that what the prophet has in mind is not simply the futility of burning incense but burning incense to a false god. The reference in the latter part of this verse to walking on wayward paths definitely accords with the sin of idolatry.

they stumble. The Masoretic Text shows "they caused them to stumble," but one Hebrew manuscript and two ancient versions have the less cumbersome "they stumble."

16. *an everlasting hiss.* This is the sound of revulsion emitted when one sees something horrendous.

17. *Like the east wind will I scatter them.* The hot wind blowing from the deserts to the east of the Land of Israel is regularly said in biblical poetry to bring trouble.

The nape, not the face, I will see of them. That is, they will be compelled to flee. Three ancient versions read "I will show them," which is merely a difference in vocalization.

18. *for teaching shall not cease from the priest.* Jeremiah, in confronting the people with his prophecies of disaster, evinces, in their view, the arrogance of displacing the more comforting teaching, counsel, and oracles of the established priests, wise men, and prophets.

let us strike him with the tongue. This may suggest that the plot against Jeremiah was enacted through slander.

19. *my quarrel.* The Masoretic Text has *yerivai,* "my adversaries." The reading of the Septuagint, *rivi,* a difference of a single consonant, makes better sense.

20. *they have dug a pit for my life.* Although the pit is in all likelihood metaphorical, the prophet is speaking, as he has before, about a real conspiracy to kill him. He will later be thrown into an actual pit.

my standing before You. The idiom implies intercession: the prophet actually pleaded to God on behalf of the people, and yet they now seek to kill

him.

21. *make them bleed.* The literal sense of the verb is “make them pour.”

22. *snares they laid for my feet.* The metaphor of snares is conventionally paired with the metaphor of the pit as two allied methods for trapping animals or birds. Because the snare is hidden (the literal meaning of this verb), it suggests the deviousness of the plot against the prophet.

23. *atone.* The verb also has the sense of “cover up.”

CHAPTER 19

[1]Thus said the LORD: “Go and buy a potter’s
earthenware flask, and [take] of the elders of the
people and of the elders of the priests, [2]and go out to
the Valley of Ben-Hinnom which is in the Gate of the
Potsherd, and call out there the words that I shall
speak to you. [3]And you shall say: ‘Hear the word of the
LORD, kings of Judah and dwellers of Jerusalem.
Thus said the LORD of Armies, God of Israel. I am
about to bring such evil upon this place that whoever
hears of it, his ears will ring. [4]Inasmuch as they have
forsaken Me and made this place foreign and burned
incense in it to other gods which neither they nor their
fathers nor the kings of Judah knew, and they have
filled this place with the blood of the innocent. [5]And
they have built high places to Baal to burn their sons in
the fire of burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not
charge and of which I did not speak and which never
came to My mind, [6]therefore, look, days are coming,
said the LORD, when this place shall not be called
Topheth and the Valley of Ben-Hinnom but the Valley

of the Killing. [7]And I will confound the counsel of
Judah and Jerusalem in this place and will bring them
down by the sword before their enemies and by the
hand of those who seek their life, and I will give their
carcasses as food for the fowl of the heavens and the
beasts of the earth. [8]And I will make this city a
desolation and a hissing. Whoever passes by it shall be
devastated and hiss over all its blows. [9]And I will feed
them the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their
daughters, and each man shall eat the flesh of his
fellow man in the siege and in the straits that their
enemies and those who seek their life shall press upon
them. [10]And you shall break the flask before the eyes
of the men who go with you. [11]And you shall say to
them, Thus said the LORD of Armies: So will I break
this people and this city as the potter's vessel is broken
and can no longer be made whole. And in Topheth
they shall bury till there is no room left to bury. [12]Thus
will I do to this place, said the LORD, and to its
dwellers, to make this city like Topheth. [13]And the
houses of Jerusalem and the houses of the kings of
Judah like the place of Topheth shall be unclean, all
the houses on the roofs on which they burned incense
to all the array of the heavens and poured libations to
other gods.'" [14]And Jeremiah came from Topheth
where the LORD had sent him to prophesy, and he

stood in the court of the house of the LORD and said to all the people, [15]"Thus said the LORD of Armies. God of Israel: I am about to bring upon this city and on all its towns the evil of which I spoke concerning it, for they have made their neck stiff not to heed my words."

CHAPTER 19 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *[take].* There definitely seems to be a verb missing in the Masoretic Text (hence the brackets in the translation). "Take" appears in the Septuagint.

4. *made this place foreign.* The clear implication of the context is that they have made it foreign by worshipping foreign gods there.

they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent. As a rule, this phrase refers to murder, and perhaps occasionally to murderous exploitation, but given the location in the Valley of Ben-Hinnom, the "innocent" may well be the children sacrificed in this place.

5. *burnt offerings to Baal.* The linkage between Baal and human sacrifice is exceptional. Elsewhere, and especially in reference to the Valley of Ben-Hinnom, it is to Moloch that children are sacrificed.

6. *the Valley of the Killing.* As what follows makes clear, the killing is not the sacrificed children but the general slaughter that will be perpetrated here in retribution for this unspeakable crime.

7. *confound.* The literal sense of the Hebrew verb is "empty out."

9. *And I will feed them the flesh of their sons and . . . their daughters.* Although cannibalism under the duress of starvation in sieges is often invoked in the Bible, and evidently actually sometimes occurred, in this instance it is measure-for-measure justice: the paganizers murdered their own children in a macabre ritual; now they will be driven by extremity to eat their children.

10. *And you shall break the flask.* The fashioning of humankind in Genesis 2 was strongly analogized to the potter's artifact. Now, the patent frangibility of an earthenware flask becomes a vivid demonstration of the vulnerability of the people to destruction.

13. *the roofs on which they burned incense to all the array of the heavens.* The roofs were flat, making them readily appropriate settings for worship of astral deities.

14. *He stood in the court of the house of the* LORD. The temple court would have been an ideal place to address a large crowd. Moreover, by moving from the Valley of Ben-Hinnom to the temple precincts, Jeremiah makes clear that the prophesied destruction is not just for the Moloch worshippers but for all of Jerusalem, "the houses of Jerusalem and the houses of the kings of Judah like the place of Topheth."

CHAPTER 20

[1]And Pashhur son of Immer the priest—he was the chief official in the house of the LORD—heard Jeremiah prophesying these things. [2]And Pashhur struck Jeremiah and put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin Gate which was in the house of the LORD. [3]And it happened on the morrow that Pashhur let Jeremiah out of the stocks, and Jeremiah said to him, “Not Pashhur has the LORD called your name but Terror-All-Around. [4]For thus said the LORD: I am about to give you over to terror, you and all who love you, and they shall fall by the sword of your enemies, with your own eyes beholding, and all Judah will I give into the hand of the king of Babylonia, and he shall exile them to Babylonia and strike them down with the sword. [5]And I will give all that is stored in this city and all its gain and all its precious stuff and all the treasures of the king of Judah I will give into the hand of their enemies, and they shall plunder them and take them and bring them to Babylonia. [6]As for you, Pashhur, and as for all who

dwell in your house, you shall go away in captivity and come to Babylonia, and there you shall die, you and all who love you, as you have prophesied lies to them.

[7]You enticed me, O LORD, and I
was enticed.
You were stronger than I, and You
prevailed.
I became a laughingstock all day
long,
all of them mocking me.
[8]For whenever I spoke, I screamed.
"Outrage and violence," I called.
For the word of the LORD became
to me
disgrace and contempt all day
long.
[9]And I thought, "I will not recall
Him,
nor will I speak anymore in His
name."
But it was in my heart like burning
fire
shut up in my bones,
and I could not hold it in,

I was unable.
[10]For I heard the slander of many;
“Terror all around!
Tell, let us tell on him.”
All my intimates
watch for my fall:
“Perhaps he will be enticed and we
shall prevail over him,
and we shall take our revenge of
him.”
[11]But the LORD is with me as a
fierce warrior,
so my pursuers shall stumble and
shall not prevail.
They shall be utterly shamed, for
they shall not succeed,
everlasting disgrace that shall not
be forgotten.
[12]LORD of Armies, probing the
righteous,
Who sees the conscience and the
heart,
let me see Your vengeance against
them,
for to You I laid out my case.
[13]Sing to the LORD,

praise the LORD,
for he has saved the life of the needy
from the hand of evildoers.

[14]Cursed the day that I was born,
the day my mother bore me,
let it not be blessed.
[15]Cursed the man who brought
tidings
to my father, saying,
“A male child is born to you,”
giving him great joy.
[16]And let that man be like the towns
that the LORD overturned and
did not relent.
And let him hear screams in the
morning,
and battle shouts at the hour of
noon.
[17]Because he did not kill me in the
womb,
that my mother could be my grave
and her womb pregnant for all
time.

[18]Why from the womb did I come
out
to see wretchedness and sorrow,
and my days end in shame?

CHAPTER 20 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *struck.* This might be merely a slap in the face, but the verb used also could mean "beat."

the stocks. The noun *mahpekhet* is some sort of device of confinement and perhaps also torture. Because it derives from a verbal stem that means "overturn," some have conjectured that it might be stocks in which a person is locked upside down. In any case, it is clear that Jeremiah undergoes very rough treatment at the hands of this establishment priest. But when he is freed, he remains unflinchingly defiant.

4. *all who love you.* The Hebrew term suggests both intimate friends and family.

7. *You enticed me, O LORD, and I was enticed.* The switch to poetry here signals the beginning of a new prophecy. Its urgent autobiographical content is a trait that sets Jeremiah apart from the other prophets. The verb represented as "enticed" could also mean "seduced" in the sexual sense. Jeremiah was drawn into his prophetic calling because he heard God addressing him, but prophecy has brought him nothing but misery, as the harsh treatment at the hands of Pashhur that was just reported painfully illustrates.

You were stronger than I, and You prevailed. The language here harbors an oblique hint of rape, as in the report of the rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13:14.

8. *Outrage and violence.* These are the conventional words shouted by someone being attacked by thieves or hooligans.

9. *But it was in my heart like burning fire.* The resolution to withdraw from prophecy cannot, to Jeremiah's great anguish, be sustained because God's word—which is to say, the overriding imperative to denounce the crimes of the people and warn them of the impending disaster—is so powerful that he cannot hold it in: it bursts forth from him like flames.

10. *Terror all around.* The words he has used in denouncing Passhur and predicting the imminent destruction are mockingly quoted by the people of Jerusalem.

Tell, let us tell on him. This is a literal rendering of the Hebrew: what they have in mind is to inform against Jeremiah, identifying him as a traitor for his prophecies of doom.

Perhaps he will be enticed and we shall prevail over him. These two verbs pointedly repeat the beginning of Jeremiah's personal complaint against God, which of course, they could not have heard. This is a very different enticement—an intent to draw Jeremiah into making statements that could be judged to be treasonous and thus cause him to be arrested and perhaps executed.

11. *But the LORD is with me as a fierce warrior.* This does not really contradict the opening lines of the poem. God has enticed the prophet to take up a calling that entails endless anguish, but this same God—after all, a God of truth and justice—will defend him against his malevolent enemies.

14. *Cursed the day that I was born.* This is surely the beginning of a new poem of complaint because the preceding verses are a confident proclamation that God will defend the oppressed. The language of this poem throughout is strikingly similar to the death-wish poem in Job 3. The similarities are so extensive that one must conclude that the Job poet, writing more than a century after Jeremiah, was familiar with this text and reworked it—brilliantly, it must be said—for his own purposes.

15. *giving him great joy.* The tone is bitterly sardonic: of course, the father would rejoice to hear that his wife had born him a son, but for the prophet

that the infant has grown up to become, there is no scintilla of joy in the fact of his birth.

16. *And let that man be like the towns / that the* LORD *overturned.* The towns are Sodom and Gomorrah, with the verb "overturned," regularly used in connection with the cities of the plain, a clue to their identity. Jeremiah's anger at being born into a destiny of anguish is poetically displaced onto the man who brought the tidings of his birth, whom he curses.

18. *Why from the womb did I come out / to see wretchedness and sorrow.* The first verset appears in Job 3:11 in what looks like an approximate quotation. The noun "wretchedness," *ʿamal,* becomes a signature term in Job.

CHAPTER 21

[1]The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD
when King Zedekiah sent to him Passhur son of
Malkiah and Zephaniah son of Maaseiah the priest,
saying: [2]“Inquire, pray of the LORD on our behalf, for
Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia is battling against
us. Perhaps the LORD will do for us according to all
His wonders, and he will withdraw from us.” [3]And
Jeremiah said to them, “Thus shall you say to
Zedekiah: [4]Thus said the LORD God of Israel: I am
about to turn round the weapons that are in your hands
with which you do battle against the king of Babylonia
and against the Chaldeans who besiege you outside the
wall, and I will gather them inside the city. [5]And I
Myself will do battle against you with an outstretched
hand and a strong arm and with anger and with wrath
and with great fury. [6]And I will strike down those who
dwell in this city, man and beast, in a great pestilence
they shall die. [7]And afterward, said the LORD, I will
give over Zedekiah king of Judah and his servants and
the people and those remaining in this city from the

pestilence, from the sword, and from the famine, into
the hand of Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia and
into the hands of their enemies and into the hands of
those who seek their lives, and he shall strike them
with the edge of the sword, he shall not spare them
and shall not pity and shall show no mercy. [8]And to
this people you shall say; Thus said the LORD: I am
about to set before you the way of life and the way of
death. [9]Who stays in this city shall die by the sword
and by famine and by pestilence. And who goes out
and goes over to the Chaldeans besieging you shall
live, and his life shall become booty. [10]For I have set
My face against this city for evil and not for good, said
the LORD. Into the hand of the king of Babylonia it
shall be given, and he shall burn it in fire. [11]And to the
house of Judah, listen to the word of the LORD."

[12]House of David, thus said the LORD:

Render justice every morning,
and save the man robbed from the
oppressor's hand.
lest My wrath spring out like fire
and burn with none to quench it
because of the evil of your acts.

[13]Look, I am against you, valley
dweller,
rock of the plain, said the LORD,
those saying, “Who can come down
upon us,
and who can enter our dwellings?”
[14]And I will exact judgment from
you
according to the fruit of your acts,
said the LORD.
And I will light a fire in her forest,
and it will consume all around her.

CHAPTER 21 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Inquire, pray, of the* LORD. This is a technical expression for inquiry of an oracle. What Zedekiah and his delegates are of course hoping for is a favorable oracle regarding the fate of the city, under siege by the Babylonians (most likely, in the period from 588 to 586 B.C.E., which would end in the conquest and destruction of Jerusalem).

Nebuchadrezzar. In other biblical books this name often appears as Nebuchadnezzar, though the spelling with two *r*s used here is more faithful to the Akkadian. Hebrew transliterations of foreign names show a considerable degree of distortion.

4. *I am about to turn round the weapons that are in your hands.* That is, I am going to render your weapons ineffectual, forcing you to fall back into the city.

the Chaldeans. These are the dominant ethnic group in Babylonia.
I will gather them. The antecedent of "them" is the Chaldeans.

5. *an outstretched hand and a strong arm.* This is a variation of the phrase used in Deuteronomy 4:34 (where it appears as "a strong hand and an outstretched arm") to describe God's intervention against Egypt on behalf of the Israelites. Here, the application is pointedly reversed as God intervenes against Israel.

7. *his servants.* This noun, when attached to a king, almost invariably refers to his courtiers or attendants.
he shall strike them with the edge of the sword. Zedekiah's actual fate was perhaps worse than death: first he was forced to watch as his sons were murdered; then he was blinded and led off to captivity.

8. *I am about to set before you the way of life and the way of death.* This echoes Deuteronomy 30:19, where Israel is urged to "choose life." The allusion is ironic because in this case the choice is between death and a life of captivity and exile. The phrase in the next verse, "his life shall become booty," means booty to the Chaldeans.

12. *House of David.* The address is to the dynastic line, and "house of Judah" in the previous verse has the same meaning.

13. *valley dweller.* The reference is not certain. Since the entire poem appears to have in view the destruction of Jerusalem, as does the preceding prose prophecy, it is likely that the valley dwellers live in Jerusalem, which does have valleys as well as steep hills. But the next phrase, "rock of the plain," has not been satisfactorily explained.

14. *And I will light a fire in her forest.* Lundbom proposes that the reference is to the royal palace, in which there was a hall called the Lebanon Forest House because of its extensive use of Lebanese cedar paneling. It seems more likely that what is to be burned is an actual forest—there were wooded areas in and around Jerusalem—and "it will consume all around her" thus plausibly invokes the destruction that extends beyond the city to the surrounding countryside. Through this entire prophecy, one readily sees why Jeremiah was a scorned or even hated figure in the eyes of his countrymen, here predicting

the total destruction of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah—a catastrophe that in fact was about to occur—at the very moment the city was under siege.

CHAPTER 22

[1]Thus said the LORD: “Go down to the house of the
king of Judah, and you shall speak there this word.
[2]And you shall say, Listen to the word of the LORD,
king of Judah, who sits on the throne of David, you
and your servants and your people who enter these
gates. [3]Thus said the LORD: Do justice and
righteousness and release the robbed from oppression,
and the sojourner, the orphan, and the widow do not
wrong and do no violence to them, and do not shed the
blood of the innocent in this place. [4]For if indeed you
do this thing, kings in the line of David sitting on his
throne shall enter the gates of this house riding in
chariots and on horses, the king and his servants and
his people. [5]And if you do not heed these words, by
Myself do I swear, said the LORD, this house shall
become a ruin. [6]For this said the LORD concerning
the house of the LORD:

You are Gilead to Me,

the Lebanon summit.
But I will surely turn you to a desert,
uninhabited towns.
7 And I will summon against you
destroyers,
each man with his weapons,
and they shall cut down the pick of
your cedars,
and pile them on the fire.

8 And many nations shall pass by this city, and they shall say one to another: 'Why did the LORD do this to this great city?' 9 And they shall say, 'Because they forsook the covenant of the LORD their God and bowed down to other gods and served them.'

10 Do not keen for the dead,
and do not grieve for him.
Keen constantly for him who goes,
for he will not come back and see
the land of his birth."

11 For thus said the LORD to Shallum son of Josiah reigning instead of Josiah his father, "Who has gone out from this place shall not go back there again. 12 For

in the place to which they exiled him he shall die, and this land he shall not see again.”

[13]Woe, who builds his house without
righteousness
and his upper chambers without
justice.
His fellow he makes work for
nothing,
and his wages does not give him.
[14]Who says, “I shall build me a
massive house,
with spacious upper chambers,
and break open for it my windows,
paneled in cedar,
painted in vermillion.”
[15]Would you be kings
by competing in cedar?
Did not your father eat and drink
and do justice and righteousness?
Then it went well for him.
[16]He defended the rights of the poor
and the needy.
Then it went well.

Is not that to know Me? said
the LORD.
17For your eyes and your heart
are on naught but your gain
and on shedding the blood of the
innocent,
and on oppression and violence, to
do it.

18Therefore thus said the LORD to Jehoiakim son of
Josiah king of Judah.

They shall not lament him,
"Woe, my brother, woe, sister!"
They shall not lament him,
"Woe, master, woe, his majesty!"
19In a donkey's burial he shall be
buried,
dragged and flung beyond
Jerusalem's gates.

20Go up to Lebanon and cry out,
and to Bashan, lift up your voice.
And cry out from Abarim
for all your lovers are broken.

[21]I spoke to you when you were
tranquil.
You said, “I will not listen.”
This is your way from your youth,
for you did not listen to My voice.
[22]All your shepherds the wind shall
herd,
and your lovers shall go into
captivity.
For then shall you be shamed and
disgraced
by all your evil.
[23]You who dwell in Lebanon,
nesting among the cedars,
how will you groan when upon you
come pangs,
shuddering like a woman in labor?

[24]“As I live,” said the LORD, “Should you, Coniah son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, be a seal on My right hand, from there I would tear you away. [25]And I will give you into the hand of those who seek your life and into the hand of those by whom you are terrified, and into the hand of Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia and into the hand of the Chaldeans. [26]And I will cast

you and your mother who bore you into another land
where you were not born, and there shall you both die.
[27]And the land to which they long to return, there they
shall not return.

[28]Is he a smashed, rejected pot,
this man Coniah?
Is he a vessel no one wants?
Why have he and his seed been cast
and flung
into a land they did not know?
[29]Land, land, land,
O hear the word of the LORD!
[30]Thus said the LORD:
Write this person down as childless,
a man who shall not prosper in his
days.
For no man sitting on David's throne
shall prosper,
nor rule again in Judah.

CHAPTER 22 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *Do justice and righteousness.* In the ancient Near Eastern polity, it was ultimately the responsibility of the king to administer justice (as the fable of Solomon's judgment piquantly illustrates). Jeremiah, confronting the king, turns from his usual theme of cultic transgressions to raise issues of legal, social, and economic justice.

the sojourner. Throughout the Bible, this Hebrew word, *ger,* designates a resident alien, who as someone without inherited land or the protection of a clan, is vulnerable, as are the widow and the orphan.

4. *shall enter the gates.* The gates envisioned are the gates of the palace. The virtuous king, his courtiers, and the people will troop proudly through these gates in a regal procession.

6. *You are Gilead to Me, / the Lebanon summit.* Both places are on heights with luxuriant growth. The idea is that for God, Israel, or the Land of Israel, was a proud and fruitful place, but now it will be turned into a desert.

7. *the pick of your cedars.* These may well be metaphorical cedars, emblems of the lofty and eminent members of Judahite society, though some interpreters think the reference is to the elaborate cedar paneling of the palace and the Temple.

8. *And many nations shall pass by this city.* This verse and the next one are a virtual citation of Deuteronomy 29:23–25.

10. *Do not keen for the dead.* The Masoretic Text shows "a dead [man]," but that vocalization is almost universally corrected to yield "the dead." The particular dead person here, according to long-standing scholarly consensus, is Josiah, who was killed by Pharaoh Neco at Megiddo in 609 B.C.E. One should not keen for him because his fate of death is not so dire as the fate of his son Shallum (more commonly called Jehoahaz, who was placed on the throne by Neco after his father's death, reigned only scant months, and then was sent down to Egypt as a prisoner). Thus Shallum-Jehoahaz is the one "who goes," never again to see the land of his birth.

13. *Woe, who builds his house without righteousness.* The person excoriated is King Jehoiakim, and so the house is a royal palace (biblical Hebrew regularly calls this structure not a "palace" but simply "the king's house"). His fellow he

makes work for nothing. What is in view is the common practice of using forced labor for royal building projects.

14. *a massive house.* More literally, "a house of [great] measure." In the story of the spies in Numbers, the Canaanites, perceived as giants, are called, literally in the Hebrew, "men of measure."

my windows. Many correct this to "his windows" because the verb attached to it is in the third-person singular. But the received text actually makes sense: the grandiose king is still speaking, and the third-person verb serves as the equivalent of a passive ("my windows are broken open for it").

15. *by competing in cedar.* Here the cedar does appear to refer to the wood paneling of the palace: Do you need the conspicuous palatial furnishings of cedar to establish your kingship in competition with surrounding monarchies?

Did not your father eat and drink / and do justice. That is, your father contented himself with the simple satisfaction of food and drink while devoting himself to justice. Jehoiakim's father, Josiah, who oversaw the sweeping cultic reforms of 622 B.C.E., is regarded in the Book of Kings as one of the few morally exemplary kings.

18. *Woe, my brother, woe, sister!* These are the words of the lament that the people are enjoined not to say. That is equally true of the woe-saying in the next line.

19. *In a donkey's burial he shall be buried.* This prophecy conflicts with the report in 2 Kings 24:6 that Jehoiakim "lay with his fathers," an expression that indicates burial in the ancestral tomb. Either this is an unfulfilled prophecy, or there is something wrong with the notation in 2 Kings. Jehoiakim died at the time of the Babylonian siege in 598–597 B.C.E., but how he died is uncertain. Some have conjectured that he was assassinated in a palace coup.

20. *Lebanon . . . / Bashan . . . / Abarim.* These are all mountainous regions and hence aptly situated lofty places from which to cry out.

22. *All your shepherds the wind shall herd.* This reverses the repeated idiom for futility in Qohelet, "herding the wind." Here the wind does the herding, and the "shepherds" are the rulers of the people.

your lovers. That is, your false allies.

23. *You who dwell in Lebanon, / nesting among the cedars.* It is possible, as some claim, that the reference is to the cedar-paneled palace, although it may be more likely that the cedars of Lebanon, here as elsewhere, are a stock metaphor for royal grandeur because of their loftiness.

24. *Coniah.* This is a shortened form of Jeconiah.

a seal on My right hand. Although "hand" is mentioned, the signet ring was worn on the finger. Since it was used to seal important documents, a dignitary would always have it with him.

26. *there shall you both die.* "Both" is added in the translation to indicate what is clear from the plural form of the Hebrew verb, that both Coniah and his mother are being addressed.

30. *Write this person down as childless.* According to other sources, Coniah had several sons, but the point appears to be that he is as good as childless because none of his sons will inherit the throne.

person . . . / a man. The two different words in the Hebrew text both mean "man." In the next sentence, "no man" uses the same Hebrew word for "man" as in "a man."

For no man sitting on David's throne shall prosper. This appears to proclaim the end of the Davidic dynasty, but elsewhere Jeremiah speaks of its restoration. The evident sense is that no one directly descending from Coniah will inherit the throne.

CHAPTER 23

[1]“Woe, negligent shepherds, who scatter the sheep of
My flock, said the LORD. [2]Therefore, said the LORD
God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd
My people, you have let my flocks scatter and
dispersed them and did not attend to them. I am about
to reckon with you for the evil of your acts, said the
LORD. [3]And I Myself will gather the remnant of My
flock from the lands to which I dispersed them, and I
will bring them back to their pasture, and they shall be
fruitful and multiply. [4]And I will raise up over them
shepherds, and they shall shepherd them, and they
shall no longer fear nor be frightened, and none shall
be missing, said the LORD.”
[5]Look, days are coming, said the LORD, when I will
raise up a righteous shoot for David,

and a king shall reign and prosper,
and do justice and righteousness
in the land.

[6]In his days Judah shall be rescued,
and Israel shall dwell secure.
This is his name that they shall call
him:
The-LORD-Is-Our-
Righteousness.

[7]“Therefore, look, days are coming, said the LORD,
when they shall no longer say, ‘As the LORD lives,
Who brought up the Israelites from the land of Egypt,’
[8]But ‘As the LORD lives, Who brought up and led the
seed of the house of Israel from the land in the north
and from all the lands to which I dispersed them,’ and
they shall dwell on their soil.”

[9]Concerning the prophets:
My heart is broken within me,
All my bones flutter.
I have been like someone drunken,
like a man overcome by wine,
because of the LORD
and because of His holy words.
[10]For adulterers have filled the land,
because of these the land is bleak,
the desert pastures are dry.

And their running is for evil,
and their valor is not so.
[11]For prophet and priest, too, are
tainted.
Even in My house I found their
evil,
—said the LORD.
[12]Therefore their way shall become
for them
like slippery ground in the dark.
They shall be thrust down and fall on
it.
For I will bring upon them evil,
the year of their reckoning,
—said the LORD.
[13]And in the prophets of Samaria
I have seen a senseless thing—
they prophesied by Baal
and led astray My people Israel.
[14]And in the prophets of Jerusalem
I have seen a frightful thing—
adultery and walking in lies,
and they strengthened the hands
of evildoers
so none turned back from his
evil.

They all have become to me like
Sodom,
and its dwellers like Gomorrah.
15 Therefore thus said the LORD of
Armies concerning the prophets:
I am about to feed you wormwood
and make you drink a poisoned
draft,
for from the prophets of
Jerusalem
a taint spreads out to all the
land.
16 Thus said the LORD of Armies:
Do not heed the word of the
prophets
who prophesy to you.
They deal emptiness to you.
Their own heart's vision they speak,
not from the mouth of the LORD.
17 They repeatedly say to those who
despise the word of the LORD,
"It will go well with you,"
And to each who goes in the
stubbornness of his heart,
"Evil will not come upon you."

[18]For who has stood in the LORD's
council
and seen and heard His words?
Who has attended to My word
and heard it?
[19]Look, the tempest of the LORD!
Wrath springs out and a whirling
storm
on the heads of the wicked it
whirls.
[20]The LORD's anger shall not turn
back
till it does and carries out
what His heart has plotted.
In future days
you shall surely grasp this.
[21]I did not send the prophets,
but they went running.
I did not speak to them,
but they prophesied.
[22]And had they stood in My council
and heard My words about My
people,
they would have turned them back
from their evil way
and from the evil of their acts.

[23]Am I not a nearby God, said the
LORD,
and not a far-off God?
[24]If a man should hide in secret
places,
would I not see him? said the
LORD.
The heavens and the earth
do not I fill? said the LORD.

[25]I have heard what the prophets said prophesying in
My name with lies, saying, “I have dreamed a dream.”
[26]How long will there be in the heart of the prophets
prophesying lies the deception of their heart? [27]Who
aim to make My people forget My name with their
dreams that they recount to each other, and their
fathers forgot My name through Baal. [28]The prophet
with whom there is a dream, let him recount the
dream. And he with whom My word is, let him speak
words of truth. What does straw have to do with
grain? said the LORD. [29]Is not My word like fire, said
the LORD, and like a hammer splitting rock?
[30]Therefore here I am against the prophets, said the
LORD, who steal My word from each other. [31]Here I
am against the prophets, said the LORD, who take up

their tongues and deliver an oracle. [32]Here I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, said the LORD, and recount them and lead My people astray with their lies and with their inconstancy when I did not send them nor charge them, and they surely will not avail for this people, said the LORD. [33]And should the people, or the prophet or the priest ask you, saying, “What is the burden of the LORD?,” you shall say to them, “You are the burden,” and I will abandon you, said the LORD. [34]As to the prophet or the priest or the people who will say “The burden of the LORD,” I will reckon with that man and with his household. [35]Thus shall you say each man to his fellow and each man to his brother, “What has the LORD answered and what has the LORD spoken?” [36]But “the burden of the LORD” you shall no longer mention, for “the burden” becomes each man’s own word, and you overturn the words of the living God, the LORD of Armies, our God. [37]Thus shall you say to the people, “What has the LORD answered you, and what has the LORD spoken?” [38]And if you all say “the burden of the LORD,” thus said the LORD, inasmuch as you have said this word, “the burden of the LORD” when I sent to you saying you shall not say “the burden of the LORD,” [39]therefore, I will surely lift you as a burden and abandon you from My presence and the city that I gave

to you and to your fathers, [40]and I will give you
everlasting shame and everlasting disgrace that will not
be forgotten.

CHAPTER 23 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *negligent shepherds.* The participle *me'abdim* could mean "destroying," but this verbal stem can signify either "to perish" or "to be lost," and since it is the task of the shepherd to prevent any sheep in his flock from getting lost, the last meaning seems more likely. A shepherd who allows sheep to go astray is negligent. As elsewhere, the shepherds are the leaders of the people.

3. *And I Myself will gather the remnant of My flock.* This language casts God as a shepherd, now stepping in to take up the task of the negligent shepherds who acted in such a way through their misguided leadership that the people were "scattered" into lands of exile.

they shall be fruitful and multiply. This phraseology borrowed from the beginning of Genesis suggests that the return to Zion will be a kind of second creation.

4. *none shall be missing.* The multipurpose verb *paqad* is here pointedly used in the sense of no sheep missing from the flock.

5. *a righteous shoot.* This phrase has currency as an epithet for the legitimate monarch not only in the Bible but in the Ugaritic literature before it.

6. *This is his name that they shall call him.* The prophet is surely playing on the common ancient Near Eastern practice of assigning a new name to the king when he assumed the throne.

9. *I have been like someone drunken, / . . . because of the* LORD. Through the simile of a man staggering from the effects of wine, Jeremiah takes up a

recurrent theme that God's word within him is so powerful and so dire that it shakes him to the core.

10. *adulterers.* It is not entirely clear whether the prophet is inveighing against sexual license or whether the adultery in view is whoring after alien gods.

11. *Even in My house.* The house is the Temple, so the reference must be to corruption of the cult of YHWH by pagan practices.

14. *a frightful thing.* This sounds more extreme than the "senseless thing" of the previous verse, and hence many commentators have inferred that the prophets of Jerusalem are condemned more sharply than the prophets of Samaria (which is to say, the now vanished northern kingdom). Jeremiah, regularly reviled by his fellow Judahites, is constantly outraged by the false prophets he sees around him, and this whole long passage to the end of the chapter is devoted to that theme.

16. *They deal emptiness to you.* The unusual verb, *mehablim*, is patently derived from *hevel*, "mere breath," "emptiness."

17. *to those who despise the word of the LORD.* The received text reads, improbably, "to those who despise Me the LORD has spoken." The translation here follows the reading reflected in the Septuagint and in the Targum Yonatan, which involves no consonantal changes, only a revocalization of two words.

18. *who has stood in the LORD's council.* Biblical poetry (as well as the frame-story of Job) repeatedly assumes the existence of a celestial council presided over by YHWH. The rhetorical question clearly conveys the idea that none of these false prophets could possibly have had access to the LORD's council.

20. *In future days / you shall surely grasp this.* When God's devastating retribution descends, you will have no choice but to finally understand His judgment.

22. *they would have turned them back from their evil way.* The fact that the people persisted in its wrongful actions while listening to these prophets is, as

it were, empirical proof that these prophets could not have stood in the LORD's council.

23. *a nearby God.* In the present context, this designation is ominous rather than reassuring: God follows the people up close; they have no way of hiding from Him, as the next verse spells out.

24. *The heavens and the earth / do I not fill?* God's presence is everywhere—in the faraway sky but also throughout the earth, so there is no hiding from Him.

25. *I have dreamed a dream.* Dream interpretation would have been a common vehicle for these popular prophets. Although dreams sometimes figure in the Bible as an instrument of authentic revelation of future events (as in the Joseph story), the classical prophets, depending on "the word of the LORD" that they repeatedly hear, do not have recourse to dreams.

28. *What does straw have to do with grain?* This sounds very much like a proverbial saying, to the effect: what does something worthless have to do with good edible stuff? The referents of the saying have already been spelled out—lying prophets and prophets who speak the truth.

29. *Is not My word like fire . . . and like a hammer splitting rock?* Jeremiah had previously likened God's word to fire that shut up in his bones, an image that expressed his own tormented experiential sense of the divine message within him. Now he focuses on the outward effect of God's word, which is fearsome and devastating. There may be an associative link between the fire and the hammer because of the spark that would leap out from the struck rock, or perhaps even because of hammers in the forge.

30. *who steal My word from each other.* Not only do they speak lies but they also steal from each other the lying words. "My word" is virtually sarcastic—what they claim to be My word.

31. *who take up their tongues.* More literally, "who take their tongues." It is an odd but actually pointed use of the verb: this delivery of purely manufactured oracles involves forced effort, a kind of heavy lifting performed with the tongue.

33. *What is the burden of the LORD?* The Hebrew *masa'*, "burden" has two meanings—burden, portent, or content of a prophecy, and a load to be carried. The passage will play these two meanings against the other, but it is clear that in the question posed in this verse, "burden" is used in its prophetic sense.

You are the burden. The Masoretic Text reads *'et-mah-masa'*, which yields something unintelligibile: accusative-particle-what-burden. A simple redistribution of consonants produces *'atem hamasa'*, "you are the burden," and this reading is confirmed by the Septuagint and the Vulgate. The question about the burden of prophecy, then, in the mouths of the followers of false prophets is turned back against them in a response that stigmatizes them as the real burden.

36. *But "the burden of the LORD" you shall no longer mention.* The mouthing of this phrase about prophetic revelation when there is no revelation is an odious act and the very phrase should be banned. There is no real prophetic burden, only "each man's word" that he has invented as pseudo-prophecy.

38. *if you all say.* "All" has been added in the translation to indicate what the Hebrew verb makes clear, that a group is being addressed.

39. *I will surely lift you as a burden.* The Masoretic Text has *nashiti nasho'*, which would mean "I will surely forget you." But some Hebrew manuscripts as well as two versions of the Septuagint and the Vulgate read *nasa'ti naso'*, "I will surely lift you." It is definitely in accord with Jeremiah's style to insist on this already repeated verbal stem inscribed in the word for "burden," here turning it into an expression of measure-for-measure justice.

40. *I will give you everlasting shame.* It is worth keeping the Hebrew repetition of the verb used at the end of the previous sentence because the repetition makes a point: Once I gave you this city in an act of generosity; now I will give you instead shame and disgrace.

CHAPTER 24

[1]The LORD showed me, and, look, two baskets of figs were set out before the LORD's temple after Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia had exiled Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim king of Judah from Jerusalem and the nobles of Judah and the craftsmen and the smiths and brought them to Babylonia. [2]In one basket were very bad figs that could not be eaten because they were so bad. [3]And the LORD said to me, "What do you see, Jeremiah?" And I said, "Figs. The good figs are very good and the bad figs are very bad, which cannot be eaten because they are so bad." [4]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, [5]"Thus said the LORD God of Israel: Like these good figs, so will I recognize for good the exiles of Judah whom I sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. [6]And I will set My eyes on them for good and bring them back to this land and rebuild them and not destroy and plant them and not uproot. [7]And I will give them a heart to know Me, for I am the LORD. And they shall be a people for Me, and I Myself will be God for them, for they

shall turn back to Me with all their heart. [8]And like the bad figs that cannot be eaten because they are so bad, thus will I make Zedekiah king of Judah and his nobles and the remnant of Jerusalem remaining in this land and those dwelling in the land of Egypt. [9]And I will make them a horror for evil to all the kingdoms of the earth, a disgrace and a byword and a taunt and a curse in all the places where I will scatter them. [10]And I will send against them sword and famine and pestilence until they come to an end on the land I gave to them and to their forefathers."

CHAPTER 24 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *showed me.* Very literally, this verb means "caused me to see." It is regularly used for prophetic passages involving vision.

after Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia had exiled Jeconiah. This took place in 597 B.C.E., a decade before the final destruction of Jerusalem.

the craftsmen and the smiths. These workers, respectively in wood and stone and in metal, were presumably deported in order to prevent the manufacture of arms in Judah.

3. *What do you see, Jeremiah?* This is God's formulaic question after He has shown a vision to a prophet.

7. *a heart to know.* As elsewhere, the heart is conceived as the seat of understanding.

8. *the remnant of Jerusalem remaining in this land.* As Lundbom notes, this prophecy reverses conventional expectations: it is the Judahites who were exiled who will prove to be the saving remnant, whereas those who remained in the kingdom of Judah will be like the bad figs, unfit for consumption and hence destined to be thrown away.

9. *And I will make them a horror.* The prophecy of destruction in this verse and the next is entirely composed of stereotypical phrases that express humiliation (verse 9) and destruction (verse 10). One might justifiably say that this is boilerplate prophecy, at least in stylistic terms. It may be that prose prophecy lends itself to this tendency, whereas the pressure to formulate parallel terms and metaphors in the poetic prophecy more often, though not invariably, leads to original expression.

CHAPTER 25

[1]The word that came to Jeremiah concerning Judah in
the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of
Judah, which was the first year of Nebuchadrezzar
king of Babylonia, [2]which Jeremiah the prophet spoke
concerning all the people of Judah and all the dwellers
of Jerusalem, saying: [3]"From the thirteenth year of
Josiah son of Amon king of Judah to this day it is
twenty-three years that the word of the LORD has
come to me, and I have spoken to you, constantly
speaking, but you did not listen. [4]And the LORD
constantly sent you His servants the prophets, but you
did not listen, and you did not bend your ear to listen,
[5]saying: Turn back, pray, each from his evil way and
from the evil of your acts, and dwell on the land that
the LORD gave to you and to your fathers for all time.
[6]And do not go after other gods to serve them and to
bow down to them, and do not vex Me with the work
of your hands, and I will do no harm to you. [7]But you
did not listen to Me, said the LORD, so as to vex Me
with the work of your hands for your harm.

[8]Therefore, thus said the LORD of Armies, inasmuch as you have not listened to My words, [9]I am about to send for and take all the clans of the north, said the LORD, and for Nebuchadrezzar, My servant, king of Babylonia, and I will bring them against this land and against its dwellers and against all these nations round about, and I will destroy them and make them a desolation and a hissing and everlasting ruins. [10]And I will put a stop among them to the sound of gladness and the sound of rejoicing, the sound of the bridegroom and the sound of the bride, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp. [11]And all this land shall become a ruin and a desolation, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylonia seventy years. [12]And it shall happen at the end of the seventy years, I will reckon with the king of Babylonia and with all that nation, said the LORD, for their crime, and with the land of the Chaldeans, and I will turn it into an everlasting desolation. [13]And I will bring upon that land all My words that I have spoken about it, and that are written in this book that Jeremiah prophesied about all the nations. [14]For they too shall serve many nations and great kings, and I will pay them back according to their acts and according to the work of their hands. [15]For thus said the LORD God of Israel to me, “Take this cup of wine, of wrath, from My hand,

and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it.
16And they shall drink and retch and go mad before the
sword that I send among them.” 17And I took the cup
from the hand of the LORD and made all the nations
to whom the LORD had sent me drink, 18Jerusalem
and the towns of Judah and its kings and its nobles, to
turn them into a ruin, a desolation, a hissing, and a
curse, as on this day, 19Pharaoh king of Egypt and his
servants and his nobles and all his people, 20and all the
mixed stock and all the kings of the land of Uz and all
the kings of the land of the Philistines and Ashkelon
and Gaza and Ekron and the remnant of Ashdod,
21Edom and Moab and the Ammonites, 22and all the
kings of Tyre and all the kings of Sidon and the kings
of the coastland that is beyond the sea, 23and Dedan
and Tema and Buz and all whose hair is cropped, 24and
all the kings of Arabia and all the kings of mixed
stock who live in the desert, 25and all the kings of
Zimri and all the kings of Elam and all the kings of
Media, 26and all the kings of the north, near and far to
each other and all the kingdoms of the world that are
on the face of the earth. And King Sheshak shall drink
after them. 27And you shall say to them, Thus said the
LORD of Armies God of Israel: Drink and get drunk
and vomit and fall down, and you shall not rise
because of the sword that I send among you. 28And it

will happen, if they refuse to take the cup from your hand to drink, you shall say to them: Thus said the LORD of Armies, 'You shall surely drink.' [29]For, look, in the city on which My name was called I begin to wreak harm, and will you be declared innocent? You shall not be declared innocent, for I call a sword against all the dwellers of the earth, said the LORD of Armies. [30]As for you, prophesy to them all these things and say to them:

The LORD roars from on high,
and from His holy dwelling He raises His voice.
He roars fiercely against His abode,
a shout like grape-treaders rings out
to all the dwellers on earth.
[31]The uproar comes to the end of the earth,
for a dispute has the LORD with the nation,
He exacts justice from all flesh,
the wicked He gives to the sword
—said the LORD.
[32]For thus said the LORD of Armies:

Look, evil goes out
from nation to nation,
and a great storm is stirred up
from the far corners of the earth.

33 And on that day the slain of the LORD shall be from
one end of the earth to the other. They shall not be
lamented nor gathered in nor buried. They shall
become dung on the face of the earth.

34 Wail, you shepherds, and scream,
wallow, you lords of the flock.
For your time to be slaughtered has
come,
and I will smash you like a
precious vessel, and you shall
fall.
35 And flight shall be lost for the
shepherds,
and escape for the lords of the
flock.
36 Hark, the scream of the shepherds
and the howling of the lords of the
flock,

for the LORD is ravaging their
pasture.
[37]And the peaceful meadows shall be
silent
before the burning wrath of the
LORD.
[38]Like a lion, He has left his lair,
for their land has become a
desolation,
before the oppressive sword,
and before His burning wrath."

CHAPTER 25 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *in the fourth year . . . of Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia.* This would be 599 B.C.E., six years after the Babylonian army defeated the Egyptians in the decisive battle of Carchemish, thus threatening to dominate the entire Fertile Crescent.

5. *saying: Turn back.* In this sprawling sentence, all the words of this verse have to be the essential content of the message that the prophets who were constantly sent by God brought to the people.

for all time. The Hebrew shows a grand rhetorical flourish—literally "from everlasting to everlasting." Although the taking away of the land might seem to contradict this notion of its eternal donation to Israel, the Hebrew idiom actually suggests something short of eternity, on the order of "from a very long time ago to a very long time to come."

7. *harm.* As in the previous sentence, the Hebrew *raʿ* means both "evil" and "harm."

9. *against all these nations round about.* Nebuchadrezzar's campaign was in fact not just against Judah but against the sundry small kingdoms of trans-Jordan, and against Philistia, Phoenicia, and Egypt.

10. *the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp.* The former are not large millstones but hand mills used domestically by women on a regular basis to grind grain. The lamp (a small earthenware oil lamp) would have been used in these domestic settings when the sun went down.

11. *these nations shall serve the king of Babylonia seventy years.* This number is formulaic, though much would be made of it later, as the Book of Daniel illustrates.

12. *I will reckon with the king of Babylonia.* As elsewhere in biblical prophecy, there is a double calculus here. God calls the Babylonian emperor "My servant" because he is the instrument of divine punishment against Judah. Yet, the havoc that he wreaks is a "crime," and in the end he will have to pay for it. This notion is elaborated in verse 14.

15. *this cup of wine, of wrath.* The Hebrew syntax is slightly odd. It seems to say: this cup of wine, the wrath. In this translation, the words are understood as standing in apposition: "this cup of wine, [this cup] of wrath."

16. *And they shall drink and retch and go mad before the sword.* The prophecy in effect telescopes two different images: the cup of wrath is a figure for the destruction that will overtake the Babylonians; the sword is then a synecdoche for the onslaught of the army that will overwhelm Babylonia.

17. *And I took the cup from the hand of the* LORD. This is a bold and quite uncommon move: the metaphoric cup of wrath seems to become an actual cup that the prophet takes from God's hand. Such quasiphysical proximity between God and prophet is altogether unusual. But since the cup is, after all, symbolic, the prophet's taking it from the hand of the LORD finally must be understood as a purely figurative act, and that understanding is confirmed by

his making the nations drink from it, an act that could not be literally performed.

19. *Pharaoh king of Egypt.* These words launch a sweeping catalogue of the surrounding nations marked for destruction (the agency of destruction being the Babylonian army that in fact advanced across the entire region)—Egypt to the south, the Philistines along the coast to the west, Tyre and Sidon to the north, and the sundry kingdoms east of Jordan going all the way to Dedan, Tema, and Buz in the Arabian peninsula and to Media in the far northeast.

26. *And King Sheshak shall drink after them.* The name "Sheshak" has long been understood as a coded reference to Babylon (Hebrew *bavel*), in which the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet is substituted for the first, the second from the last letter for the second in the alphabet, and so forth. It remains unclear why the code was used.

27. *Drink . . . and fall down, and you shall not arise because of the sword.* In this instance, the metaphorical act (drinking from the cup of wrath) and the literal event (falling by the sword) are linked sequentially: the nations, fallen drunk after imbibing the potent wine, are unable to protect themselves against the sword.

28. *if they refuse to take the cup from your hand to drink.* Given the metaphorical status of the cup, this would have to mean that they will refuse to accept Jeremiah's prophecy of doom. But they cannot escape the prophesied end—"You shall surely drink"—and the prophet goes on to articulate its terrible inevitability by casting it in poetry (verse 30ff.).

30. *the LORD roars from on high.* The poetic representation of the warrior as a fierce lion is conventional and would have been immediately recognized by the ancient audience.

His abode. This is the earth, which in biblical parlance belongs to God

a shout like grape-treaders. The shout, *heydad*, of the treaders would be a shout of joy, or perhaps, as some scholars have suggested, a rhythmic chant or song. But here it becomes a shout that spells destruction.

31. *a dispute.* The Hebrew term suggests a legal dispute.

34. *you shepherds.* As before, shepherds are the leaders of the people.

I will smash you. The grammatical form of the Hebrew verb is anomalous, seemingly combining a verbal conjugation and a noun formation, but the meaning is not in doubt.

35. *the shepherds / . . . the lords of the flock.* These two epithets, repeated three times in three verses, become a kind of anaphora that insistently conveys the dire fate of the Judahite leaders.

37. *And the peaceful meadows shall be silent.* Even though some interpreters construe the verb as "shall be destroyed" (a phonetically similar verbal stem), "silent" makes better sense. The meadows, once filled with the lowing of flocks, are now deadly silent. This ominous silence is a complementary counterpoint to the screams and wailing of the people's shepherds.

38. *Like a lion, He has left His lair.* The lion that was implied in the roaring at the beginning of the poem is now made explicit, forming an envelope structure.

before the oppressive sword. The Masoretic Text shows "before the oppressive wrath," but *ḥaron,* "wrath," is probably an inadvertent scribal duplication of that word in the second verset here. Several Hebrew manuscripts as well as the Septuagint and the Targum read *ḥerev,* "sword." The word represented here as "oppressive," *yonah,* looks like the noun that means "dove," which makes no sense in the present context. Some Hebrew exegetes understood it to mean "enemy," but without much philological warrant. It is most plausibly linked with the verbal stem *y-n-h,* which means to "oppress," and the word here would be a participle modifying "sword," not a noun.

CHAPTER 26

[1]At the beginning of the kingship of Jehoiakim son of
Josiah king of Judah this word came from the LORD,
saying: [2]Thus said the LORD, “Stand in the court of
the house of the LORD, and you shall speak
concerning all the towns of Judah who come to bow
down in the house of the LORD the words that I have
charged you to speak to them. Omit not a word.
[3]Perhaps they will listen and each man will turn back
from his evil way and I shall repent of the evil that I
am planning to do to them because of the evil of their
acts. [4]And you shall say to them: Thus said the LORD,
If you listen to Me to go in My teaching that I set
before you, [5]to listen to the words of My servants the
prophets whom I have constantly sent to you—but you
did not listen! [6]And I will make this house like Shiloh,
and this city I will make a curse for all the nations of
the earth.” [7]And the priests and the prophets and all
the people heard Jeremiah speaking all these words in
the house of the LORD. [8]And it happened when
Jeremiah finished speaking all that the LORD had

charged him to speak to all the people, the priests and the prophets and all the people seized him, saying, “You are doomed to die. [9]Why did you prophesy in the name of the LORD, saying, ‘Like Shiloh shall this house be, and this city shall be destroyed with none dwelling there’?” And all the people crowded round Jeremiah in the house of the LORD. [10]And the nobles of Judah heard of these things, and they went up from the king’s house to the house of the LORD and sat at the entrance of the new gate of the house of the LORD. [11]And the priests and the prophets said to the nobles and to all the people, saying, “A death sentence for this man! For he has prophesied about this city as you have heard with your own ears.” [12]And Jeremiah said to all the nobles and to all the people, saying, “The LORD sent me to prophesy about this house and about this city all the words that you have heard. [13]And now, make your ways and your acts better and listen to the voice of the LORD, that the LORD repent of the evil that He spoke concerning you. [14]As for me, here I am in your hand. Do to me what is good and what is right in your eyes. [15]But you must surely know that if you put me to death, you lay innocent blood on yourselves and on this city and on its dwellers, for in truth did the LORD send me to speak in your hearing all these words.” [16]And the nobles and all the people

said to the priests and to the prophets, “This man has
no death sentence, for he has spoken to us in the name
of the LORD.” [17]And men of the elders of the land
arose and said to all the assembly of the people,
saying, [18]“Micah the Morashthite did prophesy in the
days of Hezekiah king of Judah, and he said to all the
people of Judah, saying, Thus said the LORD of
Armies:

Zion shall be plowed like a field,
and Jerusalem shall become
rubble heaps,
and the Mount of the House,
high places in the forest.

[19]Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah really put
him to death? Did he not fear the LORD and entreat
the LORD, and the LORD repented of the evil that he
had spoken concerning them? And should we do great
evil against our own selves? [20]And also there was a
man prophesying in the name of the LORD, Uriah son
of Shemaiah from Kiriath-Jearim, and he prophesied
concerning this city and concerning this land like all
the words of Jeremiah. [21]And King Jehoiakim heard
his words, and with him all his warriors and all his

nobles, and the king sought to put him to death, and Uriah heard and was afraid and fled and came to Egypt. [22]And King Johaiakim sent his men to Egypt, Elnathan son of Achbor and men with him, to Egypt. [23]And they took Uriah out of Egypt and brought him to King Jehoiakim, and he struck him down with a sword, and they flung his corpse into the graves of the common people." [24]Yet the hand of Ahikam son of Shaphan was with Jeremiah not to give him into the hands of the people to put him to death.

CHAPTER 26 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Stand in the court of the house of the* LORD. It is likely that the occasion is one of the three pilgrim festivals, when huge crowds would flock to the Temple from all around the country. The clause "who come to bow down [that is, to worship] in the house of the LORD" suggests pilgrimage.

4. *If you listen to Me.* One would expect a positive clause completing this conditional statement: if you listen, I will not harm you. Instead, the statement breaks off in the middle—"but you did not listen"—because the people's refusal to change its ways is already perceived as an accomplished fact.

6. *I will make this house like Shiloh.* Shiloh was a central sanctuary in the north (see the early chapters of 1 Samuel) that was destroyed by the Philistines in the eleventh century B.C.E. It appears to have become incised in the national memory as a once sacred site that was violated and laid waste, and Jeremiah invokes it in this sense as a grim precedent for Jerusalem.

8. *You are doomed to die.* These words (rendered by many, following the King James version, as "you shall surely die") are the set formula for pronouncing a death sentence. Before this point, Jeremiah had repeatedly stated that his life was in danger because of his prophecies, beginning with a conspiracy against him by the people of his hometown, Anathoth. Now the threat is explicit and imminent. One should recall that at this moment toward the end of the seventh century B.C.E. Judah was gravely menaced by the Babylonian army. One might imagine a preacher in California in 1942, when there were fears of a Japanese invasion, repeatedly declaring that the land would be laid waste for the evil of its ways and that Los Angeles and San Francisco would be turned into rubble by a cruel enemy coming from across the great ocean. Such a person would surely have been arrested for treason and perhaps subjected to capital punishment. The anger against Jeremiah is scarcely surprising.

9. *all the people crowded round Jeremiah.* This detail suggests that they may be ready to lynch the prophet. The historicity of this entire episode seems likely.

10. *the house of the LORD.* The Masoretic Text lacks "the house of," but it appears in many Hebrew manuscripts as well as in four different ancient versions. The nobles have been in the palace, a plausible location for them, but when they hear of what has happened in the temple court, they hasten there.

11. *as you have heard with your own ears.* This must mean, as you have heard the report of what he said.

14. *As for me, here I am in your hand. Do to me what is good and what is right in your eyes.* Throughout this stark confrontation, Jeremiah exhibits steady resolution. He has just reiterated the burden of his prophecy, and if the people refuse to listen, he is prepared to submit to his fate.

15. *for in truth did the LORD send me.* This is the crux of Jeremiah's self-defense: he does not deserve to die because he has spoken his dire prophecies with the full authority of God. In the ancient society, this is an argument that many would have found persuasive, because they shared the assumption that God in fact had messages for the people that he conveyed through prophets

(our California analogue would not have fared so well with an argument of this sort).

16. *And the nobles and all the people said to the priests and to the prophets.* The aristocracy and the common people rebuke the priests and the "establishment" prophets, both groups being Jeremiah's rivals in imparting instruction to the populace.

17. *men of the elders of the land.* The relevant point of this designation is not their actual age but their status as recognized authorities or sages.

20. *And also there was a man prophesying in the name of the LORD, Uriah son of Shemaiah.* Unlike Micah, whose prophecies became part of the canon, there is no written record of Uriah's prophesies, and all that is known of him is what is reported here. His fate proved to be the opposite of Micah's.

23. *And they took Uriah out of Egypt and brought him to King Jehoiakim.* At this point, Judah was allied with Egypt, and consequently there was no difficulty about extradition.

and they flung his corpse into the graves of the common people. The report of this humiliating death of the prophet—"flung" suggests that the corpse was not given proper burial—is clearly invoked by the elders as a shameful act that should not be repeated.

24. *Yet the hand of Ahikam son of Shaphan was with Jeremiah.* Shaphan was a royal scribe, a high court position. He played an important role in the discovery of the Book of Teaching in the Temple around 622 B.C.E. Ahikam, then, would have been a well-placed official who provided support for Jeremiah within the royal court.

not to give him into the hands of the people to put him to death. First the people crowded around Jeremiah with murderous intent (verse 9). Then they appear to have accepted, together with the nobles, Jeremiah's defense that he was truly sent by the LORD (verse 16). Now, they are again represented as a threat to the prophet. This volatility of sentiment is a realistic rendering of mob psychology.

CHAPTER 27

[1]At the beginning of the kingship of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah this word came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying: [2]Thus said the LORD, “Make for yourself bands and yoke bars, and you shall put them on your neck. [3]And you shall send them to the king of Edom and to the king of Moab and to the king of the Ammonites and to the king of Tyre and to the king of Sidon in the hand of the messengers coming to Jerusalem to Zedekiah king of Judah. [4]And you shall charge them to their masters, saying, Thus said the LORD of Armies, God of Israel, thus shall you say to your masters: [5]I Myself made the earth, humankind and beast, over the face of the earth, with My great power and with My outstretched arm, for him who was right in My eyes. [6]And now, I Myself have given all these lands into the hands of Nebuchadrezzar My servant, king of Babylonia, and even the beasts of the field I have given to him to serve him. [7]And all the nations shall serve him and his son and his son’s son until the time of his land comes—he, too—and many

nations and great kings shall make him serve. [8]And it shall be, that the nation and the kingdom that does not serve him, Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia, and that does not put its neck in the yoke of the king of Babylonia, by the sword and by famine and by pestilence will I reckon with that nation, said the LORD, until I make an end of them by his hand. [9]As for you, do not listen to your prophets and to your sorcerers and to your dreams and to your soothsayers and to your wizards who say to you, saying, 'You shall not serve the king of Babylonia.' [10]For lies do they prophesy to you so as to take you far from your land, for I will scatter you and you shall perish. [11]And the nation that puts its neck in the yoke of the king of Babylonia and serves him I will leave on its land, said the LORD, and it will till it and dwell upon it." [12]And to Zedekiah king of Judah I spoke according to these words, saying, "Bring your neck into the yoke of the king of Babylonia and serve him and his people, and live. [13]Why should you die, you and your people, by the sword and by famine and by pestilence, as the LORD has spoken of the nation that does not serve the king of Babylonia? [14]And do not listen to the words of the prophets who say to you, saying: 'You shall not serve the king of Babylonia,' for lies do they prophesy to you. [15]For I have not sent them, said the LORD, and

they prophesy lies in My name, so that I will scatter you and you shall perish, you and the prophets who prophesy to you. [16]And to the priests and to all the people I have spoken, saying, Thus said the LORD: do not listen to your prophets who prophesy to you, saying, ‘Look, the vessels of the house of the LORD are now soon to be brought back from Babylonia,’ for lies do they prophesy to you. [17]Do not listen to them. Serve the king of Babylonia and live. Why should this city become a ruin? [18]And if they are prophets, and if the word of the LORD is with them, let them entreat, pray, the LORD of Armies that the vessels remaining in the house of the LORD and in the house of Judah not come to Babylonia. [19]For thus said the LORD of Armies concerning the pillars and the basins and the stands and concerning the rest of the vessels remaining in this city, [20]which Nebuchadrezzar did not take when he exiled Jeconiah king of Judah from Jerusalem to Babel with all the aristocrats of Judah and Jerusalem. [21]For thus said the LORD of Armies God of Israel concerning the vessels remaining in the house of the LORD and in the house of the king of Judah and Jerusalem: [22]To Babylonia shall they be brought, and there shall they be until the day I attend to them and bring them up and return them to this place.”

CHAPTER 27 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *At the beginning of the kingship of Jehoiakim.* Although this is the reading of the Masoretic Text, the name of the king appears to be a scribal error, for these events occur during the reign of Zedekiah, and it is he who is mentioned in what follows.

2. *Make for yourself bands and yoke bars.* This is another symbolic act that the prophet is called on to perform. "Yoke" in biblical usage is a recurrent image for subjugation (and the very English word "subjugation" means "being under the yoke"). The repeated verb "serve" in this prophecy, which can also mean "work" or "worship," has its political sense, "to be subject to."

3. *Edom . . . Moab . . . the Ammonites . . . Tyre . . . Sidon.* A conference of these kings took place in Jerusalem in 594–593 B.C.E. to consider an alliance that would resist Babylonian domination. Jeremiah's message is that any such resistance will prove futile.

5. *I Myself made the earth.* God's status as creator of all things on earth implies that it is absolutely within His power to decide which nations will be masters and which subjugated.

7. *until the time of his land comes.* History is viewed, quite realistically, as a cycle of shifting conquest and defeat. For now, Nebuchadrezzar reigns supreme, but a time will come when his nation will fall to another empire—in point of historical fact, it would be the Persians.

8. *until I make an end of them by his hand.* Throughout this vision of history, emperors are merely the instruments of God's purpose.

10. *For lies do they prophesy to you so as to take you far from your land.* It is Jeremiah's political view that exile can be avoided if Judah accepts vassal status under Babylonia. This notion is spelled out in the next verse.

14. *And do not listen to the words of the prophets . . . for lies do they prophesy to you.* This entire prophecy abounds in repetitions and sounds a little prolix. The rhetorical looseness may be encouraged by the prose medium.

16. *Look, the vessels of the house of the* LORD *are now soon to be brought back.* A portion of the temple valuables had been carted off by the Babylonians when they took the Judahite king Jeconiah into exile, as is stated in verse 20.

19. *the pillars and the basins and the stands.* This constitutes a small catalogue of the sacred furniture that is destined to be looted and taken away to Babylonia if the Judahites persist in their futile resistance to the invading forces.

22. *To Babylonia shall they be brought.* This prophecy of the despoliation of the Temple was fulfilled in the final defeat and destruction of 586 B.C.E., seven or eight years after the enunciation of this prophecy. The added note that a time will come when the vessels will be brought back to Jerusalem sets the stage for the prophecies of the return to Zion of Second Isaiah, who was active in the Babylonian exile a few decades after Jeremiah. Centuries later, the author of the episode of the writing on the wall in Daniel will still be pondering the violation of the transfer of the sacred vessels into Babylonian hands.

CHAPTER 28

[1]And it happened in that year, at the beginning of the
kingship of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the fourth year,
in the fifth month, that Hananiah the prophet son of
Azzur, who was from Gibeon, said to me in the house
of the LORD before the eyes of the priests and all the
people, saying: [2]“Thus said the LORD of Armies, God
of Israel, saying, I have broken the yoke of the king of
Babylonia. [3]In another two years I will bring back to
this place all the vessels of the house of the LORD
that Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia took from this
place and brought to Babylonia. [4]And Jeconiah son of
Johaiakim king of Judah and all the exiles of Judah
who came to Babylonia I will bring back to this place,
said the LORD, for I will break the yoke of the king
of Babylonia.” [5]And Jeremiah the prophet said to
Hananiah the prophet before the eyes of the priests
and before the eyes of all the people standing in the
house of the LORD. [6]And Jeremiah said, “In truth,
thus shall the LORD do, the LORD shall fulfill your
words that you prophesied, to bring back the vessels of

the house of the LORD and all the exiles from Babylonia to this place. [7]But listen, pray, to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. [8]The prophets who were before me and before you from times of old and prophesied concerning many lands and concerning many great kingdoms for war and for evil and for pestilence. [9]The prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of the prophet comes about, it will be known of the prophet that the LORD truly sent him." [10]And Hananiah the prophet took the yoke bar from the neck of Jeremiah the prophet and broke it. [11]And Hananiah said before the eyes of all the people, saying, "Thus said the LORD: So will I break the yoke of Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia in another two years from the neck of all the nations." And Jeremiah the prophet went on his way. [12]And the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah after Hananiah the prophet had broken the yoke bar from Jeremiah's neck, saying: [13]"Go and say to Hananiah, saying, Thus said the LORD: the wooden yoke bars you have broken, and you shall make in their stead iron yoke bars. [14]For thus said the LORD of Armies, God of Israel: An iron yoke I have put on the neck of all these nations to serve Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia, and they shall serve him. And the beasts of the field as well I have given to him." [15]And

Jeremiah the prophet said to Hananiah the prophet,
“Listen, pray, Hananiah. The LORD has not sent you,
and, as for you, you have made this people trust in a
lie. [16]Therefore, thus said the LORD: I am about to
send you away from upon the earth. This year you
shall die, for you have spoken rebellion against the
LORD.” [17]And Hananiah the prophet died that year in
the seventh month.

CHAPTER 28 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *in the house of the LORD before the eyes of the priests and all the people.* This confrontation between true and false prophet is staged for maximum public exposure—in the Temple, when priests and a throng of people are assembled for worship.

2. *Thus said the LORD of Armies.* The false prophet uses the same messenger-formula as the true prophet, claiming to convey the words of God.

5. *Jeremiah the prophet said to Hananiah the prophet.* The two are given the same epithet as they vie to demonstrate which of them is the authentic prophet.

6. *In truth, thus shall the LORD do.* What sounds like an affirmation is actually a biting challenge, as if to say: Let us see if the LORD will really fulfill your words. Alternatively, Jeremiah may mean that at some point the sacred vessels will be returned, but not as you say, and not in two years.

8. *prophesied . . . for war and for evil and for pestilence.* The prophets of old invoked here go back to Amos in the eighth century B.C.E., a century and a half before Jeremiah. The claim he makes is not that the only true prophecies are prophecies of doom but rather that, given the course of historical events and the misbehavior of Israel and other nations, the doomsayers are usually the ones who prophesy truly, whereas those who predict that all will end well are likely to be merely courting the approval of their audiences.

9. *when the word of the prophet comes about, it will be known of the prophet that the LORD truly sent him.* Obviously, peace and good historical outcomes occasionally happen, but given the historical circumstances—a powerful empire threatening to overwhelm Judah—the positive scenario is unlikely, and only if it really happens will the prophecy be authenticated.

10. *And Hananiah the prophet took the yoke bar . . . and broke it.* As Hananiah now makes clear, two can play at the game of symbolic act. Jeremiah bears the yoke to demonstrate Judah's necessary subjugation to Babylonia; Hananiah now tries to show that this political yoke is about to be broken.

11. *And Jeremiah the prophet went on his way.* Jeremiah's silence and his withdrawal from the scene of confrontation are, at least for the moment, ambiguous. He may even think that Hananiah's theatrical gesture of breaking the yoke bar could prove to have predictive force. But then the word of the LORD comes to him again (verses 12–13), giving the lie to Hananiah's gesture and affirming that unbreakable yoke bars of iron are now to replace the wooden ones.

14. *all these nations.* Judah's subjugation to Babylonia is a necessary part of Babylonia's imperial domination of nations all around.

16. *This year you shall die.* Hananiah's premature death is both punishment for his misleading the people with false prophecy and an almost immediate refutation of his prophecy—instead of the predicted liberation and restoration, the prophet himself dies.

CHAPTER 29

[1]And these are the words of the missive that Jeremiah
the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the rest of the
elders of the exiles and to the priests and to the
prophets and to all the people whom Nebuchadrezzar
had exiled from Jerusalem to Babylonia, [2]After King
Jeconiah and the queen mother and the eunuchs, the
nobles of Judah and the craftsmen and the smiths had
gone out from Jerusalem, [3]by the hands of Elasah son
of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiah whom
Zedekiah king of Judah had sent to Nebuchadrezzar
king of Babylonia, saying: [4]“Thus said the LORD of
Armies, God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I exiled
to Babylonia: [5]Build houses and dwell in them and
plant gardens and eat their fruit. [6]Take wives and beget
sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and
give your daughters to husbands and let them bear sons
and daughters, and multiply there and do not dwindle.
[7]And seek the welfare of the city to which I exiled you
and pray for it to the LORD, for through its welfare
you shall have welfare. [8]For thus said the LORD of

Armies, God of Israel: Let not your prophets who are in your midst delude you, or your soothsayers, and do not listen to your dreams that you dream. [9]For with lies do they prophesy to you in My name. I have not sent them, said the LORD. [10]For thus said the LORD: When seventy years are fulfilled for Babylonia, I will single you out and bring about My good word to return you to this place. [11]For I surely know the plans that I have devised for you, said the LORD, plans for peace and not for evil, to give you a future and hope. [12]And you shall call Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. [13]And you shall look for Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart. [14]And I will be found by you and restore your fortunes, and I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I scattered you, said the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I exiled you. [15]For you thought, the LORD has raised up prophets for us in Babylonia. [16]For thus said the LORD concerning the king seated on the throne of David and concerning all the people dwelling in this city, your brothers who did not go out with you in exile. [17]For thus said the LORD of Armies: I am about to send against them sword and famine and pestilence, and I will make them like the ghastly figs that are so bad that they cannot be eaten. [18]And I will pursue them with sword and famine and

pestilence and make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, an imprecation and a desolation and a hissing and a disgrace among all the nations where I have scattered you. [19]Because they have not heeded My words, said the LORD, that I sent to them through My servants the prophets, repeatedly sending, and you did not heed them, said the LORD. [20]As for you, heed the word of the LORD, all the exiles whom I sent from Jerusalem to Babylonia. [21]Thus said the LORD of Armies, God of Israel, concerning Ahab son of Kolaiah and Zedekiah son of Maaseiah, who prophesy lies to you in My name. I am about to give them into the hand of Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia, and he shall strike them down before your eyes. [22]And a curse shall be taken from them for all the exiles of Judah who are in Babylonia, saying, ‘May the LORD make you like Zedekiah and like Ahab, whom the king of Babylonia roasted in fire.’ [23]Inasmuch as they did a scurrilous thing in Israel and committed adultery with the wives of their fellow men and spoke a lying word in My name with which I did not charge them. As for Me, I know and am witness, said the LORD. [24]And to Shemaiah the Nehelamite you shall say, saying: [25]Thus said the LORD of Armies, God of Israel, saying: Inasmuch as you have sent missives in your name to all the people who are in Jerusalem and to Zephaniah son

of Maaseiah the priest and to the priests, saying, [26]“The LORD made you priest instead of Jehoiash the priest to serve as official in the house of the LORD for every madman playing the prophet, and you were to put him in stocks and in the pillory. [27]And now, why did you not rebuke Jeremiah the Anothite, who played the prophet to you? [28]For thus did he send to us in Babylonia, saying, It will be a long time. Build houses and dwell in them, and plant gardens and eat their fruit.’” [29]And Zephaniah the priest read this missive in the hearing of Jeremiah the prophet. [30]And the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, saying, [31]“Send to all the exiles, saying, Thus said the LORD concerning Shemaiah the Nehelamite: Inasmuch as Shemaiah prophesied to you when I did not send him and made you trust in a lie, [32]therefore, thus said the LORD, I am about to make a reckoning with Shemaiah the Nehelamite and with his seed. No man of his shall dwell among this people, and he shall not see the good that I do for My people, said the LORD, for he has spoken rebellion against the LORD.”

CHAPTER 29 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the missive.* Although the Hebrew *sefer* often has the sense of "book," it can designate anything set down in writing on a scroll. In this instance it clearly refers to a letter, but it is a communication of public and prophetic import, hence the more formal translation choice of "missive." But what is Jeremiah doing in this sending of missives to the exiles in Babylonia? One might think he has enough on his hands with a contentious populace and a hostile king in Judah. This entire episode must be read in the context of Jeremiah's confrontation with the false prophet Hananiah, recorded in the previous chapter. For Jeremiah, everything in his prophetic mission is at stake in distinguishing between true and false prophecy. Hananiah had predicted that the exiles would return to their land in just two years. One infers that he had counterparts in Babylonia itself who were deluding the people with similar rosy predictions. Against this, Jeremiah wants to make it perfectly clear to the exiles that they will have a long residence in Babylonia before any return can take place (verses 5–7).

2. *the craftsmen and the smiths.* As is also noted in 2 Kings, Nebuchadnezzar took pains to exile skilled workers in order to ensure that the Judahites would not have the capacity to manufacture weapons.

6. *multiply there and do not dwindle.* The first verb echoes the "be fruitful and multiply" of the Creation story. With the prospect of a long stay in Babylonia ahead of them, the exiles are enjoined to settle into the place, conduct normal lives, establish a flourishing community. In the event, when the opportunity of return was afforded after the Persian conquest of Babylonia, many in this community chose to stay there—it is at this point that Israel becomes both a people in its land and a diaspora community.

7. *seek the welfare of the city to which I exiled you.* The exiles do not exactly become patriotic naturalized Babylonians, but given their long-term stay in this place, they are enjoined to pray for the prosperity and safety of the city that is, after all, their habitat as well.

8. *that you dream.* Though the form of the Hebrew verb looks a little odd, it seems strained to construe it, as some have, to mean "cause to dream."

10. *When seventy years are fulfilled for Babylonia.* This would take us to the 520s, about a decade after the destruction of the Babylonian empire by

Persia. But the number of seventy is clearly formulaic, a way of indicating that the return to Zion will not occur for some three generations. In the Book of Daniel, this prophecy will be given a novel interpretation in which seventy is understood to be seventy units of seven years, thus bringing it more or less to the time when Daniel was written.

11. *to give you a future and hope.* Jeremiah thus does not cast himself merely as a doomsayer but rather as a prophet who envisages national restoration at a later moment in history.

16. *For thus said the* LORD *concerning the king seated on the throne of David.* Jeremiah is not really switching subjects, as it might momentarily seem. If the false prophets in Babylonia predict an imminent return to Zion, one has only to look to the true prophecy pronounced about those who remain in Judah: instead of a national restoration, things will become much worse, with the Judahite populace to be utterly devastated by sword and famine and plague.

19. *My words . . . that I sent to them through My servants the prophets.* This is Jeremiah's great recurring theme: prophecy is God's chief channel of communication with His people, and the people's persistent refusal to heed its true prophets is the inexorable cause of the disaster about to overtake it.

20. *heed the word of the* LORD*, all the exiles whom I sent from Jerusalem.* The catastrophe that is about to engulf the homeland should be an object lesson to the exiles.

22. *a curse shall be taken from them.* This reverses the more common linguistic practice in which someone's name is invoked as part of a blessing by future generations.

roasted. The verb is unusual, perhaps meant to convey the horror of the burning.

23. *Inasmuch as they did a scurrilous thing in Israel and committed adultery with the wives of their fellow men.* "Scurrilous thing," *nevalah,* often refers to a sexual offense. That added note may be a bit surprising in a denunciation of false prophets. One suspects Jeremiah is referring to known facts: these so-called prophets are actually lascivious men guilty of scandalous acts.

25. *you have sent missives in your name.* The sender of the missives is Shemaiah.

27. *why did you not rebuke Jeremiah the Anothite, who played the prophet to you?* Prophecy is sometimes viewed in the biblical world as a form of madness (compare “every madman” in the previous verse), especially, as here, when the verb for prophecy appears in the reflexive conjugation, which implies giving into an ecstatic frenzy. Why, then, Shemaiah asks Zephaniah the priest, did he not treat Jeremiah as a lunatic and throw him in the stocks? The content of Jeremiah’s missive to the exiles, quoted in the next verse, is cited as evidence of his madness.

CHAPTER 30

[1]The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD,
saying: [2]“Thus said the LORD God of Israel, Write
you these words that I have spoken to you on a scroll.
[3]For, look, days are coming, said the LORD, when I
will restore the fortunes of My people Israel and
Judah, said the LORD, and bring them back to the
land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall take
hold of it.” [4]And these are the words that the LORD
spoke concerning Israel and concerning Judah. [5]For
thus said the LORD:

A voice of terror we have heard,
    fear and not peace.
[6]Ask, pray, and see,
    if a male is giving birth.
Why do I see every man,
    his hands on his loins like a
        woman in labor

and every face turned sickly
green?
7 Woe, for great is that day,
there is nothing like it,
and a time of distress for Jacob,
but from it he shall be rescued.

8 "And it shall happen on that day, said the LORD of Armies, I will break his yoke from upon his neck, and his bands I will snap, and strangers shall no longer make him serve. 9 But they shall serve the LORD their God and David their king whom I will raise up for them.

10 As for you, do not fear, My servant
Jacob,
—said the LORD—
and do not be afraid, O Israel,
for I am about to rescue you from
afar
and your seed from the land of
their captivity,
and Jacob again shall be at ease,
be tranquil, with none to make
him tremble.

[11]For I am with you, said the LORD,
to rescue you,
for I will make an end of all the
nations
where I have scattered you.
But of you I will not make an end,
I will surely chastise you in
justice,
I will surely not acquit you.
[12]For thus said the LORD:
your shattering is grievous,
grave is your blow.
[13]None considers your case for a
cure,
no healing of the wound do you
have.
[14]All your lovers have forgotten you,
you they do not seek.
For an enemy's blow I struck you,
a ruthless punishment
for all your crimes,
your many offenses.
[15]Why should you cry out for your
shattering,
your grievous pain,

for all your crimes, your many
offenses?
I have done these to you.
[16]Therefore all who devour you shall
be devoured,
and all your foes, they all shall go
as captives,
and your plunderers shall become
plunder,
And all your despoilers I will turn
into spoil.
[17]For I will bring healing to you
and cure you of your blows, said
the LORD,
though they called you “outcast,”
“Zion, whom no one seeks.”
[18]For thus said the LORD:
I am about to restore the fortunes
of Jacob’s tents
and show mercy to his
dwellings,
and the city shall be rebuilt on its
mound,
and the citadel sit in its rightful
place.

[19]And a song of thanksgiving shall
issue from them
and the sound of celebrants,
and I will make them multiply, they
shall not dwindle,
give them honor, they shall not be
paltry.
[20]And his sons shall be as before,
his community before Me firm-
founded,
and I will reckon with all who
oppress him.
[21]And his leader shall be from within
him,
and his ruler shall come forth
from his midst.
I will bring him close and he shall
approach Me,
for who would presume to
approach Me?
said the LORD.
[22]And you shall become My people;
as for Me, I will be your God.

[23]Look, the LORD's storm goes forth
in wrath,
a whirling tempest,
it comes down on the head of
the wicked,
until He does and until He fulfills
His heart's devisings.
In the days afterward you shall
grasp it.

[24]At that time, said the LORD, I will be God for all the clans of Israel and they shall be My people.

CHAPTER 30 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *For, look, days are coming . . . when I will restore the fortunes of My people.* These words, signaling a prophecy of national redemption after the destruction, are taken by many scholars to mark the beginning of a distinctive subunit in Jeremiah that scholarship labels the Book of Restoration.

restore the fortunes. More literally, "restore the former state."

5. *A voice of terror we have heard.* After the summary prophecy of national restoration in verse 3, there is a switch to poetry, which serves as a vehicle to make vividly clear the great tribulation that is to precede the restoration.

6. *Why do I see every man, / his hands on his loins like a woman in labor.* The convulsions of childbirth are a standard trope in biblical poetry for shuddering and pain. In this instance, the familiar simile is represented

through a startling image: males, who could not possibly be experiencing birth pangs, writhe in pain with their hands on their loins, their faces sickly green, as though they were in labor.

7. *but from it he shall be rescued.* Only in the last verse of the last line of the poem is the move from anguish to redemption announced.

8. *from upon his neck.* The Masoretic Text has "your neck," but the Septuagint shows the third person—perhaps only an understandable regularization of the Hebrew by the Greek translators.

9. *David their king.* The ruler of the restored monarchy is to be a kind of new version of David, who is imagined to be the ideal king.

11. *I will surely chastise you in justice, / I will surely not acquit you.* These two verses are an explanatory qualification of the initial verset in this triadic line: Unlike My treatment of your oppressors, I will not entirely destroy you; however, I will first submit you to just chastisement, for I cannot ignore your crimes.

12. *your shattering is grievous, / grave is your blow.* These words follow from the reference to chastisement in the previous verse: the people is condemned to acute suffering (verses 12–15) before the redemption comes (verses 16–22).

13. *healing of the wound.* The first of the two Hebrew nouns here clearly means "healing"; the second is generally thought to refer to the scab that forms over a wound in the process of healing.

14. *All your lovers.* The probable reference is to the nations with whom Judah sought to create alliances.

an enemy's blow. God struck the people a blow so hard that it is as if He were acting as an enemy.

16. *Therefore all who devour you shall be devoured.* This is the pivotal point of the prophecy. The logical force of "therefore" is that after you have suffered these terrible blows and thus paid for your crimes, your enemies will get their comeuppance and you will be restored to your former state.

18. *and the city shall be rebuilt on its mound.* The mound or *tell* (it has become a modern archaeological term) is the heap of soil and rubble where the city once stood, which is now to underpin the rebuilding of the city.

19. *And a song of thanksgiving shall issue from them.* This and the lines that follow mark a dramatic progression: first we see the inanimate structures of the city rising again; now we have the rebuilt city filled with joyful human beings, chanting songs of thanksgiving to the accompaniment of musical instruments ("the sound of celebrants").

21. *And his leader shall be from within him.* Instead of foreign rulers, or rulers put in place by alien dominators, as in fact the Babylonians did, an authentic—presumably Davidic—king from the midst of the people will assume the throne.

for who would presume to approach Me. This is a recurring motif in a variety of biblical texts—that it is dangerous, often fatal, to approach God or His sanctuary uninvited. Here, however, God encourages the Judahite leader to approach.

23. *Look, the LORD's storm goes forth in wrath.* This entire verse may be a fragment unconnected with what precedes or follows because the image of wrathful destruction scarcely accords with the prophecy of jubilant restoration just annunciated. It is conceivable that because the destruction is said to come down on "the head of the wicked," it refers back to the devouring of the devourers in verse 16, but if that is so, the placement of these lines here looks odd.

CHAPTER 31

[1]Thus said the LORD:

The people, survivors of the sword,
have found favor in the
wilderness,
Israel going to find rest.
[2]From afar the LORD appeared to
me:
With everlasting love do I love
you,
therefore did I draw you in
kindness.
[3]Yet will I rebuild you and you will
be built,
O Virgin Israel,
Yet shall you deck yourself with
your timbrels
and go out in the celebrants'
dance.

[4]Yet shall you plant vineyards on
Samaria's hills,
the planters shall plant and eat the
fruit.
[5]For a day is to come when
watchmen call out
on Mount Ephraim:
Rise and let us go up to Zion,
to the LORD our God.
[6]For thus said the LORD:
Sing out in joy for Jacob,
shout jubilant at the head of
nations.
Proclaim, praise and say,
the LORD has rescued your
people,
the remnant of Israel.
[7]I am about to bring them from the
land of the north,
and I will gather them from the
corners of the earth.
The blind and the lame are among
them,
she with child and the woman in
labor,

a great assembly shall come
back here.
[8]In weeping shall they come,
in supplications will I lead them,
I will make them walk by brooks of
water,
on a straight way where they shall
not stumble,
For I am father to Israel,
And Ephraim is my firstborn.
[9]Listen to the word of the LORD,
you nations,
and tell in the coastlands far off
and say:
He who scattered Israel shall gather
it
and guard it as a shepherd his
flock.
[10]For the LORD has ransomed Jacob
and redeemed him from the hand
of one stronger than he.
[11]And they shall come and sing
gladly on Zion's heights
and shall shine with the LORD's
bounty,

for the grain and the new wine and
the oil,
and for the flocks and the cattle.
And their life-breath shall be like a
watered garden,
and they shall no longer be in
pain.
12 Then shall the virgin rejoice in
dance
and young men and elders
together,
and I shall turn their mourning to
gladness
and comfort them and give them
joy for their sorrow.
13 And I will wet the priests' gullet
with richness,
and My people shall be sated with
My bounty
—said the LORD.

14 Thus said the LORD:
A voice in Ramah is heard,
lament and bitter weeping.
Rachel weeps for her sons

She refuses to be comforted
for her sons, for they are no more.
15 Thus said the LORD:
Hold back your voice from weeping
and your eyes from tears,
for there is a reward for your labor—
said the LORD—
and they shall come back from the enemy's land,
16 and there is hope for your future—
said the LORD—
and the sons shall come back to their place.
17 I have surely heard
Ephraim rocking with grief:
You chastised me and I was chastised
like an untrained calf.
Bring me back, that I may come back,
for You are the LORD my God.
18 For after I turned back I repented,
and after I became aware I struck my thigh.

I was ashamed, indeed, disgraced,
for I bore the reproach of my
youth.
19 Is not Ephraim a dear son to Me,
a delightful child?
For even as I speak against him,
I surely recall him.
Therefore does My heart stir for
him,
I will surely show him mercy, said
the LORD.
20 Set yourself markers,
put up road signs for yourself,
pay heed to the highway,
the way where you walked,
Turn back, O Virgin Israel.
Turn back to these towns of
yours.
21 How long will you slip away,
rebellious daughter?
For the LORD has created a new
thing on earth—
the female goes round the male.

[22]Thus said the LORD of Armies, God of Israel: “Yet
shall they say this thing in the land of Judah and in its
towns when I restore their fortunes: May the LORD
bless you, righteous abode, holy mountain. [23]And
farmers and those journeying with the flock shall dwell
in Judah and all its towns together. [24]For I have given
full drink to the thirsty gullet, and every being in pain I
have sated.” [25]For this have I awoken and seen, and my
sleep had been sweet to me. [26]“Look, days are coming,
said the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel
and the house of Judah with human seed and seed of
beast. [27]And as I was zealous over them to uproot and
smash and lay ruin and destroy and harm, so will I be
zealous over them to build and to plant, said the
LORD. [28]In those days, they shall no longer say:

The fathers ate unripe fruit
and the sons’ teeth were blunted.

[29]Instead, a man shall die through his own crime, and
every person eating unripe fruit, his teeth shall be
blunted. [30]Look, days are coming, said the LORD,
when I will seal with the house of Israel and with the
house of Judah a new covenant. [31]Not like the
covenant that I sealed with their fathers on the day I

held their hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt,
as they broke My covenant, though I was master to
them, said the LORD. [32]But this is the covenant that I
shall seal with the house of Israel after those days, said
the LORD: I have put My teaching in their midst, and
on their heart I have inscribed it, and I will be their
God and they shall be My people. [33]And they shall no
longer teach each to his fellow man and each to his
brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD.’ For they shall all
know Me from the least of them to their greatest, said
the LORD, for I will forgive their crime, and their
offense I will no more recall.”

[34]For thus said the LORD,
Who makes the sun for light by
day,
the laws of moon and stars
for light by night,
roiling the sea, and its waves do roar
—the LORD of Armies is His
name.
[35]Should these laws be set aside
from before Me? said the LORD.
Then Israel’s seed would cease
to be a nation before Me forever.

[36]Thus said the LORD:
Should the heavens be measured
above
and the earth's foundations
fathomed below,
only then would I reject all Israel's
seed
for all that they did, said the
LORD.

[37]Look, days are coming, said the LORD, when a city for the LORD shall be built from Hananel Tower to the Corner Gate. [38]And the measuring line shall again go out before it to the Hill of Gareb and swing down to Goah. [39]And all the Valley of Corpses and the Ashes and all the fields to the Kidron Wadi, to the corner of the Horse Gate, shall be holy to the LORD. It shall not again be uprooted and shall not be destroyed for all time.

CHAPTER 31 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The people, survivors of the sword, / have found favor in the wilderness.* For the sake of English coherence, the translation reverses the order of the two Hebrew versets.

Israel going to find rest. Throughout this prophecy, the meaning of the term "Israel" that is used has been debated by scholars. Some understand it in its traditional sense as a name for the northern kingdom. While that is possible, it may not be likely that Jeremiah, writing well over a century after the destruction of the northern kingdom, was still hoping for a return of the exiled ten tribes. By this point, then, "Israel" may have become an interchangeable term with "Judah," and meaning "Judah."

2. *therefore did I draw you in kindness.* The verb here is probably dictated by an image of God's leading the people through the wilderness on the way back from exile. The noun *ḥesed,* which can also mean something like "loyalty," is better rendered here as "kindness" (or perhaps even "tenderness") because of the affirmation of love in the parallel verset.

3. *Yet shall you deck yourself with your timbrels.* The timbrel, played by the young women as they danced in celebration, is of course not exactly an ornament, but held by the hip of the dancer, it is imagined as ornamenting her in her dance.

7. *The blind and the lame are among them, / she with child and the woman in labor.* The return from exile will be so comprehensive that even those barely capable of walking—the blind and the lame, the pregnant and the parturient—will join "the great assembly." It is noteworthy that between these two versets there is a move from physical impairment to bringing life into the world, which is thus a kind of miniature intimation of the whole process of national restoration.

8. *In weeping shall they come, / in supplications will I lead them.* Both versets refer unambiguously to return, not to going out from Zion. An argument to understand the term rendered as "supplications" to mean "compassion" rests on shaky grounds. The probable meaning, in keeping with the interpretation of several medieval exegetes, is that as the people returns, it weeps and implores God to forgive it for its previous misdeeds.

I will make them walk by brooks of water. The terrain that the people must cross in their long trek from exile in the east is largely parched desert, so leading them along watercourses is a necessary part of the redemption. Second Isaiah will pick up this motif.

11. *their life-breath.* The tricky Hebrew noun is the multivalent *nefesh.* It does not mean "soul," as many translators continue to render it. The core meaning is "life-breath" and, by extension, "life," but the latter would be misleading here because it could suggest "a lived life." *Nefesh* also often implies "essential self." It sometimes means "throat" or "gullet" (by metonymy because the throat is a passageway for the breath), and that is the probable sense in verse 13, where the satisfaction of appetite is invoked.

12. *the virgin . . . / young men.* This is a fixed pair in biblical poetry, often associated with joyfulness. She is referred to as a virgin simply on the assumption that young women as yet unmarried would preserve their virginity, though nothing is really made of the abstention from sexual intercourse.

14. *A voice in Ramah is heard.* Ramah is a site just north of Jerusalem associated with Rachel, but it means "height," and so it is also possible to render this as "on the height."

for they are no more. The Hebrew shows a singular, dictated by a pointed allusion to "is no more" referring to Rachel's son Joseph, a word first uttered by the ten brothers to the man they see as the vizier of Egypt, then by their father, who laments that "Joseph is no more" and "Simeon is no more." He is wrong in both cases, which here provides an intimation that the sons for whom Rachel weeps will return.

15. *said the* LORD. It should be kept in mind that this formula for assigning speech is often extrametrical in poetry and sometimes may reflect an editorial intervention.

16. *their place.* The literal sense is "their border," which often, by metonymy, means "territory."

18. *I struck my thigh.* This is obviously a gesture of grief or regret.

19. *does My heart stir for him.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "innards" or "bowels," imagined as the seat of compassion.

20. *road signs.* The Hebrew *tamrurim,* of uncertain etymology, appears only here, and thus the meaning is surmised from the poetic parallelism.

21. *the female goes round the male.* This is the literal sense of the Hebrew, and the claim of some scholars that the verb here means "protect" is dubious. Following the castigation of the young woman as a "rebellious daughter" who "slips away," the clause might be sarcastic: it is the way of the world for the male to court the female, but in this case of the wayward daughter the roles are scandalously reversed.

24. *I have given full drink to the thirsty gullet.* This appears to be still another instance in which *nefesh* refers to "gullet" or "throat." The verb here, which suggests "watering" or "providing abundant drink" is the same one attached to the garden in verse 11 and to the priests' gullet in verse 13.

every being in pain. This is again *nefesh,* and the translation guesses that here it means "being" or "self," although it could again mean "gullet."

25. *For this have I awoken and seen.* These words are probably the prophet's, not God's, especially because the deity is said neither to slumber nor to sleep.

and my sleep had been sweet to me. The prophet evidently has enjoyed a pleasing dream of national restoration, and now he awakes to find that it is true.

26. *I will sow the house of Israel.* This may seem like a mixed metaphor, but "house of" as a term for "people of" or "kingdom of" is so formulaic that no suggestion of a built structure is conveyed.

28. *The fathers ate unripe fruit / and the sons' teeth were blunted.* This is obviously a proverbial saying with the sense: if the fathers behave badly, their offspring will suffer. In the future, Jeremiah promises, this will no longer be true. Most translations render the first Hebrew noun, *boser,* as "sour grapes," but with little warrant. In fact, it is eating unripe fruit, which is still hard, that blunts the teeth, something unripe grapes would not do. The time-honored translation of the verb in the second verset is "set on edge," but it actually means to "become blunt."

30. *a new covenant.* This Hebrew phrase, brit *ḥadashah,* famously became the designation for the Christian Scriptures ("New Testament"). What it refers to in Jeremiah's prophecy is a new covenant between God and Israel, to be fully internalized ("inscribed" on the heart), that will replace the covenant violated by Israel.

33. *For they shall all know Me.* In the coming era of the new covenant, every person in Israel will be inwardly informed of what God expects, and no teachers or external force will be required.

34. *the laws of moon and stars.* The world is created with set guiding principles, "statutes" or "laws," *ḥuquot*—the cycle of day and night (there is a reminiscence of Genesis 1:14–15), the movement of the tides. The universe is orderly, and just as its laws are immutable, God's commitment to the continuation of Israel will never waver (verse 35).

36. *for all that they did.* Israel has compiled a long bill of offenses, and for this they have suffered a national disaster, but whatever their crimes, God remains steadfast in sustaining their existence as a nation.

37. *from Hananel Tower to the Corner Gate.* These and the places mentioned in the next two verses are markers of the perimeter of Jerusalem, thus conveying to the audience of the prophecy a concretely defined sense of the dimensions of the city that is now to be rebuilt and never again to be destroyed.

CHAPTER 32

[1]The word that came to Jeremiah in the tenth year of
Zedekiah king of Judah, which is the eighteenth year
of Nebuchadrezzar. [2]Then were the forces of the king
of Babylonia besieging Jerusalem, and Jeremiah the
prophet was imprisoned in the court of the guard
which was in the house of the king. [3]As Zedekiah king
of Judah had imprisoned him, saying, “Why do you
prophesy, saying, ‘Thus said the LORD: I am about to
give this city into the hand of the king of Babylonia,
and he shall capture it. [4]And Zedekiah king of Judah
shall not escape from the hand of the Chaldeans but
shall surely be given into the hand of the king of
Babylonia, and he shall speak to him mouth to mouth
and see him eye to eye. [5]And to Babylonia he shall
take Zedekiah, and there he shall be until I single him
out, said the LORD. Though you do battle against the
Chaldeans, you shall not succeed.’?” [6]And Jeremiah
said, “The word of the LORD came to me, saying:
[7]Look, Hanamel the son of Shallum your uncle is
coming to you, saying, ‘Buy for yourself my field

which is in Anathoth, for yours is the right of redemption to buy.’ [8]And Hanamel the son of my uncle came to me according to the word of the LORD, to the court of the guard, and said to me, ‘Buy for yourself my field which is in Anathoth, which is in the region of Benjamin, for yours is the right of inheritance and yours is the redemption. Buy it for yourself.’ And I knew that it was the word of the LORD. [9]And I bought the field which is in Anathoth from Hanamel the son of my uncle and weighed out to him the silver, seventeen silver shekels. [10]And I wrote it in a scroll and sealed it and had it witnessed and weighed the silver on the scales. [11]And I took the sealed scroll of purchase, the injunction and the stipulations, and the open copy. [12]And I gave the scroll of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah before the eyes of Hanamel son of my uncle and before the eyes of the witness who signed the scroll of purchase before the eyes of all the Judahites sitting in the court of the guard. [13]And I charged Baruch before their eyes, saying, [14]Thus said the LORD of Armies, God of Israel: ‘Take these scrolls, this sealed scroll of purchase and this open scroll, and put them in an earthenware jar so that they may last many days.’ [15]For thus said the LORD of Armies, God of Israel, ‘Yet shall houses and fields and vineyards be bought in this

land.’ [16]And I prayed to the LORD after I gave the
scroll of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah, saying:
[17]Alas, O Master LORD! Look, You made the heavens
and the earth through your great power and with Your
outstretched arm. Nothing is beyond you, [18]doing
kindness for the thousands and paying back the crime
of the fathers into the lap of their sons after them,
great and mighty God, LORD of Armies is His name.
[19]Great in counsel, grand in acts, Whose eyes are open
on all the ways of humankind to give to each man
according to his ways and according to the fruit of his
deeds. [20]You Who set out signs and wonders in the
land of Egypt to this day in Israel and in humankind,
and You have made You a name as on this day. [21]And
You brought out Your people Israel from the land of
Egypt in signs and wonders and with a strong hand and
with an outstretched arm and with great terror. [22]And
You gave them this land that You vowed to their
fathers to give to them, a land flowing with milk and
honey. [23]And they came and took hold of it, but they
did not heed Your voice and did not go by Your
teachings. All that You charged them to do they did
not do, and all this evil befell them. [24]Look, the siege-
ramps have come against the city to capture it, and the
city is given into the hands of the Chaldeans battling
against it—because of the sword and the famine and

the pestilence. And that which You spoke has come to be, and here You see it. [25]And You, You said to me, O Master LORD, ‘Buy for yourself the field with silver and summon witnesses when the city is given into the hands of the Chaldeans.’” [26]And the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, saying: [27]“Look, I am the LORD, God of all flesh. Can anything be beyond Me? [28]Therefore, thus said the LORD: I am about to give this city into the hand of the Chaldeans battling against this city and into the hand of Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia, and he shall capture it. [29]And the Chaldeans battling against this city shall come and set this city on fire and burn it, with the houses and the roofs on which they burned incense to Baal and poured libations to other gods so as to vex Me. [30]For the Israelites and the Judahites have been doing naught but evil in My eyes from their youth, for the Israelites have been vexing Me with the work of their hands, said the LORD. [31]For to My anger and to My wrath this city has been to Me from the day they built it to this day, so as to remove it from before Me, [32]for all the evil of the Israelites and the Judahites that they have done to vex Me, they, their kings, their nobles, their priests, and their prophets, the men of Judah and the dwellers of Jerusalem. [33]They turned their backs to Me, and not their faces. I taught them constantly, but they have not

heeded to accept discipline. [34]And they put their foul
things in the house on which My name was called, to
defile it. [35]And they built the high places for Baal
which are in the Valley of of Ben-Hinnom to consign
their sons and their daughters to Molech, which I did
not charge them and which never came to My mind to
do this abomination, so as to make Judah offend.
[36]And so now, thus said the LORD God of Israel
concerning this city of which you said, It is given into
the hand of the king of Babylonia by the sword and by
famine and by pestilence. [37]I am about to gather them
from all the lands where I scattered them in My anger
and in My wrath and in great fury, and I will bring
them back to this place and make them dwell secure.
[38]And they shall be My people and I will be their God.
[39]And I will give them a single heart and a single way
to fear Me always, so that it will be well with them and
with their sons after them. [40]And I will seal with them
an everlasting covenant, that I not turn back from them
so that I do good for them, and My fear I will put in
their heart, that they do not swerve from Me. [41]And I
will rejoice over them to do good for them, and I will
plant them on this land truly, with all My heart and
with all My being. [42]For thus said the LORD: As I
brought upon this people all this great evil, so I am
about to bring upon them all the good that I am

speaking of them. [43]And the field shall be bought in this land about which you say, ‘It is a desolation without human beings and beasts; it is given into the hands of the Chaldeans.’ [44]Fields they shall buy with silver, writing on scrolls and sealing and summoning witnesses, in the region of Benjamin and in the environs of Jerusalem and in the towns of Judah and in the towns of the hill country and in the towns of the lowland and in the towns of the Negeb, for I will restore their fortunes, said the LORD.”

CHAPTER 32 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *in the tenth year of Zedekiah.* This is 587 B.C.E., the year before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. Hence the notation of the siege in the next verse.

2. *Jeremiah the prophet was imprisoned.* If one recalls that he was repeatedly prophesying destruction and exile in the midst of the war with the Babylonians, he would certainly have been seen as guilty of sedition, so the imprisonment is hardly surprising.

the court of the guard. The literal sense is “the court of the target.” It is possible that this area within the palace precincts was sometimes used for target practice by the royal guard.

4. *he shall speak to him mouth to mouth and see him eye to eye.* The captive king of Judah is to be confronted—we would say “face-to-face”—by the Babylonian emperor. This may well have happened.

5. *until I single him out.* The Hebrew verb *paqad* is appropriately ambiguous. It could mean either "make a reckoning with him" or "single him out to redeem him," although the former meaning is more likely.

the Chaldeans. Throughout this passage, this designation is interchangeable with "Babylonians."

8. *for yours is the right of inheritance and yours is the redemption.* The legal procedure here is similar to what is evident in the Book of Ruth. Hanamel appears to be in need of money—in this period, silver ingots that are weighed out, not coin—and thus turns to a kinsman to "redeem" the property, which thus will not be lost to the family. But the economic transaction in this instance is directed by God with the purpose of having the prophet purchase the land as a symbolic act, signifying that after the impending destruction a time will come when the Judahites will again possess their lands.

11. *And I took the sealed scroll of purchase . . . and the open copy.* This was standard procedure. The official document was signed, witnessed, and sealed, and an unsealed copy of it was made that could be referred to if a need arose to review the terms of the transaction.

scroll of purchase. Since what is involved is a sale of property, this is of course a deed, but the translation preserves the sense of the Hebrew, which keeps in view the material scroll on which the agreement is written and does not use a specialized term for deed.

12. *Baruch son of Neriah.* Baruch, who will appear later in the narrative, is a scribe and Jeremiah's personal secretary.

Hanamel son of my uncle. The Masoretic Text omits "son of," which is almost certainly a scribal slip.

before the eyes of all the Judahites sitting in the court of the guard. This formulation suggests that Jeremiah's place of confinement was not a prison cell but some sort of open space on the palace grounds to which people had ready access.

14. *put them in an earthenware jar.* The jar, which then would have been tightly sealed, was a means of preservation, as we know from the Dead Sea scrolls, which were preserved in such jars for more than two thousand years.

18. *paying back the crime of the fathers into the lap of their sons.* This of course contradicts the affirmation in the previous chapter that no longer will the teeth of the sons be blunted after their fathers eat unripe fruit. Perhaps Jeremiah has in mind the imminent exile, knowing that generations will languish in a foreign land before they can return.

24. *because of the sword and the famine and the pestilence.* This reiterated chain of disasters is actually related to the conditions of siege: the sword enforces the siege; with the city cut off, famine ensues; in the crowded conditions of the besieged city, with an inadequate water supply, contagion spreads.

25. *And You, You said to me.* This is a cry of outraged disbelief: in light of the comprehensive disaster now enveloping the city, how could God have issued instructions for the purchase of land?

27. *Can anything be beyond Me?* This is a reiterated formula in the Bible (see, for example, Genesis 18:14). Since God is all-powerful and can do all things, an eventual reversal of the fortune of disaster awaiting Israel is surely not beyond Him. However, before God comes to the promise of restoration (verse 37ff.), He launches on a lengthy indictment of Israel, listing the sins that are about to lead to a catastrophe for the nation.

33. *turned their backs.* The body part in the Hebrew is literally “nape.”

43. *And the field shall be bought in this land.* Finally, after sixteen verses, God comes to Jeremiah’s incredulous question about the purchase of the field, reassuring him that after the devastation of the whole Judahite countryside, the land will again be settled and properties will be bought.

44. *Fields they shall buy with silver, writing on scrolls and sealing and summoning witnesses.* In reprising the conditions of Jeremiah’s own purchase of land, these words evoke a time to come in which full normalcy will be restored to the country and all the regular procedures for transfer of property will be firmly in place.

CHAPTER 33

[1]And the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah again
while he was still shut up in the court of the guard,
saying, [2]"Thus said the LORD, Who fashions it to
bring it about, the LORD is His name. [3]Call out to Me
that I may answer you and tell you great and lofty
things you did not know. [4]For thus said the LORD
God of Israel concerning the houses of the city and the
houses of the kings of Judah torn down before the
siege-ramps and before the sword, [5]those coming to do
battle with the Chaldeans, but to fill them with human
corpses whom I struck down in My wrath and in My
anger as I hid My face from this city for all their evil.
[6]I am about to grant them a cure and a healing, and I
will heal them and reveal to them a wealth of true
peace. [7]And I will restore the fortunes of Judah and
the fortunes of Israel and rebuild them as before. [8]And
I will cleanse them of their crimes with which they
offended against Me and with which they rebelled
against Me. [9]And it shall become for Me a joyous
name, praise and glory, to all nations of the earth, who

shall hear of all the good that I do for them. They shall fear and tremble over all the good and all the peace that I do for them. [10]Thus said the LORD: Again shall be heard in this place of which you say, it is in ruins, without humans and without beasts, in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without humans and without beasts—[11]the voice of gladness and the voice of joy, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, saying 'Give thanks to the LORD of Armies, for the LORD is good, for His kindness is everlasting,' as they bring a thanksgiving offering to the house of the LORD, for I will restore the fortunes of the land as before, said the LORD. [12]Thus said the LORD of Armies: Again shall there be in this ruined place without humans and beasts as well and in all its towns a pasture for shepherds resting their flocks. [13]In the towns of the hill country, in the towns of the lowland and in the towns of the Negeb and in the region of Benjamin and in the environs of Jerusalem, again shall the flocks pass under the hands of him who counts them, said the LORD. [14]Look, days are coming, said the LORD, when I will fulfill the good word that I spoke concerning the house of Israel and the house of Judah. [15]In those days and at that time I will make a righteous shoot flourish for David, and he shall do justice and

righteousness in the land. [16]In those days Judah shall be rescued and Jerusalem shall dwell secure, and this is what it shall be called: The-LORD-Is-Our-Righteousness. [17]For thus said the LORD: no man of David seated on the throne of the house of Israel shall be cut off. [18]And of the levitical priests no man shall be cut off for all time from before Me who offers up burnt offering and who burns grain offering and performs sacrifice." [19]And the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, saying, [20]"Thus said the LORD: Should you break My covenant with the day and My covenant with the night, that day and night come not in their time, [21]only then would My covenant with David My servant be broken, that he have a son reigning on his throne, and the levitical priests, My ministrants. [22]As the array of the heavens cannot be counted nor the sand of the sea, so will I multiply the seed of David My servant and the Levites who minister to Me." [23]And the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, saying: [24]"Have you not seen what this people has spoken, saying, 'The two clans that the LORD chose He has rejected.' My people they have spurned from being again a nation before them. [25]Thus said the LORD: As I have surely set out My covenant with day and night, the laws of the heavens and the earth, [26]so will I not reject the seed of Jacob and David My

servant to take rulers from his seed, from the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, for I will restore their fortunes and show them mercy."

CHAPTER 33 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Who fashions it to bring it about.* The feminine pronominal object of both verbs refers to the plan or design in history that God is about to bring to fulfillment.

3. *lofty.* The Hebrew *betsurot* usually means "fortified," but by extension it could suggest "looming high," and there is no need to emend it to the more predictable *netsurot,* "hidden."

4. *torn down before the siege-ramps.* The probable reference is to a strategy of razing houses in close proximity to the city walls, either to prevent their being set on fire from the siege-ramps above them or to allow the defenders more room to maneuver. It is doubtful that the palace would have been close to the wall, so "the houses of the kings of Judah" would be royal properties beyond the palace.

5. *but to fill them with human corpses.* The strategy of razing the houses is doomed to failure, and the cleared space merely becomes a killing ground.

6. *true peace.* The Hebrew reads "peace and truth," a phrase understood in this translation as a hendiadys.

9. *And it shall become for Me.* The implied subject of the feminine verb is the nation.

11. *the voice of gladness and the voice of joy, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride.* The words of this evocation of joy in the land after its

devastation would be incorporated in the traditional Jewish marriage ceremony.

for the LORD is good, for His kindness is everlasting. These words echo a recurrent formula in Psalms. This is especially appropriate because the jubilant Judahites are then said to be bringing a thanksgiving offering to the Temple (which will be rebuilt after its destruction).

13. *again shall the flocks pass under the hands of him who counts them.* This is a practice invoked both in biblical narrative and in biblical poetry: an important responsibility of the shepherd is to count his sheep in order to make sure that none is missing. Should the count not be full, he is obliged to search for the missing sheep.

15. *I will make a righteous shoot flourish for David.* This picks up a prominent theme from Isaiah, that in the grand national restoration to come, an ideal king from the Davidic line will arise who will bring about a reign of perfect justice.

16. *The-LORD-Is-Our-Righteousness.* The idea of assigning epithets or names to Jerusalem that express its new status of rightness with God will be abundantly deployed in Second Isaiah.

17. *no man of David seated on the throne of the house of Israel shall be cut off.* At this historical moment, when the kingdom of Judah is about to be destroyed, Jeremiah provides an urgent emphasis that the divinely elected line will continue for all time. At least in this context, "Israel" is clearly interchangeable with "Judah" and cannot refer to the lost northern kingdom.

18. *And of the levitical priests no man shall be cut off.* The Temple priesthood and the Davidic monarchy are a single package—as the reform of Josiah around 622 B.C.E. stressed—and hence the continuity of both is guaranteed.

20. *Should you break My covenant with the day and My covenant with the night.* The rhetorical argument is made through a pointed extension of the term "covenant." As a rule, a covenant is a pact agreed upon between two conscious parties. Here, however, the fixed laws of nature—implicitly, fixed by God—whereby night follows day in an unvarying order are represented as

a “covenant.” Only if this covenant could be broken would the covenant between God and David, God and priesthood, be abrogated.

24. *The two clans that the LORD chose He has rejected.* The Hebrew *mishpaḥot,* “clans” or “families,” is given an extended sense here to refer to the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah. One has already been destroyed and the other is on the brink of destruction: hence, the judgment that God has rejected both. It is not immediately clear who “this people” is that makes such a judgment. The second part of the verse, “My people they have spurned from being again a nation before them,” suggests that it is a foreign people that imagines that Israel will never again have a place among the nations.

25. *the laws of the heavens and the earth.* “Laws” is now added to “covenant,” making clear that the laws of nature constitute an eternal pact between God and creation. It is characteristic of the biblical conception of nature that its laws or regulating principles are imagined not as intrinsic to it or automatic but divinely ordained.

CHAPTER 34

[1]The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD
when Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia and all his
force and all the kingdoms of the land of his dominion
and all the peoples were doing battle against Jerusalem
and against all its towns, saying, [2]“Thus said the
LORD God of Israel: Go and say to Zedekiah king of
Judah and say to him, Thus said the LORD: I am
about to give this city into the hand of the king of
Babylonia, and he shall burn it in fire. [3]And you, you
shall not escape from his hand, for you shall surely be
caught and be given into his hand, and your eyes shall
see the eyes of the king of Babylonia, and his mouth
shall speak to your mouth, and you shall come to
Babylonia. [4]But listen to the word of the LORD,
Zedekiah king of Judah. Thus said the LORD: You
shall not die by the sword. [5]In peace you shall die, and
like the incense burnings of your fathers the former
kings who were before you, so shall they burn incense
for you. And ‘Woe, master’ shall they lament for you,
for it is the word I have spoken, said the LORD.” [6]And

Jeremiah the prophet spoke to Zedekiah king of Judah
all these words in Jerusalem. [7]And the force of the
king of Babylonia was doing battle against Jerusalem
and against all the remaining towns of Judah, against
Lachish and against Azekah, for these were left of the
towns of Judah, fortress towns.

[8]The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD
after King Zedekiah sealed a covenant with the people
who were in Jerusalem, to proclaim a release for them,
[9]for every man to set free his male Hebrew slave and
every man his Hebrew slavegirl, that no man should
enslave a Judahite, his brother. [10]And all the nobles
and all the people who had entered the covenant
listened to set free every man his male slave and every
man his slavegirl so as not to enslave them anymore,
and they listened and set them free. [11]But they went
back afterward and brought back the male slaves and
the slavegirls whom they had set free, and they forced
them to be male slaves and slavegirls. [12]And the word
of the LORD came to Jeremiah from the LORD
saying, [13]“Thus said the LORD God of Israel: I Myself
sealed a covenant with your fathers on the day I
brought you out from the land of Egypt from the house
of slaves, saying, [14]At the end of seven years you shall

send away each man his Hebrew brother who was sold
to you and served you six years, and you shall set him
free from you. But your fathers did not listen to Me
and did not bend their ear. 15And you should turn back
today and do what is right in My eyes to proclaim a
release, each man to his fellow, and you should seal a
covenant before Me in the house upon which My
name is called. 16But you turned back and profaned
My name, and you brought back each man his male
slave and each man his slavegirl whom you had set
wholly free, and you forced them to be male slaves and
slavegirls for you. 17Therefore, thus said the LORD:
You, you did not listen to Me to proclaim a release,
each man to his brother and each man to his fellow. I
am about to proclaim a release for you, said the
LORD, to the sword and to pestilence and to famine,
and I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the
earth. 18And I will make the men trespassing My
covenant, who did not fulfill the words of the covenant
that they sealed before Me like the calf that they cut in
two and passed between its parts, 19the nobles of Judah
and the nobles of Jerusalem, the eunuchs and the
priests and all the people of the land who passed
between the parts of the calf. 20And I will give them
into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of
those who seek their life, and their carcasses shall be

food for the fowl of the heavens and the beasts of the earth. [21]And Zedekiah king of Judah and his nobles I will give into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life and into the hand of the force of the king of Babylonia that is withdrawing from you. [22]Look, I am about to give the command, said the LORD, and I will bring them back to this city and they shall do battle against it and capture it and burn it in fire, and the towns of Judah I will turn into a desolation, with none dwelling there."

CHAPTER 34 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *all the kingdoms . . . of his dominion and all the peoples.* This is a realistic notation: vassal kings and vassal populations were obliged to join the imperial forces in the military campaign.

5. *In peace you shall die.* In the event, this was a highly qualified peace. The captive Zedekiah was forced to watch the murder of his sons, and then the Babylonians blinded him.

the incense burnings. The Hebrew says only "burnings," but cremation was not an option in ancient Israel, and there is evidence that burning incense was sometimes part of funeral rites.

7. *Lachish.* Lachish was the principal fortified city of Judah after Jerusalem, and a quantity of written and archaeological evidence has survived bearing on its siege and capture.

8. *to proclaim a release.* This is the idiom used for the release of slaves in the jubilee year. Setting free slaves in a time of siege had a certain practical logic: the slaves could no longer work in the fields; their owners could be relieved of the responsibility of feeding them when food was scarce during the siege; and perhaps the freed slaves could have been conscripted to fight.

9. *his brother.* Although the term is obviously used in an extended sense to indicate belonging to the same ethnic group, its implication of close kinship is used pointedly.

11. *But they went back afterward.* This may have been during the early months of 587 B.C.E., when the Babylonians temporarily lifted the siege, an event alluded to in verse 21. This act of reclaiming the slaves reflects not only the bad faith of the Judahites but also their previous inclination to ignore the injunction (Exodus 21:2, Deuteronomy 15:1–2) that a Hebrew slave had to be set free at the end of seven years. He was thus less a slave than an indentured servant. God invokes the violation of this law in verse 14.

16. *set wholly free.* This translation understands the added Hebrew term *lenafsho* as an intensifier of the condition of freedom. Others think it means "according to his desire."

18. *like the calf that they cut in two and passed between its parts.* This is a covenant-making ritual well attested in the ancient Near East and reflected in Abraham's covenant with God in Genesis 15. The evident idea was that if a party to the pact violated it, his fate should be like that of the cloven animal. The verb "cut" picks up the Hebrew idiom for sealing a covenant, which is literally "to cut a covenant." The verse incorporates another pun because "pass between" and "trespass" are the same Hebrew verb.

21. *that is withdrawing from you.* See the comment on verse 11. Zedekiah is not to imagine that the lifting of the siege means he and his kingdom will escape from the onslaught of the Babylonians.

22. *Look, I am about to give the command . . . and I will bring them back to this city.* God now makes it perfectly explicit that the Babylonian withdrawal is temporary and that He will soon call back the invading army to complete its work of destruction. Since we can assume that this prophecy was

pronounced by Jeremiah early in 587 B.C.E., he either would have surmised from the strategic situation that this must be a temporary measure or would have been led to that conclusion by his deep conviction that the destruction of the city had been divinely decreed and was inevitable.

CHAPTER 35

[1]The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD in
the days of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah
saying, [2]“Go to the house of the Rechabites and speak
to them and bring them to the house of the LORD to
one of the chambers and give them wine to drink.”
[3]And I took Jaazaniah son of Jeremiah son of
Habazziniah and his brothers and all his sons and all
the house of the Rechabites. [4]And I brought them to
the house of the LORD to the chamber of the sons of
Hanan son of Igdaliah man of God, which is by the
chamber of the nobles which is above the chamber of
Maaseiah, guardian of the threshold. [5]And I set before
the sons of the house of the Rechabites pitchers filled
with wine, and cups, and I said to them: “Drink the
wine.” [6]And they said, “We will not drink wine, for
Jonadab son of Rechab our father charged us saying,
you shall not drink wine, you and your sons, for all
time. [7]And no house shall you build nor seed shall you
sow nor vineyard shall you plant, and you shall not
have them, but in tents shall you dwell all your days, so

that you may live many days on the face of the land where you sojourn. [8]And we heeded the voice of Jonadab son of Rechab our father in all that he charged us, not to drink wine all our days, we, our wives, our sons, and our daughters. [9]And not to build houses for our dwelling, nor to have vineyard and field and seed. [10]And we have dwelled in tents and heeded and done as all that Jonadab our father charged us. [11]And it happened when Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia came up to the land that we said, Come, and let us come to Jerusalem from before the Chaldean force and from before the force of Aram and let us dwell in Jerusalem." [12]And the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, saying, [13]"Thus said the LORD of Armies, God of Israel: Go and say to the men of Judah and to the dwellers of Jerusalem, Will you not accept correction to heed My words, said the LORD? [14]The words of Jonadab son of Rechab have been fulfilled, who charged his sons not to drink wine, and they have not drunk till this very day, for they heeded the command of their father. Yet I Myself have spoken to you continually, and you have not heeded Me. [15]And I sent to you all My servants the prophets, continually sent them, saying: Turn back, pray, each from his evil way and make your acts good and do not go after other gods to serve them, and dwell on the land that I gave to

you and to your fathers. But you did not bend your ear and you did not heed Me. [16]For the sons of Jonadab have fulfilled their father's command that he charged them, but this people has not heeded Me. [17]Therefore, thus said the LORD God of Armies, God of Israel, I am about to bring upon Judah and upon all the dwellers of Jerusalem all the evil of which I spoke concerning them inasmuch as I spoke to them and they did not heed, and I called them and they did not answer. [18]And concerning the house of Rechabites, Thus said the LORD of Armies, God of Israel: Inasmuch as you have heeded the command of Jonadab your father and kept all his commands and have done as all that he charged you, [19]therefore, thus said the LORD of Armies, God of Israel, no man of Jonadab son of Rechab shall be cut off from serving Me for all time."

CHAPTER 35 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *the Rechabites.* This clan, which has the look of a sect and (perhaps, as some scholars conclude) of a distinct ethnic group, first appears in 2 Kings 10, when its "father" or founder, Jonadab (there spelled Jehonadab), joins forces with Jehu in his ruthless extirpation of Baal worshippers. They are extreme pietists, taking on themselves the abstention from drinking wine, like

the nazirites, and also a nomadic way of life. When Jeremiah is enjoined to give them wine to drink, this is obviously devised as a test to see if they still are faithful to the vows imposed by their first father, Jonadab.

11. *when Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia came up to the land.* Although the Rechabites dwell in tents as nomads, the Babylonian invasion forces them to take refuge in Jerusalem. This sets the stage for Jeremiah's invitation to them to come to the Temple, where he puts wine before them.

14. *The words of Jonadab son of Rechab have been fulfilled.* The point of the test by wine of the Rechabites is now revealed: their unswerving commitment to the restrictions imposed by their ancestor provides a stark contrast to the general behavior of the Judahites, who, though bound by a much less demanding code of laws coming directly from God, flagrantly violated it.

15. *And I sent to you all My servants the prophets.* This is a recurrent theme in Jeremiah: it is not as though the people were ignorant of what God required of them, for He repeatedly sent prophets to remind them, but they ignored the prophets. Jeremiah, of course, sees himself as the most recent, and perhaps the most painfully resisted, of God's emissaries.

17. *I am about to bring upon Judah and upon all the dwellers of Jerusalem all the evil of which I spoke.* As elsewhere in his prose prophecies, Jeremiah relies heavily on repeated formulas.

CHAPTER 36

[1]And it happened in the fourth year of Jehoiakim son
of Josiah that this word came to Jeremiah from the
LORD, saying, [2]“Take for yourself a book-scroll and
write on it all the words that I have spoken to you
concerning Israel and concerning Judah and
concerning all the nations from the day that I spoke to
you, from the days of Josiah, to this day. [3]Perhaps the
house of Judah will listen to all the evil that I plan to
do to them so that they may turn back each from his
evil way, and I shall forgive their crime and their
offense.” [4]And Jeremiah called to Baruch son of
Neriah, and Baruch wrote from the mouth of Jeremiah
all the words of the LORD that he had spoken to him
on a book-scroll. [5]And Jeremiah charged Baruch,
saying: “I am confined. I cannot come to the house of
the LORD. [6]And you instead shall come and read out
from the scroll that you have written from my mouth
all the words of the LORD in the hearing of the
people in the house of the LORD on the fast-day, and
you shall also read it out in the hearing of all Judah

who come from their towns. [7]Perhaps their
supplication will fall before the LORD and they will
turn back each from his evil way, for great are the
anger and the wrath that the LORD has spoken
concerning this people." [8]And Baruch did as all that
Jeremiah had charged him to read out from the book
the words of the LORD in the house of the LORD.
[9]And it happened in the fifth year of Jehoiakim son of
Josiah king of Judah, in the ninth month, all the
people in Jerusalem and all the people coming from
the towns of Judah proclaimed a fast before the
LORD. [10]And Baruch read out from the book the
words of the LORD in the house of the LORD in the
chamber of Gemariah son of Shaphan the scribe in the
upper court at the entrance to the gate of the house of
the LORD in the hearing of all the people. [11]And
Micaiah son of Gemariah son of Shaphan heard all the
words of the LORD from the book. [12]And he went
down to the house of the king to the chamber of the
scribe, and, look, all the nobles were sitting there,
Elishama the scribe and Delaiah son of Shemaiah and
Elnathan son of Achbor and Gemariah son of Shaphan
and Zedekiah son of Hananiah and all the nobles.
[13]And Micaiah told them all the words that he had
heard when Baruch had read out from the book in the
hearing of the people. [14]And all the nobles sent to

Baruch Jehudi son of Shelemiah son of Cushi, saying, “The scroll from which you read in the hearing of the people, take it in your hand and go.” And Baruch son of Neriah took the scroll in his hand and came to them. [15]And they said to him, “Sit down, pray, and read it in our hearing.” And Baruch read it out in their hearing. [16]And it happened when they heard all the words, that they turned in fear to each other, and they said to Baruch, “We will surely tell all these words to the king.” [17]And Baruch they asked, saying, “Tell us, pray, how did you write all these words from his mouth?” [18]And Baruch said to them, “With his mouth he read out to me all these words, and I wrote it in the book with ink.” [19]And the nobles said to Baruch, “Go, hide, you and Jeremiah, that no man know where you are.” [20]And they came to the king in the court, and the scroll they laid aside in the chamber of Elishama the scribe, and they told all these words in the hearing of the king. [21]And the king sent Jehudi to take the scroll from the chamber of Elishama the scribe, and Jehudi read it out in the hearing of the king and in the hearing of all the nobles standing in attendance upon the king. [22]And the king was sitting in the winter house in the ninth month, and fire in the brazier before him was burning. [23]And it happened, as Jehudi read three or four columns, he would cut them out with a scribe’s

knife and fling them into the fire that was in the brazier until the entire scroll was consumed in the fire that was in the brazier. [24]And the king and all his servants hearing all these words were not afraid and did not rend their garments. [25]And though Elnathan and Delaiah and Gemariah implored the king not to burn the scroll, he did not listen to them. [26]And the king charged Jerahmeel the king's son and Seraiah son of Azriel and Shelemiah son of Abdel to take Baruch the scribe and Jeremiah the prophet, but the LORD had hidden them. [27]And the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah after the king had burned the scroll and the words that Baruch had written from the mouth of Jeremiah, saying, "Again, take for yourself another scroll and write on it all the former words that were in the first scroll that Jehoiakim king of Judah burned. [28]And concerning Jehoiakim king of Judah, you shall say: Thus said the LORD, You burned this scroll, saying, 'Why did you write in it, saying, the king of Babylonia shall surely come and lay waste to this land and make man and beast cease from it?' [29]Therefore, thus said the LORD concerning Jehoiakim king of Judah: No one of his shall sit on the throne of David, and his carcass shall be flung to the parching heat by day and to the frost by night. [30]And I will reckon his crime against him and against his seed and against his

servants and bring down on them and on all the dwellers of Jerusalem and on the men of Judah all the evil that I spoke concerning them, yet they do not heed. [31]And Jeremiah had taken another scroll and had given it to Baruch son Neriah the scribe, and he wrote on it all the words of the book that Jehoiakim had burned in the fire, and many words of the sort were added.

CHAPTER 36 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *In the fourth year of Jehoiakim.* This is 605 B.C.E., when Nebuchadrezzar defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish and consequently threatened the lands to the west.

2. *Take for yourself a book-scroll.* The Hebrew construct form is *megilat-sefer*. *Megilah* is a scroll; *sefer* is any written document, and in some contexts it can also mean scroll. Here it is actually a book because it contains some two decades of Jeremiah's prophecies, and perhaps that is why the double form is used. The physical existence, moreover, of the book as a scroll will be highlighted as the story unfolds.

4. *Baruch wrote from the mouth of Jeremiah.* "From the mouth" obviously means "from the dictation," but this translation preserves the physical concreteness of the Hebrew idiom. The present chapter offers a rare perspective on the mechanics of transmission of biblical prophecy. Baruch, elsewhere given the epithet of "scribe," was probably a professional scribe, but he also served as Jeremiah's personal amanuensis, in all likelihood not for pay but out of devotion to the prophet. Jeremiah may well have had some

form of abbreviated written notations of his earlier prophecies, though we should not exclude the possibility that he knew them all by heart. (One recalls the instance of the great Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, who for years did not dare to commit his poems to writing during Stalin's reign of terror but memorized them all, as did his wife.)

5. *I am confined.* As before, this indicates some sort of confinement on the palace grounds in which he has a certain amount of freedom of movement and visitors had access to him.

6. *the fast-day.* Given the Babylonian military threat, it is likely that a general fast had been proclaimed in order to implore God for help.

9. *in the ninth month.* This would be Kislev, corresponding to December—hence the winter chambers and the burning brazier in what follows.

13. *And Micaiah told them all the words.* Despite the phrase "all the words," this has to mean that he told them the general sense of Jeremiah's prophecies because he scarcely would have been expected to have memorized the entire book as he listened.

17. *how did you write all these words from his mouth?* The courtiers express amazement at Baruch's ability to produce this long text. He responds (verse 18) by explaining that it was a simple matter of dictation, the prophet reading or reciting out loud and the scribe transcribing everything with pen and ink on the scroll. It is possible that Baruch possessed a special skill of rapid writing. Elsewhere in the Bible, a "rapid scribe's pen" is an idiom for the work of a skilled scribe.

19. *Go, hide.* They immediately understand that these prophecies predicting the imminent destruction of the kingdom will be regarded as seditious by the king and could endanger the lives of both the prophet and the scribe.

22. *the winter house.* This is probably palace chambers exposed to the sun and hence better suited for residence in the cold months.

the brazier. The Hebrew ʾaḥ is an Egyptian loanword. Although in later Hebrew it came to mean "hearth" or "fireplace," ancient palaces had neither hearths nor chimneys, so this would have to be a freestanding brazier.

23. *he would cut them out with a scribe's knife and fling them into the fire.* It is not entirely clear whether the scroll was papyrus or parchment. Many scholars favor papyrus because it would have burned more readily. In that case, the "scribe's knife" would be the instrument used for cutting out sheets of papyrus. But *taʿar,* the word used here for "knife," elsewhere means "razor," and it derives from a verbal stem that means "to raze" or "remove to the roots." Such an instrument could be used to scrape away words or letters on parchment as a kind of eraser.

24. *were not afraid.* They did not take the dire warnings of the prophecies to heart but instead dismissed them, demonstrating their view of the nullity of the prophet's words by burning them.

26. *but the LORD had hidden them.* Obviously, it was Jeremiah and Baruch who hid themselves, but the narrative report seeks to attribute the agency to God, as though there were divine intervention on behalf of the two men.

27. *take for yourself another scroll and write on it all the former words.* The story vividly illustrates the futility of censorship. The scroll has been consumed in fire, column by column. Yet the words of the scroll persist in the mind of the prophet, and he is again enjoined to dictate them to his able scribe. Neither Jeremiah nor Baruch is intimidated by the threat of royal action against them.

29. *his carcass shall be flung.* Pointedly, the same verb, "flung," that was used for tossing the pieces of the scroll into the fire is now part of a grim prophecy of the king's fate.

30. *his servants.* As is almost invariably the case in royal contexts, this general term here indicates "courtiers."

31. *and many words of the sort were added.* In a gesture of defiance of the king's attempt to eradicate these prophecies, not only are they again written down verbatim, but in this second scroll, additional prophecies with the same message of destruction are included.

CHAPTER 37

[1]And King Zedekiah son of Josiah became king
instead of Coniah son of Jehoiakim, as
Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia had made him king
in the land of Judah. [2]And he and his servants and the
people of the land had not heeded the words of the
LORD that he spoke through Jeremiah the prophet.
[3]And King Zedekiah sent Jehucal son of Shelemiah
and Zephaniah son of Maaseiah the priest to Jeremiah
the prophet, saying, “Pray for us to the LORD our
God.” [4]And Jeremiah was coming and going in the
midst of the people, and they had not put him in
prison. [5]And Pharaoh’s force had gone out from Egypt,
and the Chaldeans besieging Jerusalem heard of them
and withdrew from Jerusalem. [6]And the word of the
LORD came to Jeremiah the prophet, saying, [7]“Thus
said the LORD God of Israel, thus shall you say to the
king of Judah who is sending you to Me to seek Me:
Look, Pharaoh’s force coming out to you to help is
turning back to its land, Egypt. [8]And the Chaldeans
shall turn back and battle against this city and capture

it and burn it in fire. [9]Thus said the LORD: Do not deceive yourselves, saying, ‘The Chaldeans will surely go away from us,’ for they shall not go away. [10]Though you strike down the whole Chaldean force battling against you and there remain men run through, each in his tent, they shall rise up and burn this city in fire.” [11]And it happened when the Chaldean force withdrew from Jerusalem before Pharaoh’s force, [12]that Jeremiah went out from Jerusalem to go to the region of Benjamin to hide there in the midst of the people. [13]And as he came to the gate of Benjamin, there was a prison warden there named Irijah son of Shelemiah son of Hananiah, and he caught Jeremiah the prophet, saying, “You are going over to the Chaldeans.” [14]And Jeremiah said, “That is a lie! I am not going over to the Chaldeans.” But he did not listen to him, and Irijah caught Jeremiah and brought him to the nobles. [15]And the nobles were furious with Jeremiah and struck him and put him into the place of confinement, the house of Jonathan the scribe, for they had turned it into a prison. [16]So did Jeremiah come to the house of the pit and to the cells, and Jeremiah stayed there many days. [17]And King Zedekiah sent and took him, and the king questioned him secretly in his house and said, “Is there any word from the LORD?” And Jeremiah said, “There is—into the hand of the king of Babylonia you

shall be given.” 18And Jeremiah said to King Zedekiah,
“How have I offended you and your servants and this
people that you should have put me in prison? 18And
where are your prophets who prophesied to you,
saying, the king of Babylonia shall not come against
you and against this land? 20And now, listen, pray, my
lord the king, let my supplication fall before you and
do not turn me back to the house of Jonathan the
scribe and let me not die there.” 21And Zedekiah gave
the command, and they placed Jeremiah in the court
of the guard and gave him a loaf of bread each day
from the Baker’s Street, till there was no longer any
bread in the city. And Jeremiah stayed in the court of
the guard.

CHAPTER 37 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Coniah.* This is a shortened form of Jeconiah.
as Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia had made him king.
Nebuchadrezzar had removed Jeconiah from the throne and put Zedekiah in his place, assuming he would serve submissively as a vassal king, which did not prove to be the case.

3. *Pray for us to the LORD our God.* The usual linguistic protocol is to say “the LORD your God” when addressing a prophet. The king evidently wants to emphasize his solidarity with Jeremiah—they share the same God. His

attitude toward the prophet is ambivalent: he regards him as someone who has direct access to God but dismisses his prophecies of doom, even judging them to be seditious.

4. *and they had not put him in prison.* Not yet, but this would very soon happen.

10. *and there remain men run through.* This is a hyperbole used for dramatic effect: even should you slaughter the Chaldeans, the very men you have stabbed with your swords will rise up from their tents and complete the assault against your city.

12. *to hide there.* The verb *ḥalaq* usually means "to share," and so many interpreters understand this to say that Jeremiah was going on personal business, to realize a share in an inheritance coming to him. The conduct of such business in a time of siege is unlikely. Hoffman cites an Akkadian cognate that means "to hide" or "to flee," and that sounds plausible here: Jeremiah may be fleeing from a fate of death when the city falls to the Babylonians.

13. *And as he came to the gate of Benjamin.* This would be the gate in the wall of Jerusalem leading to the territory of Benjamin. All this takes place during the brief period when the Babylonians lifted the siege.

a prison warden. The Hebrew *baʿal pequdot* is linked with *beyt hapequdot,* one of several terms for "prison."

You are going over to the Chaldeans. Given Jeremiah's history of grimly predicting a Babylonian victory, he would readily be suspected of desertion to the enemy.

14. *brought him to the nobles.* The nobles (*sarim*) are royal officers, evidently superior to the prison warden.

16. *So did Jeremiah come to the house of the pit and to the cells.* The use of "house of the pit" for "prison"—"pit" for prison also occurs in the Joseph story—suggests that it was a harsh place of confinement. Ḥ*anuyot,* "cells," appears only here. In postbiblical Hebrew, it came to mean "shops," but at least one Semitic cognate indicates that it had the ancient meaning of "cell" or "dungeon."

17. *Is there any word from the LORD?* Zedekiah still clings to Jeremiah as a privileged source of knowledge of God's intentions, but the answer to his question is a repetition of the prophecy of destruction.

20. *let me not die there.* Either he fears that he could not long survive in the harsh conditions of the prison pit at the house of Jonathan the scribe, or he is afraid that the nobles overseeing that place are so furious with him that they will end up killing him if he stays there in their charge.

21. *they placed Jeremiah in the court of the guard and gave him a loaf of bread each day.* As we have seen before, this amounts to a kind of house arrest on the palace grounds in which Jeremiah is given some freedom of movement and access to visitors. The provision of a daily loaf reflects the king's concern for Jeremiah, especially because food supplies would have been very scarce during the siege, as the next clause, "till there was no longer any bread in the city," clearly indicates.

CHAPTER 38

[1]And Shephatiah son of Mattan and Gedaliah son of Pashshur and Jucal son of Shelemiah and Pashhur son of Malkiah heard the words that Jeremiah was speaking to the people, saying, [2]“Thus said the LORD: He who dwells in this city shall die by the sword and by famine and by pestilence, and he who goes out to the Chaldeans shall live, and his life shall be booty but he shall live. [3]Thus said the LORD: This city shall surely be given into the hand of the king of Babylonia’s force and he shall capture it.” [4]And the nobles said to the king: “Let this man be put to death, for he is surely weakening the hands of the men of war remaining in this city and the hands of the people to speak to them words of this sort, for this man does not seek the welfare of this people but rather harm.” [5]And King Zedekiah said, “Here he is in your hand, for the king can do nothing with you.” [6]And they took Jeremiah and flung him into the pit of Malchiah the king’s son, which is in the court of the guard, and they lowered Jeremiah with ropes. And in the pit there was

no water, only muck, and Jeremiah sank into the muck. [7]And Ebed-Melech the Cushite, a eunuch, heard, and he was in the king's house, that they had put Jeremiah in the pit, and the king was sitting in the Benjamin Gate. [8]And Ebed-Melech came out from the king's house and spoke to the king, saying, [9]"My lord the king, these men have done evil in all that they have done to Jeremiah the prophet, in that they have flung him into the pit, and he could die on the spot of hunger, for there is no more bread in the city." [10]And the king charged Ebed-Melech the Cushite, saying, "Take in your charge from here thirty men and raise up Jeremiah the prophet from the pit before he dies." [11]And Ebed-Melech took the men in his charge and came into the king's house beneath the treasury, and he took from there worn rags and worn clothes and sent them to Jeremiah in the pit with ropes. [12]And Ebed-Melech the Cushite said to Jeremiah, "Pray, put the worn rags and clothes under your armpits beneath the ropes," and so did Jeremiah do. [13]And they pulled Jeremiah up with the ropes and brought him up out of the pit, and Jeremiah stayed in the court of the guard. [14]And King Zedekiah sent and took Jeremiah the prophet to him by the third entrance which is in the house of the LORD, and the king said to Jeremiah, "I am asking something of you. Do not hide the thing

from me.” [15]And Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “Should I tell you, would you not surely put me to death? And should I counsel you, you would not heed me.” [16]And King Zedekiah secretly swore to Jeremiah, “As the LORD lives, Who made this life of ours, I will not put you to death and I will not give you into the hand of the men who seek your life.” [17]And Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “Thus said the LORD God of Armies, God of Israel: If you indeed go out to the commanders of the king of Babylonia, you shall live and this city shall not be burned, and you and your household shall live. [18]And if you do not go out to the commanders of the king of Babylonia, the city shall be given into the hand of the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it in fire, and you yourself shall not escape from their hand.” [19]And King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “I am worried about the Judahites who have gone over to the Chaldeans, lest they give me into their hands and they abuse me.” [20]And Jeremiah said, “They will not give you over. Heed, pray, the voice of the LORD that I speak to you, that it be well with you, and you live. [21]But should you refuse to go out, this is the word that the LORD has shown me. [22]Look, all the women who have remained in the house of the king of Judah are to be brought out to the commanders of the king of Babylonia, and, look, they say:

‘They deceived you and prevailed
over you,
the men who were your intimates.
Your feet have sunk in mud,
They have fallen back.’

23 And all your wives and your children are to be
brought out to the Chaldeans, and you yourself shall
not escape from their hand, for in the hand of the king
of Babylonia you shall be caught, and this city shall be
burned in fire.” 24 And Zedekiah said to Jeremiah “Let
no man know these things, and you shall not die. 25 And
should the nobles hear that I have spoken with you and
come to you and say to you, ‘Tell us, pray, what you
spoke to the king. Do not conceal it from us, and we
will not put you to death, what the king spoke to you.’
26 You shall say to them, ‘I was laying my supplication
before the king not to send me back to the house of
Jonathan to die there.’” 27 And all the nobles came to
Jeremiah and asked him, and he told them according
to these words that the king had charged him, and they
ceased speaking with him, for the thing had not been
heard. 28 And Jeremiah stayed in the court of the guard
till the day Jerusalem was captured. And it happened,
when the city was captured. . . .

CHAPTER 38 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

4. *Let this man be put to death, for he is surely weakening the hands of the men of war.* This response of the nobles—who are probably high royal officials—is hardly surprising. Jerusalem is engaged in a bitter fight for its survival, and this prophet repeatedly and vehemently announces that all is lost, a kind of speech that could easily be regarded as treasonous.

the men of war remaining in this city. The phrasing may suggest that a substantial number of the warriors have deserted to the enemy, which is basically what Jeremiah has been urging. Compare verse 19.

5. *for the king can do nothing with you.* These words reflect a real power struggle in the court during the siege. The king is disinclined to harm Jeremiah because he regards him as an authentic prophet, but he feels that he is unable to resist the angry resolution of his nobles, who, after all, see dangerous sedition in Jeremiah's prophecies.

6. *they lowered Jeremiah with ropes.* This report qualifies "flung" in the previous clause. The pit must have been quite deep—perhaps twenty feet or more—to necessitate the lowering with ropes. The nobles do not want to kill Jeremiah outright, but rather to leave him to perish at the bottom of the dank pit.

there was no water, only muck. During the winter months, such a pit would serve as a reservoir for rainwater, but it is now midsummer, so only a residue of muck at the bottom remains.

7. *Ebed-Melech the Cushite.* A Cushite is a Nubian. One assumes that this is an accurate historical identification, but it is ironic that a foreigner should take the initiative to save the prophet.

9. *he could die on the spot of hunger.* This is new information: the nobles intended to let Jeremiah die by not providing him any food from the scarce resources.

10. *thirty men.* Obviously, just two or three would have sufficed to haul Jeremiah up out of the pit. In all likelihood, this reflects a countermove by the king to the nobles' assertion of power. Thirty men would ensure that no one could easily interfere with the rescue, and it is even possible that these men are armed.

11. *the treasury.* This may be a storeroom because it contains rags.

12. *put the worn rags and clothes under your armpits beneath the ropes.* The rags are to serve as padding so that Jeremiah will not be cut or abraded by the ropes under his arms as he is pulled up.

13. *Jeremiah stayed in the court of the guard.* This is his previous place of confinement, where he enjoyed relative freedom of movement.

14. *And King Zedekiah sent and took Jeremiah the prophet to him.* The king's motive in accepting Ebed-Melech's advice and defying the nobles to save Jeremiah becomes clear: he continues to regard the prophet as a crucial channel of God's intentions, and in this moment of national crisis, he wants to know what those may be.

17. *If you indeed go out to the commanders of the king of Babylonia.* Jeremiah counsels surrender, a piece of advice that may well have followed from his unblinking assessment of the military situation rather than from a directive by God.

19. *the Judahites who have gone over to the Chaldeans.* These deserters, opposed to Zedekiah's policy of armed resistance to the Babylonians, would have seen him as their enemy.

22. *They deceived you and prevailed over you.* To drive home his point, Jeremiah attributes two lines of poetry to the women of the royal house being led out to the Babylonians, presumably to become their sex slaves.

Your feet have sunk in mud. Although this clause approximates the metaphorical representation of dire distress in Psalms, it also obviously resonates with Jeremiah's plight in the muck at the bottom of the pit.

24. *Let no man know these things.* Zedekiah does not want to compound his own political difficulties vis-à-vis members of his court by having it known that, beyond the act of saving Jeremiah, he has been the willing audience to the prophet's grim pronouncements that the nobles would regard as seditious.

27. *and he told them according to these words that the king had charged him.* Here we have an instance of a prophet lying, though one must say that it is a lie intended to save the king from a gravely compromising predicament in this complicated play of political forces.

28. *And it happened, when the city was captured. . . .* The Hebrew cannot mean "And he was there when the city was captured," as some have claimed. Rather, this is a clause that breaks off. S. D. Luzatto, the eighteenth-century Italian Hebrew exegete, proposes that the actual place of this clause is at the beginning of 39:11. This does make syntactic and semantic sense as follows: "And it happened, when the city was captured, that Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia charged concerning Jeremiah through Nebuzaradan the high chamberlain, saying."

CHAPTER 39

[1]In the ninth year of Zedekiah king of Judah in the
tenth month Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia and all
his force came to Jerusalem and besieged it. [2]In the
eleventh year of Zedekiah in the fourth month on the
ninth of the month the city was breached. [3]And all the
commanders of the king of Babylonia came and sat in
the central gate—Nergal-Sarezer, Samgar-Nebo,
Sarsechim the chief eunuch, Nergal-Sarezer high
magus, and all the rest of the commanders of the king
of Babylonia. [4]And it happened when Zedekiah king
of Judah and all the men of war saw them, they fled
and went out by night from the city through the king's
garden, through the gate of the double walls, and he
went out toward the Arabah. [5]And the Chaldean force
pursued them and overtook Zedekiah in the desert
country of Jericho and took him and brought him up
to Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia at Riblah in the
region of Hamath, and he spoke harshly with him.
[6]And the king of Babylonia slaughtered Zedekiah's
sons before his eyes in Riblah, and all the aristocrats

of Judah the king of Babylonia slaughtered. [7]And the eyes of Zedekiah he blinded, and he bound him in bronze fetters to bring him to Babylonia. [8]And the king's house and the people's houses the Chaldeans burned in fire, and the walls of Jerusalem they shattered. [9]And the rest of the people who remained in the city and those who had gone over to him and the rest of the people remaining Nebuzaradan the high chamberlain exiled to Babylonia. [10]And from the poor people who had nothing Nebuzaradan the high chamberlain left in the land of Judah and gave them vineyards and plots of land on that day. [11]And Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia charged concerning Jeremiah through Nebuzaradan the high chamberlain, saying, [12]"Take him, and keep your eye on him, and do him no harm, but as he speaks to you, do for him." [13]And Nebuzaradan the high chamberlain and Nebushazbaz the chief eunuch and Nergal-sarezer the high magus and all the officers of the king of Babylonia sent, [14]they sent and took Jeremiah from the court of the guard, and they gave him over to Gedaliah son of Ahikam son of Shaphan to bring him out to the house, and he dwelled in the midst of the people.

15 And to Jeremiah the word of the LORD had come
when he was detained in the court of the guard,
saying, 16 "Go and say to Ebed-Melech the Cushite,
saying: Thus said the LORD of Armies, God of Israel,
I am about to bring My words to this city for evil and
not for good, and they shall happen before you on that
day. 17 And I will save you on that day, said the LORD,
and you shall not be given into the hand of the men by
whom you are terrified. 18 But I will surely let you
escape, and you shall not die by the sword and your
life shall be your booty, for you trusted in Me, said the
LORD."

CHAPTER 39 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *In the ninth year of Zedekiah.* According to the notation here and in the next verse, the siege lasted about a year and a half, from the winter of 587 B.C.E. to midsummer 586.

2. *in the fourth month on the ninth of the month.* This is the ninth of Av, traditionally marked by Jews as a fast-day to commemorate the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

3. *Nergal-Sarezer.* This name occurs twice in this verse, which must be a scribal duplication. Note as well that, understandably, all the Akkadian names in this list are somewhat distorted by the Hebrew transliteration.

high magus. The Hebrew is *rav-mag,* and as with other titles of the officials here, the precise function is uncertain.

4. *they fled and went out by night from the city through the king's garden.* The spatial indication in this clause suggests that they used some sort of secret exit, as many commentators have proposed.

the Arabah. This is the north-south rift through which the Jordan runs. They are fleeing to the south, perhaps trying to reach Egypt.

5. *the desert country of Jericho.* The Hebrew uses a plural of Arabah, which could refer either to the north-south rift or, as here, to a kind of terrain.

Riblah. This is far to the north, in Syria, where the Babylonian emperor was contending with other enemies.

he spoke harshly with him. Literally, "he spoke judgments with him." This translation understands the plural noun *mishpatim* to have an adverbial sense.

7. *And the eyes of Zedekiah he blinded.* This was, sad to say, a common treatment of prisoners of war in the ancient Near East. But Nebuchadrezzar has added to it a sadistic gesture: first he slaughters Zedekiah's sons "before his eyes," and with this last horrific sight lingering in the mind of the Judahite king, he has him blinded. Nebuchadrezzar wants to make clear to all that he does not tolerate the rebellion of vassal kings.

8. *the people's houses.* The Hebrew reads "the people's house," which sounds like a public institution, one that actually did not exist in ancient Israel. This translation adopts David Kimchi's plausible proposal that the noun is collective.

9. *the high chamberlain.* The literal sense of the Hebrew title is "chief butcher," though it is obvious that the term was extended far beyond its origins to indicate some sort of important political or military function. Potiphar in Genesis 39 bears the same title.

10. *gave them vineyards and plots of land.* This redistribution of property to the destitute was calculated to enlist their loyalty to the conquerors.

12. *do him no harm.* Nebuchadrezzar accords Jeremiah special treatment because he has heard—probably from the Judahite deserters—that the prophet had been preaching capitulation to the Babylonians.

14. *Gedaliah.* He would then be appointed by Nebuchadrezzar to serve as governor of the conquered province.

the house. Many commentators, medieval and modern, conclude that this is Gedaliah's house.

17. *the men by whom you are terrified.* These would be the men who wanted to fight to the bitter end and so sought to kill Jeremiah, whom Ebed-Melech saved, as a traitor.

18. *and your life shall be your booty.* It will not be the booty of others. This is a way of saying that you will escape with your life.

CHAPTER 40

[1]The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD after Nebuzaradan the high chamberlain sent him off when he took him—and he was bound in fetters—in the midst of all the exiles of Jerusalem and Judah who were exiled to Babylonia. [2]And the high chamberlain took Jeremiah and said to him, “The LORD your God spoke of this evil concerning this place. [3]And the LORD brought to pass and did as He had spoken, for you offended against the LORD and did not heed His voice, and this thing happened to you. [4]And now, I release you today from the fetters that are on your hands, and if it be good in your eyes to come with me to Babylonia, come, and I will keep my eye on you. And if it be not right in your eyes to come with me to Babylonia, do not. See, all the land is before you. To wherever is good and right in your eyes to go, there go.” [5]And yet he did not turn back. “And turn back to Gedaliah son of Ahikam son of Shaphan, whom the king of Babylonia appointed over the towns of Judah and stay with him in the midst of the people, or

wherever is right in your eyes to go, go.” And the high chamberlain gave him a food allotment and provisions and sent him off. [6]And Jeremiah came to Gedaliah son of Ahikam at Mizpah, and he stayed with him in the midst of the people remaining in the land.

[7]And all the commanders of the troops who were in the field heard, both they and their men, that the king of Babylonia had appointed Gedaliah son of Ahikam over the land and that he had left with him men, women, and children, some of the poor of the land who had not been exiled to Babylonia. [8]And they came to Gedaliah at Mizpah, Ishmael son of Nethaniah and Johanan and Jonathan sons of Kareah, and Seraiah son of Tanhumeth, and the sons of Eiphai the Netophathite, and Jezaniah son of Maacathite, they and their men. [9]And Gedaliah son of Ahikam swore to them, saying, “Do not be afraid to serve the Chaldeans. Stay in the land and serve the king of Babylonia, and it will go well with you. [10]As for me, here I am staying in Mizpah to stand in attendance before the Chaldeans who come to us, and you, gather wine and summer fruit in your vessels, and dwell in your towns of which you have taken hold.” [11]And also all the Judahites who were in Moab and in Ammon

and in Edom and in all the lands had heard that the king of Babylonia had left a remnant for Judah and had appointed over them Gedaliah son of Ahikam son of Shaphan. [12]And the Judahites turned back from all the places where they were scattered and came to the land of Judah to Gedaliah at Mizpah, and they gathered wine and summer fruit in great abundance. [13]And Johanan son of Kareah and all the commanders of the troops who were in the field had come to Gedaliah at Mizpah. [14]And they said to him, “Do you actually know that Baalis king of the Ammonites has sent Ishmael son of Nethaniah to kill you?” But Gedaliah son of Ahikam did not believe them. [15]And Johanan son of Kareah secretly said to Gedaliah at Mizpah, saying, “Let me go, pray, and strike down Ishmael son of Nethaniah, and no man will know. Why should he kill you, and all Judah gathered round you will disperse, and the remnant of Judah will perish?” [16]And Gedaliah son of Ahikam said to Johanan son of Kareah, “Do not do this thing, for you speak a lie about Ishmael.”

CHAPTER 40 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD.* This introductory phrase has puzzled interpreters because what follows is not a prophecy but a narrative report. The least strained explanation is that of S. D. Luzatto: in 1:3, Jeremiah's prophecies were said to continue "until the exile of Jerusalem"; the opening phrase here introduces his acts and prophecies after the exile has begun.

he was bound in fetters. This is an outright contradiction of the report in the preceding chapter that Nebuchadrezzar gave orders that Jeremiah be sent to stay with Gedaliah at Mizpah, unhampered and unharmed. Various attempts at harmonization of the two stories have been made, but it looks as though the text has combined two contradictory sources. See the comment on verse 6.

2. *The LORD your God spoke of this evil.* The high chamberlain's speech must be a historical fiction because it is hard to imagine that a Babylonian official would invoke this pious Yahwistic language.

5. *And yet he did not turn back.* This brief clause, which interrupts the speech of the Babylonian commander, looks grammatically suspect: *weʿodenu lʾo-yashuv* (the verb in the imperfect should be *weʿodenu lʾo-shav*). The entire clause may be a clumsy gloss.

6. *And Jeremiah came to Gedaliah.* Only now is the contradiction of verse 1 with chapter 39 resolved.

7. *all the commanders of the troops who were in the field.* The crucial phrase here is "in the field." The Judahite troops in Jerusalem would have been killed or captured when the city was breached, but there remained forces of resistance in open areas well beyond the city.

9. *Stay in the land and serve the king of Babylonia, and it will go well with you.* Gedaliah's counsel is entirely in keeping with Jeremiah's: resistance is futile and flight self-defeating; if the remaining Judahites cooperate with the Babylonian conquerors, they will be treated generously.

10. *gather wine and summer fruit.* Some commentators see a problem here because wine is not "gathered." The idiom is no more than an ellipsis: gather grapes, which will be turned into wine.

your towns of which you have taken hold. The verb suggests seizing something not previously possessed. Many of the towns may have been emptied out as their population fled from the Babylonians, and those who remained, perhaps roaming over the countryside in bands, took over the towns.

14. *Baalis king of the Ammonites has sent Ishmael son of Nethaniah to kill you.* The Ammonites were one of the trans-Jordanian peoples that resisted the Babylonians. Their king would thus want to kill Gedaliah as a collaborator with the Babylonians. Some have proposed that he had an eye to taking over the kingdom of Judah.

16. *Do not do this thing, for you speak a lie about Ishmael.* Gedaliah is no doubt recoiling from the idea of authorizing an assassination, which could scarcely have remained a secret, as Johanan claims. But he also appears to be by temperament an accommodationist, unwilling to imagine either that the Babylonians will deal harshly with those who remain in Judah or that a fellow Judahite might harbor murderous intentions toward him. He will pay with his life for his naïveté.

CHAPTER 41

[1]And it happened in the seventh month that Ishmael
son of Nethaniah son of Elishama of the royal seed
and the king's officers and the men with him came to
Gedaliah son of Ahikam at Mizpah, and they broke
bread together there at Mizpah. [2]And Ishmael the son
of Nethaniah rose up, together with the ten men who
were with him, and they struck down Gedaliah son of
Ahikam son of Shaphan by the sword, and they put
him to death, whom the king of Babylonia had
appointed over the land. [3]And all the Judahites who
were with him, with Gedaliah at Mizpah, and the
Chaldeans who were found there, the men of war,
Ishmael struck down. [4]And it happened on the second
day after Gedaliah had been put to death that no man
knew. [5]And men came from Shechem and from
Samaria, eighty men with beards shaved and rent
garments and slashed bodies, grain offerings and
frankincense in their hand, to bring to the house of the
LORD. [6]And Ishmael son of Nethaniah went out
toward them from Mizpah, walking along weeping,

and it happened when he met them, he said, “Come to Gedaliah son of Ahikam.” [7]And it happened when they came into the town that Ishmael son of Nethaniah slaughtered them and flung them into the cistern, him and the men who were with him. [8]But ten men were found among them who said to Ishmael, “Do not put us to death, for we have hidden stores in the field, wheat and barley and oil and honey.” And he desisted and did not put them to death with their brothers. [9]And the cistern into which Ishmael had flung all the corpses of the men whom he had struck down because of Gedaliah, it was the one that King Asa had made on account of Baasha king of Israel. Ishmael son of Nethaniah filled it with the slain. [10]And Ishmael took captive all the rest of the people who were in Mizpah, the daughters of the king and all the people remaining at Mizpah whom Nebuzaradan the high chamberlain had left with Gedaliah son of Ahikam. And Ishmael son of Nethaniah took the captives and went to cross over to the Ammonites. [11]And Johanan son of Kereah and all the commanders of the troops who were with him heard of all the evil that Ishmael son of Nethaniah had done. [12]And they took all the men and went to do battle with Ishmael son of Nethaniah, and they found him by the great pool which is at Gibeon. [13]And it happened when all the people who were with Ishmael

saw Johanan son of Kereah and all the commanders of the troops, they rejoiced. [14]And all the people whom Ishmael had taken captive from Mizpah swung round and turned back and went over to Johanan son of Kereah. [15]But Ishmael son of Nethaniah had escaped from Johanan with eight men and had gone over to the Ammonites. [16]And Johanan son of Kereah and all the commanders of the troops who were with him took the rest of the people whom he had brought back from Ishmael son of Nethaniah from Mizpah, who had struck down Gedaliah son of Ahikam—the males, men of war, women and children and eunuchs whom he brought back from Gibeon. [17]And they went and stayed at Geroth Chimham, which is by Bethlehem, on the route down to Egypt [18]from before the Chaldeans, for they feared them, for Ishmael son of Nethaniah had struck down Gedaliah son of Ahikam, whom the king of Babylonia had appointed over the land.

CHAPTER 41 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *of the royal seed.* This is a politically significant notation. Gedaliah is the grandson of Shaphan, a court scribe, and not a member of the dynastic family. Ishmael thus regards him as both usurper and a quisling, while his

own biological connection to the royal line may have encouraged him to make a move for the throne, once he has eliminated Gedaliah and at such time as there might be a possibility to shake off the Babylonian yoke.

the king's officers. These words do not appear in the parallel passage in 2 Kings 25:25, and they are probably an erroneous insertion here because Ishmael's contingent of ten men is all that is mentioned in what follows.

they broke bread together. This act of fellowship indicates Ishmael's strategy of deception. Gedaliah would surely have had many more than ten men around him, even including Chaldean soldiers, but he and those with him are taken by surprise by Ishmael and his ten killers.

5. *eighty men with beards shaved and rent garments and slashed bodies.* These are all signs of mourning. Slashing the body is explicitly prohibited in the Torah, but popular practice is quite another matter. The mourning, of course, is for the destruction of the Temple.

grain offerings and frankincense in their hand, to bring to the house of the LORD. Since they know that the house of the LORD is no longer standing, this would have to be a pilgrimage to the site of the destroyed Temple, where they hope to participate in some sort of rite with the grain offering and the incense, though animal sacrifice would be not possible without the Temple and its altar.

6. *walking along weeping.* He pretends to share their mourning.

Come to Gedaliah. In this way he lures them into Mizpah, concealing his murder of Gedaliah.

7. *Ishmael son of Nethaniah slaughtered them.* The likely motive for this act of mass murder is to make sure, lest any of the pilgrims passing by Mizpah get word of what has happened there, that no report of the assassination be made. Ishmael's unflinching ruthlessness is clearly evident.

8. *we have hidden stores in the field.* It should be kept in mind that the Judahite population has been under siege, and so food supplies are very scarce. Ishmael would have to keep these men alive so that they could lead him to the storage pits or other places of concealment where they had left the provisions.

9. *the cistern into which Ishmael had flung all the corpses.* Merely wanting to get the bodies out of sight, he compounds the brutality of the murders by denying his victims a proper burial.

the one that King Asa had made on account of Baasha king of Israel. This was in a time of war between the southern kingdom ruled by Asa and the northern kingdom. The cistern was probably dug to provide a water supply if Baasha were to besiege Mizpah.

Ishmael son of Nethaniah filled it with the slain. This grisly detail offers a concrete image of the magnitude of the slaughter.

10. *the daughters of the king.* The king's sons were executed by Nebuchadrezzar, but evidently his daughters were allowed to take refuge with Gedaliah at Mizpah.

12. *the great pool.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "many waters," but in 2 Samuel 2:13 it is a pool at Gibeon alongside which a battle in the civil war takes place.

14. *And all the people whom Ishmael had taken captive from Mizpah swung round and turned back.* As captives, they were scarcely willing allies of the murderous Ishmael, so it is hardly surprising that they should go over to the other side at the first sign of a strong opposing force. Ishmael, confronted by superior numbers and compelled to flee, is in no position to retain them.

15. *with eight men.* Two of the ten are now missing. Either they have defected or, if Gedaliah's people offered some resistance, they have been killed in the course of the slaughter.

16. *and eunuchs.* This is the first mention of their presence in this group. Their probable function is as attendants to the king's daughters.

17. *on the route down to Egypt.* The literal sense is "to come to Egypt." The people who sheltered at Mizpah now conclude that it is not safe for them to remain in Judah, and so they prepare to go to Egypt, Babylonia's adversary. The second half of this sentence, which appears in the next verse, explains that because Gedaliah, appointed by the Babylonians, has been murdered (together with a contingent of Chaldean military men), they are afraid that

they may be held accountable, perhaps suspected as survivors to be accomplices of Ishmael.

CHAPTER 42

[1]And all the commanders of the troops of Johanan son
of Kareah and Jezaniah son of Hoshaiah and all the
people from the least to the greatest approached, [2]and
they said to Jeremiah the prophet, “Let our
supplication, pray, fall before you and pray for us to
the LORD your God for all this remnant, for we
remain few of many, as your own eyes see us. [3]And let
the LORD your God tell us the way in which we
should go and the thing we should do.” [4]And Jeremiah
the prophet said to them, “I have heard. I am about to
pray to the LORD your God according to your words,
and it shall be, whatever word the LORD answers you
I will tell you, I will not hold back anything from you.”
[5]And they had said to Jeremiah, “May the LORD be a
true and faithful witness against us if we do not do
according to all the word that the LORD our God will
send you concerning us. [6]Whether good or bad, we
will heed the voice of the LORD our God to Whom
we are sending you, so that it will go well with us, that
we heed the voice of the LORD our God.” [7]And it

happened at the end of ten days that the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah. [8]And he called to Johanan son of Kareah and to all the commanders of the troops who were with him and to all the people from the least to the greatest. [9]And he said to them, “Thus said the LORD God of Israel to Whom you sent me to lay your supplication before Him: [10]If you indeed dwell in this land, I will build you and will not destroy, and I will plant you and will not uproot, for I have repented of the evil that I have done to you. [11]Do not fear the king of Babylonia of whom you are afraid. Do not fear him, said the LORD, for I am with you to rescue you and to save you from his hand. [12]And I will grant you mercy and he shall be merciful to you and bring you back to your land. [13]And if you say, ‘We will not dwell in this land,’ not heeding the voice of the LORD your God, [14]saying ‘No. Rather we shall go to the land of Egypt where we shall not see war nor hear the sound of the ram’s horn nor hunger for bread, and there shall we dwell.’ [15]And now listen to the word of the LORD, remnant of Judah. Thus said the LORD of Armies, God of Israel: if you indeed set your face to go to Egypt and go to sojourn there, [16]the sword that you fear shall overtake you in the land of Egypt, and the famine about which you worry shall catch up with you in Egypt, and there shall you die. [17]And all the people

who set their face to go to Egypt to sojourn there shall die by the sword and by famine and by pestilence, and you shall have no remnant or survivor from the evil I bring upon you. [18]For thus said the LORD of Armies, God of Israel: As My anger and wrath have poured forth on the dwellers of Jerusalem, so shall My wrath pour forth upon you when you go to Egypt, and you shall become an imprecation and a desolation and a curse and a disgrace, and you shall not see this place again. [19]The LORD has spoken concerning you, remnant of Judah. Do not go to Egypt. You surely know that I have warned you today. [20]For you have misled yourselves, for you, you sent me to the LORD your God, saying, 'Pray for us to the LORD our God, and according to all that the LORD our God says, so tell us and we will do it.' [21]And I have told you today, and you did not heed the voice of the LORD your God and all of which he sent me to you. [22]And now, you surely know that by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence you shall die in the place that you desire to go to sojourn there."

CHAPTER 42 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *And let the LORD your God tell us the way in which we should go.* After the murder of Gedaliah and the contingent with him at Mizpah, which included Chaldeans, this group of Judahites is fearful that the Babylonians may hold them responsible and exact retribution from them, and they seek guidance about what to do. One suspects that they are actually determined to flee to Egypt—"the way" could even mean "the route"—and are seeking prophetic confirmation of this decision. Following biblical protocol in addressing a man of God, they refer to the deity as "the LORD your God."

4. *I am about to pray to the LORD your God.* This usage, identifying the LORD as the God of the petitioners, is unusual and may be intended to make a point: The LORD is in fact your God as well as mine, and so you had better do whatever He commands.

5. *the LORD our God.* They here assent to Jeremiah's attaching God to them.

7. *And it happened at the end of ten days.* Such a period of waiting for word from God is unusual. Perhaps Jeremiah is struggling before he delivers an oracle that he knows they don't want to hear. Perhaps he wants to keep them in suspense before delivering the difficult prophecy.

10. *If you indeed dwell in this land, I will build you and will not destroy.* God's message as Jeremiah conveys it is emphatic and unambiguous: these Judahites must now stay in their land. But unlike the prophet's previous counsel that it was futile to resist the Babylonians, this imperative is scarcely based on a sober assessment of the political situation. There is surely no objective evidence that they have no reason to fear the king of Babylonia (verse 11), or that they will now be granted a grand national restoration.

14. *we shall go to the land of Egypt.* Throughout this passage, the Hebrew uses "come," but the directional logic of English usage requires "go."

nor hear the sound of the ram's horn. One of the chief uses of the ram's horn, which emits a shrill, piercing sound, was as a call to battle.

15. *sojourn.* The Hebrew verb implies temporary residence, but even this, in Jeremiah's view, is to be strictly avoided.

17. *shall die by the sword and by famine and by pestilence.* This is the triad of means of destruction that recurs repeatedly in Jeremiah's prophecies.

18. *As My anger and wrath have poured forth on the dwellers of Jerusalem.* The entire kingdom has been devastated by the invasion, not just the capital city, but Jerusalem, its temple razed to the ground, its houses put to the torch, is the epitome and synecdoche of the general destruction.

20. *for you, you sent me.* Jeremiah stresses the second-person pronoun *ʾatem* by inserting it before the conjugated verb, which would not normally require a pronoun: it was you yourselves who took the initiative to send me to inquire of the LORD on your behalf, promising that you would strictly follow His dictates. Now, would you dare to ignore what God has emphatically told you to do? In the event, as we learn from the narrative report that immediately follows in the next chapter, they in fact reject what Jeremiah has conveyed to them as the word of the LORD.

CHAPTER 43

[1]And it happened when Jeremiah finished speaking to
the people all the words of the LORD their God which
the LORD their God had sent to them, all these words,
[2]that Azariah son of Hoshaiah and Johanan son of
Kareah and all the arrogant men said to Jeremiah,
“You speak a lie! The LORD our God did not send
you, saying, ‘You shall not go to Egypt to sojourn
there.’ [3]But Baruch son of Neriah is inciting you
against us so as to give us into the hand of the
Chaldeans to put us to death or to exile us to
Babylonia.” [4]And Johanan son of Kareah, and all the
commanders of the troops and all the people with him,
had not heeded the voice of the LORD to dwell in the
land of Judah. [5]And Johanan son of Kareah, and all
the commanders of the troops with him, took all the
remnant of Judah who had come back from all the
nations where they were dispersed to sojourn in the
land of Judah—[6]the men and the women and the
children and the king’s daughters and every living
person whom Nebuzaradan the high chamberlain had

left with Gedaliah son of Ahikam, and Jeremiah the prophet and Baruch son of Neriah. [7]And they came to the land of Egypt, as far as Tahpanes, for they had not heeded the voice of the LORD.

[8]And the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah in Tahpanes, saying, [9]"Take in your hand large stones and bury them in mortar in the brickwork that is at the entrance of the house of Pharaoh in Tahpanes before the eyes of the Judahite men. [10]And you shall say to them: Thus said the LORD of Armies, God of Israel. I am about to send and take Nebuchadrezzar My servant, king of Babylonia, and I will put his throne over these stones that I have buried, and he shall stretch out his splendor over them. [11]And he shall come and strike the land of Egypt—who for death to death and who for captivity to captivity and who for the sword to the sword. [12]And he shall set fire to the houses of the gods of Egypt, and he shall burn them and take them captive and wrap round the land of Egypt as a shepherd wraps himself in his garment, and he shall go out from there in safety. [13]And he shall smash the obelisks of the House of the Sun that is in the land of Egypt, and the houses of the gods of Egypt he shall burn in fire."

CHAPTER 43 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *all the words of the LORD their God.* This narrative report continues the procedure of the preceding textual unit in affirming that YHWH is the God of these people—the very people who have rejected God's word delivered by Jeremiah.

3. *Baruch son of Neriah is inciting you against us.* This is a surprising accusation. It may be founded merely in a paranoid suspicion that someone must have misled the prophet on whom they were counting to confirm their decision about going to Egypt. The alternative possibility is that they are loath to accuse Jeremiah directly and so make his amanuensis responsible for what he has done.

6. *and Jeremiah the prophet and Baruch son of Neriah.* These two crucial figures are left till the very end of the list of those who were taken down to Egypt. The implication would seem to be that Jeremiah and Baruch were taken against their will.

9. *the house of Pharaoh in Tahpanes.* Tahpanes, near the northern border of Egypt, was not the capital city, but there may have been some sort of royal palace there.

10. *Nebuchadrezzar My servant.* What this epithet indicates is that the Babylonian emperor is God's instrument in history, which in the present instance involves the conquest of Egypt.

he shall stretch out his splendor over them. The noun *shafrir* appears only here. Because of the verb "stretch out," some think it means "canopy" or "pavilion," but it reflects a Hebrew root that indicates beauty, and so the general term "splendor" may be the safest translation.

12. *he shall set fire.* The Masoretic Text has "I will set fire," but the Septuagint, the Syriac, and the Vulgate all show the third-person singular,

making Nebuchadrezzar the subject of the verb. It is, of course, possible that the original text simply switched from God's human agent to God.

take them captive. It was common to cart off the gods of a conquered land. Presumably, the wooden ones were burned and those with precious metals were taken away.

wrap round the land of Egypt. This slightly odd image is meant to indicate Nebuchadrezzar's total domination of the country. The comparison to the shepherd wrapping himself in his garment suggests that the Babylonian conqueror will take warmth and comfort from appropriating the entire land.

13. *obelisks.* The Hebrew *matseivot* in Canaanite and Israelite settings refers to steles, sacred piles of stones, but in the Egyptian context these would have to be obelisks, which in fact have been found at this site in archaeological excavations.

the House of the Sun that is in the land of Egypt. The qualifying clause is introduced because there is a place in Canaan that bears this same name in Hebrew, *Beyt Shemesh.* The Septuagint renders this as "Heliopolis [Sun City] which is in On." There was a cult of sun worship at On.

CHAPTER 44

[1]The word of the LORD that came to Jeremiah
concerning all the Judahites dwelling in the land of
Egypt, dwelling in Migdol and in Tahpanes and in
Noph and in the region of Pathros, saying, [2]"Thus said
the LORD of Armies, God of Israel: You have seen all
the evil that I brought upon Jerusalem and upon all the
towns of Judah, and look, they are a ruin to this day
and none dwells in them [3]because of their evil that they
did to Me, to go to burn incense to serve other gods
which neither you nor your fathers knew. [4]And I sent
to you all My servants the prophets, continually sent,
saying, 'Pray, do not do this abhorrent thing that I
hate.' [5]But they did not heed and did not bend their ear
to turn back from their evil, not to burn incense to
other gods. [6]And My wrath and My anger poured out
and burned through the towns of Judah and through
the streets of Jerusalem, and they became a ruin and a
desolation as on this day. [7]And now, thus said the
LORD God of Armies, God of Israel: Why are you
doing this great evil to yourselves to cut off from you

man and woman, infant and suckling, from the midst of Judah, so as not to leave for yourselves a remnant, [8]to vex Me with the work of your hands, to burn incense to other gods in the land of Egypt where you came to sojourn, so as to cut off for yourselves and so that you become a curse and a disgrace among all the nations of the earth? [9]Have you forgotten the evils of your fathers and the evils of the kings of Judah and the evils of their wives and your own evils and the evils of your own wives that they did in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem.? [10]They have not been contrite to this day and they have not feared, and they have not walked by My teaching and by My statutes that I set before them and before their fathers. [11]Therefore, thus said the LORD of Armies, God of Israel: I am about to set My face against you for evil to cut off all of Judah. [12]And I will take the remnant of Judah who set their face to go to the land of Egypt to sojourn there, and all shall come to an end in the land of Egypt. They shall fall by the sword and come to an end by famine. From the least to the greatest, by sword and by famine they shall die, and they shall become an imprecation and a desolation and a curse and a disgrace. [13]And I will reckon with those dwelling in the land of Egypt, as I reckoned with Jerusalem, by the sword and by famine and by pestilence. [14]And there

shall be no fugitive and no survivor for the remnant of Judah coming to sojourn there in the land of Egypt to go back to the land of Judah to which they long to go back to dwell there, for they shall not go back except as fugitives." [15]And all the men knowing that their wives were burning incense to other gods and all the women standing, a great assembly, and all the people dwelling in the land of Egypt, in Pathros, answered Jeremiah, saying, [16]"The word that you have spoken to us in the name of the LORD—we will not heed you. [17]For we will surely do every word that comes out of our mouth, to burn incense to the Queen of the Heavens and to pour out libations to her, as we have done, we and our fathers, our kings and our nobles, in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, and we ate our fill of bread, and we were good, and evil we did not see. [18]And ever since we stopped burning incense to the Queen of the Heavens and pouring out libations to her, we have lacked everything, and by the sword and by famine we have come to an end. [19]And when we burn incense to the Queen of the Heavens and pour out libations to her, is it without our husbands that we have made cakes for her, framing her image and pouring out libations to her?" [20]And Jeremiah said to all the people, including all the men and all the women and all the people who answered in

speech, saying, [21]“Why, the incense that you have burned in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, you and your fathers, your kings and your nobles and the people of the land, that is what the LORD recalls and brings to mind. [22]And the LORD shall no longer bear it because of the evil of your acts, because of the abominations that you have done, and your land has become a ruin and a desolation and a curse with no dweller as on this day [23]because you have burned incense and have offended the LORD and have not heeded the voice of the LORD, and by His teaching and His statutes and His precepts you have not gone. Therefore has this evil befallen you as on this day.” [24]And Jeremiah said to all the people and to all the women: “Listen to the word of the LORD, all Judah that is in the land of Egypt. [25]Thus said the LORD of Armies, God of Israel, saying, you and your women, who have spoken with your mouths and with your hands you have fulfilled it, saying, ‘We will surely carry out our vows to burn incense to the Queen of the Heavens and to pour out libations to her.’ Then indeed fulfill your vows, you women, and carry out your vows. [26]Therefore listen to the word of the LORD, all Judah who dwell in the land of Egypt. Look, I vow by My great name, said the LORD, that My name shall no longer be called by the mouth of any man of Judah,

saying, ‘As the LORD lives,’ in all the land of Egypt.
[27]Look, I am vigilant over them for evil and not for
good, and all the men of Judah who are in the land of
Egypt shall come to an end by the sword and by
famine until they are no more. [28]And the fugitives of
the sword shall come back from the land of Egypt to
the land of Judah as a handful of men. And all the
remnant of Judah who have come to the land of Egypt
to sojourn there shall know whose word shall be
fulfilled, Mine or theirs. [29]And this is the sign for you,
said the LORD, that I am reckoning with you in this
place, so you may know that My word concerning you
shall surely be fulfilled for evil. [30]Thus said the LORD:
I am about to give Pharaoh Hophra king of Egypt into
the hand of his enemies and into the hand of those
who seek his life as I gave Zedekiah king of Judah into
the hand of Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia, his
enemy and the one who sought his life.”

CHAPTER 44 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *concerning all the Judahites dwelling in the land of Egypt.* There was an expatriate Judahite population in Egypt before 586 B.C.E., and this wording here—with “all the Judahites” and “dwelling,” the term for permanent

settlement—suggests that Jeremiah is addressing all these people, not just the group with whom the prophet had been brought down.

Noph. This is the Egyptian city generally called Memphis.

3. *to burn incense.* The ritual act of burning incense, though part of most cults, is particularly associated with the worship of the Assyrian goddess Ishtar (known in Greek as Astarte), which was widespread among the Israelites in the last two centuries before the destruction. This identification will be made clear later in the prophecy, where Ishtar is named by her epithet "Queen of the Heavens."

6. *burned through the towns of Judah and through the streets of Jerusalem.* The Hebrew word for "wrath" suggests heat, and so the transformation into burning, which is actually what the invaders have done, is direct.

9. *the evils of the kings of Judah.* As is clear in the Book of Kings, several Judahite monarchs encouraged pagan practices, even introducing them into the temple precincts.

the evils of their wives. Again by the account of the Book of Kings, the wives, some of them foreigners, were sometimes especially active in pagan worship, and the cult of Ishtar had a strong attraction for women.

10. *contrite.* The basic meaning of the Hebrew term is "crushed," but a convincing exegetical tradition going back at least to Rashi links it with contrition, or a crushed spirit.

11. *set My face.* The idiom here indicates measure-for-measure justice to be meted out to the people who "set their face to go to the land of Egypt" (verse 12).

14. *except as fugitives.* This of course contradicts the statement at the beginning of the verse that "there shall be no fugitive and no survivor." Either an editor or perhaps Jeremiah himself seeks to qualify the total grimness of the prophecy of destruction.

16. *we will not heed you.* The people's response is unrepentant defiance.

17. *we ate our fill of bread, and we were good, and evil we did not see.* The people present an empirical theological justification for their worship of Ishtar: over the many decades that they observed her cult, they were never in want. After the religious reforms of Josiah, beginning in 622 B.C.E., the cult was suppressed, and then disaster after disaster came upon them, culminating in the destruction of the kingdom.

19. *And when we burn incense to the Queen of the Heavens . . . is it without our husbands.* Although the verb is masculine, the content of the clause indicates that the women are speaking, and a certain freedom in grammatical gender is sometimes observable in biblical Hebrew. The women are saying that they always had the support and perhaps participation of their husbands when they worshipped Ishtar.

made cakes for her. This was a prominent part of the cult. Archaeologists in fact have found numerous clay molds with the image of a naked female, presumably, Ishtar. The verb rendered as "framing her image" appears to refer to this practice, and Rashi, long before the advent of archaeology, understood it precisely in this way. The people appear to report the specific details of the cult of the Queen of the Heavens with relish.

21. *Why, the incense that you have burned . . . that is what the LORD recalls.* Jeremiah flings their own words back in their face: you take such pleasure in recalling how you have burned incense to Ishtar, but it is precisely this that God will bring to mind to punish you.

24. *and to all the women.* They are singled out for mention because of their special attachment to the cult of the Queen of the Heavens.

25. *fulfill your vows, you women.* Although the beginning of the verse refers to "you and your women," the verbs used sarcastically here are conjugated in the feminine, and so "you women" has been added in the translation to make it clear that Jeremiah is addressing the women.

26. *My name shall no longer be called by the mouth of any man of Judah.* In all likelihood, the cult of Ishtar among the Judahites was not an exclusive practice but part of syncretistic worship, so that people might well still invoke the name of YHWH in their vows even as they burned incense to the Queen

of the Heavens. God now announces that He will put an end to this hypocrisy —presumably, by destroying all the paganizers, as the verse goes on to say.

28. *And the fugitives of the sword shall come back from the land of Egypt.* This is the same contradiction of the prophecy of total destruction that is noted above in verse 14.

29. *And this is the sign for you.* If the Pharaoh who is the protector of the refugees from Judah is killed, their dream of a safe haven in Egypt will be shattered.

30. *I am about to give Pharaoh Hophra king of Egypt into the hand of his enemies.* Even though the enemies are not specified, the prime candidate would be Babylonia. Some classical sources say that Hophra (Apries) came to a violent end, but not at the hand of Nebuchadrezzar, who did not invade Egypt until 568 B.C.E., two years after Hophra's death.

CHAPTER 45

[1]The word that Jeremiah the prophet spoke to Baruch
son of Neriah as he wrote these words in a book from
the mouth of Jeremiah in the fourth year of Jehoiakim
son of Josiah king of Judah, saying, [2]“Thus said the
LORD God of Israel concerning you, Baruch: [3]You
said, ‘O woe is me, for the LORD has added sorrow to
my pain. I am weary with my groaning, and no rest
have I found.’ [4]Thus shall you say to him: Thus said the
LORD. Look, what I built I will destroy. What I
planted I will uproot—all of that land is Mine. [5]As for
you, do you seek great things for yourself? Do not
seek, for I am about to bring evil upon all flesh, said
the LORD, but I will give you your life as booty in all
the places where you go.”

CHAPTER 45 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The word that Jeremiah the prophet spoke to Baruch son of Neriah.* After the narrative of Jeremiah's probably unwilling descent into Egypt and his confrontation with his countrymen there, the text goes back to the fourth year of Jehoiakim, which would be 605 B.C.E., almost two decades earlier. This brief chapter may have been intended editorially as a kind of concluding frame for all the preceding narrative material, especially if, as is often inferred, Baruch is the author of these narratives.

as he wrote these words in a book from the mouth of Jeremiah. "From the mouth of," as before, means "from the dictation of." The book of prophecies that Baruch is writing out could not be the one burned by Zedekiah because that happened considerably later. The reasonable inference is that this is a first installment of the prophecies of Jeremiah, perhaps chapters 1–20 in the canonical collection.

3. *O woe is me.* The language here is close to poetry—specifically the poetry of lament—although the sentence does not quite scan as formal verse. The cause for the woe may be the dire content of the prophecies.

I am weary with my groaning. Approximate parallels of this language appear in Psalms 6:7 and 69:4.

4. *all of that land is Mine.* The Masoretic Text reads, abruptly, "all of that land," prefaced by an accusative particle but without a verb. The Targum Yonatan translates as "all of the Land of Israel, for it is Mine," but it is uncertain whether this is based on a Hebrew text that showed this reading or is simply an interpretive clarification.

5. *As for you, do you seek great things for yourself?* This is not a time for personal ambition (which would not have been out of place on the part of a scribe) when the entire country is about to be laid waste. Against the background of the preceding chapters, Baruch's fate, with the national hierarchy where he might have risen in ruins, will be to go with a group of exiles to Egypt and, in all likelihood, to chronicle the conflict there between the prophet and the other exiles.

I will give you your life as booty in all the places where you go. As before, this expression means: I will enable you to survive, but you can count on little more than that. "All the places where you go" probably intimates the future destiny of exile.

CHAPTER 46

[1]Which was the word of the LORD to Jeremiah
concerning the nations. [2]For Egypt, concerning the
force of Pharaoh Neco king of Egypt that was by the
River Euphrates at Carchemish, which
Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia struck down in the
fourth year of Jehoiakim king of Judah.

[3]Ready the buckler and shield
and move forward to battle.
[4]Harness the horses
and mount, O riders.
Take your station in helmets,
burnish the lances,
gird on the chain armor.
[5]Why did I see them panicked,
falling back, their warriors
crushed and fled,
they do not turn back, terror all
around?

said the LORD.
[6]The swift does not flee
nor the warrior escape.
To the north by the River Euphrates
they stumbled and fell.
[7]Who is this rising like the Nile,
like the streams his waters swell?
[8]Egypt like the Nile rises,
and like streams the waters swell.
And he said, “I will rise, will cover
the earth,
will destroy town and its
dwellers.”
[9]Rise up, O horses,
and chariots, go wild!
Let the warriors come out,
Cush and Put handling the
buckler
and the Ludim who bend the
bow.
[10]And that day is the Master’s, the
LORD of Armies,
day of vengeance to take revenge
of His foes.
And the sword shall consume and be
sated

and drink its fill of their blood.
For a sacrifice has the Master,
LORD of Armies,
in the land of the north by the
River Euphrates.
[11]Go up to Gilead and get balm,
O Virgin Daughter of Egypt.
In vain you devised many cures—
there is no healing for you.
[12]The nations heard of your infamy,
and the earth is filled with your
screaming,
for warrior stumbled against warrior,
together the two of them fell.

[13]The word that the LORD spoke to Jeremiah the prophet about the coming of Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia to strike the land of Egypt.

[14]Tell it in Egypt and make it heard
in Migdol,
and make it heard in Noph and
Tahpanes.
Say, take your station and ready
yourself,

for the sword consumes all round
you.
15 Why are your heroes swept away?
They do not stand, for the LORD
thrust them down.
16 He made many stumble, even fall.
Each man said to his fellow,
“Rise up, let us go back to our
people
and to our birth land before the
oppressive sword.”
17 There they called Pharaoh king of
Egypt
“an uproar that missed the set
time.”
18 As I live, said the King,
LORD of Armies is His name,
like Tabor among the mountains
and like Carmel by the sea he
shall come.
19 Prepare yourself gear of exile,
O dweller, Daughter of Egypt.
For Noph shall become a desolation,
shall be razed with none there to
dwell.
20 O beautiful heifer in Egypt—

a gadfly from the north comes, it comes.
[21]Her hired troops, too, in her midst
were like stall-fed calves.
They, too, turned away,
fled together, they did not stand.
For the day of disaster came upon them,
the time of their reckoning.
[22]Her voice like a snake as it goes.
For in a force they shall go
and with axes come against her
like hewers of wood.
[23]They have cut down her forest, said the LORD,
yes, it cannot be fathomed,
for they are more numerous than locusts,
and they are beyond number.
[24]The Daughter of Egypt was shamed,
given into the hand of the people of the north.

[25]The LORD of Armies has said: “I am about to make
a reckoning with Amon of No and with Pharaoh and
with Egypt and with its gods and with its kings and
with Pharaoh and with all who trust in him. [26]And I
will give them into the hand of those who seek their
life and into the hand of Nebuchadrezzar king of
Babylonia and into the hand of all his servants. But
afterward she shall dwell as in days of old.”

[27]And now, do not fear, My servant
Jacob,
nor be panicked, Israel.
For I am about to rescue you from
afar
and your seed from the land of
captivity,
and Jacob once more shall be quiet
and tranquil with none making
him tremble.
[28]As for you, do not fear, My servant
Jacob—
said the LORD—
for I am with you.
I will make an end of all the nations
where I have dispersed you,

but of you I will not make an end,
yet I will chastise you in justice,
will surely not leave you
unblamed.

CHAPTER 46 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *by the River Euphrates at Carchemish.* The battle at Carchemish would determine much of Near Eastern history for decades to come. Pharaoh Neco headed north in 609 B.C.E. in an effort to aid the Assyrians, who were waging a losing war against the Babylonians. The Judahite King Josiah tried to stand in his way and was killed in battle by Neco. In 605, the Egyptian and Babylonian armies clashed at Carchemish, and the Egyptians were routed, as this prophecy reports.

3. *Ready the buckler and shield.* All these words of military exhortation are best understood as addressed by God—"the word of the LORD"—to the Egyptian army, which is being urged to head into the battle where it will meet its destruction. "Buckler," *magen,* is generally thought to be a small round shield and "shield," *tsinah,* a larger rectangular one.

7. *Who is this rising like the Nile, / like the streams his waters swell?* The Nile does periodically overflow its banks. As the principal source of water for Egypt, it serves here as an apt image of the overweening Egyptian expeditionary force that aspires to "cover the earth."

9. *Rise up, O horses.* The verb in this instance, playing back against the rising of the Nile, probably refers to the rearing up of the horses.

Cush and Put . . . / Ludim. Cush is Nubia, at one point a conqueror of Egypt. Put is probably Lybia and the Ludim are probably the Lydians, a people of Asia Minor. All these foreigners would be mercenaries fighting in

the Egyptian ranks, and mercenaries ("hired troops") are explicitly mentioned in verse 21.

the Ludim who bend the bow. The implication is that the Lydian contingent were skilled archers. "Bend the bow" is literally "trod the bow" because one foot was needed to pull back these large bows.

10. *sacrifice.* Much to the point of the present line, the Hebrew noun can also mean "slaughter."

11. *Go up to Gilead and get balm.* The northern region of Gilead was famous for its medicinal herbs. The injunction for Egypt to go up there is obviously sarcastic, for as the next line spells out, she will not heal from the grievous wounds she has suffered at the hands of the Babylonians.

12. *for warrior stumbled against warrior.* This is an image of their panicked flight as they are routed on the battlefield.

13. *the coming of Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia to strike the land of Egypt.* While Josephus and some other ancient sources report a Babylonian invasion of Egypt in the late 580s B.C.E., the historicity of this event is now widely doubted. It seems more likely that Jeremiah, after the Egyptian defeat at Carchemish, is projecting the prospect of a devastating Babylonian assault on the Egyptian homeland.

15. *your heroes.* The Hebrew *ʾabirim* can mean "bulls," "steeds" (its sense in the Song of Deborah, Judges 5, and here in 47:3), or, because of the association of both animals with physical strength, something like "powerful warriors." This last sense seems the most likely here especially because of the reference to not standing and being pushed down in the next line. Lundbom thinks the term refers to Apis, the Egyptian bull god, which is ingenious but not persuasive.

16. *Rise up.* The imperative verb, *qumah,* is particularly appropriate here because they—not their horses or their bull god—have been knocked down on the battlefield.

17. *an uproar that missed the set time.* Although the meaning of this phrase is in dispute, it is best understood as a mocking designation of the Pharaoh who

has failed to defend his land: he makes a big noise, but he does not arrive at the right time and place to rescue his people.

18. *the King / LORD of Armies.* The monarchic epithet for God is purposefully chosen as a contrast to "Pharaoh king of Egypt" in the preceding line.

like Tabor . . . / like Carmel. Since neither of these mountains can move, the reference must not be to "he [the invader] shall come," but to "the King, / LORD of Armies," who stands lofty over all the nations like these two mountains over the surrounding landscape.

19. *gear of exile.* This would presumably be minimal changes of clothing, cooking utensils, and other wherewithal for everyday life on the move.

20. *gadfly.* The Hebrew *qerets* occurs only here, but it probably relates to a verbal stem that means to break off or pinch and is thus linked with the bite of the gadfly. That, in turn, is a metaphor for Nebuchadrezzar.

21. *Her hired troops.* See the second comment on verse 9.

like stall-fed calves. The fatted calves are led directly from the confining stall to be slaughtered, with no chance to escape.

22. *Her voice like a snake as it goes.* Crushed by defeat, the Egyptians can emit no more than the rustling sound of a snake crawling over the ground. This is an obvious antithesis to the "uproar" made by Pharaoh.

23. *They have cut down her forest.* Since Egypt has no forests, this is either an extension of the metaphor of woodcutting for destruction or possibly a reference to the wood-paneled interiors of Egypt's palaces.

it cannot be fathomed. The "it" is in effect explained in the next line: the invading force is so vast that it cannot be fathomed.

25. *with its kings.* The slightly puzzling plural might refer to a succession of Egyptian monarchs destined to suffer under the yoke of foreign domination.

with Pharaoh. This replicates the phrase at the beginning of the series, so one of them may be a scribal duplication.

26. *But afterward she shall dwell as in days of old.* This final positive note may be based on the prophet's realistic assessment of the geopolitical

situation: Babylonia will not be able to sustain its conquest of Egypt indefinitely.

28. *but of you I will not make an end, / yet I will chastise you in justice.* This is a balancing act of prediction that the prophet performs elsewhere. Unlike other nations, which are destined to be utterly destroyed, Israel will survive; nevertheless, because of its repeated offenses against God, it must first be brought to judgment and pay the bitter price of defeat and captivity ("chastisement") for what it has done.

CHAPTER 47

[1]Which was the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the
prophet concerning the Philistines before Pharaoh
struck down Gaza.
[2]Thus said the LORD:

Look, waters come up from the
north
and turn into a sweeping torrent,
and they shall sweep through the
land and its fullness,
the town and those dwelling
within it,
and men shall shout,
all the land's dwellers howl.
[3]From the sound of his stallions'
pounding hooves,
from the clatter of his chariots,
the roar of his wheels
fathers turn not to the sons

because of slackness of hands
[4]for the day that comes to ravage
all the Philistines,
to cut off from Tyre and Sidon
every survivor, helper.
For the LORD ravages the
Philistines,
the remnant of the isle of Crete.
[5]Shaved pates have come upon Gaza,
Ashkelon is demolished.
Remnant of the Anakites,
how long will you gash
yourselves?
[6]Woe, O sword of the LORD,
till when will you be unquiet?
Slip back into your sheath,
rest and be still.
[7]How can it be quiet
when the LORD has commanded
it?
To Ashkelon and to the seashore,
there He has posted it.

CHAPTER 47 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *before Pharaoh struck down Gaza.* In the prophecy that follows, it is Babylonia ("waters come up from the north") that attacks the Philistines, but there is some warrant for concluding that an Egyptian incursion into Philistine territory took place at some point in the last decade of the seventh century B.C.E.

2. *torrent.* The usual sense of the Hebrew *naḥal* is "wadi," but the poetic image is based on the fact that the dry gulches of wadis are filled during the heavy winter rains with rushing torrents.

3. *From the sound of his stallions' pounding hooves.* Here the poetry switches from the metaphor of the sweeping torrent to a literal representation of the Babylonian chariot corps galloping against the Philistines.

slackness of hands. "Hand" in biblical idiom is often a term for "strength," and so "slackness of hands" means weakness, incapacity.

4. *Tyre and Sidon.* These are principal Phoenician cities, farther up the coast from the five Philistine cities, which also sit on the shore of the Mediterranean. There is archaeological evidence of abundant commercial contact between the Philistines and the Phoenicians, and some sort of political alliance may also have been in place.

every survivor, helper. The verbal noun "helper" often appears in military contexts and could conceivably have a technical sense of "ally."

5. *Shaved pates.* Though the literal sense is "baldness," the clear reference is to shaving the head as a sign of mourning. The gashing at the end of this verse is another act of mourning. Israelites are prohibited from following both these practices, although there are grounds to suspect that they often ignored the prohibition.

Remnant of the Anakites. The received text, which seems to say "remnant of their valley," *she'erit 'imqam,* does not make much sense (and there are no valleys along the coastal area where the Philistines lived). The proposal of some scholars, citing a purported Ugaritic cognate, that *'imqam* means "their strength" has no warrant elsewhere in the biblical corpus. This translation follows the Septuagint, which reads *she'erit ha'anaqim,* the Anakites being in biblical lore an archaic race of giants (perhaps ancestors of Goliath).

6. *Woe, O sword of the LORD, / till when will you be unquiet?* Babylonia is imagined as the "sword of the LORD," carrying out His purposes in history—here, wreaking vengeance on Israel's historic enemies, the Philistines. Even though the prophet is no friend of the Philistines, as he envisages the terrible onslaught against them, he is aghast and so asks in this apostrophe how long it will continue.

7. *How can it be quiet / when the LORD has commanded it?* This is the rejoinder to the horrified "how long" of the two previous lines. It is God's will to extirpate Philistia, and so the horrific destruction must continue.

CHAPTER 48

[1]Concerning Moab, thus said the LORD of Armies,
God of Israel.

Woe to Nebo, for it is ravaged,
Kiriathaim is shamed, is captured.
The stronghold is shamed and
shattered.
[2]The Praise of Moab is no more.
In Heshbon they plotted harm
against her:
“Come, let us cut her off as a nation
Madmein, too, you shall be mute.
After you the sword shall go.”
[3]A sound of outcry from Horonaim
—
wrack and great ruin.
[4]Moab is broken,
her young make heard an outcry.
[5]For on the Ascent of Luhith

weeping upon weeping goes up.
For in the Descent of Horonaim
a distressed outcry of shattering
they hear.
[6]Flee, save your lives,
and become like Aroer in the
desert.
[7]For, as you put trust
in your works and in your
treasures,
you, too, shall be caught,
and Chemosh shall go out into exile,
his priests and his nobles together.
[8]And the ravager shall come to each
town,
no town shall escape.
And the valley shall perish,
and the plain be destroyed,
as the LORD said.
[9]Make a marker for Moab,
for she surely shall go out,
and her towns shall become a
desolation
with no dweller within them.
[10]Cursed be he who deceives when
he does the LORD's task,

and cursed be he who holds back
his sword from blood.
11 Moab was tranquil from his youth
and settled in his lees,
and was not poured from jug to jug,
nor in exile did he go.
Therefore his flavor stood in him
and his fragrance did not change.

12 Therefore, look, days are coming, said the LORD,
when I will send him men to tip him over, and they
shall pour out his jugs and shatter his flasks. 13 And
Moab shall be shamed of Chemosh as the house of
Israel was shamed of Bethel, their trust.

14 How can you say, “We are warriors
and men of valor for battle”?
15 Moab is ravaged, gone up from its
towns
and its choicest young men gone
down to the slaughter
—said the King, LORD of
Armies is His name.
16 Moab’s disaster is close to come,
and its harm is very swift.

[17]Console him, all who are round
him
and all who know his name.
Say, how is the staff of strength
broken,
the splendid rod!
[18]Go down from glory, sit in thirst,
O dweller, Daughter of Dibon.
For Moab's ravager has gone up
against you,
laid waste to your fortresses.
[19]By the wayside stand and look out,
O dweller of Aroer.
Ask him who flees and him who
escapes,
Say "What has happened?"
[20]Moab is shamed, for she is
shattered.
Wail and cry out.
Tell it in Arnon
that Moab is ravaged.

[21]And judgment has come to the plain land, to Holon and to Johzah, and to Maphaath [22]and to Dibon and to Nebo and to Beth-Diblathaim [23]and to Kiriathaim and

to Beth-Gamul and to Beth-Maon [24]and to Kerioth and
to Bozrah and to all the towns of Moab, far and near.

[25]The horn of Moab is hacked down
and his arm is broken, said the
LORD.
[26]Make him drunk, for over the
LORD he vaunted,
and Moab shall dabble in his
vomit
and he, too, shall become a
mockery.
[27]For was not Israel a mockery to
you?
Was he found among the thieves,
for as you spoke against him,
you shook your head?
[28]Leave the towns and dwell among
the rocks,
O dwellers of Moab,
and be like the dove that nests
on the brink of a pit.
[29]We have heard the pride of Moab,
very proud,

his haughtiness, headstrong, his
pride,
and his overweening heart.

30 I know, said the LORD, his rage and his lies are not
right, not right have they done. 31 Therefore over Moab
I wail, and over all Moab I cry out, for the men of Kir-
Heres I moan.

32 More than the weeping for Jazer I
weep for you,
O vine of Sibmah.
Your branches passed over the sea,
to the sea, to Jazer they reached.
On your summer fruit and on your
vintage
the ravager has fallen.
33 And joy and gladness are taken
away
from the farmland, from the land
of Moab,
and wine from the presses I made
cease,
none treads with a shout,
the shout is no shout.

[34]From Heshbon's cry to Eleaheh to Jahaz they raised
their voices, from Zoar to Horonaim, Eglath-
Shelishiah, for the waters of Nimrim have become a
desolation. [35]And I have caused to cease for Moab,
said the LORD, offering up on the high places and
burning incense to his gods. [36]Therefore My heart
moans for Moab like pipes and, for the men of Kir-
Heres like pipes it moans, for the abundance they
made—it has vanished.

[37]For every pate is shaved,
and every beard is shorn,
on all the hands are gashes
and over loins is sackcloth.

[38]On all the roofs of Moab and in her squares all is
lament, for I have broken Moab like an unwanted
vessel, said the LORD. [39]How she is shattered! O,
wail! How Moab has turned its back in shame, and
Moab has become a mockery and a fright, said the
LORD. [40]For thus said the LORD,

Look, like an eagle he soars,
and spreads his wings against
Moab.

[41]Kerioth is captured
and the strongholds are seized,
and the heart of Moab's warriors on that day
is like the heart of a woman in pangs.
[42]And Moab is destroyed as a people,
for it vaunted over the LORD.
[43]Terror and pitfall and trap
against you, O dweller of Moab,
said the LORD.
[44]Who flees from the terror
shall fall into the pit,
and who gets up from the pit
shall be caught in the trap.
For I will bring against her, against Moab,
the year of their reckoning, said the LORD.
[45]In the shadow of Heshbon they stopped,
those fleeing without strength,
for fire has come out from Heshbon
and a flame from within Sihon,
and consumed the brow of Moab
and the pate of the raucous ones.

[46]Woe to you, O Moab,
Chemosh's people has perished.
For your sons are taken captive
and your daughters are in captive
state.
[47]But I will restore the fortunes of
Moab
in the days after, said the LORD.
Thus far the judgment of Moab.

CHAPTER 48 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Nebo . . . / Kiriathaim.* Nebo was the mountain in trans-Jordan on which, according to Deuteronomy, Moses delivered his farewell address. Kiriathiam means "twin city." In the list of Moabite towns that follows, some of the sites have been identified by archaeologists; others remain unknown.

2. *Madmein.* The conventional English transliteration, Madmen, unfortunately looks like a designation of the insane.

7. *Chemosh shall go out into exile.* Chemosh is the principal god of Moab. In conquest, local idols were often borne off by the conquerors, although this clause probably has a secondary meaning, suggesting that the deity is exiled with his worshippers.

9. *Make a marker for Moab.* The Hebrew noun here, *tsits,* means either "tassel," "diadem," or "blossom." Attempts to make the sense of "diadem" work here are strained, as is the claim that the term means "wing." This translation follows the Septuagint, which reads *tsiyun,* "marker."

10. *the LORD's task.* As verse 2 made clear, the LORD's task is the ruthless implementation of the destruction of Moab.

12. *I will send him men to tip him over.* These would be the invading Babylonians, about to devastate and exile Moab after its long period of relative tranquillity, "settled in his lees" (verse 11). The breaking of the (clay) vessels both continues the metaphor of the wine in jugs and evokes the actual destruction of Moab, when its towns and possessions are smashed.

13. *as the house of Israel was shamed of Bethel.* The prophet, hewing to the view of the Deuteronomistic History, conceives the northern kingdom's sanctuary at Bethel, with its bull-shaped icons of YHWH, as a place of idolatry and hence a cultic equivalent of pagan Moab.

15. *Moab is ravaged, gone up from its towns.* There is no good textual warrant for emending the passive verb *shudad* to read *shoded,* "ravager." The land has been ravaged, and its people "go up," which has the sense of "withdraw," from the towns where they lived. The going up has a pointed antithesis in the second verset, when the young men are said to have "gone down to the slaughter."

17. *all who know his name.* This idiom suggests an intimate relationship and hence is a parallel term to "all who are round him."

18. *sit in thirst.* The Moabite towns, like the one mentioned here, Dibon, were surrounded by desert—hence the sitting in thirst as the fate of the exiles.

25. *The horn of Moab.* As almost everywhere in biblical poetry, "horn" is an epithet for "strength," an idiom deriving from the goring power of a bull or ram. "Arm" in the second verset is equally a term for strength, though one that comes from human anatomy.

26. *dabble in his vomit.* The Hebrew verb usually means "to clap" and so here probably means to "dabble" or "splash about."

he, too. It should be noted that Moab is referred to sometimes as a masculine agent, because the noun is masculine, and sometimes in the feminine, because lands are imagined as women. Such gender switching is fairly common in biblical poetry.

27. *For was not Israel a mockery to you?* Here, "Israel" probably means the northern kingdom. Moab mocked it when the Assyrians destroyed it, but now the same fate has overtaken Moab.

Was he found among the thieves. Moab treated Israel as though it were a criminal who deserved what had befallen it.

for as you spoke against him. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "for as your words against him." Either *devareykha,* "your words," should be emended to *dabrekha,* "your speaking," or it may simply have the same sense as *dabrekha*.

you shook your head. This is a gesture of mockery.

29. *his haughtiness, headstrong, his pride.* The Hebrew makes the point emphatic through strong alliteration: *govho ugeʾono wegaʾawato.* This translation reproduces only two-thirds of the alliteration. A more literal rendering is: his haughtiness and his arrogance and his pride.

30. *his lies are not right, not right have they done.* The Hebrew syntax is obscure and the meaning far from certain.

32. *Your branches passed over the sea.* Given that Moab is in the trans-Jordanian region, the sea would be the Dead Sea.

33. *none treads with a shout, / the shout is not a shout.* The shout in question, *heydad,* is the rhythmic shout or perhaps chant that the grape-treaders call out as they trample the grapes. This would be a joyous shout, but here there is no vintage, and either no one shouts (first verset), or there is no shout of joy (second verset).

36. *like pipes.* Most translations represent this as "flutes," but the term refers to a shepherd's simple wooden pipes, which emit a rustic, piercing sound.

for the abundance they made—it has vanished. The Hebrew text here looks defective, so the translation is merely a guess.

37. *For every pate is shaved, / and every beard is shorn, / on all the hands are gashes, / and over loins is sackcloth.* Every one of these items is a sign of mourning.

40. *like an eagle he soars.* The “he” is Nebuchadrezzar, whose armies are about to lay waste to Moab and the other trans-Jordanian kingdoms and then to Judah.

41. *the strongholds.* It is possible that the Hebrew *hametsudot* is a place-name.

43. *Terror and pitfall and trap.* This whole line of poetry, together with the next two, constitutes a direct citation of Isaiah 24:17–18. The Hebrew exhibits rich alliterative wordplay only faintly mirrored in the single alliteration of this translation (paḥat wafaḥat wafaḥ).

45. *from within Sihon.* This appears to be what the Hebrew text says. But it is possible that the preposition *mibeyn* simply reflects a scribal reversal of consonants and that the original word was *mibeney,* “from the sons of.”

46. *Chemosh’s people.* Chemosh being the tutelary god of Moab, “Chemosh’s people” is a poetic epithet—situated in the second verset, as such epithets almost invariably are—for the Moabites.

47. *But I will restore the fortunes of Moab.* It may seem a bit odd that Jeremiah would stipulate restoration for this traditional enemy of his people. Some scholars say that such stipulation at the end of a prophecy of destruction is more or less formulaic, but Jeremiah may have in mind a geopolitical consideration: if the Babylonian conquest of Judah is eventually to be reversed and the kingdom of Judah reestablished, such restoration would also be extended to Judah’s neighbors to the immediate east.

CHAPTER 49

[1]Concerning the Ammonites, thus said the LORD:

Does Israel have no sons,
    does he have no heir?
Why has Milcom dispossessed Gad,
    and his people has dwelled in
        Gad's towns?
[2]Therefore days are coming, said the
    LORD,
    when I will make Rabbah of the
        Ammonites hear
        the trumpet blast of war,
and she shall become a desolate
    heap,
    and her villages shall be burned in
        fire,
and Israel shall dispossess those who
    dispossessed her
    —said the LORD.

[3]Wail, O Heshbon, for Ai has been
ravaged,
scream, O daughters of Rabbah,
gird sackcloth and lament,
and run about among the sheep
pens,
for Milcom shall go into exile,
his priests and his nobles together.
[4]Why should you boast of the
valleys?
—Your valley oozes sickly,
wayward daughter
who trusts in her treasures:
“Who can come against me?”
[5]I am about to bring upon you terror
—said the Master, LORD of
Armies—
from all sides round you,
and you shall be dispossessed, each
before him,
with none taking in the wanderer.
[6]And afterward I will restore the
fortunes of the Ammonites, said
the LORD.
[7]Concerning Edom. Thus said the
LORD of Armies:

Is there no longer wisdom in
Teman?
Counsel is lost to the
discerning,
their wisdom is brought
down.
[8]Flee, turn round, sit low,
O dwellers of Dedan!
For Esau's disaster have I brought
upon him,
the time when I reckon with him.
[9]If grape harvesters came to you,
would they not leave gleanings?
If thieves in the night,
they would despoil just what they
need.
[10]For I have stripped Esau,
have laid bare his hidden places,
and he cannot be concealed,
his seed and brothers are ravaged
and his neighbors—he is no
more.
[11]Leave your orphans with me, I will
sustain them,
and your widows, rely on me!

[12]For thus said the LORD, “Look, those who are not
wont to drink the cup will surely drink, and as for you,
you shall not go scot free, you shall not go scot-free,
for you surely shall drink. [13]For by Myself do I vow,
said the LORD, that a desolation, a disgrace, a ruin,
and a curse shall be Bosra, and all its towns shall be
everlasting ruins.”

[14]A report I have heard from the
LORD,
and an envoy among the nations is
sent:
Gather and come against her
and rise up for battle.
[15]For, look, I have made you least
among the nations,
spurned by humankind
[16]The horror you imposed deceived
you,
the arrogance of your heart.
Dweller in crevices of the rock,
who seizes the height of the hill,
though you raise high your nest like
the eagle,

from there I will bring you down,
said the LORD.

17 And Edom shall become a desolation. All who pass
by her shall be shocked and hiss at her blows. 18 Like
the overturning of Sodom and Gomorrah and its
neighbors, said the LORD, no man shall dwell there
and no human being sojourn within her.

19 Look, as a lion comes up
from the Jordan's thicket to a
secure pasture,
so in a flash I will rush him off from
her,
and who is the young man I could
appoint over her,
for who is like Me, who can fix a
time for Me,
who the shepherd that can stand
against Me?
20 Therefore hear the counsel of the
LORD
that He conceived against Edom
and the plans that He devised
against the dwellers of Teman—

they shall surely drag them off, the
young of the flock,
they shall surely desolate their
pastures.
[21]From the sound of their falling the
earth shook
the sound of a scream at the Reed
Sea was heard.

[22]Look, as the eagle goes up and soars and spreads its wings over Bosra, the heart of the warriors of Edom on that day shall be like the heart of a woman in travail.

[23]Concerning Damascus.
Be shamed, Hamath and Arpad,
for an evil report they have
heard.
They quailed in a sea of unease,
they cannot be quiet.
[24]Damascus has gone slack,
turned back to flee,
and trembling has seized her,
distress and pangs gripped her like
a woman in labor.

[25]“How is the city of praise forsaken,
the town of my joy!”

[26]Therefore shall her young men fall in her streets and
all the men of war shall be silent on that day, said the
LORD of Armies.

[27]And I will light a fire in the wall of
Damascus,
and it shall consume the citadels
of Ben-Hadad.

[28]Concerning Kedar and the kingdom of Hazor that
Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia struck down, thus
said the LORD:

Arise, go up to Kedar,
and ravage the Easterners.
[29]Their tents and their flocks shall be
taken,
their curtains and all their gear.
And their camels they shall bear off
for themselves,
and they shall call them: Terror
All Round.

[30]Flee, wander far, sit low,
O dwellers of Hazor, said the
LORD.
For Nebuchadrezzar king of
Babylonia has conceived counsel
against you,
and devised plans against you.
[31]Arise, go up against a tranquil
nation
dwelling safely, said the LORD.
No double doors nor bolt he has,
Alone do they dwell.
[32]And their camels shall become
spoil,
and their crowd of cattle become
booty.
And I will scatter them to every
wind,
the men of cropped hair,
and from all sides I will bring
their disaster
—said the LORD.
[33]And Hazor shall become a jackals'
den,
an everlasting desolation.
No man shall dwell there,

and no human being sojourn
within her.

34 Which was the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the
prophet at the beginning of the kingship of Zedekiah
king of Judah, saying,

35 "Thus said the LORD of Armies: I am about to
break the bow of Elam, the prime of their valor. 36 And
I will bring against Elam four winds from the four
corners of the heavens and I will scatter them to all
these winds, and there shall be no nation where the
dispersed of Elam will not go.

37 And I will shatter Elam before their
enemies
and before those who seek their
life,
and I will bring harm upon them,
My smoldering wrath, said the
LORD.
And I will send the sword after them
until I make an end of them.
38 And I will set My throne in Elam

and destroy from there king and
nobles, said the LORD.
[39]And it will happen in the days after
that I will restore the fortunes of
Elam."

CHAPTER 49 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Does Israel have no sons, / does he have no heir?* The line is clearly framed on the legal assumption of the patriarchal society that it is the sons who inherit from the father. But it also plays on the other meaning of the verb *yarash,* which is "to take hold of," as in conquest.

Milcom. He is the patron god of Ammon. The Masoretic Text reads *malkam,* "their king," but three ancient versions show "Milcom," and most modern scholars concur that this is the correct reading.

2. *Rabbah of the Ammonites.* This capital city stood on the site of present-day Amman, and all of the foreign nations mentioned in this chapter are trans-Jordanian kingdoms, with the exception of Elam, which is in Persia.

her villages. Though the literal sense of the Hebrew is "her daughters," this is a term regularly used for the small outlying towns or hamlets in the vicinity of a city, and the city itself is sometimes given the epithet of "mother."

3. *daughters of Rabbah.* In this instance, "daughters" must refer to the young women of the city, who take up the role of keening women, wailing and lamenting.

for Milcom shall go into exile. As in verse 1, the Masoretic Text has *malkam,* "their king."

4. *Your valley oozes sickly.* The claim of some scholars that *ʿemeq,* "valley," either here or in the preceding verset, means "strength," is far-fetched. The

Ammonites took pride in their fertile valleys (first verset). Now, however, the valley "flows" or "oozes," *zav.* While this verb is the one that is used in the recurrent phrase "a land flowing with milk and honey," it is also used for suppurations of the body, and that is the more likely sense here, because what the context suggests is a contrast between the valley about which the Ammonites once boasted and its present woeful state.

5. *the wanderer.* Here and below, this term is used as a loose synonym for an "exile" or "fugitive."

6. *I will restore the fortunes of the Ammonites.* See the comment on 48:47.

7. *Teman.* This place-name also means "south." A tradition going back to Late Antiquity locates it near Petra in present-day Jordan, but the precise identification remains uncertain.

8. *sit low.* The odd phrasing of the Hebrew is, literally, "deepen sitting." The likely reference is sitting or living (the verb means both) in a lowly, humble condition.

Esau's disaster. Esau is the purported founding father of the people of Edom.

9. *would they not leave gleanings? / . . . they would despoil just what they need.* In the normal order of things, grape harvesters leave some small grapes, and even thieves (the second verset is a kind of *a fortiori*) leave behind what they cannot use. Edom's condition, on the other hand, will be grimmer, for the ravaging invader will take everything. In point of historical fact, Edom allied itself with the Babylonian invaders (see Psalm 137), and only two decades later would it become the target of a Babylonian assault.

11. *I will sustain them.* Literally, "I will make them live."

12. *those who are not wont to drink the cup.* The cup in question is the cup of poison or destruction, so the reference is to a people that had been accustomed to live in security.

14. *an envoy among the nations is sent.* The most likely identity of the envoy is the prophet himself, here bringing this message of doom to the sundry

nations east of Judah.

15. *I have made you least among the nations.* "You" is Edom.

16. *The horror you imposed deceived you.* The Hebrew simply says "your horror deceived you." Though other interpretations have been proposed, this translation assumes that the reference is to the fear that a once powerful Edom inspired in its neighbors and hence "you imposed" has been added by way of clarification.

Dweller in crevices of the rock, / who seizes the height of the hill. The Edomites were prone to take strategic advantage of the rocky mountainous terrain around their towns. These elevated military positions, however, will not avail against the devastating force of the invaders: "though you raise high your nest like the eagle, / from there I will bring you down."

18. *no man shall dwell there and no human being sojourn within her.* Jeremiah's prophecies of doom make abundant use of stereotypical phrases such as this one.

19. *I will rush him off from her.* The received text here is puzzling because what is envisaged is someone attacking Edom. It is possible that the "him" refers to the fleeing inhabitant of Edom, but it may be more likely that the initial *mem* of the preposition here is a scribal error and that one should read *ʾaleyha,* "against her."

who is the young man I could appoint over her. This somewhat obscure formulation, in light of what is said in the next line, may mean: what able-bodied man could I appoint to take charge of the conquest of Edom when I Myself will do it?

the shepherd. As repeatedly elsewhere, this is an epithet for the king.

23. *Concerning Damascus.* The prophecies against the nations now move northward to Syria and its capital, Damascus.

a sea of unease. The Masoretic Text shows a syntactically problematic reading: *bayam deʾagah,* "in the sea unease." This translation revocalizes the first word as *beyam,* yielding a construct state between the two nouns, "a sea of unease."

25. *How is the city of praise forsaken, / the town of my joy!* This is best construed as the quotation of a lament (the initial "how is" is the formula for beginning a lament) spoken by an inhabitant of Damascus. It is such a person who would call it "the city of praise," "the town of my joy." It should be noted that the verb "forsaken" in the Hebrew is preceded by *lo*', which usually means "no" or "not" but here functions as a marker of emphasis, as it does in rhetorical questions (is it not . . .?).

27. *Ben-Hadad.* This is a hereditary name for the kings of Syria.

28. *Kedar.* This is an umbrella term for nomadic tribes to the southeast of ancient Israel, perhaps extending as far as the Arabian peninsula. The nomadic character of this population is signaled in the next verse in the reference to "tents," "flocks," and "curtains" (that is, tent curtains).

29. *And their camels they shall bear off for themselves.* This verset and the next exhibit the fluidity of pronominal reference that often characterizes biblical Hebrew. The antecedent of the initial "their" has to be the peoples of Kedar, whereas "they shall bear off for themselves" must refer to the Babylonian troops who seize the camels of Kedar as booty.

31. *Arise, go up against a tranquil nation.* The preceding imperative to flee was addressed to the inhabitants of Hazor. The present command, however, must be to the Babylonian forces, urging them to attack this people that had before been secure and had not felt the necessity to protect itself with bolted doors in its city walls.

35. *I am about to break the bow of Elam.* Some ancient sources indicate that the Elamites were renowned archers.

38. *I will set My throne in Elam.* The formulation is unusual. God will depose the king and nobles of Elam (second verset) and reign there instead. The theological idea behind this line is that God is the ruler of all nations, determining their fate, so that if He decides to destroy faraway Elam, He Himself will be king there, as He is king of all the earth.

39. *And it will happen in the days after / that I will restore the fortunes of Elam.* As with the other prophecies concerning the sundry nations, the

prediction of doom concludes with this stereotypical pronouncement about a future restoration. History is a continual cycle of conquests and devastations, but in the course of events, most nations are not obliterated, only ravaged and then eventually restored.

CHAPTER 50

[1]The word that the LORD spoke concerning
Babylonia, concerning the land of the Chaldeans,
through Jeremiah the prophet.

[2]Tell among the nations and make it
heard,
and raise a banner, make it heard,
do not conceal it.
Say: Babylonia is captured, Bel is
shamed, Merodach shattered.
Her idols are shamed, her foul
things shattered.
[3]For a nation from the north has
gone up against her,
and it shall make her land a
desolation,
and there shall be no dweller in it,
from man to beast, they shall
wander, go off.

[4]In those days and in that time, said
the LORD,
the Israelites and the Judahites
shall come together,
weeping as they walk shall they go,
and the LORD their God they
shall seek.
[5]Zion shall they ask,
their faces turned this way.
“Come!” and they shall join the
LORD
in an everlasting covenant never
forgotten.
[6]Lost sheep my people were.
Their shepherds led them astray.
To the mountains they led them
astray,
quick to the hills they went,
they forgot their resting place.
[7]All who found them devoured them,
and their foes said, “We bear no
guilt
as they offended the LORD,
the righteous pasture and their
father’s hope, the LORD.”
[8]Wander from the midst of Babylon

and from the land of the
Chaldeans.
They shall go out and become like
he-goats
before the flock.
9For I am about to rouse and bring
up against Babylonia
an assembly of great nations from
the land of the north,
and they shall array against her, from
there she shall be captured.
His arrows like those of a death-dealing warrior,
he does not turn back empty.
10And the Chaldeans shall become spoil,
all their despoilers shall be sated,
said the LORD.
11For you rejoiced, for you exulted,
O plunderers of My estate.
For you stomped like a heifer threshing,
and you neighed like stallions.
12Your mother is greatly shamed,
she who bore you is disgraced.
Look, the last among nations—
wilderness, parched land, and desert.
13Because of the LORD's fury she shall not be
settled,

and all of her shall be a desolation.
All who pass by Babylonia shall be shocked
and hiss at all her blows.
[14]Array against Babylonia all round,
all who bend the bow.
Shoot at her, spare no arrow,
for she has offended against the LORD.
[15]Shout against her all around.
She gave up, her bastions have fallen,
her walls have been destroyed.
For the LORD's vengeance it is, take vengeance of her,
as she did to you, do to her.
[16]Cut off the sower from Babylonia
and the sickle wielder in harvesttime.
From the oppressive sword
each man shall turn to his people
and each man shall flee to his land.
[17]Israel is a scattered flock—
lions have harried him.

First the king of Assyria devoured him and then the last one, Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia, crunched his bones. [18]Therefore, thus said the LORD of Armies, God of Israel: I am about to reckon with the king of Babylonia and with his land as I reckoned with the king of Assyria.

[19]And I will bring back Israel to his
pasture,
and he shall graze on Carmel and
in Bashan,
and on Mount Ephraim and in
Gilead he shall be sated.
[20]In those days and in that time, said
the LORD,
Israel's crime shall be sought and
it shall be gone,
and Judah's offenses—and they
shall not be found.
For I will forgive those I let remain.

[21]Against the land of Merathaim,
go up against her.
And against the dwellers at Pekod,
ruin and utterly destroy them

said the LORD,
and do as all I have charged you.
22 Hark! War is in the land
and a great shattering.
23 How hacked and broken
is the hammer of all the earth.
How become a desolation
Babylonia among the nations.
24 I laid a snare for you and you were
captured,
O Babylonia, and you did not
know.
You were found and also caught,
for you provoked the LORD.
25 The LORD opened his armory
and brought out the weapons of
His wrath,
for the LORD of Armies has a task
in the land of the Chaldeans.
26 Come against her from all sides,
open her granaries.
Pile her up like heaps and utterly
destroy her.
Let her have no remnant.
27 Put all her bulls to the sword,
let her go down to the slaughter.

Woe to them, for their day has
come,
the time of their reckoning.
[28]Hark! The fugitives flee
from the land of Babylonia
to tell in Zion
the vengeance of the LORD our
God,
the vengeance for his people.
[29]Summon archers against Babylonia
all who bend the bow.
Camp against her all around,
let her have no fugitives.
Pay her back for her acts,
as all that she did, do to her,
for she was arrogant toward the
LORD
toward Israel's Holy One.

[30]Therefore shall her young men fall in her squares,
and all her men of war shall be silent on that day, said
the LORD.

[31]Here I am against you. Arrogance,

said the Master, LORD of
Armies.
For your day has come,
the time when I reckon with you.
[32]And Arrogance shall stumble and
fall,
with none to raise him up,
and I will light a fire in his towns
and it shall consume all round
him.

[33]Thus said the LORD of Armies:

The Israelites were oppressed
and the Judahites, together,
and all their captors held on to them,
refused to set them free.
[34]Their redeemer is strong,
the LORD of Armies is His
name.
He shall surely take up their cause
so as to bring quiet to the land
and make the dwellers of
Babylonia quake.

[35]A sword against the Chaldeans,
said the LORD,
and against Babylonia's dwellers
and against her nobles and her
sages.
[36]A sword against the soothsayers,
exposed as fools.
A sword against her warriors, that
they be shattered.
[37]A sword against her horses and her
chariots.
A sword against the mixed race in
her midst,
that they turn into women.
A sword against her treasures,
that they be looted.
[38]A drought against her waters, that
they dry up,
for she is a land of idols,
and through the gods they fear,
they madden.
[39]Therefore wildcats and hyenas shall
dwell there,
and ostriches shall dwell within
her,
and she shall be uninhabited forever,

and shall not be settled for all
time.
40 Like God's overturning of Sodom
and Gomorrah and its neighbors,
said the LORD.
No man shall dwell there
and no human sojourn in her.
41 Look, a people is coming from the
north,
a great nation,
and many kings shall be roused
from the far corners of the earth.
42 Bow and lance they wield,
they are cruel and show no mercy.
Their voice roars like the sea,
and on horses they do ride,
arrayed as one man for battle—
against you, Daughter of
Babylonia.
43 Babylonia's king heard the report
of them,
and his hands went slack.
A pang seized him,
travail like a woman in labor.
44 Look, as a lion comes up

from the Jordan's thicket to a
secure pasture,
so in a flash I will rush him off from
her,
and who is the young man I could
appoint over her,
for who is like Me, who can fix
a time for Me?
45 Therefore hear the counsel of the
LORD
that He conceived against
Babylonia
and the plans that He devised against
the land of the Chaldeans—
they shall surely drag them off, the
young men of the flock,
they shall surely desolate their
pastures.
46 And from the sound of "Babylonia
is captured" the earth shook,
and a scream was heard in the
nations.

CHAPTER 50 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Bel . . . Merodach.* There are two names for the patron deity of Babylonia. The latter also appears as "Marduk."

her foul things. As elsewhere in biblical usage, *gilulim* is a deliberately insulting epithet for "idols" that invokes *gelalim,* "turds."

3. *a nation from the north.* Babylonia's traditional enemies—most recently, the Assyrian empire, which it conquered—came from the north, so this is neither a prediction nor a late reflection of Persia's successful assault on Babylonia half a century after Jeremiah.

4. *the Israelites and the Judahites shall come together.* This is another moment when Jeremiah cherishes the idea of a restored Israel reunited with a restored Judah, though by his own time, a century and a half after the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians, scant trace of it remained.

weeping as they walk. This is a very different picture of the return to Zion from the one in the prophecies of Second Isaiah, where the returning exiles are jubilant and triumphant. Here, they weep because they have been shattered by the experience of exile, and they are even uncertain about how to get back to Zion, asking for directions (verse 5).

5. *"Come!" and they shall join the* LORD. The Syriac reads somewhat more smoothly, "Come, and let us join the Lord."

6. *To the mountains they led them astray, / quick to the hills they went.* The probable reference is to sites in the mountains and hills where they worshipped nature gods, led by false leaders ("shepherds").

their resting place. The Hebrew noun is a term for the place where animals bed down and so continues the metaphor of the people as lost sheep.

7. *All who found them devoured them.* Sheep wandering over the hills with no proper shepherd would be vulnerable to predators.

8. *Wander from the midst of Babylon.* The prophet exhorts the inhabitants of Babylonia to flee before the arrival of the murderous invaders. The Hebrew *bavel* can refer either to the country, Babylonia, or to its principal city, Babylon, and the latter sense is perhaps more likely here.

9. *a death-dealing warrior.* The Hebrew *mashkil,* unusual in this conjugation, literally means "causing bereavement." Some Hebrew manuscripts and three ancient versions read *maskil,* "cunning."

12. *the last among nations.* The phrase *ʾaḥarit goyim* plays antithetically on the more common collocation, *reʾshit goyim,* "first among nations." Babylonia's standing has been entirely reversed.

15. *She gave up.* The literal sense is "she gave her hand," but since "hand" often means "power," giving up is the likely meaning.

16. *each man shall turn to his people.* The evident assumption is that there was a multiethnic population in Babylonia, whether through immigration or the attachment of mercenaries to the army.

21. *the land of Merathaim / . . . the dwellers at Pekod.* Although these are actual regions of Babylonia, the prophet is also clearly playing on the seeming echoes in the names of Hebrew words: Merathaim could suggest to the Hebrew ear either "rebellion" or "bitterness" and Pekod, "reckoning."

23. *the hammer of all the earth.* In all likelihood this is an epithet for the mighty Babylonian emperor. Jeremiah would have been thinking of Nebuchadrezzar.

25. *The LORD opened his armory*. At several points in biblical poetry, a virtually mythic image occurs of YHWH as a warrior-god with a storehouse of weapons in the sky saved for a cosmic battle.

for the LORD of Armies has a task / in the land of the Chaldeans. This is a striking instance in which instead of the usual semantic parallelism in the second half of the line of poetry, a surprise is sprung. The word "task" in itself might seem innocuous, but when it is followed by "in the land of the Chaldeans," and after the mention of weapons of wrath, the task turns out to be a grim mission of destruction throughout Babylonia.

28. *to tell in Zion / the vengeance of the LORD.* This is a piquant fantasy of revenge. Not only do the inhabitants of Babylonia flee as their kingdom falls, but they flee to Zion, where they can bear witness before the Judahites of the

full extent of vengeance God has exacted from those who destroyed His temple.

31. *Here I am against you. Arrogance.* The poem now moves into a quasi-allegorical mode. Babylonia, or perhaps its king, is represented as the very personification of arrogance.

34. *Their redeemer is strong.* Despite the salvific resonance of the English noun "redeemer," *goʾel* is less a theological term than a legal term. The *goʾel* is the kinsman who sets right a wrong that has been done to one of his close relatives. Its very use implies a kind of kinship between God and Israel.

35. *A sword against the Chaldeans.* In a rhetorical move relatively rare in biblical poetry, this prophecy builds on an insistent anaphora, virtually every line beginning with "A sword against . . ." The effect is to powerfully convey a sense of the inexorable, comprehensive destruction that is about to sweep over Babylonia.

38. *A drought against her waters.* The Hebrew for "drought" here is *ḥorev,* which, as many commentators have observed, puns on *ḥerev,* "sword." A sword, of course, would be an odd weapon to use against water, hence the punning substitution of "drought."

and through the gods they fear, they madden. The Hebrew says merely "the terrors," though the firm consensus of interpreters, medieval and modern, is that the reference is to their deities—hence "gods" in the translation. (One epithet for God in Genesis is "Fear of Isaac"). The maddening may be their behavior in ecstatic pagan rites, as some medieval commentators have proposed, or it could mean that they become wildly distraught in the crisis of destruction because their gods can in no way help them.

39. *wildcats and hyenas.* All that is certain about the identity of these two groups of beasts is that they are indigenous to wasteland terrain.

41. *from the far corners of the earth.* In the geographical perspective of the ancient Hebrews—which encompasses India but nothing as distant as the Far East—the lands to the north of the Mesopotamian valley qualify as "the far corners of the earth."

42. *and on horses they do ride.* The detail about mounted troops adds to the general sense of terrific clamor and speed in the attacking army, and the horses may have been especially scary to an Israelite audience whose armies were thin in cavalry.

44–45. *Look, as a lion comes up.* These two verses approximately replicate 49:19–20. See the comments on those verses.

46. *the sound of "Babylonia is captured."* The two Hebrew words that immediately follow "the sound" (or "the sound of") are most plausibly understood as the words cried out when the realization of Babylonia's defeat is grasped (hence the quotation marks in the translation). This is how Lundbom understands it. All are dumbfounded, or perhaps aghast, at the fall of the powerful empire—hence all the earth shakes, the outcry is heard among all the nations.

CHAPTER 51

[1]Thus said the LORD:

I am about to rouse against
    Babylonia
    and against the dwellers of Leb-
        Kamai
        a destroying wind.
[2]And I will send strangers to
    Babylonia and they shall scatter
    her,
    and they shall devastate her land,
for they are all around against her
    on an evil day.
[3]Let not the bowman bend his bow,
    and let him not put on his armor,
and spare not her young men.
    Utterly destroy all her army.
[4]And the slain shall fall in the
    Chaldeans' land,

and the ones run through in her
streets.
[5]For Israel and Judah are not
widowed
of their God, the LORD of
Armies,
but their land was filled with guilt
before Israel's Holy One.
[6]Flee from the midst of Babylonia;
each man, save your life,
do not be wiped out through
her crime.
For it is vengeance time for the
LORD,
requital He pays back to her.
[7]A golden cup was Babylonia in the
LORD's hand
making all the earth drunk.
From her cup the nations drank,
and so the nations maddened.
[8]Of a sudden Babylonia fell and was
broken.
Wail over her.
Take balm for her hurt,
perhaps she will be healed.

[9]We sought to heal Babylonia but she
was not healed.
Leave her, and let us go each to
his land.
For her judgment has touched the
heavens,
and mounted to the sky.
[10]The LORD has brought forth our
just cause.
Come and recount in Zion
the deed of the LORD our
God.
[11]Hone the arrows,
fill the quivers!
The LORD has roused the spirit of
the kings of Media
for His design is against Babylonia
to destroy it,
for it is the vengeance of the LORD,
the vengeance for His temple.
[12]Against the walls of Babylon raise a
banner,
reinforce the watch,
set out the watchmen,
ready the ambushers.

For the LORD has devised and also
done
that which He spoke for Babylon's
dwellers.
13 You who settle by many waters,
abundant in treasures,
your end has come,
the measure for your ill-gotten
wealth.
14 The LORD of Armies has sworn
by Himself:
I will surely fill you with people
like locusts,
and they shall raise a joyous
shout over you.
15 Who makes the earth through His
power,
firmly founds the world through
His wisdom,
and through His discernment
stretches out the heavens.
16 When He sounds His voice—the
roar of waters in the heavens,
and He brings up the clouds from
the end of the earth.
Lightning for the rain He has made,

and He brings forth the wind from
His treasure stores.
[17]Every human is ignorant without
knowledge,
every goldsmith is shamed by his
idol,
for his molten image is false,
no breath is in them.
[18]They are emptiness, work of
delusion,
at the time of their reckoning they
shall perish.
[19]Not like these is Jacob's Portion,
for He fashions everything,
and Israel is the tribe of His estate—
the LORD of Armies is His
name.
[20]You were a mace for Me,
weapons of battle,
and I smashed nations with you
and laid waste kingdoms with you.
[21]And I smashed with you horse and
rider
and smashed with you chariot and
its rider.

[22]And I smashed with you man and
woman
and smashed with you elder and
lad
and smashed with you young
man and virgin.
[23]And I smashed with you shepherd
and his flock
and smashed with you farmer and
his team,
and smashed with you satraps
and prefects.
[24]And I will pay back Babylonia
and all the dwellers of Chaldea
for their evil that they did
in Zion before your eyes, said the
LORD.
[25]Here I am against you, a destroying
mountain
—said the LORD—
that destroys all the earth,
and I will stretch out My hand
against you
and roll you down from the crags
and make you a burnt-out
mountain.

[26]And they shall not take from you a
cornerstone
nor a stone for the foundations,
for you shall be an everlasting
desolation, said the LORD.
[27]Raise a banner on the earth,
sound the ram’s horn in the
nations.
Marshal nations against her,
assemble kingdoms against her,
Ararat, Minni, and Ashkenaz.
Appoint against her an officer,
bring up horses like locusts
swarming.
[28]Marshall nations against her,
Media and her satraps and all her
prefects
and all the lands of their
dominion.
[29]And the earth shall shake and
shudder,
for the LORD’s plan against
Babylonia has risen,
to turn the land of Babylonia
into a desolation with no one
dwelling.

[30]The warriors of Babylonia have
ceased fighting,
they sit in the strongholds.
Their valor is sapped, they turn into
women.
They have set fire to her
dwellings,
broken are her bolts.
[31]Runner to meet runner dashes
and herald to meet herald
to tell to the king of Babylonia
that his city is captured from end
to end.
[32]And the forces have been seized,
and the marshes they have burned
with fire,
and the men of war are
panicked.

[33]For thus said the LORD of Armies, God of Israel:

The Daughter of Babylonia is like a
threshing floor when it is trod—
in a little while her harvesttime
shall come.

[34]Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia
has devoured me, has stunned me,
set me out like an empty vessel,
swallowed me like the sea
monster.
He has filled his belly with my
delicacies,
he has dispossessed me.
[35]The outrage against me and my
flesh be upon Bablyonia
says the dweller of Zion,
and my blood be upon the dwellers
of Chaldea,
says Jerusalem.

[36]Therefore thus said the LORD:

I am about to take up your cause
and will exact vengeance for you,
and I will drain her sea
and dry up her fount.
[37]And Babylonia shall turn into heaps
of ruins,
a den of jackals,
desolation and target of hissing

with no one dwelling.
[38]Together they shall roar like lions,
growl like lion cubs.
[39]In their heat I will set out their
drink
and make them drunk so that they
be merry,
and they shall sleep an eternal sleep,
and they shall not awake, said the
LORD.
[40]I will bring them down like lambs
to the slaughter,
and like rams with he-goats.
[41]“How has Sheshak been taken and
caught,
the praise of all the earth!
How has she become a desolation,
Babylonia among the nations.
[42]The sea has gone up over
Babylonia,
in the surge of its waves she is
covered.
[43]Her towns have become a
desolation,
parched land and desert,
a land where no man dwells,

and no human passes through it.”
[44]And I will reckon with the
Daughter of Babylonia
and take what she has swallowed
from her mouth,
and nations shall no longer flow to
her,
the very wall of Babylon has
fallen.
[45]Go out from her midst, O my
people,
and each man, save your life
from the smoldering wrath of
the LORD.

[46]And lest your heart quail and you fear for the rumor heard in the land, and the rumor shall come that year and afterward in the next year a rumor, and outrage is in the land, and ruler against ruler.

[47]Therefore, look, days are coming
when I will reckon with the idols
of Babylonia,
and all her land shall be shamed,

and all her slain shall fall within
her.
[48]And they shall cry for joy over
Babylon,
the heavens and the earth and all
that is in them.
For from the north shall come
against her the ravagers, said
the LORD.
[49]Babylonia, too, shall fall
O slain of Israel,
yes, as before Babylonia did fall
the slain of all the earth.
[50]Fugitives of the sword,
go, do not stand.
Recall from afar the LORD
and let Jerusalem come to mind.
[51]We were shamed, for we heard
reproach,
disgrace had covered our face.
For strangers came
against the sacred places of the
house of the LORD.
[52]Therefore, look, days are coming,
said the LORD,
when I will reckon with her idols

and through all her land those
being slain shall groan.
[53]Though Babylonia go up to the
heavens,
and though she bolster her
stronghold on high,
from Me shall come ravagers,
said the LORD.
[54]Hark! screaming from Babylonia,
and a great shattering from the
land of the Chaldeans!
[55]For the LORD is ravaging
Babylonia,
has put an end to her great voice.
And their waves roar like mighty
waters,
the din of their sound rings out,
[56]for the ravager has come against
her, against Babylonia.
and her warriors are captured,
their bows are shattered,
for a God of requital is the
LORD,
He surely shall pay back.

[57]And I will make her nobles and her sages, her satraps and her prefects drunk, and they shall sleep an everlasting sleep and not awake, said the King, LORD of Armies is His name. [58]Thus said the LORD of Armies: the walls of broad Babylon shall surely be razed and her high gates shall be set on fire. And peoples shall strive for naught, and nations against the fire, and shall be wearied.

[59]The word with which Jeremiah the prophet charged Seriah son of Neriah son of Mahseiah when he went with Zedekiah king of Judah to Babylonia in the fourth year of his reign. And Seriah was minister of tribute. [60]And Jeremiah wrote down in a single scroll all the harm that would come upon Babylonia, all these words written concerning Babylonia. [61]And Jeremiah said to Seraiah, “When you come to Babylonia and see, you shall read aloud all these words. [62]And you shall say, ‘LORD, You Yourself spoke concerning this place to cut it off, so there should be in it no human dweller nor even a beast, for it should be an everlasting desolation.’ [63]And it shall be, when you finish reading aloud this book, you shall tie it to a stone and fling it into the Euphrates. [64]And you shall say, ‘So shall Babylonia sink and not rise because of the harm that I

am about to bring upon her.' And they shall be wearied."

Thus far the words of Jeremiah.

CHAPTER 51 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Leb-Kamai.* This ostensible name is actually a cipher for Chaldea based on the simple system of substituting the last letter of the alphabet for the first, the second-to-last letter for the second, and so forth. The same cipher is manifested in verse 41, where "Sheshak" stands in for *Bavel,* "Babylon." No one has satisfactorily explained why ciphers should be used in a text that, after all, constantly refers to Babylonia and Chaldea by their actual names.

3. *Let not the bowman . . . / let him not put on.* The Masoretic Text has a puzzling vocalization of the initial word in these clauses, *ʾel,* "to," but many Hebrew manuscripts and several ancient versions show *ʾal,* "let not." The idea is that resistance on the part of the Babylonians is futile.

and spare not her young men. This clause equally begins with *ʾal,* but the verb now is second-person plural, so the prophecy turns from the Babylonians to their attackers.

5. *For Israel and Judah are not widowed.* The Hebrew *ʾalman*—this masculine form appears only here, although the feminine *ʾalmanah,* "widow," is very common—should be construed as an adjective. That is, Israel is the bride and God the husband, as in Jeremiah's opening prophecy in chapter 1. The masculine form is dictated by the fact that either "Israel" or "Judah" can be treated as a masculine noun.

6. *Flee from the midst of Babylonia.* While some interpreters understand this imperative differently, it is probably an injunction to the exiles to flee the land of their captivity as it is about to be devastated.

each man, save your life. Though the Hebrew actually says "his life," the imperative verb requires the second person for idiomatic coherence in English.

7. *A golden cup was Babylonia.* The gold, as many commentators have noted, invokes Babylonia's fabled wealth.

making all the earth drunk. The contents of the golden cup are evidently terrifying—Babylonia has delivered a cup of the wine of destruction to the nations, driving them into a frenzy.

8. *Take balm for her hurt.* As the next verse makes clear, this is ironic.

11. *the vengeance for His temple.* This is a recurring note in Jeremiah. Although Babylonia may have served as God's instrument in punishing Judah, it bears the indelible guilt of having destroyed God's own house, and for this it will pay a severe price.

12. *the walls of Babylon.* As elsewhere, this translation distinguishes between Babylonia, the nation, and Babylon, the city. Given the reference to the city walls here, "Babylon" seems more appropriate. The Hebrew *Bavel* can mean either.

13. *many waters.* Babylon was located on the banks of the Euphrates, and also had canals and smaller streams as well as an artificial lake.

your ill-gotten wealth. The Hebrew *betsaʿ* has the literal sense of "slice" or "cut" but strongly suggests illegitimate profits.

14. *a joyous shout.* This is the cry *heydad* called out or chanted by grape-treaders. Here it is the invading armies treading on the Babylonians in a harvest of blood.

16. *the roar of waters.* One should keep in mind that in the Hebrew cosmology, there are waters above the visible "slab," *raqiʿa,* of the sky, and when it rains, as in the Flood story, they come down through the open casements of the heavens.

19. *Jacob's Portion.* This is an ad hoc epithet for God, stressing His intimate connection with Israel.

20. *You were a mace for Me.* Elsewhere in Prophetic poetry, powerful empires figure as God's "rod," but here that metaphor is intensified in the image of the smashing battle-mace.

21. *horse and rider / . . . chariot and its rider.* These phrases are a reminiscence of the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15), in which Pharaoh's horses and riders are destroyed by God.

23. *shepherd . . . / farmer . . . / satraps and prefects.* The swathe of destruction perpetrated by the Babylonian king swept all the way from ordinary peasants to high government officials.

25. *a destroying mountain.* Though the image of an inert mountain as an agent of destruction may seem a little strange, the mountain is meant to invoke the massive solidity and towering stature of the Babylonian empire.

a burnt-out mountain. This seems to imply that the "destroying mountain" was a volcano—now extinct.

26. *And they shall not take from you a cornerstone.* The rocky mountain is useless even as a quarry for building stones.

27. *Ararat, Minni, and Ashkenaz.* These are kingdoms to the far north, in Asia Minor and northwestern Iran. Ashkenaz would later be taken up as the designation for the lands where the Jews settled along the Rhine, although that of course is not its biblical meaning.

30. *they sit in the strongholds.* The clear implication is that they are afraid to go out to the battlefield.

31. *Runner to meet runner dashes / and herald to meet herald.* The dramatic effect of this structure of repetition is to convey a sense of frantic rushing to and fro by the messengers bringing news of the disaster that is engulfing Babylonia.

32. *the marshes they have burned with fire.* There were marshes along the Euphrates with bushes growing that could be set on fire by the invaders.

33. *in a little while her harvesttime shall come.* This second verset moves from a simile ("like a threshing floor," which is to say, stomped upon) to an implied but directly related metaphor: the harvesttime for Babylonia is the harvest of death and destruction.

34. *Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia has devoured me.* The poem now switches from the report of Babylonia's destruction to the cry of dismay of Zion, devastated by the Babylonians and now eager to see the unfolding devastation of their hated enemies.

sea monster. This is an allusion to the fearsome sea monster (*tanin*) of Canaanite mythology.

36. *take up your cause.* This is a frequently used idiom of legal advocacy.

I will drain her sea / and dry up her fount. There is, of course, no actual sea in Babylonia, but the reference may be to its artificial lake. "Fount" appears to be a collective image for all the many water sources of Babylonia.

37. *target of hissing.* "Target" is merely implied.

38. *growl.* The Hebrew verb *naʿar* appears only here, but the parallelism compels a sense like "growl." In later Hebrew, this would be the verb used for a donkey's braying, but lions do not bray.

39. *In their heat.* There is debate about the reference of "heat," but the probable sense is sexual or quasisexual: they are filled with imperative desire for strong drink.

and make them drunk so that they be merry. The drunken merriment proves to be illusory: the cup God offers them is lethal, as the next line of poetry spells out. What would ordinarily be a wine-induced slumber or stupor turns out to be the sleep of death.

42. *The sea has gone up over Babylonia.* In verse 36, Babylonia's literal body of water was drained. Now, in what may be a deliberate poetic counterpoint, we have a metaphorical sea, representing Babylonia's enemies, which overwhelms the country. The metaphorical character of this sea of invaders is underscored in the next verse when the whole country is turned into "parched land and desert."

44. *and take what she has swallowed from her mouth.* The clear implied image is of Babylonia as a beast of prey. "What she has swallowed" would be both the captive Judahites and the temple treasures that the Babylonians looted and brought back to their land.

45. *each man, save your life.* See the comment on verse 6.

46. *the rumor shall come that year and afterward in the next year a rumor.* The repetitive structure conveys a sense of panicked upheaval. Babylonia is convulsed; ruler strives against ruler; rumors of disaster abound.

50. *Fugitives of the sword, / go, do not stand.* This urging of the exiles to flee Babylonia as it is enveloped by bloody destruction is of a piece with the imperative in verse 6 and verse 45.

52. *those being slain shall groan.* The Hebrew appears to say "the slain shall groan," but dead men do not groan, so a reference to those in the throes of dying is inevitable.

53. *Though Babylonia go up to the heavens.* The formulation is reminiscent of the mockery of the king of Babylonia in Isaiah 14. There, too, he is said to aspire to mount to the heavens in his overweening arrogance.

55. *has put an end to her great voice.* This would be the boastful or imperious voice of the once dominant Babylonia.

their waves. The referent of this metaphor of destruction is spelled out here: "they" are "the ravagers."

57. *drunk, and they shall sleep an everlasting sleep.* Sleep, of course, is one effect of drunkenness, but here the sleep is everlasting because the chalice is a chalice of poison.

58. *nations against the fire, and shall be wearied.* The formulation is a little odd, but the context makes its meaning clear: peoples will exhaust themselves trying to save Babylonia, but the fires they try to put out will be too much for them.

59. *Seraiah son of Neriah.* The patronymic tells us that he is the brother of Jeremiah's loyal secretary Baruch.

minister of tribute. The received text reads sar *menuḥah,* which would mean "minister of rest," but the more likely reading is sar *minḥah,* the minister appointed to oversee the payment of tribute, *minḥah.*

61. *read aloud all these words.* Jeremiah has remained in Judah, and then is forced to join the group of Judahites that goes down to Egypt. He thus is obliged to send Seraiah as his spokesman to read out loud his written words that he, as prophet, would ordinarily have delivered orally himself.

62. *LORD, You Yourself spoke concerning this place.* The sentence Seraiah is enjoined to say is a kind of authentication of the written words he has read out: it is God Himself Who has pronounced this message of the destruction of Babylon.

63. *you shall tie it to a stone and fling it into the Euphrates.* This is the last in the series of symbolic-predictive acts that punctuate the Book of Jeremiah. In this case, the meaning of the act is crystal-clear.

64. *And they shall be wearied.* Many scholars think that these words—actually, a single word in the Hebrew—are an inadvertent scribal duplication of the last word of verse 58. It is also possible that the repetition is deliberate, intended to mark an envelope structure between the end of that final prophecy of destruction and the end of the collection of the prophecies of Jeremiah.

Thus far the words of Jeremiah. This is a formal indication of the conclusion of Jeremiah's book. The single chapter that follows is not ascribed to him. It is no longer "the words of Jeremiah" but instead a narrative report of the fall of Jerusalem—a dire event repeatedly predicted by Jeremiah—that replicates, with minor variations, 2 Kings 24:18–25:30.

CHAPTER 52

[1]Twenty-one years old was Zedekiah when he became
king, and his mother's name was Hamutal daughter of
Jeremiah from Libnah. [2]And he did what was evil in
the eyes of the LORD as all that Jehoiakim had done.
[3]For because of the LORD's wrath, it was against
Jerusalem and Judah, till He flung them from His
presence. And Zedekiah rebelled against the king of
Babylonia. [4]And it happened in the ninth year of his
reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth of the month,
Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia came—he and all
his forces—against Jerusalem and camped against it
and built siege-towers all around it. [5]And the city came
under siege till the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. [6]In
the fourth month on the ninth of the month the famine
was severe in the city and there was no bread for the
people of the land. [7]And the city was breached, and all
the men of war fled and went out of the city by night
through the gate between the double walls which is by
the king's garden, and the Chaldeans were upon the
city all around. And they went through the Arabah.

[8]And the Chaldean force pursued the king and
overtook him on the plain of Jericho, and all his forces
scattered from around him. [9]And they seized the king
and brought him up to the king of Babylonia at Riblah,
and he pronounced judgment against him. [10]And the
king of Babylonia slaughtered Zedekiah's sons before
his eyes, and also all the nobles of Judah he
slaughtered in Riblah. [11]And the eyes of Zedekiah he
blinded, and he bound him in bronze fetters, and the
king of Babylonia brought him to Babylonia and put
him in the house of detention. [12]And in the fifth month
on the seventh of the month, which was the nineteenth
year of King Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia,
Nebuzaradan the high chamberlain stood in attendance
before the king of Babylonia in Jerusalem. [13]And he
burned the house of the LORD and the house of the
king and all the houses of Jerusalem, and every great
house he burned in fire. [14]And all the walls of
Jerusalem all around did the Chaldean force that was
with the high chamberlain shatter. [15]And some of the
poorest of the people and the rest of the people
remaining in the city and the turncoats who had gone
over to the king of Babylonia and the rest of the
artisans Nebuzaradan the high chamberlain exiled.
[16]And of the poorest of the land Nebuzaradan left to
be vine-dressers and field workers. [17]And the bronze

pillars that were in the house of the LORD and the stands and the bronze sea that was in the house of the LORD the Chaldeans smashed and bore off their bronze to Babylonia. [18]And the pails and the scrapers and the snuffers and the ladles and the bronze vessels with which one ministered they took. [19]And the fire-pans and the sprinkling bowls and the snuffers and the pails and the lampstands and the ladles and the scrapers, whatever was of gold and whatever was of silver, the high chamberlain took. [20]The two pillars, the sea, the twelve bronze bulls that were under the stands that King Solomon had made for the house of the LORD—all these vessels were beyond measure in their bronze. [21]And the pillars were eighteen cubits high each pillar, and a thread of twelve cubits encircled it, and its thickness four fingers, hollow. [22]And there was a bronze capital on it, and the height of a single capital was five cubits, with meshwork and pomegranates on the capital all around. Everything was bronze, and like these were the second pillar and the pomegranates. [23]And there were ninety-six pomegranates to a side, a hundred all the pomegranates over the meshwork all around. [24]And the high chamberlain took Seraiah the head priest and Zephaniah the assistant priest and the three guards of the threshold. [25]And from the city he took one eunuch

who was the official over the men of war and seven men who attended in the king's presence, who were in the city, and the scribe of the army commander who mustered the people of the land who were in the city.
[26]And Nebuzaradan the high chamberlain took them to the king of Babylonia at Riblah. [27]And the king of Babylonia struck them down and put them to death in Riblah in the land of Hammath. And he exiled Judah from its land. [28]This was the people that Nebuchadrezzar exiled in the seventh year—three thousand twenty-three Judahites. [29]In the eighteenth year of Nebuchadrezzar—from Jerusalem, eight hundred thirty-two persons. [30]In the twenty-third year of Nebuchadrezzar, Nebuzaradan the high chamberlain exiled seven hundred forty-five Judahites; all the persons were four thousand six hundred. [31]And it happened in the twenty-seventh year of the exile of Jehoiakim king of Judah in the twelfth month on the twenty-seventh of the month, that Evil-Merodach in the year he became king lifted up the head of Jehoiakim king of Judah and brought him out from the prison house. [32]And he spoke kindly to him and gave him a throne above the thrones of the kings who were with him in Babylonia. [33]And he changed his prison garments, and Jehoiakim ate bread perpetually before him all the days of his life. [34]And his provision was a

perpetual provision given him by the king of Babylonia day after day till his dying day, all the days of his life.

CHAPTER 52 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Twenty-one years old was Zedekiah.* The conclusion of the Book of Jeremiah, as noted above, largely replicates the conclusion of the Book of Kings, beginning with 2 Kings 24:18. The obvious rationale is that the principal burden of Jeremiah's prophecies has been the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Judahites, which is now presented as a historical report. Some of this material also appears in 39:1–10.

3. *And Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylonia.* As usual, the writer provides no political explanation—in this case, for the fact that Zedekiah, having been installed by Nebuchadrezzar in 597 B.C.E. as vassal king, now decides to rebel. We have seen earlier in the book that there were sharp divisions within the kingdom of Judah between a pro-Egyptian faction and one advocating accommodation with Babylonia. Zedekiah at this moment, counting on Egyptian support, joined an alliance of trans-Jordanian kingdoms plotting to overthrow Babylonian rule in the west. Egypt did not provide support, and the rebellion failed to materialize. The consequence was Nebuchadrezzar's assault on Jerusalem and the destruction of the kingdom of Judah in 586 B.C.E.

6. *bread.* As elsewhere, this word is a synecdoche for food in general.

9. *he pronounced judgment against him.* This would scarcely have been a proper trial but summary judgment of a vassal king who had proved himself a traitor.

11. *the house of detention.* The Hebrew *beyt hapequdot* is an unusual term for a prison or place of confinement, but the meaning is clear.

13. *every great house.* These are the houses of the nobility, as the Aramaic translation, *batey revavaia,* properly registers.

14. *And all the walls of Jerusalem all around did the Chaldean force . . . shatter.* Destroying the walls rendered the city totally indefensible, eradicating any possibility that it could continue to be the capital of an independent state.

15. *the turncoats.* Literally, "those who fell," a term that occurs earlier in Jeremiah. One should recall that there was a strong group among the Judahites (including Jeremiah) who thought that the rebellion was ill-advised, and so it is not surprising that some of these should defect to the Babylonians.

the artisans. The Hebrew *he'amon* appears to be a collective noun for "artisans." The parallel text in Kings reads *hehamon,* "the masses."

17. *And the bronze pillars.* This catalogue of precious vessels seized by the Babylonians reverses everything reported in 1 Kings 6–7 about the splendid furnishings for the Temple and palace that Solomon caused to be fashioned. Everything that the grand first king after David built or made is either reduced to rubble or taken off by the enemy.

the bronze sea. This is a large cast-metal pool mentioned in 1 Kings 7:23 and elsewhere.

20. *beyond measure.* More literally, "beyond weighing."

24. *And the high chamberlain took Seraiah the head priest and Zephaniah the assistant priest.* The obvious intention is to prevent a renewal of the cult. The usual term for high priest (in the Hebrew, "great priest") is not used but rather "head priest," *kohen haro'sh.*

27. *And the king of Babylonia struck them down and put them to death.* No Geneva convention obtains for these ancient prisoners of war, and since they constitute the nation's military and sacerdotal elite, Nebuchadrezzar wants to eliminate them entirely.

28. *This was the people that Nebuchadrezzar exiled.* This enumeration of the exiles does not appear in the parallel passage in Kings.

in the seventh year. This is Nebuchadrezzar's seventh reignal year, 597 B.C.E., when he put down the Judahite rebellion, made King Jehoiakim a

captive and exile, and installed Zedekiah as vassal king.

29. *In the eighteenth year.* This would be 587 or 586 B.C.E., a one-year discrepancy evident between this and the mention of "the nineteenth year" in verse 12.

30. *In the twenty-third year.* This would be 582 B.C.E., the year of the assassination of Gedaliah (not mentioned in this chapter), an act of insurrection that provoked an additional deportation of Judahites.

all the persons were four thousand six hundred. This amounts to a rather small number of exiles, even if the general population of Judah was not large.

31. *lifted up the head.* This idiom is borrowed from the Joseph story, where it is applied to the release from prison of Pharaoh's vizier. The change of garments in verse 33 recalls Joseph's change of garments after Pharaoh takes him from prison to occupy a high place in the royal court.

32. *gave him a throne above the thrones of the kings who were with him.* This is probably a nationalistic flourish of the writer's because it is unlikely that Jehoiakim would have been granted a higher status than other kings held in Babylonian captivity.

33. *Jehoiakim.* The Hebrew says merely "he," and the proper noun has been added in order to avoid confusion of pronominal reference.

34. *And his provision was a perpetual provision . . . day after day.* This verse is also the last verse of the Book of Kings. Its editorial inclusion here is an attempt to mitigate the national catastrophe that Jeremiah has repeatedly predicted and that is reported in this chapter. The concluding image intimates a hopeful possibility of future restoration: a Davidic king is recognized as king, even in captivity, and is given a daily provision appropriate to his royal status. As he sits on his throne elevated above the thrones of the other captive kings, the audience of the story is invited to imagine a scion of David again sitting on his throne in Jerusalem.

EZEKIEL

Introduction

Ezekiel is surely the strangest of all the prophets. Well before the appearance of the so-called writing prophets in the middle of the eighth century B.C.E., figures known as prophets, *neviʾim*, at least as they are represented in the narratives, were identified as people given to ecstatic states when they were inhabited by the divine spirit. All of the prophets appear to have felt that they heard God speaking, the speech sometimes accompanied by visual revelations, in what would have amounted to paranormal experiences. Prophets were sometimes perceived as altogether transgressing the borders of sanity. “The prophet is witless, / the man of spirit crazed,” Hosea proclaims, having in mind the way Israel’s waywardness had driven the prophet to wild distraction. Yet even against this background, Ezekiel is an extreme case.

He was a Jerusalem priest, in all likelihood part of the group of an exiled elite that was deported to Babylonia with King Jehoiachin in 597 B.C.E., a decade before the destruction of Jerusalem and the more general exile. His entire activity as a prophet took place in Babylonia, with many of the prophecies introduced by a careful notation of day, month, and year. (Although biblical scholars, as they are wont to do, once sought to ascribe many of these prophecies to a later period, the current consensus is that they were in fact composed by Ezekiel, probably on the dates he cites, but of course the editing could have been done considerably later.) Unlike Jeremiah, who was also from a family of priests, Ezekiel often exhibits distinctively priestly concerns—with purity and impurity, with the Temple and its architectural configurations, and with the regimen of sacrifices. But what most distinguishes Ezekiel is that so much of the prophesying is conducted in a condition that looks like God-intoxicated derangement. He is by no means a master of literary craft, like Isaiah, and most of his prophecies are composed in prose that exhibits a weakness for repetition. His power as a prophet stems from the hallucinatory vividness and utter originality of his visions.

The book begins with the grand theatrical effect of his vision of the divine chariot—fire flashing, radiance all around, the face of a different living creature on each of the four sides of a dazzling structure with mysterious wheels beneath that appears to hover in the air. Elsewhere in the Bible, “the glory of the LORD” designates an overpowering radiant manifestation of God’s presence, but we are told that it cannot really be seen. When Moses asks God to show him His glory, God tells him that he cannot look upon it head-on but, hidden in the crevice of a rock, may glimpse only its afterglow as it passes by. Ezekiel, by contrast, is vouchsafed a full and detailed vision of the divine apparatus, which he calls “the glory of the LORD.” There is nothing quite like this elsewhere in the Bible, and Ezekiel’s first chapter would accordingly become the inspiration for the development of Jewish mysticism in Late Antiquity.

There are quite a few arresting visions in Ezekiel’s book, the most memorable of them being the vision of exiled Israel’s national restoration in the Valley of the Dry Bones (chapter 37). This was a man whose mind swarmed with potent images, many of them cast as figures in allegories, which are the most effective vehicle of his prophecies. One senses that these images were not contrived or invented but manifested

themselves imperatively in the imagination of the prophet. While the idea of the spirit descending on an elected person is common in biblical literature, including many of the narratives, again and again in this book the prophet attests to being seized, sometimes violently, by the spirit. In Hebrew, as in several other languages, the same word means both "spirit" and "wind," but for Ezekiel the latter meaning is often salient, even if the former sense may also be implied: repeatedly, he is "borne off" by the wind to a place of vision (often Jerusalem), or, in tandem with this idea, the heavy "hand of the LORD" comes down on him, as in the beginning of the vision of the Dry Bones, "The hand of the LORD was upon me, and He took me out by the wind of the LORD and set me down in the valley."

All this powerful seizure by visionary experience is associated in Ezekiel with a variety of bizarre behaviors that would seem to reflect some kind of psychological disturbance. Other prophets feel they are commanded by God to perform symbolic-prophetic acts. Jeremiah, for example, is enjoined to go down to the potter's workshop, to purchase a plot of land, and to do other acts that are more or less ordinary actions which are given symbolic or illustrative significance. But the acts that Ezekiel reports God has ordered him

to carry out are not normal ones: he eats a scroll, he constructs a model of Jerusalem with a brick and an iron pan, he lies on one side for three hundred ninety days and then forty days on his other side without the capacity to turn over. This last instance is the most egregious. It is fairly plausible that Ezekiel actually did this, and lying on one side for more than a year in "bonds," he says, imposed by God looks very much like an extreme symptom of hysterical paralysis.

Among the themes of Ezekiel's prophecies, the most striking expression of neurosis is his troubled relation to the female body. Real and symbolic bodies become entangled with each other. In biblical poetry, a nation, and Israel in particular, is quite often represented as a woman. God's covenant with Israel—see Jeremiah 1—is imagined as a marriage, and so the bride Israel's dalliance with pagan gods is figured as adultery or whoring. This is a common trope in biblical literature, but the way Ezekiel articulates it is both startling and unsettling.

The most vivid instance of this psychological twist in Ezekiel is the extended allegory of whoring Israel in chapter 16. The allegory here follows the birth of the nation in Canaan—represented with stark physicality in the image of the infant girl naked and wallowing in the blood of afterbirth, then looked after by a

solicitous God—to her sexual maturity and her betrayal of God through idolatry. The focus throughout is on Israel as a female sexual body. Thus, the prophet notes (as does no other biblical writer) the ripening of the breasts and the sprouting of pubic hair. The mature personification of the nation is a beautiful woman, her beauty enhanced by the splendid attire God gives her (this is probably a reference to national grandeur and to the Temple). Yet, insatiably lascivious, she uses her charms to entice strangers to her bed: "you spilled out your whoring" (given the verb used and the unusual form of the noun, this could be a reference to vaginal secretions) "upon every passerby." Israel as a woman is even accused of harboring a special fondness for large phalluses: "you played the whore with the Egyptians, your big-membered neighbors." She is, the prophet says, a whore who asks no payment for her services. "You befouled your beauty," he inveighs, "and spread your legs for every passerby." All this concern with female promiscuity is correlative with Ezekiel's general preoccupation with purity and impurity.

It is of course possible to link each of these sexual details with the allegory of an idolatrous nation betraying its faith. But such explicitness and such vehemence about sex are unique in the Bible. The

compelling inference is that this was a prophet morbidly fixated on the female body and seething with fervid misogyny. What happens in the prophecy in chapter 16 is that the metaphor of the lubricious woman takes over the foreground, virtually displacing the allegorical referent. Ezekiel clearly was not a stable person. The states of disturbance exhibited in his writing led him to a series of remarkable visionary experiences, at least several of which would be deeply inscribed in the Western imagination, engendering profound responses in later poetry and in mystical literature. At the same time, there is much in these visions that reminds us of the dangerous dark side of prophecy. To announce authoritatively that the words one speaks are the words of God is an audacious act. Inevitably, what is reported as divine speech reaches us through the refracting prism of the prophet's sensibility and psychology, and the words and images represented as God's urgent message may sometimes be distorted in eerie ways.

CHAPTER 1

[1]And it happened in the thirtieth year, in the fourth
month on the fifth of the month, that I was among the
exiles by the Kebar Canal, and I saw divine visions.
[2]On the fifth of the month, which was the fifth year of
the exile of King Jehoiachin, [3]the word of the LORD
came to Ezekiel son of Buzi the priest in the land of
the Chaldeans, by the Kebar Canal, and the hand of
the LORD was upon him there. [4]And I saw, and, look,
a storm wind was coming from the north, a great
cloud, and fire flashing, and radiance all round it, and
from within it like the appearance of amber from
within the fire. [5]And from within it the likeness of four
living creatures, and this was their look—the likeness
of a human being they had. [6]And each had four faces
and four wings to each of them. [7]And their legs were
straight legs, and the soles of their feet like the soles of
a calf's foot, and they glittered like the look of
burnished bronze. [8]And there were human hands
beneath their wings on their four sides. And the faces
and the wings of the four of them [9]were joined to each

other. Their wings did not turn as they went; each went straight ahead. [10]And the likeness of their faces—the face of a human and the face of a lion on the right of the four of them, and the face of a bull to the left of the four of them, and the face of an eagle to the four of them. [11]And their faces and their wings were separated from above for each—two were joined for each and two covered their bodies. [12]And each went straight ahead: wherever the spirit was to go, they would go; they did not turn as they went. [13]And the likeness of the creatures, their look, was like burning coals of fire, like the look of torches going back and forth among the creatures, and the fire had a radiance, and from the fire lightning came forth. [14]And the creatures were racing back and forth like the look of sparks. [15]And I saw the creatures, and look, one wheel was on the ground by the creature on its four sides. [16]The look of the wheels and their fashioning were like chrysolite, and a single likeness the faces of them had, and their look and their fashioning as when a wheel is within a wheel. [17]On their four sides as they went they would go. They did not turn as they went. [18]As for their rims, they were high and they were fearsome, and their rims were filled with eyes, all round the four of them. [19]And when the creatures went, the wheels went with them, and when the creatures lifted up above the

ground, the wheels lifted up. [20]Wherever the spirit was there to go, there they went [there the spirit to go], and the wheels lifted up along with them, for the spirit of the creature was in the wheels. [21]When they went, they would go. When they stood still, they would stand still, and when they lifted up above the ground, the wheels would lift up along with them, for the spirit of the creature was in the wheels. [22]And there was a likeness over the heads of the beasts—a platform like the appearance of the fearsome ice stretched over their heads above. [23]And beneath the platform their wings stood straight and toward each other, each had two covering them, covering their body. [24]And I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of many waters, like the sound of Shaddai, as they went, like the sound of an uproar, like the sound of an armed camp. When they stood still, their wings grew slack. [25]And there was a sound above the platform that was over their heads. When they stood still, their wings slackened. [26]And above the platform that was over their heads, it was like the look of sapphire stone—the likeness of a throne, and above the likeness of the throne, like a human form upon it above. [27]And I saw like the appearance of amber, like the look of fire within it all round—from the look of his loins above and from the look of his loins below I saw like the look of fire with

radiance all round. [28]Like the look of the rainbow that is in the clouds on a day of rain, this was the look of the radiance all round, the look of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And I saw and fell on my face and heard a voice speaking—

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *in the thirtieth year.* What this refers to has stumped scholars. One proposal is that it is the thirtieth year of Ezekiel's life.

divine visions. Or, "visions of God." But most of the vision here is devoted to the divine "chariot," with the figure of God introduced only toward the end, so "divine" may be a more apt translation.

2. *the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin.* He was exiled with a substantial group of Judahites, by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 B.C.E., when Judah was reduced by Babylonia to a vassal state. The clear implication is that Ezekiel was among those deported to Babylonia in 597. The beginning of his prophecy overlaps with the last decade of Jeremiah's prophecy; he would have been a generation younger, Jeremiah having begun his mission in the 620s.

3. *the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel.* Since the book begins in the first person and then continues here in the first person, this third-person reference to the prophet may reflect an editorial intervention.

4. *a storm wind was coming from the north, a great cloud, and fire flashing, and radiance all round it.* These accoutrements of epiphany are traditional in the Bible: in many different texts, from Exodus to Psalms, God reveals himself in fire and lightning and cloud. Nevertheless, this prophecy is strikingly innovative in form. First, it combines the pyrotechnic paraphernalia

of divine revelation with imagery evidently borrowed from sundry Mesopotamian sources—the wheeled throne, the four faces of the creatures like the four faces of the Babylonian god Marduk, the iconic animals. Isaiah in his dedication scene (Isaiah 6) glimpses the skirts of God's robe filling the Temple and sees seraphim, but there is no direct description of God and no elaborate imagining of a celestial vehicle. One should also note that this elevated vision is cast in prose, but it is a visibly poetic prose marked by hypnotic cadences. The words do not scan as poetry, yet some of the diction is poetic. The reiterated term for "radiance," *nogah,* for example, ordinarily appears only in poetic texts. Thus, Ezekiel has devised a prophetic prose-poetry that has scant precedents.

like the appearance. The preposition here could also mean "the color of."

amber. This translation adopts one traditional equivalent for the Hebrew *ḥashmal,* but its precise identity is elusive. It would seem to be some sort of precious stone that is orange, yellow, or reddish in color.

5. *likeness.* This word, *demut*, and its complementary term, *marʾeh,* "look" or "appearance," are insisted on again and again in this vision as well as in several visions that follow. The prophet wants to make clear that his report of what he has seen is of something that can be represented only by analogy: these are likenesses, appearances, analogs of things known to humankind, but not literally those things.

8–9. *And the faces and the wings of the four of them were joined to each other.* As the vision proceeds, it becomes progressively difficult to sort out visually what these creatures and the moving composite they make up look like. (Two and a half millennia of exegetes have labored in vain to work out all the details.) A certain bewilderment may well have been Ezekiel's intention. There are abundant repetitions of phrases through the passage, some of them probably quite deliberate in order to create an incantatory effect, although at least a couple of them seem to be the product of scribal inadvertence.

10. *lion . . . bull . . . eagle.* These are all heraldic beasts associated with royalty or divinity. The fourth face is human.

11. *two covered their bodies.* Evidently, for modesty as with the wings of the seraphim in Isaiah 6.

14. *sparks.* The Hebrew *bazak* appears only here, but it clearly indicates some sort of flashing light. In rabbinic Hebrew, it serves as a synonym for "lightning."

16. *as when a wheel is within a wheel.* The most likely reference is to concentric wheels.

18. *they were high and they were fearsome.* More literally, "they had height and they had fearsomeness." The fearsome aspect of the wheels may be because they are then said to be studded, nightmarishly, with eyes. The meaning of the eyes remains mysterious. Some commentators claim they were a manifestation of all-seeing divine omniscience. Perhaps the primary effect is that they are disorienting and disturbing: these are wheels like none ever encountered by human gaze.

19. *when the creatures went, the wheels went with them.* The wheels are not physically attached to the creatures, but their movements are synchronized with them through a shared "spirit."

20. *[there the spirit to go].* This bracketed phrase, with its tenuous syntactic connection with the rest of the sentence, definitely looks like a mistaken scribal repetition.

21. *when they lifted up above the ground, the wheels would lift up along with them.* This four-sided moving structure, with wheels below and a kind of platform above, is what led tradition to call it a "chariot," *merkavah.* To moderns, it may seem like a bizarrely composite hovering helicopter.

22. *a platform.* The Hebrew *raqiʿa* indicates a flat, pounded-out surface (it is derived from a verbal root that means to "pound" or "to stomp"). In Genesis 1, it is the word used for the vault of the heavens (more traditionally, "firmament"), so here it figures as a constructed equivalent of the sky. Structurally, the *raqiʿa* amounts to a beaten slab.

24. *many waters.* This phrase, recurring often in biblical literature, refers to the primordial sea or deep, with mythological overtones. Compare, for example, Psalm 93:4.

like the sound of an uproar, like the sound of an armed camp. All this emphasis on sound, after the exclusive focus on visual elements, sets the stage for God's speech, which is introduced at the end of the chapter.

28. *the look . . . of the glory of the* LORD. Never before in biblical literature has God's "glory," *kavod,* been given such visual realization.

CHAPTER 2

[1]And He said to me, “Man, stand on your feet and I
shall speak with you.” [2]And a spirit entered me as He
spoke to me and stood me on my feet, and I heard
what was spoken to me. [3]And He said to me, “Man, I
am sending you to the Israelites, to the rebellious
nations that have rebelled against Me, they and their
fathers have revolted against Me to this day. [4]And to
the brazen-faced hard-hearted sons I am sending you,
and you shall say to them, ‘Thus said the Master, the
LORD.’ [5]As for them, whether they listen or not, they
are surely a house of rebellion, but they shall know
that a prophet has been in their midst. [6]As for you,
man, do not fear them and do not fear their words, for
they are thorns and thistles to you, and among
scorpions you dwell. Do not fear their words and do
not be terrified by them, for they are a house of
rebellion. [7]And you shall speak My words to them,
whether they listen or not, for they are a house of
rebellion. [8]As for you, man, listen to what I speak to
you. Be not rebellious like the house of rebellion.

Open your mouth and eat what I give you.” [9]And I saw, and, look, a hand was stretched out to me, and, look, in it was the scroll of a book. [10]And He unrolled it before me, and it was written on both sides and written in it—dirges, lament, and woe.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Man.* The Hebrew *ben-ʾadam,* “human being,” is the characteristic form through which God repeatedly addresses Ezekiel. As several commentators have noted, it places the prophet in an antithetical relation to the “creatures” of the divine chariot, who are not mortal humans. The translation avoids rendering the term as “son of man” because, after the Gospels, that designation took on Christological connotations.

2. *And a spirit entered me as He spoke to me and stood me on my feet.* Ezekiel is thus like the wheels in the divine vision, which are inhabited by a spirit that directs them. Ezekiel appears to exert less human agency than the other prophets, and that could well be a manifestation of his distinctive psychology as prophet.

and I heard what was spoken to me. Some understand this as “one speaking to me.” The Hebrew shows a reflexive form of the verb “to speak,” with no visible subject, perhaps reflecting reticence about saying “God.”

3. *the rebellious nations.* The designation of the Israelites as “nations” in the plural is peculiar. Some think it refers to the tribes, but they are not elsewhere called “nations.” Perhaps the plural is meant to encompass both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. While the northern kingdom had long been destroyed, the verbal phrase “have rebelled against

Me" invokes past actions, and Ezekiel may also be imagining a virtual presence of the vanished kingdom, as Jeremiah sometimes does.

4. *Thus said the Master, the LORD.* This is the so-called messenger-formula with which many prophecies begin. No words of prophecy follow, though the last words of this chapter indicate the content of the prophecy.

5. *but they shall know that a prophet has been in their midst.* The anticipation, shared by Isaiah and Jeremiah, that the people may not heed the prophet, is parsed in a different way here: perhaps the people will choose to ignore the prophet's admonitions, but they will not escape a strong and troubling sense of the urgent authenticity of his message.

6. *thorns and thistles.* Many translations render the first term as "nettles" (only an approximate meaning is known), but the Hebrew shows a forceful alliteration—*saravim, salonim*—that deserves to be emulated in the English.

8. *Open your mouth and eat what I give you.* Other prophets are bid to perform symbolic acts, but this one is extreme, and characteristic of Ezekiel. He has just been told not to be rebellious like his countrymen; now he is asked to show his total submission by ingesting a scroll. Again, this appears to reflect Ezekiel's aberrant psychology. God does not inform him what he is to eat until the mysterious hand appears with the scroll.

10. *it was written on both sides.* As Menachem Haran has noted, this means the scroll was papyrus, not parchment, because the way animal skins were prepared for scrolls in this period precluded writing on both sides. It would, of course, be considerably easier to ingest papyrus than parchment.

CHAPTER 3

[1]And He said to me, “Man, what you find, eat. Eat this
scroll and go speak to the house of Israel.” [2]And I
opened my mouth and He fed me this scroll. [3]And He
said to me, “Man, your belly you shall feed and your
innards you shall fill with this scroll that I give you.”
And I ate, and it became sweet as honey in my mouth.
[4]And He said to me, “Man, come! Go to the house of
Israel and speak to them My words. [5]For not to a
people of an unfathomable language and an obscure
tongue do I send you—but to the house of Israel. [6]Not
to many peoples of impenetrable language and obscure
tongue whose words you would not understand. Surely
had I sent you to them, they would have listened to
you. [7]But the house of Israel does not want to listen to
you, for they do not want to listen to Me, for all the
house of Israel are hard-browed and hard-hearted.
[8]Look, I have made your face hard against their faces
and your brow hard against their brows. [9]Like diamond
harder than flint I have made your brow. You shall not
fear them and shall not be terrified by them, for they

are a house of rebellion.” [10]And He said to me, “Man, all My words that I shall speak to you—take into your heart and with your ears listen, [11]and come! go to the exiles, to the sons of your people, and speak to them and say to them: Thus said the Master, the LORD, whether they listen or not.” [12]And a wind lifted me, and I heard behind me the sound of a great roar: “Blessed be the LORD’s glory from its place,” [13]and the sound of the creatures’ wings touching each other and the sound of the wheels over against them and the sound of a great roar. [14]And a wind lifted me and took me, and bitter did I go, with an incensed spirit, and the hand of the LORD was strong upon me. [15]And I came to the exiles at Tel Abib who dwelled by the Kebar Canal, where they dwelled, and I sat there seven days, desolate in their midst. [16]And it happened at the end of seven days that the word of the LORD came to me, saying, [17]“Man, I have made you a lookout for the house of Israel. When you hear a word from My mouth, you shall warn them from Me. [18]When I say to a wicked man, ‘You are doomed to die,’ and you have not warned him and have not spoken to warn the wicked man against his wicked ways to keep him alive, that wicked man shall die for his crime but his blood I will requite of you. [19]As for you, when you warn the wicked man and he does not turn back from his

wickedness and from his wicked way, it is he who shall die for his crime and you, you shall have saved your own life. [20]And when the righteous man turns back from his righteousness and does wrong, and I put a stumbling block before him, he shall die, for you did not warn him. For his offense he shall die, and his righteousness shall not be recalled, but his blood I will requite of you. [21]And you, when you have warned the righteous man not to offend and he has not offended, he shall surely live, for he has taken warning, and you, you shall have saved your own life."

[22]And the hand of the LORD was upon me there, and He said to me, "Arise, go out to the valley, and there will I speak to you." [23]And I arose and went out to the valley, and, look, the LORD's glory was standing there, like the glory I had seen by the Kebar Canal, and I fell on my face. [24]And a spirit entered me and stood me on my feet and spoke to me and said to me, "Come, shut yourself within your house. [25]And now, man, they have put cords on you and bound you with them, that you not go out in their midst. [28]And your tongue I will make cleave to your palate that you be mute, and you shall not be a reprover to them, for they are a house of rebellion. [27]But when I speak to you I

will open your mouth, and you shall say to them: 'Thus said the Master, the LORD: Who listens shall listen, and who does not shall not, for they are a house of rebellion.'"

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *Man, your belly you shall feed and your innards you shall fill with this scroll.* Such specification indicates that the prophet is not merely meant to chew the papyrus scroll but to swallow and digest it. It seems quite likely that Ezekiel believed he had been commanded to perform this difficult symbolic act and in fact carried it out. His report that the taste of the papyrus in his mouth was sweet as honey leads one to infer that he was a person susceptible to aberrant or perhaps abnormal states.

5. *a people of an unfathomable language and an obscure tongue.* The literal sense is "deep of language and heavy of tongue." Elsewhere in Prophetic texts, the unintelligibility of the language of the conquerors is part of their fearsome aspect. Here, it becomes part of an *a fortiori* statement: had the prophet been sent to peoples speaking a barbaric foreign tongue, they would have listened to him; but when he is sent to the Israelites, addressing them in their shared mother tongue, Hebrew, they refuse to listen because of their stubbornness.

but to the house of Israel. The "but" is merely implied in the Hebrew.

8. *I have made your face hard against their faces and your brow hard against their brows.* Rimon Casher has proposed that the repetition throughout these verses of *ḥazak* ("hard," and elsewhere usually "strong") may be a play on the root of Ezekiel's name, *yeḥezqʾel* ("God will make strong").

9. *You shall not fear them . . . for they are a house of rebellion.* The causal logic here is that because they are rebels, they are destined to be punished by

God, and so there is nothing to fear from them, however they may threaten the prophet.

12. *And a wind lifted me.* We repeatedly see this prophet as a passive subject of prophecy, being lifted, borne off, stood on his feet, by divine powers.

Blessed be the LORD*'s glory from its place.* One often proposed emendation reads instead of *barukh,* "blessed," *berum,* "in the rising of," which yields not a line of dialogue but a narrative report about the divine chariot: "When the LORD's glory rose up from its place." This emendation is encouraged by the fact that in paleo-Hebrew script the letters *mem* and *kaf* look fairly similar, so a scribe could easily have erred. The emended reading flows more smoothly into the next verse and a half reporting the ascent of the divine chariot, but the Masoretic Text has been retained in this translation because it has become prominently enshrined in the Hebrew liturgy.

14. *bitter did I go, with an incensed spirit.* The prophet's disturbed emotional state reflects his troubled sense that the prophetic mission will be very arduous, perhaps impossible.

15. *Tel Abib.* Though this looks like a Hebrew name, "mound of the sprouting season," and modern-day Tel Aviv drew the name from here, it is actually Akkadian and means "mound of the flood."

where they dwelled. This might be a scribal duplication.

17. *lookout.* The lookout or watchman, as can be inferred from the appearance of the term in narrative contexts, was someone posted on an elevation to look for the approach of hostile forces. Thus, the prophet is appointed to look out for imminent disaster triggered by Israel's bad behavior and to warn them, as a watchman would.

18. *but his blood I will requite of you.* This is a much grimmer formulation of the burden of prophecy than that given to other prophets: Ezekiel is obliged to work under an imminent death sentence if he fails to adequately warn the transgressors.

22. *the valley.* Although some render this as "plain," the Hebrew term clearly derives from a verbal stem that means "rift" or "split," and it refers to a valley —in the case of Jordan, the riverbed and the surrounding banks.

23. *the LORD's glory was standing there.* Repeatedly in Ezekiel, "the LORD's glory" (or "majesty") refers to the divine "chariot" described in chapter 1.

24. *And a spirit entered me and stood me on my feet.* As before, Ezekiel is a virtual puppet of the divine spirit. This is an idea that will be picked up in Daniel.

shut yourself within your house. Some have seen this as a contradiction of the previous injunction to the prophet to "warn" Israel, compounded by the fact that in the next verse God says He will impose a condition of complete muteness on the prophet. But such oscillations should not surprise us, especially if we assume that all these divine instructions have some relation to the psychology of this particular prophet. In that case, at one moment he feels an absolute imperative to reprove the people, a responsibility he needs to carry out on the pain of death. At another moment, despairing of the very possibility of in any way changing the course of action of these stubborn rebels against God, he shuts himself up in his house and sinks into a condition of total silence.

25. *they have put cords on you and bound you with them.* Since the prophet has already shut himself up in his house, it is unclear why anyone would feel the necessity to bind him in cords in order to prevent him from going outside. Perhaps this statement should be construed as a metaphor: "they" (the people) have through their actions imposed on the prophet a condition of isolated withdrawal, as though they had bound him with cords.

CHAPTER 4

[1]And you, man, take you a brick and put it before you
and incise on it the city of Jerusalem. [2]And you shall
lay a siege against it and build against it a siege-work
and throw up a ramp against it and set an armed camp
against it and put against it battering rams all round.
[3]And you, take you an iron pan and make it an iron
wall between you and the city. And you shall set your
face toward it, and it shall be besieged, and you shall
lay siege against it. It is a sign for the house of Israel.

[4]And you, lie down on your left side and put the guilt
of the house of Israel upon it. For the number of days
that you lie on it you shall bear their guilt. [5]As for Me,
I have made for you the years of their crime as the
number of days, three hundred ninety days, and you
shall bear the guilt of the house of Israel. [6]And you
shall complete these and lie down again on your right
side and bear the guilt of the house of Judah forty
days, each day for a year I have made it for you. [7]And

to the siege of Jerusalem you shall set your face with
your arm laid bare, and you shall prophesy against it.
[8]And, look, I have put cords on you, that you not turn
over from side to side until you complete the days of
your siege. [9]And you, take you wheat and barley and
beans and lentils and millet and emmer and put them
in a single vessel and make them into bread for
yourself the number of days that you lie on your side,
three hundred ninety days you shall eat it. [10]And your
food that you shall eat, by weight, twenty weights a
day, from one day to the next you shall eat it. [11]And
water by measure you shall drink, the sixth of a *hin,*
from one day to the next you shall drink. [12]And a
barley loaf you shall eat, and it shall be baked on the
turds of human excrement before your eyes. [13]And the
LORD said, “Thus shall the Israelites eat their bread
defiled among the nations where I will scatter them.”
[14]And I said, “Alas, O Master, LORD, look, my throat
is undefiled, and carrion and torn animal carcasses I
have not eaten from my youth until now, nor has foul
meat come into my mouth.” [15]And He said to me,
“Look, I give you cattle dung instead of human turds,
and you shall make your bread upon that.” [16]And He
said to me, “Man, I am about to break the staff of
bread in Jerusalem, and they shall eat bread by weight
and in disgust, and water by measure and in desolation

they shall drink, [17]so that they want for bread and water and each man and his brother be desolate, and they shall rot in their guilt."

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *take you a brick and . . . incise on it the city of Jerusalem.* Bricks were the building material of choice in the Mesopotamian valley, whereas stone was more commonly used in the mountainous region of Judah. (Compare the use of bricks in the story of the Tower of Babel, Genesis 11.) The incising would have been done before the firing of the brick. A brick with a depiction of the Babylonian city of Napur was actually discovered in an archaeological dig.

2. *And you shall lay a siege against it.* This appears to be a model of a siege with the appropriate siege-works, not an image also incised on the brick. The proclivity for symbolic acts is brought to an elaborate extreme here.

3. *an iron wall between you and the city.* Now, in the playing with models and symbols, Ezekiel takes on the role of God (!), estranged from the city, a condition represented by the interposed iron wall.

4. *For the number of days that you lie on it you shall bear their guilt.* This is another instance in which the borderline between symbolic act and psychological aberration in Ezekiel is blurred. If, as seems likely, he actually performed this act, he would have been in a state of paralysis (hysterically induced?), lying on one side, for almost thirteen months. The idiom "bear guilt" has several different meanings in biblical usage, but the most likely one here is that the prophet symbolically takes on himself the guilt—the word can also indicate "punishment"—of his offending people.

5. *three hundred ninety.* This number of years, if one calculates from the erection of the Temple around 970 B.C.E., takes us forward to 580 B.C.E., which falls within the period of Ezekiel's prophecy in Babylonia. Moshe

Greenberg observes that, in accordance with the viewpoint of the Deuteronomist, the existence of the "high places" outside of Jerusalem throughout this period would define the entire span of nearly four centuries as a time when guilt was incurred.

6. *lie down again on your right side and bear the guilt of the house of Judah forty days.* Forty is a formulaic number, but it is difficult to reconcile it with the figure of 390 or to imagine what it could refer to historically. Many scholars plausibly conclude that the lying on the right side is a secondary interpolation, and that "the house of Israel" in verse 5 refers to the entire people of Israel, and then is made to indicate the northern kingdom only by this inconvenient add-on that introduces a reference to the southern kingdom. Surely more than a year would have been enough for the prophet to continue in this paralytic state.

7. *your arm laid bare.* The bared arm is a token of the use of force.

8. *I have put cords on you.* As in 3:25, these are not literal cords: the prophet, feeling unable to move from this position lying on his side, understands that he has been immobilized by God.

9. *wheat and barley and beans and lentils and millet and emmer.* Although one American Christian group actually markets bread purportedly made from this recipe, it is in fact siege bread, made not from wheat but from a combination of grains and legumes because of the lack of sufficient wheat supplies. The Talmud reports an experiment in which the bread was made with these ingredients and a dog would not touch it.

10. *twenty weights a day.* By some calculations, this is no more than eight ounces—a very scant daily ration.

12. *it shall be baked on the turds of human excrement before your eyes.* Dried animal dung was commonly used for fuel, but not human excrement. Thus the baking manifests the condition of the exiles constrained to live in an "unclean" (or "defiled") land, which is how foreign territory was conceived. The "your" of "your eyes" is plural and is addressed to the exiles, not the prophet.

14. *my throat is undefiled.* While the prohibition against consuming the meat of carrion and animals torn up by predators is incumbent on all the people, Ezekiel as a priest would have taken special care to preserve the condition of ritual purity.

15. *cattle dung instead of human turds.* Seeing the prophet's visceral revulsion, God offers a compromise, but the bread is still baked on filth.

16. *break the staff of bread in Jerusalem.* Bread is a "staff" because it supports or sustains life, and in biblical Hebrew, as in many other languages, it is a synecdoche for food in general. The obvious reference is to the condition of near starvation in time of siege, and so this element of the prophecy is linked with the model siege of verses 1–3. The phrase "break the staff of bread" is taken from the dire prediction of disaster in Leviticus 26 if Israel abandons God's ways, and other phrases from that passage in Leviticus are invoked here.

CHAPTER 5

[1]And you, man, take you a sharp blade, a barber's
razor, take it for yourself, and pass it over your head
and your beard, and take you a scales and divide it. [2]A
third you shall burn in fire within the city when the
days of the siege are done. And you shall take a third
and strike it with a blade all round her, and a third you
shall scatter to the wind. And a sword will I unsheathe
after them. [3]And you shall take from there a bit and
wrap it in the skirts of your garment. [4]And from it you
shall take more and fling it into the fire and burn it in
fire. From it fire shall go out to the whole house of
Israel. [5]Thus said the Master, the LORD: This is
Jerusalem, in the midst of the nations I set her, with
lands all round her. [6]And she rebelled against My laws
for wickedness more than the nations, and against My
statutes more than the lands that are all round her. For
they spurned My laws and did not follow My statutes.
[7]Therefore, thus said the Master, the LORD: Inasmuch
as you have raised a clamor more than the nations that
are all round you, My statutes you did not follow, My

laws you did not keep, and like the laws of the nations
that are all round you, you did not do. [8]Therefore, thus
said the Master, the LORD: Look, I on My part am
now against you, and I will carry out judgments in
your midst before the eyes of the nations. [9]And I will
do what I have not done and the like of which I will
not do again because of all your abominations.
[10]Therefore, fathers shall eat sons within you and sons
shall eat their fathers, and I will perform judgments
against you and scatter your remnant to every wind.
[11]Therefore, as I live, said the Master, the LORD,
because you have defiled My sanctuary with all your
disgusting things and with all your abominations, I on
My part will surely shear, and My eye shall not spare,
and I, too, will show no pity. [12]A third of you shall die
by pestilence and come to an end within you by
famine, and a third shall fall by the sword all round
you, and a third will I scatter to every wind, and I will
unsheathe the sword after them. [13]And My anger shall
come to an end, and I will put to rest My wrath against
them, and I will repent, and they shall know that I the
LORD have spoken in My passion when I bring to an
end My wrath against them. [14]And I will make you a
ruin and a reproach among the nations that are all
round you, before the eyes of every passerby. [15]And
she shall be a reproach and a revilement, an object

lesson and a fright to the nations all round you when I carry out judgments in anger and in wrath and in chastisements of wrath. I the LORD have spoken.
16When I let loose My deadly arrows—famine—
against them, which become a destroyer, which I will let loose against them to destroy them, and famine will I add against them and break their staff of bread.
17And I will let loose against you famine and vicious beasts, and they shall bereave you, and pestilence and bloodshed shall pass through you, and the sword will I bring against you. I the LORD have spoken.

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *a sharp blade.* The noun *ḥerev* usually means "sword." The choice of the term here, as several commentators have noted, is in order to point forward to the use of the same word in the sense of "sword" near the end of the next verse.

2. *A third you shall burn in fire within the city.* The city in question is the design of the city that has been incised on the brick. The destruction of the cut hair in three equal parts is thus a continuation of the symbolic modeling of the destruction of Jerusalem.

5. *This is Jerusalem.* In this speech, God is pointing to the image of the city incised on the brick and expounding its meaning.

6. *she rebelled against My laws.* The noun *mishpatim* can mean "judgments," "laws," "rules." The English equivalent "laws" is used here because "judgments" is not right for the context, but as the passage continues, the cognate *shefatim,* which means "judgments" in the sense of "punishment," is insisted on.

7. *raised a clamor.* The verb strongly implies rebellion.

like the laws of the nations that are all round you, you did not do. This is an extreme element in Ezekiel's castigation of Judah. The surrounding nations, though they had no covenant with God, observed at least some basic guidelines or laws (*mishpatim,* also "judgments") of civilized behavior, but even these minimal constraints on behavior you ignored.

10. *fathers shall eat sons within you and sons shall eat their fathers.* Although the horror of cannibalism in time of siege is frequently invoked in the Bible—see especially Leviticus 26, an important intertext to this one—the idea of reciprocal cannibalism between the generations is an added ghastly twist.

11. *your disgusting things and with all your abominations.* Both terms are repeatedly used in the Bible for pagan idols. Ezekiel has in mind the fact that more than once idols were actually introduced into the Jerusalem sanctuary. The language here and again further in this passage borrows from the denunciations in Deuteronomy 32, the so-called Song of Moses.

12. *I will unsheathe the sword after them.* In the bleakly schematic terms of Ezekiel's prophecy of the three thirds, after a third die by pestilence and famine and a third fall to the sword, the third who flee ("scatter[ed] to every wind") will also perish by the sword. The unusual usage of the preposition "after" is intended to indicate that the scattered ones are in flight, pursued by the sword.

13. *My anger shall come to an end.* This is a qualified consolation. God's anger will come to an end only after He has thoroughly devastated the people.

passion. The Hebrew *qinʾah* has a core meaning of "jealousy" (and in English we speak of "jealous passion"), a sense not altogether irrelevant here because God is so often imagined as Israel's spouse.

15. *judgments.* Here *shefatim* is used. In verse 8 the cognate *mishpatim* is used in the same sense as *shefatim*, which means “punishment.”

16. *deadly.* More literally, “evil.”

17. *against you.* The switch from third person (plural) to second person (still plural), or the other way around, is fairly common in biblical usage.

vicious beasts. Again, the literal sense is “evil beasts.” Such attacks by beasts of prey would occur because the countryside of Judah would be devastated and depopulated, allowing dangerous carnivores to proliferate.

bloodshed. The Hebrew says merely “blood,” which constitutes a somewhat unusual employment of the word.

CHAPTER 6

[1]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[2]"Man, set your face to the mountains of Israel and
prophesy to them, [3]And say, 'Mountains of Israel, hear
the word of the Master, the LORD. Thus said the
Master, the LORD, to the mountains and to the hills,
to the gullies and to the valleys: I am about to bring
the sword against you, and I will destroy your high
places, [4]and your altars shall be desolate and your
incense stands broken, and I will make your slain fall
in front of your vile things. [5]And I will put the corpses
of the Israelites in front of your vile things, and I will
scatter your bones all round your altars. [6]Through all
your settlements the towns shall be reduced to ruins
and the high places made desolate so that your altars
lie in ruins and be desolate, and your vile things shall
be broken and destroyed and your incense stands be
cut down, and your handiwork wiped out. [7]And the
slain shall fall in your midst, and you shall know that I
am the LORD. [8]And I will leave some of you, when
you are fugitives of the sword among the nations, when

you are scattered in the lands. [9]And your fugitives shall recall Me among the nations where they were captive, that I have broken their whoring heart that swerved from Me and their eyes whoring after their vile things, and they shall loathe themselves for the evils that they did, for all their abominations. [10]And they shall know that I, the LORD, not for nothing did I speak to them this evil.'"

[11]Thus said the Master, the LORD: "Strike with your palm and stamp with your foot and say, Alack! for all the evil abominations of the house of Israel. Who by the sword, by famine, or by pestilence shall fall. [12]He who is far off by pestilence shall die, and he who is near by the sword shall fall, and he who remains and is besieged, by famine shall die, and I will bring My wrath to an end against them. [13]And you shall know that I am the LORD when their slain are in the midst of their vile things all round your altars on every high hill, on all the mountaintops, and under every lush tree and under every leafy oak, the places where they offered a pleasing odor to all their vile things. [14]And I will stretch out My hand against them and make the land an utter desolation from the desert to Diblah

through all their settlements. And they shall know that I am the LORD.

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *set your face to the mountains of Israel.* The apostrophe to the mountains and the hills and the valleys that begins in the next verse amounts to a rhetorical displacement of an address to the people of Israel that worshipped idols in these nature settings. The sword that is about to come against the mountains and hills is actually directed, in a metonymic slide, against the places of pagan worship and finally against the worshippers.

3. *high places.* These elevated altars were often placed on hilltops outside towns, but they could also be located in valleys (hence the "the gullies and the valleys" earlier in this verse).

4. *I will make your slain fall.* The metonymic slide is completed here: "your high places" could still refer to the hills and mountains, but "your slain" means the slain of the people of Judah.

5. *your vile things.* As elsewhere, this is a pejorative (even probably excremental) epithet for idols.

scatter your bones all round your altars. This act renders the area ritually impure.

8. *And I will leave some of you.* The Hebrew merely says "And I will leave" and it is textually problematic. It is absent in the Septuagint, and its deletion yields a smooth-reading sentence here: "When you are fugitives of the sword among the nations, when you are scattered in the lands, your fugitives shall recall Me. . . ."

9. *I have broken their whoring heart.* The Hebrew appears to say "I am broken," *nishbarti.* Many interpreters, medieval and modern, understand this

to mean, “I am brokenhearted,” but there are no other instances where the verb “to break” is used elliptically in this manner to mean “brokenhearted.” Either this is a case in which the passive form takes an active sense, or, more likely, it is a scribal error for the active form, *shavarti,* triggered by the similar form of the immediately preceding verb *nishbu,* “were captive.”

12. *He who is far off . . . he who is near . . . he who remains.* This tripartite division spells out the meaning of the symbolic prophetic act of dividing the hair into three parts (5:1–4).

I will bring My wrath to an end. The verb “bring to an end,” *kilah*, is susceptible to two interpretations, but these come down to the same idea: it means either “I will utterly implement all My wrath” or “having entirely carried out the aims of My wrath, it will come to an end, be spent.”

13. *where they offered a pleasing odor to all their vile things.* The formulation incorporates a pointed polemic contradiction: the “pleasing odor” is the standard phrase for incense, presumed to be pleasing to the gods, or to God; but a stench attaches itself to *gilulim,* “vile things,” because of the association of the term with dung.

14. *an utter desolation.* In the Hebrew, this sense is conveyed by joining two different nouns derived from the same root, *shemamah* and *meshamah*.

Diblah. This is probably the same site as Riblah, the town on the edge of Syrian territory where Nebuchadnezzar set up headquarters during his campaign against Judah and surrounding lands. The desert here marks the south and Diblah the far north.

CHAPTER 7

[1]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying:
[2]"And you, man, thus said the Master, the LORD,
concerning the country of Israel:

An end, the end has come
upon the four corners of the earth.
[3]Now the end is upon you,
and I have let loose My wrath
against you
and exacted judgment of you by
your ways
and laid upon you all your
abominations.
[4]And My eye shall not spare you
nor will I show pity,
for your ways will I lay upon you,
and your abominations shall be in
your midst,

and you shall know that I am
the LORD.
5Thus said the Master, the LORD:
6One evil, an evil about to come,
the end has come, is roused
against you, yes, it comes!
7The gyre has come round against
you,
O dweller in the land.
The time has come, the day is near,
an uproar, no cheers in the
mountains.
8Now soon I will pour out My anger
against you,
and bring My wrath to an end
against you,
And judge you by your ways
and lay upon you all your
abominations.
9And My eye shall not spare,
nor will I show pity,
by your ways I will lay upon you
and your abominations shall be in
your midst,
and you shall know that I am
the LORD.

[10]Here is the day, here it comes,
the gyre has turned around,
the staff blooms, arrogance
flowers.
[11]Outrage rises as a staff of
wickedness—
not of them nor of their crowd,
not of them, and no lament in
them.
[12]The time has come, the day
arrived.
Let not the buyer rejoice nor the
seller mourn,
for there is wrath against all her
crowd.
[13]For the seller to his sold goods shall
not come back,
though they be still alive,
for the vision against all her around
shall not turn back,
each alive in his crime shall not
hold fast.
[14]They have sounded the horn and
readied all things,
but none goes to the battle,

for My wrath is against all her
crowd.
15 The sword is outside,
pestilence and famine within.
Who is out in the field by the sword
shall die,
and he in the town, famine and
pestilence consume him.
16 And their refugees flee
and come to the mountains,
like doves of the valleys
they all moan in their crime.
17 All hands go slack,
and all knees run with water.
18 And they shall gird sackcloth,
and shudders cover them.
On every face is shame,
and all their heads are shaven.
19 Their silver they fling into the
streets,
and their gold becomes unclean.
Their silver and their gold cannot
save them
on the day of the wrath of the
LORD.
Their gullets shall not be sated

nor their innards shall they fill,
for a stumbling block their
crime has become.
[20]And their lovely ornaments of
which they were proud,
they made of them images of their
loathsome abominations,
therefore will I make them
unclean.
[21]And I will give them into the hand
of strangers as booty
and to the wicked of the earth as
spoils, and they shall defile her.
[22]And I will turn My face from them,
and they shall defile My treasure,
and brutes shall enter her and
defile her.
[23]Forge a chain,
for the land is filled with blood-
justice
and the city is filled with
outrage.
[24]And I will bring the most evil of
nations,
and they shall take hold of your
homes;

and I will end the pride of the
strong,
and their sanctuaries shall be
defiled.
[25]Terror comes!
They shall seek peace and it shall
not be.
[26]Disaster upon disaster shall come,
and rumor after rumor shall be.
And they shall seek vision from a
prophet,
but teaching shall be gone from
the priest
and counsel from the elders.
[27]The king shall mourn,
and the prince don desolation.
The hands of the people of the land
shall panic.
By their way will I do with them,
and by their judgments will I
exact judgment of them.
And they shall know that I am the
LORD.

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *An end, the end has come / upon the four corners of the earth.* This is the first prophecy in Ezekiel unambiguously cast as poetry. Perhaps Ezekiel sensed an appropriate match between the incantatory force of the poetic medium and the apocalyptic reach of the prophetic message (note the hypnotic insistence on "the end" at the very beginning of this prophecy). Although what follows concentrates on the judgment of the people of Israel, "the four corners of the earth" embraces the entire world, as if to say: the catastrophe about to overtake Israel will engulf all humanity.

3. *exacted judgment.* Though the verb relates to the root concept of "judgment," its sense in context is close to "punish."

4. *you shall know that I am the* LORD. This is a virtual refrain in Ezekiel. The idea behind it is that until now the people, pursuing its refractory ways, behaved as though YHWH did not exist, but as they bear the terrible punishment for their acts, they will be forced to recognize His existence and power.

7. *the gyre.* The Hebrew *tsefirah* is a rare term. It has most plausibly been linked by both medieval and modern commentators with a root that indicates something round, here perhaps a cycle of time. Because of the unusualness of the Hebrew term, this translation uses "gyre" (the same element one finds in "gyroscope"), a word famously deployed by the poet W. B. Yeats for an apocalyptic turn in the cycle of time.

no cheers in the mountains. Following many interpreters, this translation understands *hed* as a shortened variant form of *heydad,* the cry of joy of grape harvesters.

10. *the staff blooms, arrogance flowers.* As has often been noted, this is a sardonic reversal of the blooming of Aaron's staff (Numbers 17:23), which was a sign of divine election.

11. *not of them nor of their crowd, / not of them, and no lament in them.* The Hebrew is one long string of fused phonemes, perhaps a sign that the text has

been garbled, perhaps an intended poetic effect. It sounds like this: *lo'-meihem welo' meihamonam welo' mehameihem welo'-nohah bahem.*

12. *Let not the buyer rejoice nor the seller mourn.* In ordinary circumstances, the buyer would rejoice at having acquired something he wanted and the seller mourn for having lost something he was obliged to part with. Now, however, all exchanges of property become meaningless because everyone is about to be swept up in the general destruction.

13. *though they be still alive.* The Hebrew here is a little obscure.

14. *readied all things.* Given the sounding of the horn and the reference to battle in the next verset, this means readied weapons for war.

16. *like doves of the valleys.* There is a species of dove that nests among the rocks and crevices of valleys. Greenberg proposes that *ge'ayot,* "valleys," puns on *hogot,* the moaning sound made by doves.

17. *all knees run with water.* This refers to urinating in terror. The line thus neatly illustrates the general pattern in which the second verset in a line concretizes or intensifies what is stated in the first verset: "slack hands" is a very common idiom for weakness, but then we see the shameful evidence of fear in urine running down the knees.

18. *all their heads are shaven.* As elsewhere, the shaving of the head is a sign of mourning, prohibited to the Israelites, but much in evidence in the language of poetry.

19. *Their silver they fling into the streets.* This is in keeping with the pointlessness of buying and selling in verse 12. Wealth is now utterly useless because, as the next line goes on to say, it cannot save them.

22. *and they shall defile My treasure.* Since the defiling by "brutes" that follows has a feminine object, God's "treasure" is in all likelihood the city of Jerusalem, regularly represented as a feminine singular.

23. *blood-justice.* The collocation *mishpat-damim* in the Hebrew is unusual, but the parallel with "outrage" (others, "violence") clearly indicates it is a

perversion of justice that victimizes the innocent. The plural form of "blood" used here almost always indicates unjust or murderous violence.

25. *Terror comes!* The word for "terror," *qefadah,* is unusual but appears to relate to a root that means "to bristle." Note that "comes," a verb prominent at the beginning of this prophecy, is repeated as a kind of key word, stressing the terrible imminence of the end.

26. *rumor after rumor.* These are clearly rumors of disaster.

vision from a prophet, / . . . teaching . . . from the priest / . . . counsel from the elders. These are the three sources of authority in ancient Israelite society: the prophet is the vehicle of vision; the priest offers instruction, perhaps from a written text; the elders, with their accumulated wisdom, proffer counsel. In the dire end-time, a manifestation of the punishment of the people will be that all sources of authority and guidance will be taken away.

27. *don desolation.* After the mourning of the king, we might have expected the formulaic "don sackcloth," so "desolation" comes as a small but striking surprise. Ordinarily, of course, princes would put on regal raiment.

by their judgments. The multipurpose *mishpatim* can also mean something like "practices" or "modes of behavior."

CHAPTER 8

[1]And it happened in the sixth year in the sixth month on the fifth of the month, I was sitting in my house, and the elders of Judah were sitting before me, and the hand of the Master, the LORD, fell upon me there. [2]And I saw and, look, a likeness like the look of fire, from the look of his loins and below fire, and from his loins and above like the look of brilliance, like the color of amber. [3]And He reached out the form of a hand and took me by a lock of my head, and a wind bore me between the earth and the heavens and brought me to Jerusalem through divine visions to the entrance of the gate of the inner court facing northward where the icon of the provoking provocation is set. [4]And, look, there was the glory of the God of Israel like the sight that I had seen in the valley. [5]And He said to me, “Man, raise your eyes toward the north.” And I raised my eyes toward the north, and, look, from north of the altar gate, this icon of provocation was in the entranceway. [6]And He said to me, “Man, do you see what abominations they are

doing, which the house of Israel are doing here to go
far from My sanctuary? And you will yet see greater
abominations." [7]And He brought me to the entrance of
the court, and I saw, and, look, there was a hole in the
wall. [8]And He said to me, "Man, pray, break through
the wall." And I broke through the wall, and, look,
there was an entrance. [9]And He said to me, "Come and
see the evil abominations that they are doing here."
[10]And I came and saw and, look, every form of
creeping thing and beast, disgusting things, and all the
foul things of the house of Israel were incised on the
wall all around. [11]And seventy men of the elders of
Israel, with Jaazaniah son of Shaphan standing in the
midst of them, were standing before these, each with
his incense pan in his hand, and a dense cloud of
incense was rising. [12]And He said to me, "Do you see,
man, what the elders of the house of Israel are doing
in the dark, each in the chambers of his sculpted
images, for they say, 'The LORD does not see us. The
LORD has abandoned the land.'" [13]And He said to me,
"You shall yet see greater abominations that they are
doing." [14]And He brought me to the entrance of the
gate of the house of the LORD that was to the north,
and, look, women were sitting there keening for
Tammuz. [15]And He said to me, "Do you see, man?
You will yet see greater abominations than these."

16 And He brought me to the inner court of the house
of the LORD, and, look, between the great hall and
the altar were some twenty-five men, their backs to the
LORD's temple and their faces eastward, and they
were bowing down eastward to the sun. 17 And He said
to me, "Do you see, man? Is it too light a thing for the
house of Judah to do the abominations they have done
here that they should fill the land with outrage and
repeatedly vex Me? And here they are reaching out the
vine branch to My nose. 18 And I on My part will act in
wrath and My eye shall not spare them nor will I show
pity, and they shall call out in My hearing with a loud
voice but I will not listen to them."

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *in the sixth year.* This would be the sixth year of Jehoiachin's exile (and Ezekiel's), or 591 B.C.E.

the hand of the Master, the LORD, fell upon me. The usual idiom is "came [or was] upon me." This more physical formulation is scarcely accidental: as before, Ezekiel is a passive vessel acted upon vigorously, almost violently, by God.

2. *a likeness like the look.* As in the vision of the celestial chariot, Ezekiel is careful to interpose a whole set of qualifying terms indicating that what he sees in the vision is not the thing itself but a resemblance or analogical image of things familiar to humankind.

like the look of fire. The Septuagint, instead of *ʾesh,* "fire," reads *ʾish,* "a man."

3. *a wind bore me between the earth and the heavens and brought me to Jerusalem.* The sense of the prophet as the passive object of divine action continues here. The basis of this whole vision appears to be some sort of hallucinatory experience in which the prophet, who has very recently been lying immobilized for more than a year, senses that he is physically borne off to Jerusalem, if only in a divine vision. As an exiled priest, the Temple there was very much on his mind, and now he envisages, or is made to witness, the pagan abominations practiced in this holy space.

the gate of the inner court. "Court" is implied in an ellipsis in the Hebrew.

the icon of the provoking provocation. The unusual word for "icon," *semel,* is an appropriate borrowing from the Cannanite, where it indicates the statue of a god. The prophet refuses to name a particular god but instead uses an elliptical epithet of opprobrium, "the provoking provocation." The verbal stem from which that designation derives suggests "jealousy," which makes sense here because God is a "jealous" God, indignant when Israel goes whoring after other deities.

7. *there was a hole in the wall.* This is the oddest moment in Ezekiel's vision of the abominations in the Temple. It suggests a kind of prophetic voyeurism. There is a hole through which he might almost peek into the vile pagan rites practiced within the chambers of God's temple. In order actually to see them, however, he must enlarge the hole and break through the wall.

10. *every form of creeping thing and beast, disgusting things, and all the foul things of the house of Israel were incised on the wall.* There is an effective segue here from living creatures prohibited as food and regarded with disgust to the "foul things"—which is to say, idols—equally felt to be disgusting by the prophet. It is questionable whether there was a practice of incising the images of pagan gods on the temple walls, but it is a forceful representation of how deeply paganism had penetrated into the most sacred space of the nation.

11. *seventy men of the elders of Israel.* This assembly of the canonical seventy elders, evidently led by one of the eminent figures of the court aristocracy,

amounts to the group's celebrating a kind of black mass, at least in the eyes of the prophet.

dense cloud. The first of these two nouns, *ʿatar,* appears only here, but it is probably related to a Syriac word that means "fume." As elsewhere, when two synonymous nouns are joined in the construct form, the effect is an intensification of their meaning, hence "dense cloud" in this translation. Compare the very similar construction in Exodus 19:9, *ʿav-he ʿanan,* "the utmost cloud."

12. *Do you see, man, what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark.* Although the elders go on to say that the LORD does not see them, they may be hedging their bets or are perhaps fearful that some groups in the community of Judah—certainly prophets such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel—would vehemently object to what they are doing. The fact that they worship strange gods in their private chambers seems to contradict the pagan assembly in the Temple depicted here. Perhaps as a rule they practice their pagan rites in the darkness of their chambers but here have exceptionally joined together to celebrate the cult of strange gods within an inner hall of the Temple, still hidden from the eyes of the general populace but not from the prophet, who has enlarged the hole in the wall so that he can see everything.

14. *women were sitting there keening for Tammuz.* Tammuz is a deity imported from Babylonia (the Akkadian name is Dumuzi). Like Adonis, he is a vegetation god thought to die and descend into the underworld after the dying of vegetation at the end of the spring. Women in ancient Near Eastern societies were assigned the role of keening for the dead, and so they took over the cultic function of keening for Tammuz.

16. *bowing down eastward to the sun.* Worship of the sun god and other astral deities, because of Assyrian influences, became widespread in the last two centuries of the First Commonwealth.

17. *reaching out the vine branch to My nose.* The Masoretic Text says "their nose," but this is an explicit "scribal correction," introducing a kind of euphemism in order not to say something offensive relating to God. But the meaning of the expression is elusive. The attempt by some to link *zemorah,* "vine branch," with a homonymous root that means "strength" is far-fetched—the clear meaning of the word is "vine branch." Some have imagined,

perhaps fancifully, that it reflects the worship of a phallic deity. But, as Greenberg observes, the prophet at this point has moved on from pagan rituals to a condemnation of moral turpitude—"they . . . fill the land with outrage." The most reasonable assumption is that the branch extended toward the nose is some sort of insulting gesture.

CHAPTER 9

[1]And he called out to me in a loud voice, saying,
“Bring near those appointed over the city, each with
his weapon of destruction in his hand.” [2]And, look, six
men were coming by the way of the upper gate, which
faces to the north, and each had his mace in his hand,
and a man in their midst was dressed in linen with a
scribe’s case at his waist. And they came and stood by
the bronze altar. [3]And the glory of the LORD had
ascended from the cherub on which it had been to the
threshold of the house, and He called out to the man
wearing linen with a scribe’s case at his waist. [4]And
the LORD said to him, “Pass through the city, in the
midst of Jerusalem, and trace a mark on the foreheads
of the men groaning and moaning over all the
abominations done in her midst.” [5]And to these He
said in my hearing, “Pass through the city after him
and strike, let your eye not spare, nor show pity.
[6]Elder, young man and virgin, little ones and women
you shall slay, destroying. But do not approach any
man upon whom is the mark. And from My sanctuary

you shall begin.” [7]And they began with the elders who were in front of the house. [8]And He said to them, “Defile the house and fill the courts with corpses. Go forth.” And they went forth and struck in the city. [9]And it happened as they were striking that I remained, and I fell on my face and cried out and said, “Woe, O Master, LORD, are You destroying all the remnant of Israel as You pour out Your wrath on Jerusalem?” [10]And He said to me, “The crime of the house of Israel and Judah is very, very great, and the land is filled with bloodguilt and the city filled with injustice, for they have said, ‘The LORD has abandoned the land, and the LORD does not see.’ [11]And I on My part, My eye shall not spare nor will I show pity. I will bring their ways down on their head.” [12]And, look, the man dressed in linen with the case at his waist brought back word, saying, “I have done as You have charged.”

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *those appointed.* Though the Hebrew term suggests “officials,” or “appointed ones,” Greenberg notes that this same root is also associated with punishment or retribution, and so he renders it more grimly as “executioners.”

2. *mace.* This specification of the identity of the "weapons of destruction" points to an especially bloody and brutal implementation of the command of destruction—not with sword thrusts, but with the bashing of heads.

a man in their midst was dressed in linen. This makes a total of seven, the sanctified number. He wears linen like the priests (in Daniel, by extension, angels will be dressed in linen).

a scribe's case. He will use his pen and ink to make the marks on the foreheads of those to be saved.

4. *trace a mark on the foreheads.* The word for "mark," *taw,* is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In paleo-Hebrew script, the form of this letter was an X. The saving mark on the forehead recalls the mark that saves Cain from retribution.

groaning and moaning. The translation imitates the Hebrew sound-play, *haneʾenaḥim wehaneʾenaqim.*

5. *let your eye not spare, nor show pity.* These fierce phrases are a refrain through this whole large prophecy, repeatedly attached to God, but here to His agents.

6. *Elder, young man and virgin, little ones and women you shall slay.* Although other prophets foresee a comprehensive disaster that will sweep over the entire people, Ezekiel is distinctive in imagining an active undertaking of genocidal killing by executioners commanded by God.

7. *the elders who were in front of the house.* Presumably, these are the paganizing elders, previously seen within the Temple, who now have come out in front of it.

8. *Defile the house and fill the courts with corpses.* Corpses intrinsically defile a place. The command to defile the Temple is shocking, but as Greenberg notes, it has already been defiled by the abomination of idol worship and hence is no longer a fit place for the worship of YHWH.

9. *are You destroying all the remnant of Israel.* Some interpreters have taken this to contradict the saving of those marked on the forehead. In fact, it makes emotional sense: Ezekiel, confronted in his vision with the bloody spectacle of the Temple courts filled with corpses, and men, women and children

bludgeoned to death with maces everywhere, is devastated and feels as if the entire people were being wiped out.

10. *The crime of the house of Israel and Judah is very, very great.* Ezekiel's God is perhaps the most implacable of the many versions of God in the Hebrew Bible.

CHAPTER 10

[1]And I saw and, look, on the platform that was upon
the heads of the cherubim—like the sapphire stone,
like the look of the likeness of a throne was seen upon
them. [2]And He said to the man dressed in linen, and
said, “Come between the wheels beneath the cherubim
and fill your hands with fiery coals from between the
cherubs and cast them over the city.” And he came in
before my eyes. [3]And the cherubim were standing at
the right side of the house as a man enters, and the
cloud filled the inner court. [4]And the glory of the
LORD rose up over the cherub on the threshold of the
house and filled the house, and the house was filled
with the radiance of the glory of the LORD. [5]And the
sound of the cherubim’s wings could be heard as far as
the outer court, like the sound of El Shaddai when He
speaks. [6]And it happened when He charged the man
dressed in linen, saying, “Take fire from within the
wheelwork from among the cherubim,” he came and
stood by the wheel. [7]And the cherub reached out his
hand from between the cherubim to the fire that was

between the cherubim and carried it and gave it into the hands of the man dressed in linen, and he took it and went out. [8]And there appeared on the cherubim the form of a human hand beneath their wings. [9]And I saw, and, look, there were four wheels by the cherubim, a single wheel by each cherub, and the look of the wheels was like the color of chrysolite. [10]And their look, a single likeness for the four of them, as a wheel is within a wheel. [11]When they go, to their four sides they do go, they do not turn as they go, but to the place where the head turns, toward it they go, they do not turn as they go. [12]And all their flesh and their backs and their hands and their wings and the wheels were filled with eyes all round the four of them, their wheels. [13]As to the wheels, in my hearing they were called wheelwork. [14]And each one had four faces. The face of one was a cherub's face, and the face of the second was a human face, and of the third, a lion's face, and of the fourth, an eagle's face. [15]And the cherubim rose up—these were the creatures that I had seen by the Kebar Canal. [16]And when the cherubim went, the wheels went along with them, and when the cherubim lifted their wings to rise from the ground, the wheels did not turn either from alongside them. [17]When they stood still, they, too, stood still, and when they rose, they, too, rose, for the spirit of the creatures

was in them. [18]And the glory of the LORD went forth
from the threshold of the house and stood over the
cherubim. [19]And the cherubim lifted their wings and
rose from the ground before my eyes as they went
forth, and the wheels were opposite them. And they
stood still at the entrance of the eastern gate of the
LORD's house. And the glory of the God of Israel was
upon them from above. [20]These were the creatures that
I had seen beneath the God of Israel at the Kebar
Canal, and I knew that they were cherubim. [21]Each one
had four faces, and each one had four wings, and a
likeness of human hands was beneath the wings. [22]And
the likeness of their faces—these were the faces that I
had seen by the Kebar Canal, the same look. Each
straight ahead they did go.

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *like the look of the likeness of a throne.* Ezekiel's proclivity for interposing words negating the literalness of the nouns attached to the divine apparition is especially pronounced here.

2. *cast them over the city.* Throwing the fiery coals over the city is obviously either a symbolic prefiguration or the actual implementation of the fiery destruction that will engulf Jerusalem.

5. *El Shaddai.* This is an archaic—and hence usually poetic—designation of God that emphasizes His terrific power, though the etymology of the second word is disputed.

6. *he came and stood by the wheel.* Since in the next verse it is one of the cherubim who gives him the fiery coals, the man dressed in linen stops short of carrying out the command. David Kimchi plausibly suggests that he was afraid to reach into the wheelwork.

7. *gave it into the hands of the man.* No explanation is offered as to how his hands would not have been scorched. Contrast Isaiah 6:6, where a seraph needs tongs for the fiery coal.

12. *four of them, their wheels.* The ostensible apposition here looks awkward and "their wheels" may not belong. It must be said that there are several junctures in this description of the celestial chariot where the text looks garbled. This might even reflect a confusion on the part of the ancient scribes about what precisely was going on in this bewildering vision.

13. *As to the wheels . . . they were called wheelwork.* The puzzling fact is that both *ʾofanim,* "wheels," and *galgal,* "wheelwork," mean "wheel." This translation follows Greenberg and the New Jewish Publication Society version in using "wheelwork" for the collective noun *galgal*, but that may be no more than a strategy of desperation.

14. *The face of one was a cherub's face.* The description here diverges from the description in chapter 1. There, each of the creatures had four different faces. Here each appears to have four similar faces with the differences showing from one creature to the next. The face of the bull, moreover, in chapter 1 is replaced here by the face of a cherub (unless, as some have claimed, cherubs had bull faces). These discrepancies may derive from the fact that Ezekiel had two parallel but not entirely identical visions of the same celestial apparatus, or they may reflect struggles in the process of transmitting this difficult vision.

15. *these were the creatures.* Though the Hebrew uses a singular noun, the context requires understanding it as a collective noun.

22. *the same look.* The Hebrew here sounds odd: *marʾeyhem weʾotam* would be literally “their looks and them.” The translation is thus somewhat speculative.

CHAPTER 11

[1]And the wind bore me and brought me to the eastern
gate of the house of the LORD facing eastward, and,
look, in the entrance of the gate were twenty-five men,
and I saw in their midst Jaazaniah son of Ezer and
Pelatiah son of Benaiah, officials of the people. [2]And
He said to me, “Man, these are the men plotting
wrongdoing and devising evil counsel in this city,
[3]thinking, ‘Soon is not the time to build houses. It is
the pot and we are the meat.’ [4]Therefore prophesy
concerning them, prophesy, man.” [5]And the spirit of
the LORD fell upon me, and He said; “Say, thus said
the LORD: So have you thought and what comes to
your mind I know. [6]You have left many slain in this
city and filled its streets with the slain. [7]Therefore, thus
said the Master, the LORD: Your slain that you put
within it, they are the meat and it is the pot, and you
will I bring out from within it. [8]You feared the sword,
and a sword I will bring against you, said the Master,
the LORD. [9]And I will bring you out from within it
and give you into the hand of strangers and exact

punishment from you. [10]By the sword you shall fall, at the border of Israel I will punish you, and you shall know that I am the LORD. [11]It shall not be a pot for you nor shall you live within it as meat. At the border of Israel I will punish you. [12]And you shall know that I am the LORD in Whose statutes you did not go and My laws you did not do, but like the laws of the nations that were all round you did you do." [13]And it happened as I prophesied that Pelatiah son of Benaiah died, and I fell on my face and cried out in a loud voice and said, "Woe, O Master, the LORD, You are making an utter end of the remnant of Israel."

[14]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, [15]"Man, your brothers, your next of kin, and all the house of Israel to whom the dwellers of Jerusalem have said, 'Go away from the LORD. To us the land has been given as an inheritance.' [16]Therefore, say, Thus said the Master, the LORD: Though I have taken them far away among the nations and though I have scattered them among the lands and became for them but a bare sanctuary in the lands where they came, [17]therefore say, Thus said the Master, the LORD: I will gather you from the peoples and bring you together from the lands where you were scattered, and I will

give you Israel's soil. [18]And they shall come there and take away from it all its disgusting things and all its abominations. [19]And I will give them a single heart, and a new spirit I will put in your midst, and I will take away the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh. [20]So that they go by My statutes and keep My laws and do them, and they shall be a nation for Me and I will be their God. [21]But those whose heart goes after their disgusting things and their abominations, I have laid their ways on their head, said the Master, the LORD." [22]And the cherubim lifted their wings, with the wheels alongside them, and the glory of the LORD was over them from above. [23]And the glory of the LORD ascended from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is east of the city. [24]And a wind bore me and brought me to Chaldea, to the exiles, in the vision, in the divine spirit, and the vision that I had seen ascended away from me. [25]And I spoke to the exiles all the words of the LORD that He had showed me.

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *twenty-five men.* These are evidently the same twenty-five mentioned in 8:16 who were worshipping the sun.

3. *Soon is not the time to build houses.* The plotters belong to the party resisting Babylonia, and so they think that all efforts should be channeled into constructing fortifications, not building houses.

It is the pot and we are the meat. The sense of this rather odd metaphor is: it (the city) is the pot that contains us, and we are the good meat within the pot. But the metaphor undermines its own arrogant assertion because meat in a pot over a fire is destined to be cooked and consumed.

6. *You have left many slain in this city.* The preceding account of the turpitude of these Jerusalemites concentrated on their attachment to idolatry. Now, however, they are castigated as murderers.

7. *Your slain . . . they are the meat and it is the pot, and you will I bring out from within it.* God now reverses the self-congratulatory metaphor of the perpetrators of crime. Their victims are the true elite ("the meat"), and the victimizers will be cast out of the pot (that is, the city) as matter unfit for consumption.

10. *By the sword you shall fall, at the border of Israel.* The miscreants will be cast very far from the city in which they thought they might find safety. What the prophet may have in mind concretely is that they will flee Jerusalem in the face of the Babylonian invaders, only to be caught and killed at the border.

12. *like the laws of the nations that were all round you did you do.* Here the reference appears to be to idolatry. One should keep in mind that the Hebrew *mishpatim* means both "laws" and "practices" or "behavior."

13. *Woe, O Master, the LORD, You are making an utter end of the remnant of Israel.* This sentence could also be construed as a tormented question (Are you making . . .?). It may seem puzzling that Ezekiel should be distressed over the death of Pelatiah, who is after all one of the ringleaders of the men "devising evil counsel." All we know about Pelatiah is that he was some sort of high-ranking official, but this may have been enough to make his sudden death a cause of distress for the prophet. That is, if the leaders of the people suddenly begin to drop off in this fashion, is God about to wipe out the whole people?

15. *your brothers, your next of kin.* The designation "next of kin" is adopted from Greenberg. The literal sense is "your redemption people," that is, the people who because of their kinship are legally obliged to redeem property that has been somehow alienated from a person. (Compare the "redeeming kin" in the Book of Ruth.) The mention in the next verse of God's having "taken them far away among the nations" indicates that these are the exiles. The self-satisfied residents of Jerusalem want to dissociate themselves from their exiled brothers, claiming exclusive rights to the land: "Go away from the land. To us the land has been given as an inheritance."

16. *but a bare sanctuary.* The Hebrew expression *miqdash meʿat* was taken by later tradition as a reference to the synagogue, but this text well antedates the institution of the synagogue. The idea seems to be that in the exile, in the absence of a temple, God provides only minimal indications—perhaps through prophecy?—of His continuing closeness to Israel.

17. *Israel's soil.* Here, and in the next chapter, the reference seems to be to the land, but the suggestion of soil to be tilled in the Hebrew term is worth retaining.

19. *give them . . . put in your midst.* As elsewhere, the switching back and forth between third person and second person reflects ancient Hebrew usage.

21. *But those whose heart goes after their disgusting things.* The beginning of this clause in the Masoretic Text reads, incomprehensibly, "But to the heart [*weʾel lev*] of their disgusting things." The translation reflects a widely accepted emendation grounded in the Targum Yonatan, *weʾeleh ʾaḥarey.*

24. *in the vision, in the divine spirit.* By stipulating these phrases, Ezekiel again emphasizes that all the sights he has been vouchsafed to see in Jerusalem were a visionary experience, not a bodily one. Since the same noun, *marʾeh* (literally, "what is seen"), is then used for the celestial chariot that rises into the sky above the prophet, the implication is that it, too, is not a literal, physical entity, but a visionary reality that reveals something about the nature of the deity.

CHAPTER 12

[1]And the word of the LORD came to me saying,
[2]“Man, in the midst of the house of rebellion you
dwell, who have eyes to see but do not see, ears to hear
but do not hear, for they are a house of rebellion. [3]And
you, man, make for yourself exile’s gear and go into
exile by day before their eyes, and go into exile from
your place to another place before their eyes. Perhaps
they will see that they are a house of rebellion. [4]And
you shall take out your gear as exile’s gear by day
before their eyes. And you, you shall go out at evening
before their eyes as the going out to exile. [5]Before their
eyes, break through the wall and take out your gear
through it. [6]Before their eyes you shall shoulder the
burden. In the gloom you shall take it out. Your face
you shall cover and you shall not see the land, for I am
making you a portent for the house of Israel.” [7]And so
did I do as I was charged. I took out my gear as exile’s
gear by day, and at evening I broke through the wall by
hand in the gloom. I took it out, I shouldered the
burden before their eyes. [8]And the word of the LORD

came to me in the morning, saying, [9]“Man, have not the house of Israel, the house of rebellion, said to you, ‘What are you doing?’ [10]Say to them, Thus said the Master, the LORD: The prince is this burden in Jerusalem and all the house of Israel who are in their midst. [11]Say, I am your portent. As I have done, so it will be done to them. In exile in captivity they shall go. [12]And the prince who is in their midst shall shoulder the burden in the gloom, and he shall go out, they shall break through the wall to bring out gear through it. His face he shall cover, so that he not see the land with his eyes. [13]And I will cast My net over him, and he shall be caught in My toils. And I will bring him to Babylonia, to the land of the Chaldeans, but he shall not see it, and there shall he die. [14]And all that is around him, his allies and all his divisions, I will scatter to every wind, and the sword I will unsheathe after him. [15]And they shall know that I am the LORD when I disperse them among the nations and scatter them in the lands. [16]And I will leave of them a handful of men from the sword, from the famine, and from pestilence, that they may recount all their abominations among the nations where they have come. And they shall know that I am the LORD.”

[17]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[18]“Man, your bread you shall eat quaking, and your water you shall drink in upheaval and in unease. [19]And you shall say of the people of the land, Thus said the Master, the LORD, concerning the dwellers of Jerusalem on the soil of Israel: their bread they shall eat in unease, and their water they shall drink in desolation, so that its land be desolate of what fills it, because of the outrage of all who dwell in it. [20]And the settled towns shall be in ruins, and the land shall be a desolation, and you shall know that I am the LORD.”

[21]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[22]“Man, what means this proverb for you on the soil of Israel, saying, ‘Long days will pass and vision will vanish’? [23]Therefore, say to them, Thus said the Master, the LORD: I have put an end to this proverb, and they shall no longer recite it in Israel. Rather, speak to them, ‘The time has drawn near for every vision to come about.’ [24]For there shall no longer be any empty vision or soothing divination within the house of Israel. [25]For I the LORD, I will speak the word that I speak and it shall be done. It shall no longer be drawn out, but in your days, O house of rebellion. I will speak a word and do it, said the

Master, the LORD.” [26]And the word of the LORD
came to me, saying, [27]“Man, look, the house of Israel
say, ‘The vision that he sees, of many days hence and
of faraway times he prophesies.’ [28]Therefore say to
them, Thus said the LORD: All My words shall no
longer be drawn out. I will speak a word and it shall be
done,’” said the Master, the LORD.

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *who have eyes to see but do not see, ears to hear but do not hear.* The people’s resistance to the prophetic message is a recurrent theme in the prophecies (see especially Isaiah’s dedication scene, Isaiah 6). But this clause also recalls the language of Psalm 115:5–6, where it is applied to idols—as if to say, these stupidly obtuse people are no better than dumb carvings of wood.

3. *exile’s gear.* These would be the basic implements of daily survival wrapped up in a pack and carried on the shoulder. Assyrian bas-reliefs depict precisely this image of exiles driven off by Assyrian troops.

go into exile . . . before their eyes. Ezekiel is addressing a group of exiles in Babylonia in the late 590s B.C.E., but his symbolic act prefigures a much more comprehensive exile that in fact will take place in 586.

4. *you shall go out at evening.* Although this looks like a contradiction of his going out into exile by day, the intention may be to suggest the encompassing nature of the departure into exile—by day, *yomam,* and in the evening, *ba ʿerev,* as well.

5. *break through the wall.* This peculiar detail is an odd echo of the prophet’s breaking through the wall of the Temple in 8:8 in order to witness the

abominations performed inside. Perhaps an equivalence is suggested between discovering the shame within the chambers and the shame of exile outside. There may be an intimation here of something surreptitious in the flight into exile. Perhaps more pertinent, he is asked to do damage to the house he is leaving, with no expectation that he will return to it.

6. *Your face you shall cover and you shall not see the land.* Some interpreters take this as a gesture of hiding because of the humiliation of exile. The second clause, however, suggests that the aim is to cover the eyes so that the exile will not look on the homeland he is forced to abandon.

10. *The prince is this burden.* The Hebrew shows a pun: *hanasi'*, "the prince" (etymologically, "the one borne up"), and *hamasa'*, "the burden."

13. *he shall not see it.* Many interpreters, medieval and modern, take this as a reference to the last Judahite king, Zedekiah, who was blinded before he was brought to Babylonia (the medieval exegetes see this as a prophecy that was fulfilled, the moderns as a prophecy *ex eventu,* after the fact). Even if this clause does refer to Zedekiah's fate, it does not follow that the preceding verses about the exile of the king reflect that fate, because the terms are rather general. Even the wording here could simply stem from the prophet's knowledge that it was a common practice to blind vassal kings who had rebelled.

22. *what means this proverb for you.* The "you" is plural in the Hebrew, so in contrast to other passages that begin with the vocative "man," it is not the prophet but the people that is addressed.

Long days will pass and vision will vanish. Time will go on, and the prophet's vision of impending doom will not come to pass.

23. *The time has drawn near for every vision to come about.* This reversal of the popular proverb that dismisses prophecy has in view the prophecies of doom pronounced by Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and a few others, "every vision" being a kind of ellipsis for prophecies of doom.

24. *For there shall no longer be any empty vision or soothing divination.* It now emerges that the people, while rejecting the prophecies of imminent disaster,

embraced false prophets who assured them nothing amiss would happen. This is a theme emphatically displayed in Jeremiah.

25. *It shall no longer be drawn out.* This translation reproduces the literal force of the Hebrew, which obviously means "to be delayed."

27. *of many days hence and of faraway times he prophesies.* This is a somewhat different formulation of dismissal of the prophecy from the proverb cited in verse 22. According to the proverb, with the passage of time it will be seen that the prophecy is entirely groundless. Here, the deniers say that these predictions of doom may someday be fulfilled, but that time is so distant that it is of no concern to them. Ezekiel, we should recall, is at this point prophesying no more than five years before the final destruction of the kingdom of Judah, so in fact his prediction will come about very soon and not in "faraway times."

CHAPTER 13

[1]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[2]“Man, prophesy to the prophets of Israel who
prophesy, and say to these prophets out of their own
heart, Listen to the word of the LORD. [3]Thus said the
Master, the LORD: Woe to the scoundrel prophets
who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing.
[4]Like foxes among the ruins, O Israel, your prophets
have become. [5]You did not go up in the breaches and
build a barrier around the house of Israel to stand in
battle on the day of the LORD. [6]They saw empty
visions and false divinations, saying, ‘the LORD said,’
when the LORD did not send them, and they expected
to fulfill their word. [7]Why, you have seen an empty
vision and a false divination you have spoken, saying,
‘the LORD said,’ when I did not speak. [8]Therefore,
thus said the Master, the LORD: Inasmuch as you
have spoken emptiness and have seen false visions,
therefore, here I am against you, said the Master, the
LORD. [9]And My hand shall be against the prophets
who see empty visions and perform false divinations.

They shall not take part in the council of My people and shall not be written in the writ of the house of Israel and shall not come to the soil of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD. [10]Surely because they misled My people, saying, It is well, when it was not well. The people was building a mere partition, and they daubed it with plaster. [11]Say to the daubers of plaster that it will fall. When pounding rain comes—and you—hailstones fall and a storm wind that splits things apart, [12]and, look the wall shall fall. Why, it shall be said to you, Where is the plaster that you daubed? [13]Therefore, Thus said the Master, the LORD: I will split things apart with a storm wind in My wrath, and pounding rain in My anger shall there be and hailstones in wrath for utter destruction. [14]And I will wreck the wall on which you daubed plaster and bring it down to the ground, and its foundation shall be laid bare. And it shall fall and you shall be utterly destroyed within it, and you shall know that I am the LORD. [15]And I will exhaust My wrath upon the wall and upon those who daubed it with plaster, and I will say to you: the wall is gone and those who plastered it are gone, [16]O prophets of Israel who prophesy concerning Jerusalem and see a vision of well-being for her when there is no well-being, said the Master, the LORD. [17]And you, man, set your face toward the

daughters of your people who babble prophecy out of their own heart, and prophesy about them. [18]And you shall say, Thus said the Master, the LORD: Woe, you who sew cushions for all the joints of the arms and make padding for the head of every stature to entrap lives. Would you entrap the lives of My people and your own lives preserve? [19]And you profane Me to My people with handfuls of barley and morsels of bread to proclaim death for people who will not die and to proclaim life for people who will not live, as you lie to My people, who listen to lies. [20]Therefore thus said the LORD: Here I am against your cushions with which you entrap lives like birds. And I will tear them from your arms and set free the people whom you entrapped like birds. [21]And I will tear off your cushions and save My people from your hands, and they shall no longer be in the toils in your hand. And you shall know that I am the LORD. [22]Inasmuch as you have struck the heart of the innocent man with lies, when I did not cause him grief, and strengthened the hands of the wicked man to preserve him that he turn not back from his evil way to preserve his life. [23]Therefore, no longer shall you see empty visions and no longer perform divinations, and I will save My people from your hands, and you shall know that I am the LORD."

CHAPTER 13 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *prophets out of their own heart.* The idiom "out of their own heart," which occurs elsewhere, indicates things that are purely a person's invention.

3. *follow their own spirit.* Greenberg renders "spirit" here as "whims." It is obviously a parallel to "their own heart" in verse 1.

5. *the breaches.* This image picks up the simile of the foxes among the ruins from the previous verse: foxes could make their way through the breach in the stone walls protecting vineyards and planted fields to wreak havoc within. Thus, the prophets, who should have protected the people, are themselves predators.

to stand in battle on the day of the LORD. As elsewhere in the Prophets, "the day of the LORD" is the day when God comes to exact retribution from Israel for its offenses. The prophets, then, in this battle metaphor, should have defended Israel and warded off punishment from God by warning the people about its waywardness.

9. *shall not come to the soil of Israel.* This phrase is an indication that Ezekiel is excoriating a group of false prophets in the Babylonian exile.

10. *The people was building a mere partition.* The subject of the verb in the Hebrew is simply "it," but its antecedent has been introduced in the translation in order to avoid confusion. The Hebrew word *ḥayits*, represented in this translation as "mere partition," occurs only here; however, it patently derives from a root that suggests demarcating inside from outside. Both the etymology and the context indicate that it is a rather flimsy barrier, hence the addition of "mere" in the translation.

they daubed it with plaster. Many interpreters conclude that the word for "plaster," *tafel* (elsewhere a term for "insipid"), designates an inferior form of plaster, mixed with straw. But smearing plaster over a wall—especially if it is a shaky wall—would scarcely strengthen it against breaches, no matter what kind of plaster was used.

11. *When pounding rain comes—and you.* The "and you" definitely looks out of syntactic place and may reflect a scribal error.

13. *Thus said the Master, the* LORD. Rimon Kasher proposes that Ezekiel's constant use of this introductory formula could be polemic: Ezekiel has been sent by God and is faithfully quoting God's actual words, in contrast to the false prophets.

split things apart. The splitting verb is chosen in reference to the wall.

hailstones. The Hebrew *ʾelgavish* is not the usual word for "hail" and may reflect poetic diction.

15. *I will exhaust My wrath.* The Hebrew employs the same verbal stem that appears in "utter destruction" and "utterly destroyed."

17. *daughters of your people who babble prophecy out of their own heart.* Having dealt with the male prophets, Ezekiel now is commanded to turn to the women. They are not so much prophets as soothsayers or fortune-tellers, and consequently the verb for prophesying is used here in the reflexive conjugation, which has the connotation of going into ecstatic fits, a nuance represented in this translation by the addition of "babble."

18. *cushions . . . padding.* We have only an approximate sense of the meaning of both these nouns, and the same is true of their function. They appear to be the trappings of rites of divination performed by these women, but the specifics remain elusive.

all the joints of the arms. This same phrase in Jeremiah means "armpits," but here the whole arm seems to be involved, as verse 21 indicates.

19. *with handfuls of barley and morsels of bread.* These are used in the superstitious ritual, either as instruments of divination—in Mesopotamia, flour was cast on water for this purpose—or as offerings to the gods.

22. *to preserve his life.* This is the same verb that is used in verse 19 in the sense of "proclaim life." These soothsaying women, instead of making baseless proclamations about who is destined to live, should have been warning the wicked man to turn back from his path of evil in order to save his life.

CHAPTER 14

[1]And men of the elders of Israel came to me and sat down before me. [2]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, [3]“Man, these men have brought to mind their foul things, and the stumbling block of their crime they have set before them. Shall I respond in an oracle to them? [4]Therefore, speak to them and say to them, Thus said the Master, the LORD: Every man of the house of Israel who brings to mind his foul things and puts before him the stumbling block of his crime and comes to the prophet, I the LORD will answer him as he comes with his many foul things, [5]so as to catch the house of Israel in their thoughts, as they all have fallen back from Me with their foul things. [6]Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus said the Master, the LORD: Turn back, and turn away from your foul things, and turn your face away from all your abominations. [7]For every man of the house of Israel and of the sojourner who sojourns in Israel who falls back from Me and brings to mind his foul things and puts the stumbling block of his crime before him and

comes to the prophet to ask an oracle of him, I the LORD will answer him Myself. [8]And I will set My face against that man and desolate him as a sign and a byword, and I will cut him off from the midst of My people, and you shall know that I am the LORD. [9]And the prophet who will be enticed and will speak a word, it is I the LORD Who enticed that prophet, and I will reach out My hand against him and destroy him from the midst of My people. [10]And they shall bear their punishment, he who seeks an oracle and the prophet, with like punishment. [11]So that the house of Israel no longer stray from Me nor be defiled by all their transgressions, and they shall be My people, and as for Me, I will be their God, said the Master, the LORD."

[12]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, [13]"Man, when a land offends against Me, to commit betrayal, I will stretch out My hand against her and break her staff of bread and let loose against her famine and cut off from her man and beast. [14]And these three men shall be within her, Noah, Daniel, and Job. They in their righteousness shall save their lives, said the Master, the LORD. [15]Should I send vicious beasts through the land and they bereave her and she become a desolation with no passerby because of the

beasts, [16]these three men within her—by My life, said the Master, the LORD—shall surely save neither sons nor daughters. They alone shall be saved, and the land shall be a desolation. [17]Or should I bring the sword against that land and say, The sword shall pass through the land and I will cut off from her man and beast, [18]these three men within her—by My life, said the Master, the LORD—shall not save sons and daughters but they alone shall be saved. [19]Or should I let loose pestilence against that land and pour My wrath on her in blood to cut off from within her man and beast, [20]and Noah, Daniel, and Job are within her—by My life, said the Master, the LORD—they shall surely save neither son nor daughter. They in their righteousness shall save their lives. [21]For thus said the Master, the LORD: How much more so when I have let loose against Jerusalem My four evil scourges, the sword and famine and vicious beasts and pestilence, to cut off from her man and beast. [22]And, look, there shall be left in her a remnant that is brought out, sons and daughters. Here they are going out to you. And you shall see their way and their deeds and be consoled for the evil that I brought upon Jerusalem, all that I have brought upon her. [23]And they shall console you when you see their way and their deeds, and you

shall know that not for naught did I do all that I did against her," said the Master, the LORD.

CHAPTER 14 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *came to me and sat down before me.* The only reason they would come to the prophet would be to hear an oracle from him. This very expectation enrages Ezekiel because he is aware that while seeking instructions about the intentions of YHWH—hedging their bets, one might say—their thoughts are taken up with other gods.

3. *their foul things, and the stumbling block of their crime.* It is characteristic of Ezekiel's polemic style that he often will not bring himself to refer to false gods as "gods" or "idols" but instead substitutes pejorative epithets—*gilulim,* "foul things," a word that recalls the Hebrew term for "turds," and "stumbling block of their crime." (For this reason, translations that render *gilulim* as "idols" or "fetishes" dilute the force of the original.)

Shall I respond in an oracle to them? The verb *darash* is the technical term for inquiry of an oracle, which is precisely what the elders have come to do.

7. *I the LORD will answer him Myself.* The "answer" that God says He will deliver is not the communication of an oracle but withering punishment.

9. *And the prophet who will be enticed and will speak a word, it is I the LORD Who enticed that prophet.* The theology behind this statement is somewhat convoluted. The evident idea is that these false prophets have habitually been speaking "out of their own heart," which surely suggests human initiative. Given that behavior, God will now proceed to "entice" (or "seduce") such a prophet to continue pronouncing false prophecies so that he will be ripe for punishment.

11. *they shall be My people, and as for Me, I will be their God.* This recurring statement expresses Ezekiel's expectation that after the national cleansing of terrible retribution, Israel's wholeness will be restored.

14. *Noah, Daniel, and Job.* It is now clear to all scholars that here Daniel does not refer to the protagonist of the Book of Daniel. One should note that the consonantal text allows us to pronounce this name as *Danʾel*. In the Ugaritic Epic of Aqhat, there is a righteous judge named *Danʾel*. These three figures, then, are three legendary righteous men, none belonging to the people of Israel. Job's presence among the three reflects the fact that a story about a righteous man named Job was current in the region well before the composition of the Book of Job. The non-Israelite identity of the three is in keeping with the generalizing force of the declaration, "when a land offends against Me," which is to say, any land.

16. *these three . . . shall surely save neither sons nor daughters.* In Ezekiel's implacable moral vision, God follows a more stringent standard of justice than he does in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. There, he agreed to save the cities of the plain if there were ten righteous men within them, and in the implemented destruction, Lot was able to save his two daughters. Here, only the three righteous men will survive, and their own children will perish.

21. *How much more so.* This formula for an *a fortiori* condition, *ʾaf ki,* is applied here because if any offending land is subject to the unremitting scourge of divine punishment, an offending Jerusalem, which was God's chosen city, will all the more be punished.

22. *there shall be left in her a remnant that is brought out, sons and daughters.* This is the surprise turn of God's compassion for Israel. By all rights, since the sons and daughters of all other lands would not be spared, we might expect that Jerusalem's sons and daughters would perish. God, however, will not allow the covenanted people to be utterly destroyed, and so, after the terrible devastation, the sons and daughters survive to go out of the city and join the earlier exiles in Babylonia as the nucleus of national regeneration.

23. *And they shall console you when you see their way and their deeds.* Although many claim that *ʿalilot,* "deeds," has a negative sense in Ezekiel, the present context invites the opposite inference: the exiles will be consoled

when they see these sons and daughters behaving as Israelites should and thus bringing hope for the future. There may even be an intended contrast between the paganizing elders of the previous prophecy and the young exiles here.

CHAPTER 15

[1]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[2]“Man, what will come of the vine stock, the vine
branch, of all the trees of the forest? [3]Will wood be
taken from it to use for any task? Will a peg be taken
from it to hang upon it any vessel? [4]Look, it is given to
the fire to be consumed, its two ends the fire consumes
and its inside is reduced to ash. Can it serve for any
task? [5]Look, when it was whole, it could be used for
no task. How much more so when fire consumes it and
it is reduced to ash. Could it still be used for any task?
[6]Therefore, thus said the Master, the LORD: Like the
vine stock among the trees of the forest that I give to
the fire to consume, so have I given the dwellers of
Jerusalem. [7]And I will set My face against them. From
the fire they shall come out, but the fire shall consume
them. And you shall know that I am the LORD when I
set My face against them. [8]And I will make the land a
desolation inasmuch as they have betrayed,” said the
Master, the LORD.

CHAPTER 15 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And the word of the LORD came to me.* In this instance, the formula introduces a parable instead of the usual message of castigation. Because the borders of the parable are quite distinct, the chapter concludes with the end of the parable, not attaching to it any other kind of prophecy. This makes the present chapter the shortest in the book.

2. *the vine stock.* The Hebrew *ʿets-hagefen* could mean either "wood of the vine," as some versions represent it, or "tree of the vine." The grapevine, of course, is not exactly a tree, though its branches are made of woodlike material. The point of the parable is that, unlike the wood of real trees, the branches of the vine cannot be made into anything. This translation adopts from Greenberg "vine stock" as a solution.

4. *it is given to the fire to be consumed.* You can't make anything out of vine branches, but you can feed a fire with them if they are sufficiently dry.

5. *How much more so.* The logic of the *a fortiori* statement is evident: if the branches were useless for anything when they were whole, once they are burned there is nothing left of them except ashes.

6. *Like the vine stock . . . so have I given the dwellers of Jerusalem.* Given the aggressively didactic purpose of this parable, its meaning is now clearly spelled out. Comparisons of Israel to a vineyard or a vine were traditional (see the Parable of the Vineyard in Isaiah 5), but here the comparison is tilted hard against Israel. Just as the vine is useless in comparison to the wood of real trees, the people of Israel has demonstrated its own worthlessness by its treacherous behavior, and hence all that it is good for is to be consumed by fire. The fire is quite literal because conquered cities were put to the torch.

7. *From the fire they shall come out.* The critical consensus is that the first fire is the partial destruction of Jerusalem when Jehoiachin was exiled in 597 B.C.E. A greater destruction is to come.

CHAPTER 16

[1]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[2]“Man, make known to Jerusalem her abominations.
[3]And you shall say, Thus said the Master, the LORD
to Jerusalem: Your origins and your birthplace are
from the land of the Canaanite. Your father was an
Amorite and your mother a Hittite. [4]As to your birth,
on the day of your birth, your navel cord was not cut
nor were you washed smooth in water nor were you
rubbed with salt nor were you swaddled. [5]No eye had
pity on you to do even one of these to show mercy to
you, but you were flung out into the field in the disgust
you caused on the day of your birth. [6]And I passed by
you and saw you wallowing in your blood, and I said to
you, ‘In your blood live,’ and I said to you, ‘In your
blood live.’ [7]Myriad as the plants of the field I made
you, and you grew and came of age and put on the
finest jewels. Your breasts were ripe and your hair
sprung up, but you were stark naked. [8]And I passed by
you and saw you, and, look, your time was the time for
lovemaking. And I spread My skirt over you and

covered your nakedness, and vowed to you and entered
a covenant with you, said the Master, the LORD, and
you became Mine. [9]And I washed you in water and
rinsed your blood from upon you and rubbed you with
oil. [10]And I dressed you in embroidered cloth and shod
you in ocher-dyed leather and turbaned you in linen
and covered you with silk. [11]And I bedecked you with
jewels and put bracelets on your arms and a necklace
round your neck. [12]And I put a ring on your nose and
earrings on your ears and a splendid diadem on your
head. [13]And you were bedecked with gold and silver,
and your attire was linen and silk and embroidered
cloth. Fine flour and honey and oil you ate, and you
became very, very beautiful and fit to be a queen.
[14]And a name for you went out among the nations for
your beauty, for it was consummate through My
splendor that I set upon you, said the Master, the
LORD. [15]And you trusted in your beauty and played
the whore with your name, and you spilled out your
whoring upon every passerby—his it was. [16]And you
took from your garments and made yourself tapestried
high places and played the whore on them. Such things
should never be. [17]And you took your splendid
ornaments, from My gold and from My silver that I
gave to you, and made for yourself male images and
played the whore with them. [18]And you took your

embroidered garments and covered them, and My oil and My incense you set before them. [19]And My bread that I gave you, the fine flour and honey and oil that I fed you, you set before them as a fragrant odor, and so it was, said the Master, the LORD. [20]And you took your sons and your daughters whom you had born Me and sacrificed them to these as food. And as though your whorings were not enough, [21]you slaughtered My sons and gave them over to these. [22]And with all your abominations and your whorings you did not recall the days of your youth when you were stark naked, wallowing in your blood you were. [23]And it happened after all your evil—woe, oh woe to you—said the Master, the LORD, [24]that you built yourself mounds and made yourself a height in every square. [25]At every crossroad you built your height, and you befouled your beauty and spread your legs for every passerby and multiplied your whorings. [26]And you played the whore with the Egyptians, your big-membered neighbors, and multiplied your whorings to vex Me. [27]And, look, I set My hand on you and cut back your daily portion and gave you into the gullet of those who hate you, the Philistine girls shocked by your lewd way. [28]And you played the whore with the Assyrians insatiably, and you played the whore with them, yet were not sated. [29]And you multiplied your whorings as far as the

trader-land, Chaldea, but even in this you were not
sated. [30]How hot was your ardor, said the Master, the
LORD, when you did all these, the acts of a willful
whore, [31]Building your mound at every crossroad and
making your height in every square, but you were not
like a whore, for you scorned a whore's pay.
[32]Adulteress, who takes strangers instead of her
husband! [33]To every whore they give pay, but you, you
gave your pay to all your lovers and bribed them to
come to bed with you in your whoring all around.
[34]And you became the contrary of women in your
whoring, and after you none will play the whore so,
when you gave a whore's pay and no whore's pay was
given you but the contrary. [35]Therefore, whore, listen
to the word of the LORD. [36]Thus said the Master, the
LORD: Inasmuch as your wetness poured out and you
laid bare your nakedness in your whoring with your
lovers and with all the foul things of your
abominations, as by the blood of your children that
you gave to them, [37]therefore I am about to gather all
your lovers to whom you were sweet, and all whom
you loved with all whom you hated, and I will gather
them against you from all around and lay bare your
nakedness to them, and they shall see all your
nakedness. [38]And I will condemn you with the
punishment of adulteresses and women who shed

blood and give you over to blood, wrath, and jealousy.
39And I will give you into their hand, and they shall
wreck your mound and raze your heights, and they
shall strip your garments from you and take your
splendid ornaments and leave you stark naked. 40And
they shall bring up a crowd against you and stone you
and hack you to pieces with their swords. 41And they
shall burn your houses in fire and inflict punishment
upon you before the eyes of many women, and I will
stop you from being a whore, nor whore's pay shall
you give anymore. 42And I will let My fury against you
come to a rest, and My jealousy of you shall turn
away, and I will be tranquil and no longer be vexed.
43Inasmuch as you did not recall the days of your youth
nor quake before Me in all these things, I on My part,
look, I have set out your way first, said the Master, the
LORD. Have you not done lewdness in addition to all
your abominations? 44Look, whoever pronounces a
byword says about you, 'Like mother, like daughter.'
45You are your mother's daughter, showing contempt
for her husband and her children. And you are your
sister's sister, who showed contempt for their husbands
and their children. Your mother is a Hittite and your
father is an Amorite. 46And your big sister is Samaria
—she and her daughters—who dwells on your left, and
your little sister who dwells on your right is Sodom and

her daughters. [47]Did you not go in their ways and perform their abominations? Very soon, you will have acted more ruinously than they in all your ways. [48]By My life, said the Master, the LORD, surely Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done. [49]Here was the crime of Sodom and her daughters: the pride of satiety of bread and the ease of tranquillity she and her daughters had, and she did not support the hand of the poor and the needy. [50]And they were haughty and performed abominations before Me, and I removed them when I saw it. [51]And Samaria, barely half your offenses she committed, and you did more abominations than these, and you made your sister look innocent through all your abominations that you performed. [52]Even you, bear your disgrace for advocating for your sister through your offenses in which you were more abominable than they and they more innocent than you. And even you, be shamed and bear your disgrace for making your sister look innocent. [53]And I will restore their fortunes, the fortunes of Sodom and her daughters and the fortunes of Samaria and her daughters, and the fortunes of your captives in their midst, [54]so that you bear your disgrace and be disgraced by all that you have done in giving comfort to them. [55]And your sisters, Sodom and her daughters, shall be restored to their former state, and

Samaria and her daughters shall be restored to their former state, and you and your daughters shall be restored to your former state. [56]Was not Sodom, your sister, a word of scorn in your mouth on the day of your pride, [57]before your evil was exposed? Now [you are] a disgrace to the daughters of Aram and all her environs, to the daughters of the Philistines who loathe you all around. [58]You have borne your lewdness and your abominations, said the LORD. [59]For thus said the Master, the LORD: I will do unto you as you have done when you despised the oath to violate the covenant. [60]But I on My part will recall My covenant with you in the days of your youth and establish for you an everlasting covenant. [61]And you shall recall your ways and be ashamed when you receive your big sisters and your little sisters and I give them to you as daughters, though they are not of your covenant. [62]And I Myself will establish the covenant with you, and you will know that I am the LORD. [63]So that you recall and be shamed, and you shall be unable to open your mouth again because of your disgrace when I atone for you for all that you have done," said the Master, the LORD.

CHAPTER 16 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *Your origins and your birthplace are from the land of the Canaanite.* The point is that the people of Israel is not to think of itself as altogether unique—it is just one of the Canaanite peoples (Amorites and Hittites are ethnic groups repeatedly numbered among the seven that constitute the population of Canaan). One wonders whether this statement might reflect a historical tradition that the origins of Israel were not in a Hebrew slave population escaped from Egypt but among the indigenous peoples of Canaan. That, in fact, is the view of modern scholarship.

4. *your navel cord was not cut.* This emphasis on addressing the physical care of the newborn prepares us for the focus on the physicality of the mature woman who will develop from this infant.

nor were you rubbed with salt. There was a practice—still sometimes observed among Bedouins—of rubbing the baby's body with a mixture of olive oil and salt in the belief that it toughened the tender skin.

5. *you were flung out into the field in the disgust you caused.* It is hard to relate these details of the neglect of the newborn babe to the actual history of Israel, except, perhaps, through some general sense that the origins of the people were humble and unpromising. The point seems to be that God now takes up the neglected and rejected child and nurtures her, bringing her to flourishing womanhood.

6. *wallowing in your blood.* This would be the blood of childbirth that had not been wiped away.

In your blood live. Despite being covered with blood, you will now live. There may be a suggestion that the future history of Israel will be marked by bloodshed but that the people will nevertheless survive. The repetition of these words might be a scribal duplication.

7. *Myriad.* Although many interpreters understand this simply to mean "growing" or "sprouting," the set meaning of the Hebrew term is "myriad," and this surely could be a reference to the proliferation of the people, the allegory of the daughter slipping from the allegorical vehicle to its tenor or

referent, the history of Israel. This will occur again at another point in the prophecy.

your hair. The context suggests that this is pubic hair.

8. *your time was the time for lovemaking.* The infant girl has passed puberty, and God (seen before as a kind of foster father) will now take her as His bride —"I . . . vowed to you and entered a covenant with you . . . and you became Mine." But the focus on her sexuality will then be given an explosive development.

9. And I washed you in water and rinsed your blood from upon you. These acts appear to repair the neglect of the infant, as though the blood of birth were still on her. But the blood now may well be the blood from the onset of menstruation.

10. *I dressed you in embroidered cloth.* In the allegory, this whole catalogue of finery refers to the splendor of Jerusalem and its Temple that God bestowed on His people.

15. *And you trusted in your beauty and played the whore.* The image of unfaithful Israel as a whore betraying her Spouse by dalliance with alien gods is common in the Prophets, appearing in Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. No other prophet, however, focuses at such length and so concretely as does Ezekiel on the physical aspects of promiscuity. One detects here an expression of Ezekiel's distinctive psychology, which appears to involve some sort of morbid obsession with the female body in its sexual aspect. The word "whore" and its derivatives are repeated again and again.

you spilled out your whoring upon every passerby. Because of the unusual choice of the verb "spill out," the reference may well be to vaginal secretions as a metonomy for "whoring." Such a reference is made explicit in verse 36.

16. *tapestried high places.* This is a crossover from allegorical vehicle to tenor: the woman Zion was adorned in finery; here she takes embroidered cloth to decorate the altars of pagan worship.

Such things should never be. The Hebrew wording at this point is somewhat cryptic, so the translation is an educated guess.

17. *made for yourself male images and played the whore with them.* The whoring is again the following of a pagan cult, but in the allegorical vehicle there is a suggestion of autoeroticism in this playing with male—probably phallic—images.

18. *covered them.* That is, covered the idols.

My oil and My incense. The oil and incense that should have been used for the worship of YHWH in the Temple were devoted to pagan deities.

20. *And you took your sons and your daughters.* Child sacrifice, which on the evidence of the Prophets was actually practiced in ancient Israel, is regarded as one of the greatest obscenities of the pagan cult.

24. *mounds . . . a height in every square.* These structures are different from the hilltop altars or "high places" mentioned so frequently, but they are clearly constructed sites for pagan worship.

26. *the Egyptians, your big-membered neighbors.* As is often the case of different peoples living in proximity, fantasies spring up about the sexual potency or endowments of the neighboring group. Here, the prophet excoriates the lasciviousness of the Daughter of Zion by asserting that she was drawn to the Egyptians by the supposed large size of their male members. This complements the image of playing the whore with phallic icons.

27. *the Philistine girls shocked by your lewd way.* Even the young women of Philistia, reputed to be far from virtuous, are shocked by your lasciviousness.

29. *but even in this you were not sated.* This reiterated emphasis clearly suggests that the Daughter of Zion is what used to be called a nymphomaniac, before that term was discredited.

30. *How hot was your ardor.* The meaning of both the adjective and the noun is not altogether clear. This translation follows Greenberg's philological analysis and adopts his English rendering of the phrase. The heat of ardor is certainly in keeping with the thematic emphasis of the prophecy as a whole.

31. *for you scorned a whore's pay.* You did not give yourself to other men for pay, which at least would have had a commercial logic, but gratuitously, out

of sheer perversity.

32. *instead of her husband.* Some construe this phrase to mean "while under her husband's authority."

33. *you gave your pay to all your lovers and bribed them to come to bed with you.* The unbridled lust of Israel is such that she paid to get sex from all her alien lovers. This reduces them to gigolos and may imply that she has lost her extraordinary beauty through all her whoring.

36. *your wetness poured out and you laid bare your nakedness in your whoring.* The initial noun *nehushteikh* resembles the Hebrew word for "bronze" (hence the New Jewish Publication Society renders it as "brazen effrontery"). But contemporary scholarship has made a convincing case that it is an Akkadian loanword that means "vaginal lubrication." This not only fits the focus on the bodily manifestations of female sexuality, but also is likely because of Ezekiel's location in Babylonia, where Akkadian was used—he might well have been inclined to borrow a term for which there was no good Hebrew equivalent.

as by the blood of your children that you gave to them. The wording of this reference to child sacrifice, the greatest of pagan abominations, loops back to the wallowing in blood of the infant Daughter of Zion, which is now seen as a foreshadowing of her future behavior.

37. *I will . . . lay bare your nakedness to them, and they shall see all your nakedness.* This is a piece of measure-for-measure justice: she has spread her legs for every passerby; now she will be shamefully exposed to all eyes, not only to her former lovers but to those whom she despised.

38. *women who shed blood.* Here, again, there is a shuttling between tenor and vehicle. "Adulteress" belongs to the figurative representation of paganism as whoring, whereas the bloodshed refers literally to child sacrifice.

39. *they shall strip your garments from you . . . and leave you stark naked.* This was in fact a known punishment for an adulteress in many regions of the ancient Near East. The allegorical reference would be to the stripping away of the splendor of Jerusalem, razed by its conquerors, and to the divestment of national sovereignty.

40. *stone you and hack you to pieces.* This was an actual practice: stoning to death followed by mutilation of the corpse.

42. *My jealousy.* Given the whole context of sexual betrayal, the Hebrew *qinʾah* surely means "jealousy" and not "passion," as many have claimed.

44. *Like mother, like daughter.* The point of invoking this proverb here is that Israel's waywardness is a long-standing practice, not something invented by the current generation. Authorized by the convention of representing cities and nations as women, Ezekiel continues through this section of the prophecy in his sharply gender-focused denunciation, invoking mothers and daughters and sisters.

45. *Your mother is a Hittite and your father is an Amorite.* This line from the very beginning of the prophecy is repeated here because Ezekiel will go on to say that the people of Judah resembles its neighbors in evil, only it is worse than they.

46. *your big sister is Samaria.* "Big" and "little" here refer not to age but to the size of the territory of each of these kingdoms.

she and her daughters. The Hebrew builds on an untranslatable pun: "daughters" also means the villages or hamlets around a city, the implied metaphor being that the city is the mother.

on your left . . . on your right. Left and right are, respectively, north and south, the imagined point of orientation being someone facing the east (one word for "east" also means "front" or "forward").

48. *surely Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done.* The idea that Israel could turn into Sodom had some currency early in biblical literature (compare Judges 19 and Isaiah 1). Ezekiel, however, pushes the notion further by contending that Israel is worse than Sodom. In verse 49, it is explained that Sodom's crime consisted in neglecting the needy through her complacent satisfaction with her own affluence. This scarcely accords with the representation of the Sodomites as vicious sexual predators in Genesis 19, but the prophet probably wants to reserve sexual misbehavior exclusively for his castigation of his own people.

51. *and you made your sister look innocent.* Zion's offenses are compounded by the fact that they were so unspeakable that even the crimes of her neighbors to the north and south came to look innocent by comparison.

52. *bear your disgrace for advocating for your sister.* This is a rhetorical conceit: by setting a standard of evil that her neighbors could not equal, Judah became an inadvertent advocate for them.

55. *And your sisters, Sodom and her daughters . . . and Samaria and her daughters shall be restored to their former state, and you and your daughters shall be restored to your former state.* The prophet now gives his argument another peculiar twist. "Restoring the former state" (the idiom that appears in verse 55) is equally used to express the national restoration of the people of Israel after its punishment. Here, however, in keeping with "your mother is a Hittite and your father is an Amorite," this restoration is not unique for Judah but part of a general pattern in the region.

56. *a word of scorn.* More literally, "a rumor."

57. *[you are] a disgrace to the daughters of Aram.* The bracketed words do not appear in the Hebrew but are necessary for intelligibility and may have been dropped in scribal transmission. Some critics emend "Aram" to "Edom" (graphically similar in Hebrew) because the Edomites became eager allies of the Babylonian invaders.

60. *But I on My part will recall My covenant with you.* Even though Israel has been a faithless, adulterous wife, God remains committed to the everlasting covenant He has sealed with His people.

61. *though they are not of your covenant.* This clause reflects two rather cryptic Hebrew words, and the sense is uncertain.

63. *you shall be unable to open your mouth.* The literal sense is "you shall have no opening of the mouth."

CHAPTER 17

[1]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[2]“Man, pose a riddle and frame a parable for the house
of Israel. [3]And you shall say to them, Thus said the
Master, the LORD: The great eagle, great-winged,
broad of pinion, full-plumaged, richly colored, came
to Lebanon and took the crown of the cedar. [4]Its
topmost tendril he plucked and brought it to the land
of Canaan, set it down in the city of traders. [5]And he
took from the seed of the land and put it in a seed-
field, a slip by many waters, he set it down as a willow.
[6]And it flourished and became a vine, spreading in low
stature, its branches turned toward him and its roots to
be beneath him. And it became a vine, and it produced
branches and sent forth boughs. [7]And there was
another great eagle, great-winged, abundant in
plumage, and, look, this vine wrapped its roots around
him and sent its boughs out to him to be watered in the
bed where it was planted. [8]In the goodly field, by many
waters it was planted, to put forth branches to bear
fruit, to become a majestic vine. [9]Say, Thus said the

Master, the LORD: Will it thrive? Will he not break off its roots and rot out its fruit that it wither, and all the leaves it sprouted will wither? And not with great power nor with many troops will it be pulled up by its roots. [10]And, look, it is planted—will it thrive? Will it not surely wither when the east wind touches it? On the bed where it grew, it will wither."

[11]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, [12]"Pray, say to the house of rebellion: Do you know what these are? Say! Look, the king of Babylonia has come to Jerusalem and taken her king and her nobles and brought them to him in Babylonia. [13]And he has taken one of the royal seed and sealed with him a pact and made him swear an oath, and he has taken away the leaders of the land, [14]to make it a lowly kingdom, that it not be raised up, to keep his pact that it might endure. [15]But he rebelled against him, sending his messengers to Egypt to give him horses and many troops. Will he thrive? Will he who does these things escape? Will he break the pact and escape? [16]By My life, said the Master, the LORD, in the place of the king who made him king, whose oath he spurned and whose pact with him he broke, within Babylonia he shall surely die. [17]And not with a great force nor with a

large assembly shall Pharaoh deal with him in battle, piling up ramps and building siege-works to cut off many lives. [18]But he has spurned the oath and broken the pact, and look, he gave his hand to it, but all these things he did. He shall not escape. [19]Therefore, thus said the Master, the LORD: By My life, My oath that he has spurned and My pact that he has broken, I will put on his own head. [20]And I will spread My net over him, and he shall be caught in My toils. And I will bring him to Babylonia and will come to judgment with him there for his betrayal of Me. [21]And all his fugitives in all his battalions shall fall by the sword, and those left shall be scattered to every wind."

[22]Thus said the Master, the LORD: "I Myself will take from the lofty crown of the cedar, from its topmost branches, a tender one I will pluck, and I Myself will plant it on a high and steep hill. [23]On the mount of the height of Israel I will plant it, and it shall bear branches and put forth fruit and become a majestic cedar, and every winged bird shall dwell beneath it, in the shade of its boughs they shall dwell. [24]And all the trees of the field shall know that I, the LORD, have brought low the high tree, have raised high the lowly tree, have made the moist tree wither and made the

withered tree bloom. I, the LORD, have spoken and have done it."

CHAPTER 17 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *pose a riddle and frame a parable.* There is a semantic overlap between the two nouns here, *ḥidah* and *mashal,* and the bracketing of them at the beginning of the Book of Proverbs suggests that sometimes they were nearly synonymous. Ḥ*idah,* as in the Samson story, does point to an enigmatic saying that requires deciphering. *Mashal* has a wider range of meanings, from allegorical "parable," as here, to "proverb" and to "poetic burden," as in Balaam's oracles. Some scholars view the text that follows as formal verse, but it doesn't scan very well, though it does employ a good many loosely parallel sentence structures. The poetic function, as is often the case in Ezekiel, would appear to be manifested not prosodically but chiefly in the use of allegorical imagery, the vehicle of the *mashal*.

3. *The great eagle . . . came to Lebanon.* The eagle is Nebuchadnezzar. Lebanon with its lofty cedars is, perhaps somewhat confusingly, Zion.

richly colored. The Hebrew uses the term that usually means "embroidered cloth."

4. *Its topmost tendril he plucked.* This is the Judahite king Jehoiachin, taken captive and exiled by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylonia in 597 B.C.E.

brought it to the land of Canaan. Like "Lebanon," this is a confusing reference because "Canaan" in the historical allegory has to mean Babylonia. Ezekiel is probably punning on the secondary meaning of "Canaanite" as "merchant," making this phrase semantically parallel with "the city of traders."

5. *the seed of the land.* The phrase indicates the royal seed, and the reference is to Zedekiah, whom Nebuchadnezzar installs as a vassal king.

a slip. The noun qaḥ occurs only here, but it is attested in three Semitic languages as a tree growing alongside streams, perhaps a variety of willow.

6. *its branches turned toward him and its roots to be beneath him.* Both these details are tokens of Zedekiah's vassal status.

7. *another great eagle.* "Another," *aḥer,* is the plausible reading of the Septuagint instead of the Masoretic *eḥad,* "one." The second eagle is the Egyptian Pharaoh. The vine wrapping its roots around him indicates Zedekiah's seeking an alliance with Egypt.

8. *In the goodly field, by many waters it was planted.* Nebuchadnezzar had seen to it that his vassal would enjoy comfortable circumstances and the majesty of kingship.

9. *Will he not break off its roots.* The "he" is Nebuchadnezzar, and we may assume that this prophecy antedates the actual destruction of Judah in 586 B.C.E.

not with great power. Ezekiel assumes that the Babylonians will not require a massive force to overwhelm Jerusalem.

10. *the east wind.* In biblical literature, the east wind, blowing from the desert, brings trouble. Nebuchadnezzar comes from the east.

12. *Do you know what these are?* Now the meaning of the parable, the *nimshal* of the *mashal,* is spelled out.

the king of Babylonia has come to Jerusalem. These are the events of 597 B.C.E., so now it is clear that "Lebanon" is Zion.

13. *And he has taken one of the royal seed.* This is Zedekiah.

made him swear an oath. The particular category of oath, *ʾalah,* is one in which a curse is pronounced on the party of the oath should he violate it.

14. *that it might endure.* There is an ambiguity as to whether "it" refers to the pact or the kingdom.

16. *within Babylonia he shall surely die.* This will prove to be the fate of Zedekiah, first blinded by Nebuchadnezzar and then brought captive to

Babylonia. This is a reasonable prediction in light of Ezekiel's understanding that it is folly to rebel, so one need not construe this as an *ex eventu* prophecy.

17. *And not with a great force nor with a large assembly shall Pharaoh deal with him in battle.* The ostensible historical reference is puzzling, and many critics assume that "Pharaoh" is a mistaken addition, the original reference being to Nebuchadnezzar, as in the parallel statement in verse 9.

19. *My pact that he has broken.* The Hebrew *brit* can mean either "pact," which seems the appropriate sense for the political context of the verses above, or the more theological "covenant." To preserve the parallelism of this passage with the preceding one, "pact" is again used here in the translation. However, the clear implication is that just as Zedekiah has broken his pact with Nebuchadnezzar, he has violated his covenant with God, and hence the punishment inflicted on him by Babylonia is also God's punishment.

22. *I Myself will take from the lofty crown of the cedar . . . and I Myself will plant it on a high and steep hill.* God performs the same figurative action as the conquering Nebuchadnezzar, but now it is an act of restoring the kingdom of Judah.

23. *put forth fruit.* The cedar does not bear fruit, so this is a miraculous fulfillment.

CHAPTER 18

[1]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[2]"What is wrong with you, who recite this proverb on
the soil of Israel, saying:

The fathers ate unripe fruit
and the sons' teeth were blunted.

[3]By My life, said the Master, the LORD, there shall be
none reciting this proverb in Israel. [4]Look, all lives are
Mine, the life of the father and the son alike are Mine.
The person offending, it is he shall die. [5]And should a
man be righteous and do what is just and right, [6]he did
not eat on the mountains nor lift his eyes to Israel's
foul things, and he did not defile his fellow man's wife
nor was intimate with a menstrual woman. [7]And no
man did he wrong; what is pawned in debt he
returned; he did not rob; his bread he gave to the
hungry and the naked he covered with clothes. [8]He did
not lend with advance interest nor accrued interest. He

pulled his hand back from wrongdoing; he enacted
true justice between one man and another. [9]By My
statutes he walked, and My laws he kept to act in truth.
He is righteous, he shall surely live, said the Master,
the LORD. [10]And should he beget a brutish son, who
sheds blood, and who does none of these things, [11]and
he did none of these things but ate on the mountains
and defiled his fellow man's wife, [12]wronged the poor
and the needy, robbed, did not return what was
pawned and to the foul things lifted his eyes—
abomination he did. [13]He lent with advance interest
and took accrued interest. He surely shall not live—all
these abominations he did. He is doomed to die, his
bloodguilt is upon him. [14]And look, should he beget a
son who sees all the offenses of his father, sees and
does not do the like, [15]on the mountains he does not eat
nor does he lift his eyes to the abominations of the
house of Israel. He does not defile his fellow man's
wife, [16]nor does he wrong any man. He takes nothing
in pawn, nor does he rob. His bread he gives to the
hungry, and the naked he covers with garments. [17]He
draws his hand back from harming the poor, neither
advance interest nor accrued interest does he take. He
performs My laws, in My statutes he walks. He shall
not die for his father's crime—he shall surely live. [18]As
for his father, should he have committed fraud, robbed

a brother, and what was not good should have done among his people, look, he shall die for his crime.
[19]And should you say, ‘Why does the son not bear the crime of the father?’ When the son has done justice and righteousness and kept My statutes and performed them, he shall surely live. [20]The offending person, it is he who shall die. The son shall not bear the father’s crime, and the father shall not bear the son’s crime. The righteousness of the righteous man shall be on him, and the wickedness of the wicked man shall be on him. [21]And the wicked man who turns back from all his offenses that he did and keeps all My statutes and does justice and righteousness, he shall surely live, he shall not die. [22]All his wrongs that he did shall not be recalled against him. Through his righteousness that he has done he shall live. [23]Do I really desire the death of the wicked, said the Master, the LORD, and not instead his turning back from his ways, that he may live? [24]And when the righteous man turns back from his righteousness and does wrong like all the abominations that the wicked man did, will he do this and live? All his righteousness that he did shall not be recalled for him when he betrays and in his offense that he commits. For them he shall die. [25]And should you say, ‘The way of the Master does not measure up,’ listen, pray, house of Israel. Does My way not measure

up? Why, your way does not measure up! [26]When the righteous man turns back from his righteousness and does wrong, he shall die for it. For his wrong that he has done he shall die. [27]And when the wicked man turns back from his wickedness that he has done and does justice and righteousness, he shall preserve himself in life. [28]And if he sees and turns back from all his trespasses that he committed, he shall surely live, he shall not die. [29]And should the house of Israel say, 'The way of the Master does not measure up,' do My ways not measure up? Why, it is your ways that do not measure up! [30]Therefore each according to his ways will I judge you, O house of Israel, said the Master, the LORD. Turn back altogether from your trespasses, and they shall not be a stumbling block of crime for you. [31]Fling away from you all your trespasses that you have committed and make you a new heart and a new spirit. Why should you die, O house of Israel? [32]For I do not desire anyone's death, said the Master, the LORD, but turn back and live."

CHAPTER 18 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *The fathers ate unripe fruit / and the sons' teeth were blunted.* This phrase is also quoted in Jeremiah 31:28, attesting to its circulation as a popularly

invoked saying. Most translations read "unripe grapes," with little warrant, for the term can mean any unripe fruit. Presumably, the hardness of the unripe fruit is what blunts the teeth (and that would scarcely work for grapes). The proverb as Ezekiel quotes it reflects the absurdity of thinking that the sons suffer for the crimes of the fathers because, obviously, no one could suffer the ill effects of someone else's imprudence in biting down on unripe fruit.

6. *he did not eat on the mountains.* Since the clause that immediately follows mentions idolatry, the reference here is almost certainly to a sacrificial feast that was part of a pagan cult.

he did not defile his fellow man's wife. The prophet moves without transition from cultic transgressions to sexual ones. In the next verse, he will go on to the economic wrongs, making all three categories part of a single package.

8. *advance interest nor accrued interest.* The first term, *neshekh,* has the literal sense of "bite": hence, a chunk taken out from the loan extended. The second term, *tarbit,* etymologically suggests compounding or multiplying.

9. *By My statutes he walked, and My laws he kept.* Like a good many other phrases in this chapter, all this will be repeated. Repetition appears to be part of the prophet's rhetorical strategy of didactic insistence in conveying the message that each person is solely responsible for the consequences of his acts.

10. *who does none of these things.* In the Hebrew, there is an intrusive *ʾaḥ,* "brother," which is almost certainly a mistaken scribal duplication of the two middle consonants in the word that immediately follows, *meʾeḥad,* "one of."

11. *he did none of these things but ate.* The wording is somewhat confusing, especially after the last clause of the previous verse. It is possible that a negative before the verb has been dropped out in the previous verse.

15. *on the mountains he does not eat.* The repetitiousness is especially pronounced here and through to the end of verse 17.

20. *bear the . . . crime.* This Hebrew idiom clearly means "bear the consequences of the crime." In fact, *ʿawon,* "crime," is often used

interchangeably for “punishment” as well.

22. *All his wrongs that he did shall not be recalled against him.* This element of Ezekiel’s doctrine of divine justice surely addresses the condition of his audience of exiles. According to theological principle, their plight of exile is a consequence of their evil acts, and the prophet has been insistently castigating them for their behavior. But a person who turns away wholeheartedly from his misdeeds will qualify for God’s protection.

24. *And when the righteous man turns back from his righteousness.* The system is symmetrical: just as the wicked man has the power to reverse his fortunes, the righteous man can undo all the merit he has earned by slipping from the straight and narrow path to do evil.

25. *does not measure up.* There has been some dispute among interpreters about the meaning of the verb *yitakhen.* The clear biblical sense of this verbal stem is “to measure.” (Compare Isaiah 40:12: “and the heavens has gauged [*tiken*] with a span.”) The idea seems to be that in the eyes of Israel, God’s way makes no sense, has no good measure.

31. *Fling away from you all your trespasses that you have committed and make you a new heart and a new spirit.* A vivid image informs this sentence: a person’s trespasses weigh down on his very body—the Hebrew literally means “fling away from upon you.” Once this weight of evil acts is flung away, a person can regenerate from within, making a new heart and spirit for himself.

32. *anyone’s death.* More literally, “the death of him who dies.”

CHAPTER 19

[1]And you, sound this lament over the princes of Israel,
[2]and say,

What a lioness your mother
among lions!
She crouches among young lions,
she rears her cubs.
[3]She raised up one of her cubs,
he became a young lion
and learned to go after prey,
a human did he eat.
[4]And nations heard of him,
in their pit he was caught,
and they brought him down in hooks
to the land of Egypt.
[5]And she saw that she waited in vain,
her hope was lost.
And she took another of her cubs,
made him a young lion.

[6]And he walked about among lions,
    he became a young lion.
And he learned to go after prey,
    a human did he eat.
[7]And he harrowed their bastions,
    and their towns he destroyed.
And the land and its fullness were
    dumbfounded
    by the sound of his roaring.
[8]And nations set upon him,
    all the provinces round about,
and cast their net upon him,
    in their pit he was caught.
[9]And they put him in a neck iron
    with hooks
    and brought him to the king of
        Babylonia,
        brought him in toils;
so that his voice would no more be
    heard
    on the mountains of Israel.
[10]Your mother was like a vine
    planted by waters,
fruitful and branching
    from many waters.
[11]And she had mighty boughs,

for the scepters of rulers.
And its stature rose on high
to be among the clouds.
And it was seen in its height
with all its branches.
[12]But it was torn from its roots in
fury,
to the ground it was flung,
and the east wind withered its fruit,
it fell apart and withered,
her mighty bough the fire
consumed.
[13]And now she is planted in the
desert,
in a parched and thirsty land.
[14]And a fire springs out from her
boughs,
consumes her fruit
and no mighty bough is there within
her,
a scepter for ruling.
—This is a lament, and has become
a lament.

CHAPTER 19 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *sound this lament.* What follows are two allegorical prophecies, one involving lions and the other a vine. Unlike the allegories that have preceded, this pair is cast in poetry because it is a "lament," *qinah,* and it follows—loosely, it should be said—the lament meter of three accents in the first verset and two in the second.

the princes of Israel. These are the last kings of Judah, though precise identification of monarchs will become problematic.

2. *your mother.* After the plural "princes," the poem switches to the singular, evidently having in mind one particular king.

She crouches among young lions. The fierce lion is a stock figure for monarchs in biblical poetry (as in many other cultures), being linked in the Blessing of Jacob (Genesis 49:9) with the royal tribe of Judah. But this proud image of the royal line will be quickly subverted here.

3. *a young lion.* It is the translator's despair that there are five different words for "lion" in biblical Hebrew, and the distinctions among them are unclear. "Young lion" for *kefir* is the solution of the King James Version, perhaps in part because of this passage, even though elsewhere *kefir* is indistinguishable in meaning from the four other terms for "lion."

4. *pit.* The Hebrew *shaḥat* everywhere else means "pit," and so there is not much justification for rendering it here as "net," which many modern interpreters do. Lions were sometimes trapped in pits, and then a restraining net was cast over them, which seems to be the case in verse 8.

they brought him down in hooks / to the land of Egypt. The one Judahite king who was carried off to Egypt was Jehoahaz son of Josiah and Hamutal. What remains somewhat problematic about this identification is that he reigned only three months before his deportation by Pharaoh Neco, which makes the representation of his ravening power in the previous verse look a bit odd. Perhaps any king once enthroned was imagined to be a fierce lion.

5. *she took another of her cubs.* At this point, the identification becomes ambiguous: two of Hamutal's sons reigned successively, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah.

7. *harrowed.* The Hebrew seems to say "knew." Many interpreters, medieval and modern, understand it in the sexual sense, meaning "rape" (although, despite its sexual sense, it is not a verb used for rape). Its object in the received text is *ʾalmenotaw,* "their [literally, its] widows." All this seems improbable. *ʾAlmenotaw* has been emended here to *ʾarmenotaw,* "their bastions." The verb is understood in the sense in which it is used in Judges 8:16. The verb as it appears in Judges is in a different conjugation, but the Masoretic vocalization here may be mistaken.

9. *brought him to the king of Babylonia.* This makes Jehoiachin, who was exiled to Babylonia in 597 B.C.E., the most likely candidate for the historical reference.

so that his voice would no more be heard / on the mountains of Israel. This line neatly joins vehicle and tenor: the captured lion will no longer strike terror in the terrain around him; the king of Judah will no longer exercise authority in his land.

10. *Your mother was like a vine.* The received text seems to say "Your mother like a vine in your blood." This translation emends *bedamkha,* "in your blood," to *damta,* "was like." Rashi understands it this way without emendation.

like a vine. As the lion is a traditional image of the king, the vine is a traditional image of the people of Israel.

11. *And she had mighty boughs / for the scepters of rulers.* The branches of the vine are thick and strong, producing powerful kings.

12. *But it was torn from its roots in fury.* While the prophetic mode uses verbs that imply a completed action, this is a prediction of the final destruction of the kingdom.

13. *the desert.* The reference must be to the land of exile.

14. *And a fire springs out from her boughs.* No explanation is offered for the sudden appearance of fire in the vine, either here or in verse 12. The image may be used automatically because fire is a constant image of destruction, or the historical referent—the destruction of Jerusalem, put to the torch by the invaders—may have seeped into the allegorical image.

CHAPTER 20

[1]And it happened in the seventh year, in the fifth month, on the tenth of the month, men of the elders of Israel came to inquire of the LORD and sat down before me. [2]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, [3]“Man, speak to the elders of Israel and say to them, Thus said the Master, the LORD: To inquire of Me do you come? By My life, I will not respond to your inquiry, said the LORD. [4]Will you judge them, will you judge, man? Make known to them all the abominations of their fathers. [5]And say to them, Thus said the Master, the LORD: On the day I chose Israel, I raised My hand to the seed of the house of Jacob and made Myself known to them in the land of Egypt, saying, I am the LORD your God. [6]On that day I raised My hand to them to bring them out of the land of Egypt to a land that I had searched out for them, flowing with milk and honey, a splendor for all the lands. [7]And I said to them: Let each man fling away the loathsome things that are before his eyes, and do not be defiled with the foul things of Egypt. I am the

LORD your God. [8]But they rebelled against Me and did not want to heed Me. Each man did not fling away the loathsome things that were before his eyes, and they did not forsake the foul things of Egypt. And I thought to pour out My wrath upon them, to exhaust My anger against them in the land of Egypt. [9]But I acted for the sake of My name, that it not be profaned in the eyes of the nations in whose midst they were, as I had made Myself known before their eyes, to bring them out of the land of Egypt. [10]And I brought them out of the land of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness. [11]And I gave them My statutes and made My laws known to them, that a man should do them and live through them. [12]And My sabbaths, too, I gave to them to be a sign between Me and them, to know that I am the LORD who hallows them. [13]And the house of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness. They did not follow My statutes, and they spurned My laws, that a man should do them and live. And My sabbaths they profaned grievously, and I thought to pour My wrath against them in the wilderness. [14]But I acted for the sake of My name, not to profane it in the eyes of the nations before whose eyes I had brought them out. [15]And I on My part raised My hand to them in the wilderness not to bring them to the land that I had given, flowing with milk and honey, a splendor to

all the lands, [16]inasmuch as they spurned My statutes, they had not followed them, and My sabbaths they had profaned, for after the foul things their heart had gone. [17]But My eye had pity for them not to destroy them, and I did not make an end of them in the wilderness. [18]And I said to their children in the wilderness: Do not follow the statues of your fathers and do not keep their laws and do not be defiled with their foul things. [19]I am the LORD your God. Follow My statutes and keep My laws and do them. [20]And hallow My sabbaths, that they be a sign between Me and you to know that I am the LORD your God. [21]And the sons rebelled against Me, My statutes they did not follow and My laws they did not keep to do them, which a man does and lives through them. My sabbaths they profaned. And I thought to pour out My wrath on them, to exhaust My anger against them in the wilderness. [22]But I pulled back My hand and acted for the sake of My name not to profane it in the eyes of the nations before whose eyes I had brought them out. [23]I on My part raised My hand to them in the wilderness to disperse them among the nations and to scatter them in the lands. [24]Inasmuch as they did not do My laws and they spurned My statutes and they profaned My sabbaths and their eyes went after the foul things of their fathers. [25]And I on My part gave them statutes that

were not good and laws through which they would not
live. [26]And I defiled them with their gifts when they
passed every womb-breach in sacrifice, so that I might
desolate them, so they might know that I am the
LORD. [27]Therefore speak to the house of Israel, man,
and say to them, Thus said the LORD: In this, too,
your fathers insulted Me in betraying Me. [28]And I
brought them to the land that I had raised My hand to
give them, and they saw every high hill and every
thick-branched tree and offered their sacrifices there
and put their vexing offerings there and set their
fragrant odors there and poured out their libations
there. [29]And I said to them, What is the high place to
which you come? And its name has been called *high
place* to this day. [30]Therefore, say to the house of
Israel, Thus said the Master, the LORD: Are you
defiled in the way of your fathers, and do you whore
after their loathsome things? [31]And in bringing up your
gifts, in passing your children through the fire you are
defiled for all your foul things to this day. And shall I
respond to your inquiry, house of Israel? By My life,
said the Master, the LORD, I will not respond to you.
[32]And what occurs to your mind, it shall surely not
come about, that you say, ‘We shall be like the nations,
like the clans of the lands, to serve wood and stone.’
[33]By My life, said the Master, the LORD, with a strong

hand and with an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath, I will surely reign over you. [34]And I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you from the lands where you were scattered with a strong hand and with an outstretched hand and with outpoured wrath. [35]And I will bring you to the desert of peoples and come to judgment with you there face-to-face. [36]As I came to judgment with your fathers in the desert of the land of Egypt, so will I come to judgment with you, said the Master, the LORD. [37]And I will make you pass under the rod and bring you into the bonds of the covenant. [38]And I will purge from you the rebels and those who trespass against Me. I will bring them out of the land of their sojourning, but to the soil of Israel they shall not come, and you shall know that I am the LORD. [39]And you, house of Israel, thus said the Master, the LORD: Each man go, worship his foul things, and afterward, if you do not heed Me. . . . But My holy name you shall no longer profane with your gifts and with your foul things. [40]But on My holy mountain, on the mountain of the height of Israel, there shall all the house of Israel worship Me, all of it in the land. There will I favor them, and there will I require your offerings and your choice donations with all your sacred things. [41]By a fragrant odor I will show favor to you when I bring you out from the peoples,

and I will gather you from the lands where you were scattered, and I will be hallowed through you before the eyes of the nations. [42]And you shall know that I am the LORD when I bring you to the soil of Israel, to the land for which I raised My hand to give it to your fathers. [43]And you shall recall there your ways and all your acts through which you were defiled, and you shall be disgusted with yourselves for all your evils that you did. [44]And you shall know that I am the LORD when I deal with you for the sake of My name, not according to your evil ways and your ruinous acts, O house of Israel," said the Master, the LORD.

CHAPTER 20 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *in the seventh year, in the fifth month.* As before, the reckoning is from the beginning of the exile of Jehoiachin, so the year is 591 B.C.E. The fifth month is Av, which occurs in midsummer.

came to inquire of the LORD. Though several theories have been proposed about the nature of the oracle they were seeking, there is no clear indication of what it might have been.

3. *I will not respond to your inquiry.* Given what is presumed to be the reprehensible behavior of the elders, God—or perhaps one should say, His spokesman the prophet—will issue no oracle but instead will castigate them for their misdeeds.

4. *all the abominations of their fathers.* Ezekiel, himself taken into exile with the Judahite king and nobles and seeing the imminence of a much more comprehensive exile and national disaster, here undertakes an extensive revision of the history of Israel. In his perception, the people's reprehensible behavior is by no means limited to recent generations but goes all the way back to its origins in Egypt and is indelibly stamped in the national character.

5. *I raised My hand.* This is the gesture of someone taking a solemn vow (still used in courtrooms in our own society).

6. *to a land that I had searched out for them.* In this version, the episode of the twelve spies sent by Moses to search out the land is elided in order to emphasize God's extravagant bountifulness to Israel.

8. *Each man did not fling away the loathsome things.* The idea that the Hebrews in Egypt were wallowing in the idolatrous practices of their Egyptian enslavers is nowhere hinted in Exodus.

9. *But I acted for the sake of My name.* This notion that God spared wayward Israel in order not to compromise His reputation among the nations is no more than hinted at in the Wilderness narrative, but Ezekiel gives it special prominence because in his dour view Israel has scarcely any redeeming features that would intrinsically justify its national survival.

12. *And My sabbaths, too, I gave to them to be a sign between Me and them.* In the late monarchic period and on into the era of exile, there was an increasing emphasis on the centrality of the sabbath, as attested in passages in Jeremiah and Trito-Isaiah as well as in Ezekiel. The portability of the sabbath as a community-affirming observance may have made it especially appealing in a time when the Temple was no longer accessible.

13. *And My sabbaths they profaned grievously.* In Exodus, it is one man who violates the sabbath, but Ezekiel accuses the whole people of such violation.

18. *Do not follow the statues of your fathers . . . and do not be defiled with their foul things.* Given that the Israelites, in Ezekiel's revision of the national narrative, persisted in their Egyptian idolatry in the wilderness, they had no right to be brought into the land flowing with milk and honey. God

nevertheless allows them to survive and come into the land, both for the sake of the divine name and because He chooses to give the next generation an opportunity—which they will reject—to turn away from the misdeeds of their fathers.

22. *and acted for the sake of My name not to profane it in the eyes of the nations.* As in the long prose prophecy of chapter 18, this prophecy is marked by didactic repetition.

25. *And I on My part gave them statutes that were not good.* This is a startling theological idea. In part it flows from the general assumption that since God is ultimately responsible for everything that happens, if Israel adopts perverse practices, it is because God has decreed it. A dynamic of punishment, however, is detectable here: if Israel stubbornly clings to pagan abominations, God will compound the guilt of the people by encouraging them to persist in their waywardness.

26. *gifts.* In this context, the term means "sacrifices," gifts to a deity.
they passed every womb-breach in sacrifice. The prophets of this era so often inveigh against child sacrifice that one may reasonably infer it was actually widespread. "Womb-breach" is a term borrowed from Exodus as an epithet for the firstborn.

29. *What is the high place to which you come?* The Hebrew exhibits a derisive false etymology: "high place" is *bamah;* "what" is *mah;* the first syllable of "come" is *ba.* (James Moffatt, with some ingenuity and a little strain, conveys this in English as: "What is this high place you hie to?) The implication of the ad hoc etymology is that the very name *bamah* reflects the fact that it is something alien, scarcely comprehensible.

31. *And shall I respond to your inquiry.* This phrase loops back to the beginning of the prophecy (verse 3), suggesting that the elders do not deserve any oracular revelation because they are the representatives of an idolatrous people.

34. *And I will bring you out from the peoples . . . with a strong hand.* Momentarily, this sounds like a promise to bring them out from exile, but that illusion is shattered as God goes on to say that the people will be brought

out into the desert to be destroyed (and note how "outpoured wrath" is held back until the end of the sentence).

35. *the desert of peoples.* This is the great Syrian desert to the west of Babylonia and contiguous with several countries.

36. *As I came to judgment with your fathers in the desert of the land of Egypt.* This is a mysterious reference, and it may be that Ezekiel is caught up here in the rhetorical momentum of his invective, reaching to invoke a historical parallel to the present moment. Egypt in the ancient period didn't have a desert, and if it is the "desert" at the Sea of Reeds, Israel was saved there, not brought to judgment.

37. *And I will make you pass under the rod.* This is the notion of the shepherd counting his sheep. But "rod" also suggests punishment.

the bonds. The Hebrew *masoret* looks as though it were the word for "tradition," though in its syntactical position that word would have been vocalized as *mesoret.* Most scholars plausibly conclude that it is an elliptical spelling of *maʾasoret,* a noun derived from the verb *ʾasar,* which means "to bind."

38. *I will purge from you the rebels.* Ezekiel's vision is quite implacable: before any return to Zion, the exiles will be taken out into the desert where many of them—implicitly, the majority—will be destroyed.

39. *Each man go, worship his foul things.* This is obviously sarcastic.

and afterward, if you do not heed Me. . . . The only way to save the received text is to assume, as several scholars have proposed, that a clause has dropped out that would have stipulated the dire consequences of not heeding God. The words that follow swivel around to imagine an Israel that puts aside the idolatrous ways of its fathers and returns to worship God in the proper place, on Mount Zion.

43. *you shall be disgusted with yourselves for all your evils that you did.* A psychological manifestation of the people's true repentance is that it experiences deep revulsion in thinking of its past behavior—a revulsion clearly shaped by the prophet as he castigates Israel for its idolatry.

CHAPTER 21

[1]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[2]“Man, set your face to the way of Teman and
proclaim to the south, and prophesy to the wooded
region of the Negeb. [3]And you shall say to the wooded
region of the Negeb: hear the word of the LORD.
Thus said the Master, the LORD: I am about to light a
fire in you, and it shall consume in you every moist
tree and every dry tree. The white-hot flame shall not
go out, and every face shall be scorched by it from
south to north. [4]And all flesh shall see that I the LORD
kindled it, it shall not go out.” [5]And I said, “Woe, O
Master, LORD, they say to me, ‘Is he not just reciting
parables?’” [6]And the word of the LORD came to me,
saying, [7]“Man, set your face to Jerusalem and proclaim
concerning the sanctuaries and prophesy concerning
the soil of Israel. [8]And you shall say concerning the
soil of Israel, Thus said the LORD: Here I am against
you, and I will take out My sword from its sheath and
cut off from you the righteous and the wicked.
[9]Inasmuch as I have cut off from you the righteous and

the wicked, My sword shall come out from its sheath
against all flesh from south to north. [10]And all flesh
shall know that I am the LORD. I have taken out My
sword from its sheath, it shall no more turn back.
[11]And you, man, groan with shuddering loins and
bitterly groan before their eyes. [12]And should they say
to you, ‘Why are you groaning?,’ you shall say, ‘For the
tidings that have come.’ And every heart shall quail
and all hands go slack and every spirit grow weak and
all knees be wet. Look, it has come and has happened,
said the Master, the LORD.”

[13]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[14]“Man, prophesy and say, Thus said the LORD:

A sword, a sword is whetted
and also it is burnished,
[15]to wreak slaughter it is whetted,
that it gleam it was burnished
[Or we rejoice for the rod, my son,
spurning all blood.]
[16]And it was given to be burnished,
to be grasped in the hand.
For this the sword was whetted
and for this was burnished—
to be put in the hand of a killer.

[17]Scream and howl, O man,
for it was against My people,
it was against all Israel's
princes.
Felled by the sword were My people,
so clap upon the thigh.
[18][For he probes and what if the rod,
too, spurning shall not be?] said
the LORD.
[19]And you, man, prophesy
and strike palm against palm.
Let the sword do double work and
triple,
it is a sword for the slain,
a sword for many slain,
driving into them,
[20]so that the heart faint
and stumbling blocks abound.
At all their gates I set
slaughter by the sword
Ah, it is made to gleam,
burnished for the slaughter.
[21]Stay whetted! Lay about on the
right and the left!
Where do you turn?

[22]And I, too, will strike palm against
palm
and let My wrath come to rest.”

[23]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[24]“And you, man, set out for yourself two ways for the coming of the sword of the king of Babylonia from one land. The two of them shall go out, and clear away a space, and the crossroad of the way of the city, clear it. [25]Set out a way for the coming of the sword against Rabbah of the Ammonites and against fortified Jerusalem in Judah. For the king of Babylonia has stood at the fork of the road, at the crossroad of the two ways, to perform divination, to shake out arrows, to inquire of the household gods, to inspect the liver. [26]On its right lobe, was the omen of Jerusalem, to set up battering rams, to scream murder with full throat, to raise the voice in shouting, to set up battering rams against the gates, to pile up ramps, to build siege-towers. [27]And it seemed in their eyes like an empty divination—they had oaths sworn to them, but it was a remembering of guilt for them to be caught.
[28]Therefore, thus said the Master, the LORD:
Inasmuch as you have remembered your guilt as your trespasses are laid bare, for your offenses to be seen in

all your acts, inasmuch as you have been remembered,
you shall be caught in a grip. [29]And you, profane in
wickedness, O prince of Israel, whose day has come at
the end-time of the guilt! [30]Thus said the Master, the
LORD: Take off the turban and lift off the diadem.
This is not this—raise up what is low and bring down
what is high. [31]Ruins, ruins, ruins will I make it. This,
too, has not come about, until the coming of him who
has the judgment and will grant it to him. [32]And you,
man, prophesy and say, Thus said the Master, the
LORD, to the Ammonites concerning their disgrace,
and you shall say, ‘A sword, a sword unsheathed for
slaughter, perfectly burnished to gleam, [33]when empty
visions were seen for you, when false divinations were
cast for you concerning the necks of the profane
wicked whose day has come at the end-time of guilt.’
[34]Put it back in its sheath; in the place where you were
created, in the land of your origin I will judge you.
[35]And I will pour out on you My anger, the fire of My
fury I will fan against you and give you into the hand
of hotheaded men, craftsmen of destruction. [36]You
shall be fuel for the fire. Your blood shall be in the
land. You shall not be recalled. For I the LORD have
spoken.”

CHAPTER 21 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Teman . . . the south . . . Negeb.* The Hebrew uses three different words that mean "south." Although the territory of Judah is to the west of Ezekiel's location in Babylonia, what this prophetic injunction has in view is a destruction of Judah that will begin from the south and sweep up through the north.

3. *the wooded region.* It is unclear whether the Negeb once had a wooded region. Some think this may be an area of low shrubs, but the next verse speaks of trees.

The white-hot flame. The joining of two Hebrew synonyms in the construct form (literally, "fire of flame") is an intensifier.

5. *Is he not just reciting parables?* The adverb "just" has been added in the translation to bring out the sense of the Hebrew—that the people think the prophet is merely spinning out parables that have no relation to reality.

8. *cut off from you the righteous and the wicked.* The phrase essentially means "everyone." It is a severe form of divine justice, in direct contradiction to the exchange between Abraham and God over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18.

11. *shuddering loins.* More literally, "broken loins."

12. *all knees be wet.* As above (7:17), the expression derisively indicates people wetting themselves in terror.

14. *A sword, a sword is whetted.* The sword is often used in biblical language as a metonymy for "military force" or "destructive power." The special effectiveness of the poetry here is that it builds on this ordinary sense of "sword" but focuses with unusual concreteness on the weapon, unsheathed, whetted, burnished, and gleaming.

15. *Or we rejoice for the rod.* This entire bracketed sentence is unintelligible, even though each separate word is understandable. In the Hebrew, neither the syntax nor the grammar makes sense. It is hard to believe that Ezekiel could

have written this sentence, at least in the form we have, though how these words got into the text is a mystery.

16. *to be put in the hand of a killer.* The spooky power of these lines is heightened by cloaking the identity of the killer in anonymity, but he is no doubt the fierce Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar.

17. *for it was against My people.* The "it" is feminine and refers to the sword, a feminine noun.

18. *For he probes and what if the rod.* This bracketed sentence has the same problems of intelligibility as the one in verse 15 and incorporates some of the same cryptic phrases.

21. *Where do you turn?* This question reinforces the sense of the sword slashing on every side.

22. *let My wrath come to rest.* After the sword has done its terrible work, God's wrath against Israel will be completely spent, setting the stage for restoration.

24. *two ways for the coming of the sword of the king of Babylonia.* This prose prophecy, following the poetic one, more or less spells out the meaning of the oracle of the sword—here the sword comes together with its wielder, the king of Babylonia, across known geographical space. The two ways are evidently the trajectories to Rabbah of the Ammonites in trans-Jordan and to Jerusalem.

26. *to perform divination, to shake out arrows.* It was a regular practice in military campaigns in the ancient Near East to seek guidance through an oracle or divinatory devices in order to choose the proper route or strategy. The shaking out of arrows for divination involved writing alternatives—here, those might be "Rabbah" and "Jerusalem" on the shafts of different arrows. Inspecting patterns in animal livers was a very common divinatory procedure.

27. *On its right lobe.* The Hebrew says only "on its right," but the clear reference is to the liver.

28. *And it seemed in their eyes like an empty divination.* The grammatical subject here refers either to Ezekiel's audience of exiles or to the population in Judah. If it is the latter, they were imagined as somehow having got wind of the Babylonian divination.

they had oaths sworn to them. This is obscure. It might mean that the Judahites were confident in their safety because they thought God had sworn to protect them for all time.

it was a remembering of guilt for them to be caught. Perhaps: their confidence was a trap, involving their guilt or crime, in which they would be caught. The collocation "remembering of guilt" appears in Numbers 5:15 in the passage about the woman suspected of adultery, and the echo may be intended to suggest Israel's whoring after other gods.

29. *you have remembered your guilt.* Or, "have called to mind your guilt"—that is, caused it to be remembered.

30. *profane in wickedness.* The phrase could also mean "corpse of uncleaness," although that sense seems unlikely.

the end-time of the guilt. The literal order of the Hebrew is "the time of the end of the guilt [or punishment]." The obvious sense is: the time when you will have to pay for the guilt you have incurred.

31. *This is not this.* The three Hebrew words are a little obscure but probably mean: things as they are will no longer be the same.

32. *until the coming of him who has the judgment and will grant it.* This is another crabbed formulation, though the most likely reference is to Nebuchadnezzar, who is to be the instrument of divine judgment.

33. *the Ammonites.* Their capital city, Rabbah, is one of the two targets of the Babylonian assault.

34. *when empty visions were seen for you.* The Ammonites evidently trusted in false oracles that they would be saved from the Babylonians.

concerning the necks of the profane wicked. The Ammonites believed that the prophecy of destruction pertained only to the Judahites.

35. *Put it back in its sheath.* Once the ordained project of destruction has been completed, the sword must be sheathed again, for the Babylonian rampage cannot go on indefinitely. On the contrary, while they have served as God's punishing instrument, they will now have to pay for their own excess of cruelty.

in the land of your origin I will judge you. It is the fate of conquering Babylon to become the victim of its conquerors.

36. *hotheaded men.* The Hebrew is probably a pun. *Boʿarim* can mean "ignorant" or "crude," but it also means "burning." Since fire is prominent in the immediate context, burning or heated temperament is probably the more salient meaning.

CHAPTER 22

[1]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[2]"And you, man, you shall surely judge the city of bloodshed and make known to her all her abominations. [3]And you shall say, Thus said the Master, the LORD: O city shedding blood in its midst, to cause her time to come, and she makes foul things for herself in defilement. [4]In your blood that you shed you are guilty, and in your foul things that you make you are defiled, and you bring your days close and come to the end of your years. Therefore do I make you a disgrace to the nations and a revilement to all the lands. [5]Those near and those far shall revile you, O defiled in name, great in disorder. [6]Look, the princes of Israel, each with his strong arm, were within you so as to shed blood. [7]Father and mother they treated with contempt within you. Toward the sojourner they acted oppressively in your midst. Orphan and widow they wronged within you. [8]My holiness you despised and My sabbaths you profaned. [9]Slanderers there were within you so as to shed blood, and they ate on the

mountains among you. Lewdness they did in your midst. [10]A father's nakedness was laid bare within you. The menstruant's defilement they took by rape within you. [11]And each man did an abomination with his fellow man's wife, and each defiled his daughter-in-law in lewdness, and each took his sister, his father's daughter, by rape. [12]They took bribes within you, so as to shed blood. Advance interest and accrued interest you took, and you got ill gain from your fellow men through oppression. And Me you have forgotten, said the Master, the LORD. [13]And look, I have struck My palm over your ill-gotten gain that you acquired and over your bloodguilt that was in your midst. [14]Will your heart stand the test, will your hands be strong, in the days I am about to set against you? I am the LORD. I have spoken and I have done. [15]And I will disperse you among the nations and scatter you in the lands, and I will wipe out your defilement from you. [16]And you shall be dishonored before the eyes of the nations, and you shall know that I am the LORD."

[17]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, [18]"Man, the house of Israel has become dross to me. They are all bronze and tin and iron and lead, in a kiln of silver dross they are. [19]Therefore, thus said the

Master, the LORD: Inasmuch as they all have become dross, therefore will I gather them into Jerusalem, [20]a gathering of silver and bronze and iron and lead and tin into the kiln to fan fire upon it for smelting. So will I gather My anger and My wrath and fan the fire and smelt you. [21]And I will gather you in and fan the fire of My fury upon you, and you shall be smelted within it. [22]As silver is smelted within a kiln, so shall you be smelted, and you shall know that I, the LORD, have poured out My wrath upon you."

[23]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, [24]"Man, say to her: You are an unclean land. She was not rain-washed on the day of anger. [25]The plot of her prophets is in her midst. Like a roaring lion rending prey they devoured lives; treasure and riches they took, they made her widows many in her midst. [26]Her priests outraged My teaching and profaned My sacred things. They did not distinguish between sacred and profane, they did not teach the difference between clean and unclean. They averted their eyes from My sabbaths, and I was profaned in their midst. [27]Her nobles in her midst were like wolves rending prey, to shed blood, to destroy lives, so as to take ill-gotten gain. [28]And her prophets daubed the walls with plaster, seeing empty

visions and divining lies, saying, ‘Thus said the Master, the LORD’ when the LORD had not spoken. [29]The people of the land committed oppression and robbed and wronged the poor and the needy and oppressed the sojourner lawlessly. [30]And I sought from them a man to mend the fence and stand in the breach before Me for the sake of the land so as not to destroy it, and I found none. [31]And I poured out My anger upon them, in the fire of My fury I made an end of them. Their way I paid back on their head,” said the Master, the LORD.

CHAPTER 22 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *in its midst.* This phrase (a single word in the Hebrew) and one variant are constantly repeated in this prophecy, emphasizing the idea that the corruption has penetrated to the very heart of the city.

4. *you bring your days close and come to the end of your years.* The obvious reference is to the time of judgment; but the preposition rendered as “to” here, *ʿad,* is unusual, and a number of Hebrew manuscripts show instead *ʿet,* “the time of.” The phrase “the end” does not appear in the Hebrew but is assumed here to be implied.

7. *Father and mother . . . sojourner . . . Orphan and widow.* Although the prophet has begun with the sin of idolatry (“foul things”), he now moves on to violations of the familial order and the perpetration of social injustice. From this he will go on (verses 10–11) to acts of sexual indecency, something that appears to have particularly enraged him.

9. *Slanderers . . . so as to shed blood.* Slander is used as a weapon to condemn the innocent to death or to provoke acts of violence against them, either out of simple hatred or in order to seize the property of those whose blood is shed.

they ate on the mountains. As before, the reference is to a pagan ritual meal.

10. *The menstruant's defilement they took by rape.* Sex with a menstruating woman is forbidden even when there is mutual consent. Here the prophet assumes that she would not agree to have sex during her period, so she is taken by force, two taboos thus violated in one fell swoop. The same situation pertains to the rape of the sister in the next verse.

11. *his father's daughter.* In a polygamous marriage, she might well be only his half sister, but this is still incest.

18. *dross.* What follows might possibly be an elaborated allusion to Isaiah 1:22, "your silver has turned to dross." In any case, it exemplifies Ezekiel's penchant for adopting quasipoetic strategies in his prose prophecies. The metaphor of silver cheapened by dross is extended through verse 21.

19. *Inasmuch as they all have become dross.* What follows is an image of measure-for-measure justice: the people have debased their intrinsic value, turned silver into dross; now God will take together all this debased metal and burn it away in a fiery kiln.

20. *fan the fire and smelt you.* Since one of several synonyms for "anger" that are used here, *ḥeimah,* "wrath," is derived from a root that means "heat," the anger jibes nicely with the metaphor of the burning furnace.

21. *you shall be smelted within it.* As smelting is a process that burns away impurities, the suggestion is that the base elements of the people will be destroyed but a virtuous core will remain.

25. *The plot of her prophets.* The general meaning of the noun *qesher* (literally, "knot") is "plot" or "conspiracy." There is not much warrant to render it as "gang," as does the New Jewish Publication Society. The Septuagint, however, reads *ʾasher nesiʾeha,* "that her princes," which is

attractive because it eliminates the duplication of "prophets" in verse 28 in this catalogue of miscreants.

they made her widows many. This is the obvious consequence of killing the husbands.

26. *They did not distinguish between sacred and profane . . . between clean and unclean.* This is the special responsibility of the priests, as Ezekiel, himself a priest, was keenly aware.

28. *And her prophets daubed the walls with plaster.* This covering up of cracks in the figurative wall of the people is inspired by the elaboration of that image in 13:10ff.

30. *a man to mend the fence and stand in the breach.* That man would be the authentic prophet, who speaks truth to the people and acts to turn them from their evil ways and thus averts God's assault on the city through the very breaches that the people have made. Ezekiel, of course, is speaking about Jerusalem while himself prophesying in Babylonia. There is no recognition here of his older contemporary Jeremiah, surely a man who tried to stand in the breach. Ezekiel would have known, or at least heard about, Jeremiah before he himself was exiled in 597 B.C.E.

31. *Their way I paid back on their head.* The translation follows the contours of the Hebrew idiom (still more literally, "gave on their head"), which implies payback for misdeeds.

CHAPTER 23

[1]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,

[2]“Two women were there,
daughters of one mother.
[3]And they played the whore in
Egypt, in their youth,
they played the whore there.
Their breasts were squeezed
and there were their virgin teats
fondled.

[4]And their names were Oholah, the elder, and Oholibah, her sister. And they became Mine and bore sons and daughters, and their names were Samaria, Oholah, and Jerusalem, Oholibah. [5]And Oholah played the whore while she was Mine, and she was hot for her lovers, the warriors of Assyria, [6]clothed in indigo, satraps and governors, all of them lovely young men, horsemen riding steeds. [7]And she gave her whoring to

them, the pick of Assyria all of them, and in
everything she was hot for, in all their foul things, she
was defiled. [8]And her whoring from Egypt she did not
abandon, for they had lain with her in her youth, and
they fondled her virgin teats and spilled their whoring
upon her. [9]Therefore did I give her into the hand of
her lovers, into the hand of the Assyrians for whom
she was hot. [10]They laid bare her nakedness. Her sons
and her daughters they took, and her they slew with
the sword. And she became a byword for women, and
they exacted punishment upon her. [11]And her sister
Oholibah saw, and she made her hot lust more ruinous
than hers and her whoring more than her sister's
whoring. [12]For the Assyrians she was hot, satraps and
governors, warriors clothed to perfection, horsemen
riding steeds, lovely young men all of them. [13]And I
saw that she was defiled—a single way for the two of
them. [14]And she went further with her whoring, and
she saw men etched on the wall, images of Chaldeans
etched with vermillion, [15]girded with belts around their
waists, wrapped turbans on their heads, the look of
captains all of them had, the image of the sons of
Babylonia, Chaldeans, the land of their birth. [16]And
she was hot for them, for what her eyes saw, and she
sent messengers to them in Chaldea. [17]And the sons of
Babylonia came to her for lovemaking and defiled her

with their whoring. And she was defiled by them and disgusted by them. [18]And she laid bare her whoring and laid bare her nakedness, and I was disgusted by her as I was disgusted by her sister. [19]And she played the whore still more to recall the days of her youth when she played the whore in the land of Egypt. [20]And she was hot for their consorts, whose flesh was the flesh of donkeys and whose members were like the members of stallions. [21]And you went back to the lewdness of your youth when your teats were fondled by the Egyptians, your youthful breasts squeezed. [22]Therefore, Oholibah, thus said the Master, the LORD: I am about to rouse your lovers against you, by whom you were disgusted, and I will bring them against you all around. [23]The Babylonians and all the Chaldeans, Pekod and Shoa and Koa, all the Assyrians, those lovely young men, satraps and governors all of them, captains and marshaled fighters, riders of horses all of them. [24]And they shall come against you, charger and chariot and wheel in an assembly of troops, buckler and shield and helmet. They shall set about against you all around, and I will set judgment before them, and they shall punish you with their judgments. [25]And I will set My jealousy against you, and they shall deal with you in wrath. Your nose and your ears they shall lop off, and those

left after you shall fall by the sword. They shall take
your sons and your daughters, and those left after you
shall be consumed by fire. [26]And I will strip off your
garments, and they shall take your splendid apparel.
[27]And I will end your lewdness and your whoring from
the land of Egypt, and you shall not lift up your eyes to
them, and Egypt shall you no more recall. [28]For thus
said the Master, the LORD, I am about to give you
into the hand of those you hate, into the hand of those
by whom you were disgusted. [29]And they shall deal
with you in hatred and take all your gain and abandon
you stark naked, and your whoring nakedness and your
lewdness and your whoring shall be laid bare—[30]the
doing of these to you in your whoring after the
nations, for your being defiled by their foul things. [31]In
the way of your sister you went, and I have given her
cup in your hand."

[32]Thus said the Master, the LORD:
Your sister's cup you shall drink,
deep and wide.
It shall be a laughingstock and scorn.
Much does it hold.
[33]With drunkenness and sorrow you
are filled,

the cup of devastation and
desolation,
your sister's cup, Samaria.
34 And you shall drink it to the dregs,
and its shards you shall grind,
and your breasts you shall cut
off.
For I have spoken, said the Master,
the LORD.

35 Therefore, thus said the Master, the LORD:
"Inasmuch as you forgot Me and flung Me behind your back, even you shall bear your lewdness and your whoring." 36 And the LORD said to me, "Man, will you judge Oholah and Oholibah and tell them their abominations? 37 For they committed adultery and there is blood on their hands, and they committed adultery with their foul things, and also their sons whom they bore for Me they gave over to be consumed. 38 This besides they did to Me: they defiled My sanctuary on that day and My sabbaths they profaned. 39 And they slaughtered their children to their foul things and came into My sanctuary on that day to profane it and, look, so did they do within My house. 40 And even more, they sent for men coming from afar, to whom a messenger

was sent, and, look, they came to you who bathed, put kohl around your eyes, and decked your self with jewels. [41]And you sat on a sumptuous bed with a table set before it, and you put My incense and My oil on it. [42]And the sound of a singing throng was in it, and to many men [you sent]. Drink was brought from the desert, and they put bracelets on their arms and splendid diadems on their heads. [43]And I said to her worn out from adultery: now let them whore in her whoring. And she—. [44]And they came to bed with her as one comes to bed with a whore-woman, so did they come to bed with Oholah and Oholibah, the lewd women. [45]And righteous men, they shall judge them by the law of adulteresses and by the law of those who shed blood, for they are adulterers and there is blood on their hands. [46]For thus said the Master, the LORD: Bring up against them a crowd and make them a horror and an object of scorn. [47]And let the crowd stone them and cut them apart with their swords. Their sons and their daughters let them slay, and let them burn their houses in fire. [48]And I will put an end to lewdness in the land, and all the women shall learn a lesson and not do like your lewdness. [49]And they shall put your lewdness upon you, and you shall bear the offenses of your foul things. And you shall know that I am the Master, the LORD."

CHAPTER 23 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *Their breasts were squeezed and there were their virgin teats fondled.* As in chapter 16, Ezekiel takes the conventional metaphor of whoring as an image of idolatry (and also of alliances with foreign powers) and pushes it to a level of sexual explicitness as does no other biblical writer. Nowhere else in the Bible does one find this sort of direct reference to fondling breasts in sexual play, and nowhere else does one encounter an evocation of a concupiscent woman allured by the largeness of the male sexual organ (verse 20). There are passages in this prophecy where the allegorical referent of idolatry virtually disappears as the sexual foreground is flaunted. Ezekiel looks distinctly like a man morbidly obsessed with the female body and with female sexuality, exhibiting a horrified fascination with both. The word in the second verset of this line, *dad,* is represented by some as "nipple," but on dubious grounds. It is a phonetic cousin of *shad,* the standard word for "breast." It occurs only here and in Proverbs 5:19, where it does not seem to mean "nipple" either. In any case, "fondling" (the more general sense of the verb is "knead") does not work well for nipples, although it is appropriate for breasts.

4. *Oholah . . . Oholibah.* No entirely convincing explanation for the choice of these names to designate, respectively, Samaria and Judah, has emerged. Both names have a component that suggests "tent," *ʾohel,* and names close to these appear elsewhere in the Bible.

5. *while she was Mine.* Literally, "beneath Me," that is, under My authority—a phrase used for adulterous wives. Ezekiel invokes the familiar trope that Israel is wedded to God.

7. *all their foul things.* In this polemic designation of idols, the referent of the metaphor briefly breaks through the sexual foreground of the figure.

8. *her whoring from Egypt she did not abandon.* Ezekiel persists in his notion that the Israelites first became idolators in Egypt, and, having become accustomed to the practice, never let go of it.

spilled their whoring upon her. In her case, "whoring" indicates her promiscuous readiness to give herself to all comers. In the case of the lovers, because the noun is the subject of the verb "spill," there is a clear suggestion that it means "semen."

10. *They laid bare her nakedness.* Usually, this idiom is used for incest. Here, it has a literal sense (they stripped her naked as an object of sexual exploitation) and a figurative one (she was utterly without defenses). What is represented by the figure is the destruction of the northern kingdom by Assyria.

12. *lovely young men all of them.* The warriors are good-looking, muscular young men, inciting the desire of Oholibah. They will, of course, destroy her.

14. *she saw men etched on the wall.* The peoples of Mesopotamia had a sophisticated art of bas-relief, sometimes outlining the figures in vermillion, as here. Oholibah is at once drawn to the visual art, to the heroic male figures it depicts, and to the pagan culture it embodies.

20. *their consorts. Pilagshim,* a loanword that elsewhere refers to concubines, here must refer to male lovers, an application encouraged by the fact that the plural ending of the word looks like a masculine plural.

the members. The noun *zirmah,* which occurs only here, is derived from a verbal stem that means "to flow." It seems formally analogous to *shufkhah,* a term for the penis derived from a verb that means "to pour." In both cases, the use to indicate the male member would be through metonymy. It is possible, however, that *zirmah* has the sense of the noun (not the verb) "ejaculate." It is also possible that "flesh" in this verse is a euphemism for "penis."

22. *your lovers . . . by whom you were disgusted.* It now emerges that the promiscuous Oholibah, having given herself to all these lovers, has discovered that they, or at least some of them, are distasteful.

23. *Pekod and Shoa and Koa.* These are obviously Babylonian ethnic groups, though precise identification, at least for the last two, is uncertain.

25. *Your nose and your ears they shall lop off.* Such mutilation was actually sometimes practiced against conquered populations, but in the sexual metaphor, the once alluring Oholibah will be hideously disfigured.

28. *those you hate . . . those by whom you were disgusted.* The evident idea is that these were foreign lovers with whom she had dalliances and then after the fact was revolted by them.

31. *her cup.* The cup or chalice of destruction or poison is such a stock image for the prophets that Ezekiel merely has to mention "cup" and the whole idea is evoked. Samaria was destroyed, and now it is the turn of Judah.

32. *It shall be a laughingstock.* An emendation of the suffix of the verb here would yield "you shall be."

33. *devastation and desolation.* The Hebrew wordplay is *shamah ushemamah.*

34. *your breasts you shall cut off.* This ghastly self-mutilation follows the lopping off of ears and more above and provides a violent denouement to the breasts fondled by Egyptian lovers.

38. *they defiled My sanctuary on that day.* Ezekiel seems to have in mind a particular event in which a pagan cult was brought into the Jerusalem temple. A certain day in the reign of Manasseh might be a candidate for the reference.

40. *they came to you who bathed, put kohl around your eyes, and decked your self with jewels.* While Ezekiel may have in mind Judah's seeking foreign alliances, the sexual metaphor once more occupies the foreground: like the seductress in Proverbs 7, Jerusalem prepares the bed where she will receive her lovers with rich fabrics, and lays out a feast for their enjoyment. All of this points to burning incense and offering sacrifices to strange gods in the Temple.

42. *a singing throng.* This translation emends the Masoretic *shalew,* "tranquil," to *shirim,* "songs."

bracelets on their arms. The suffix for "their" is feminine and hence refers to the women waiting for the foreigners. The Hebrew also veers from the

second person to third person, as happens frequently in biblical usage.

43. *her worn out from adultery.* Through all her promiscuity, she has become a worn-out, faded thing, no longer alluring to men.

And she— This (a single Hebrew word) dangles at the end of the sentence, and it looks as if something has been lost in the text.

47. *let the crowd stone them and cut them apart with their swords.* Although this is a prophecy of the destruction of the kingdom of Judah, what remains in the foreground at the end is the image of the insatiable adulteress, stoned to death and hacked to pieces.

CHAPTER 24

[1]And the word of the LORD came to me in the ninth
year in the seventh month on the tenth of the month,
saying, [2]“Man, write you the name of the day, this very
day. The king of Babylonia has laid siege against
Jerusalem on this very day. [3]And speak a parable to
the house of rebellion and say to them, Thus said the
Master, the LORD:

Put the pot on the fire
    and pour water into it, too.
[4]Gather in it the cuts of meat,
    every good cut,
thigh and shoulder,
    with choice bones fill it.
        [5]take the choice of the flock.
And burn the wood under it, too,
    let it boil away,
        and its bones, too, will be
            cooked within it.

[6]Therefore, thus said the Master, the LORD: Woe, city
of bloodshed, pot with its filth within it, and its filth
has not left it. Empty it cut by cut. No lot has fallen on
it. [7]For her blood has been within it. On bare rock she
put it, she did not spill it on the ground to cover it with
dirt. [8]To raise up wrath, to wreak vengeance I have put
her blood on bare rock so as not to be covered.
[9]Therefore, thus said the Master, the LORD: Woe, city
of bloodshed. I on My part will make the pyre blaze.
[10]Pile on the wood, kindle the fire, let the meat be
consumed, stir the broth, and let the bones be charred.
[11]And set it empty over its coals, that it grow hot and
its copper heat up and its uncleanness melt within it,
its filth be purged, [12]but it will not leave it—the
abundance of its filth, in the fire is its filth. [13]In your
lewd uncleanness, inasmuch as I cleansed you but you
were not clean of your uncleanness, you shall no longer
be clean until I have set My wrath upon you. [14]I the
LORD have spoken. It has come and I have done it. I
will not revoke and will not show pity and will not
repent. By your ways and by your acts they have
judged you, said the Master, the LORD."

[15]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[16]"Man, I am about to take from you by plague what is

dear in your eyes, but you shall not lament and you shall not keen and no tear shall you shed. [17]Groan silently. Perform no mourning for the dead. Wear your head-cloth, put your sandals on your feet, and do not cover your moustache, and do not eat the bread of other men." [18]And I spoke to the people in the morning, and my wife died in the evening, and the next morning I did as I had been charged. [19]And the people said to me, "Will you not tell us what these things that you are doing mean for us?" [20]And I said to them, "The word of the LORD came to me, saying, [21]Say to the house of Israel, Thus said the Master, the LORD: 'I am about to profane My sanctuary, the pride of your strength, what is dear in your eyes, what is cherished in your heart, and your sons and your daughters whom you abandoned shall fall by the sword. [22]And you shall do as I have done: you shall not cover your moustache nor shall you eat the bread of other men. [23]And your head-cloth shall be on your head and your sandals on your feet. You shall not lament and you shall not keen, and you shall rot in your crimes and moan to one another. [24]And Ezekiel shall be a portent for you. As all that he did, you shall do when it comes, and you shall know that I am the Master, the LORD. [25]And you, man, on the day I take from them their stronghold, the joy of their splendor,

what is dear in their eyes, their heart's longing, their sons and their daughters, [26]will not on that day a fugitive come to you to let you hear with your own ears? [27]On that day your mouth shall open to the fugitive and you shall no longer be mute, and you shall become a portent for them, and they shall know that I am the LORD.'"

CHAPTER 24 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *in the ninth year in the seventh month.* This computes to January 587 B.C.E., which means that the final conquest of Jerusalem is only a year and a half in the future. Ezekiel could well have had word in Babylonia of the expeditionary force sent to take Jerusalem.

2. *has laid siege.* An unusual verb is used here that has the more common sense of "lean on" or "support."

3. *speak a parable.* The fluid sense of the Hebrew *mashal* is in this instance close to "veiled saying." That is, an image of uncertain reference is developed through the lines of poetry; then its meaning is spelled out in the prose that follows.

4. *Gather in it the cuts of meat, / every good cut.* The poetic parable unfolds through a false lead: it seems as though what is being evoked is the preparation of a sumptuous meat meal, but then the explication of the images will turn them into a portent of total destruction.

6. *pot with its filth within it.* Only now are we told that there is something disgusting in this pot of cooking meat.

No lot has fallen on it. This brief sentence is rather cryptic. Since lots were sometimes used to single out the guilty person in a crowd (see, for example, the story of Achan in Joshua 7), the meaning may be that here no lots were cast because everyone was guilty and everyone would be punished.

7. *For her blood has been within it.* In this prophecy, Ezekiel targets bloodshed rather than idolatry as the crime for which the city is condemned. Child sacrifice, of course, combines the two.

to cover it with dirt. This violates the injunction to cover spilled blood. Blood splashed on bare rock is painfully conspicuous, as is the crime of Judah in the eyes of the prophet.

10. *let the meat be consumed, stir the broth, and let the bones be charred.* In the poem, it seemed as if a proper meal were cooking in the pot. Now it emerges that the contents of the pot are to be cooked to death—the meat boiling until there is nothing left, the bones entirely charred. As the next verse spells out, only the destruction of the unclean matter within the pot will cleanse it, which is to say, the defilement of the people of Judah can be eradicated only by fiery annihilation.

12. *but it will not leave it.* The first Hebrew word of this verse, *teʾunim,* is unintelligible, and the second word, *ḥelʾat*, makes no syntactic sense. This translation assumes an erroneous scribal duplication here—*teʾunim* repeating and expanding the penultimate word of the previous verse, *titom,* and *ḥelʾat* repeating the last word of that verse, *ḥelʾatah.*

13. *My wrath.* The word for "wrath" suggests "heat," and thus picks up the image of the burning pot.

14. *It has come.* "It" is the catastrophe.

16. *what is dear in your eyes.* It is not at first revealed to Ezekiel that the dear possession to be taken away is his wife. This is the first mention of the marital status of this prophet so morbidly obsessed with female sexuality. One may assume that the loss of his wife by plague is a biographical fact, but it is turned here into a portent of the destiny of the nation.

17. *Wear your head-cloth.* Going bareheaded was one of the practices of mourning.

do not cover your moustache. This is an odd-sounding gesture of mourning, but it is attested elsewhere (Leviticus 13:45).

do not eat the bread of other men. As in later Jewish practice, it was customary for mourners not to prepare their own food but to be fed by members of their community.

21. *I am about to profane My sanctuary.* Because God determines all things in this theological perspective, it is He Who decrees that the Babylonians should profane the Temple.

and your sons and your daughters whom you abandoned. What is suggested is that the panicked parents fled the city, leaving their children behind.

24. *And Ezekiel shall be a portent for you.* At this point, God, as it were, interrupts Ezekiel's address to the exiles in order to comment on the meaning of the prophet's acts.

25. *their heart's longing.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "their being's longing." (The same is true of "cherished in your heart" in verse 21.) The multipurpose noun *nefesh* is used here and in verse 21.

26. *a fugitive come to you to let you hear with your own ears.* Ezekiel has been constantly prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem, but now he will be confronted with an eyewitness account of the actual horror.

CHAPTER 25

[1]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[2]“Man, set your face to the Ammonites and prophesy
about them. [3]And say to the Ammonites, ‘Listen to the
word of the Master, the LORD. Thus said the master,
the LORD: Inasmuch as you have said hurrah
concerning My sanctuary when it was profaned and
concerning the soil of Israel when it was desolated and
concerning the house of Judah when they went into
exile, [4]therefore am I about to give you to the
Easterners as an inheritance, and they shall set up their
encampments within you and place their dwellings
within you. They shall eat your fruit and they shall
drink your milk. [5]And I will turn Rabbah into a camel
pasture and the Ammonite towns into a place where
sheep bed down, and you shall know that I am the
LORD. [6]For thus said the Master, the LORD:
Inasmuch as you have clapped your hands and
stamped your feet and rejoiced in all your utmost spite
over the soil of Israel, [7]therefore, look, I have stretched
out My hand against you and have made you spoil for

the nations and have cut you off from among the peoples and made you perish from among the lands. I have destroyed you. And you shall know that I am the LORD.'"

[8]Thus said the Master, the LORD: "Inasmuch as Moab and Seir have said, 'Look, the house of Judah is like all the nations,' [9]therefore will I expose the flank of Moab, its towns every one of them, the splendor of the land—Beth-Jeshimoth, Baal-Meon, and Kiriathaim [10]to the Easterners, besides the Ammonites, I will give it as an inheritance, that the Ammonites be not recalled among the nations. [11]And against Moab will I wreak punishment, and they shall know that I am the LORD."

[12]Thus said the Master, the LORD, "Inasmuch as Edom has taken vengeance on the house of Judah and incurred guilt and wreaked vengeance upon them, [13]therefore thus said the Master, the LORD: I will stretch out My hand against Edom and cut off from her man and beast and turn her into ruins, from Teman to Dedan they shall fall by the sword. [14]And I will set My vengeance against Edom through the hand of My people of Israel, and they shall act against Edom

according to My anger and according to My wrath; and they shall know My vengeance, said the Master, the LORD."

15Thus said the Master, the LORD, "Inasmuch as the Philistines have acted in vengeance and wreaked vengeance in utmost spite as a destroyer, in age-old enmity, 16therefore, thus said the Master, the LORD: I am about to stretch out My hand against the Philistines and I will cut off the Cherithites and destroy the remnant of the seacoast. 17And I will wreak great vengeance upon them in punishing wrath, and they shall know that I am the LORD when I exact vengeance from them."

CHAPTER 25 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *set your face to the Ammonites and prophesy about them.* Ezekiel now turns his attention from Israel to the surrounding peoples that have been hostile toward Israel, each now predicted to have its comeuppance. Four different peoples are singled out in this chapter, and the language used is stereotypical, varying only slightly from one prophecy to the next.

3. *Listen to the word of the Master, the LORD.* One may regard this direct address to the Ammonites as a kind of rhetorical fiction since it is virtually inconceivable that Ezekiel actually will speak to them.

you have said hurrah. The guilt of the Ammonites is in their open expression of schadenfreude at the destruction of Jerusalem. Given the context, it looks as if this sequence of prophecies was pronounced after 586 B.C.E.

4. *the Easterners.* These are nomadic tribes, chiefly Arab, living in the desert area east of the Jordan. Their nomadic character is indicated in their setting up "encampments," not towns, in the conquered area of Ammon. The erasure of the urban nature of Ammon is spelled out in the next verse.

7. *I have destroyed you.* This phrase (a single Hebrew word) looks out of place syntactically and is a superfluous repetition of what immediately precedes.

10. *besides the Ammonites.* The evident sense is that Moab as well as Ammon will be given to the eastern tribes.

12. *Edom has taken vengeance.* Unlike the previously mentioned peoples, who gloated over the fall of Judah, Edom actually allied itself with the Babylonians and played an active role in Judah's destruction. The anger against the Edomite collaboration with the Babylonian invaders is sharply registered in Psalm 137.

13. *from Teman to Dedan.* Though both are obviously Edomite towns and are mentioned elsewhere, their exact location has not been determined.

15. *the Philistines.* They were perennial enemies of the Israelites from the period of the Judges onward, a fact noted in the phrase "age-old enmity."

16. *the Cherithites.* That is, the Cypriots. According to biblical tradition, the origin of the Philistines, who certainly came from the Greek sphere, was Cyprus.

the remnant of the seacoast. The Philistines, associated with the Sea Peoples who are mentioned in Egyptian sources, arrived via the Mediterranean in the thirteenth century B.C.E. and remained largely confined to a strip of territory close to the seacoast.

CHAPTER 26

[1]And it happened in the eleventh year on the first of
the month, the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[2]“Man, inasmuch as Tyre has said concerning
Jerusalem ‘Hurrah! The doors of the peoples are
broken. It has come round to me. Let me be filled
from the city in ruins.’ [3]Therefore, thus said the
Master, the LORD: Here I am against you, Tyre, and I
will bring up against you many nations as the sea
brings up its waves. [4]And they shall ruin the walls of
Tyre and destroy her towers, and I will sweep away her
earth from her and turn her into bare rock. [5]A place
for spreading fishnets she shall be within the sea, for I
have spoken, said the Master, the LORD, and she shall
become spoil for the nations. [6]And her daughter-
villages that are in the field shall be slain by the sword,
and they shall know that I am the LORD. [7]For thus
said the Master, the LORD: I am about to bring
against Tyre Nebuchadrezzar, king of Babylonia, from
the north, a king of kings, with horses and with
chariots and with horsemen and an assembly and many

troops. [8]Your daughter-villages in the field he shall slay
with the sword, and he shall set against you siege-
towers and build against you siege-ramps and put up
against you shields. [9]And his assault catapults he shall
set against your walls, and your towers he shall raze to
ruins. [10]In the rush of his horses he shall cover you
with their dust. From the sound of horsemen and
wheels and chariots your walls shall shake as he enters
your gates as through the entrance of a breached town.
[11]With his horses' hooves he shall trample all your
streets. Your people he shall slay with the sword, and
the pillars of your strength he shall bring down to the
ground. [12]And they shall loot your wealth and plunder
your wares and destroy your walls, and your precious
houses they shall raze, and your stones and your
timber and your earth they shall plunge into the water.
[13]And I will bring an end to the murmur of your songs,
and the sound of your lyres shall be heard no more.
[14]And I will turn you into bare rock, a place for
spreading fishnets she shall be. She shall not be built
again. For I the LORD have spoken, said the Master,
the LORD. [15]Thus said the Master, the LORD, to
Tyre: Why, from the sound of your collapse, in the
groaning of the slain, in the killing within you, the
coastlands shall shudder. [16]And all the princes of the
seacoast shall come down from their thrones and take

off their robes, and their embroidered garments they shall strip. They shall don shuddering. On the ground they shall sit, and they shall shudder moment by moment and be desolate over her. [17]And they shall sound an elegy over you and say to you:

How you have perished, O settled
    from the seas,
    the celebrated city
that was strong in the sea,
    she and her dwellers,
who struck with terror
    all dwelling in her.
[18]Now will the coastlands shudder
    on the day of your collapse,
and the coastlands that are by the sea
    are dismayed by your demise.

[19]For thus said the Master, the LORD: When I turn you into a city in ruins, like cities that were never settled, when I bring up over you the deep and many waters cover you, [20]I will bring you down with the dwellers of the Pit, to the people of yore, with those who go down to the Pit, so that you shall not be settled and you shall not show splendor in the land of the

living. [21]I will turn you into horror, and you shall be sought and never found again, said the Master, the LORD."

CHAPTER 26 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the eleventh year on the first of the month.* In the received text, the name of the month is missing. The eleventh year of Ezekiel's exile brings us to 586 B.C.E., probably after the destruction of Jerusalem (although that would depend on the month), as the cries of schadenfreude noted here would seem to indicate. It could be that the month is the eleventh month, omitted by haplography, which would put this prophecy after the fall of Jerusalem.

2. *Let me be filled from the city in ruins.* In this dialogue attributed to the Phoenician city of Tyre, the city imagines herself looting the riches of Jerusalem that are left among the ruins.

3. *as the sea brings up its waves.* The simile is strategically chosen because Tyre is situated on an island.

4. *turn her into bare rock.* The flourishing island-city, after the invading army has swept over it, is imagined as desolate bare rock in the sea.

6. *daughter-villages.* The Hebrew *banot* means both "daughters" and the villages adjacent to a town. This translation adopts the solution of the Jewish Publication Society version by representing both meanings hyphenated. The slaying, of course, works better for "daughters" than for "villages."

7. *a king of kings.* This is a title that had currency in Akkadian. As a Hebrew idiom, it has the force of a superlative, "the supreme king."

8. *put up against you shields.* The whole sequence of assault here is realistic. First, arrows are shot into the city from the height of siege-towers. Then

troops rush up to the top of the walls on the ramps they have built, protecting themselves with serried rows of shields.

11. *With his horses' hooves he shall trample all your streets.* This vivid depiction of Nebuchadrezzar's army swarming through the streets of Tyre and destroying everything in sight was not realized historically. The Babylonian siege of Tyre went on for a very long time—according to Josephus, for thirteen years—but the city was never taken.

12. *And they shall loot your wealth and plunder your wares.* Ezekiel's language is nicely calibrated for Tyre. It was a mercantile city par excellence, its ships plying the Mediterranean. An unusual word is chosen for "wares," *rekhulet,* a term derived from the more common *rokhel,* "trader."

your stones and your timber and your earth. These are all building materials, especially for city walls.

14. *I will turn you . . . She shall not be built again.* The weaving between second person and third person is common in biblical usage.

16. *all the princes of the seacoast.* The Hebrew is literally "princes of the sea," but the obvious reference is to the kingdoms by the sea or islands just offshore, such as Tyre.

They shall don shuddering. In a shrewd metaphorical move, the Tyrian princes, having shed all their finery, clothe themselves not in garments but in shudders.

On the ground they shall sit. This is a gesture of mourning as well as of dethronement.

17. *settled from the seas.* The preposition "from" probably indicates that people have come by the sea to settle in Tyre.

19. *like cities that were never settled.* While the ruins suggest that a city once stood here, the devastation is so complete that it is as if there had never been a settlement in this place.

20. *I will bring you down.* There is a pointed antithesis between bringing up the deep in the previous clause and bringing down the inhabitants of the city

to the netherworld. Though drowning is a set trope for dying in biblical poetry, it is especially relevant to Tyre, an island washed by the waves.

you shall not show splendor. The wording of the Hebrew is a little difficult. It might seem to say, "I will give you (*wenatati*) splendor," which does not make much sense. But the verb here could also be an archaic form of the second-person feminine singular, which is how it is understood in this translation, and the "not" of "you shall not be settled" could carry over to this verb that immediately follows.

21. *I will turn you into horror, and you shall be sought and never found again.* The meaning of "horror" is unpacked in the second clause: Tyre's extinction will be so absolute an ending that no trace of her will remain.

CHAPTER 27

[1]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[2]"And you, man, sound a lament for Tyre. [3]And say to
Tyre, which sits at the gateways to the sea, trader to
peoples, to many coastlands, thus said the Master, the
LORD:

Tyre, you said,
'I am perfect in beauty.'
[4]In the heart of the seas are your
borders.
Your builders perfected your
beauty.
[5]With cypress from Senir they built
you—
all your panels.
Cedar from Lebanon they took
to make masts for you.
[6]Of oak from Bashan they made
your oars,

your planks they made of ivory
inlaid in boxwood from the
coastlands of Kittim.
[7]Embroidered linen from Egypt
were your sails
to be for you a banner.
Indigo and crimson from the isles of
Elisha
were your canopy.
[8]The dwellers of Sidon and Arvad
were rowers for you.
Your skilled men, O Tyre, were
within you,
they were your mariners.
[9]Gebal's elders and skilled men
were within you repairing the
crafts.
All the ships of the sea and their
sailors
were within you to traffic in your
wares.
[10]Peras and Lud and Put
were in your forces, your men of
war.
Buckler and helmet they hung in
you,

it is they who gave your glory.

[11]Men of Arvad and Helech were within your walls all
around, and the Gammarites were on your towers.
Their shields they hung on your walls all around, it is
they who perfected your beauty. [12]Tarshish traded with
you. From all the great wealth of silver, tin, and lead,
they deposited your goods. [13]Javan, Tubal, and
Meshech, they traded with you in human beings and
copper vessels; they gave your wares. [14]From Beth-
Targemah, horses and horsemen and mules, they
deposited your goods. [15]The men of Dedan traded with
you, many coastlands were traders under you. Ivory
tusks and ebony they gave back as your tribute. [16]Aram
traded with you and all the things you made in
malachite, purple cloth and embroidery and linen and
coral and agate they gave for your deposited goods.
[17]Judah and the land of Israel traded with you in the
wheat of Minnith and Paggo, and honey and oil and
balm they gave for your wares. [18]Damascus traded with
you in all the things you made, from all the great
wealth of Helbon wine and white wood. [19]Vedan and
Javan of Uzal for your deposited goods gave forged
iron, cassia, and cane. For your wares it was. [20]Dedan
traded with you in saddle cloths for riding. [21]Arabia

and all the princes of Kedar were traders under you.
Fat sheep and rams and he-goats of theirs were your
trade. [22]The traders of Sheba and Raamah traded with
you in the choicest of all spices and precious stones
and gold, they gave for your deposited goods. [23]Haran
and Canneh and Edom, the traders of Sheba, Assyria,
and Cilmad traded with you. [24]They traded with you in
fine raiment, in indigo robes and bright-colored rugs
bound in cords and packed tight among your wares.
[25]Tarshish ships were in the service of your trade.

And you were full and became
greatly ladened
in the heart of the seas.
[26]Into many waters they brought you,
those rowing for you.
The east wind broke you
in the heart of the seas.

[27]Your wealth and your deposited goods, your wares,
your sailors, the repairers of your ships and the
supervisors of your wares and all your men of war who
were within you and all your assembly that was within
you shall fall into the heart of the seas on the day of
your downfall.

[28]At the sound of the scream of your
mariners
the breakers shall toss.
[29]And they shall come down from
their ships,
all who wield the oar,
sailors, all the sea's mariners
shall stand on the ground.
[30]And they shall make their voices
heard over you
and scream bitterly,
and put dust upon their heads,
in ashes they shall wallow.
[31]And they shall shave their heads
over you
and gird sackcloth
and keen over you most bitterly,
a bitter dirge.
[32]And their sons shall sound over you
a lament
and lament over you:
Who is like Tyre for silence
within the sea?

[33]When your deposited goods went out from the seas,
you sated many peoples with your great wealth, and
with your wares you enriched the kings of the earth.

[34]When you were broken on the seas,
into the waters' depths your wares
and all your assembly within
you fell.
[35]All the coastland dwellers
were shocked over you,
and their kings were horrified,
and their faces were contorted.
[36]Traders among the peoples
hissed over you.
You are become a horror,
and you exist no more, forever."

CHAPTER 27 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *trader to peoples.* This epithet announces the central theme of the prophecy. The Phoenicians were famous as a maritime and mercantile people, developing trade routes far to the west in the Mediterranean and establishing colonies as distant as Carthage (present-day Tunisia) and Spain. Ezekiel will evoke the breadth and splendor of this mercantile empire as he forecasts its destruction.

5. *Senir.* A mountainous region mentioned in the Song of Songs 4:8 as adjacent to Mount Hermon to the north of Israel.

to make masts for you. At this point it becomes clear that the perfected beauty of Tyre is not chiefly in the structures of the city but in its ships, which become a kind of metonymy for the city that sends them far to the west.

6. *your planks they made of ivory / inlaid in boxwood.* Whether this description reflects the reality of Tyre's merchant fleet or not, it represents the ships as not merely utilitarian vessels but as extravagantly luxurious constructions ("Your builders perfected your beauty" [verse 4]), with decks inlaid with ivory, sails made of embroidered Egyptian linen, and canopies of regal indigo and crimson cloth to shade the travelers.

7. *the isles of Elisha.* This may be Cyprus.

8. *Your skilled men.* The noun *ḥakham* usually means "wise man," but it also has a general sense of someone skilled in a craft or trade.

10. *Lud and Put.* Although some want to identify Lud with Lydia in Asia Minor, both places are probably located in Africa, in proximity to Egypt, in the region of modern Libya. In Ezekiel's vision, the reach of Tyre extends on the west to the Greek sphere, on the south to North Africa, on the east to Arabia and Mesopotamia.

it is they who gave your glory. The clear sense is that the army of Tyre was manned by mercenaries from these sundry far-off lands.

11. *Men of Arvad.* One should note that Ezekiel readily slips from poetry—virtually required by the *qinah,* the lament form—into prose, with no real change in content. This is not a prophet who is entirely comfortable in verse.

Gammarites. The received text shows "Gammadites," but the known place-name is Gomer (the Hebrew letters for *r* and *d* are rather similar in shape, and there are many scribal confusions in the transcription of the two).

it is they who perfected your beauty. In this instance, the perfected beauty is linked not to the ships but to the city walls displaying the highly polished shields (compare Song of Songs 4:4).

12. *Tarshish.* Though frequently mentioned in the Bible, Tarshish has not been confidently identified, locations as different as Asia Minor, North Africa,

and Spain having been proposed. All that is certain is that it is far to the west.

13. *Javan.* This name, which looks like the two that come after it, appears in the Table of Nations in Genesis, and is a Hebrew transliteration—*yawan*—of Ion or Ionia.

15. *were traders under you.* The literal sense is "were trade of your hand." Since "hand" implies power, responsibility, oversight, it is assumed in this translation that the word suggests superiority in the trade relationship.

16. *malachite.* As elsewhere in the Bible, the identification of this and other precious stones in this verse is conjectural.

19. *cassia, and cane.* These are both aromatic substances.

25. *Tarshish ships.* As elsewhere, this is probably a designation not of ships built in Tarshish but of a particular kind of vessel constructed for long voyages.

26. *The east wind broke you.* The previous line initially seems to continue the evocation of Tyre's dominance as a trader city over vast regions. Now, however, in a sudden transition, the prosperous city, emblematized by a ship, is shattered in the heart of the seas by an east wind, which in the Bible generally brings bad things.

28. *At the sound of the scream of your mariners / the breakers shall toss.* Tyre's grandeur had been represented in this lament chiefly through the splendor of her sea vessels. Now the ships are shattered, engulfed by waves, and the crewmen terrified.

29. *shall stand on the ground.* This final verset seems rather flat for the depiction of a disaster at sea, conveying merely a sense of the sailors leaving the ship to stand on dry land. The move may be dictated by the desire to represent the sailors in the next three verses as assuming all the grief-stricken postures of mourning.

31. *they shall shave their heads over you.* Less familiar than the ashes and sackcloth, this is a gesture of mourning.

32. *Who is like Tyre for silence / within the sea?* The meaning of *kedumah,* "for silence," is somewhat doubtful, but *dumah,* "silence," is an epithet for the realm of death.

35. *their faces were contorted.* Though the Hebrew verb here, deriving from the word for thunder, sometimes suggests "anger," that does not seem appropriate for this context.

36. *Traders among the peoples / hissed over you.* This is the final turn in Tyre's reversal of fortunes. The many peoples of the region had enjoyed multiple trade relations with Tyre and had been willing to assume the role of subordinate partners in trade. Now these very partners in commerce are both shocked by and contemptuous of Tyre (both implied by the hissing).

CHAPTER 28

[1]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[2]“Man, say to the prince of Tyre, Thus said the
Master, the LORD: Inasmuch as your heart was
haughty and you said, ‘I am a god, enthroned like a
god. I have sat in the heart of the seas.’—but you are
human and not a god, and you thought your heart like
the heart of a god! [3]Why, you are wiser than Daniel. In
all obscure things none can match you! [4]Through your
wisdom and through your discernment you have
gained wealth, and you have gathered gold and silver
in your treasure houses. [5]Through all your wisdom in
your trading you have made your wealth great, and
your heart became haughty through your wealth.
[6]Therefore, thus said the Master, the LORD: Inasmuch
as you have thought your heart like the heart of a god,
[7]therefore am I about to bring against you strangers,
the fearsome ones of the nations, and they shall
unsheathe their swords against the beauty of your
wisdom and profane your splendor. [8]To the Pit they
shall bring you down, and you shall die the deaths of

the slain in the heart of the seas. [9]Will you really say, ‘I am a god’ before your killer? But you are human and not a god in the hand of him who slays you. [10]The death of the uncircumcised you shall die by the hand of strangers, for I have spoken,” said the Master, the LORD.

[11]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, [12]“Man, sound a lament over the king of Tyre and say to him, Thus said the Master, the LORD: Man, you are the sealer of the plan, full of wisdom, perfect in beauty. [13]In Eden the garden of God you were. Every precious stone was in your raiment—carnelian, chrysolite, and amethyst, beryl, lapis lazuli, and jasper, sapphire, turquoise, and emerald and gold crafted to beautify you and your groves within you. On the day you were created they were made. [14]You were a cherub anointed and sheltering. And I set you on a holy mountain. A god you were. Among stones of fire you walked about. [15]Unblemished you were in your ways from the day you were created until wrongdoing was found in you. [16]Through all your trading, you were filled with acts of outrage and offended, and I profaned you, not to be on the mountain of God, and made you wander, O sheltering cherub, far from the stones of

fire. [17]Your heart grew haughty through your beauty.
You ruined your wisdom together with your splendor. I
flung you to the ground; before kings I set you to be
stared at. [18]From all your crimes, through the
wrongdoing of your trading, you profaned your
sanctuaries, and I brought out fire from within you—it
consumed you. And I turned you into ashes on the
ground before the eyes of all who saw you. [19]All who
knew you among the peoples were shocked over you.

You are become a horror,
and you exist no more, forever."

[20]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[21]"Man, set your face to Sidon and prophesy
concerning her. [22]And say, Thus said the Master, the
LORD: Here I am against you, Sidon, and I will be
honored in your midst, and they shall know that I am
the LORD when I carry out punishments within her,
and I will be hallowed in her. [23]And I will send against
her pestilence and blood in her streets, and the slain
shall fall within her by the sword against her all
around, and they shall know that I am the LORD.
[24]And the house of Israel shall no longer have stinging
thistles and painful thorns from all around them who

despise them, and they shall know that I am the LORD."

[25]Thus said the Master, the LORD: "When I gather in the house of Israel from the peoples where they were scattered, I will be hallowed through them in the eyes of the nations, and they shall dwell on their soil that I gave to My servant Jacob. [26]And they shall dwell on it secure and build houses and plant vineyards when I carry out punishments against all who despise them all around them, and they shall know that I am the LORD."

CHAPTER 28 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *the prince of Tyre.* Why Ezekiel should have directed all these prophecies of doom against Tyre is not entirely evident. The Phoenicians had been trading partners of the kingdom of Judah since the time of Solomon, and they were in no way allied with the Babylonians, as were the hated Edomites. The prophet's objection to Tyre, as emerges in the second part of this verse and in what follows, appears to have been theological rather than political: this prosperous maritime kingdom, enjoying luxurious wealth from its trading activities, had in the prophet's view committed the primal transgression of imagining that it was godlike.

your heart. Again, one must remember that the heart was thought of as the seat of intellection, which leads to the indictment of Tyre's pride in its wisdom in the next verse.

3. *wiser than Daniel.* This is, of course, not the Daniel of the later biblical book but a wise and virtuous figure of Ugaritic—and, presumably, Canaanite—legend. It might be noted that though the Masoretic vocalization asks us to pronounce the name "Daniel," the consonantal text shows *danʾel* (without the *yod* after the *nun*), which is how the name appears in the Ugaritic.

10. *The death of the uncircumcised you shall die.* This dire fate must be understood in light of the relatively widespread practice of circumcision among the peoples adjacent to ancient Israel. The act enjoined on Abraham and his descendants was not an innovation; what was new was the meaning imposed on the act. It is noteworthy that of all the surrounding groups, only the Philistines are given the repeated epithet "uncircumcised," and the Philistines were not a Semitic people, having arrived on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean from the Greek realm in the thirteenth century B.C.E.

13. *In Eden the garden of God you were.* The prophet here chooses a somewhat surprising rhetorical strategy. In order to represent—hyperbolically—the perfect splendor enjoyed by Sidon, which will now be violently shorn from it, he imagines the king of Sidon living an angelic life in the Garden of Eden.

Every precious stone was in your raiment. The list of precious stones is the same as those on the breastplate of a high priest. In both cases, the precise identification of most of the stones is not possible. There is nothing whatever about bejeweled garments in the Garden story in Genesis—the first two humans walk about naked—so this is either a free elaboration on the part of Ezekiel or the reflection of a different tradition about Eden.

crafted to beautify you and your groves. The meaning of the entire string of phrases is doubtful.

14. *You were a cherub anointed and sheltering.* The Hebrew phrase is obscure, especially the word here conjecturally translated as "anointed." In the Garden story, the only cherub mentioned appears at the moment of expulsion, wielding a fiery sword to block the way to Eden.

a holy mountain. There is no reference to a mountain in the Eden of Genesis, but perhaps Ezekiel introduces one here because of the conception of a mountain as the dwelling place of the gods in Syro-Canaanite tradition.

A god you were. This is, of course, an audacious assertion. It probably should be seen as a translation into poetic-mythological hyperbole of Tyre's notion that it is a god.

Among stones of fire you walked about. Although this is meant to express the godlike invulnerability of the Edenic Sidon, it is still another detail never hinted at in the canonical Garden story. It could be a poetic invention, but one suspects that Ezekiel was tapping a tradition about Eden that has not survived elsewhere.

16. *I profaned you, not to be on the mountain of God.* "To be" is merely implied in the Hebrew.

17. *Your heart grew haughty through your beauty.* Just as Ezekiel rages against the seductive allure of the female body, the very presence of beauty—the finely wrought aesthetic objects made possible through Sidon's wealth—seems to him a snare that catches its possessor in pride and arrogant self-regard.

22. *I will be honored in your midst.* God is honored, hallowed, by manifesting His overwhelming power to destroy a kingdom intoxicated with its own grandeur.

24. *And the house of Israel shall no longer have stinging thistles and painful thorns.* Historically, it is not clear how the Phoenicians were such tormentors of Israel, though Ezekiel seems persuaded that this was the case.

CHAPTER 29

[1]In the tenth year, in the tenth month, on the twelfth of
the month, the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[2]“Man, set your face to Pharaoh king of Egypt and
prophesy concerning him and concerning all of Egypt.
[3]Speak and say, Thus said the Master, the LORD:

Here I am against you, Pharaoh,
    king of Egypt,
the great crocodile
    crouching in its rivers,
who said, ‘My Nile is mine,
    and I made it for myself.’
[4]I will put the hooks in your jaws
    and make the fish of your rivers
        cling to your scales
and bring you up from your rivers,
    and all the fish of your rivers shall
        cling to your scales.

[5]And I will abandon you in the
desert,
you and all the fish of your rivers.
On the surface of the field you shall
fall,
you shall not be gathered nor
taken up.
To the beasts of the earth and to the
fowl of the heavens
I will give you to be eaten.
[6]And all the dwellers of Egypt shall
know
that I am the LORD
inasmuch as they have been
a reed staff to the house of Israel.
[7]When they grasp you with the palm,
you shatter,
and you crack every shoulder
among them.
And when they lean on you, you
break,
and you wrench all loins among
them.

[8]Therefore, thus said the Master, the LORD: I am
about to bring the sword against you, and I will cut off
from you man and beast. [9]And the land of Egypt shall
become a desolation and a ruin, and they shall know
that I am the LORD, inasmuch as he said, ‘The Nile is
mine and I made it.’ [10]Therefore, here I am against you
and against your Nile and its offshoots, and I will turn
the land of Egypt into ruins, desolate parched ground,
from Migdol to Seyene and to the border of Nubia.
[11]No human foot shall pass over it, and no beast’s foot
shall pass over it, and it shall be unsettled for forty
years. [12]And I will make the land of Egypt a desolation
among desolate lands, and its ruined cities shall be a
desolation for forty years, and I will disperse Egypt
among the nations and scatter them among the lands.
[13]For thus said the Master, the LORD: At the end of
forty years I will gather Egypt from the peoples where
they were dispersed. [14]And I will restore the fortunes
of Egypt and bring them back to the land of Patros, to
the land of their origins, and they shall be there a lowly
kingdom. [15]Among the kingdoms she shall be lowly
and shall no longer be raised up over the nations, and I
will diminish them, that they not hold sway over the
nations. [16]And they shall no longer be for the house of
Israel a place to trust, recalling crime when they

turned toward them. And they shall know that I am the Master, the LORD."

[17]And it happened in the twenty-seventh year, in the first month, on the first of the month, that the word of the LORD came to me, saying, [18]"Man, Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia has made his forces labor mightily against Tyre. Every head is bald and every shoulder scraped. But no gain did he and his forces get from all the labor that he spent upon it. [19]Therefore, thus said the Master, the LORD: I am about to give Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia the land of Egypt, and he shall carry away her abundance and take her spoil and seize her plunder, and she shall be gain for his forces. [20]His wages for which he labored I will give him, the land of Egypt, for what they did to Me, said the Master, the LORD. [21]On that day I will make a horn sprout for the house of Israel, and to you I will give freedom to speak in their midst, and they shall know that I am the LORD."

CHAPTER 29 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *In the tenth year.* This would be 587 B.C.E., roughly half a year before the conquest of Jerusalem.

2. *Pharaoh king of Egypt.* Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel saw a proposed alliance with Egypt against Babylonia as a self-destructive illusion, but Pharaoh, like the king of Tyre, is also excoriated for his overweening idea that he is a god.

3. *the great crocodile.* Although this same Hebrew word in Genesis and Psalms refers to a mythological sea beast, here it is the crocodile, whose habitat is the Nile, and who also is an emblem for Pharaoh. The "scales" or armor plates of the beast belong to the crocodile.

its rivers. The Hebrew is the plural of *yeʾor,* an Egyptian loanword designating the Nile. In biblical poetry it often has the general sense of "rivers," although here the probable reference is to the seven tributaries of the Nile. "Rivers" in the following lines is again the plural of *yeʾor.*

4. *make the fish of your rivers cling to your scales.* This is a double disaster: the crocodile (Pharaoh) will be hauled out of the Nile after being caught with hooks, and the fish of the Nile—a vital source of sustenance for the Egyptians—will be hauled out with the crocodile, to die on dry land.

5. *And I will abandon you in the desert.* This is, of course, a place without water where neither the crocodile nor the fish can survive.

you shall not be gathered nor taken up. The probable reference is to being collected for burial. Not only will the crocodile-Pharaoh perish in the desert, but it will suffer the ignominy of denied burial and becoming food for scavengers.

6. *a reed staff.* The slender reed will of course break when a person tries to lean on it.

7. *When they grasp you.* The "you" is the reed, made clear in the Hebrew because it is masculine singular, like the word for "reed."

you crack every shoulder. When the reed breaks, the shoulder of the person leaning on it as though it were a solid staff is wrenched. This is an image of the illusory trust in any alliance with Egypt.

you wrench all loins. Though the Hebrew *haʿamadta* looks as though it meant "made stand," there is a reversal of consonants here (something Rashi

already understood), and the meaning is the same as *hamʿadta*—literally, "cause to stumble."

10. *your Nile and its offshoots.* While this is the same plural form for the word for "Nile" that is translated above as "rivers," the pointed reference to "The Nile is mine" at the end of the previous verse is crucial, so the word "Nile" needs to be repeated. A very literal rendering would be "your Niles," but of course there is only one Nile.

desolate parched ground. Egypt, watered by the Nile and its tributaries, was famous in the region for its lushness. Now it will become a desert.

from Migdol . . . to the border of Nubia. Migdol is on the northern border of Egypt, Nubia (Cush in the Hebrew) to its south.

11. *unsettled for forty years.* The formulaic number forty is invoked.

14. *And I will restore the fortunes of Egypt.* This amounts to an ironic use of this familiar phrase. When the fortunes of Israel are restored, it is returned in splendid triumph to its land. Egypt will be returned to its land, but only in a pitifully reduced state.

17. *in the twenty-seventh year.* This would be 571 B.C.E., making this the latest of all the precisely noted dates in Ezekiel.

18. *Nebuchadrezzar . . . has made his forces labor mightily.* Much earlier, Ezekiel had predicted the fall of Tyre. The siege had been very protracted (according to Josephus, thirteen years, but perhaps even longer), hence the laboring mightily of the troops.

Every head is bald. Although elsewhere this is translated as "shaven," here it is not a sign of mourning but an indication that the soldiers are worn (or perhaps simply aged) through the long siege.

19. *she shall be gain for his forces.* The conquest of Egypt becomes a kind of consolation prize for the Babylonians. Unable to take Tyre, they are compensated—at least they have "gain" for their labors—by the opportunity to plunder Egypt.

20. *for what they did to Me.* The phrase is cryptic. It could mean "for what the Egyptians did in offending Me"; it could also mean "for what the

Babylonians did in acting on My behalf."

21. *make a horn sprout.* As throughout biblical literature, the horn—whether bull's or ram's horn—is an idiom for "strength."

to you I will give freedom to speak. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "opening of the mouth." The idea is that in the restored Israel the prophet will be able to speak without inhibition, and everyone will listen to him.

CHAPTER 30

[1]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[2]“Man, prophesy and say, Thus said the Master, the LORD:

Wail ‘woe’ for the day.
    [3]For the day is near and the night is near for the LORD.
A day of cloud, a day of nations it shall be.
    [4]And a sword shall come against Egypt,
        and there shall be shuddering in Nubia
    when the slain fall in Egypt
        and they take off her abundance, and her foundations shall be ruined.
[5]Nubia and Put and Lud and all the mixed throng
    and Cub and the people from the land of the pact,
        they shall fall by the sword.
[6]Thus said the LORD:
The supporters of Egypt shall fall,
    and the pride of her strength shall come down.

From Migdol to Seyene
by the sword they shall fall within her
—said the Master, the LORD.
7And they shall be desolate among desolate lands,
and its towns among ruined towns shall be.
8And they shall know that I am the LORD
when I set fire to Egypt,
and all who help her are broken.

9On that day messengers shall go out before Me in ships to strike secure Nubia with terror, and there shall be shuddering in them on the day of Egypt, for look, it is coming. 10For thus said the Master, the LORD: I will bring an end to the abundance of Egypt by the hand of Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylonia. 11He and his troops with him, the fearsome ones of the nations, are to be brought to lay ruin to the land, and they shall unsheathe their swords against Egypt, and they shall fill the land with the slain. 12And I will turn the rivers into dry land and give over the land into the hand of evil men, and I will make the land and its fullness desolate by the hand of strangers. I, the LORD, have spoken.
13Thus said the Master, the LORD: I will destroy the foul things and bring an end to the ungods from Noph, and no prince shall there be from the land of Egypt,

and I will set fire to the land of Egypt. [14]And I will make Patros desolate and set fire to Zoan, and I will execute punishments in No. [15]And I will pour out My wrath upon Sin, the stronghold of Egypt, and cut off the abundance of No. [16]And I will set fire to Egypt. Sin shall surely shudder, and No shall be breached, and Noph, the foes by day. [17]The young men of Aven and Pi-Beseth shall fall by the sword, and the cities shall go into captivity. [18]And in Tahpanhes the day shall go dark when I break there the staffs of Egypt. And the pride of her strength shall end within her. As to her, a cloud shall cover her, and her daughters shall go into captivity. [19]And I will execute punishments in Egypt, and they shall know that I am the LORD."

[20]And it happened in the eleventh year in the first month on the seventh of the month that the word of the LORD came to me, saying, [21]"Man, I have broken the arm of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and, look, it has not been bound up to heal, to put a dressing on it to bind it for strengthening it to grasp a sword. [22]Therefore, thus said the Master, the LORD: Here I am against Pharaoh king of Egypt. I will break his arms, the strong one and the broken one and make the sword drop from his hand. [23]And I will disperse Egypt among

the nations and scatter them among the lands. [24]And I will strengthen the arms of the king of Babylonia and put My sword in his hand, and I will break the arms of Pharaoh, and he shall groan as the slain groan before Me. [25]And I will strengthen the arms of the king of Babylonia, but the arms of Pharaoh shall drop. And they shall know that I am the LORD when I put My sword in the hand of the king of Babylonia and he reaches it out against the land of Egypt. [26]And I will disperse Egypt among the nations and scatter them among the lands, and they shall know that I am the LORD."

CHAPTER 30 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *A day of cloud.* Given the context of impending catastrophe, this is more than just a cloudy day. The day when God exacts retribution is here (compare verse 18), as in several other prophets, a day when the sky goes ominously dark.

4. *shuddering in Nubia / when the slain fall in Egypt.* The Hebrew features wordplay: "shuddering" is *ḥalḥalah,* "the slain" is *ḥalal.*

5. *Nubia and Put and Lud and all the mixed throng / and Cub.* These are all neighboring lands (though Cub has not been indentified) that were either allied with Egypt or provided mercenaries to the Egyptians.

the people from the land of the pact. The reference is somewhat obscure, but as part of a list of allies of Egypt, it probably indicates a country that had

some sort of military pact with the Egyptians.

6. *From Migdol to Seyene.* As before, this is from north to south within Egypt.

8. *all who help her.* As with the "supporters" in verse 6, this is a term often used for those who provide military aid.

9. *there shall be shuddering in them on the day of Egypt.* This formulation conveys the idea that as retribution comes down on Egypt, it will engulf her neighboring allies as well.

12. *I will turn the rivers into dry land.* Again, "rivers" is literally "Niles," meaning the Nile, its tributaries, and its canals.

14. *No.* This is a city in northern Egypt that at times served as a capital. "No" is a variant of "Noph": the Hebrew sometimes uses one form and other times the other (e.g., in verse 16 below, as well as in Jeremiah 2:16).

15. *the abundance of No.* It should be noted that both here and in verses 4 and 10 above, the term *hamon,* "abundance" or "wealth," can also mean "crowd."

16. *and Noph, the foes by day.* The translation reproduces the obscurity of the Hebrew. Perhaps a preposition ("from," "by") was dropped.

18. *Tahpanhes.* Another prominent Egyptian city; like No, there are variant spellings in the Hebrew. This translation reflects that, sometimes using the spelling Tahpanes (e.g., Jeremiah 2:16).

go dark. The Masoretic Text reads *ḥasakh,* "hold back," but many Hebrew manuscripts show the more plausible *ḥashakh,* "go dark."

when I break there the staffs of Egypt. The staff is an emblem of sovereignty.

20. *the eleventh year.* This takes us back to 587 B.C.E. This historical moment, just before the final destruction of Jerusalem, seems to have been a time when Ezekiel was repeatedly moved to pronounce prophecies about the nations.

21. *I have broken the arm of Pharaoh.* The prophecy is a striking instance of the rhetorical strategy of resuscitating a dead metaphor. Repeatedly, "arm" is a term for "strength" or "power." That is what it means here, but the literal sense of the word becomes salient: the arm is broken; it has been given no medical attention to heal it; dangling broken, it can no longer grasp a sword; then the other arm is broken, and the damaged one is broken a second time. The devastation of Egypt as a military power in this way is made painfully vivid.

22. *make the sword drop from his hand.* In keeping with the literalization of the metaphor of the arm, Pharaoh's broken, pain-wracked arm, incapable of holding a sword, lets it drop from his grip.

24. *And I will strengthen the arms of the king of Babylonia and put My sword in his hand.* This is the final turn of the metaphor of the arm: while Pharaoh's broken arms dangle, unable to wield any weapon, God makes Nebuchadnezzar's arms strong and ready to grasp the sword. "My sword" does not refer to a divine or magical weapon but simply invokes the idea that the Babylonian king is acting on God's behalf, or at God's bidding.

26. *And I will disperse Egypt among the nations and scatter them among the lands.* One again sees the pronounced tendency in Ezekiel's prose prophecies to deploy formulaic language and frequent repetition.

CHAPTER 31

[1]And it happened in the eleventh year in the third
month, on the first of the month, that the word of the
LORD came to me, saying,

[2]“Man, say to Pharaoh king of Egypt
and to his throng:
Whom were you like in your
greatness?
[3]Look, Assyria was a cedar in
Lebanon,
lovely in branches, a shady wood,
and lofty in stature,
among the clouds its crest.
[4]Water made it grow,
the deep raised it high,
led its rivers round where it was
planted
and sent out its channels
to all the trees of the field.

[5]Therefore did its stature grow
higher
than all the trees of the field,
and its boughs became many,
its branches grew long
from the many waters in its
duct.
[6]On its boughs nested
all the fowl of the heavens,
and under its branches
all the beasts of the field spawned,
and in its shade dwelled
all the many nations.
[7]And it was lovely in its great size
in the length of its branches,
for its roots were
by many waters.
[8]Cedars did not match it
in the garden of God.
Cypresses did not equal
its boughs,
and plane trees did not have
the like of its boughs.
No tree in the garden of God
was like it in its beauty.
[9]Lovely did I make it

in all its boughs,
and all the trees of Eden envied it,
which were in the garden of God.

10 Therefore, thus said the Master, the LORD:
Inasmuch as it grew high in stature, and its crest was
set among the clouds, and its heart became lofty
through its height, 11 I will give it into the hand of the
fiercest of nations. He shall surely do to it according to
its wickedness. I have banished it. 12 And strangers, the
most fearsome of nations, shall cut it off and abandon
it in the mountains and in all the valleys. Its boughs
shall fall and its branches shall break in all the
watercourses of the earth, and all the peoples of the
earth shall come away from its shade and abandon it.
13 In the place of its downfall all the fowl of heavens
shall dwell, and on its branches all the beasts of the
field shall be, 14 so that no trees by water be lofty in
their stature and they not set their crests among the
clouds, and no well-watered trees stand up to them in
their height. For they are all given over to death, to the
netherworld, in the midst of humans who go down to
the Pit. 15 Thus said the Master, the LORD: On the day
it went down to Sheol, I dried up, covered the deep
over it, and held back its rivers, and the many waters

were blocked. And I made Lebanon grow dark over it, and all the trees of the forest languished over it. [16]With the sound of its downfall I shook nations, when I brought it down to Sheol with those who go down to the Pit, and in the netherworld all the trees of Eden, the choicest and the best of Lebanon, all well-watered, took comfort. [17]They, too, went down with it to Sheol, to the slain by the sword, its helpers who had dwelled in its shade in the midst of nations. [18]To whom were you like in such glory and grandeur among the trees of Eden? But you were brought down with the trees of Eden to the netherworld. Among the uncircumcised you lie with those slain by the sword. This is about Pharaoh and all his throngs," said the Master, the LORD.

CHAPTER 31 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *in the eleventh year in the third month.* This would be June 587 B.C.E.

3. *Look, Assyria was a cedar in Lebanon.* Assyria had been the paradigmatic image of the towering, overweening imperial power that was brought down to the dust. The body of this prophecy will focus on the grandeur and downfall of Assyria, but it is all intended to serve as a monitory image of the fate that will now overtake arrogant Egypt.

4. *the deep.* Although *tehom,* "the deep," often refers to the cosmic abyss of waters (as at the beginning of Genesis), here it indicates the groundwater that nurtures the tree.

5. *boughs . . . branches.* One might note that Ezekiel uses four different Hebrew words (one borrowed from the Aramaic) for "branches" in the course of this prophecy.

6. *in its shade dwelled / all the many nations.* The introduction of "many nations" is a clear indication that the towering tree is an image of Assyria's imperial grandeur.

8. *Cedars did not match it / in the garden of God.* As in the prophecy concerning Egypt in chapter 28, Ezekiel pushes his hyperbole to the limit by bringing Eden into the picture, saying that even the perfect cedars of God's garden were not the equal of this grand tree.

10. *it grew high.* The Masoretic Text reads "you grew high," and perhaps the switch from second person to third person in this verse was accepted usage for Ezekiel, but it would be confusing in English. The Syriac shows the third person here, but there is no way of knowing whether it used a Hebrew text with the third person or whether the translators were regularizing the Hebrew.

11. *I have banished it.* This clause (a single word in the Hebrew) looks syntactically disjunct and may reflect a scribal error.

12. *its branches shall break in all the watercourses of the earth.* Previously, the many watercourses nurtured the tree and caused it to grow high. Now, the broken branches float down the streams, manifestly unable to be sustained in life by the water.

13. *on its branches all the beasts of the field shall be.* The tree has been shattered and the broken branches lie on the ground. Instead of birds nesting in the living branches, earthbound animals crouch over them.

14. *well-watered trees.* The Hebrew says literally "water-drinking trees."
For they are all given over to death. The fact that trees, like human beings, die is an indication that empires, too—the grandest of trees—come to an end.

15. *I dried up, covered the deep over it.* The wording is a little confusing. Ordinarily, the deep is an inexhaustible source of water. Here, however, the deep is dried up—or, perhaps alternatively, its waters are "blocked"—so that when the great tree of the Assyrian empire descends into the netherworld, the "deep" or abyss that covers it serves to reinforce its withered state.

16. *when I brought it down to Sheol . . . all the trees of Eden . . . took comfort.* The somewhat complicated symbolic plot is as follows: Because trees, like humankind, are mortal, even the trees of Eden have gone down to Sheol. Now, when they see that the great tree of the Assyrian empire, which they were said to have envied, has joined them in the realm of death, they rejoice; the tree that towered over them has now been reduced to their equal.

17. *the slain by the sword, its helpers.* As is often the case with Ezekiel's handling of allegorical figures, the referent here obtrudes into the allegorical image: "the slain by the sword" are fallen soldiers, and "helpers" would be Assyria's military allies or mercenary troops.

18. *Among the uncircumcised you lie.* See the note on 28:10.

This is about Pharaoh and all his throngs. This notation at the very end of the prophecy betrays a certain awkwardness in the deployment of the allegory. The entire extended image of the towering tree has been a representation of the grandeur of the Assyrian empire. Now, however, the prophet must remind his audience that in fact Pharaoh is like Assyria in his greatness and that the whole prophecy is really about Pharaoh.

CHAPTER 32

[1]And it happened in the twelfth year, in the twelfth
month, on the first of the month, that the word of the
LORD came to me, saying, [2]“Man, sound a lament
over Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and say to him:

To a lion among nations were you
likened,
but you were like a crocodile in
the seas
churning through your rivers,
muddying waters with your feet,
trampling their rivers.

[3]Thus said the Master, the LORD: I will cast over you
My net in the assembly of many peoples and bring you
up in My toils. [4]And I will abandon you on the ground
and cast you on the surface of the field. And I will
settle upon you all the fowl of the heavens and sate
from you the beasts of the earth. [5]And I will put your

flesh on the mountains and will fill the valleys with
your blood. [6]And I will water the earth with what
floods from you, from your blood on the mountains,
and the channels shall fill from you. [7]And I will cover
the heavens with your going dark, and I will darken
their stars. I will cover the sun with cloud, and the
noon shall not shine its light. [8]All the sources of light
in the heavens will I darken upon you. And I will set
darkness over your land, said the LORD. [9]And I will
vex the heart of many peoples when I bring your
breaking among the nations, upon nations that you
never knew. [10]And I will shock many peoples over you,
and their kings shall be horrified by you when I let My
sword fly over their faces, and they shall tremble
constantly, each for his life, on the day of your
downfall. [11]For thus said the Master, the LORD:

The sword of the king of Babylonia
shall come upon you.
[12]By the swords of warriors will I
make your throng fall.
Fearsome among the nations
they all are,
and they shall plunder the pride of
Egypt,

and all her throng shall be
destroyed.
13 And I will destroy all their cattle
from alongside many waters,
and no more shall human foot
muddy them,
and the hooves of cattle shall not
muddy them.
14 Then will I sink their waters
and lead their rivers like oil
—said the Master, the LORD.
15 When I make the land of Egypt a
desolation
and the land and its fullness
become desolate,
when I strike down the dwellers
there,
they shall know that I am the
LORD.
16 It is a lament, and the daughters of
Egypt lament it,
they shall lament it over Egypt,
and over all their throng they
shall lament it.”
—said the Master, the LORD.

[17]And it happened in the twelfth year, on the fifteenth
of the month, the word of the LORD came to me,
saying, [18]“Man, weep over the throng of Egypt and
bring it down, you and the daughters of the nations:

The mighty to the netherworld
    with those who go down to the Pit.
[19]More lovely than who were you? Go down!
    and be laid with the uncircumcised.
[20]Among the slain by the sword they shall fall.
    The sword is let loose. They have pulled down her
        and all her throngs.
[21]The mightiest warriors speak to him
    from Sheol, together with his allies:
The uncircumcised have come down, they lie,
    those slain by the sword.
[22]Assyria is there and all her assembly,
    round her all her graves.
All of them are slain,
    fallen by the sword,
[23]whose graves have been put
    in the far reaches of the Pit.
And her assembly is round her gravesite,
    all of them are slain,
        fallen by the sword,

who had sown terror
in the land of the living.
[24]Elam is there and all her throng
round her gravesite.
All of them are slain,
fallen by the sword,
who came down uncircumcised
to the netherworld,
who had sown terror
in the land of the living,
and they bear their disgrace
with those who go down to the Pit.
[25]Amidst the slain
they made her a place to lie
with all her throng
round her graves.
All of them are uncircumcised,
fallen by the sword.
For they had sown terror
in the land of the living,
and they bear their disgrace
with those who go down to the Pit.
[26]Meshech and Tubal are there and all their throng
round their graves.
All of them are uncircumcised,
pierced by the sword.

For they had sown terror
in the land of the living.
[27]And they shall not lie with the warriors,
those fallen of the uncircumcised
who came down to Sheol with their weapons of war
and put their swords beneath their heads,
and their crimes were upon their bones,
for the terror of the warriors was upon the land of the living.
[28]As for you, in the midst of the uncircumcised you are broken,
and you lie with those slain by the sword.

[29]Edom is there and all her kings and all her princes, who despite their valor were put with those slain by the sword—they lie with the uncircumcised and with those who go down to the Pit. [30]The princes of the north are all of them there and all the Sidonians, who have come down with the slain in their terror, shamed of their valor, and they lie with the uncircumcised, with those slain by the sword, and bear their disgrace with those who go down to the Pit. [31]Pharaoh sees them and regrets all her throng. Pharaoh and all his force are slain by the sword, said the Master, the LORD. [32]For he had sown terror in the land of the living and was

laid down in the midst of the uncircumcised with those slain by the sword—Pharaoh and all her throng"—said the Master, the LORD.

CHAPTER 32 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *in the twelfth year, in the twelfth month.* This sets the prophecy in 585 B.C.E., some months after the destruction of the kingdom of Judah.

2. *To a lion among nations were you likened.* The metaphor of the conquering king as a lion is conventional throughout the Near East and appears frequently in biblical poetry.

but you were like a crocodile in the seas. The crocodile, while perhaps fearsome, has little of the grandeur of the lion and is confined to his aqueous habitat ("the seas" here are the Nile and its tributaries). It can be caught with nets (verse 3), and when it is flung on dry land far from the water (verse 4), it cannot long survive.

5. *with your blood.* The Masoretic *ramutekha* is opaque. Some interpreters derive it from *r-m-h,* a verbal stem that means "to throw," and so take it to indicate the body of Pharaoh thrown away in open country. Because that interpretation seems strained, this translation follows the Septuagint in reading *damkha,* "your blood," which aptly matches "your flesh" in the first half of this sentence.

6. *what floods from you.* The single Hebrew word here is problematic, and so the translation is conjectural.

7. *I will darken their stars.* Although apocalyptic darkness is often part of prophecies of God's day of judgment, the elaboration of engulfing darkness has special resonance here in relation to Pharaoh because it recalls the plague of darkness that descended on Egypt. "I will set darkness over your land" in verse 8 is an especially pointed allusion to Exodus.

10. *when I let My sword fly over their faces.* The horrendous power of God's act of destruction is so sweeping that the surrounding peoples fear for their own lives, even though the wrath is not directed at them.

14. *lead their rivers like oil.* When poured, oil advances in a slow trickle.

16. *the daughters of Egypt lament it.* As elsewhere in the Bible, women figure as designated keeners crying over deaths.

18. *you.* This translation reads *ʾatah,* "you," instead of the Masoretic *ʾotah,* "her."

19. *be laid with the uncircumcised.* This again appears as a shameful fate. Circumcision was practiced in Egypt's priestly class, and there may have been a difference between a circumcised elite and uncircumcised masses.

23. *who had sown terror.* The literal sense of the Hebrew verb here is "had given." This is not a collocation that occurs elsewhere.

25. *with all her throng.* The "her" refers to Elam, in Persia, following the common biblical usage in which nations are represented in the feminine singular because of an implied personification of the nation as a woman.

26. *Meshech and Tubal.* These are peoples of Asia Minor, always paired together in the Bible. The Hebrew text does not have an "and" here and treats the two as a feminine singular, but they are in fact two distinct peoples.

pierced by the sword. There is a slight variation here in this highly repetitious text. In previous instances, the phrase was ḥaleley *ḥerev,* "slain by the sword," whereas here a passive verb, *meḥuleley,* is used instead of the noun.

27. *And they shall not lie with the warriors.* That is, they shall be denied the dignity of a warrior's burial.

who came down to Sheol with their weapons of war / and put their swords beneath their heads. This line invokes the widespread practice, abundantly confirmed by archaeology, in the Near East (and, indeed, elsewhere) of burying warriors with their weapons.

28. *you are broken.* This verb is often used for defeat or catastrophe, but here it probably indicates that the corpse in the grave is damaged or mutilated through violent death.

30. *The princes of the north.* Although "north" is used freely by the prophets to designate distant enemy powers, the mention here of the Sidonians makes this a reference to the Phoenicians.

31. *Pharaoh sees them.* Witnessing all these rulers who have descended to the netherworld in disgrace, Pharaoh is compelled to recognize that he shares their dire fate.

all her throng. As in the previous usages here, the feminine "her" refers to the nation, Egypt.

Pharaoh and all his force. This is virtually a formulaic phrase, occurring in a variant form in the destruction of the Egyptian army at the Sea of Reeds in Exodus 15.

32. *he had sown terror.* The Masoretic Text shows a first-person singular verb, but three ancient versions, more plausibly, have the third person.

CHAPTER 33

[1]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[2]“Man, speak to the sons of your people and say to
them: When I bring the sword against a land, the
people of the land take one man from their best and
make him a lookout for them. [3]And when he sees the
sword coming against the land, he blows the ram’s
horn and warns the people. [4]And whoever hears the
sound of the ram’s horn and does not heed the warning
and the sword comes and takes him, his blood is on his
own head. [5]The sound of the ram’s horn he heard but
he did not heed the warning, his blood is upon him.
But he who heeds the warning shall save his life. [6]And
the lookout who sees the sword coming and does not
blow the ram’s horn and the people is not warned, and
the sword comes and takes lives from them, the person
is taken in his crime, but his blood will I demand of
the lookout. [7]And you, man, I have made you a
lookout for the house of Israel, and you shall hear a
word from My mouth and warn them from Me. [8]When
I say to the wicked: Wicked man, you are doomed to

die, and you have not spoken to warn the wicked man
of his way, he, the wicked man, shall die for his crime,
but his blood I will seek out from you. [9]And you, when
you warn the wicked man of his way to turn back from
it, and he does not turn back from it, he shall die for
his crime, but you shall save your life. [10]And you, man,
say to the house of Israel: Thus you have said, saying,
'Why, our trespasses and our offenses are upon us, and
we rot in them, and how shall we survive?' [11]Say to
them: By My life, said the Master, the LORD, I do not
desire the death of the wicked but rather the turning
back of the wicked from his way, that he may live.
Turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why
should you die, O house of Israel? [12]And you, man, say
to the sons of your people: The righteousness of the
righteous shall not save him on the day of his trespass,
and in the wickedness of the wicked he shall not
stumble on the day he turns back from his wickedness.
And the righteous cannot live by virtue of it on the day
of his offense. [13]When I say of the righteous, he shall
surely live, and he trusts in his righteousness and does
wrong, all his righteousness shall not be recalled, and
for the wrong that he has done, he shall die. [14]And
when I say to the wicked, you are doomed to die, and
he turns back from his offense and does justice and
righteousness, [15]if he gives back what is pledged, pays

for what is robbed, goes by the statutes of life, not doing wrong, he shall surely live, he shall not die. [16]All his offenses that he committed shall not be recalled for him. He has done justice and righteousness—he shall surely live. [17]And should the sons of your people say, ‘The way of the Master does not measure up,’ it is they whose way does not measure up. [18]When the righteous turns back from his righteousness and does wrong, he shall die for it. [19]And when the wicked turns back from his wickedness and does justice and righteousness, for it he shall live. [20]And you have said, ‘The way of the Master does not measure up.’ Each man of you will I judge for his ways, O house of Israel.”

[21]And it happened in the twelfth year of our exile in the eleventh month on the fifth of the month, a fugitive came to me from Jerusalem, saying, “The city has been struck down.” [22]And the hand of the LORD was upon me in the evening before the fugitive came, and He opened my mouth, and I was no longer mute. [23]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, [24]“Man, these dwellers among the ruins on the soil of Israel are saying, ‘Abraham was but one, and he took hold of the land, and we are many. To us has the land been given as an inheritance.’ [25]Therefore, say to them,

Thus said the Master, the LORD: Over blood you eat,
and your eyes you lift up to your foul things, and you
shed blood. And shall you take hold of the land? [26]You
took your stand with your sword. You performed
abominations, and each man defiled his fellow man's
wife. And shall you take hold of the land? [27]Thus shall
you say to them, Thus said the Master, the LORD:
Those who are among the ruins shall surely fall by the
sword, and those on the surface of the field I will give
to the beasts as food, and those in the fortresses and in
the caves shall die by pestilence. [28]And I will turn the
land into a desolation and a devastation, and the pride
of its strength shall come to an end, and the mountains
of Israel shall be desolate with no passerby. [29]And they
shall know that I am the LORD when I turn the land
into a desolation and a destruction for all their
abominations that they did. [30]And you, man, the sons
of your people who speak to each other about you by
the walls and at the entrances of the houses, and one
speaks to another, a man to his kinsman, saying,
'Come, pray, and hear what is the word coming forth
from the LORD.' [31]They shall come to you as the
people are wont to come, and My people shall sit
before you and hear your words, but these they do not
do, for in the lust in their mouths they act, after their
gain their heart goes. [32]And look, you are for them a

song of lust, lovely in sound and deftly played. And they hear your words but do not act on them. [33]And when it comes—look, it comes—they shall know that a prophet was in their midst."

CHAPTER 33 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *a lookout.* The same metaphor for the role of the prophet is used in 3:17. Although this term could also be rendered as "watchman," the connotation is clearly military: he is the person posted in a tower or on a height to look out for and warn the people of approaching armies, as the prophet sees and warns of impending disaster.

3. *when he sees the sword coming against the land.* This passage makes effective use of synecdoche: "the sword" clearly refers to the military force wielding swords, but the concrete image of a destructive sword descending upon the city is palpable.

the ram's horn. The ram's horn, with its sharp, penetrating sound, was used both to muster troops and to warn of an attack.

6. *the person is taken in his crime, but his blood will I demand of the lookout.* The offending person (the Hebrew says merely "he"), not having been warned by the prophet, will be punished by death, but the prophet, because he has failed to fulfill his calling, will bear responsibility for that death, and retribution will be exacted from him. Verse 8 essentially repeats this idea in slightly different language, Ezekiel's penchant for repetition again in view.

11. *I do not desire the death of the wicked.* More than any other prophet, Ezekiel is repeatedly concerned with questions of divine justice and penitence. This sentence, for understandable reasons, was later incorporated in the liturgy for the Day of Atonement.

12. *And the righteous cannot live by virtue of it.* The "it," though a little distant from its antecedent, refers to "the righteousness of the righteous."

16. *All his offenses that he committed shall not be recalled for him.* In Ezekiel's vision of divine justice, a person lives in a condition of constant existential choice: the wicked man can reverse the dire consequences of all his previous trespasses by deciding to do what is right, and the righteous man can cancel all the good effects of his acts of justice by sliding into acts of wickedness. The next four verses, hewing to Ezekiel's characteristic style, go on to repeat this idea.

21. *a fugitive came to me from Jerusalem.* Since the notation of date at the beginning of the verse places this prophecy in 585 B.C.E., this would be a year after the destruction of Jerusalem.

22. *And the hand of the LORD was upon me . . . and He opened my mouth.* As elsewhere, Ezekiel represents his prophetic experience as a kind of bodily seizure by God in which he is virtually a passive instrument. One suspects that, more than the other prophets, he underwent extreme ecstatic states. He seems to imply here that prior to the night before the arrival of the fugitive, he had been plunged in a condition of muteness. By his own account, he had certainly prophesied several times in the period before and after the final conquest of the kingdom of Judah. It may be the case that he alternated between times of ecstatic prophecy and times of total silence.

24. *these dwellers among the ruins.* This phrase suggests that Ezekiel had already heard of the destruction of Jerusalem.

25. *Over blood you eat.* Consuming blood, or eating "over" blood, is explicitly prohibited (see Leviticus 19:26). There could also be a reference here to some sort of magical rite, as the invocation of idolatry in the next phrase might suggest. But then the end of the verse mentions shedding blood, so the blood forbidden to be eaten perhaps puns on the idea of murder—you eat as you are immersed in bloodshed.

27. *among the ruins . . . on the surface of the field . . . in the fortresses and in the caves.* This constitutes a panorama of where the survivors of the destruction of Jerusalem are to be found: some remain among the ruins of the

city; some have fled to the open field; some have taken refuge outside the city in fortresses (whether actual fortresses or simply mountain crags) and caves.

28. *a desolation and a devastation.* The wordplay in the Hebrew is *shemamah umeshamah.*

30. *by the walls and at the entrances of the houses.* This is a realistic picture of people congregating on the streets outside their homes to speak to one another.

one speaks to another, a man to his kinsman. Since both phrases mean the same thing, this is probably one of those instances in which scribal tradition has incorporated in the text two alternate versions of the same phrase.

Come, pray, and hear what is the word coming forth from the LORD. As elsewhere, the people, despite the tension between them and the prophet, are anxious to hear from him what God's word is, especially at this grim moment when they know that their homeland has been destroyed.

31. *as the people are wont to come.* Literally, "as the coming of the people."

the lust in their mouths. While the expression sounds a bit strange (the Septuagint has instead "the lies of their mouth"), it is probably authentic, leading to the reference to "a song of lust" in the next verse. The people are scarcely ready to take in the word of the LORD spoken by the prophet, immersed as they are in concupiscence and greed ("after their gain their heart goes").

32. *you are for them a song of lust, lovely in sound and deftly played.* The prophet speaks God's imperative words, but all his listeners are capable of hearing is the sort of lewd song accompanying their own profligacy to which they are habituated.

33. *And when it comes—look, it comes.* The meaning "it" invoked is the disaster of which Ezekiel has prophesied—at this dark moment, a disaster compounding the catastrophe of material defeat.

CHAPTER 34

[1]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[2]“Man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel.
Prophesy, and say to them, to the shepherds, Thus said
the Master, the LORD: Woe, shepherds of Israel who
were shepherding them. Will not the shepherds
shepherd the flock? [3]You eat the suet and wear the
wool, slaughter the fat one. The flock you do not
shepherd. [4]You did not strengthen the weak ones, and
the sick ones you did not heal nor bind up the one with
a broken limb nor bring back the one that had
wandered nor did seek out the one that was lost. And
by force you held sway over them with crushing labor.
[5]And they scattered without a shepherd and became
food for all the beasts of the field [and they were
scattered]. [6]My flock has strayed through all the
mountains and on every high hill, and over the face of
the earth has my flock scattered, and none searches
and none seeks for them. [7]Therefore, listen, O
shepherds to the word of the LORD. [8]As I live, said
the Master, the LORD: My flock has surely become

plunder, and My flock has become food for all the beasts of the field without a shepherd, and My shepherds have not sought out My flock, and the shepherds herded themselves, but My flock they did not herd. [9]Therefore, O shepherds, listen to the word of the LORD. [10]Thus said the Master, the LORD: Here I am against the shepherds, and I will demand My flock from their hand and stop them from herding the flock, and the shepherds shall not herd themselves anymore, and I will save My flock from their mouths, and they shall not be food for them. [11]For thus said the Master, the LORD: Here I am, and I will seek out My flock and sort them. [12]As a shepherd sorts his herd when there are ones that are separated within his flock, so will I sort My flock and save them from all the places where they were scattered on the day of cloud and gloom. [13]And I will bring them out from the peoples and will gather them from the lands and bring them to their soil and herd them on the mountains of Israel by watercourses and in all the places of settlement of the land. [14]On good pastures will I herd them, and on the mountains of the height of Israel their fold shall be. There shall they lie down in a good fold and feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. [15]I Myself will herd My flock, and I Myself will bed them down, said the Master, the LORD. [16]The lost

one will I seek out, and the strayed one will I bring back, and the one with the broken limb will I bind up, and the weak one will I strengthen, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will herd it in justice. [17]And you are My flock. Thus said the Master, the LORD: I am about to judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and he-goats. [18]Is it not enough for you that you graze in the good pasture, and what is left of your pasture you trample with your feet, and you drink pools of water, and what is left you muddy with your feet? [19]And My flock feeds on what your feet have trampled, and what your feet have muddied they drink. [20]Therefore, thus said the Master, the LORD, to them: Here I am, and I will judge between the fat sheep and the lean, [21]inasmuch as you have shoved against flank and shoulder and gored with your horns all the weak ones till you scattered them abroad. [22]And I will rescue My flock, and they shall no longer be plundered, and I will judge between sheep and sheep. [23]And I will set up over you a single shepherd, and he shall herd them. My servant David, he shall herd them, and he shall be their shepherd. [24]And I the LORD will be their God and My servant David a prince in their midst. I the LORD have spoken. [25]And I will seal a covenant of peace with them and put an end to vicious beasts in the land, and they will dwell secure in the

wilderness and sleep in the forests. [26]And I will make
them a blessing round My hill, and I will bring down
the rain in its season, rains of blessing they shall be.
[27]And the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and
the land shall yield its produce, and they shall be
secure upon their soil, and they shall know that I am
the LORD when I break the shafts of their yoke and
save them from the hand of their enslavers. [28]And they
shall no longer be plunder for the nations, and the
beasts of the field shall not devour them, and they shall
dwell secure with none to make them tremble. [29]And I
will set up for them an esteemed planting, and they
shall no longer be swept away by famine in the land,
and they shall no longer suffer the disgrace of the
nations. [30]And they shall know that I am the LORD
your God with them, and they are My people, the
house of Israel, said the Master, the LORD. [31]And you
My flock, the flock of My pasture, you are human
beings. I am your God, said the Master, the LORD."

CHAPTER 34 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *the shepherds of Israel.* Since the equation between shepherds and leaders is a fixed trope, the prophet's audience would immediately know about whom

he was talking.

3. *You eat the suet.* The shepherds prey on their flocks, picking off the best sheep to feed their appetite, instead of looking after them.

4. *And by force you held sway over them with crushing labor.* As elsewhere, Ezekiel has some difficulty in keeping apart his metaphor and its referent. "Hold sway" and "crushing labor" direct us to the actual exploitation of the people by their leaders and are not phrases appropriate to shepherds and flocks.

5. *[and they were scattered].* These words—only one word in the Hebrew—are bracketed because they seem to be an inadvertent scribal repetition of the beginning of the verse. The flock has just been said to be eaten by predators, so they could not now be scattered.

10. *I will save My flock from their mouths.* Though this expression looks back to the consumption by the shepherds of the choicest sheep mentioned in verse 3, the formulation also suggests that the shepherds themselves have been like the ravening beasts of the field preying on the flocks.

11. *sort them.* The Hebrew verb refers to the shepherd's activity of surveying and counting his flock, seeing which sheep may be missing, which injured or ailing and hence needing special attention. This meaning is spelled out in the next verse.

12. *the day of cloud and gloom.* This is the day Jerusalem was conquered. The scattered flock, then, are the Judahites who either fled the city or were driven into exile. Exile is clearly the more salient sense.

13. *watercourses.* A reliable source of water is always necessary for the population to prosper.

16. *but the fat and the strong I will destroy.* This is another instance in which Ezekiel does not quite manage his metaphorical vehicle. These two terms are feminine and so must be part of the flock, *ts*ʾ *on,* which is a feminine noun. But the reference is clearly to the predatory leaders, so at this point the shepherds have become part of the flock. Their metaphorical identity as

belonging to the flock is spelled out in the next verse: “I am about to judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and he-goats.” A partial justification for this confusion is that God is now the shepherd and hence all Israel is the flock, but the switch is nevertheless awkward.

18. *pools of water.* The literal sense is “sinking of water.”

19. *My flock feeds on what your feet have trampled.* Previously, the leaders were predatory shepherds devouring the sheep. Now they are greedy sheep, taking all the good grass and water for themselves and leaving scarcely anything fit to eat or drink for the rest of the flock.

21. *gored with your horns all the weak ones.* Now it emerges that the leaders are not pacific sheep but rather rams and he-goats (see verse 17) that attack the sheep.

23. *a single shepherd.* Throughout this prophecy, God has been addressing a plurality of leaders—shepherds. In the restored Israel, there will be a single shepherd, a righteous king.

My servant David. This is surely a reference to a legitimate monarch from the line of David. While the actual narrative of David’s rise and reign in the Book of Samuel presents a decidedly mixed record, in the Book of Kings the retrospective references to David represent him as an ideal king, God’s “servant,” and Ezekiel is clearly drawing on that background.

he shall herd them. There is a nice convergence here of metaphor and literal reference because David began as an actual shepherd and then became the leader of his people.

25. *they will dwell secure in the wilderness and sleep in the forests.* The “peace” of the covenant implies security and tranquillity, so that the people of Israel feel safe even in dangerous places.

26. *round My hill.* The Masoretic Text has “and round My hill,” but the Septuagint plausibly deletes the “and.” The hill is Mount Zion.

31. *And you My flock, the flock of My pasture, you are human beings.* Once again, this looks awkward: Ezekiel, as if he were not altogether sure that his audience would understand that the flock all along has been the people of

Israel, feels obliged to say at the end of the prophecy that what he is talking about is not sheep but human beings.

CHAPTER 35

[1]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[2]“Man, set your face to Mount Seir and prophesy
concerning it. [3]And say to it, Thus said the Master the
LORD:

Here I am against you, Mount Seir,
and I will reach out My hand
against you
and turn you into a desolation
and a devastation.
[4]Your towns I will make a ruin,
and you shall be a desolation,
and you shall know that I am
the LORD.

[5]Inasmuch as you harbored age-old enmity and made
the Israelites bleed with the sword in the time of their
disaster, in the end-time of guilt. [6]Therefore, as I live,
said the Master, the LORD, I will surely turn you into

blood, and blood shall pursue you. In blood did you
hate, and blood shall surely pursue you. [7]And I will
turn Mount Seir into a desolation and a devastation
and cut off from it anyone passing through or
returning. [8]And I will fill its mountains with its slain.
Your hills and your valleys and all your watercourses
—the slain by the sword shall fall in them.

[9]An everlasting desolation will I
make you,
and none shall dwell in your
towns,
and you shall know that I am
the LORD.

[10]Inasmuch as you thought, ‘The two nations and the
two lands shall be mine, and we shall take hold of
them.’ But the LORD was there. [11]Therefore, as I live,
said the Master, the LORD: I will act according to
your anger and according to your zeal as you acted
from your hatred of them, and I will become known
through them as I judge you. [12]And you shall know
that I am the LORD. I have heard all your jibes that
you said of the mountains of Israel, saying, ‘A
desolation! They have been given to us for food.’ [13]And

you were arrogant toward Me in your speech, and piled up words against Me. I have heard. [14]Thus said the Master, the LORD: When all the earth rejoices, I will turn you into a desolation. [15]Like your joy over the estate of the house of Israel for its becoming desolate, so will I do to you. Mount Seir shall be a desolation and all Edom, all of it, and they shall know that I am the LORD."

CHAPTER 35 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Mount Seir.* This mountainous region in trans-Jordan was the territory of the Edomites.

5. *you harbored age-old enmity.* Hostile relations between Israel and Edom marked much of the period of the First Commonwealth.

made the Israelites bleed with the sword in the time of their disaster. Edom allied itself with Babylonia and played an eager role in the destruction of Jerusalem, as Psalm 137 vehemently recalls.

in the end-time of guilt. Ezekiel understands Israel's violation of its covenant with God as the cause of national disaster, so the moment when Jerusalem is destroyed is the end-time when the people are doomed to pay the collective price for the guilt they have incurred.

6. *I will surely turn you into blood, and blood shall pursue you.* The Hebrew is terrifically compact and the meaning thus not entirely certain. What stands out is the triple insistence on "blood" in this verse. It is a way of emphasizing Edom's bloodguilt: they shed the blood of Israelites, and now a fate of blood will befall them, bloodthirsty enemies will pursue them. The Hebrew for "blood," *dam,* may play on *Edom.*

In blood did you hate. The Hebrew is literally "Blood did you hate," and so the translation is somewhat conjectural.

10. *The two nations and the two lands.* These are Judah and Israel.

11. *your hatred of them.* That is, your hatred of Judah and Israel.
I will become known through them. This is a recurrent biblical theme: God's fame is manifested to the nations as He shows His power through the destruction of the enemies of Israel.

12. *A desolation!* In this instance, the word appears to refer not to a landscape turned to desert but to a landscape emptied of human inhabitants. Thus the Edomites imagine that they will find or extract food on the mountains of Israel.

13. *you were arrogant toward Me in your speech.* Literally, "You were big against Me with your mouth."
piled up. This translation takes the unusual verb *he ʿetarta* to derive from the Aramaic root *ʿ-t-r,* which indicates abundance or riches.

14. *When all the earth rejoices.* The probable reference is to the general rejoicing when Israel is restored to its land.

CHAPTER 36

[1]And you, man, prophesy to the mountains of Israel
and say, Mountains of Israel, heed the word of the
LORD. [2]Thus said the Master, the LORD: “Inasmuch
as the enemy said of you, ‘Hurrah! The age-old high
places have become an inheritance for us,’ [3]therefore,
prophesy and say, Thus said the Master, the LORD:
Surely inasmuch as to devastate and trample you all
round, that you become an inheritance for the remnant
of the nations and come up on the tip of the tongue
and in the people’s slander, [4]therefore, hear the word
of the Master, the LORD. Thus said the Master, the
LORD, to the mountains and to the hills and to the
watercourses and to the valleys and to the desolate
ruins and to the deserted towns that had become a
scorn and mockery for the remnant of the nations that
were all round. [5]Therefore, thus said the Master, the
LORD: I have surely spoken in the fire of My zeal
concerning the remnant of the nations and concerning
all Edom that made My land an inheritance for
themselves with the joy of every heart and with spite

so as to take its fields in plunder. [6]Therefore, prophesy concerning the soil of Israel and speak to the mountains and to the hills and to the watercourses. Thus said the Master, the LORD: Look, in My zeal and in My wrath I have spoken inasmuch as you have borne the disgrace of nations. [7]Therefore, thus said the Master, the LORD: I Myself have raised My hand—the nations that are all round you shall surely bear their disgrace. [8]And you, O mountains of Israel, you shall put forth your branches and bear your fruit for My people Israel, for soon shall they come. [9]For here I am for you, and I will turn to you, and you shall be tilled and sown. [10]And I will multiply humankind upon you, the whole house of Israel, all of it, and the towns shall be settled and the ruins shall be rebuilt. [11]And I will multiply upon you man and beast, and they shall multiply and be fruitful, and I will settle you as you were before and do well by you more than in your beginnings, and you shall know that I am the LORD. [12]And I will lead humankind upon you, My people, and they shall take hold of you, and you shall become for them an estate, and you no longer shall make them bereaved. [13]Thus said the Master, the LORD: Inasmuch as they say of you, ‘You are a man-eater, and a bereaver of your nations you are,’ [14]therefore, you shall no longer eat man, and you shall no longer

bereave your nations. You no longer shall stumble, said the LORD. 15And I will no longer let the disgrace of the nations be heard against you, and the taunts of the people you shall no longer hear, and you shall no longer make your nations stumble," said the Master, the LORD.

16And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 17"Man, the house of Israel dwell on their land and defile it through their way and through their acts. Like the defilement of the menstruant has their way been before Me. 18And I poured out My wrath upon them for the blood they shed on the land and for their foul things by which they defiled it. 19And I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed among the lands. According to their way and their acts have I judged them. 20And they came to the nations where they came and profaned My holy name when it was said to them, 'These are the people of the LORD, and from His land they have gone out.' 21But I had pity for My holy name that the house of Israel had profaned among the nations where they had come. 22Therefore, say to the house of Israel, Thus said the LORD: Not for your sake do I act, house of Israel, but for My holy name that you have profaned among the nations where

you have come. [23]And I will hallow My great name
profaned among the nations that you profaned in their
midst, and the nations shall know that I am the LORD,
said the Master, the LORD, when I am hallowed
through you before their eyes. [24]And I will take you
from the nations and gather you from all the lands and
bring you to your soil. [25]And I will cast upon you clean
water, and you shall be cleansed of all your
defilements, and of all your foul things I will cleanse
you. [26]And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit
will I put within you, and I will take away the heart of
stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh.
[27]And My spirit I will put within you, and I will act so
that you go by My statutes and keep My laws, and you
shall do it. [28]And you shall dwell in the land that I gave
to your fathers, and you shall become My people, and
I will be your God. [29]And I will rescue you from all
your defilements, and I will call forth the grain and
make it abundant, and I will not set famine upon you.
[30]And I will make the fruit of the tree abundant and
the yield of the field so that you no longer bear the
disgrace of famine among the nations. [31]And you shall
recall your evil ways and your acts that were not good,
and you shall be disgusted by your crimes and by your
abominations. [32]Not for your sake do I act, said the
Master, the LORD. Let it be known to you—be

ashamed and remorseful for your ways, O house of Israel.” [33]Thus said the Master, the LORD: “On the day I cleanse you of all your crimes and settle the towns, and the ruins are rebuilt, [34]and the desolate land is tilled after having been desolate before the eyes of every passerby, [35]they shall say, ‘That desolate land has become like the garden of Eden, and the ruined and desolate and ravaged towns are settled, fortified.’ [36]And the nations that shall remain all round about you shall know that I the LORD have rebuilt the ravaged towns, I have sown the desolate land. I the LORD have spoken and have done it.” [37]Thus said the Master, the LORD: “For this, too, will I be sought out for the house of Israel to do for them—I will multiply humans like sheep. [38]Like consecrated sheep, like the sheep of Jerusalem on its festivals, so shall the ruined towns be filled with human sheep, and they shall know that I am the LORD.”

CHAPTER 36 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *prophesy to the mountains of Israel.* Ezekiel effects an interesting rhetorical switch here: the prophecy of consolation, instead of being directed to the conquered Judahites, is addressed to the mountains that have been occupied by the conquerors. This becomes a means of focusing the idea of the restoration of the land and its soil.

2. *The age-old high places.* Given the preceding invocation of mountains, the term here must refer to natural heights, not to hilltop altars.

3. *trample.* The verb *shaʾaf* can mean "to pant" or "intensely aspire to," but it has a homonym that means "to trample" or "to crush," and that is the more likely sense here.

4. *to the desolate ruins and to the deserted towns.* The series of places addressed by the prophet moves effectively from the natural landscape to the devastated places where the Judahites once lived.

scorn. The Masoretic Text shows *baz,* which usually means "plunder." Either this should be revocalized as *buz,* "scorn," or *baz* may also have the sense of "scorn."

7. *I Myself have raised My hand.* As elsewhere, the raising of the hand is a gesture for making a solemn vow.

10. *I will multiply humankind upon you.* The mountains have been shorn of human population by the devastating conquest. Now they will again abound with people. The verb "multiply" and the term for "humankind," *ʾadam,* obliquely recall the Creation story: the national restoration is to be a second Genesis.

11. *man and beast.* The Hebrew again uses *ʾadam,* "humankind," but the translation preserves the proverbial collocation "man and beast."

and they shall multiply and be fruitful. This is the most explicit echo in this chapter of the beginning of Genesis.

12. *you no longer shall make them bereaved.* The Judahites through their acts have brought disaster upon the nations and triggered widespread bereavement in the conquest by the Babylonians, but this will no longer be the case.

13. *You are a man-eater.* This continues the idea of the previous verse: Israel's evil acts have had murderous consequences for its own population.

your nations. This evidently refers to Judah and Israel. This usage of the term is unique to Ezekiel.

14. *You no longer shall stumble.* If the first two consonants of the verb are reversed, as a few Hebrew manuscripts show, this would read "You no longer shall make bereaved," both here and in verse 15.

17. *Like the defilement of the menstruant.* Although in biblical law the menstruant does impart ritual defilement, it is characteristic of Ezekiel's troubled relation to the female body that he should invoke menstruation as the paradigmatic instance of defilement.

18. *for the blood they shed on the land.* This item reflects an associative connection with the menstrual blood.

their foul things. The excremental connotation of this pejorative epithet for idols is activated here because idolatry defiles or pollutes the land.

20. *profaned My holy name.* The people of Israel are supposed to be in the land God gave them as an inheritance. The mere fact of their exile is a profanation of God's reputation, for it suggests to the nations that His power has failed.

22. *Not for your sake do I act, house of Israel, but for My holy name.* This is an odd theological twist, but it has an antecedent in the Wilderness narrative when God is tempted to wipe out Israel and is dissuaded by Moses. God decides to redeem Israel not for any merit in the people but because He does not want His standing in the eyes of the nations to be compromised.

24. *your soil.* The obvious sense of the Hebrew *ʾadamah* here and above is "land," but the prophet, in using this term instead of *ʾerets,* emphasizes the arable soil that will again be cultivated. Moshe Greenberg makes the same translation choice in his rendering of the first twenty chapters of the book.

25. *of all your foul things I will cleanse you.* Once more, the suggestion of filth in *gilulim,* the term used for "idols," is clearly activated.

26. *I will take away the heart of stone from your body.* The Hebrew term rendered as "body" is the same word as "flesh" in "heart of flesh" at the end of this verse. Although "flesh" is its more common meaning, it is sometimes used for "body," and that is the less confusing sense here.

27. *And My spirit I will put within you.* In Ezekiel's view, the perversity of the people is such that a kind of spiritual surgery is required: first its heart of stone has to be replaced by a heart of flesh, and then it can be infused with God's spirit.

30. *so that you no longer bear the disgrace of famine among the nations.* A suffering nation, stricken with famine and other collective disasters, is viewed with contempt by other nations as a pitiful entity that must somehow be unworthy.

35. *settled, fortified.* Fortification is the emblem of a secure city.

37. *will I be sought out.* The passive form of this verb suggests that the people seek God and, now favorably disposed, He allows Himself to be found.

38. *Like consecrated sheep, like the sheep of Jerusalem on its festivals.* The reference is to sheep brought to be sacrificed in the Temple. At least according to the hyperbolic account in Kings, which Ezekiel probably knew, thousands upon thousands of sacrificial animals were brought to Jerusalem on the occasion of the festivals. The simile is not entirely apt because, even though it conveys the idea of a very large number, the sheep were destined to be slaughtered, which is hardly what the prophet means to suggest about the people.

CHAPTER 37

[1]The hand of the LORD was upon me, and He took
me out by the wind of the LORD and set me down in
the valley, and it was filled with bones. [2]And He made
me pass by them all around, and, look, they were very
many on the surface of the valley, and, look, they were
very dry. [3]And He said to me, “Man, can these bones
live?” And I said, “O Master, LORD, it is You Who
knows.” [4]And He said, “Prophesy to these bones and
say to them, ‘O dry bones, listen to the word of the
LORD. [5]Thus said the Master, the LORD, to the dry
bones: I am about to bring breath into you and you
shall live. [6]And I will lay sinews over you and bring up
flesh over you and stretch over you skin. And I will put
breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know
that I am the LORD.’” [7]And I prophesied as I was
charged, and there was a sound as I prophesied and,
look, a clatter, and the bones came together, one bone
to another. [8]And I saw, and, look, upon them were
sinews, and flesh came up, and skin stretched out over
them from above, but there was no breath in them.

[9]And He said to me: “Prophesy to the wind, prophesy, man, and say to the wind, ‘Thus said the Master, the LORD: From the four winds, come, wind, and blow into these slain that they may live.’” [10]And I prophesied as He had charged me, and the breath came into them and they lived, and they stood up on their feet, a very very great legion. [11]And He said to me, “Man, these bones are all the house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dry and our hope is lost. We have been cut off.’ [12]Therefore prophesy and say to them, Thus said the Master, the LORD: I am about to open your graves, and I will bring you up, My people, from your graves and bring you to Israel’s soil. [13]And you shall know that I am the LORD when I open your graves and when I bring you up from your graves, My people. [14]And I will put My breath in you, and you shall live, and I will set you on your soil, and you shall know that I the LORD have spoken and have done it,” said the LORD.

[15]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, [16]“And you, man, take you one stick and write upon it ‘For Judah and for Israel joined to him,’ and take another stick and write on it ‘For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim, and for the Israelites and all the house of Israel, joined to him.’ [17]And put them together each to

each as a single stick for you, and they shall be one in your hand. [18]And when the sons of your people say to you, saying, ‘Will you not tell us, what are these to you?,’ [19]speak to them, Thus said the Master, the LORD: I am about to take the stick of Joseph, which is in the hand of Ephraim, and those joined with him, the tribes of Israel, and I will set upon it the stick of Judah and make them a single stick, and they shall be one stick in My hand. [20]And the sticks upon which you shall write shall be in your hand before their eyes, [21]and speak to them, Thus said the Master, the LORD: I am about to take the Israelites from among the nations where they have gone, and I will gather them from all around and bring them to their soil. [22]And I will make them a single nation in the land on the mountains of Israel, and a single king shall be their king, and they no more shall be two nations, and no more shall they be divided into two kingdoms. [23]And they shall no more be defiled by their foul things and by their vile things and by all their trespasses. And I will rescue them in all the places of their habitation where they offended, and I will cleanse them, and they shall be My people, and I will be their God. [24]And My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have a single shepherd. And by My laws they shall go, and My statutes they shall keep and do them. [25]And

they shall dwell in the land that I gave to My servant Jacob, where your fathers dwelled, and they shall dwell in it, they and their children and their children's children evermore, and My servant David shall be prince over them evermore. [26]And I will seal with them a covenant of peace, an everlasting covenant shall there be with them, and I will set them [as a blessing] and multiply them, and I will set My sanctuary in their midst evermore. [27]And My dwelling place shall be over them, and I will be their God and they shall be My people. [28]And the nations shall know that I am the LORD hallowing Israel when My sanctuary is in their midst evermore."

CHAPTER 37 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *He took me out by the wind of the* LORD. Throughout this prophecy, Ezekiel plays on the different senses of *ruaḥ,* which can mean "spirit," "wind," and "breath." While many translators render the term here as "spirit," the sense of "wind" fits much better with Ezekiel's repeated pattern of being borne off physically by a palpable divine force. Compare 11:24, where it is precisely a wind that carries him to the place of revelation.

2. *and, look, they were very dry.* The remains of these dead are at a very great remove from life: they are not corpses but disarticulated bones and very dry, suggesting that the deaths occurred much earlier. This is an obvious way of amplifying the miraculous restoration to life.

3. *Man, can these bones live?* This prophecy is probably the most famous one in Ezekiel. Early Jewish and Christian interpreters took it as a prophecy of the resurrection of the dead, but it is quite doubtful that this is what Ezekiel meant. The scattered dry bones of the long dead are a symbolic image of the people of Israel in exile, its national existence violently ended by the conquest and destruction of the kingdom of Judah. The miraculous return to life of the bones figures the restoration of national existence in the homeland.

4. *Prophesy to these bones.* The startling extremeness of the prophecy of the bones is dramatically evident in the command to the prophet to address, as surely no prophet in the real world ever did, a message to dry bones.

5. *breath.* Here ruaḥ has to mean "breath," not "wind" or "spirit."

7. *and the bones came together, one bone to another.* This weird self-assembling of the disarticulated bones became the basis for the language of the famous Negro spiritual about this prophecy.

9. *From the four winds, come, wind.* The initial "winds" here has still another meaning: the four directions, or the four corners of the earth. In Genesis, God blows the breath of life into the inert clay of the first human. Here it is the four winds that perform this act of vivification, giving it a global scope that jibes with the implied idea that the exiles have been scattered to the four corners of the earth.

slain. Now we learn that these dead have met a violent end.

10. *legion.* The Hebrew *ḥayil* usually means "military force" (hence the King James Version's "army"). Here it probably indicates the great number of the revived, but to translate it "multitude," as some modern versions do, erases the martial connotation, that this vast number of the conquered dead has become a large army. "Legion" in English actually has both meanings.

12. *I am about to open your graves.* Ezekiel appears to have forgotten that the bones are scattered on the surface of the valley. Now the dead have been buried and will rise from their graves.

16. *take you one stick.* The Hebrew *ʿets* means "tree," "wood," or "stick." Some modern interpreters see these as wooden tablets because we know that

such tablets were sometimes used to write on. However, the joining together of the two to make one works better for sticks than for tablets, and in Numbers writing is inscribed on staffs, something close to sticks.

Judah . . . Joseph. These indicate the southern and northern kingdoms, sundered after the death of Solomon.

18. *Will you not tell us, what are these to you?* Unlike the visionary-allegorical prophecy of the dry bones, this is a rather traditional, and didactic, symbolic-prophetic show-and-tell. Its meaning is fairly apparent even before Ezekiel goes on to explain it.

22. *I will make them a single nation.* This is a utopian prophecy because by Ezekiel's time there was no real trace of the northern kingdom, destroyed a century and a half earlier by the Assyrians.

on the mountains of Israel. Ezekiel, originating in Jerusalem, repeatedly imagines a mountainous landscape for his homeland, though in fact it extended to valleys and lowlands.

23. *in all the places of their habitation.* Many manuscripts show instead of the Masoretic *moshvoteyhem,* "their habitations," *meshuvoteyhem,* "their rebelliousness."

24. *And My servant David shall be king over them.* The reference is not to some sort of reincarnation of David but to a legitimate heir to the Davidic dynasty who embodies the ideal qualities attributed to him in the Book of Kings.

26. *I will set them [as a blessing].* The received text has only "I will set them," but it looks as if a predicate or adverbial qualifier such as the one supplied in brackets has dropped out of the text.

27. *My dwelling place.* This is a synonym for "sanctuary" in the preceding verse, and both terms refer to the Temple, which, restored, is to manifest God's greatness in the world.

CHAPTER 38

[1]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[2]“Man, set your face to Gog in the land of Magog,
supreme prince of Meshech and Tubal, and prophesy
about him. [3]And say, Thus said the Master, the
LORD: Here I am against you, Gog, supreme prince
of Meshech and Tubal. [4]I will lead you and put hooks
in your jaws, and I will bring you out and all your
force out, horses and riders, all of them clothed to
perfection, a great assembly, with buckler and shield,
all of them wielding swords. [5]Persia, Nubia, and Put
with them, all with shields and helmets. [6]Gomer and
all its divisions, Beth-Torgemah from the far reaches
of the north with all its divisions, many peoples are
with you. [7]Be ready, and ready yourself and all your
assembly gathering round you, and become their
guard. [8]After many days you shall be mustered, at the
end of years you shall come to a land brought back
from the sword, and gathered in from many peoples on
the mountains of Israel that had become a perpetual
ruin, and it was brought out from the peoples, and they

all dwell secure. [9]And you shall come up like a storm, like a cloud, to cover the land you shall be, and all your divisions and the many peoples with you. [10]Thus said the Master, the LORD: On that day things shall come to mind for you, and you shall conceive a plan of evil. [11]And you shall say: I will go up against a land of unfortified towns, I will come upon the tranquil folk dwelling secure, all of them dwelling without walls, neither bolt nor double doors do they have, [12]to plunder and to loot, to put your hand against resettled ruins and against a people gathered from the nations, abounding in herds and possessions, dwelling in the heartland. [13]Sheba and Dedan and the traders of Tarshish and all its leaders shall say to you, 'Have you come to loot, have you assembled your throng to bear off silver and gold, to take herds and possessions, to plunder a great plunder?' [14]Therefore, prophesy, man, and say to Gog, Thus said the Master, the LORD: On that day, when My people Israel dwells secure, shall you not know? [15]And you shall come from your place, from the far reaches of the north, you and the many peoples with you, all of them riding horses, a great assembly and a vast force. [16]And you shall come up against My people Israel; like a cloud to cover the land, in the days afterward, you shall be. And I will bring you against My land so that the nations may know Me as I am

hallowed through you, O Gog.” [17]Thus said the Master, the LORD: “Are you the one of whom I spoke in former days through My servants, the prophets of Israel who were prophesying in those days for years, to bring you upon them? [18]And it shall happen on that day when Gog comes against the soil of Israel, said the Master, the LORD, My wrath shall mount in My nostrils. [19]And in My zeal, in the fire of My fury I have spoken: surely on that day there shall be a great earthquake on the soil of Israel. [20]And the fish in the sea and the fowl in the heavens shall quake before Me, and the beasts of the field and every crawling thing that crawls on the earth, and every human who is on the face of the earth, and the mountains shall be destroyed and the cliffs shall fall, and every wall shall fall to the ground. [21]And I will call forth the sword against him in all My mountains, said the Master, the LORD. Each man’s sword shall be against his brother. [22]And I will wreak punishment upon him through pestilence and through blood and through pelting rain and hailstones; sulfurous fire will I rain down on him and on his divisions and on the many peoples that are with him. [23]And I will be magnified and hallowed, and I will become known before the eyes of many nations, and they shall know that I am the LORD.”

CHAPTER 38 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Gog in the land of Magog.* The Hebrew syntax could also be construed as "Gog of the land of Magog." Both names, which look quite foreign in the Hebrew, are mystifying and as such have encouraged the mythological readings of this prophecy prevalent in both Christian and Jewish tradition. Gog is sometimes linked by scholars with a King Gugu of Lydia in Asia Minor. Ezekiel does not appear to be referring to a historical figure—in contrast, for example, to Second Isaiah's references to Cyrus—and may have embraced the name for its sheer strangeness. What is important is that Gog comes from the far north, the direction from which destruction traditionally descends upon Israel, as is repeatedly evident in Jeremiah.

supreme prince. The literal sense is "prince of the chief," but when two synonyms are joined in a construct form, the effect is to indicate a superlative.

Meshech and Tubal. This kingdom, mentioned previously by Ezekiel, is in Asia Minor.

3. *Here I am against you.* Although Gog is sent by God on a mission of conquest, he is yanked along with hooks in his jaws and will come to a bad end.

5. *Persia, Nubia, and Put.* This suggests a vast array of mercenaries assembled by Gog from Persia in the east down to Nubia and Put south of Egypt.

7. *assembly.* This general term is repeatedly used by Ezekiel in a military sense.

8. *a land brought back from the sword.* The population of Judah, driven off by the sword, has now been brought back to its land.

9. *And you shall come up like a storm.* One of the peculiar features of this strange prophecy is that the people of Israel, after having been restored from bitter exile to their land, are to be subjected to still another horrendous assault.

11. *a land of unfortified towns.* The Judahites returned from exile are so confident of their safety that they leave their towns unfortified, with no walls and "neither bolt nor double doors."

11–12. *I will come upon the tranquil folk . . . to put your hand against resettled ruins.* The switch here from first person (Gog speaking) to second person (Gog addressed) is fairly common in biblical usage.

12. *the heartland.* The Hebrew phrase *tabur haʾarets* occurs only here and in Judges 9:37. The Septuagint understood the obscure *tabur* to mean "navel," and in that sense it was ensconced in later Hebrew.

13. *its leaders.* The literal sense is "its lions," leaving a margin of doubt about the meaning. The translation follows an interpretive tradition going back to Late Antiquity, which essentially takes this as a metaphor for "leaders."

14. *shall you not know?* As what follows makes clear, you will come to know the power of the God of Israel.

16. *as I am hallowed through you, O Gog.* It is Gog's defeat, despite the overwhelming might of all his forces, that is to hallow God by making manifest God's power.

17. *Are you the one of whom I spoke.* No actual mention of Gog appears in any of the earlier prophets, but he is represented here as the realization of the sundry vague prophecies of a dire enemy descending on Israel from the distant north.

18. *My wrath shall mount in My nostrils.* The second term here, *ʾaf,* is a synonym for "wrath" because smoke or fire is imagined to be exhaled from the nostrils of the infuriated deity. Here, the idiom is returned to its physical base, and God is imagined breathing fire (fire is mentioned at the beginning of the next verse).

20. *the fish in the sea and the fowl in the heavens . . . the beasts of the field and every crawling thing.* These terms all recall the Creation story in Genesis 1. It is as though the earthquake that will shake the whole land of Israel will be so cataclysmic that the work of creation itself will be undone. Such

language strongly encouraged the apocalyptic reading of this prophecy, linking Gog with the cosmic upheavals of the end of days.

21. *And I will call forth the sword against him.* It had seemed as though the cataclysm was directed against Israel, but now it emerges that Gog and his vast army will be panicked and destroyed.

22. *sulfurous fire.* The literal sense is "fire and sulfur," but this is most likely a hendiadys. In any case, Gog's army is devastated both by fierce natural forces and by violent internal divisions. (Compare verse 21, "Each man's sword shall be against his brother.")

23. *I will be magnified and hallowed.* The two Hebrew words here, *wehitgadalti wehitqadshti,* expressing God's glorification through the sweeping defeat of Gog's army, are picked up as the first two words of the Kaddish, which is a prayer for the establishment of God's kingdom on earth.

CHAPTER 39

[1]And you, man, prophesy concerning Gog and say, “Thus said the Master, the LORD: Here I am against you, Gog, supreme prince of Meshech and Tubal. [2]I will lead you and take you along and bring you up from the far reaches of the north and bring you to the mountains of Israel. [3]And I will strike your bow from your left hand and will make your arrows drop from your right hand. [4]On the mountains of Israel you shall fall, and all your divisions and the people that are with you. I will make you food for carrion birds, every winged thing, and for beasts of the field. [5]On the surface of the field you shall fall, for I have spoken, said the Master, the LORD. [6]And I will send fire against Magog and against those who dwell secure in the coastlands, and they shall know that I am the LORD. [7]And My holy name I will make known in the midst of My people Israel, and I will no longer let My holy name be profaned, and the nations shall know that I am the LORD, the Holy One in Israel. [8]Look, it has come and now it is, said the Master, the LORD, it is

the day of which I spoke. [9]And the dwellers of Israel's towns shall go out and light fires with the weapons, the bucklers and shields, with the bows and with the arrows and with the clubs and with the spears, and they shall light fires with them for seven years. [10]And they shall not carry off wood from the field nor cut down trees from the forests, for with weapons they shall light fires. And they shall plunder their plunderers and loot their looters, said the Master, the LORD. [11]And it shall happen on that day that I will give Gog a burial place there in Israel, in the Valley of Those Who Pass Through, east of the sea, and it blocks those who pass through. And they shall bury Gog there with all his throng and call it the Valley of the Throng of Gog. [12]And the house of Israel shall bury them so as to cleanse the land, for seven months. [13]And all the people of the land shall do the burying, and the day I am granted glory shall be a famous thing for them, said the Master, the LORD. [14]And perpetually appointed men shall separate those who pass through the land, burying those who pass through, the ones left on the surface of the land, to cleanse it. At the end of seven months they shall probe it. [15]And those who pass through the land shall pass through, and should someone see a human bone, he shall build by it a marker till the buriers bury it in the Valley of the

Throng of Gog. [16]And the name of the town, too, is Throng. And they shall cleanse the land. [17]And you, man, Thus said the Master, the LORD: Say to the birds, every winged thing, and to all the beasts of the field—Gather and come, assemble from all around for My sacrificial feast that I am about to sacrifice for you, a great sacrificial feast on the mountains of Israel. And you shall eat flesh and drink blood. [18]The flesh of warriors you shall eat, and the blood of princes of the earth you shall drink, rams, lambs, and he-goats, bulls, all of them fatlings of Bashan. [19]And you shall eat suet to satiety and drink blood to drunkenness, from My sacrificial feast that I have prepared for you. [20]And you shall be sated at My table with horse and chariot, warrior and every man of war, said the Master, the LORD. [21]And I will set out My glory among the nations, and all the nations shall see My judgment that I have done and My hand that I set against them. [22]And all the house of Israel shall know that I am the LORD their God from that day onward. [23]And the nations shall know that for their crime the house of Israel went into exile, because they betrayed Me and I hid My face from them and gave them into the hand of their foes, and they all fell by the sword. [24]According to their defilement and according to their trespasses I dealt with them and hid My face from them. [25]Therefore,

Thus said the Master, the LORD: Now will I restore the fortunes of Jacob and show mercy to the house of Israel and be zealous for My holy name. [26]And they shall forget their disgrace and all their betrayal that they committed against Me when they dwell secure upon their soil with none to make them tremble, [27]when I lead them back from the peoples and gather them from the lands of their enemies. And I will be hallowed through them before the eyes of many nations. [28]And they shall know that I am the LORD when having exiled them among the nations I gather them in upon their soil and do not leave any of them there anymore. [29]And I will not hide My face from them anymore, as I have poured out My spirit upon the house of Israel," said the Master, the LORD.

CHAPTER 39 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *I will lead you and take you along.* This whole verse repeats the scenario of the previous chapter. However, the verb translated as "take you along" is unique to this text, so its meaning must be inferred from the context and from a possible Semitic cognate. The salient difference in this second account of Gog's expedition to the land of Israel is that there is a much more detailed focus on his devastating defeat.

6. *I will send fire against Magog.* In this version, not only will Gog's vast invading army be devastated on the mountains of Israel but also a second prong of divine destruction will be directed toward Gog's distant homeland and toward its allies or colonies ("the coastlands"). It is worth noting that this entire vision of Israel's triumph over its enemies is quite different from anything in the other Prophets. The characteristic Prophetic vision is of Israel restored to its land and dwelling in peace and prosperity after the bitter experience of defeat and exile. Only Ezekiel imagines that the people again ensconced in its land and living in tranquillity will be assaulted by a fearsome invading power which, however, will be utterly destroyed. Perhaps Ezekiel, himself an exile who had witnessed the dominant force of the Babylonian empire, and who also had in mind the earlier dominance of the Assyrians, could not easily conceive a simple peaceful national restoration. History was felt as a continuing cycle of violent imperial aggressions. In this prophetic version, an ultimate—virtually mythological—aggressor is drawn to the land of Israel where God will bring about his total destruction, at last making Israel genuinely secure. Through this scenario, all the nations of the earth finally "shall know that I am the LORD."

9. *they shall light fires with them for seven years.* What is intended here is an extravagant hyperbole: the huge mass of arms left by the extinct army of Gog, mostly made of combustible materials (leather shields stretched on wooden frames, spears with wooden shafts, bows and arrows and clubs) is sufficient to provide firewood for seven years, obviating the need to bring wood from the forests.

11. *the Valley of Those Who Pass Through.* The meaning of the name is a little ambiguous. It would seem to refer to the searchers for corpses mentioned in verse 14 who pass through the land looking for dead enemy soldiers. But in verse 14 the same word is also attached to the invaders.

it blocks those who pass through. Perhaps the blockage is because of the vast quantity of corpses piled up in the valley.

12. *so as to cleanse the land.* Corpses are a source of ritual contamination.

14. *perpetually appointed men.* "Appointed" is merely implied.

At the end of seven months they shall probe it. That is, they shall check to make sure no corpses have been left unburied.

16. *And the name of the town, too, is Throng.* Evidently, there was a town in proximity to the valley.

17. *sacrificial feast.* This is a macabre idea—that the corpses to be consumed by scavengers and carrion birds are a grand sacrificial feast prepared for them by God. As the preceding reference to a discovered bone indicates, the bones picked clean by the scavengers would then still need to be buried.

18. *rams, lambs, and he-goats.* Since there would not be large flocks at hand, all these are metaphors for the sumptuous feast of corpses that the scavengers will enjoy.

20. *horse and chariot.* The chariot is obviously not edible but it goes along with "horse" as part of a fixed pair.

23. *And the nations shall know that for their crime the house of Israel went into exile.* This is an essential theological point for Ezekiel: Israel went into exile because of neither the sheer military power of its enemies nor any weakness in its God, but as a punishment—now come to an end—for betraying its God.

they all fell by the sword. As is often the case, Ezekiel's language is not entirely precise. By no means all of the people were killed by the Babylonians: some stayed in Judah while many others were exiled rather than killed.

28. *and do not leave any of them there.* Ezekiel's vision of a total return of the exiles to Zion was not fulfilled, as many of them chose to stay in Babylonia. From this point onward, the Jews would remain in part a diasporic people.

CHAPTER 40

[1]In the twenty-fifth year of our exile, at the beginning
of the year on the tenth of the month in the fourteenth
year after the city was struck, on that very day, the
hand of the LORD was upon me, and He brought me
there. [2]In divine vision He brought me to the land of
Israel and set me down on a very high mountain, and
upon it was like the shape of a city on the south. [3]And
He brought me there, and, look, a man, his appearance
like the appearance of bronze, and a linen tassel in his
hand, and a measuring rod, and he was standing in the
gate. [4]And the man spoke to me: “Man, see with your
eyes and with your ears hear and pay mind to all that I
show you, for in order that it should be shown you
have you been brought here. Tell all that you see to the
house of Israel.” [5]And, look, there was a wall outside
the house all around, and in the man’s hand a
measuring rod six cubits and a handsbreadth in length,
and he measured the depth of the building’s wall to be
one rod and the height one rod. [6]And he entered that
gate facing toward the east and went up its steps and

measured the threshold of the gate to be one rod in depth and the inner threshold one rod in depth. [7]And each recess was one rod high and one rod deep, and there were five cubits between the recesses, and the threshold of the gate alongside the gate's hall from within was one rod. [8]And he measured the gate's hall from within to be one rod. [9]And he measured the gate's hall to be eight cubits and its pillars two cubits, and the gate's hall was within. [10]And the recesses of the gate facing east were three on each side, a single measure for the three of them and a single measure for the pillars on each side. [11]And he measured the depth of the gate entrance to be ten cubits. The height of the gate was thirteen cubits. [12]And there was a partition in front of the recesses of one cubit, one cubit the partition on each side, and the recess was six cubits on each side. [13]And he measured the gate from the ceiling of the recess to the ceiling of the opposite recess, the depth was twenty-five cubits, entrance facing entrance. [14]And he measured the columns to be sixty cubits, and the column of the gate's court all around. [15]And in front of the gate was the entranceway, in front of the inner wall of the gate, fifty cubits. [16]And the recesses had latticed windows, and toward their pillars inside the gate all around, and so it was for the halls, windows all around inside, and on each pillar palm

designs. [17]And he brought me to the water court, and look, there were chambers and a pavement fashioned for the court all around, thirty chambers for the pavement. [18]And the pavement was up to the side of the gates and opposite the width of the gates was the lower pavement. [19]And he measured the depth from in front of the lower gate in front of the inner court from outside to be a hundred cubits, the east and the north sides. [20]And the gate that was facing north of the outer court, he measured its height and its depth. [21]And its recess was three cubits on each side, and its pillars and its hall were as the measure of the first gate, fifty cubits long and twenty-five cubits wide. [22]And its windows and its pillars and its palm designs as the measure of the gate facing out, and on seven steps they would go up to it with its pillars before them. [23]And the inner court had a gate opposite the gate to the north and to the east, and he measured from gate to gate to be a hundred cubits. [24]And he led me to the south side, and, look, there was a gate on the south side. And he measured its pillars and its halls according to these measures. [25]And there were windows in its halls all around like these windows, fifty cubits long and twenty-five cubits wide. [26]And there were seven steps going up to it, and its hall was in front of them, and its pillars had palm designs on each side.

[27]And the inner court had a gate on the south side. And he measured from gate to gate on the south side to be a hundred cubits. [28]And he brought me to the inner court through the south gate, and he measured the south gate to be as these measures. [29]And its recesses and its pillars and its halls were as these measurements, and its halls had windows all around, fifty cubits long and twenty-five cubits wide. [30]And the halls all around were twenty-five cubits long and five cubits wide. [31]And the outer court had a hall with its pillars, and eight steps going up. [32]And he brought me to the inner court on the east side and measured the gate to be as these measurements. [33]And its recesses and its pillars and its halls were as these measurements, and its halls had windows all around, fifty cubits long and twenty-five cubits wide. [34]And the outer court had halls and palm designs on its pillars on each side and eight steps going up. [35]And he brought me to the north gate and measured as these measures. [36]Its recesses, its pillars and its halls and the windows it had all around, fifty cubits long and twenty-five cubits wide. [37]And there were pillars for the outer court and palm designs on the pillars on both sides and eight steps going up. [38]And there was a chamber with its entrance in the hall of the gates. There they would wash the sacrifice. [39]And in the hall of the gate were

two tables on each side on which to slaughter the burnt offering and the offense offering and the guilt offering.
40 And on the flank outside the hall of the gate's entrance to the north were two tables and on the other flank of the hall of the gate two tables. 41 Four tables there were on each side of the flank of the gate—eight tables on which they did the slaughtering. 42 And four tables of hewn stone for the burnt offering, one and a half cubits long and one and a half cubits wide and one cubit high. Upon them they would set the utensils with which they slaughtered the burnt offering and the sacrifice. 43 And the spits, one handsbreadth, were set in the house all around, and upon the tables was the flesh of the sacrifice. 44 And outside the inner gate were the chambers of the nobles, in the inner court that was by the flank of the northern gate, and they faced to the south, one by the flank of the eastern gate, facing to the north. 45 And he spoke to me: "This is the chamber that faces to the south for the priests who keep the watch of the house. 46 And the chamber that faces to the north is for the priests who keep the watch of the altar. They are the sons of Zadok from the sons of Levi who drew near to the LORD to serve Him."
47 And he measured the court to be a hundred cubits in length and a hundred cubits in width, square, and the altar was in front of the house. 48 And he brought me to

the hall of the house and measured the hall to be five hundred cubits on each side, and the width of the gate was three cubits on each side. [49]The hall was twenty cubits long and eleven cubits wide, and one went up to it by steps. And there were columns by the pillars on each side.

CHAPTER 40 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the twenty-fifth year of our exile.* This locates the present prophecy in 572 B.C.E., as the text goes on to note, fourteen years after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple.

the hand of the LORD was upon me, and He brought me there. This formulation is in line with others in Ezekiel in which the visionary experience is registered as a virtual physical transportation from one place to another. But the term "divine vision" indicates this is a mental experience.

2. *like the shape of a city.* As in Ezekiel's visions from chapter 1 onward, what he sees is represented not as the thing itself but as a semblance to or analogue of the real thing.

3. *a man.* As the next phrase makes clear, "the man" is in fact a divine emissary. Daniel will pick up this usage from Ezekiel.

5. *there was a wall outside the house.* Throughout, "the house" is the house of God—that is, the Temple. To the modern reader, it is certainly odd that Ezekiel's book should end with nine chapters devoted to an intricate account of the architecture of the Temple and the procedures of the sacrificial cult. There is nothing quite like this in any of the other Prophets. There is no reason, however, to question the status of these chapters as an authentic

production by Ezekiel. One should remember that he was a Jerusalem priest deported from the city where the Temple stood in the early, partial exile of 597 B.C.E. Now, a quarter of a century later, and fourteen years after the Temple was demolished in the conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, he undertakes a kind of imaginative reconstruction of the Temple, and then of the cult, painstakingly laying out its sundry structures, gate by gate, hall by hall, recess to recess. For him, this amounts to a prophecy of consolation. All this, it must be said, is rather bewildering to follow, although various commentators have sought to provide charts and floor plans based on Ezekiel's notations. There is, to begin with, a problem of architectural terms, many of which are uncertain in meaning. (The same is true of the account of Solomon's temple in Kings.) At least a few terms actually fluctuate in meaning. The two Hebrew words that usually mean "width" and "length" at first appear to indicate "depth" and "height," but later in the chapter they revert to their ordinary meaning. But even if we could be certain of all the architectural terms, the lineaments of the Temple are hard to make out. This commentary therefore will not attempt to elucidate the picture of the Temple. It should also be noted that Ezekiel's description of the Temple does not altogether jibe with the one in the Book of Kings, nor does his account of the cult entirely match other biblical formulations. One must assume that he either was writing from imperfect memory of the Jerusalem scene he had left two and a half decades earlier or was projecting what he conceived as an ideal image of the Temple and the worship within it.

he measured the depth. The device of having all the measurements done by the divine emissary is a way of confirming their unvarying accuracy.

38. *There they would wash the sacrifice.* For Ezekiel the priest, the Temple is vital not only as a splendid architectural structure but because within it animal sacrifices can be offered daily—sacrifices that had been totally interrupted for the past fourteen years.

46. *who drew near to the* LORD. The verb here is used in its technical cultic sense: one who "draws near" is the priest who is authorized to enter into the sacred space of the Temple.

CHAPTER 41

[1]And he brought me into the great hall and measured the pillars to be six cubits wide on each side, the width of the pillar. [2]And the width of the entrance was ten cubits, and the supports of the entrance five cubits on each side. And he measured its length to be forty cubits and its width twenty cubits. [3]And he came within and measured the pillars of the entrance to be two cubits and the entrance two cubits and the width of the entrance seven cubits. [4]And he measured its length to be twenty cubits and the width twenty cubits facing the great hall. And he said to me, “This is the Holy of Holies.” [5]And he measured the wall of the house to be six cubits and the width of the flank four cubits all around the house. [6]And the flanks, one on top of another were thirty-three, and in the indentation of the wall of the house for the flanks all around to be fastened, and they were not fastened in the wall of the house. [7]And it became wider as it went round higher and higher on the flanks, for the house turned all around higher and higher. Therefore the width of the

house was greater above. And thus did we go up from the bottom level to the top level through the middle level. [8]And I saw that the house had a raised pavement all around, the foundations of the flanks, a full rod's length, six cubits. [9]The width of the flank's wall on the outside was five cubits, and there was a walkway between the flanks of the house. [10]And between the chambers it was twenty cubits wide all around the house. [11]And the entrance of the flank for the walkway, one entrance to the north and one entrance to the south, and the width of the place of the walkway was five cubits all around. [12]And the structure facing the open space at the western corner was seventy cubits wide, and the wall of the structure was five hundred cubits wide all around, and its length was ninety cubits. [13]And he measured the house to be a hundred cubits long, and the open space and the structure and its walls a hundred cubits long. [14]And the width of the façade of the house and the open space to the east was a hundred cubits. [15]And he measured the length of the structure facing the open space which was to the west with a passage on both sides, a hundred cubits. And the inner great hall and the halls of the court, [16]the thresholds and the latticed windows and the passages around the three of them opposite the threshold, there was an overlay of wood all around

from the ground to the windows, and the windows were covered. [17]Up above the entrance as far as the inner house and outside on the entire wall all around, on the inner and on the outer, were carvings. [18]And it was fashioned with cherubim and palm designs on both sides, and the palm design had a lion's face on one side fashioned for the entire house all around. [19]And the palm design had a human face on one side and a lion's face on the other, fashioned for the entire house all around. [20]From the ground to above the entrance there were cherubim and the fashioned palm designs, and on the wall of the great hall. [21]And the great hall had four doorposts, and facing the sanctum a look like the look of [22]the altar, of wood, three cubits high and twelve cubits its length, and it had corners, and its length and its walls were of wood. And he spoke to me: "That is the table that is before the LORD." [23]And the great hall and the sanctum had two doors. [24]And the doors had two door panels, panels swinging open, two for each door. [25]And fashioned for them on the doors of the great hall were cherubim and palm designs like the ones fashioned for the walls, and there was a wooden beam in the front of the hall on the outside. [26]And the windows were latticed, and there were palm designs on both sides on the supports of the hall and the flanks and the beams.

CHAPTER 41 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *And the width of the entrance was ten cubits, and the supports of the entrance five cubits on each side.* Most modern translations seek to impart coherence to this whole account of the layout of the Temple by choosing terms familiar in our own architecture—"vestibules," "ledges," "porticoes," and the like—and rearranging the tangled syntax. But, in fact, even if we knew the precise meaning of these architectural terms, which we do not, Ezekiel's report of spatial entities and their dimensions is quite bewildering. The clarity, then, of the modern translation is illusory, and the present translation is meant to replicate the bewilderment conveyed in the Hebrew. Verses 7 and 8 are a particularly striking instance of the impenetrability of Ezekiel's description, but there are problems of comprehension throughout.

11. *the walkway.* The Hebrew munaḥ is one of the most elusive of the many architectural terms used, so this translation, like everyone else's, is no more than a guess.

CHAPTER 42

[1]And he took me out to the outer court. The way was to the north. And he brought me to the chamber that is opposite the open space and that is opposite the structure to the north. [2]Its façade was a hundred cubits, the northern entrance, and the width fifty cubits. [3]Opposite the twenty cubits of the inner court and opposite the pavement of the outer court was a passage. The façade of the passage had three levels. [4]And in front of the chambers a walkway ten cubits wide to the inner court and a hundred cubits long, and their entrances were to the north. [5]And the upper chambers were cut back, for the passages could not [fit?] in them from the lowest levels and from the middle levels of the structure. [6]For they were triple-tiered, and they did not have columns like the columns of the courts. Therefore space was taken from the lowest levels and from the middle levels from the ground. [7]And there was a barrier from the outside facing the chambers through the outer court to the front of the chambers fifty cubits long. [8]For the length

of the chambers of the outer court was fifty cubits, and at the front of the great hall a hundred cubits. [9]And below these chambers an entrance from the east where one enters from the outer court, [10]in width like the barrier of the court to the north facing the open space. And facing the structure were chambers. [11]And the way in front of them was like the shape of the chambers on the northern side, both their length and their width and according to their arrangements were their exits and their entrances, [12]and like the entrances of the chambers that were on the southern side, an entrance at the head each way, a way in front of the barriers to the garden on the east side where one entered. [13]And he said to me, “The northern chambers and the southern chambers that are in front of the open space—they are the holy chambers in which the priests who are close to the LORD shall eat the holiest offerings. There shall they set the holiest offerings and the grain offering and the offense offering and the guilt offering, for the place is holy. [14]When the priests come, they shall not go out from the sanctum to the outer court, and there they shall lay down their garments in which they minister, for they are consecrated, and they shall put on other garments, and they shall draw near to what is the people’s area.” [15]And he finished the measurements of the inner house and brought me out

through the gate that faces to the east and measured it all around. [16]He measured the eastern side with the measuring rod to be five hundred cubits by the measuring rod all around. [17]He measured the northern side to be five hundred cubits by the measuring rod all around. [18]He measured the southern side to be five hundred cubits by the measuring rod. [19]He turned round to the western side, measured it to be five hundred cubits by the measuring rod. [20]On four sides he measured it. It had a wall all around five hundred cubits long and five hundred cubits wide to separate the holy from the profane.

CHAPTER 42 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And he brought me to the chamber that is opposite the open space and that is opposite the structure to the north.* The bafflements of Ezekiel's floor plan of the Temple continue to proliferate, and no attempt will be made here to sort them out. Verses 5–6 are especially egregious. Rashi, perhaps the greatest of medieval Hebrew exegetes and an acute close reader, frankly confessed, "I was unable to understand at all these three phrases: What are these *ʾatiqim* [in the guess of this translation, "passages"], and how do they fit [eat?] from the lowest levels and from the middle ones, and the reason he gives, that they were triple-tiered and had no columns, I was unable to understand." We shall follow Rashi in throwing up our hands in despair.

5. *[fit?].* As indicated in the previous note, the Hebrew word represented in the translation within brackets and with a question mark is altogether opaque: *yokhlu* looks like a defective spelling of the word that means “eat,” but that makes no sense whatever, and so one can only guess about the meaning.

CHAPTER 43

[1]And he led me to the gate, the gate that faces the
eastern way. [2]And, look, the glory of the God of Israel
was coming from the eastern way, and its sound was
like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone
from His glory. [3]And it was like the look of the sight
that I had seen, like that sight that I had seen when I
came to pronounce the destruction of the city, and
sights like the sight I had seen by the Kebar Canal.
And I fell on my face. [4]And the glory of the LORD
came into the house through the gate that faced the
eastern way. [5]And a wind bore me up and brought me
to the inner court, and, look, the glory of the LORD
filled the house. [6]And I heard it speaking to me, and a
man was standing by me. [7]And he said to me, “Man,
the place of My throne and the soles of My feet where
I dwell in the midst of the Israelites forever! Nor shall
the house of Israel defile My name anymore—they and
their kings—with their whoring and with the corpses
of their kings, their high places, [8]when they set their
threshold by My threshold and their doorpost by My

doorpost, with the wall between them and Me, and
they defiled My holy name with their abominations
that they did, and I made an end to them in My wrath.
[9]Now let them put far from Me their whoring and the
corpses of their kings, and I will dwell in their midst
forever. [10]You, man, tell the house of Israel about the
house, and let them be ashamed of their crimes, and
let them measure its design. [11]And if they are ashamed
of all that they have done, inform them of the plan of
the house and its design and its exits and its entrances
and all its plan and all its regulations [and inform them
of all its designs and all its rules] and write them
before their eyes that they may observe all its design
and all its regulations and do them. [12]This is the
regulation for the house on the mountaintop, all its
boundaries all around are holy of holies. Look, this is
the regulation for the house. [13]And these are the
measurements of the altar in cubits, a cubit and a cubit
and a handsbreadth, and the trench a cubit deep and its
boundary at its edge all around one span and its depth
one cubit. And this is the structure of the altar. [14]From
the trench in the ground to the lower level it is two
cubits, and one cubit wide, and from the small level to
the large level, four cubits and a cubit wide. [15]And the
altar hearth is four cubits, and from the altar hearth to
above the horns on the altar four. [16]And the altar

hearth is twelve cubits long by twelve cubits wide, square on its four sides. [17]And the level section is fourteen cubits long by fourteen cubits wide on its four sides, and the boundary around it is half a cubit, and it has a trench a cubit all around, and its steps face the east." [18]And he said to me, "Man, thus said the Master, the LORD: These are the statutes of the altar on the day it is made, to offer up on it a burnt offering and to cast blood upon it. [19]And you shall give these to the levitical priests who are the seed of Zadok, who may draw near to Me, said the Master, the LORD, to minister unto Me, a bull from the herd for an offense offering. [20]And you shall take from its blood and put it on the four horns of the altar and at the four corners of the level section and on the boundary all around, and you shall purify and purge it. [21]And you shall take the bull of the offense offering and burn it in the set place of the house outside the sanctuary. [22]On the second day you shall sacrifice an unblemished he-goat as an offense offering, and they shall purify the altar as they purified with the bull. [23]When you finish purifying, you shall sacrifice an unblemished bull from the herd and an unblemished ram from the flock. [24]And you shall sacrifice them before the LORD, and the priests shall cast salt upon them and offer them up as a burnt offering to the LORD. [25]Seven days you shall do a goat

for offense offering each day and a bull from the herd
and a ram from the flock. Unblemished shall they be.
[26]Seven days they shall purge the altar and make it
clean and consecrate it, [27]and the days shall be
completed. And it shall happen from the eighth day
onward that the priests shall do their burnt offerings
and their well-being sacrifices on the altar, and I will
accept them favorably, said the Master, the LORD."

CHAPTER 43 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *the glory of the God of Israel.* This phrase marks the beginning of another of Ezekiel's epiphanies. The "glory" is the dazzling manifestation of the divine presence before the eyes of the prophet. It is possible that the glory here is identical with the divine chariot of chapter 1, but there is no unambiguous indication in the text that this is the case.

3. *that sight that I had seen when I came to pronounce the destruction of the city.* The Hebrew says merely "when I came to destroy the city," but the prophet is not the agent of destruction, so it is assumed in this translation that he is referring to his prophecies of destruction in chapters 8–11.

and sights like the sight I had seen by the Kebar Canal. This phrase does take us back to the vision in chapter 1, which is located on the banks of the Kebar Canal.

5. *the glory of the LORD filled the house.* This clause is reminiscent of the epiphany in Isaiah 6. Here, as throughout these chapters, "the house" means "the house of the LORD," which is to say, the Temple.

6. *speaking to me.* The Hebrew, at least as it is vocalized in the Masoretic Text, does not actually say "speaking," *medaber,* but uses an unusual reflexive form of this verb, *midaber,* which would appear to suggest a kind of mediated activity of speech rather than direct address to the prophet. The somewhat paraphrastic but semantically correct solution of the New Jewish Publication Society translation is "speech addressed to me."

7. *the place of My throne.* The noun phrase here is preceded by the accusative particle *ʾet,* leading us to expect a verb, but none appears in this sentence. Some understand the *ʾet* as indicating emphasis. This translation replicates the syntactic incompleteness of the Hebrew. It should be noted that the "man" addressing Ezekiel is now clearly God.

with their whoring and with the corpses of their kings. As elsewhere, the probable reference of "whoring" is idolatry. The "corpses of their kings" refers to the practice of the last several Judahite kings of using the Garden of Uzza, in proximity to the Temple, as a royal burial ground. Corpses impart ritual defilement. The threshold and doorposts of the next verse would thus be the threshold and doorposts of the royal mausoleums.

10. *let them measure its design.* For Ezekiel, there is a seamless connection between grand visions of a restored temple and a restored monarchy with the cubit-by-cubit measurements of the Temple that is to be rebuilt. It is as if, as he contemplates the Temple that has been in ruins for two decades, the reality of its rebuilding becomes palpable for him by his tracing all the details of its measurements that the builders are to follow.

11. *[and inform them of all its designs and all its rules].* Although Ezekiel's prose is prone to repetition, the repetition in this instance is so excessive that one suspects the bracketed clause to be an inadvertent scribal duplication.

13. *a cubit and a cubit and a handsbreadth.* As before, the indications of the measurements and the architectural terms are bewildering.

18. *the altar on the day it is made.* This phrase clearly indicates that this is a plan which the builders are to implement as they proceed with the reconstruction of the destroyed temple.

19. *And you shall give these to the levitical priests.* Now Ezekiel moves from architectural instructions to instructions about the sacrifices to be performed within the rebuilt temple.

20. *the four horns of the altar.* The ancient altars had hornlike protuberances, probably symbolizing power, at their four corners.

27. *from the eighth day onward that the priests shall do their burnt offerings.* After seven days during which the rebuilt altar is purified and sanctified, the priests will take up their set regimen of regular offerings.

CHAPTER 44

[1]And he brought me back through the outer gate of
the sanctuary facing eastward, but it was closed. [2]And
the LORD said to me, “This gate shall be closed. It
shall not be opened, and no man shall enter it, for the
LORD God of Israel has entered it, and it has become
closed. [3]The prince, he, the prince—it is he who shall
sit in it to eat bread before the LORD. By the way of
the gate hall he shall come in and by its way he shall
go out.” [4]And He brought me through the gate of the
north in front of the house, and I saw and, look, the
glory of the LORD filled the house, and I fell on my
face. [5]And the LORD said to me, “Man, pay mind and
see with your eyes and with your ears hear all that I
speak to you about all the statutes of the house of the
LORD and about all its regulations, and you shall pay
mind to the entrance of the house and to all the exits
of the sanctuary. [6]And you shall say to the rebels, to
the house of Israel, Thus said the Master, the LORD:
Enough for you of all your abominations, house of
Israel, [7]when you bring foreigners, uncircumcised of

heart and uncircumcised of flesh, to be in My sanctuary to profane My house when you offer up the food, suet, and blood, and they violate My covenant with all their abominations! [8]And you have not kept My holy watch, but you have set them for yourselves as keepers of My watch in My sanctuary. [9]Thus said the Master, the LORD: No foreigner uncircumcised of heart and uncircumcised of flesh shall enter My sanctuary, no foreigner who is among the Israelites, [10]but only the Levites, who went far away from Me when Israel strayed, as they strayed from Me after their foul things, and they shall bear their punishment. [11]And they shall minister in My sanctuary, in appointed office, at the gates of the house, ministering in the house. They shall slaughter the burnt offering and the sacrifice for the people, and they shall stand before them to minister to them. [12]Inasmuch as they ministered to them before their foul things and became a stumbling block of crime for the house of Israel, therefore I have sworn concerning them, said the Master, the LORD, that they shall bear their punishment. [13]And they shall not approach Me to serve as priests to Me, to approach all My consecrated things, to the Holy of Holies. And they shall bear their disgrace and their abominations that they did. [14]And I will make them keepers of the watch of the house in

all its service and in all that they do within it. [15]But the levitical priests, the sons of Zadok, who kept the watch of My house when the Israelites strayed from Me, they shall draw near to minister to Me and stand before Me to offer up suet and blood, said the Master, the LORD. [16]They shall enter My sanctuary and they shall draw near to My table to minister to Me, and they shall keep My watch. [17]And it shall happen when they enter the gate of the inner court, they shall wear linen garments, and no wool shall be upon them when they minister in the gates of the inner court and within. [18]Linen headdresses shall be on their heads and linen trousers shall be on their loins, and they shall not gird what causes sweat. [19]And when they go out to the outer court, to the outer court, to the people, they shall remove their garments in which they have ministered and lay them in the sacred chamber and don other garments, lest they consecrate the people through their garments. [20]Their heads they shall not shave, nor shall they let their hair grow long. They shall surely trim their hair. [21]And no priest shall drink wine when he comes into the inner court. [22]Nor shall they take for themselves a widow or a divorced woman as wife but only a virgin from the seed of the house of Israel, or a widow who is widow of a priest they may take. [23]And My people they shall teach, what is between sacred

and profane and between unclean and clean they shall inform them. [24]And concerning a legal dispute they shall stand to judge by My laws and judge it. And My teachings and My statutes in all My appointed times they shall keep, and My sabbaths they shall hallow. [25]And no human corpse shall they approach because of the uncleanness, but for a father or a mother or a son or a daughter or a brother or a sister who is unmarried they may become unclean. [26]And after he has become clean, they shall count seven days for him. [27]And on the day he comes into the sanctuary, into the inner court, to minister in the sanctuary, he shall offer his offense offering, said the Master, the LORD. [28]And it shall be an estate for them. I am their estate. And you shall not give them a holding in Israel. I am their holding. [29]As to the grain offering and the offense offering and the guilt offering, they shall eat them, and whatever is consecrated in Israel shall be theirs. [30]And the best of all first fruits and all gifts whatsoever shall be the priests', and the best of your kneading troughs you shall give to the priests so as to settle blessing on your home. [31]No carrion nor preyed-upon animal, whether fowl or beast, shall the priests eat."

CHAPTER 44 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

6. *And you shall say to the rebels, to the house of Israel.* Until this point, the prophet seemed to be focused on laying out all the regulations of the use of the Temple. Now, however, a theme of castigation is introduced: before the destruction of the First Temple, its sanctity had been repeatedly violated in ways that Ezekiel will spell out; in the restored Temple, things must be set right.

7. *when you bring foreigners, uncircumcised of heart and uncircumcised of flesh, to be in My sanctuary.* Ezekiel appears to refer to an actual practice of using foreigners to perform menial tasks in the Temple. In his view, the state of ritual unfitness of someone who is uncircumcised is correlative to a state of spiritual or moral unfitness ("uncircumcised of heart").

they violate My covenant. The verb here might conceivably have a causative sense: "they cause My covenant to be violated."

8. *My holy watch.* This is the Temple cult with all its intricate procedures designed to preserve the sanctity of the place and of the service.

10. *but only the Levites, who went far away from Me.* The Levites, because of their pedigree, will be allowed back in the sanctuary, but because they were complicit in the sins of Israel, they are to be demoted in function as the prophet will spell out. The verb, "went far away," *raḥaqu,* is the antonym of *qarvu,* "drew close," the technical term used for the officials who can enter the sanctuary.

11. *They shall slaughter the burnt offering and the sacrifice for the people.* The sacerdotal function of these Levites is limited to preparing the sacrifices for the people, but they are barred from the Holy of Holies as punishment for their past acts.

15. *the levitical priests, the sons of Zadok, who kept the watch of My house.* It is not clear whether Ezekiel had reliable knowledge that the Zadokite priests were not complicit in compromising the sanctity of the cult or whether he is merely inclined to see them as a legitimate priestly elite for genealogical reasons.

stand before Me. This idiom has both its literal meaning and the sense of "to serve."

16. *They shall enter My sanctuary.* This is in contrast to the Levites, who are to remain in the court of the Temple.

My table. This is an epithet for the altar.

17. *they shall wear linen garments.* This is in keeping with the stipulations about priestly dress in Leviticus. Perhaps linen was thought of as a purer fabric than wool because it did not come from an animal. In any case, a linen garment would have been cooler, less likely to induce sweating, a concern stated at the end of the next verse.

19. *to the outer court, to the outer court.* The repetition may be a scribal error (dittography).

lest they consecrate the people through their garments. This appears to be an idea peculiar to Ezekiel: Just as ritual uncleanness is imparted by contact with an unclean object, sacredness is imagined to be imparted by contact with anything that has been consecrated. For Ezekiel, who is after all a priest and preoccupied with drawing the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, it is essential that the condition of consecration not spread among the people. Hence the consecrated garments must be removed and left inside the sacred chamber.

20. *trim their hair.* More literally, "trim their head."

22. *Nor shall they take for themselves a widow or a divorced woman.* In Leviticus, this prohibition is for the high priest, not for the whole priestly caste. The motive is to ensure the genealogical purity of the priestly line. Perhaps it is feared that the widow or divorced woman might have conceived by her first husband, before that marriage was ended by death or divorce. Alternately, her sexual contact with a man not of the priestly line might have been thought of as contaminating.

24. *My appointed times.* This is a fixed idiom for the festivals.

26. *And after he has become clean, they shall count seven days for him.* After the priest has cleansed himself through the prescribed ablutions, he must wait

seven days before again entering the sanctuary.

27. *his offense offering.* This is one of the many indications in the biblical corpus that the *ḥata't* is not a "sin offering," as it is usually translated. The priest has committed no sin. He has merely been in a state of ritual uncleanness, which would be an offense or violation of the sacred space of the sanctuary.

28. *I am their estate . . . I am their holding.* The priest needs no crop-producing tribal territory because his sustenance is provided through the animal and grain offerings brought to the Temple.

31. *No carrion nor preyed-upon animal . . . shall the priests eat.* These are taboo to all Israelites, but there is contextual justification for mentioning them here for the priests: their food comes from the best of what the Israelites bring, and thus it is all the more unthinkable that they would ever resort to carrion and animals torn by beasts of prey.

CHAPTER 45

[1]And when you cast lots for the land as estate, you
shall give a donation to the LORD, sacred from the
land, twenty-five thousand cubits long and ten
thousand cubits wide. It is to be sacred through all its
boundary all around. [2]From this, for the sanctuary,
shall be five hundred cubits square all around, and fifty
cubits for an open space all around it. [3]And by this
measure you shall measure it: twenty-five thousand
cubits long and ten thousand cubits wide, and within it
shall be the sanctuary, the holy of holies. [4]It shall be
sacred from the land for the priests who minister in the
sanctuary, who draw near to minister to the LORD,
and it shall be for them a place for houses and a
consecration for the sanctuary. [5]And twenty-five
thousand cubits long and ten thousand cubits wide
shall be for the Levites who minister in the house.
Theirs it shall be as a holding, twenty chambers. [6]And
the city's holding you shall give—five thousand cubits
wide and twenty-five thousand cubits long
corresponding to the sacred donation. It shall be for

the whole house of Israel. [7]And for the prince on both sides of the sacred donation and to the city's holding facing the sacred donation and facing the city's holding from the western side westward and from the eastern side eastward and the length corresponding to one of the sections from the western border to the eastern border for the land. [8]It shall be a holding in Israel for him, and My princes shall no longer cheat My people, and the land they shall give to the house of Israel by their tribes.

[9]Thus said the Master, the LORD: "Enough for you, princes of Israel. Put aside outrage and plunder and do justice and righteousness. Take away your banishments from My people, said the Master, the LORD. [10]Just scales and a just *ephah* and a just *bat* shall you have. [11]The *ephah* and the *bat* shall have a single measure, the *bat* to contain a tenth of a *homer,* the *ephah* a tenth of the *homer* shall its measure be. [12]And the shekel shall be twenty *gerahs.* Twenty shekels, twenty-five shekels, fifteen shekels shall the *minah* be for you. [13]This is the donation that you shall make: a sixth of an *ephah* from each *homer* of wheat and a sixth of an *ephah* from each *homer* of barley. [14]And the regulations for oil, the oil by the *bat*, a tenth of a *bat*

for each *kor,* ten *bats* are a *homer,* [for ten *bats* are a *homer*]. [15]And one sheep from the flock from every two hundred from Israel's well-watered pastures as a grain offering and as a burnt offering and as well-being sacrifice to atone for them, said the Master, the LORD. [16]All the people of the land shall be with the prince of Israel for this donation. [17]And upon the prince shall be the burnt offerings and the grain offerings and the libation on the festivals and on the new moons and on the sabbaths. On all the appointed times of the house of Israel he shall do the offense offering and the grain offering and the burnt offering and the well-being sacrifice to atone for the house of Israel."

[18]Thus said the Master, the LORD: "In the first month, on the first of the month, you shall take an unblemished bull from the herd and purify the sanctuary. [19]And the priest shall take from the blood of the offense offering and put it on the lintel of the house and on the four corners of the level space on the altar and on the lintel of the gate of the inner court. [20]And thus shall you do on the seventh of the month for the errant man and for the unwitting, and you shall purge the house. [21]In the first month, on the fourteenth day of

the month, you shall have the Passover, a festival of seven days. Flatbread shall be eaten. [22]And the prince shall do for himself and for all the people of the land an offense-offering bull. [23]And the seven days of the festival he shall do a burnt offering to the LORD, seven unblemished bulls and seven unblemished rams each day of the seven days and an offense offering of a he-goat each day. [24]And a grain offering, an *ephah* for each bull and an *ephah* for each ram he shall do, and oil, a *hin* for each *ephah.* [25]In the seventh month, on the fifteenth day of the month, on the festival he shall do like these for seven days, the offense offering and the burnt offering and the grain offering and the oil alike."

CHAPTER 45 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *cast lots for the land.* The idiom used here harks back to Joshua, where a system of casting lots is used in order to divide up the tribal territories.
a donation to the LORD. The area designated is to be set aside for the Temple, the Levites, and the priests.

4. *It shall be sacred from the land.* That is, it shall be set off from the rest of the land as consecrated ground.

5. *twenty chambers.* This is the reading of the Masoretic Text, *ʿesrim leshakhot,* but it is puzzling what chambers are doing out in this open area.

Perhaps one should adopt the Septuagint's reading, which is *ʿarim lashavet,* "towns in which to dwell."

7. *And for the prince.* Throughout, "the prince" is the king.

8. *My princes shall no longer cheat My people.* With these clear demarcations of what area belongs to the crown, what to the priests and Levites, and what to the people, royal expropriation of lands belonging to the people will cease.

9. *outrage and plunder.* This could be construed as a hendiadys, having the sense "outrageous plunder."

Take away your banishments. The grammatical form of the noun that derives from the verbal stem meaning "to banish" is peculiar, but, given the context of royal exploitation of the people, the probable sense is eviction of people from lands that have been expropriated by the crown.

10. *a just* ephah *and a just* bat. The *ephah* is a dry measure, the *bat* a liquid measure. The *ḥomer,* as is spelled out at the end of the next verse, is a dry measure ten times the size of an *ephah.*

12. *shekel.* This word means "weight"—its cognate is used in several other Semitic languages—and it is not, as in later usage, a coin. Although equivalents in modern measurements are often proposed by scholars for all these terms of weight and volume, there appears to have been some fluctuation of their values in different times and regions.

14. *[for ten* bats *are a* homer]. This clause is bracketed because it appears to be an inadvertent duplication of the immediately preceding clause.

15. *well-watered pastures.* The Hebrew *mashqeh* usually means "offering drink," so the translation is a surmise based on context.

17. *And upon the prince shall be the burnt offerings.* Since it is the duty of the priests, not of the king, to perform the actual rite of sacrifice, this must mean that it is the prince's obligation to oversee the arrangements for the sacrifices and to make sure they are done in the appropriate ways at the appropriate times.

18. *the first month.* This is Nissan, approximately corresponding to April.
purify the sanctuary. This was done by sprinkling the blood of the slaughtered bull on the altar. The blood, as Jacob Milgrom puts it, was thought of as a kind of detergent.

19. *on the lintel of the gate of the inner court.* In Leviticus, the rite of purification was restricted to the altar. Ezekiel, preoccupied as he is with purity, extends it here to the inner court.

20. *for the errant man and for the unwitting.* These would be people who without intending to do so have brought ritual uncleanness into the sacred zone of the Temple. The impurity has to be purged.

25. *In the seventh month, on the fifteenth day of the month.* This is the month of Tishrei, corresponding to September–October. The festival in question is the fall holiday of Succoth. Between the two festivals mentioned here, Passover is the holiday that affirms belonging to the community of Israel, whereas Succoth, which takes place at the completion of the work of harvesting, is the holiday for which the greatest number of pilgrims came to Jerusalem.

CHAPTER 46

[1]Thus said the Master, the LORD: “The gate of the
inner court facing eastward shall be closed during the
six workdays, and on the sabbath day it shall be open
and on the day of the new moon it shall be open. [2]And
the prince shall come through the gate hall from
outside and stand by the lintel of the gate, and the
priest shall do his burnt offerings and his well-being
sacrifices, and he shall bow down on the threshold of
the gate and go out, and the gate shall not be closed
until evening. [3]And the people of the land shall bow
down before the LORD at the entrance of that gate on
sabbaths and on new moons. [4]And the burnt offering
that the prince shall offer to the LORD on the sabbath
day shall be six unblemished sheep and an
unblemished ram. [5]And a grain offering, an *ephah* for
each ram, and for the sheep, a grain offering, the gift
of his hand, and oil, a *hin* to the *ephah*. [6]And on the
day of the new moon, an unblemished bull from the
herd and six sheep and a ram. Unblemished shall they
be. [7]And an *ephah* for each bull and an *ephah* for each

ram he shall do as a grain offering, and for the sheep, as his hand may attain, and oil, a *hin* to the *ephah.*
[8]And when the prince enters, through the gate hall he shall enter and by way of it he shall go out. [9]And when the people of the land enter before the LORD on the appointed times, who enters through the northern gate to bow down shall go out through the southern gate, and who enters through the southern gate shall go out through the northern gate, and he shall not go back through the gate by which he entered, but straight ahead of him he shall go out. [10]As for the prince, in their midst when they enter he shall enter, and where they go out he shall go out. [11]And on the festivals and on the appointed times the grain offering shall be an *ephah* for each bull and an *ephah* for each ram and for the sheep the gift of his hand, and oil, a *hin* to the *ephah.* [12]And should the prince do a freewill offering, whether burnt offering or well-being sacrifices, a freewill offering to the LORD, he shall open the gate facing eastward and do his burnt offering and his well-being sacrifices as he does on the sabbath day, and he shall go out and close the gate after he has gone out.
[13]And a yearling unblemished sheep he shall do on the sabbath day, a burnt offering to the LORD for the day, each morning you shall do it. [14]And a grain offering you shall do together with it, each morning, the sixth

of an *ephah,* and oil, the third of a *hin,* to sprinkle on the fine flour, a grain offering to the LORD, an everlasting perpetual statute. [15]And they shall do the sheep and the grain offering and the oil every morning, a perpetual burnt offering. [16]Thus said the Master, the LORD: Should the prince give a gift to one of his sons, it shall be his estate, to his sons shall their holding be, it comes in estate. [17]And should he give a gift from his estate to one of his servants, it shall be his till the year of release and shall go back to the prince. His estate must surely belong to his sons. [18]And the prince shall not take from the estate of the people to cheat them of their holding. From his own holding he shall bequeath to his sons, so that My people be not scattered each man from his holding."

[19]And he brought me into the entrance that is on the side of the gate to the sacred chambers for the priests that face northward, and, look, there was a place in the far corner to the west. [20]And he said to me, "This is the place in which the priests prepare the guilt offering and the offense offering, where they bake the grain offering so as not to bring it out to the outer court to consecrate the people." [21]And He took me out to the outer court and made me pass by the four corners of

the court, and, look, there was an enclosure in each corner of the court. [22]In the four corners of the court there were enclosures without roofs, forty cubits long and thirty cubits wide the measure of each of the four corners. [23]And there was a row of bricks within all around for the four of them, and cooking utensils fashioned beneath the rows all around. [24]And He said to me, “These are the kitchens where the ministrants of the house cook the sacrifices of the people.”

CHAPTER 46 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *on the sabbath day it shall be open and on the day of the new moon it shall be open.* The obvious reason for opening the gate, as becomes clear in the next verse, is so that the prince can enter through it.

2. *and he shall bow down.* As is usually the case in ritual contexts, this verb carries both its literal sense and, through a kind of synecdoche, designates the act of worship.

7. *as his hand may attain.* This idiom, taken from the sacrificial laws of the Torah, indicates a category of offering in which the number or quantity is not fixed but determined by the economic capacity of the person who brings it to the Temple.

9. *who enters through the northern . . . shall go out through the southern gate.* It is not clear whether this instruction has some ritual or symbolic justification or is simply a means of regulating foot traffic within the Temple.

13. *each morning you shall do it.* The switch from "he" (the prince) to "you" (singular) is slightly disorienting, but it may reflect the fluidity with which biblical Hebrew switches grammatical person, rather than being the result of a scribal error.

14. *oil, the third of a* hin, *to sprinkle on the fine flour.* The reason for this instruction is culinary rather than strictly ritual: the grain offering is to be baked, and so the flour needs to be suffused with oil to make it into dough.

16. *it shall be his estate.* That is, the gift shall become the inheritance of the son to whom it has been given.

17. *one of his servants.* In royal contexts, "servants" usually means "courtiers." A royal gift to a courtier for exemplary service rendered would be fairly common.

the year of release. This might be the jubilee year. In any case, it is a set year in which slaves are freed and property that has been assigned to others reverts to its original owners. Thus the king's gift to his courtiers, unlike the gift to his sons, is not permanent.

18. *so that My people be not scattered each man from his holding.* As in earlier biblical literature, Ezekiel envisages an agrarian society in which stability and prosperity are contingent on possessing arable land. It is for this reason that the king is sternly prohibited from expropriating land from his subjects.

20. *so as not to bring it out . . . to consecrate the people.* As before, consecration is conceived as a kind of contagious condition. The consecrated grain offering must be prepared by the priests within their chambers and should not come in contact with the people.

21. *an enclosure.* This is the same Hebrew word that is rendered as "court" at the beginning of this verse, but it has a secondary sense of "enclosure."

22. *each of the four corners.* The Masoretic Text reads "in each of the four of them *mehuqatsʿot.*" This last word is not intelligible and in fact is marked by the Masoretes with dots over it, a way of indicating that a word is textually suspect. This translation adopts the emendation proposed by Rimon Kasher, *leʾarbaʿat hamiqtsqaʿot.*

23. *a row of bricks.* The Hebrew merely says “row,” but what is indicated is a low inner wall of bricks or perhaps of stones.

CHAPTER 47

[1]And he brought me back to the entrance of the
house, and, look, water was coming out from under
the threshold of the house to the east, for the front of
the house was on the east, and the water was going
down from the right side of the house from south of
the altar. [2]And he took me out through the gate to the
north and turned me around outside the gate on the
way facing eastward, and, look, water was seeping
from the right side. [3]When the man came out to the
east, there was a line in his hand, and he measured out
a thousand cubits and made me cross through the
water, ankle-deep water. [4]And he measured out a
thousand cubits and made me cross through the water,
knee-deep water, and he measured out a thousand
cubits and made me cross through waist-deep water.
[5]And he measured out a thousand cubits—a stream
which I could not cross for the water was surging,
water to swim in, a stream that could not be crossed.
[6]And he said to me, “Do you see, man?” and he led me
and brought me back to the bank of the stream. [7]When

I came back, look, on the bank of the stream were very many trees on both sides. [8]And he said to me, “This water is going out to the eastern area and will go down to the Arabah and enter the sea, the sea of filthy water, and the water shall become clean. [9]And it shall be that every living creature that swarms, all that enters there in the double stream shall live, and there shall be very many fish there, for this water has entered there and it has become clean. And all that enters there in the stream shall live. [10]And it shall be that fishermen shall stand over it from Ein-Gedi to Ein-Eglaim, a place for spreading nets. There shall be fish of all kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea, very many. [11]Its swamps and its marshes shall not become clean—for salt shall they be set aside. [12]And by the stream, on its bank, on both sides every fruit-bearing tree shall spring up. Their leaf shall not wither, their fruit shall not cease. They shall yield new fruit month after month, for their water comes out from the sanctuary, and their fruit shall be for eating and their leaf for healing.”

[13]Thus said the Master, the LORD: “These are the boundaries by which you shall inherit the land for the twelve tribes. For Joseph—two portions. [14]And you

shall inherit it, each man like his fellow, as I have sworn to give it to your fathers, and this land shall fall in lots to you as an estate. [15]And these are the boundaries of the land: at the northern end from the Great Sea by way of Hethlon, Lebo-Hamath, Zedad, [16]Berathah, Sibraim, which is between the border of Damascus and the border of Hamath, Hazer-Hatticun, which is on the border of Hauran. [17]And the boundary shall be from the Sea to Hazer-Enan, north of the border of Damascus, and the border of Hamath to the north. This is the northern limit. [18]And the eastern limit is from Hauran to Damascus and from Gilead to the Land of Israel, the Jordan a border. To the eastern sea you shall measure. And this is the eastern limit. [19]And the southern limit is south of Tamar to the waters Meriboth-Kadesh, along the wadi to the Great Sea. This is the southern limit. [20]And the western limit is the Great Sea, the border as far as opposite Lebo-Hamath. This is the western limit. [21]And you shall share out this land for yourselves for the tribes of Israel. [22]And it shall be that you shall let lots fall in estate for yourselves and for the sojourners who sojourn in your midst who have begotten children in your midst. And they shall become for you like the native-born of the Israelites. With you they shall share in estate in the midst of the tribes of Israel. [23]And it

shall be that in the tribe in which the sojourner sojourns, there you shall grant his estate, said the Master, the LORD."

CHAPTER 47 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *water was coming out from under the threshold of the house.* In the midst of all the technical reports of temple floor plans and sacrifices, to be followed later in this chapter by a listing of the borders of the land, Ezekiel offers the last of his entirely original visionary experiences. At first blush, this looks like it might be merely some underground spring beneath the Temple from which water is seeping, but the miraculous nature of the flow of water quickly becomes apparent.

2. *seeping.* The verb *mefakim* occurs only here. The probable root is *p-k-h,* and it has been suggested that it is related to the noun *pakh,* a jar from which liquid would pour out in a thin stream.

3. *there was a line in his hand.* The line for measuring looks back to the elaborate measurements of the Temple carried out by "the man" earlier, but in this case he will measure only the extent of the stream, which deepens after every thousand cubits.

5. *a stream which I could not cross.* The familiar pattern, manifested in quite a few biblical stories and in folktales outside the Bible, is three (or in some instances, three plus one) with a difference at the end: in this case, an intensification from one to three (the deepening water), concluding in the unfordable depth of the stream. The pattern thus conveys the miraculous character of the vision—water seeping out from under the Temple somehow turns into a deep surging stream.

7. *very many trees.* While the Hebrew uses a singular form, it is clearly a collective noun. The abundant trees alongside the stream are a foreshadowing

of the vision of fruitfulness in the culmination of this prophecy.

8. *This water is going out to the eastern area and will go down to the Arabah.* The water flows downhill from Mount Zion eastward to the Arabah, the rift of the Jordan Valley. From there it will continue downward to the Dead Sea, which is more than 435 feet below sea level and the lowest place on the face of the earth.

the sea. This lowercased body of water is the Dead Sea, in contrast to the uppercased Sea in verse 17, which is the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean, referred to in verse 10 in the Hebrew as the Great Sea, constitutes the sea par excellence for the Land of Israel—hence the capital *S*.

the sea of filthy water. The designation is somewhat imprecise, motivated by the awareness that the saline content of the Dead Sea is so high that nothing can live in it.

become clean. The literal sense of the Hebrew verb is "be healed," but the biblical term for healing is often used for restoring a person or substance to a condition of wholeness. "Clean" water is water in which life can now survive. This meaning is spelled out in the last sentence of the next verse: "And all that enters there in the stream shall live."

9. *every living creature that swarms.* The phrasal echo of the Creation story evokes the idea of abundant proliferating life-forms and perhaps of Eden itself.

the double stream. The vocalization of this noun in the Hebrew is a doublative form. This could be a scribal error, but perhaps it might be meant to intensify "stream."

there shall be very many fish there. This is the focus of Ezekiel's vision of an eschatological restoration of the devastated homeland: the Dead Sea, where nothing can live, will be transformed by these miraculous waters seeping out from the Temple into fresh water pullulating with life, suggesting a new Eden.

10. *from Ein-Gedi to Ein-Eglaim.* Ein-Gedi is an oasis overlooking the northern reaches of the Dead Sea (*ein* means "spring"), and Ein-Eglaim is presumably somewhere to the south in this same region.

a place for spreading nets. The establishment of marine life in this hitherto lifeless body of water also provides sustenance to the people living

nearby.

11. *for salt shall they be set aside.* The Dead Sea was no doubt drawn on as a source of salt, and since salt is a necessary substance, the marshlands along its borders will be excluded from the cleansing and continue to provide salt.

12. *every fruit-bearing tree.* This is another phrase that recalls the Creation narrative.

They shall yield new fruit month after month. Complementing the miracle of the cleansed waters, the trees along the banks of the stream will be miraculously fruitful, not just in one season but month after month. This, too, is an edenic motif.

their leaf for healing. In fact, leaves, especially from the Dead Sea region, were often used as herbal medication.

13. *These.* For the Masoretic *geh,* which is not comprehensible, we read here with the ancient versions *zeh,* "this" or "these."

These are the boundaries. Ezekiel's prophecy of national restoration now returns to its preoccupation with measurements and demarcations—in this case, the sundry boundaries of the land.

For Joseph—two portions. The tribe of Joseph is the exception because it comprises two half-tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh.

15. *Lebo-Hamath.* The received text says only Lebo, not a place-name, but the Septuagint has Lebo-Hamath, and the second component of this name evidently was displaced to the beginning of the next verse, where it does not belong.

18. *the eastern sea.* This is the Dead Sea, the Mediterranean being the western sea.

22. *and for the sojourners who sojourn in your midst.* In Joshua, the sojourners, or resident aliens, are not given territory, so this is an innovation of Ezekiel's. It may reflect a demographic reality in which there was a substantial population of resident aliens and in which the tribes as distinctive entities had largely disappeared.

who have begotten children in your midst. Ezekiel stipulates that the sojourners would have to be longtime residents in the Israelite community.

CHAPTER 48

[1]And these are the names of the tribes: From the
northern end by the way of Hethlon, Lebo-Hamath,
Hazar-Enan, the border of Damascus to the north, and
from the eastern side to the west—Dan, one. [2]And by
the boundary of Dan from the eastern end to the
western end—Asher, one. [3]And by the boundary of
Asher from the eastern end to the western end—
Naphtali, one. [4]And by the boundary of Naphtali from
the eastern end to the western end—Manasseh, one.
[5]And by the boundary of Manasseh from the eastern
end to the western end—Ephraim, one. [6]And by the
boundary of Ephraim from the eastern end to the
western end—Reuben, one. [7]And by the boundary of
Reuben from the eastern end to the western end—
Judah, one. [8]And by the boundary of Judah from the
eastern end to the western end there shall be a
donation that you shall set aside—twenty-five thousand
cubits in width and length like one of the portions
from the eastern end to the western end, and the
sanctuary shall be within it. [9]The donation that you

shall set aside for the LORD is to be twenty-five thousand cubits long and ten thousand cubits wide.
10And for these shall the sacred donation be: for the priests on the north twenty-five thousand cubits long and to the west ten thousand cubits wide and to the east ten thousand cubits wide and to the south twenty-five thousand cubits long, and the LORD's sanctuary shall be within it, 11for the consecrated priests of the sons of Zadok, who kept My watch, who did not stray when the Israelites strayed as the Levites strayed.
12And it shall be a donation to them from the donation of the land, holy of holies, by the territory of the Levites. 13And the Levites are opposite the territory of the priests, twenty-five thousand cubits long and ten thousand cubits wide, the whole length twenty-five thousand cubits and the whole width ten thousand cubits. 14And they shall not sell any of it nor shall they exchange nor shall it be transferred. It is the best of the land, sacred to the LORD. 15And the remaining five thousand cubits in width by twenty-five thousand in length is profane ground for the city for dwellings and for open fields, and the city shall be within it.
16And these are its measurements: on the north side four thousand five hundred cubits and on the south side four thousand five hundred cubits and on the east side four thousand five hundred cubits and on the west

side four thousand five hundred cubits. [17]And there shall be an open field for the city to the north, two hundred fifty cubits, and to the south, two hundred fifty cubits and to the east, two hundred fifty cubits and to the west, two hundred fifty cubits. [18]And the remaining area in length opposite the sacred donation shall be ten thousand cubits on the east and ten thousand cubits on the west, and it shall be opposite the sacred donation. And its produce shall be for bread for the city workers. [19]And the city workers shall work in it from all the tribes of Israel. [20]The whole donation, twenty-five thousand cubits by twenty-five thousand cubits square, you shall set aside as a sacred donation in addition to the city's holding. [21]And what is remaining is for the prince on both sides of the sacred donation and of the city's holding, facing the twenty-five thousand cubits of the donation to the eastern and western borders facing the twenty-five thousand cubits on the western border opposite the tribal portions. This is the prince's, and the sacred donation and the sanctuary of the house shall be within it. [22]And the Levites' holding and the city's holding shall be within what is the prince's between the territory of Judah and the territory of Benjamin. For the prince it shall be. [23]As for the remaining tribes, from the eastern end to the western end: Benjamin, one. [24]And by the territory

of Benjamin from the eastern end to the western end: Simeon, one. [25]And by the territory of Simeon from the eastern end to the western end: Issachar, one. [26]And by the territory of Issachar from the eastern end to the western end: Zebulun, one. [27]And by the territory of Zebulun from the eastern end to the western end: Gad, one. [28]And by the territory of Gad to the southern end, the boundary shall be from Tamar to the waters of Meribath-Kodesh, to the wadi, as far as the Great Sea. [29]This is the land that you shall cast in lots for the tribes of Israel, and these are its portions, said the Master, the LORD. [30]And this is the span of the city: from the eastern side four thousand five hundred cubits in measure. [31]And the gates of the city are after the names of the tribes of Israel: three gates on the north—the Gate of Reuben, one; the Gate of Judah, one; the Gate of Levi, one. [32]And on the eastern side, four thousand five hundred cubits and three gates—the Gate of Joseph, one; the Gate of Benjamin, one; the Gate of Dan, one. [33]And the southern side, four thousand five hundred cubits and three gates—the Gate of Simeon, one; the Gate of Issachar, one; the gate of Zebulun, one. [34]The western side, four thousand five hundred cubits. Their gates are three—the Gate of Gad, one; the Gate of Asher, one; the Gate of Naphtali, one. [35]All around it is eighteen

thousand cubits. And the name of the city from that day shall be “The LORD Is There.”

CHAPTER 48 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And these are the names of the tribes.* For modern readers, this catalogue of the tribal territories, including a delineation of the sectors of Jerusalem, is likely to be an uninspiring conclusion to a book of prophecy. One suspects that for Ezekiel, on the contrary, these dry listings were inspiring because they constituted a geometrical representation of a vision of national restoration. It should be noted that almost none of this corresponds to the historical realities of the land but is rather an eschatological imagining of the land. All the demarcations are symmetrical—equal borders for each of the tribes; Jerusalem is divided into symmetrical sectors for the priests, the Levites, the king, and the common people; the four walls of the city with gates named for three tribes on each side.

Dan. Another manifestation of the eschatological character of Ezekiel’s report of tribal borders is that it is careful to include all twelve tribes, even though the ten northern tribes had ceased to exist a century and a half before this prophecy.

2. *Asher, one.* The evident sense of “one” is “one share in the division of the land.” The unvarying repetition of this formula for each of the twelve tribes conveys the idea that each receives an equal portion—again, in contradiction to the preceding historical reality.

8. *And by the boundary of Judah . . . there shall be a donation that you shall set aside.* For Judah, there is a break in the series of formulaic repetitions because Jerusalem is in the tribal territory of Judah, and so here the prophet reverts to his delineation of the borders of sacred space around the Temple. “Donation,” which elsewhere in the Bible refers to a kind of sacrifice, is

throughout these concluding chapters a large plot of land reserved for priestly use.

and the sanctuary shall be within it. In Ezekiel's priestly vision, the city and the whole land are centered around the sanctuary.

15. *open fields.* Israelite cities had open fields, *migrashim,* around them, chiefly used to pasture herds and cultivate crops.

18. *bread for the city workers.* As elsewhere, bread is a synecdoche for food.

19. *And the city workers shall work in it from all the tribes of Israel.* Because Jerusalem is the site of both the Temple and the royal bureaucracy, its maintenance is an obligation of the entire people, the exaction of labor being a kind of taxation.

23. *As for the remaining tribes.* Having detailed the sundry divisions within Jerusalem triggered by the mention of Judah, the prophet now returns to his formulaic catalogue of tribal boundaries.

29. *This is the land that you shall cast in lots . . . said the Master, the* LORD. This sentence uses two rather different formulations: the verb at the beginning, which suggests the casting of lots, harks back to the procedure said to be used for the division of the land in Joshua, but the LORD's "saying" how the land should be divided implies the symmetrical, preordained plan of division evident here.

30. *And this is the span of the city.* Having finished with the tribal territories, Ezekiel returns to his overriding preoccupation with the dimensions of the city, his vision constantly centered on Jerusalem.

35. *And the name of the city from that day shall be "The* LORD *Is There."* This concluding flourish underscores the grand eschatological character of this vision of the restored city and land: in the rebuilt, carefully demarcated, symmetrical Jerusalem, with the sanctuary at its center, the very name of the city will express God's constant presence in the place where He has chosen to dwell.

THE TWELVE MINOR PROPHETS

Introduction

The Twelve Minor Prophets are “minor” only in regard to the quantity of their writings that have come down to us. In fact, in Hebrew they are simply called “the Dozen,” with no mention of minor. The longest among these books, Hosea and Zechariah, are barely a sixth the length of Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Ezekiel, and some of these Prophets show only three, two, or even one chapter. (The brevity might reflect the temporal brevity of their missions, in contrast to the three major prophets, each of whom was active for decades.) One of the twelve, moreover, Jonah, doesn’t really belong. The Book of Jonah was put in this group because it is a very short text about a prophet; however, in fact it is not, like the others, a book of prophecies but rather a fable about prophecy featuring a fictitious prophet, and as such it really should have been placed in Ketuvim, the miscellaneous writings. (Consequently, it will be

accorded its own introduction here.) “Minor,” then, has nothing to do with the resonance or power of these Prophets, and at the very best, Hosea and Amos are among the greatest biblical Prophets, though their books weigh in, respectively, at fourteen and nine chapters according to the conventional chapter divisions.

Hosea and Amos are the first of the so-called literary prophets, and it is a mystery why in the eighth century B.C.E. Hebrew prophets should have begun to cast their messages in writing—chiefly, in poetry. There are frequent appearances of prophets in the early biblical narratives—Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha are the most familiar names, and quite a few others enter the sundry stories. These prophets are said to exert a certain divinatory power; some are reported to work miracles; and most assume a role of moral castigation, which, however, is usually directed to rulers, not to the general populace. There is no indication that any of these early figures used writing as a medium for their prophecies. Then, probably in the 760s B.C.E., a cattle herder and arborist from a small village near Jerusalem makes his way from the kingdom of Judah to the northern kingdom of Israel and begins to inveigh, in powerful poetry, against the moral and economic crimes of its inhabitants. While

some of the other prophets come from a priestly background, it is noteworthy that the first among them is of peasant stock, and yet literate, which might offer a clue about the dissemination of literacy in this culture. He evinces a mastery of the parallelistic form of Hebrew verse, which lends itself to strong emphasis through interechoing utterances; and he uses this form, among other purposes, to convey to his audience the urgent imperative of the prophetic calling:

> Do two walk together
> if they have not first agreed?
> Does the lion roar in the forest
> unless it has taken prey?
> Does the maned beast put forth its
> voice from its lair
> if it has not made a catch? . . .
> A lion roars,
> who does not fear?
> The Master, the LORD, speaks.
> Who cannot prophesy? (Amos 3:3–4 and 8)

Amos provides a bit of autobiographical information in responding to a challenge from a

northern priest. About others of the Twelve Minor Prophets we know less, or nothing at all. Hosea, who probably prophesied in the generation after Amos, is definitely from the northern kingdom, and some of his writing appears to reflect traditions about the patriarchs that diverge from those that appear in Genesis, the larger part of which was written and certainly edited in the south. He is enjoined to marry a whore, but whether this is an actual biographical fact or merely a symbolic gesture is not entirely certain. About Joel nothing is known, and the dating of his four chapters is elusive. Of Obadiah, represented by a single chapter, all that is inferable is that because of his angry doomsaying against Edom, he probably wrote during the last years of the kingdom of Judah, when the Edomites were active collaborators with the Babylonians in their onslaught against Jerusalem. The ordering of the twelve is not strictly chronological, and thus Micah, the next in sequence after Obadiah and Jonah, would have been active after the destruction of the northern kingdom in 721 B.C.E. and also after the incursion of Sennacherib into Judah in 701 B.C.E., both reflected in his writing. One famous passage, 4:1–5, the exalted vision of teaching going out from Zion and the nations grinding their swords into plowshares, is nearly identical with Isaiah 2:2–4, and may well be

the insertion of a later editor, although it is at least possible that Micah was Isaiah's source. Scholars have detected other late materials in his text, which is common for any Prophetic book longer than a couple of chapters. In any case, Micah's noble vision of the LORD requiring justice and humility more than spates of animal sacrifice puts him early in the line of prophets that set ethical behavior above the Temple cult as Israel's primary responsibility.

Nahum (three chapters) is another prophet about whom precious little is known. His book is followed in the canonical order by Habakkuk. Here, again, there are three brief chapters with little indication of historical context. The invocation of a threat from the Chaldean army suggests a date not long before the destruction of the kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E., but even that has been disputed by some scholars. Zephaniah, the next book in the canonical order, has a superscription reporting that he was active during the reign of King Josiah (640–609 B.C.E.). Some have inferred that he wrote before Josiah's sweeping reforms in 622 B.C.E. He fulminates about the imminent Day of the LORD, which is also a motif in other Prophets, and which is imagined to be realized when Jerusalem will be destroyed. Haggai and Zechariah are the latest of the

Twelve who can be confidently dated. They prophesied in the later decades of the fifth century B.C.E. and were part of the early community of those who had returned to Jerusalem from Babylonian exile after the enabling edict of the Persian emperor Cyrus issued in 538 B.C.E. Both Haggai and Zechariah are concerned with the project of rebuilding the Temple and establishing safeguards for its ritual purity. Both ally themselves with Zerubbabel, the Persian-appointed governor of the province of Yehud (formerly the kingdom of Judah) and Joshua the high priest. This concentration on the practical task of restoring the Temple reflects a reduction of the grand moral sweep of many of the earlier prophets.

Malachi, the concluding book of the Twelve Minor Prophets, again three relatively short chapters, takes its title not from the proper name of a prophet but rather from a general designation: the Hebrew means “my messenger,” and quite a few times the prophets are elsewhere referred to as God’s messengers. This text also appears to be post-exilic, but, even in its brevity, it is uncertain whether it is the work of a single writer. In any case, it does provide an apt conclusion to the collection of all the prophets by invoking Elijah, the iconic prophet of the preliterary era, in a promise of a restorative, not destructive, Day of the LORD.

Look, I am about to send to you
    Elijah the prophet
before the coming of the day of the
    LORD,
    great and fearsome.
And he shall bring fathers' hearts
    back to sons
    and the sons' hearts to their
        fathers. (Malachi 3:23–24)

This is not altogether as upbeat as it initially sounds because this last poetic line of the book is triadic, and its third verset reads as follows: "lest I come and strike the land with utter destruction." That is, if people know what is good for them, they will embrace Elijah's project of bringing fathers' hearts back to sons. Otherwise, the usual prophetic warning of disaster remains in place. In any case, this conclusion of the Book of Malachi, of which much has been made by both Jewish and Christian tradition, vividly illustrates the enduring power of the Minor Prophets. Each works on a small scale; many of these texts tend to be fragmentary; most of them are stripped of the enhancing sense of historical context that Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel give us. But despite

all this, these little books incorporate moments of soaring poetry and visionary illumination that still speak to the heart and to the religious imagination.

Hosea

CHAPTER 1

[1]The word of the LORD that came to Hosea son of
Beeri in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah,
kings of Judah and in the days of Jeroboam son of
Joash king of Israel. [2]When the LORD began to speak
to Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea:

Go, take you a wife of whoring
and children of whoring,
for the land has surely whored
away from the LORD.

[3]And he went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim,
and she conceived and bore him a son. [4]And the
LORD said to him: “Call his name Jezreel, for soon I
will make a reckoning for the blood of Jezreel against
the house of Jehu and put an end to the kingdom of
the house of Israel. [5]And it shall be on that day I will
break the bow of Israel in the Valley of Jezreel.” [6]And
she conceived again and bore a daughter. And He said

to him: “Call her name Lo-Ruhamah, for I will no more show mercy to the house of Israel nor will I forgive them in any way. [7]But to the house of Judah I will show mercy and rescue them through the LORD their God, but I will not rescue them through bow and sword and in battle with horses and with horsemen.” [8]And she weaned Lo-Ruhamah and conceived and bore a son. [9]And He said: “Call his name, Lo-Ami, Not My People, and I will not be yours.”

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, kings of Judah.* These monarchs reigned from the middle of the eighth century B.C.E. to the later decades of that century. Given that Hosea was a prophet of the northern kingdom, this notation probably reflects the presence of a later Judahite editor who wanted to place the prophecies in a time frame more familiar to his Judahite audience.

and in the days of Jeroboam son of Joash king of Israel. It has puzzled scholars why only Jeroboam is mentioned because there were several kings of Israel during this period, most of them reigning rather briefly.

2. *When the LORD began to speak.* The literal sense is “in the beginning of the LORD’s speaking”—the grammatical structure is the same as “When God began to create” at the beginning of Genesis, although a different word for “beginning” is used there.

take you a wife of whoring. Some commentators think she may have been a cult-prostitute rather than a whore for profit, but this notion may well be merely an effort to mitigate the shocking character of what Hosea is commanded to do.

for the land has surely whored. While the Hebrew verb looks like a future, verb tenses are fluid in biblical poetry, and God is surely objecting to trespasses already committed.

4. *Call his name Jezreel.* Many set out this whole passage as poetry, but it does not really scan.

I will make a reckoning for the blood of Jezreel against the house of Jehu. Jehu, usurping the throne, killed Jezebel and carried out a mass execution of those loyal to her (2 Kings 9–10). The Book of Kings represents these bloody acts as authorized by God, but Hosea appears to have had a very different view of them.

5. *I will break the bow of Israel in the Valley of Jezreel.* This could be a specific reference to the Assyrian army that repeatedly threatened Israel in this period.

6. *Lo-Ruhamah.* This inauspicious name means "Not Shown Mercy." One hopes that this whole story of marrying a whore and blighting two of the three offspring with dire names was a Prophetic fiction, not something Hosea actually did, but there is no way of knowing.

nor will I forgive them in any way. The Hebrew does not show a negative, but this translation assumes that "no" is carried over from the first clause as a double-duty term.

7. *But to the house of Judah I will show mercy.* It is possible that Hosea, as a prophet of the northern kingdom, draws this contrast to make a didactic point to his audience, even though some scholars infer that this is an insertion by a Judahite editor.

9. *and I will not be yours.* This brief concluding clause is perfectly coherent as it stands in the Masoretic Text, but some interpreters are inclined to infer that a word was dropped: "I will be *your God.*"

CHAPTER 2

[1]And the number of the Israelites shall be like the
sand of the sea that cannot be measured and cannot be
counted, and it shall happen, instead of its being said
of them, “You Are Not My People,” it shall be said of
them, “Children of the Living God.” [2]And the people
of Judah and the people of Israel shall gather together
and set over them a single chief, and they shall go up
from the lands, for great is the day of Jezreel.

[3]Say to your brothers, “My People,”
and to your sisters, “She Is Shown
Mercy.”

[4]Bring a case against your mother,
bring a case,
for she is not My wife,
and I am not her husband.
Let her take off her whoring from
her face

and her adultery from between her
breasts,
[5]lest I strip her naked
and set her out as the day she was
born.
And I will turn her into a desert
and make her like parched land
and let her die of thirst.
[6]And to her children I will show no
mercy,
for they are the children of
whoring.
[7]For their mother played the whore,
she who conceived them acted
shamefully.
For she said, “Let me go
after my lovers
who give me my bread and water,
my wool and my flax,
my oil and my unguents.”
[8]Therefore I am about to hedge in
your way with thorns
and raise a wall for her,
and she shall not find her paths.
[9]And she shall run after her lovers
and shall not catch them,

and she shall seek them and not
find them.
And she shall say, “Let me
go back to my first husband,
for it was then better for me
than now.”
10 And she did not know
that it was I who gave her
the new grain and the wine and
the oil,
and silver I showered upon her
and gold that they fashioned for
Baal.
11 Therefore will I turn back and take
away
My new grain in its time
and My wine in its season
and reclaim My wool and My flax
that would cover her nakedness.
12 And now, I will lay bare her shame
before the eyes of her lovers,
and no man shall save her.
13 And I will put an end to her
rejoicing,
to her festivals, her new moons,
and her sabbaths

and all her appointed times.
[14]And I will wither her vines and her
fig trees
of which she said, “They are a
whore’s pay for me
that my lovers gave to me.”
And I will turn them into scrubland,
and the beasts of the field shall
devour them.
[15]And I will make a reckoning
against her for the days of the
Baalim
to whom she burned incense,
and she put on her nose-ring and her
jewelry
and went after her lovers,
but Me she forgot, said the
LORD.

[16]Therefore, I am about to beguile
her
and will lead her to the wilderness
and speak to her very heart.
[17]And I will give her from there her
vineyards

and the Valley of Achor an
opening to hope,
and she shall sing out there as in the
days of her youth,
as on the day she came up from
the land of Egypt.
18 And it shall be, on that day, said
the LORD,
she shall call Me “my Husband”
and no longer call Me “my
Baal.”
19 And I will take away the names of
the Baalim from your mouth,
and they shall no more be recalled
by their name.
20 And I will seal a pact with them on
that day,
with the beasts of the field and
with the fowl of the heavens
and the creeping things of the
earth.
And bow and sword and battle
will I break from the earth,
and I will make them lie down
secure.

[21]And I will betroth you to Me
forever,
I will betroth you in right and in
justice
and in kindness and in mercy.
[22]And I will betroth you in
faithfulness,
and you shall know that I am the
LORD.
[23]And it shall be on that day,
I will answer, said the LORD,
I will answer for the heavens,
and they shall answer for the
earth.
[24]And the earth shall answer for the
new grain
and for the wine and for the oil,
and they shall answer for
Jezreel.
[25]And I will sow her for Me in the
land
and show mercy to Lo-Ruhamah,
and I will say to Lo-Ami, “You are
My people,”
and he shall say, “You are my
God.”

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And the number of the Israelites shall be like the sand of the sea that cannot be measured.* These words manifestly introduce a new prophecy, one of national restoration, after the doomsaying of the first chapter. They pointedly invoke the language of God's grand promise to Abraham in Genesis.

2. *And the people of Judah and the people of Israel shall gather together.* Some scholars detect here the hand of the Judahite editor who envisages the reunification of the southern and the northern kingdoms (presumably, after the northern kingdom was destroyed), though it is certainly possible that Hosea could have imagined a reunited nation as part of his utopian vision of the future.

they shall go up from the lands. The received text shows "land," but "to go up from the land" is a phrase that would imply leaving the country, as in Exodus 1:10. The New Jewish Publication Society's rendering, "rise up from the ground" is philologically possible but strained. This translation assumes the original text had a plural, "lands," implying return from the lands of exile.

4. *Bring a case against your mother.* The language of a court case is used because she has committed adultery and so deserves to be hauled before a judge.

Let her take off her whoring from her face. This expression is a metonymy: she has put kohl around her eyes, reddened her lips, and set a ring in her nose, to ply her whore's trade.

and her adultery from between her breasts. This is a parallel metonymy: she has put a sachet of fragrance between her breasts (compare the Song of Songs 1:13) to make herself more alluring to her lovers.

5. *And I will turn her into a desert.* As often happens in biblical poetry, the prophet switches from one set of images—Israel as a promiscuous female body—to another—the barren desert as a representation of national ruin.

7. *their mother . . . / she who conceived them.* While these two terms are conventional in poetic parallelism, the second one, intimating the physical act in which conception takes place, underscores the wife's sexual betrayal of her husband.

my bread and water, / my wool and my flax, / my oil and my unguents. Zeev Wisman aptly notes that there is a progression here from the basic elements of food and drink to the materials needed to clothe the body to the more luxurious substances used to gratify the body and make it attractive. The last word here, rendered by some as "drink," means "balm" in Proverbs 3:8 and "unguents" seems right for this context.

8. *your way . . . / for her.* The switch in grammatical person is common in biblical usage.

9. *And she shall run after her lovers / and shall not catch them.* This line should be taken together with the preceding one: her way is blocked and bristles with thorns, and she cannot see where she should go; desperately running after her lovers, she finds herself lost and trapped. All this leads her to the realization expressed in the next line that she was better off with her husband.

10. *it was I who gave her.* The word for "I," *ʾanokhi,* is placed before the verb for emphasis: she had thought that her lovers provided all her needs (verse 7), but it was actually God.

silver I showered upon her. The literal sense of the verb is "multiplied" or "made abundant."

that they fashioned for Baal. God had bestowed national prosperity on Israel, including precious silver and gold, but these were then used by the Israelites to fashion idols for Baal.

12. *her shame.* This is an equivalent of "her nakedness" at the end of the preceding line.

13. *festivals . . . new moons . . . sabbaths.* All these nouns are singular in the Hebrew but with a collective sense.

15. *the days of the Baalim.* The probable reference is to festival days when the Baalim were worshipped.

16. *Therefore.* It should be noted that this word (*lakhen*) is used by Hosea as a transitional term rather than one of causation to mark the beginning of a new prophecy.

beguile. Although this Hebrew verb elsewhere means "to entice" or "to seduce," here it clearly has a positive sense, suggesting tenderness.

17. *the Valley of Achor an opening to hope.* The Hebrew *ʿakhor* suggests "trouble," but in the bright future this very place with its dark associations will become the entranceway to hope.

sing out. The Hebrew verb *ʿanah* also often means "to answer," but a clearly attested sense is "to speak out" or "to sing out." That is the compelling sense here. The third verset, which invokes the moment of exodus from Egypt, probably means to make us recall the Song of the Sea that Moses and Miriam sing to celebrate God's triumph over Egypt.

18. *she shall call Me "my Husband" / and no longer call Me "my Baal."* This line turns on an untranslatable pun: *baʿal* is one of two Hebrew words for "husband," but it is also the name of the principal Canaanite deity; the Hebrew synonym, *ʾish,* is the word translated here as "husband."

19. *the names of the Baalim.* What is referred to is invoking the name of the deity in worship or in vows. Plurals are used because Baalim (*im* is the masculine plural suffix) can refer not to Baal alone but to a plurality of Canaanite deities.

20. *a pact . . . / with the beasts of the field.* A kind of edenic harmony will be imposed on nature, so that even ravening beasts and birds of prey will be pacific. Peace in nature will be coordinated with peace among men, as the next line spells out.

21. *I will betroth you to Me forever.* The prophet now reverts to the marriage metaphor, forseeing that the wretchedness of adultery will be replaced by a faithful union. The triple repetition of "I will betroth you" sounds very much like a performative speech-act, God pronouncing the wedding vows.

23. *I will answer for.* "Answer for" is probably the best English equivalent here for the Hebrew verb that means "to answer" (in each instance followed by a direct object in the Hebrew). The idea is that all the constituents of

nature will be harmoniously joined in mutual responsibility, giving each to each.

25. *I will sow her.* This declaration—a single Hebrew word—immediately follows "Jezreel" at the end of the previous line: *yizrʿeʾel / uzerʿatiha* and so is clearly a play on the etymology of the name, which means "God will sow." The very valley that in the first chapter was associated with crimes because of all the blood that was shed there is now to live up to its name by becoming a place of fecund growth.

You are my God. The Hebrew has only "my God," but the verb "to be," according to standard usage, is implied, and "my God" by itself would sound like an exclamation rather than an affirmation.

CHAPTER 3

[1]And the LORD said to me, “Again, go love a woman beloved by a companion yet an adulteress, like the love of God for the Israelites when they turn to other gods and to lovers of cups of the grape.” And I loved a lusting woman. [2]And I hired her for myself with fifteen weights of silver and a *homer* of barley and a *letekh* of barley. [3]And I said to her, “Many days you shall dwell with me. You shall not play the whore and you shall be no man’s, and I, too, shall not come to bed with you. [4]For many days shall the Israelites dwell without king and without commander and without sacrifice and without sacred pillar and without ephod and without teraphim. [5]Afterward, the Israelites shall turn back and seek the LORD their God and David their king, and they shall revere the LORD and His bounty in the latter days.”

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *said to me, "Again.* It should be noted that the Masoretic cantillation markings attach "again" to the words introducing God's speech, "And the LORD said to me again," and that reading is possible.

a companion. This probably means her husband, but it could conceivably indicate a devoted lover.

And I loved a lusting woman. The Hebrew of the received text looks quite suspect. The literal sense of the last two words is "raisin cakes" (though others think that the meaning is "grape cups"). The Revised English Bible tries to rescue some sense from this by translating "the cakes of the raisin offered to idols." The present translation adopts the emendation proposed by Tur-Sinai: instead of the Masoretic *ohavey ʾashishey ʿanavim*, he reads *waʾohav ʾeshet ʿagavim*.

2. *a* homer *of barley and a* letekh *of barley.* A *letekh* is half a *ḥomer,* so the repetition appears to be a way of saying, "a *homer* and a half of barley."

3. *shall not come to bed.* A verb of sexual intimacy is implied in the elliptical Hebrew.

4. *the Israelites dwell without king and without commander.* This is a prophecy of the loss of national sovereignty and of exile.

without ephod and without teraphim. Both are divinatory devices.

5. *David their king.* Many scholars conclude that the reference to David was inserted by the Judahite editor, although it is perhaps possible that Hosea as a prophet of the northern kingdom envisaged a utopian future in which the two kingdoms would reunite under the divinely elected Davidic dynasty.

CHAPTER 4

[1]Hear the word of the LORD, O
Israelites,
for the LORD has a brief
against the dwellers of the land.
For there is no truth and there is no
trust
and there is no knowledge of the
LORD in the land.
[2]Falsely swear and murder
and steal and commit adultery.
They burst bonds—and blood
spills upon blood.
[3]Therefore the land does languish,
and all those dwelling within it are
bleak.
With the beasts of the field and the
fowl of the heavens
and with the fish of the sea, too—
they shall perish.
[4]But let no man inveigh

and let no man rebuke
when your people inveighs
against priest.
[5]And you stumbled by day,
and the prophet, too, stumbled by
night,
and I will destroy your people.
[6]My people is destroyed without
knowledge,
for you—you rejected knowledge,
and I rejected you from being priest
to Me.
And you forgot your God's
teaching—
I will forget your sons on My
part.
[7]As they increased, they offended
against Me,
I will exchange their honor for
disgrace.
[8]My people's offense offerings they
eat,
and they long for its crimes.
[9]And it shall be, people and priest
alike,

I will make a reckoning with them
for their ways,
and for their acts I will pay
them back.
10 And they shall eat yet not be sated,
play the whore yet not burst
bonds.
For they have forsaken the LORD
11 to keep on whoring and drinking
and new wine that takes away
the mind.
12 My people asks oracles of a tree,
and his rod tells him what to do.
For a spirit of whoring made them
stray,
and they played the whore against
their God.
13 On the mountaintops they
sacrificed,
on the hills they offered incense,
beneath the oak and the poplar,
and the terebinth of goodly shade.
Therefore their daughters go
whoring,
and their daughters-in-law are
adulterous.

[14]I will make no reckoning with your
daughters for whoring
and with your daughters-in-law
who are adulterous.
For they themselves go off with the
whores
and with the cult-harlots they
sacrifice,
and a people undiscerning
comes to grief.
[15]If you go whoring, Israel,
let Judah not be held guilty
And do not come to Gilgal
nor go up to Beth-Aven,
and do not swear, “As the
LORD lives.”
[16]For like a wayward cow
Israel was wayward.
Now shall the LORD herd him
like a sheep in an open field?
[17]Ephraim is stuck fast to idols.
Let him be!
[18]When their swilling is over,
they go on to whore.
They love the disgrace of their
defenders.

[19]The wind bundles them in its
wings,
and their altars are shamed.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *trust.* The Hebrew term *ḥesed* is usually represented in this translation as "kindness," but it also often implies loyalty in a covenant or relationship, and that is clearly the salient meaning here.

2. *They burst bonds.* The Hebrew says merely "burst" (which could also mean "break through" or "spread out"), but what the verb appears to imply here is reprobate behavior, and thus "bonds" has been added for clarification.
blood spills upon blood. Literally, "blood touches blood."

4. *when your people inveighs against priest.* The Hebrew of this clause is obscure and looks as though it has been scrambled in scribal transmission. It reads literally: "and your people is like the quarrels [or inveighings] of a priest." The general idea of the whole line would seem to be: offer no criticism when your people inveighs against the priests, for they deserve it.

5. *you.* The probable reference is to the priest, matched by the mention of the prophet in the next verset. Both have betrayed their calling of providing moral instruction to the people.

7. *As they increased.* Others take this to mean "most of them."

8. *My people's offense offerings they eat, / and they long for its crimes.* The priests had a substantial portion of the sacrificial animal set aside for their own consumption. Here they are represented as wanting the people to transgress more and more because that would bring them more offense offerings to eat.

10. *play the whore yet not burst bonds.* The second verb is the same verb that is used in verse 2. In the understanding behind this translation, the meaning would be: they were promiscuous without ever attaining the immoral freedom of total libertinage, just as they ate (perhaps even stuffed themselves) without being sated. Others, looking toward the sense of "spread out" that the verb sometimes has, think the reference is to lack of progeny from their promiscuous couplings.

12. *his rod tells him what to do.* This would be a divining rod. The words "what to do" are added in the translation to make clear that this is an activity of seeking guidance parallel to the asking of an oracle in the first verset.

against their God. The literal sense of the Hebrew preposition is "from under," the word "under" suggesting "authority."

13. On the mountaintops they sacrificed, / on the hills. These terms, and the small catalogue of trees that follows, suggest worship of nature gods, often accompanied by fertility rites—hence the invocation of the whoring daughters in the next line.

14. *I will make no reckoning with your daughters.* They are not accountable because they have been led astray by their fathers; the "they themselves" who go off whoring are the fathers.

15. *let Judah not be held guilty.* Again, this is often seen as an intervention of the Judahite editor, though the inference is not inevitable.

do not come to Gilgal. Gilgal was a well-known cultic site in the north, near the Jordan.

nor go up to Beth-Aven. Beth-Aven, which means "house of sin," is probably not the actual place-name but a polemic substitution for Bethel, one of the two principal cultic sites of the northern kingdom.

16. *Now shall the LORD herd him / like a sheep in an open field?* If Israel behaves like a cow that swerves from the way that she should go (occasionally they were used as draft animals), how could one expect God to allow it the freedom of a sheep pacifically grazing in an open field?

17. *Let him be.* This is a little obscure but it probably means that since Ephraim has become so addicted to idolatry, there is no point in trying to

rebuke or dissuade him—let him wallow in his vile cult.

18. *When their swilling is over.* The Hebrew implies that they have recovered from their drunken stupor—now they are ready for sex with a whore.

They love the disgrace of their defenders. This clause is obscure and may have suffered textual damage. First, the two words represented as "they love," *ʾahavu heivu,* look strange (they might mean "they love, give"), and the second word may be a dittography triggered by the last two syllables of the preceding word. It is also not clear who the defenders are, and the Hebrew says "her defenders." The conclusion of many traditional Hebrew commentators that the reference is to the leaders of the people is as good a guess as any.

19. *The wind bundles them in its wings.* The wind will carry off the profligate drunkards and fornicators. This is an image similar to the one in Psalm 1 where the wicked are borne off like chaff, but the notion here of being bundled in the wings of the wind evokes the helpless passivity of the practitioners of vice carried away to their destruction.

CHAPTER 5

[1]Hear this, you priests,
and listen, house of Israel,
and the house of the king, bend your ear,
for against you is the judgment.
For a trap you have been to Mizpah,
and an outspread net against Tabor,
[2]and have dug a deep pit at Shittim,
but I am chastisement for them all.
[3]I know Ephraim,
and Israel is not hidden from Me.
For now you have whored, Ephraim,
Israel is defiled.
[4]Their acts do not let them
turn back to their God.
For the spirit of whoring is within them,
and the LORD they do not know.

[5]And Israel's pride bore witness
against him,
and Israel and Ephraim stumble in
their crime.
Judah, too, has stumbled with
them.
[6]With their sheep and their cattle
they go
to seek out the LORD.
But they do not find Him.
He slipped away from them.
[7]The LORD they betrayed,
for alien sons they bore.
Now the new moon shall consume
them,
together with their fields.
[8]Sound the ram's horn at Gibeah,
the trumpet at Ramah.
Shout out at Beth-Aven:
"After you, Benjamin!"
[9]Ephraim shall be a desolation
on the day of stern rebuke.
Among the tribes of Israel
I have faithfully made it known.
[10]The nobles of Judah have become
like those who move boundaries.

Upon them I will pour
My wrath like water.
[11]Exploited is Ephraim,
and crushed in justice,
For he undertook to go
after an empty thing.
[12]And I am like the moth to Ephraim
and like rot to the house of Judah.
[13]When Ephraim saw his sickness
and Judah his running sores,
Ephraim went off to Assyria
and sent out to King Jareb.
But he cannot cure you
and will not give you healing.
[14]For I am like a lion to Ephraim
and like the king of beasts to the
house of Judah.
I, I will maul the prey and go off,
bear it away and no one will save
it.
[15]I will go, return to My place,
until they sense their guilt and
seek Me,
when in straits they shall search
for Me.

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *for against you is the judgment.* Although others understand the polyvalent Hebrew term *mishpat* differently, the most likely meaning is: You are about to be sentenced, or brought to justice, for your crimes.

2. *Shittim.* The Masoretic Text shows an obscure word, *seitim,* but most scholars conclude this is a mistake for the well-attested place-name Shittim, which would make it, plausibly, the third in a series of place-names here.

5. *Israel's pride bore witness against him.* Literally, "bore witness in his face." While the verb here can also mean "to answer" or "to call out," what is clearly involved is testimony of a crime, continuing the judicial image of verse 1.

6. *With their sheep and their cattle.* These are the sacrificial animals they bring with them when they go to seek the LORD.

7. *for alien sons they bore.* This could mean either sons estranged from God because they have been raised in alien ways or sons begotten with foreign women.

Now the new moon shall consume them. This clause is mysterious. Many emendations have been proposed for "new moon," *ḥodesh,* but none is very convincing. Perhaps the reference is to the new moon celebrations, tainted with pagan practices that will turn into catastrophes when God carries out judgment against these people.

8. *After you, Benjamin.* Since the sounding of the ram's horn and trumpet is a marshaling of troops for battle, this may indicate a rallying of the tribes, north and south, to face the invader.

10. *like those who move boundaries.* Moving stone boundary markers in order to lay claim to land that belongs to someone else is strictly forbidden (see Deuteronomy 27:17). The nobles of Judah are accused of expropriating land, though not necessarily by shifting boundary markers. Why Judah is introduced here is not entirely clear.

11. *after an empty thing.* As elsewhere, the referent is idolatry.

13. *King Jareb.* This term is obscure. It might be a proper name, as tentatively assumed in this translation, or it might be a peculiar formation from the verbal stem that means “to quarrel” or “to contest.” The context, however, suggests turning to a person in power for help.

15. *I will go, return to My place.* This is an interesting biblical intimation of the idea of *deus absconditus.* God, in His anger against Israel, withdraws from them to His celestial abode, where He will await the moment they recognize their guilt and seek Him out before He will return to Israel.

CHAPTER 6

[1]Come let us return to the LORD,
for He mauled but He will heal us,
He struck but He will bind up.
[2]He will revive us after two days,
on the third day raise us up,
that we may live in His
presence,
[3]and that we may know, pursue
knowing the LORD.
Like daybreak His emergence is
sure,
and He will come to us like the rain,
like the latter rain He will shower
the earth.
[4]What shall I do for you Ephraim,
What shall I do for you, Judah,
When your trust is like a morning
cloud,
like early dew that melts away?

[5]Therefore have I hacked among
your prophets,
slain them with the utterances of
My mouth,
and your sentence will come
out like light.
[6]For trust did I want and not sacrifice
and knowledge of God more than
burnt offerings.
[7]But they like humankind breached
the covenant,
there they betrayed Me.
[8]Gilead is a town of criminals,
covered with tracks of blood.
[9]And like gangs who lie in wait for a
man
is the band of the priests.
They murder on the road to
Shechem.
Why, debauchery they perform!
[10]In the house of Israel I have seen a
horror.
There the whoring is Ephraim's,
Israel is defiled.
[11]Judah, too, He sets a harvest for
you.

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Come let us return to the* LORD. These words, until the end of verse 3, are the speech of the Israelites, imagining that their present suffering will be of brief duration and that God will heal their wounds and revive them. God's angry rejoinder begins in verse 4.

3. *like the latter rain He will shower the earth.* As often happens in the Bible, there is a pun hiding close to the surface. God's instruction to humankind (the word translated as "shower" also means "instruct") is life-giving, like the rain. But the verb for "teach" or "instruct," *yoreh,* is also a homonym of the noun that means "former rain," often paired with *malqosh,* "latter rain." One should also note that in these two lines God is compared first to the sun, then to the rain—both giving life to earth.

4. *like a morning cloud, / like early dew.* These two similes pick up the invocation of vivifying rain in the speech of the Israelites (verse 3), but with the meaning turned entirely around: the moisture-bearing clouds and dew quickly dissipate, like the purported trust of the Israelites.

5. *your prophets.* Given the two verbs of destruction, these would have to be false prophets.

like light. The Masoretic Text lacks the particle that means "like," but this single letter, *kaf,* has probably been dropped through haplography because the immediately preceding Hebrew word ends in a *kaf.*

7. *like humankind.* This sounds a bit odd, but it may express the idea that humankind has a proclivity for treachery, as David Kimchi proposed. Others emend *keʾadam* to *beʾadam,* "in Adam" (or Admah), construing the word as a place-name. This would make better sense of "there" in the second verset.

9. *They murder on the road to Shechem.* This is a bitter irony because Shechem was supposed to be one of the towns of refuge where an unintentional manslaughterer could flee.

11. *Judah, too, He sets a harvest for you.* This whole clause is puzzling. One reading proposed by a number of interpreters is that God has prepared a harvest of retribution for offending Judah. In any case, this looks like an orphaned verset because there is no matching second verset. The three Hebrew words that follow in the canonical chapter division in all likelihood belong to the beginning of the next chapter, and that is how they are treated in this translation.

CHAPTER 7

6:11b When I would restore the
fortunes of My people,
1 and I would heal Israel,
Ephraim's crime is laid bare
and the evils of Samaria,
for they have acted in lies;
the thief comes within
and the gang raids outside.
2 And let them not say in their heart
that I have recalled all their evil.
Now their deeds have turned them
around—
before My face they are.
3 In their evil they gladden the king,
and with their deceits, the nobles.
4 All of them are adulterers,
like a burning oven.
The baker ceases from stirring,
from kneading the dough till it
rises.

[5]On the day of our king
the nobles made him sick with
poisoned wine.
He had set his hand with the
scoffers.
[6]For they drew near in their ambush,
their hearts like an oven.
All night their leader sleeps,
in the morning he burns like a
tongue of flame.
[7]They all grow hot like an oven
and devour their judges
All of their kings have fallen,
none among them calls to Me.
[8]Ephraim among the nations—
it is he who mingles.
Ephraim is like a loaf
not turned over.
[9]Strangers consumed his strength,
but he did not know.
His hair turned suddenly gray,
but he did not know.
[10]And Israel's pride bore witness
against it,
yet for all that they did not seek
him.

[11]And Ephraim became like a
foolish senseless dove.
To Egypt they called,
to Assyria went.
[12]Where they go
I will spread My net upon them.
Like the fowl of the heavens I will
bring them down.
I will bind them as their kinfolk
listen.
[13]Woe to them for they have
wandered from Me.
Disaster for them, as they rebelled
against Me!
Shall I redeem them
when they have spoken against Me
lies?
[14]And they did not cry out to Me
from their heart,
but they wailed upon their couch,
over grain and new wine they gashed
themselves,
they swerved away from Me.
[15]I braced, I strengthened their arm,
but against Me they plotted evil.
[16]They go back to what is worthless,

they are like a faulty bow.
Their nobles shall fall by the sword
because of their angry tongue,
which is their mockery in the
land of Egypt.

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

6:11b. *When I would restore the fortunes of My people.* God would like to show favor to His people, but Israel continues in its waywardness.

2. *I have recalled all their evil.* The evident sense is: let them not think I have done registering all their evil, for there is still more.

Now their deeds have turned them around. The image is of miscreants who have turned their backs on God or have hidden from Him. Now, their evil deeds turn them around and they are exposed to God's head-on gaze.

3. *In their evil they gladden the king.* This is best understood as pillorying the king for his complicity with them, delighting in their evil acts.

4. *like a burning oven.* The simile of the burning oven, which will be elaborated, is chosen because of the association of heat with sexual desire—in Hebrew, as in other languages, to be in heat is one of the idioms for sexual readiness.

The baker ceases from stirring. Because the oven of desire is stoked, the baker is presumed to have finished his task of preparing the dough and now puts it in the heated oven. But the stirring, the kneading, and the fermenting of the dough do not appear to have a further figurative referent.

5. *the day of our king.* This term has no equivalent elsewhere but probably designates the king's birthday or a similar celebration for the monarch.

the nobles made him sick with poisoned wine. The court atmosphere roils with vicious conspiracies, the king no better than his murderous nobles. All this may well reflect the recent history of the northern kingdom, which was marked with assassinations and coups.

He had set his hand with the scoffers. Although the meaning is not altogether clear, this probably indicates that the king had been involved with dubious characters, thus providing a motive for his assassination.

6. *their hearts like an oven.* Now the referent of the oven simile shifts from adulterers to conspirators, hot to carry out their plot against the king.

7. *All of their kings have fallen.* The plural here does seem to evoke the bloody court history of the northern kingdom.

8. *Ephraim among the nations— / it is he who mingles.* This is in all likelihood a critique of the repeated quest for foreign alliances on the part of the northern kingdom.

like a loaf / not turned over. The simile now dispenses with the oven and imagines a round flat loaf of bread baked on coals (as present-day Bedouins still bake their *pittah*), which, not having been turned over, is burned on the bottom and unbaked on the top.

11. *like a / foolish senseless dove.* It is a dove that lacks the homing instinct a dove (or pigeon—the Hebrew term covers both) should have. Thus Ephraim seeks out Egypt and Assyria.

12. *My net.* Nets were often used to trap fowl. The metaphor of fowling picks up the foolish dove in verse 11.

I will bind them. The translation reads, with many scholars, *ʾeʾsurem* for the Masoretic *ayesirem,* "I will afflict them," which doesn't make much sense in context and shows grammatically anomalous vowel-points in the received text.

as their kinfolk listen. The Hebrew is obscure and the translation conjectural.

14. *they gashed themselves.* The Masoretic Text has *yitgoraru,* meaning uncertain. This translation reads, with the Septuagint, *yitgodadu,* the shape of the Hebrew letters for *r* and *d* being quite similar. Gashing oneself was a form

of imprecating the gods, as in the story of the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18.

15. *I braced.* The received text says "I afflicted," *yisarti,* but this translation, like that of the New Jewish Publication Society, reads instead *yisadti,* which can mean "to make firm."

16. *to what is worthless.* The Hebrew has two unintelligible monosyllabic words, *lo*ʾ *ʿal* (not above?). The translation reads with the Septuagint and the Syriac *labliyaʿal.*

which is their mockery in the land of Egypt. There is debate over the meaning of this last cryptic clause, but the sense could be that the Egyptians regard the rash angry speech of the Israelite nobles as a butt of mockery. Some think the reference is to an attempt to seek an alliance with Egypt that becomes a target of ridicule.

CHAPTER 8

[1]A ram's horn to your lips!
—he is like an eagle against the
LORD's house.
For they have breached My covenant
and rebelled against My teaching.
[2]To Me they cry out—
"We know you, O God of Israel!"
[3]Israel rejects what is good—
an enemy shall pursue him.
[4]They set up kings but not through
Me,
installed nobles but without My
knowledge.
From their silver and their gold
they made themselves idols,
that they might be cut off.
[5]Your calf rejects you, Samaria,
My wrath against them flares.
How long will they fail to be
clean?

[6]And it—a craftsman made it,
and it is not a god.
For shards it shall become,
the calf of Samaria.
[7]For they sow the wind
and harvest a storm.
Standing grain that has no sprouts,
it will not make flour.
If perhaps it should make some,
strangers shall swallow it up.
[8]Israel has been swallowed,
now they become among the
nations
like a vessel no one wants.
[9]For they have gone up to Assyria,
a wild ass on its own is Ephraim,
they have made courtship's
plea.
[10]Though they give gifts among the
nations,
now will I gather them up,
and they will soon tremble
from the burden of kings and
nobles.
[11]For Ephraim made many altars
an offense they were for him,

altars to offend.
[12]I wrote for him My many teachings
—
like something strange they were
viewed.
[13]The sacrifices I gave they
slaughtered,
it was flesh, and they ate.
The LORD did not accept them
favorably.
Now will their crime be recalled,
and a reckoning made for their
offense.
They shall go back to Egypt.
[14]And Israel forgot his Maker
and he built palaces.
And Judah made many fortified
towns,
but I set fire to his towns,
and it consumed his citadels.

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *to your lips.* Literally, “to your palate.”

he is like an eagle against the LORD's house. The clause is obscure. The probable referent is an invader of the kingdom of Israel—hence the sounding of the ram's horn as an alarm. In that case, "the LORD's house" would have to be the northern kingdom and not, as it usually means, the Temple.

2. *We know you, O God of Israel.* The Hebrew word order is scrambled. This declaration, made by the people, is clearly a deluded one.

4. *that they might be cut off.* Their idolatrous ways will lead to their destruction.

5. *Your calf.* This is the icon used for worship in the northern kingdom. It corresponds to the cherubim in the southern kingdom. It was viewed by the Judahite writers as an idol.

9. *a wild ass.* The wild ass figures in biblical poetry as a creature that cannot be tamed, living solitary in the wilderness. Israel's seeking an accommodation with Assyria (represented here as a courtship) manifests its proclivity to go it alone, ignoring both prudent counsel and God's instruction.

10. *give gifts.* The Hebrew says only "give," and "gifts" is supplied as a guess. These could be courtship gifts.

now will I gather them up. Though this phrase is often used for gathering exiles to return to Zion, here it would appear to mean "gather up for destruction."

13. *it was flesh, and they ate.* They viewed the sacrifices not as a means of expressing devotion to God but merely as a source of meat meals.

accept them favorably. The object of this verb is the sacrifices.

They shall go back to Egypt. This should probably be understood figuratively: they shall return to a condition of slavery. The likely candidate for enslavers would be the Assyrians.

CHAPTER 9

[1]Do not rejoice, O Israel,
no exulting like the peoples.
For you went whoring from your God,
you loved a whore's pay
on every new grain threshing floor.
[2]Threshing floor and winepress know them not,
and new wine shall deny them.
[3]They shall not dwell in the land of the LORD,
and Ephraim shall go back to Egypt
and in Assyria eat unclean things.
[4]They shall pour no wine libation to the LORD,
and their sacrifices shall not please Him.

Like mourners' bread it shall be to
them,
all who eat it become unclean.
For their food is for their gullet,
it shall not enter the house of the
LORD.
[5]What will you do for the appointed
day,
for the day of the LORD's
festival?
[6]For, look, they go off from
destruction.
Egypt gathers them in,
Memphis buries them.
The treasure house for their silver
the thistle shall inherit,
the thorn is in their tents.
[7]The days of reckoning have arrived,
the days of retribution have
arrived.
Israel shall know it.
The prophet is witless,
the man of spirit crazed
by all your crimes,
all your hate.
[8]The lookout of Ephraim,

the prophet with my God—
a snare is laid in all his ways,
hate in the house of his God.
9They have acted most ruinously
as in the days of Gibeah.
He shall recall their crime,
make a reckoning for their
offense.
10Like grapes in the wilderness
I found Israel.
Like the first fruit on the fig tree
when it appears
I saw your fathers
Yet they came to Baal Peor
and devoted themselves to a
shameful god
and became vile things like
what they loved.
11Ephraim—their glory shall fly off
like a bird,
from birth and from the womb
and from conception.
12For should they raise their sons,
I would bereave them of
humankind,
for woe to them indeed

when I swerve away from them.
[13]Ephraim as I saw him—
a palm frond planted in a
meadow.
But Ephraim brings out his
sons to the slayer.
[14]Give them, LORD,
what should you give?
Give them a miscarrying womb
and shriveled breasts.
[15]All their evil at Gilgal,
for there did I hate them.
For the evil of their deeds
I will banish them from My
house.
I will no longer love them.
All their nobles are knaves.
[16]Ephraim is stricken,
their root is dry,
they cannot make fruit.
Even when they give birth,
I will put to death the precious
ones of their womb.
[17]My God shall reject them,
for they did not heed Him,

and they shall be wanderers
among the nations.

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *no exulting.* The received text reads *'el-gil*, "to exulting," emended here to *'al-gil*, "no exulting."

on every new grain threshing floor. These would be sites where pagan rites took place.

2. *Threshing floor and winepress know them not.* The Masoretic Text shows *lo' yir'em,* "did not shepherd them," but this translation reads, with the Septuagint, *lo' yeda'em,* "knew them not." The idea is measure-for-measure justice: the Israelites worshipped alien gods in these places; now threshing floor and winepress will give them no yield.

3. *Ephraim shall go back to Egypt.* See the third comment on 8:13.

4. *all who eat it become unclean.* Mourners' food would be ritually unclean because it has been in contact with the dead.

For their food is for their gullet. In bringing animals to sacrifice, their chief interest is in consuming the meat of the part of the animal that is not devoted to the offering.

5. *the appointed day.* The Hebrew term is a synonym for "festival."

6. *they go off from destruction.* This is one of many obscure phrases in this chapter. Given the reference to Egypt and to the Egyptian city of Memphis in the next two versets, it probably means that they flee the devastation of their own land (by the Assyrians) to take refuge in Egypt, where they die.

7. *all your hate.* The hatred is directed against the prophet, driving him to distraction.

8. *The lookout.* Elsewhere in the Prophets, this noun is a synonym for "prophet," and that would seem to be the case here.

9. *as in the days of Gibeah.* At Gibeah (Judges 19), the local Benjaminites gang-raped a woman to death, fulfilling what Sodom only sought to do, as the elaborate allusions to the Sodom story there remind us. Gibeah thus becomes the paradigm of a wholly depraved society.

10. *Like grapes in the wilderness / I found Israel.* The discovery of grapes in the largely barren wilderness is gratifying. Israel at the beginning of its wilderness wanderings could delight God in this way.

when it appears. More literally, "at its first."

Yet they came to Baal Peor. The cherished Israelites quickly abandoned their God to join in a pagan orgy at Baal Peor (see Numbers 25:1–5.)

a shameful god. The Hebrew *boshet* means "shame" and is regularly used as a polemic substitution for "Baal," especially in theophoric suffixes.

like what they loved. The Hebrew is cryptic but may refer to the idols.

11. *from birth and from the womb and from conception.* This series goes back in time from birth to the womb from which the infant is born to conception nine months earlier. The curse of infertility and child mortality is spelled out in the next verse.

13. *a palm frond.* The Hebrew *tsor* seems to refer to "Tyre," the Phoenician city, but both a talmudic source and many modern scholars link it to a term that means "palm frond," which makes far better sense as something planted in a meadow. Ephraim was seen by God as a luxuriant plant, but his own actions led to the killing of his sons (or "children") by invaders.

14. *Give them a miscarrying womb / and shriveled breasts.* This picks up the curse of dying infants from verses 11–12. Even if the mother doesn't miscarry, her shriveled breasts will spell doom for the infant.

15. *All their evil at Gilgal.* The phrase lacks both preposition and verb. Gilgal was where the people demanded of Samuel that he put a king over them (1 Samuel 12). Unless Hosea has some different association with Gilgal in mind, he seems to be saying that the establishment of the monarchy was in itself a rejection of God's kingship.

All their nobles are knaves. This imitates the Hebrew wordplay, *sareyhem sorerim.*

16. *I will put to death the precious ones of their womb.* Once again, the reiterated grim theme of infant mortality is struck.

17. *My God shall reject them.* Until this point, God has been speaking in the first-person singular. It is possible that this switch to the third person, the prophet now speaking about God, is meant to mark the end of the prophecy. Some critics, basing themselves on the Septuagint, prefer to read "their God."

CHAPTER 10

[1]A blighted vine is Israel,
his fruit is just the same.
When his fruit was abundant,
he made abundant altars.
When it was good in his land,
they made goodly cult-pillars.
[2]Their heart is divided—
now they bear guilt.
He shall break the back of their
altars,
ravage their cultic pillars.
[3]For now they say,
"We have no king,
for we have not feared the LORD,
and a king—what can he do to
us?"
[4]They have spoken words,
empty oaths,
sealed a pact,
and justice blooms like poison weeds

in the furrows of the field.
[5]The calf of Beth-Aven they fear,
the dwellers of Samaria.
For his people mourns for it,
and his priests for it.
They wail over their glory,
for it has departed from them.
[6]It, too, shall be brought to Assyria,
a tribute to King Jareb.
Ephraim shall be disgraced
and Israel shamed by its counsel.
[7]Samaria shall be destroyed and her king,
like foam upon the water.
[8]And the high places of Aven are ravaged,
the offense of Israel.
Thorn and thistle shall spring up
upon their altars.
And they shall say to the mountains,
“Cover us,”
and to the hills, “Fall upon us.”
[9]From the days of Gibeah Israel offended,
there they took their stand.

“War will not overtake them in
Gibeah
against the wrongdoers.”
10 As I wish will I harness them
and peoples shall gather against
them
as they are harnessed to their
two shafts.
11 And Ephraim is a trained calf
that loves to thresh,
and I passed over its goodly neck,
yoked Ephraim that he would
plow,
[Judah] that Jacob would harrow.
12 Sow for yourselves in
righteousness,
reap in faithfulness.
Till for yourselves tilled ground,
and it is time to seek the LORD
until He comes and teaches you
righteousness.
13 You have plowed wickedness,
wrongdoing do you reap.
You have eaten denial’s fruit
for you trusted in your own way,
in all your warriors.

[14]And the clamor shall rise in your
people
and all your fortresses shall be
ravaged
like Shalmaneser's ravaging
at Beth-Arbel on the day of battle
—
mothers with children were
ripped apart.
[15]Thus is it done to you, Bethel,
because of your utter evil.
At daybreak the king of Israel
will indeed be destroyed.

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *is just the same.* More literally, "is equal to it," revocalizing the verb *yeshaveh* as *yishveh*.

When it was good in his land. When the land flourished and yielded its abundance, the Israelites used the bounty they had garnered from the land to build lavish pagan altars.

2. *He shall break the back of their altars.* The subject of the verb is God. The verb itself is an unusual and vivid choice: its general meaning is "to behead" or "break the neck."

3. *We have no king.* This speech attributed to the people may reflect the political predicament of the northern kingdom, which was plagued by a series

of coups and assassinations.

for we have not feared the LORD, */ and a king—what can he do to us?* There is an *a fortiori* logic here: we have not feared the LORD, so why should we fear a king? The Israelites have embraced a rule of anarchy, rejected the authority of monarchs and of the divine King.

5. *Beth-Aven.* As before, this is a pejorative distortion of Bethel.

For his people mourns for it. The antecedent is the calf icon at Bethel.

his priests. The term used, *kemarim,* usually refers to officiants in a pagan cult, in contrast to *kohanim,* priests of God.

They wail. The received text has *yagilu,* "they exult." This translation adopts a widely proposed emendation, *yeililu.* The mistake, if it is a mistake, might have been triggered by the word for "departed" (or "exiled") in the second verset, *galah,* "for it has departed from them." There is an echo here of the report of the loss of the Ark to the Philistines in 1 Samuel 4:22.

6. *King Jareb.* See the comment on 5:13.

7. *and her king.* The translation adds "and" for the sake of coherence.

8. *And they shall say to the mountains, "Cover us."* The inhabitants of Samaria, in their terror of the destruction overtaking them, extravagantly beg of the mountains and hills to cover them.

9. *the days of Gibeah.* See the comment on 9:9.

there they took their stand. The meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain, although the ordinary verb for "stand" is used.

War will not overtake them in Gibeah. This should perhaps be construed as the speech of the inhabitants of Gibeah, imagining that they will be safe from evil enemies. In the story that follows the gang-rape in Judges 19, an alliance of the tribes in fact attacks Gibeah and the whole tribe of Benjamin and comes close to exterminating them. This will be the fate of the northern kingdom.

10. *harness them.* The vocalization of the Hebrew word is anomalous, and some see a different verb here. "Harness," however, makes good sense in conjunction with the image of the plowing calf in what follows.

11. *passed over its goodly neck.* The implied object of the verb is "yoke."

[*Judah*]. This word is bracketed because it does not make sense in context and may well be the interpolation of the Judahite editor.

12. *and it is time to seek the* LORD. Once the (metaphoric) field has been planted in righteousness and reaped in faithfulness, the time will be ripe to seek the LORD.

teaches you righteousness. A pun is hidden in the verb "teaches," *yoreh,* because it has a homonymous noun, "former rain," which would fructify the planted field.

13. *denial's fruit.* The phrase also suggests disappointing or false fruit that cannot really be eaten.

in your own way. The Masoretic Text makes perfectly good sense, but it is worth noting that the Septuagint seems to have used a Hebrew text that read *berikhbekha,* "in your chariots," instead of *bedarkhekha,* "in your own way." This yields a better parallelism with "warriors" in the second verset.

14. *the clamor.* This is the loud noise of the attacking army.

like Shalmaneser's ravaging. The Hebrew shows merely "Shalman," not an attested name. It seems likely that this is an abbreviated version of "Shalmaneser," the Assyrian emperor.

Beth-Arbel. Nothing is known about this place and the evidently savage fighting that took place there.

15. *Thus is it done to you.* This translation construes the third-person singular verb as an equivalent of the passive. It could also be understood as "He [God] does to you." A third, rather less likely, possibility adopted by others is to construe the whole clause as "Thus does Bethel do to you."

CHAPTER 11

[1]For Israel was a lad and I loved him,
and from Egypt I called to My
son.
[2]They called to them,
yet they went off from them.
To the Baalim they sacrificed,
and to the idols they burned
incense.
[3]Yet I taught Ephraim to walk,
took him by his arms,
but they did not know that I had
healed them.
[4]With human cords I tugged them,
with bonds of love,
and I became to them
like those who lift an infant to
their cheeks,
and I bent over them and fed
them.

[5]No! He turned back to the land of
Egypt,
and Assyria was his king,
for they refused to come back
to Me.
[6]And the sword shall swoop down on
his towns
and destroy his limbs
and devour because of their
counsels.
[7]And My people cling to rebellion
against Me.
When they call him on high,
he does not rise up.
[8]How can I give you over, Ephraim,
surrender you, Israel?
How can I make you like Admah,
set you like Zeboiim?
My heart churns within me,
My compassion altogether is
stirred.
[9]I will not act in My blazing wrath,
I will no more destroy Ephraim.
For I am God and not a man,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I do not desire to root out.

[10]After the LORD they shall go,
like a lion He shall roar.
When He roars,
the sons shall hasten from the
west.
[11]They shall hasten like a bird from
Egypt,
like a dove from Assyria's land
and I will settle them in their
homes, said the LORD.

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *They called to them.* This is the first of the many obscurities with which this chapter swarms. Those calling may be God's agents, but that is not quite clear. The veering from singular to plural compounds the difficulty.

3. *I taught Ephraim to walk.* The unusual conjugation of the verb based on the root meaning "foot" has been variously interpreted, but taking Ephraim by the arms suggests holding a small child who is just learning to walk.

4. *like those who lift an infant to their cheeks.* The entire phrase is obscure. This translation takes the noun *ʿol* not to mean "yoke," as it does elsewhere, but to be a shortened form of *ʿolal,* "infant," continuing the imagery of the preceding verse.

6. *And the sword shall swoop down.* Again, the translation is conjectural, not just for this verset but for the entire line.

7. *When they call him on high, / he does not rise up.* The Hebrew here is quite opaque.

8. *How can I give you over, Ephraim.* This marks a turning point: although Israel has provoked God, He is unwilling to consign it to destruction.

Admah, / . . . Zeboiim. These are two of the cities of the plain mentioned in Genesis 10:19 that are destroyed together with Sodom and Gomorrah.

9. *and I do not desire to root out.* The received text reads *welo᾽ ᾽avo᾽ beʿir,* "I will not come into a town," which does not make much sense. The translation supposes the emendation *welo᾽ ᾽ oveh baʿer.*

10. *hasten.* Even though the Hebrew verb usually means "to tremble" (as in 1 Samuel 21:2), it is also used in the sense of "hasten."

from the west. It is not clear why the sons should be in the west.

CHAPTER 12

[1]Ephraim encircled Me in denial,
and the house of Israel in deceit.
But Judah still stays with God
and with the holy ones is faithful.
[2]Ephraim herds the wind
and chases the east wind all day.
Lies and plunder he multiplies
and seals a pact with Assyria,
oil to Egypt is brought.

[3]And the LORD has a case against
Judah
to make a reckoning with Jacob
for his acts,
by his deeds He shall pay him
back.
[4]In the womb he cheated his brother,
and with his power he strove with
God.

[5]He strove with the Messenger and
prevailed—
he wept and pleaded with him.
At Bethel he did find him,
"And there he spoke with us."
[6]And the LORD God of Armies,
the LORD is what He is called.
[7]As for you, to your God you shall
turn back,
faithfulness and justice keep,
and hope for your God always.
[8]A huckster in whose hand are
cheating scales
loving to exploit!
[9]And Ephraim said,
"Why I have grown rich,
found power for myself.
All my gains do not expose for me
a crime that is an offense."
[10]But I am the LORD your God
from the time of the land of
Egypt
Once more will I settle you in tents
as on the festival days.
[11]And I spoke to the prophets,
and I framed many visions

and through the prophets
showed forth images.
[12]If Gilead does wrong,
they become an empty thing.
At Gilgal they offered bulls.
Their altars, too, are like heaps of
ruins
in the furrows of the field.
[13]And Jacob fled to the field of
Aram,
and Israel labored for a woman,
and for a woman he guarded
the flocks.
[14]But by a prophet the LORD
brought up Israel from Egypt,
and by a prophet it was guarded.
[15]Ephraim was bitterly vexing,
and his bloodguilt shall be set
upon him,
and his Master shall pay him
back for his shame.

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *But Judah still stays with God.* The meaning of the verb *rad* (and its verbal root as well) is uncertain, and the translation is a surmise from the context.

the holy ones. Who these are is obscure. Some claim that this is a plural of majesty, referring to God, but that seems questionable.

2. *herds the wind.* This is the earliest occurrence of this vivid metaphor for futility that will be abundantly used in Qohelet.

chases the east wind. Bad things come from the east wind, blowing from the desert.

oil to Egypt is brought. Olive oil, an important product of the Land of Israel, would be exported to Egypt, implying both a commercial and a political relationship and thus a parallel to the pact with Assyria.

4. *he cheated his brother.* The verb *ʿaqav* is a negative etymology of the name Yaʿaqov, Jacob, and the one invoked by Esau when he discovers that Jacob has stolen his blessing. The birth narrative of the twins in Genesis 25 actually provides a more neutral etymology, relating it to *ʿaqev,* "heel," which would make it mean "grab the heel." Thus Hosea represents Jacob (which is to say, Israel) as a cheat from the womb, in keeping with the people's behavior in the prophet's time.

he strove with God. This is what the Hebrew says. The next line "corrects" this to a divine messenger or angel.

5. *he wept and pleaded with him.* This clause presents a rather different picture of the struggle with the divine adversary from the one in Genesis 32. Unlike the story in Genesis, the adversary here is reduced to tears and pleading.

At Bethel he did find him. In context, this has to mean that the mysterious stranger found Jacob at Bethel. Again, this differs from the tradition in Genesis, where the nocturnal encounter is at the Jabbok ford, whereas at Bethel, in Jacob's flight to Aram, he had the epiphany of the angels ascending and descending on a ramp (or ladder).

And there he spoke with us. The import of this clause is unclear. Perhaps the people of Israel are represented as confidently declaring that God spoke to them at Bethel through Jacob. Bethel was a principal cult-site of the northern kingdom.

8. *A huckster.* This is a denunciation of Israel, using the noun *kenaʿan*—elsewhere, Canaan—to mean "trader" or "huckster," evidently as a pejorative.

9. *found power for myself.* The same term, *ʾon,* that was used to explain Jacob's conquest of God or angel is again invoked.

10. *from the time of the land of Egypt.* "The time of" is merely implied in an ellipsis.

Once more will I settle you in tents. This is best understood as a restoration of the idyllic early days, although some see it as a punishment. Or, since "the festival days" are mentioned, it could refer to pilgrims at the crowded Succoth festival staying in improvised tent accommodations.

13. *for a woman he guarded the flocks.* This is another ellipsis, the Hebrew saying only "he guarded." The reference is to Jacob's working for Laban for seven years as payment of a bride-price for the woman he loved, Rachel.

14. *But by a prophet.* The prophet is Moses. There is an antithesis here: Jacob labored for a woman, but it was by Moses (in Hebrew, the same preposition as "for") that God rescued the Hebrews from slavery. Thus, the pedigree of the people as a whole is finer than the pedigree of Jacob-Israel.

it was guarded. The guarding of the people by a prophet is a nobler thing than the guarding of the flocks by Jacob.

CHAPTER 13

[1]When Ephraim spoke in trembling,
he was a prince in Israel,
but he was guilty with Baal and
died.
[2]And now they continue to offend
and make themselves molten
images
from their silver in their form as
idols,
all of it craftsmen’s work.
To them they say:
sacrifices of man, calves to be
kissed.
[3]Therefore shall they be like a
morning cloud
and like early dew that melts
away,
like chaff whirled out from the
threshing floor
and like smoke from a chimney.

[4]Yet I am the LORD your God
ever since the land of Egypt,
and no God save Me shall you know
and no rescuer except for Me.
[5]I knew you in the wilderness
in a parched land.
[6]When they grazed and they were
sated,
they were sated and grew proud.
Therefore they forgot Me.
[7]And I will become to them like a
lion,
like a leopard I spy on the way.
[8]I will meet them like a bear robbed
of her cubs
and rip the sinews round their
heart.
And I will devour them there like a
lion,
the beasts of the field shall tear
them apart.
[9]You are ruined, O Israel,
for who will come to your aid?
[10]Where is your king, then?
Let him rescue you in all your
towns.

And your leaders to whom you said,
“Give me a king and nobles.”
[11]But I will give you a king in My
wrath
and take him away in My anger.
[12]Ephraim’s crime is bundled up,
hidden, his offense.
[13]Birth pangs come upon him,
and the child is not wise.
For now he shall not last
on the birth-stool for children.
[14]From Sheol shall I ransom them,
from death shall I redeem them?
Where are your words, O Death,
where your scourge, O Sheol?
Regret is hidden from My eyes.
[15]Though he put forth fruit in
meadows,
the east wind shall come, the
LORD’s wind.
from the desert rising up.
And his fountain shall dry up
and his spring shall arid be.
It shall ravage treasure,
every precious vessel.

CHAPTER 13 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *spoke in trembling.* The context suggests that it is trembling before God, when Ephraim was still God-fearing.

but he was guilty with Baal and died. Although this sounds like a flat statement, it must mean that Ephraim's pagan ways caused many of the people to perish.

2. *in their form.* The Masoretic Text reads *ketevunam,* "according to their discernment" (?), but the Septuagint *ketavnitam* makes much better sense. *Tavnit* is a term often used for the form or image of an idol.

To them they say. Perhaps these are denouncers of the idolatrous people of Ephraim, though this is not entirely clear.

sacrifices of man. This is another opaque phrase. It could possibly mean "human sacrifices," but there are no indications elsewhere that Ephraim practiced human sacrifice.

calves to be kissed. These are the icons that figured in the cult of YHWH in the northern kingdom.

6. *grew proud.* Literally, "their heart was high."

8. *like a lion.* Here the poem uses another of the five biblical terms for "lion," not the same word as in verse 7.

9. *for who.* The Masoretic Text has "me," *bi,* but two ancient versions show "who," *mi.*

10. *Where is.* The received text has *ʾehi,* "I will be," but this is generally corrected to *ʾayeh* (a simple reversal of consonants).

Give me a king and nobles. As before, Hosea follows the line of the prophet Samuel in viewing the popular demand for a king as a presumptuous mistake.

12. *bundled up, / hidden.* These words may anticipate the birth imagery of the following lines.

13. *and the child is not wise.* This formulation may suggest that the child born is defective.

now. The Hebrew *ʿet* usually means "time," but here it appears to be the equivalent of a related word *ʿatah*.

he shall not last. Literally, "he shall not stand"—that is, "he shall not survive."

14. *From Sheol shall I ransom them, / from death shall I redeem them?* Some interpreters construe this as a positive declaration by God, that He will ransom Ephraim from death. But this makes no sense in light of the language of utter devastation deployed in the next verse, so it is best to understand it as a rhetorical question with the implied answer "no."

Where are your words, O Death. Some critics revocalize *devareyka,* "your words," as *devrekha,* "your pestilence," yielding a neater parallelism with the second verset. As in verse 10, *ʾehi* at the beginning of each of the two versets here is emended to *ʾayeh.* If, as this translation assumes, the preceding line of poetry comprises two rhetorical questions, then the meaning of the two questions here is: where is your scourge, Death?—bring it to bear on these miscreants.

15. *It shall ravage treasure.* The antecedent of "it" is probably the devastating east wind rising from the desert. The alternative would be that the image of the wind is now dropped and that the pronoun, which could also mean "he," refers to the invader.

CHAPTER 14

[1]Samaria is guilty,
for it rebelled against its God.
They shall fall by the sword,
their infants shall be smashed,
and their pregnant women split
apart.
[2]Turn back, O Israel, to the LORD
your God,
for you have stumbled in your
crime.
[3]Take words with you
and turn back to the LORD.
Say to Him, “All crime You shall
forgive.
And take what is good,
and we shall offer our speech
instead of bulls.
[4]Assyria will not rescue us,
on horses we shall not ride.
And we shall say no more ‘our God’

to our handiwork,
as in You alone the orphan is
shown pity.”
5“I will heal their rebellion,
I will love them freely,
for My wrath has turned back
from them.
6I will be like dew to Israel.
He shall blossom like the lily
and strike root like Lebanon.
7His branches shall go forth
and his glory be like the olive tree,
and his fragrance like Lebanon.
8Those who dwell in his shade shall
come back,
they shall give life to new grain,
and like the vine they shall blossom.
His fame is like Lebanon wine.
9Ephraim—‘Why more should I deal
with idols?
I have answered and I espy Him
I am like the lush cypress.
from me your fruit is found.’”
10Who is wise and can grasp these
things,
discerning, and can know them?

For straight are the ways of the
LORD,
and the righteous shall walk on
them,
but rebels shall stumble on
them.

CHAPTER 14 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *their infants shall be smashed, / and their pregnant women split apart.* It is a sad historical fact that such barbaric practices are repeatedly attested to in biblical literature.

3. *Take words with you.* This slightly odd formulation probably conveys the idea that words are to be the vehicles of repentance—not animal sacrifices or grain offerings but words spoken from the heart.

All crime You shall forgive. The Hebrew word order is "All you shall forgive crime," which is either a scribal error or nonstandard syntactical usage.

we shall offer our speech instead of bulls. This picks up and explicates "Take words with you."

5. *I will heal their rebellion.* God now responds to the words of penitent Israel. Although "heal" may seem an unusual verb to attach to "rebellion," the condition of "rebellion" is conceived as a sickness. Compare the imagery of illness in Isaiah 1:5–6.

My wrath has turned back from them. This is God's matching response to Israel's turning back (verse 3) to Him.

6. *I will be like dew to Israel.* Twice earlier, the simile of dew was used to evoke Israel's melting away. Now, with Israel likened to a flowering plant and

a tree, the dew is fructifying.

strike root like Lebanon. In the pattern of second-verset intensification common in biblical poetry, the line moves from a flowering bush to a deep-rooted tree. "Lebanon" is a poetic ellipsis for "trees of Lebanon," a heavily forested region, as the ancient audience would immediately have understood.

8. *like the vine they shall blossom.* They raise crops—"they shall give life to new grain"—and themselves flourish like the growing vine.

9. *I have answered and I espy Him.* Some interpreters contend that these words and everything that follows in this verse are spoken by God. But the verb *shur*, "to espy" or "to make out from a distance," is more appropriate for Israel to God than the other way around. The comparison, moreover, to a verdant tree is often used for a resurgent Israel or for a righteous person but not for God.

from me your fruit is found. The "you" here would be anyone seeking fruit, which the flourishing Israel can provide.

10. *Who is wise and can grasp these things.* The language of this concluding verse is entirely constituted of formulas from Wisdom literature. The inevitable conclusion is that this is a coda added by an editor that asks us to contemplate the moral wisdom of this collection of Hosea's prophecies.

rebels shall stumble on them. While the clause is formulaic (and the noun here could also be represented, as many translations do, as "sinners"), the editorial choice of a formula with "stumbles" makes a nice envelope structure with "stumbled" in verse 2 at the beginning of the prophecy.

Joel

CHAPTER 1

[1]The word of the LORD that came to Joel son of
Pethuel.

[2]Hear this, you elders,
and give ear, all dwellers of the
land.
Has its like happened in your days
and in the days of your fathers?
[3]Recount it to your children
and to your children's children
and to their children in a
generation to come.
[4]What remained from the locust the
grasshopper ate,
and what remained from the
grasshopper the swarmer ate
and what remained from the
swarmer the grub did eat.
[5]Wake up, you drunkards and weep,

and wail, all drinkers of wine,
for the fermented juice that is
cut off from your mouth.
6 For a nation has come up against
my land,
vast and countless.
Its teeth are the teeth of a lion,
the maned beast's jaws it has.
7 It has turned my vine to a desolation
and my fig tree into shards.
It has stripped it bare,
its branches are gone white.
8 Howl like a virgin girt in sackcloth
over the husband of her youth.
9 Grain offering and libation are cut
off
from the house of the LORD.
The priests mourn,
the ministers of the LORD.
10 The field is ravaged,
the soil mourns,
for the new grain has been ravaged,
the new wine dried up,
the oil is bleak.
11 The farmers are shamed,
the vintners wail

over wheat and over barley,
for the field's harvest is gone.
[12]The vine has dried up
and the fig tree is bleak.
Pomegranate, also palm tree and
quince,
all the trees of the field are sear,
for joy has dried up
from the sons of man.
[13]Gird and lament, you priests,
wail, ministrants of the altar.
Come, spend nights in sackcloth,
ministrants of my God.
[14]Pronounce a fast,
proclaim convocation.
Gather the elders,
all the land's dwellers,
to the house of the LORD your God
and cry out to the LORD.
[15]Alack for the day,
for the day of the LORD is near,
and like a shattering from
Shaddai it comes.
[16]Why, before our eyes
food is cut off
from the house of our God,

rejoicing and exultation.
17 The seeds have rotted
beneath their clods.
The storehouses are desolate,
the granaries ruined,
for the new grain has dried up.
18 How the livestock groans,
the herds of cattle are
confounded,
for there is no pasture for them,
the flocks of sheep are desolate.
19 To you, O LORD, I call,
for fire consumed the wilderness
meadows.
and a flame burned all the trees
of the field.
20 The beast of the field, too,
yearns for You.
For the channels of water are dry.
Fire consumed the wilderness
meadows.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *a generation to come.* Literally, “another generation.”

4. *the locust.* Plagues of locusts, an instance of which figures in the Ten Plagues, were known catastrophic events in the Near East. Vast swarms of the voracious insects would eat everything in their path, leaving the fields bare of produce. Joel uses four different Hebrew synonyms for “locust,” and all the English versions, including the present translation, flounder to find or invent four equivalents. Some scholars think these four terms indicate four stages in the metamorphosis of the insect, but that is uncertain. Three of the four Hebrew words show a transparent etymology: *gazam* (the word rendered here as “locust”), “to cut back”; *ʾarbeh,* “multitude”; and *ḥasil,* “to finish off or destroy.” The last, *yeleq,* might conceivably be linked with *laqaq,* “lick.”

5. *drunkards . . . / drinkers of wine.* This is not a denunciation of drunkenness, as one finds, for example, in Isaiah. Rather, the prophet is invoking all the hedonists who delighted in the pleasures of drinking and now, with the vineyards stripped bare by the locusts, will have nothing to drink.

6. *For a nation has come up against my land.* In this instance, the invading nation is a metaphorical representation of the locusts.

Its teeth are the teeth of a lion. The prophet revels in a poetic paradox. In biblical poetry, warriors are often compared to ravening lions. Here, the gnawing insects are tiny, with nothing like lion’s teeth, but the effect of their vast voracious numbers is as devastating as the rending fangs of a lion.

9. *Grain offering and libation are cut off.* With the standing grain and the vines utterly consumed by the locusts, there is nothing left to bring to the Temple.

10. *the oil is bleak.* While in context this probably means something like “gone bad,” there is a persistent personification in this prophecy that is worth preserving.

11. *The farmers are shamed.* The Hebrew verb in this conjugated form is a homonym of “dried up” in verse 10, and the pun seems quite deliberate. “Dried up” at the beginning of the next verse is the same word, thus carrying a subsurface secondary meaning of “shamed.”

12. *quince.* The Hebrew *tapuaḥ,* appearing only here and in the Song of Songs (2:3), does not mean "apple," as it is often translated, because there were no apple trees in the ancient Near East. "Quince" is an educated guess, although others opt for "apricot."

joy has dried up. This is the fourth occurrence of this verb, again with a likely double meaning.

13. *Gird.* This verb is an ellipsis for "gird sackcloth."

15. *like a shattering from Shaddai it comes.* The Hebrew wordplay, approximated in this English version, is *shod* (literally, "devastation," "ravaging") *mishaday.* "Shaddai" is an archaic name for God, of uncertain etymology, largely restricted to poetry.

16. *rejoicing and exultation.* The verb "cut off" does double duty for "food" and for these two nouns. The festivals in the Temple were times of joyous celebration as pilgrims came from throughout the land to offer sacrifices and to partake in the festive feasts. Now, there is nothing to bring as offering ("food") and no occasion for joy.

17. *The seeds have rotted.* The point of view now swivels away from the desolate Temple, deprived of the wherewithal for the celebration of the festivals, to the fields across the country lying in ruins.

18. *the flocks of sheep are desolate.* The verb here is another reflection of Joel's fondness for introducing double meanings through similarities of sound. The verb *neʾashmu* would ordinarily mean "to be guilty," but it seems to be a deliberate distortion of *nashamu,* "to be desolate," thus intimating a shadow of personifying guilt in the depiction of the desolate animals.

19. *for fire consumed the wilderness meadows.* At this point, it becomes clear that another disaster, distinct from the locusts, has swept over the land. The drying out of the new grain (verse 17) and of the watercourses (verse 20) are the result of drought, and as residents of California know, in a drought the tinder-dry fields and forests are wont to catch fire.

20. *The beast of the field, too, / yearns for You.* Joel is probably recalling Psalm 42:2: "As a deer yearns for streams of water, / so I yearn for You, O

God.” The elided term “water,” associated with God, is activated through the allusion.

CHAPTER 2

[1]Blow the ram's horn in Zion,
sound the alarm on my holy
mountain.
Let all the land's dwellers shake,
for the day of the LORD comes,
yes, nears.
[2]A day of darkness and of gloom,
a day of clouds and dense fog.
Like dawn spread out on the
mountains—
a vast and numerous people.
Its like has never been
and after it will be none like it
through years of generations
without end.
[3]Before it fire consumes
and behind it a flame burns hot.
Like the Garden of Eden was the
land before it,
and behind it desolate desert,

nor does anything escape it.
[4]Like the look of horses is its look,
like horsemen so they race.
[5]Like the sound of chariots
on the mountaintops they bound.
Like the sound of fiery flame
consuming straw,
like a vast troop
arrayed for battle.
[6]Before it peoples tremble,
all faces lose their luster.
[7]Like warriors they race,
like men of war they scale the
walls.
Each goes ahead on his way
and they do not bend their paths,
[8]and each does not press against his
fellow,
every man goes on his road,
and through the outer wall they
pounce,
they do not suffer wounds.
[9]In the town they raise a clamor,
they race upon the walls,
they go up in the houses,

through the windows they come
like a thief.
10 Before it the earth shudders,
the heavens shake,
sun and moon go dark
and stars their radiance withdraw.
11 And the LORD sends forth His
voice
before His force,
for very great is His camp,
for vast are those who do His
command.
For great is the day of the LORD,
and who can endure it?
12 And now, too, said the LORD,
turn back to Me with all your
heart,
in fasting and weeping and
mourning,
13 and rend your heart, not your
garments,
and turn back to the LORD your
God,
for He is gracious and
compassionate,

slow to anger and abounding in
kindness
and relenting over evil.
14 Who knows? He may once more
relent
and leave blessing after Him,
grain offering and libation to
the LORD your God.
15 Blast the ram's horn in Zion,
pronounce a fast,
proclaim convocation.
16 Gather the people,
dedicate an assembly,
summon the elders,
gather the babes,
the sucklings at the breast.
Let the bridegroom come out from
his chamber
and the bride from her wedding
canopy.
17 Between the great hall and the altar
let the priests weep,
let the LORD's ministrants say,
"Have pity, LORD, on Your
people,

and do not let Your estate be
    disgraced
    for nations to rule over them.
Why should they say among the
    peoples,
    ‘Where is their God?’
[18]And let the LORD be zealous for
    His land
    and show mercy for His people.”
[19]And the LORD answered and said
    to His people,
    I am about to send to you
new grain and new wine and oil
    and you will be sated with them.
And I will no more make you
    disgraced among the nations.
[20]And the northerner I will put far
    from you
    and scatter him to a parched and
        desolate land,
his face to the eastern sea
    and his end to the western sea.
And his stench shall go up
    and his foul odor go up,
        for he has done enormities.
[21]Do not fear, O land,

exult and rejoice,
for the LORD has done
enormous things.
22 Do not fear, O beasts of the field,
for the wilderness meadows sprout
grass,
for the tree yields its fruit,
the fig tree and vine put forth their
wealth.
23 And children of Zion,
exult and rejoice
in the LORD your God.
For he has given you the early rain as
bounty
and brought down the rain for
you,
early rain and latter rain as
before.
24 And the threshing floors shall fill
with grain
and the vats overflow with new
wine and oil.
25 And I will pay you back for the
years
that the grasshopper ate,

the swarmer, the grub, and the
locust,
My great force that I sent against
you.
[26]And you shall eat, be continuously
sated,
and you shall praise the name of
the LORD your God
Who has done wondrously for you,
and My people shall not be
shamed evermore.
[27]And you shall know that I am in
the midst of Israel,
and I am the LORD your God,
there is none else,
and My people shall not be
shamed evermore.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Like dawn spread out on the mountains.* This is another striking poetic paradox. Dawn is a positive idea, but here the appearance of the millions of locusts on the eastern horizon—a dark mass and not bright like the dawn—is altogether sinister, sharing with dawn only the attribute of being spread out over the mountains.

3. *Before it fire consumes / and behind it a flame burns hot.* This metaphor effects a kind of synthesis of the plague of locusts in 1:1–14 and the drought with wildfire depicted in 1:15–20. The total devastation brought about by the army of locusts is like the destruction wrought by an uncontrolled fire that reduces everything in its path to scorched earth.

4. *Like the look of horses is its look.* At this point, the poem begins a different metaphorical representation of the locusts, as an army with its cavalry racing in the vanguard.

5. *Like the sound of fiery flame.* This line of poetry splices the metaphor of wildfire into the dominant metaphor of an invading army.

6. *all faces lose their luster.* The second noun here, *paʾrur,* has been much disputed. The most likely construction, proposed in the Middle Ages by Abraham ibn Ezra, is that it is related to *peʾer,* "splendor," with a doubling of the final consonant.

7. *bend.* The Hebrew verb in question occurs only here, but the idea of making the path swerve, first proposed in Late Antiquity, seems likely.

8. *the outer wall.* The Hebrew shelaḥ elsewhere can mean "weapon," and some interpreters understand it in that sense here, but a proposed Akkadian cognate indicating an outer wall may be more plausible in context.

suffer wounds. This translation assumes that *yivtsaʿu* is the equivalent of *yiftsaʿu,* the verb for being wounded.

9. *they go up in the houses, / through the windows they come like a thief.* Here the metaphor of an invading army segues into the actual penetrative movement of the locusts.

11. *before His force.* One must keep in mind that the locusts are not imagined as a natural phenomenon but as an army summoned by God to punish the wayward people.

13. *for He is gracious and compassionate.* The prophet here invokes the doxology of divine attributes that first appears in Exodus 34:6–7. The Book of Jonah quotes a version of this same formula.

relenting. The Hebrew verb means to change one's mind after having determined to follow a particular course of action.

14. *blessing . . . / grain offering and libation.* After neither has been possible because of the devastation of the land (1:13), the fields will return to being fruitful.

15. *Blast the ram's horn in Zion.* This picks up, word for word, the beginning of the prophecy, but now the ram's horn sounds not as an alarm but as a summons to a national convocation of penitence through which the evil will be reversed.

16. *the babes, / the sucklings at the breast.* These two versets illustrate the general poetic pattern in which the synonym in the second verset concretizes the matching term in the first verset.

Let the bridegroom come out from his chamber. As other biblical uses of "chamber" in connection with man and woman indicate, this is the chamber in which the bridegroom consummates his marriage. But the urgency is so great that he must leave it.

the bride from her wedding canopy. More decorously, she is linked with the wedding ceremony rather than with the marriage bed. Or perhaps we are invited to imagine that he has been waiting in the bedchamber for her to leave the canopy and join him.

17. *Have pity, LORD.* The words here, continuing through the end of verse 18, are the language of the collective supplication addressed to God in this penitential rite.

20. *the northerner.* This is a slightly odd designation for the locusts, which would have come from the east and the south. It is in all likelihood influenced by the disposition throughout Prophetic poetry to see invaders as descending from the north.

the eastern sea. This is the Dead Sea.

the western sea. This is the Mediterranean.

for he has done enormities. Very literally, this would be "for he has greatly done." Some think it refers to God, but, coming as it does at the end of the description of the rotting hordes of locusts, it more likely refers to the terrible

destruction they have caused which now brings about their own deserved extinction.

21. *for the LORD has done enormous things.* The same phrase is used again, but now in an antithetical sense: God has "greatly done" in reversing the destruction wrought by the locusts.

22. *the wilderness meadows sprout grass.* Now the ravaged fields and plantations are restored to fruitfulness.

23. *as bounty.* Although the Hebrew *tsedaqah* usually means "righteousness," it also has this sense (compare, for example, Judges 5:11, "His bounties [*tsidqot*] for unwalled cities in Israel"), and that meaning is the apt one here.

as before. The received text has *bari'shon,* "in the first," but one Hebrew manuscript and three ancient versions show *kari'shon*, "as before."

25. *the grasshopper . . . / the swarmer, the grub, and the locust.* The prophet now recapitulates the initial list of different kinds of locust, although in a different order.

26. *and My people shall not be shamed evermore.* This grand pronouncement, repeated in the next verse at the very end of this prophecy is an incipiently eschatological flourish: after the ghastly devastation of the land, the people return with all their hearts to God, upon which He undertakes to grant them a splendidly restored prosperity and security that will never again be interrupted.

CHAPTER 3

[1]And it shall happen afterward:

I will pour My spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters
shall prophesy.
Your elders shall dream dreams,
your young men see visions.
[2]And even upon male slaves and
slavegirls
in those days will I pour My spirit.
[3]And I will set portents in the
heavens and on earth,
blood and fire and columns of
smoke.
[4]The sun shall turn into darkness
and the moon into blood
before the coming of the day of the
LORD,
great and fearful.

[5]And all who call in the name of the LORD shall escape. For on Mount Zion there shall be a remnant, as the LORD has said, in the survivors whom the LORD calls.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And it shall happen afterward.* Rashi, Kimchi, and most modern interpreters take this to be an indication of the end-time, but it is a rather quotidian expression, as if one were to say "the day after tomorrow" or "in a month or so." Could it be an indication that Joel thought the end-time was very close?

2. *And even upon male slaves and slavegirls.* There is, then, to be no social limitation to the gift of prophecy—it will envelop all.

3. *blood and fire and columns of smoke.* What begins as an ostensibly benign vouchsafing of prophecy to all here turns violent and, indeed, ominous.

4. *The sun shall turn into darkness.* Even though this seems to be the prediction of a solar eclipse, it is clearly represented as a frightening supernatural event.

and the moon into blood. Under certain atmospheric conditions, the moon does have a reddish appearance, but, again this is imagined as a supernatural occurrence—blood in the sky answering to the blood and fire on earth, harbinger of the terrifying "day of the LORD" that is invoked in the next line of poetry.

5. *And all who call in the name of the LORD shall escape.* The vision becomes properly apocalyptic, a reflection of Joel's Late Biblical location. As in the conclusion of the Book of Daniel, there will be a great cataclysm in which many will perish and only the elect who cling to God will be saved.

the survivors whom the LORD *calls.* Some interpreters, with an eye to the beginning of the verse, understand this as "the survivors who call to the LORD." The verb, however, is in the singular, and the prophet is probably registering a familiar biblical idea that when people call sincerely to God, He will call to them in return.

CHAPTER 4

[1]For, look, days are coming and that time when I will
restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem.

[2]And I will gather all the nations
and bring them down to the Valley
of Jehoshaphat
and come to judgment with them
there
over My people and Israel, My
estate,
whom they scattered among the
nations,
and they divided up their land.
[3]And over My people they cast lots
and bartered a boy for the price of
a whore
and sold a girl for wine which
they drank.

[4]And also what are you to Me, Tyre
and Sidon
and all the provinces of Philistia?
Are you paying back against Me?
If you are paying back against
Me,
swiftly, quick will I pay it back
on your head.
[5]As My silver and My gold you took,
and My goodly treasures you
brought to your palaces,
[6]and the people of Judah and the
people of Jerusalem
you sold to the Greeks
to put them far from their
frontiers.
[7]I am about to raise them from the
place
where you sold them
and pay you back upon your
head.
[8]And I will sell your sons and your
daughters
into the hands of the Judahites,
and they shall sell their captives to a
distant nation.

For the LORD has spoken.

[9]Proclaim this among the nations,
assemble for battle.
Raise the warriors,
let all the men of war
come forth, go up.
[10]Grind your plowshares into swords
and your pruning hooks into
spears.
The weak shall say: I am a
warrior.
[11]Hasten and come,
all nations round about, and
gather.
There bring down, O LORD,
your warriors.
[12]The nations shall be roused and
come up
to the Valley of Jehoshaphat.
For there will I sit to judge
all the nations round about.
[13]Wield the sickle,
for the harvest is ripe.
Come, go down,

for the winepress is full.
The vats overflow,
for their evil is great.
[14]Crowds upon crowds
in the Valley of Doom,
for near is the day of the LORD
in the Valley of Doom.
[15]Sun and moon go dark
and the stars withdraw their light.
[16]And the LORD from Zion roars
and from Jerusalem sounds His
voice,
and the heavens and the earth
shudder.
But the LORD is a refuge to His
people.
and a stronghold to the Israelites.
[17]And you shall know that I am the
LORD your God
Who dwells in Zion, My holy
nation,
and Jerusalem shall be holy,
no more shall strangers pass
through it.
[18]And it shall happen on that day:

the mountains shall drip
fermented juice
and the hills run with milk
and all the channels of Judah
run with water.
And a spring shall issue from the
house of the LORD
and water the Wadi of Acacias.
[19]Egypt shall become a desolation
and Edom a desolate wilderness
for the outrage done to the Judahites
in whose land they shed the blood
of the innocent.
[20]And Judah shall be settled forever
and Jerusalem for all generations.
[21]Shall I acquit for their blood? I will
not acquit.
And the LORD dwells in Zion.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *the Valley of Jehoshaphat.* The name means "The LORD judges," and the prophet immediately plays on *shafat,* "judges," as he says "come to judgment," *nishpateti.*

3. *bartered a boy for the price of a whore / and sold a girl for wine.* The captive Judahite children are treated as cheap merchandise, sold for the price of a quick bout of sex or a flask of wine.

4. *Tyre and Sidon / . . . Philistia.* In this concluding prophecy, Joel casts his net of condemnation over most of the surrounding nations—the Phoenicians to the north, the Philistines (in fact, no longer a political entity) on the southern strip of the Mediterranean coast, and, farther on, Egypt to the south and Edom to the east. No mention is made of Persia or any great eastern empire.

5. *My silver and My gold.* The reference is to the treasures of the Temple. The despoliation of the Temple was perpetrated by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E., which would have been considerably before Joel's probable time. It seems that he has bundled together exile, exploitation, and the remembered plunder of the Temple as an amalgam of the victimization of Judah by the sundry nations.

6. *sold to the Greeks.* Some interpreters take this as an indication that Joel wrote after the conquest of the Near East by Alexander the Great in the late fourth century B.C.E. This is not a necessary inference because there were trading connections with the Greeks earlier, and Greece, *yawan* ("Ion"), is mentioned as a known entity in the Table of Nations in Genesis 10.

7. *I am about to raise them from the place / where you sold them.* Joel is presumably prophesying in Judah to a Judahite audience at some point after the return to Zion in the middle of the fifth century B.C.E. There was, however, a substantial diaspora population in this Second Temple period, and it is this that he appears to have in mind.

9. *assemble for battle.* This has the look of an apocalyptic war, when a final reckoning will be made with all the nations.

10. *Grind your plowshares into swords / and your pruning hooks into spears.* This is an obvious—and grim—reversal of the famous verse in Isaiah 2:4 that envisions a wondrous era of peace.

The weak shall say: I am a warrior. This has a double meaning of "I am mighty."

11. *There bring down, O LORD, your warriors.* The meaning of this line—especially the verb—is somewhat uncertain.

12. *the Valley of Jehoshaphat, / . . . sit to judge.* The same play on the "judge" component of the name as in verse 2 is evident here.

13. *for their evil is great.* Only at the end of these three lines of poetry does it become clear that the ripe harvest, the full winepress, and the overflowing vats are allegorical figures for the harvest of death that is about to be reaped in retribution for the evil the nations have done.

14. *the Valley of Doom.* The verbal stem *ḥ-r-ts,* appearing here in the name *ḥaruts,* means to pronounce judgment or issue a verdict. It seems to be a poetic synonym for the Valley of Jehoshaphat.

17. *no more shall strangers pass through it.* In Joel's historical moment, this may indicate the status of the province of Yehud as a vassal entity within the Persian empire, lacking the autonomy to exclude foreigners. Joel might also be harking back to memories of the conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians.

18. *the mountains shall drip fermented juice / and the hills run with milk.* Joel is recalling Amos 9:13, although he changes the second verset. In Amos it is: "and all the hills shall melt." The entire verse here runs the gamut of sustaining liquids, from wine to milk to water.

And a spring shall issue from the house of the LORD. This appears to be a direct reference to the miraculous spring gushing forth from the Temple in Ezekiel 47.

20. *Judah shall be settled forever.* This marks a strong antithesis to the desolation of Egypt and Edom in the preceding verse.

21. *Shall I acquit for their blood? I will not acquit.* The formulation is cryptic and has engendered different understandings. The assumption reflected in this translation is that "their blood" refers back to "the blood of the innocent" in verse 19. The first clause here is then construed as a rhetorical question. God will certainly not acquit those who have shed the blood of His innocent

people—Judah will dwell peacefully for all time, but those who once victimized it will remain an eternal desolation.

Amos

CHAPTER 1

[1]The words of Amos, who was among the sheep-
breeders of Tekoa, who saw visions concerning Israel
in the days of Uzziah king of Judah and in the days of
Jeroboam son of Joash king of Israel, two years before
the earthquake. [2]And he said:

The LORD from Zion roars
    and from Jerusalem puts forth His
        voice,
and the shepherds' meadows wither,
    and the peak of Carmel dries up.
[3]Thus said the LORD:
For three trespasses of Damascus
    and for four I will not turn it back
        —
for their threshing Gilead
    with iron threshing boards.
[4]And I will set fire to the house of
    Hazael,

and it shall consume the citadels
of Ben-Hadad,
5and I will break the bolt of
Damascus
and cut off dwellers from Aven
Vale
and him who holds the scepter
from Beth-Eden.
And the peoples of Aram shall be
exiled to Kir, said the LORD.
6Thus said the LORD:
For three trespasses of Gaza
and for four I will not turn it back
—
for their inflicting a total exile
to hand over to Edom.
7And I will set fire to Gaza's wall,
and it shall consume her citadels.
8And I will cut off dwellers from
Ashdod
and him who holds the scepter
from Ashkelon,
and I will bring My hand against
Ekron,
and the Philistines' remnant shall
perish.

[9]Thus said the LORD:
For three trespasses of Tyre
and for four I will not turn it back
—
for their inflicting a total exile,
handing over to Edom,
and they did not recall the pact
of brothers.
[10]And I will set fire to Tyre's wall
and it shall consume her citadels.
[11]Thus said the LORD:
For three trespasses of Edom,
and for four I will not turn it
back—
for his pursuing his brothers with the
sword
and stifling his compassion,
and he bore a grudge ceaselessly
and kept up his wrath unending.
[12]And I will set a fire in Teman,
and it shall consume the citadels
of Bosra.
[13]Thus said the LORD:
For three trespasses of the
Ammonites

and for four I will not turn it back
—
for their splitting open the pregnant
women of Gilead
so as to expand their borders.
14 And I will light a fire on the wall of
Rabbah,
and it shall consume her citadels
with trumpet blast on the day of
battle
and with a storm on the tempest
day.
15 And their king shall go into exile,
he and his nobles together
—said the LORD.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Tekoa.* This is a village in the vicinity of Jerusalem. There is no evidence for a Tekoa in the north, although some scholars have sought to place Amos there because he later identifies himself as a trimmer of sycamore trees, not known to be cultivated in the southern region. The case remains convincing that Amos was a Judahite who undertook a prophetic mission to the northern kingdom.

two years before the earthquake. This was obviously a well-remembered event. There is some archaeological evidence for such a seismic event around

770 B.C.E. or slightly later. It is not clear whether Amos's prophesying begins or ends then, though beginning may be more likely.

3. *For three trespasses of Damascus / and for four.* In context, *pesha ʿaim* means something like "atrocities" or "crimes against humanity," but this translation respects the stylistic decorum of the Hebrew, which hews to general terms that may take on a distinctive coloration according to context. There are neither three nor four trespasses listed here that a reader can count. Rather, this is a common biblical idiom, occurring several times in Proverbs, with the sense, "a certain few, and even one more." Because the three and four together add up to a formulaic seven, some have proposed that they indicate a totality. There is no way of knowing whether these dire prophecies about the surrounding nations were actually the beginning of Amos's message, but they certainly would have provided a means of drawing in the Israelite audience with something they wanted to hear before the prophet launched on a denunciation of that very audience. The formulaic repetition of these lines for one nation after another generates a kind of hypnotic drumbeat.

I will not turn it back. The object of the verb is left unspecified, perhaps deliberately and ominously, but it would have to be something like "retribution" or "wrath."

Gilead. This is an area in the northeastern sector of the kingdom of Israel.

4. *the house of Hazael.* Hazael and Ben-Hadad designate the royal house of Aram, the capital of which is Damascus.

5. *break the bolt.* The bolt is the heavy iron bar that secures the gates of the city.

Kir. This is a city in the far north, perhaps near Armenia.

6. *Gaza.* In Amos's time, Gaza was the principal Philistine city, though three others are mentioned in the following lines. The view has now swung from north to south.

for their inflicting a total exile. The identity of those exiled is unspecified. In any case, uprooting an entire population means putting an end to its national existence and hence is viewed as a war crime.

9. *Tyre.* This is the principal Phoenician city, so the perspective moves north again, along the Mediterranean coast.

11. *Edom.* Now we are in the southeast, across the Jordan.

his brothers. Since Esau, Jacob's brother, is the purported ancestor of the Edomites, the Israelites would be their "brothers."

stifling his compassion. Because of the unusual verb, which usually means "lay ruins to" or "destroy," some scholars have suggested that the phrase has the sense of "destroying his [Israel's] wombs," an alternative term for splitting open pregnant women.

bore a grudge. The Masoretic Text reads *wayitrof . . . ʾapo,* "and his anger ravaged," but three ancient versions reflect *wayitor* (dropping the last consonant of the verb), and Jeremiah 3:5 shows precisely this poetic parallelism of *n-t-r / sh-m-r*.

13. *so as to expand their borders.* This is an explanation for the savagery perpetrated on the pregnant women. Not only are they murdered, but their offspring are as well, so there will be no one left in the future to lay claim to the territory. This looks very much like genocide.

14. *Rabbah.* The capital city of Ammon.

CHAPTER 2

[1]Thus said the LORD:

For three trespasses of Moab,
and for four, I will not turn it back
—
for his burning the bones of
Edom's king into lime.
[2]And I will set fire to Moab,
and it shall consume the citadels
of Kerioth,
and Moab shall die in an uproar,
in shouts and the sound of the
ram's horn.
[3]And I will cut off the leader from
her midst
and all her nobles I will slay with
him
—said the LORD.
[4]For three trespasses of Judah,

and for four, I will not turn it back
—
for their spurning the LORD's
teaching,
and His statutes they did not keep,
and their false things led them
astray,
after which their fathers had gone.
5 And I will set a fire in Judah,
and it shall consume Jerusalem's
citadels.
6 Thus said the LORD:
For three trespasses of Israel,
and for four, I will not turn it back
—
for their selling the just man for
silver
and the needy for sandals.
7 Who trample the head of the needy
in the dust of the ground
and pervert the way of the
poor.
And a man and his father go to the
same girl
to profane My holy name.

[8]And on pawned garments they
stretch out,
alongside every altar,
and wine bought with funds from
fines
they drink in the house of their
God.
[9]Yet I had destroyed the Amorite
before them,
who is tall as the height of cedars
and sturdy as the oaks.
And I destroyed his fruit above
and his roots below.
[10]And I brought you up from the land
of Egypt
and led you in the wilderness forty
years.
to take hold of the Amorite's
land.
[11]And I raised up from your sons to
be prophets
and from your men to be nazirites.
Is it not so, O Israelites? said
the LORD.
[12]But you gave the nazirites wine to
drink

and to the prophets you charged,
“Prophesy not!”
[13]I am about to halt you where you
are
as the wagon overflowing with
grain halts.
[14]And flight shall elude the swift,
and the strong shall not summon
his power,
and the warrior shall not escape
with his life.
[15]And the bowman shall not stand,
and the fleet-footed shall not
escape,
and the horseman shall not
escape with his life.
[16]And whose heart is staunch among
the warriors
naked shall flee on that day—said
the LORD.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *burning the bones.* Desecrating a corpse was seen as a violation of human dignity and thus is included in the list of war crimes.

4. *For three trespasses of Judah.* While some scholars claim that the introduction of Judah is a later editorial interpolation, it makes perfect sense that this Judahite prophet, moving from pronouncements of doom on the surrounding nations to Israel, would include a denunciation of the trespasses of his own kingdom before arriving at his main target, the northern kingdom of Israel.

their false things. This is an epithet for idols, which makes this a very different kind of transgression from the crimes against humanity. Some see here Deuteronomistic language, thus attributing this text to a much later date than that of Amos, but this identification is not convincing, even if the anti-idolatry theme resembles Deuteronomy.

6. *for their selling the just man for silver / and the needy for sandals.* When Amos turns to the transgressions of Israel, his concern is injustice and exploitation of the vulnerable. Coming after the catalogue of crimes against humanity perpetrated by the surrounding nations, perversions of justice are in effect also represented as crimes against humanity. "The just man," *tsadiq,* may here carry its legal sense—the person who deserved to be declared right, given justice, in a court of law. In that case, selling him for silver would mean taking a bribe so that he is given an unfavorable ruling. Selling the needy for sandals means selling such a person—perhaps into slavery—for something of relatively minor value.

7. *a man and his father go to the same girl.* One understanding that has had considerable currency is that they both go to the same cult-prostitute, but this is not certain. The word for "girl," *naʿarah,* means "a nubile young woman," with no special indication of her profession or sexual activity. The choice of the term here is pointed: a *naʿarah* could conceivably be an appropriate sexual partner for a young man, but a son and father sharing her is an abomination—in fact, a kind of incest.

9. *Yet I had destroyed the Amorite before them.* Israel has done all these unspeakable acts even though historically it was the beneficiary of God's manifest generosity that enabled it, against all odds, to conquer the land.

who is tall as the height of cedars. The gigantic stature of the Canaanites is registered in Numbers 13 and elsewhere.

12. *But you gave the nazirites wine to drink.* The nazirites take a vow of abstention from alcohol, thus constituting a kind of elite of holiness within the people. The likely motive for giving them wine is not sheer perversity but reflects an indiscriminate abuse of alcohol in the Israelite population, of the sort Isaiah would denounce a few decades after Amos.

13. *halt you.* Although this Hebrew verb would later mean something like "to weigh down," its likely biblical sense is "to bring to a stop, to impede."

14. *And flight shall elude the swift.* The failure of flight follows directly from the "halting" of the previous line. The three lines of poetry beginning here—the first two are triadic—are all the more effective as a representation of a catastrophe overtaking the nation because there is no direct mention of an invading army: all we see is the swift and the strong and the martially skilled in the army of Israel flailing and unable to escape.

15. *the horseman shall not escape with his life.* The whole line exhibits a striking pattern of intensification from one verset to the next. First, the stationary bowman is unable to withstand the onslaught of the enemy; then, the swift-footed soldier is not fast enough to escape; finally, even the horseman on his mount cannot get away.

16. *naked shall flee on that day.* While the literal sense of "naked" is possible, the likely meaning is that the brave warrior, now terrified by the overwhelming force of the enemy, will strip himself of his armor and throw away his weapons in order to flee.

CHAPTER 3

[1]Hear this word that the LORD has spoken
concerning you, O Israelites, concerning the entire
clan that I brought up from Egypt, saying:

[2]Only with you was I intimate
of all the clans of the earth.
Therefore will I make a reckoning
with you
for all your crimes.
[3]Do two walk together
if they have not first agreed?
[4]Does the lion roar in the forest
unless it has taken prey?
Does the maned beast put forth its
voice from its lair
if it has not made a catch?
[5]Does a bird fall into a trap on the
ground
when there is no snare for it?

Does a trap spring up from the soil
and fail to make a catch?
6 Is the ram's horn sounded in the
town
and the people do not tremble?
Is there harm within the town
and the LORD has not done it?

7 For the Master, the LORD, does nothing without
revealing His secret to His servants, the prophets.

8 A lion roars.
Who does not fear?
The Master, the LORD, speaks.
Who cannot prophesy?

9 Let it be heard in the citadels of Ashdod and in the
citadels of the land of Egypt, and say: Gather on the
mountains of Samaria and see the many upheavals
within it and the oppressed in its midst.
10 And they do not know how to do what is right,
said the LORD, who store up outrage and plunder in
their citadels.
11 Therefore, thus said the Master, the LORD:

A foe goes round the land.
He shall take down from you your strength,
and your citadels shall be despoiled.
12 Thus said the LORD:
As the shepherd may save
from the lion's mouth
two shank bones or an earlobe,
so shall Israel be saved.
You who sit in Samaria
by the head of a bed or at the end of a couch,
13 listen and bear witness against the house of Jacob,
said the Master, the LORD God of Israel.
14 For on the day I make a reckoning
for Israel's trespasses
I will make a reckoning with the altars of Bethel
and the horns of the altar shall be hacked off,
and they shall fall to the ground.

15 And I will strike down the winter
house
together with the summer house,
and the houses of ivory shall be
destroyed
and the great houses swept away
—said the LORD.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *clan.* The Hebrew *mishpaḥah* slides from a clan proper to larger groups. It may be used here to underscore the mutual belonging of the Israelites.

2. *was I intimate.* The literal sense of the verb is "know," which famously has in some contexts a sexual connotation but here is employed to suggest a special close relationship.

3. *Do two walk together.* These words initiate an extended anaphoric series arriving at a compelling conclusion that will not be revealed until verse 8. Everything in nature and in human affairs exhibits a pattern of cause and effect, including the call to prophecy.

4. *Does the lion roar in the forest.* It should be observed that all of the instances cited involve either the inspiring of fear or the creating of an entrapment: the call to prophecy is scary, and it locks the person called in a trap.

6. *Is the ram's horn sounded in the town.* The shrill piercing notes of the ram's horn were used to sound the alarm in moments of military crisis.
Is there harm within the town / and the LORD *has not done it?* God is introduced at the end of the series, preparing the ground for the introduction

of prophecy.

7. *For the Master, the LORD.* This prose verse breaks the poetic series and, in the way it makes explicit the point of all the images, it looks like an editorial interpolation.

8. *A lion roars. / Who does not fear?* The poem in this way loops back to its beginning, making an envelope structure. Then God and prophecy will be added in the next line.

The Master, the LORD, speaks. / Who cannot prophesy? This is an idea invoked by other prophets—most strikingly, by Jeremiah. Prophecy is not experienced as a choice. The prophet feels it as an overwhelming imperative coming from God.

9. *Let it be heard in the citadels of Ashdod and in the citadels of the land of Egypt.* Philistia and Egypt are summoned to serve as witnesses of the shame of Samaria.

10. *who store up outrage and plunder.* An expressive ellipsis is put into play: what the Israelites store up in their citadels is the ill-gotten wealth amassed from acts of outrage and plunder. After the prose introduction of verses 9 and 10, the prophecy swings back into poetry, beginning with "A foe goes round the land."

11. *A foe goes round the land.* The received text reads *tsar wesaviv,* "a foe and around." This translation presupposes an emendation to *tsar yesoveiv.*

12. *save / from the lion's mouth.* The verb here incorporates the sense of "to pull out from."

so shall Israel be saved. Only a few bloody scraps will be left.

the head of a bed or at the end of a couch. There are philological grounds for thinking that the first term, *pe'ah*, means "head of the bed" here (elsewhere, it means "corner"). The second term is obscure, and so the translation leans on the poetic parallelism. Sitting on the bed may allude to the indolence of the aristocrats of the northern kingdom.

14. *the horns of the altar.* The four corners of altars had hornlike protuberances, symbolic of power.

15. *the winter house / together with the summer house.* Many think these are the winter and summer palaces of the king, but members of the wealthy class could well have enjoyed such luxuries.

the houses of ivory. The houses were not built of ivory but decorated inside with ornamental ivory panels, some of which have been unearthed by archaeologists.

the great houses. The adjective here usually means “many” but can also mean “great,” and the target of the destruction is clearly not the habitations of the general populace but the grand homes of the aristocracy.

CHAPTER 4

[1]Listen to this word,
you cows of Bashan who are on
Mount Samaria,
who exploit the poor,
who crush the needy,
who say to their husbands,
"Bring, that we may drink."
[2]The Master, the LORD, has sworn
by His holiness
that days are coming upon you
when you shall be borne off in
baskets
and the last of you with fishhooks,
[3]and through the breaches each
woman shall go out straight ahead,
and you shall be flung on the
refuse heap—said the LORD.

[4]Come to Bethel and trespass,
to Gilgal and continue to trespass,

and bring the next morning your
sacrifices
and on the third day your tithes.
5 And burn a thanksgiving offering of
leavened bread
and proclaim freewill offerings,
make them heard.
For so have you loved,
O Israelites—said the Master, the
LORD.
6 And I on My part have given you
cleanness of teeth in all your
towns
and want of bread in all your
places,
but you did not come back to Me,
said the LORD.
7 And I on My part withheld from
you the rain
with still three months till the
harvest,
and I rained on one town
but on another town did not rain.
One field would have rain,
but the field without rain would
dry up.

[8]And two or three towns would
wander
to a single town to drink water,
and would not slake their thirst.
But you did not turn back to Me,
said the LORD.
[9]I struck you with blight and with
mildew.
Ruins were your gardens and your
vineyards,
and your fig trees and your olive
trees the locusts devoured.
But you did not turn back to Me,
said the LORD.
[10]I let loose the pestilence against
you as in Egypt.
I slew your young men by the
sword with your captured
horses
and made your camps' stench
rise in your very nostrils.
But you did not turn back to Me,
said the LORD.
[11]I overthrew you
as God overthrew Sodom and
Gomorrah,

and you became like a brand saved
from burning.
But you did not turn back to Me,
said the LORD.
[12]Therefore, this will I do to you,
Israel,
because this will I do to you,
prepare to meet your God, O
Israel.
[13]For, look, He fashions the
mountains and creates the wind
and tells man what is his thought,
turns dawn into darkness
and treads on the earth's high
places.
The LORD God of Armies is
His name.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria.* The region of Bashan was famous for its cattle, but these well-fed cows are in Samaria. The prophet addresses the women with this vitriolic epithet not because they are fat but because all they do is indolently satisfy their appetite, like cows grazing in a pasture. It should be noted that because Hebrew verbs are conjugated

according to gender, all the verbs that follow remind us of the female identity of those excoriated.

Bring, that we may drink. The pampered wives of Samaria are worse than cows because they have an appetite not only for nutrients, like their bovine counterparts, but for wine.

2. *baskets / . . . fishhooks.* Both Hebrew words occur only here. Some scholars think both are terms for baskets used by fishermen; others think both are kinds of hooks.

3. *through the breaches.* The use of this noun implies that the walls of the city have been broken through by invaders.

the refuse heap. The meaning of the Hebrew *harmon* is uncertain, and it could even be a place-name. This translation adopts one scholarly conjecture.

4. *Come to Bethel and trespass.* This verse and the next are strongly sarcastic. None of the ritual acts mentioned, to be performed at the two principal cult centers of the northern kingdom, is in itself illegitimate, but the offense is in going through the steps of ritual when the worshippers have been exploiting the poor, perverting justice, and wallowing in ill-gotten gains. Amos is not expressing a principle of opposition to the cult but, like Isaiah after him, is objecting to the conjunction of what Isaiah calls "crime and convocation," of approaching the altar with hands stained with blood.

6. *cleanness of teeth.* This is an original coinage of Amos's. It of course does not have anything to do with dental hygiene but evokes a mouth in which there is no food, as "want of bread" in the next verset makes clear. The line reverses the usual pattern, in which the standard term appears in the first verset and a metaphorical or poetic equivalent in the second, because the prophet means to confront his audience with a small enigma at the beginning of the line that is spelled out at the end.

7. *with still three months till the harvest.* Lack of rain three months before the harvest would be devastating for the crops.

I rained on one town / but on another town did not rain. It is unclear whether such selective distribution of rainfall could have actually occurred, but the prophet's statement of it is meant to convey the idea that God

exercises absolute power to bless or blight human populations according to His will.

9. *Ruins were your gardens.* The Masoretic Text reads *harbot,* "to multiply," which does not make much sense. This translation is based on an emendation of that word to *ḥorvot,* "ruins."

10. *with your captured horses.* This phrase suggests that the "young men" are fighters who have been defeated in battle, their mounts taken by the victors and they themselves put to the sword.

11. *overthrew.* This is a set verb beginning with the account in Genesis 19 of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah for the total devastation of a town or a nation.

13. *For, look, He fashions the mountains and creates the wind.* The doxology of this concluding verse is continuous with what precedes: the powerful God that Israel must prepare to meet is the cosmic Creator Who controls all the forces of the earth. This verset makes strategic use of the verbs for creation that appear, respectively, in Genesis 2 and 1: for the solid mountains the potter's concrete word "fashion," *yotser,* is used; for the wind, the more spiritual *borei*ʾ, "create."

CHAPTER 5

[1]Listen to this word that I bear about you as a dirge, O
house of Israel.

[2]She has fallen, no more shall rise,
the Virgin of Israel.
She is abandoned on her soil,
none lifts her up.
[3]For thus said the Master the LORD:
The town that goes out a thousand
shall be left a hundred
and that goes out a hundred
shall be left ten—for the house
of Israel.
[4]For thus said the LORD to the
house of Israel:
Seek Me and live
[5]and seek not Bethel
and to Gilgal do not come

and to Beersheba do not pass
on.
For Gilgal shall go in exile
and Bethel shall turn into evil.
6 Seek the LORD and live,
lest the house of Joseph flare like
fire
and consume Bethel with none
to quench it.
7 You who turn justice into
wormwood
and righteousness bring to the
ground—

8 He makes the Pleiades and Orion
and turns death's darkness into
morning
and day He darkens to night,
calls to the waters of the sea
and pours them over the land.
The LORD is His name.
9 He flashes destruction on the strong,
and destruction comes down on
the fortress.

[10]They hated the reprover in the gate,
and the truth speaker they
despised.
[11]Therefore, as you trampled upon
the poor man,
and a payment of grain you
exacted from him,
hewn-stone houses you have built,
but you shall not dwell in them.
Lovely vineyards you have planted,
but you shall not drink their wine.
[12]For I know that your trespasses are
many
and numerous your offenses—
foes of the righteous, takers of
bribes,
you pervert the needy's case in the
gate.
[13]Therefore the prudent on that day
shall fall silent,
for it is an evil time.
[14]Seek good and not evil,
that you may live.
And so may the LORD God of
Armies be with you,
as you have said.

15 Hate evil and love good
and set out justice in the gate.
Perhaps the LORD God of Israel
may grant grace to Joseph's
remnant.

16 Therefore thus said the LORD,
the God of Israel, the Master:
In all the squares—lament,
and in all the streets they say
"alas."
And they shall call the farmer to
mourning,
and to lament, those expert in
weeping.
17 And in all the vineyards there is
wailing
as I pass in your midst, said the
LORD.

18 Woe, who long for the day of the
LORD!
Why should you need the day of
the LORD?
It is darkness and not light.

[19]As a man flees from a lion
and a bear blocks his way,
and he enters the house
and leans his hand on the wall,
and a snake bites him.
[20]Why, the day of the LORD is
darkness and not light,
pitch black, and no radiance in it.

[21]I hate, I spurn your festivals
and smell no fragrance in your
convocations.
[22]Should you offer up to Me burnt
offerings
or grain offerings, I will not accept
them;
nor will I look on the well-
being sacrifice of your fatted
calves.
[23]Take away from me the noise of
your singers,
nor will I listen to the melody of
your lutes.
[24]But let justice well up like water

and righteousness like a steady
stream.
[25]Did you bring Me sacrifices and
grain offering
in the wilderness forty years,
house of Israel?
[26]And you shall bear away Sikkuth
your king and Kiyyun,
your icons, your star gods that you
made for yourselves,
[27]and I will exile you beyond
Damascus,
said the LORD, God of Israel in
His name.

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *She is abandoned on her soil.* This wording suggests that the kingdom has been conquered and Israel is now left on her own soil at the mercy of the invaders.

3. *The town that goes out a thousand.* This might suggest a military sortie because the verb "go out" is sometimes used in that sense, but this is not entirely certain here.

5. *Bethel / . . . Gilgal . . . / Beersheba.* The first two, as noted above, are the principal cultic sites of the northern kingdom. Beersheba is far to the south, hence the need to "pass on" (through the kingdom of Judah). It would seem

that some sort of cult was conducted at Beersheba, but we have scant information about it.

Gilgal shall go into exile…Bethel . . . evil. The Hebrew sound-play is *hagilgal galoh yigaleh* and *beit-ʾel . . . ʾawen.*

6. *flare.* This Hebrew verb generally is used for the "descent" of the spirit, but perhaps it also indicates any kind of sudden movement.

7. *You who turn justice into wormwood.* This prophecy appears to break off after these two versets, which lack a predicate.

8. *He makes the Pleiades and Orion.* These words begin another doxology celebrating God's greatness, but it manifestly interrupts the castigation of Israel of the preceding lines, which is resumed again in verse 10. This makes it look suspiciously like an editorial glitch.

10. *the reprover in the gate.* The square in front of the city gate was where courts of justice were held (compare verse 15) and it would also be an appropriate setting for the prophet to reprove or harangue the people.

11. *hewn-stone houses.* These are grand houses, which have already been the subject of Amos's ire (3:15).

16. *And they shall call the farmer to mourning, / and to lament, those expert in weeping.* The idea of summoning the farmers to join in the mourning may be meant to indicate that the entire people, not just the inhabitants of the towns, will be involved. The line exhibits a neat chiastic structure—farmer (a), mourning (b), lament (b′), those expert in weeping (a′). The second group would be professional keeners, who are usually women—although the verb here is masculine.

18. *Woe, who long for the day of the* LORD. The background to this idea must be inferred. It appears to be a popular eschatological belief that a grand era is coming when God will elevate Israel and make it triumphant among the nations. Some of the later prophecies of national restoration—as, for example, in Second Isaiah—may have drawn on such traditions of folk belief. In any case, Amos makes emphatically clear that such expectations are a

delusion and that the day of the LORD will be a day of dire retribution for Israel's sins.

19. *a bear blocks his way.* The verb can mean "meet" or "encounter" but also "strike" or "attack." Since, however, the man escapes the bear and makes it to his house, it does not seem that the bear actually assaults him.

21. *I hate, I spurn your festivals.* As before, God's revulsion from the Israelite cult is because it is conducted by people whose moral behavior is vicious.

smell no fragrance. The Hebrew says merely "I will not smell." The incense burned on the altar and the burnt offerings themselves were thought—perhaps literally—to be a pleasing fragrance to the LORD.

23. *the noise of your singers, / . . . the melody of your lutes.* The prophet now moves from smell to sound: both vocal music (the chorus of the Levites) and instrumental music were part of the Temple service.

24. *like water / . . . like a steady stream.* The simile of water of course expresses the idea of an uninterrupted and abundant flow of justice, but it is also associated with a process of cleaning after the morally contaminated odors and music of the suspect cult.

25. *in the wilderness forty years.* As with later prophets—most notably, Jeremiah—the Wilderness era is imagined as a kind of idyll, when God and Israel were secluded together.

26. *Sikkuth . . . Kiyyun.* These are actual deities, initially Assyrian and later taken over by the Babylonians. The vocalization of both names has been deliberately distorted by the Masoretes to make them sound like *shiqutz,* "abomination." The original names were Sakkut and Keivan.

your king. This is surely sarcastic.

27. *I will exile you beyond Damascus.* This is somewhere unspecified, far to the northeast. In fact, when the inhabitants of the northern kingdom were exiled by the Assyrians in 721 B.C.E., this was the general direction in which they were taken.

CHAPTER 6

[1]Woe, you complacent in Zion
and you trusting ones on Mount
Samaria,
eminent among the first of nations,
and the house of Israel came to
them.
[2]Pass on to Calneh and see,
and go from there to great
Hammath,
and go down to the Philistines'
Gath.
Are you better than these kingdoms,
is your territory larger than theirs?
[3]You who dismiss the evil day
but bring on disaster and outrage;
[4]who lie on ivory-inlaid beds
and lounge on their couches
and eat the lambs from the flock
and calves from the stall,
[5]who pluck on the lute,

like David they devise song's
instruments.
[6]Who drink from bowls of wine
and with the finest oils anoint
themselves
and are not distressed by
Joseph's disaster.
[7]Therefore now shall they be exiled
at the head of exiles,
and the lounging feasts shall be no
more.
[8]The Master, the LORD, has sworn
by His life,
said the LORD, God of Armies:
I loathe the pride of Jacob,
and his citadels I hate,
and I will hand over the town
and its fullness.

[9]And it shall happen that if ten men are left in a house, they shall die. [10]And a handful of men shall remain to carry out the bones from the house. And one shall say to him who is in the far corners of the house, "Is anyone still with you?" And he shall say, "None." And

he shall say, “Hush!” so as not to mention the name of the LORD.

[11]For, look, the LORD commands,
and He shall strike the great house
into splinters
and the small house into shards.
[12]Can horses race on rock,
can one plow with an ox in the
sea?
For you have turned justice into
poison
and the fruit of righteousness into
wormwood.
[13]You who rejoice over Lo-Dabar,
who say, Why, with our strength
we have captured Karnaim.
[14]But I am about to raise against you,
house of Israel,
said the LORD, God of Armies, a
nation.
And they shall harry you
from Lebo-Hammath
to the Wadi of Arabah.

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *you complacent in Zion.* The reference to Zion—which is to say, Jerusalem, the capital of the southern kingdom—is something of a puzzle because Amos's mission has been to the northern kingdom. Some scholars want to see this as the interpolation of the Judahite editor, but if one removes this verset, there is no longer a line of parallelistic poetry. We should not exclude the possibility that Amos had in view a similar group of smugly self-satisfied people in his home kingdom, even if he was addressing a northern audience.

the first of nations. This appears to be a designation—perhaps sardonic—for Israel.

the house of Israel came to them. The meaning is not transparent, but the sense may be that the people would come for guidance to the elite of the nation, the "eminent."

2. *Calneh.* A distant city in Syria.

great Hammath. A city in central Syria.

is your territory larger than theirs? The received Hebrew text reads, "is their territory larger than yours?," but the context surely requires that these terms be reversed.

3. *but bring on disaster and outrage.* The first of these two nouns in the Masoretic Text is *shevet,* "dwelling" or "sitting," which makes little sense. This translation assumes, as do many scholars, that this is a scribal error for either *shever* or *shod,* either of which suggests disaster.

4. *who lie on ivory-inlaid beds.* Amos, a farmer and pastoralist, is no doubt repelled by the indolent life of luxury he observes among the northern aristocratic class, but he also has in mind the exploitation of the vulnerable that is the source of the wealth.

5. *like David they devise song's instruments.* The tone is sarcastic. David's legendary skill as a lyre player and "sweet singer" was by this time ensconced as an item of popular culture.

6. *Who drink from bowls of wine.* Pointedly, they are said to drink not from flasks but from large bowls.

and with the finest oils anoint themselves. Rubbing the body with oil was one of the pleasures of the good life, as in Homer's Greece. But the verb *mashaḥ,* "anoint," is generally reserved for sacral or royal use of oil, so its employment here adds to the invective.

Joseph. The house of Joseph, one should recall, is an equivalent for the house of Israel.

7. *at the head of exiles.* That is, they shall lead the rest of the people into exile, a bitterly ironic turn of their leadership.

10. *And a handful of men shall remain.* The first three words of the Masoretic Text, *unasʾu dodo umesarfo,* are not intelligible, and there is no grammatical agreement between the initial verb and the two words that follow. A literal rending would be: and they shall-carry his-uncle and-his-*mesaref,* the meaning of this last noun remaining unknown. The present translation adopts the reading of the Septuagint, which evidently had a Hebrew text with three different (and intelligible) Hebrew words: *wenishʾaru metey mispar.*

to him who is in the far corners of the house. Apparently, there is a single survivor, huddled, perhaps hiding, in a remote corner of the house.

so as not to mention the name of the LORD. People often greeted each other in the name of the LORD, as Boaz does with his laborers in Ruth 2:4. The speaker wants to make sure this will not happen in this place of death and devastation, for that would be a violation of the sanctity of the divine name.

12. *can one plow with an ox in the sea?* The received text reads *ʾim-yaḥarosh babeqarim,* "can one plow in the mornings?" A small, widely accepted emendation breaks out the last word into two, *babaqar yam,* yielding the meaning shown in this translation.

13. *Lo-Dabar.* This is a town in the northern part of Gilead, but the name could also be understood to mean "nothing," and a pun is clearly intended.

Karnaim. A town in the Bashan region. Both Gilead and Bashan were part of the northern kingdom but at times were contested.

14. *a nation.* Though the verb “raise against” occurs at the beginning of this verse, its object, as a kind of ominous revelation, is withheld to the very end of the sentence.

from Lebo-Hammath / to the Wadi of Arabah. Lebo-Hammath is in the Lebanon valley; the Wadi of Arabah is far to the south, in the rift descending from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea.

CHAPTER 7

[1]Thus did the Master, the LORD show me: And, look,
He was creating locusts at the beginning of the
sprouting of the late grain, and, look, it was the late
grain after the king's reaping. [2]And so, after they had
finished devouring the green growth of the land, I said,
"O Master, LORD, pray forgive! How will Jacob
stand, for he is small?" [3]The LORD repented
concerning this. "It shall not be," said the LORD.
[4]Thus did the LORD show me: And look, the Master,
the LORD was calling forth to contend with fire, and it
consumed the great deep and consumed the fields.
[5]And I said, "O Master, LORD, pray cease. How will
Jacob stand, for he is small?" [6]The LORD relented
concerning this. "This, too, shall not be," said the
Master, the LORD. [7]Thus did the LORD show me:
And, look, the Master was stationed by a wall built
with a plumb line, and in His hand was a plumb line.
[8]And the LORD said to me; "What do you see,
Amos?" And I said, "A plumb line." And the Master
said to me, "I am about to place a plumb line in the

midst of My people Israel. I will no longer forgive them."

[9]And Isaac's high places shall be
desolate,
and Israel's sanctuaries shall
become ruins,
and I will rise against the house
of Jeroboam with a sword.

[10]And Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, "Amos has plotted against you in the midst of the house of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words." [11]For thus has Amos said:

By the sword Jeroboam shall die,
and Israel shall surely be exiled
from its soil."

[12]And Amaziah said to Amos, "Seer, go, flee to the land of Judah and there eat bread and prophesy there. [13]But in Bethel you shall no longer prophesy, for it is the king's sanctuary and a royal house." [14]And Amos answered and said to Amaziah, "No prophet am I, nor the son of a prophet am I, but a cattle herder am I and

a tender of sycamore fruit. [15]And the LORD took me
from going after the flock, and the LORD said to me
‘Go, prophesy to My people Israel.’ [16]And, now, hear
the word of the LORD, you who say, ‘You shall not
prophesy to Israel and shall not preach to the house of
Isaac.’ [17]Therefore thus said the LORD:

Your wife shall play the whore in the
town,
and your sons and your daughters
shall fall by the sword,
and you shall be shared out with a
measuring line,
and you shall die on unclean soil,
and Israel shall surely be exiled
from its soil.”

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Thus did the Master, the LORD show me.* These words, which will be repeated as a formula, initiate a series of four prose prophecies that come in the form of visions (the Hebrew verb for “show” is literally “cause to see”).

And, look. This word, *wehineh,* is regularly used to introduce what is seen in a dream and thus underscores the generic connection between vision and dream.

after the king's reaping. Part of the earlier harvest was set aside for fodder for the king's herds and horses.

4. *it consumed the great deep and consumed the fields.* This would be a truly catastrophic fire, not only burning the fields (a natural event when a wildfire spreads) but drying out the groundwater beneath the surface of the earth (in effect, an apocalyptic event).

7. *plumb line.* This is the traditional understanding of *ʾanakh,* which appears only here. Some have disputed its meaning, claiming it might be a term for "axe" because it becomes here an instrument of destruction. "Plumb line," however, makes perfectly good sense. The wall is a plumb-line wall ("built" is merely implied) because it is properly constructed as a perfect vertical. God will use a plumb line to measure out inexorable judgment against Israel. Compare 2 Kings 21:13: "I will stretch over Jerusalem the line of Samaria and the weight [the "plumb" of the plumb line] of the house of Ahab, and I will wipe out Jerusalem."

10. *And Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam.* This narrative episode interrupts the sequence of four visionary prophecies.

Amos has plotted against you. Given the recent history of court conspiracies and coups in the northern kingdom, Amaziah readily represents the prophet as a political subversive.

11. *By the sword Jeroboam shall die, / and Israel shall surely be exiled from its soil.* Amaziah steps up the actual words of Amos's prophecy (verse 9), putting in his mouth an explicit prediction of the death of Jeroboam and of Israel's exile.

12. *there eat bread.* Modern translations have often eliminated the concreteness of this idiom by rendering it as "There earn your living" or some equivalent, but English has its own idiomatic use of "bread" as "sustenance" (for example, "breadwinner"). In fact, Rashi may be correct in saying "in language of contempt he spoke to him—there they will give you crusts of bread as payment for prophesying to them."

14. *No prophet am I, nor the son of a prophet.* Amos responds directly to the remark about eating bread. He says that he is no professional prophet of the

sort that expects payment for prophesying. The expression "son of a prophet" refers to the disciples who constituted the following of such a prophet. What he is invoking is the phenomenon registered in Samuel and Kings of career prophets surrounded by their disciples (who are called "sons of the prophet") and who cultivate ecstatic states, often with the aid of musical instruments. Amos, by contrast, is a simple herdsman and farmer driven to prophesy by a call from God.

a tender of sycamore fruit. The sycamore yields a figlike fruit, and the unusual verb used here, *boles,* may refer to a well-attested practice of scratching the surface of the fruit in order to facilitate its ripening.

17. *Your wife shall play the whore in the town.* Some interpreters want to understand the verb *tizneh* as "be raped" (or substitute another verb that has this meaning), but that seems questionable. The priest's shame will be compounded when his wife decides to give herself to the invading troops, either because she simply has her eye on the main chance or because she wants to avert any harm that might come to her.

you shall die on unclean soil. The "unclean soil" is of course the soil of the foreign land to which the exiles will be deported. This carries a special barb for Amaziah because he is a priest, enjoined to preserve ritual purity, and no sacrifices can be offered on unclean soil.

CHAPTER 8

[1]Thus did the Master, the LORD, show me: And,
look, a basket of summer's-end fruit. [2]And He said to
me, "What do you see, Amos?" And I said, "A basket
of summer's-end fruit." And the LORD said to me:

The end has come upon My people
Israel.
I will no longer forgive them.
[3]And the palace's songstresses shall
howl
on that day, said the LORD:
"Many the corpses flung
everywhere. Hush!"

[4]Hear this, who trample the needy,
destroying the poor of the land,
[5]saying, "When will the new moon
be over, that we may sell grain,

and the sabbath, that we may
trade in wheat?
to use a short *ephah* measure and an
oversize shekel-weight
and to tilt cheating scales,
6 to buy the indigent with silver
and the needy for the price of
sandals,
and we may sell chaff as grain."
7 The LORD has sworn by the Pride
of Jacob:
I will never forget their acts.
8 For this should not the earth
shudder
and all its dwellers mourn?
It shall rise, altogether, like the Nile,
heave and sink like the Nile of
Egypt.
9 And it shall happen on that day, said
the LORD,
I will make the sun set at noon
and darken the earth on a day
of light.
And I will turn your festivals into
mourning
and all your songs into lament,

And lay sackcloth on all loins
and every head a shaved pate.
And I will make her as the mourning
for an only child
and her end as a bitter day.

10 Look, days are coming, said the
LORD,
when I will let loose famine in the
land,
not famine for bread
and not thirst for water
but for hearing the words of the
LORD.
11 And they shall wander from sea to
sea,
and from the north to the east they
shall roam
to seek the LORD's word,
but they shall not find it.
12 On that day the lovely virgins shall
faint
and the young men, too, with
thirst.
13 Who swear by the Guilt of Samaria

and say, “As your God lives,
Dan,”
and “As the way to Beersheba
lives.”
They shall fall and rise no more.

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *summer’s-end fruit.* The Hebrew puns on *qayits,* “summer” and *qeits,* “end.” Since many fruits do not ripen until late in the summer, *qayits* might even actually mean “summer’s end.”

3. *songstresses.* The Masoretic Text has *shirot,* “(long) songs,” but most scholars prefer to read, as does this translation, *sharot,* “songstresses.”

Many the corpses flung everywhere. Hush! These are probably the women’s words. This does not scan as a line of poetry and the Hebrew syntax is ambiguously terse. The received text has *hishlikh,* “he flung,” but the context requires a passive form, *hoshlakh.* The Masoretes linked this verb with “hush,” but flinging is an action more appropriate to abandoned corpses.

5. *trade.* The verb here usually means “open” and probably refers to opening sacks of grain.

a short ephah *measure and an oversize shekel-weight.* Giving the buyer a short *ephah* (a dry measure) would be shortchanging him. The oversize weight for the shekel would mean paying more in silver than the actual stipulated silver weight.

6. *sell chaff as grain.* This loops back to the grain transactions at the beginning of their speech. Obviously, they would not actually have spoken this catalogue of their cheating practices—it is rather the prophet who exposes their intentions, putting the words in their mouths.

7. *the Pride of Jacob.* Though elsewhere this expression refers to the people of the northern kingdom, here it would have to be God.

8. *rise . . . like the Nile.* There are tides in the Nile and periods of flooding. The earth in this image will have the instability of water.

9. *every head a shaved pate.* This is a practice of mourning forbidden in Deuteronomy 14:1, evidently because of its association with paganism. It appears, however, with some frequency in poetry, either as a linguistic fossil or because it was actually common in popular religion.

I will make her. The nearest antecedent for this pronoun is "the earth" at the beginning of this verse, although it is possible that the reference is to Israel, often represented as a woman.

11. *from sea to sea.* This probably means from the Mediterranean to the Dead Sea, though from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea is also possible.

12. *the lovely virgins / . . . the young men.* These are young people in their prime, and the pride and joy of the nation. If even they faint away, one may infer that elders and children will scarcely be able to withstand the distress of this famine for the word of the LORD. Thus the idea of such a famine is made vividly concrete because people grow faint and perish, as if they were deprived of actual food and water.

13. *Who swear by the Guilt of Samaria.* The received text makes sense as it stands: the worship of the icons of the calves in Dan and Bethel is guilty worship. Some scholars, however, propose emending the Hebrew word for "guilt" so that it reads as the name of a pagan deity.

As the way to Beersheba lives. Here the oath is taken in the name of the way because a long pilgrimage to the south is involved in order to reach the cultic center in Beersheba. This is the second mention of this center—compare 5:5.

CHAPTER 9

[1]I saw the Master stationed by the
altar, and He said:
Strike the capitals that the thresholds
shake.
I will split them on the heads of
them all,
and who is left of them I will
slay with the sword.
None from them shall be able to
flee,
and no survivor from them shall
escape.
[2]Were they to dig down to Sheol,
from there My hand would take
them,
and were they to ascend to the
heavens,
from there I would bring them
down.

[3]And were they to hide on the peak
of Carmel,
I would search them out there and
take them.
And were they to take cover from
My eyes on the floor of the sea,
from there I would summon the
Serpent and it would bite them.
[4]And should they go in captivity
before their enemies,
from there I will summon the
sword and it would slay them.
And I will put My eye on them
for evil and not for good.

[5]And the Master, LORD of Armies,
Who but touches the earth and it
melts
and all dwellers upon it mourn,
and it all goes up like the Nile,
and sinks like the Nile of Egypt.
[6]Who builds in the heavens His lofts
and His vault upon earth He
founds.
Who calls forth the waters of the sea

and pours them over the earth—
the LORD is His name.

[7]Are you not like the Cushites to Me,
O Israelites? said the LORD.
Did I not bring up Israel from the
land of Egypt
and the Philistines from Crete
and Aram from Kir?
[8]Look, the eyes of the Master, the
LORD,
are upon the offending kingdom,
and I will destroy it
from the face of the earth.
But I will surely not destroy the
house of Jacob, said the LORD.
[9]For I am about to command,
and I will shake up the house of
Israel in all the nations
as one shakes in a sieve
and no pebble shall fall to the
ground.
[10]By the sword shall die
all the offenders among My
people

who say “The evil shall not
approach and come close to us.”
[11]On that day I will raise up
the fallen shelter of David
and I will stop up its breaches
and its ruins will I raise
and rebuild it as in days of
yore,
[12]so that they take hold of the
remnant of Edom
and all the nations on which My
name has been called,
said the LORD, Who does this.
[13]Look, days are coming, said the
LORD,
when the plowman shall overtake
the reaper
and the treader of grapes the
sower of seed.
And the mountains shall drip
fermented juice,
and all the hills shall melt.
[14]And I will restore the fortunes of
My people Israel,
and they shall rebuild desolate
towns and dwell there

and plant vineyards and drink
their wine.
And they shall make gardens
and eat their fruit.
15 And I will plant them on their soil,
and they shall no more be
uprooted from their soil
that I have given them, said the
LORD your God.

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Strike the capitals.* The imperative here is puzzling because it makes the prophet the agent of destruction, a role that prophets do not play. Some medieval Hebrew commentators propose that this command is delivered to an angel (not mentioned in the text) and not to Amos. An alternative would be to emend the verb to "I will strike," changing *hakh* to *ʾakh.*

I will split them. The received text has "he will split them." See the previous comment.

2. *Were they to dig down to Sheol.* This sequence of lines to the end of verse 3 is strongly reminiscent of Psalms 139:7–12. Both the passage in Psalms and this one articulate a vision of God as an all-seeing cosmic deity from Whom there can never be escape. The theater of retribution against Israel is thus dramatically widened.

3. *the Serpent.* This is a mythological entity, not the serpent of the Garden story but the monstrous Leviathan of Canaanite tradition. Here the once menacing sea god answers the LORD's bidding.

5. *Who but touches the earth and it melts.* This verse and the next are still another doxology celebrating God's overwhelming power, with language reminiscent of several psalms. The editorial motivation for the placement of the doxology here is the vivid evocation in verses 2–4 of God's cosmic omniscience in pursuit of all who seek to flee.

6. *vault.* The translation is a guess for *ʾagudah,* a term that may be architectural because it derives from a verbal stem that means "to bind together."

7. *Are you not like the Cushites to Me.* The Cushites are the Nubians, perhaps invoked here because as black Africans, they would seem to be an ultimate other to the Israelites (a presence of individual Nubians among the Israelites is attested to in several biblical narratives, with no suggestion of racial prejudice). The idea, then, is that God oversees all nations and peoples, however different they might seem from Israel. But from what follows in the next line of poetry, one would expect a mention of God's having brought the Cushites to Nubia from another land, and that is absent.

Israel from the land of Egypt. Nubia borders on Egypt to the south, so its mention in the preceding line provides an associative preparation for the introduction at this point of Egypt.

the Philistines from Crete / and Aram from Kir. The Philistines in fact migrated to the eastern shore of the Mediterranean from somewhere in the Greek realm, perhaps actually from Crete. Nothing is known about a migration of Arameans from Kir, far to the northeast in Mesopotamia, but the reference here may reflect factual knowledge about such origins in Amos's time. In any case, the point of these references is to say that God oversees the migration of all peoples and that the movement of Israel from Egypt to Canaan is not unique.

8. *the eyes of the Master . . . / are upon the offending kingdom.* The offending kingdom must be Israel. Thus, the God Who moves peoples from one territory to another does not grant special privileges or guarantee permanent residence to Israel if it turns itself into an offending kingdom.

But I will surely not destroy the house of Jacob. The prophet has just represented God as saying He will destroy the offending kingdom from the face of the earth. Although it is possible that he wants to qualify that

sweeping declaration, one suspects that the mitigation of the prophecy of destruction is an editorial addition—especially since this entire sentence does not scan as poetry.

9. *no pebble shall fall to the ground.* This is a little confusing. Does it mean that the whole people, good and bad, will be shaken in the sieve of exile and destroyed? A possible solution is that the "pebble"—"the offenders" of the next line—will remain in the sieve while the grain, which has smaller particles, will fall through the holes and be saved.

11. *the fallen shelter.* The Hebrew noun *sukah* is strategically chosen. It is the shelter or hut erected in a field for someone watching over the crops. Thus, unlike a fortress or a palace, it is easily knocked down.

David. This invocation of the Davidic dynasty appears to suggest a hope on the part of the prophet that in future times the united kingdom will be restored.

12. *all the nations on which My name has been called.* Edom and other regions east of the Jordan were conquered by David and made part of a mini-empire. David's taking possession of these lands is what is meant by God's name being called on these nations. Now the empire will be restored.

13. *the plowman shall overtake the reaper.* The whole line is a hyperbole for an era of extravagant agricultural fertility.

and all the hills shall melt. Those who see in this an image of fields of waving grain betray a lack of understanding of how biblical poetry works. First, the mountains "drip" new wine because the yield of the vineyards is so abundant. Then, in an intensification in the second verset, the hills produce such a flow of wine that they veritably melt.

15. *And I will plant them on their soil, / and they shall no more be uprooted from their soil.* The prophecy pointedly concludes by underscoring through the terms chosen a continuity between the flourishing vineyards and gardens and the people flourishing on the soil. The Hebrew *ʾadamah* means "soil" but has an extended sense of "land," and both meanings are brought into play here.

Obadiah

CHAPTER 1

[1]The vision of Obadiah. Thus said the LORD
concerning Edom:

A report we have heard from the
LORD,
and an envoy among the nations
was sent.
Rise and let us rise against her
for battle.
[2]Look, I have made you last among
the nations,
you are utterly spurned.
[3]Your heart's arrogance deceived you
who dwell in the clefts of the
rock,
in your abode on high,
who say in your heart,
"Who can bring me down to the
ground?"

[4]Should you go high as the eagle
and should you nest among the
stars,
from there I would bring you
down, said the LORD.
[5]Should thieves come to you,
plunderers in the night,
how you would be destroyed!
They would take but what they
needed.
Should grape harvesters come to
you,
would they not leave gleanings?
[6]How Esau has been stripped,
his hidden places laid bare!
[7]To the border they have sent you
off,
all the men allied with you.
They deceived you, prevailed against
you,
all the men in league with you.
Who ate bread at your table
have laid a trap beneath you.
There is no discerning in him.

[8]Why, on that day, said the LORD:
I shall destroy the sages from Edom
and discerning from Esau's mountain.
[9]And your survivors shall be terror-stricken, Teman,
that every man be cut off from Esau's mountain.
[10]For the slaughter, for the outrage against your brother Jacob,
shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever.
[11]On the day you stood aloof,
on the day strangers seized his wealth
and aliens entered his gates,
and for Jerusalem they cast lots,
and you were as one of them.
[12]And do not gloat on your brother's day,
on the day of his downfall.
And do not rejoice over the Judahites
on the day of their destruction.
And do not boast

on the day of distress.
[13]Do not enter My people's gate
on the day of their disaster.
Do not gloat on your part
over the evil that befalls him on
the day of his disaster.
[14]And do not stand at the crossroads
to cut off his fugitives
and do not hand over his survivors
on the day of distress.
[15]For near is the day of the LORD
against all the nations.
As you have done, it shall be done to
you.
Your requital shall come back on
your head.
[16]For as you drank on My holy
mountain,
all the nations shall drink ever
more.
They shall drink and babble
and be as though they never had
been.
[17]But on Mount Zion there shall be a
remnant,
and it shall be sacrosanct,

and the house of Jacob shall
dispossess their
dispossessors.
[18]And the house of Jacob shall be a
fire
and the house of Joseph a flame,
and the house of Esau shall be straw,
and they shall ignite them and
consume them.
And the house of Esau shall have no
survivor,
for the LORD has spoken.

[19]And they shall take hold of Esau's mountain and the lowland of the Philistines and the field of Ephraim and the field of Samaria, and Benjamin—Gilead. [20]And this force of exiles of the Israelites that is among the Canaanites as far as Zarephath and the exiles of Jerusalem who are at Sepharad—they shall take hold of the Negeb towns. [21]And rescuers shall go up Mount Zion to exact judgment against Esau's mountain, and the kingdom shall be the LORD's.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *concerning Edom.* Obadiah's exclusive subject is the outrages Edom has committed against Judah and the retribution it will receive for its hateful acts. The inference is compelling that he witnessed Edom's collaboration with the Babylonians in the dire events of 586 B.C.E. Jeremiah, Second Isaiah, and, most vividly, Psalm 137, register responses to these same acts of Edom.

A report we have heard. Much of this passage through verse 6 replicates Jeremiah 49:14–16, although the order of verses is different and there are some discrepancies between the two texts. Either Obadiah drew from Jeremiah (perhaps the most likely explanation) or the other way around, or both writers used a common source.

3. *who dwell in the clefts of the rock.* Edom is in part a mountainous region, referred to as "Mount Seir" and also (here only) as "Edom's mountain."

5. *how you would be destroyed.* This is somewhat puzzling because the point is that the thieves would take only what they needed. One solution would be to read this clause as a question, although that would clash with the exclamatory "how" at the beginning of the next verse.

7. *all the men allied with you.* This is measure-for-measure justice: Edom betrayed its brother Israel; now it will be betrayed by its allies.

Who ate bread at your table. The Hebrew shows merely "your bread," but the text looks defective because this one word is not sufficient prosodically to constitute a verset. The translation assumes that the line originally read 'okhley *laḥmekha,* literally, "the eaters of your bread," a biblical idiom for dependents or vassals.

There is no discerning in him. The masculine pronoun refers to Edom. Such switches from third person to second person are common biblical usage.

8. *discerning from Esau's mountain.* This is part of a new prophecy, inserted at this point because the "discerning" at the end of the previous prophecy is picked up in the opening line here.

9. *Teman.* A principal city of Edom.

10. *For the slaughter.* The received text puts this single Hebrew word at the end of the previous verse, but it makes better sense here.

11. *On the day you stood aloof.* As the next three versets make clear, this is the day of the conquest of Jerusalem.

for Jerusalem they cast lots. They cast lots in order to divide up the city in shares for the conquerors.

12. *And do not gloat.* The literal sense of the word is "see in," a set idiom for witnessing the downfall of one's enemy with schadenfreude. This series of sentences is cast as negative imperatives, but the implication is that this is what Edom in fact did and should never have done.

14. *And do not stand at the crossroads / to cut off his fugitives.* The indictment of Edom moves from his simply gloating over the downfall of Judah to his taking an active part in the onslaught by killing those who attempt to flee.

16. *For as you drank on My holy mountain.* The "you" of the preceding verse is in the singular and clearly refers to Edom. This "you" is plural and probably refers to the Judahites: they have drunk the poison chalice (*kos hatarʿeilah*—that term is elliptically implied but not mentioned) on the day Jerusalem ("My holy mountain") was destroyed, and now the turn of the nations is coming to drink that cup to its bitter dregs.

babble / . . . never had been. The Hebrew deploys an untranslatable pun: *laʿu . . . loʾ hayu.*

18. *no survivor.* This is condign justice for the people who cut down the survivors of Judah.

20. *Zarephath.* This is a Phoenician town about nine miles south of Sidon. In the Middle Ages, it would be adopted as the designation for France, a usage carried over into modern Hebrew.

Sepharad. This is Sardis in Asia Minor. In the Middle Ages, it would be used as the name for Spain, another usage preserved in modern Hebrew. Obadiah appears to have mapped out a plan in which groups of Judahites exiled to different regions would be assigned different territories in the return to Zion.

21. *And rescuers shall go up Mount Zion to exact judgment against Esau's mountain.* The military strategy is somewhat opaque, the point being to set mountain over against mountain. Perhaps what is implied is that the forces of

Judah will assemble on their own lofty mountain and then proceed to attack Mount Seir.

Jonah

Introduction

We know nothing about the author of the Book of Jonah or his geographic location, and only a rough approximation can be made of the time of the book's composition. The main evidence for dating is linguistic: there are quite a few turns of phrase that indicate this is Late Biblical prose, a kind of Hebrew not written until after the return from the Babylonian exile in the fifth century B.C.E. The book's universalist theology probably also argues for a relatively late date because one does not find this sort of rigorously world-embracing monotheism until Second Isaiah, the anonymous sixth-century prophet of the Babylonian exile. It is possible that the book's author drew on an earlier folktale, as some scholars have conjectured, although there is no way of proving that, and the fabulous elements of the story in their very extravagance have the look more of literary invention than of a naïve folk imagination.

The name Jonah son of Amittai is drawn from a passing reference in 2 Kings 14:25 to a prophet so designated who delivered God's word during the reign of Jeroboam II and about whom nothing more than that is said. Since our story, which has no clear historical moorings, apart from the vague invocation of Assyria, was almost surely composed centuries later (despite some unconvincing dissent on the issue of dating from a few biblical scholars), the protagonist is surely not identical with the prophet mentioned in 2 Kings. The writer may have adopted the name because the patronym *amittai* suggests *ʾemet*, "truth," in Hebrew. The first name, *yonah*, means "dove," which could have an ironic application here because this Jonah is an unwilling agent who ends up averting a punitive cataclysm, in approximate analogy to Noah's dove, which signals the restoration of life after a punitive cataclysm. Alternately, the writer might simply have chosen this particular prophet's name as a convenient hook on which to hang a fable about prophecy precisely because nothing more is known about the prophet in question.

While the Hebrew narratives composed in the First Temple period utilize heterogeneous materials, they exhibit a great deal of uniformity in regard to narrative conventions and the general purposes for which

narratives are framed. By contrast, what characterizes the narratives of the Late Biblical period is a vigorous experimentation with genre and an impulse to move beyond the governing procedures of earlier biblical narrative. Perhaps the most distinctive hallmark of Jonah's relatively late composition is that it tells a story altogether unlike those of earlier biblical literature. The recalcitrance of the prophet is a recurring feature of the classic call narratives of the prophets, as with Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Moses himself, but nowhere else do we have a person summoned to prophecy who actually tries to flee to the other end of the known world. Similarly, though one prophet, Amos, is sent from his home in Judah to prophesy in the northern—and not very friendly—kingdom of Israel, the two realms are still, after all, within the family, while only in Jonah is a man called to deliver a prophecy to the general populace of an altogether foreign, and hostile, nation.

The two instances just mentioned offer a clue to Jonah's relation to its literary antecedents. It picks up certain hints or precedents from earlier biblical narrative but pushes them to an extreme where they play a role in what amounts to a different genre. The narratives originating in the First Temple period, despite exhibiting some miraculous events and some

spectacular episodes of divine intervention, are by and large "history-like," as Hans Frei has aptly called them, from the Patriarchal Tales to the stories of David and the later kings. Jonah, on the other hand is a manifestly fabulous tale. Though earlier Hebrew narrative offers one anomalous instance of a talking animal, Balaam's she-ass, that is the exception that proves the rule, an invention introduced to sharpen the satire on the pagan soothsayer who is blind to what his visionary beast can plainly see. Jonah's fish does not speak, but it follows God's instructions dutifully, first swallowing Jonah and then, when it gets the word, vomiting him up on dry land. Its capacity, moreover, to keep Jonah three days in the dark wet prison of its innards is an even more fantastic contrivance than according Balaam's ass the momentary gift of speech. This peculiar performance of the fish, serving as God's obedient instrument, is in keeping with the cattle and sheep in Nineveh, bizarrely required to don sackcloth and fast together with the human beings, and, in the deliberately ambiguous wording of the Hebrew, seen as if consciously covering themselves with sackcloth and as if crying out to God along with the human denizens of Nineveh.

All this has led scholars to scramble for labels to describe Jonah. It has been called everything from a

Menippean satire to an allegory, but none of these identifications of Jonah is entirely convincing. I would see Jonah as its own kind of ad hoc innovative narrative. It aims to recast traditional Israelite notions of prophecy in a radically universalist framework. The prophets of Israel all work in an emphatically national context. Their messages are addressed to the people of Israel, often with explicitly political concerns, and the messages are manifestly directed to the fate of the nation—its imminent destruction by foreign powers if it fails to mend its evil ways, the fulfillment of its hope for national restoration after the disaster has occurred. The medium of the prophets is generally poetry, where all the powerful expressive resources of the Hebrew language could be summoned to convey the prophetic vision to the people. This may be one reason that Jonah is accorded no verbal prophetic message, only that single brief prediction of catastrophe which, if one is supposed to think of such considerations, he would have spoken not in Hebrew but in Akkadian. Jonah engages with no Israelites in the story. First he has an exchange with the polytheistic mariners, then he addresses the Ninevites, and his closest connection is with two presumably insensate living things, a very large fish and a leafy plant. The God with whom he has such difficulties because of his Israelite nationalist

mind-set is not chiefly the God of Israel but the God of the whole world, of all creatures large and small. He is not a God you can pin down to national settings. Although He initially addresses Jonah somewhere within the land of Israel—perhaps even in Jerusalem, where the Temple, evoked in chapter 2, stands—His fullest dialogue with Jonah is on a promontory overlooking Nineveh. While He does rebuke Jonah as the God of earlier Hebrew narratives and poems rebukes wayward people, the rebuke itself is oddly formulated, in keeping with the wonderful strangeness of this book. God exercises magisterial control over storm winds, fish, livestock, and plants, as well as over human beings of all tribes and nations, and He asks the recalcitrant prophet why he should "have pity" for an ephemeral plant but not for a vast city of clueless human beings and their beasts. It is beautifully appropriate that the story ends with the beasts, and with a question. It is in no way clear how Jonah will respond to this question. Will God's challenge lead him to a transformative insight about God's dominion over all things and all peoples, or will it prove to be a challenge that is quite beyond the myopia of his ingrained prejudices? The trembling balance of this concluding ambiguity perfectly focuses the achievement of the Book of Jonah both as an

enchanting story and as the shaking up of an entire theological world.

CHAPTER 1

[1]And the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, [2]“Get up, go to Nineveh the great city, and call out against it, for their evil has risen before Me.” [3]And Jonah got up to flee to Tarshish from before the LORD to Jaffa and found a ship coming from Tarshish, and he paid its fare and went down with them to go to Tarshish from before the LORD. [4]And the LORD cast a great wind upon the sea, and there was a great storm on the sea, and the ship threatened to break up. [5]And the sailors were afraid, and each man cried out to his god, and they cast the gear that was in the ship into the sea to lighten their load. And Jonah had come down into the far corners of the craft and had laid down and fallen deep asleep. [6]And the captain approached him and said, “What are you doing deep asleep? Call out to your god. Perhaps the god will give some thought to us, that we may not perish.” [7]And they said to each other, “Let us cast lots that we may know on whose account this evil is upon us.” And they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. [8]And

they said to him, “Tell us, pray, you on whose account this evil is upon us, what is your work and from where do you come? What is your land, and from what people are you?” [9]And he said to them, “I am a Hebrew and the LORD God of the heavens do I fear, Who made the sea and the dry land.” [10]And the men feared greatly, and they said to him, “What is this you have done?” For the men knew that he was fleeing from before the LORD, for he had told them. [11]And they said to him, “What shall we do that the sea calm for us?” For the sea was storming more and more. [12]And he said to them, “Lift me up and cast me into the sea that the sea calm for you, for I know that on my account this great storm is upon you.” [13]And the men rowed to get back to the dry land and were not able, for the sea was storming upon them more and more. [14]And they called out to the LORD and said, “Please, O LORD, pray let us not perish on account of the life of this man, and do not exact from us the blood of the innocent, for You, O LORD, as You desire You do.” [15]And they lifted up Jonah and cast him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its fury. [16]And the men feared the LORD greatly and offered sacrifices to the LORD and made vows.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *came to Jonah.* The literal meaning of the Hebrew verb is "was to Jonah."

2. *Nineveh the great city.* The entirely fabulous proportions of its vastness will become clear in chapter 3. Although there are a couple of rare instances in the Book of Kings of an Israelite prophet's going on a mission to a foreign country, the call to go to Nineveh is anomalous and hardly historical. Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire, no longer existed by the likely time of Jonah's composition; however, it is remembered as the power that entirely destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and later seriously threatened the southern kingdom of Judah as well. To send a Hebrew prophet to Nineveh would be rather like sending a Jewish speaker to deliver moral exhortation to the Germans in Berlin in 1936. While Jonah's words to God in 4:2 make it clear that he does not want to undertake the mission because he foresees that the Ninevites will repent and that God will forgive them, he might well also be afraid to go to Nineveh.

3. *And Jonah got up to flee.* For a brief moment, he might seem to be heeding God's command to get up and go to Nineveh, but this momentary illusion is broken by the infinitive "to flee."

Tarshish. This location, mentioned in a variety of biblical texts, has been identified with a variety of places from Asia Minor to Spain. In any event, it is far to the west, in the opposite direction from Nineveh.

Jaffa. This port city, more or less on the site of present-day Tel Aviv, was probably not under Israelite control. The rest of Jonah's story will unfold entirely among foreigners.

went down. We are not informed about Jonah's hometown, but it would likely be up in the hill country, perhaps even in Jerusalem, for Israelite habitation in the coastal plain was sparse. First Jonah goes down to Jaffa, then into the ship. His trajectory is a series of goings down as he is cast into the sea and then into the belly of the fish.

4. *the ship threatened to break up.* The term *ḥishvah* reflects a root that in earlier biblical Hebrew means "to plan," "to devise," or "to reckon." Jack Sasson argues that it is a deliberate personification and thus he renders it as "expected," but "threatened" is personification enough and more idiomatic in context.

5. *the sailors were afraid.* Their fear will mark this entire episode, taking on a new meaning at its end.

to lighten their load. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "to lighten from upon them."

Jonah had come down. This is the third occurrence of this thematically fraught verb, marked here as a pluperfect (subject before the verb, verb in the *qatal* form).

the far corners of the craft. This is presumably the hold, but the phrase *yarketey hasefinah* plays on *yarketey bor,* "the far corners of the Pit" (that is, death), and perhaps also, as James Ackerman has proposed, on *yarketey tsafon*, "the far corners of Tsafon" (the dwelling place of the gods in Canaanite mythology).

6. *will give some thought to us.* The Hebrew *yitʿashet* is unique to this text. The translation follows the proposal of some medieval exegetes that is related to *ʿeshtonot*, "thoughts."

7. *Let us cast lots.* The lot is a divinatory device, especially for determining guilt. See Joshua 18:6 and 1 Samuel 14:41–42.

8. *you on whose account.* The "you" is merely implied in the Hebrew.

what is your work. Most passengers would have been merchants, but Jonah has brought no merchandise on board. The noun has the specific connotation of a designated task, so they may be asking Jonah what he is up to.

What is your land. Jaffa, probably a polyglot city where traders embarked and disembarked, would give them no clue as to the national identity of this passenger.

9. *I am a Hebrew.* This is regularly the designation used by foreigners for Israelites and so it makes sense that Jonah would choose it to identify his nationality to the ship's crew.

and the LORD God of the heavens do I fear, Who made the sea and the dry land. Although this declaration of faith serves the thematic purposes of this story, the effect is almost comic: Jonah, who has run away from God's command, as if a geographic escape from God were possible, now announces his reverence for the universal God of sky, sea, and earth. His declaration would surely at first have baffled the polytheistic sailors, for whom there would have been a separate deity for each of these realms.

11. *For the sea was storming more and more.* As the story continues, there is an indication in the verbal form used, *holekh wesoʿer*, of a constant increase in the intensity of the storm, which was powerful to begin with.

12. *Lift me up and cast me into the sea.* Jonah means simply that if they get rid of his jinxing presence on board, the storm will cease to pound the ship. The crew, however, may well have construed this as casting an offering to appease the raging sea god.

13. *And the men rowed to get back to the dry land.* They are reluctant to follow Jonah's instructions, which they of course understand as condemning him to almost certain death. But rowing toward the shore (the ship would have been equipped with both oars and sails) is a strategy of desperation because in a fierce storm, approaching the shore would have most likely led to a catastrophic shipwreck.

14. *And they called out to the LORD.* They may not have been transformed into monotheists, but Jonah's testimony to them has clearly convinced them that in the present dire circumstances, the LORD, YHWH, is a powerful deity who controls the urgent situation.

let us not perish on account of the life of this man. This may mean that they do not want to be the target of God's punishing wrath together with Jonah, who is on the ship with them. But the reference to the blood of the innocent in the next clause may rather suggest that they are praying not to be condemned for killing Jonah by throwing him overboard.

16. *And the men feared the LORD greatly.* This is exactly the phrase used for their fear of the storm in the verse 10. Now it appears in its other meaning of showing reverence through worship (the sacrifices and vows at the end of this verse) for a deity, even though the first sense of terror still lingers—they

revere the LORD because they have witnessed His fearsome power in the terrible storm and in His causing it to suddenly stop. Again one needn't assume that they have become perfect monotheists, like the Aramean general in 2 Kings miraculously cured of his skin disease, for they might simply be recognizing that Jonah's deity is the one who has manifested fearsome control over the storm that almost destroyed them. In any case, the turning of the hearts of these pagans to the God of Israel anticipates the response of the Ninevites to Jonah's message.

offered sacrifices to the LORD and made vows. There is some evidence that ships in the ancient world actually carried animals which could be sacrificed on board at urgent or propitious moments. The "vows" are pledges to offer further, votary sacrifices after their safe return to land.

CHAPTER 2

[1]And the LORD set out a great fish to swallow Jonah,
and he was three days and three nights in the innards
of the fish. [2]And Jonah prayed to the LORD his God
from the innards of the fish. [3]And he said:

"I called out from my straits
to the LORD, and He answered
me.
From the belly of Sheol I cried out
—
You heard my voice.
[4]You flung me into the deep, in the
heart of the sea,
and the current came round me.
All your breakers and waves
streamed over me.
[5]And I thought:
I am banished from before Your
eyes.

Yet again will I look
on Your holy temple.
[6]Water lapped about me to the neck,
the deep came round me,
weed was bound round my
head.
[7]To the roots of the mountains I
went down—
the underworld's bolts against me
forever.
But You brought up my life from the
Pit,
O LORD my God.
[8]As my life-breath grew faint within
me,
the LORD did I recall,
and my prayer came unto You,
to Your holy Temple.
[9]Those who look to vaporous lies
will turn away from their mercy.
[10]And I with a voice of thanksgiving
let me sacrifice to You.
What I vowed let me pay.
Rescue is the LORD's."

[11] And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto the dry land.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And the* LORD *set out.* This term (*m-n-h*) recurs in the subsequent story, highlighting God's supervisory control over all living constituents of creation: animal, vegetable, and human.

a great fish. Although this could conceivably be a whale, as traditional understandings of the story imagine—perhaps most vividly in *Moby-Dick*—the Hebrew employs the unspecific generic term for sea creature.

three days and three nights. Many events in biblical narrative are said to occur in precisely this time span. What is distinctive here is the emphatic addition of three nights to three days, inviting us to envisage Jonah's terror imprisoned in the dark belly of the big fish three long nights and three long days, during which he of course has no way of distinguishing between day and night.

2. *the* LORD *his God.* Now, as if to confirm Jonah's declaration of faith to the mariners, the LORD is reported to be his God.

3. *I called out from my straits / to the* LORD, *and He answered me.* As is the regular practice in biblical narrative, a poem is inserted that was originally composed for another context (compare Hannah's thanksgiving psalm, 1 Samuel 2:1–10). This poem is a psalm of thanksgiving, exhibiting many of the formulas and metaphors of that genre. It fits the narrative situation somewhat imperfectly because, while it is introduced as Jonah's prayer from the belly of the fish, it is not actually a plea for deliverance but the rendering of thanks to God for having already delivered the speaker, as this opening line at once makes clear. The image of almost drowning in the depths of the seas as a metaphor for near death (often because of a grave illness) is conventional in thanksgiving psalms, but here it is made to apply literally to Jonah's desperate aqueous plight. Not surprisingly, the inserted psalm makes no

mention of being swallowed by a fish because the maws of gigantic fish do not figure in thanksgiving psalms. Nevertheless, the poem does incorporate several relevant points of connection with Jonah's story.

You heard my voice. Having first referred to God in the third person, the speaker now intimately addresses Him directly.

4. *All your breakers and waves / streamed over me.* This vivid image of drowning invokes, as noted, a conventional trope of the thanksgiving psalm.

5. *And I thought: / I am banished from before Your eyes.* Death is the ultimate separation from God in the biblical worldview. But the psalm also provides a geographical orientation for Jonah's story: fleeing God's presence, which has its territorial focus in the Jerusalem Temple on Mount Zion, Jonah finds himself in the watery depths, at the antipodes from God's holy place. He has manifestly "gone down" (compare verse 7, "to the roots of the mountains I went down") from Jerusalem.

Yet again will I look / on Your holy temple. The speaker expresses faith against odds that he will live and return to worship God in His temple. Jonah, who has fled from the divine presence, now affirms the desire to return and enjoy it.

6. *weed was bound round my head.* This strong image of the head entrammeled in seaweed amplifies the conventional metaphor of sinking into the depths. The clause is rhythmically compact and assonant in the Hebrew—*suf ḥavush lero'shi*—an effect the translation tries to emulate.

7. *underworld's . . . / the Pit.* Because the sea as a site of drowning is the metaphorical equivalent of death, the poem naturally moves from the watery abyss to the underworld, just as it began by placing the speaker in "the belly of Sheol."

8. *my prayer came unto You, / to Your holy Temple.* The Temple is where prayer is most readily heard by God. We have here a cosmic reach from the roots of the mountains, the bottom of the sea, to the Temple on Mount Zion.

9. *Those who look to vaporous lies.* This phrase replicates a phrase that occurs in Psalm 31:7.

will turn away from their mercy. The wording in the Hebrew is cryptic and has encouraged diverse interpretations. The least strained, which this translation seeks to register, is that the idol worshippers (clearly the referent of "those who look to vaporous lies") at some point will be compelled to recognize that the purported deities from whom they seek mercy are mere illusions, and thus they will abandon their futile worship. The possessive pronoun "their" (in Hebrew merely a suffix) attached to "mercy" would refer to the idolators. In all this, as both medieval and modern commentators have noted, there is some relevance to Jonah and the sailors: each of the mariners calls upon his own God, but to no avail; after hearing Jonah's words, they implore YHWH instead, Who in the end saves them.

10. *And I with a voice of thanksgiving.* One of the conventions of the thanksgiving psalm is to announce thanks or acclamation (*todah*, which is also the designation of the thanksgiving sacrifice) at the end of the poem.

let me sacrifice . . . / let me pray. Existing translations render this as a simple future, but that misses the nuance of the Hebrew because both verbs show the suffix that is the marker of the optative mode. What the speaker declares is that he *wishes* to offer sacrifice. Presumably, we will carry out his desire, but that is different from a simple statement of the future tense.

11. *And the LORD spoke to the fish.* Just as He assigns the fish to swallow Jonah at the beginning of the episode, now He gives word to the fish to spew out Jonah. God's omnipresent control of all things is again manifest.

vomited. As Sasson observes, this unpleasant verb is perfectly appropriate for a kind of indignity to which Jonah is subjected in the very act of being rescued.

CHAPTER 3

[1]And the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second
time, saying, [2]“Get up, go to Nineveh the great city,
and call out to it the call that I speak to you.” [3]And
Jonah got up and went to Nineveh according to the
word of the LORD. And Nineveh was a great city of
God’s, a three days’ walk across. [4]And Jonah began to
come into the city, one day’s walk, and he called out
and said, “Forty days more, and Nineveh is
overthrown.” [5]And the people of Nineveh trusted God,
and they called a fast and donned sackcloth, from the
greatest of them to the least. [6]And the word reached
the king of Nineveh, and he rose from his throne and
took off his mantle and covered himself in sackcloth
and sat upon ashes. [7]And he had it proclaimed and he
said in Nineveh: “By the authority of the king and his
great men, saying, man and beast, cattle and sheep,
shall taste nothing. They shall not graze and they shall
not drink water. [8]And man and beast shall cover
themselves with sackcloth, and they shall call out to
God with all their might, and every man of them shall

turn back from his evil way and from the outrage to which they hold fast. [9]Who knows? Perhaps God will turn back and relent and turn back from His blazing wrath, and we shall not perish." [10]And God saw their acts, that they had turned back from their evil way, and God relented from the evil that He said to do to them, and he did not do it.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Get up, go to Nineveh the great city, and call out to it.* God repeats verbatim His initial command to Jonah, rightly anticipating that after Jonah's terrifying experience of God's power on the ship and in the belly of the fish, the prophet will now be prepared to carry out the mission. The one small difference from the opening words of chapter 1 is that instead of the proposition *ʿal*, "against," God uses *ʾel,* "to," perhaps suggesting that Jonah's message may not have an altogether hostile purpose. If that is so, it is a clue Jonah does not pick up, as we shall see.

3. *And Jonah got up and went to Nineveh.* All we know about his location is that, after having been spewed out by the big fish, he is somewhere on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean. In a move characteristic of biblical narrative, his journey to Nineveh, which would have taken weeks, is compressed into four Hebrew words, with all circumstantial detail suppressed.

a great city of God's. The Hebrew has been variously understood as "a great city to God," "a great city before God," and even as "a super-great city" (with *ʾelohim* serving merely as an intensifier). But this preposition, *l*^{e}, often means "belonging to" in biblical Hebrew (including many inscriptions on pottery, seals, and the like). That meaning makes sense in terms of the

theology of the book: Nineveh, like everything else in the world, is God's possession, and thus God is appropriately concerned about the behavior of its inhabitants and their fate.

a three days' walk across. "Across" is merely implied in the Hebrew. But the dimensions of the city vividly reflect the fabulous nature of the story: clocking roughly three miles an hour, a walker could cover as much as thirty miles in a day. A city ninety miles across would be considerably larger than contemporary Los Angeles, and, needless to say, no actual city in the ancient Near East could have been anywhere near that big. This three days' walk also has the consequence that it will take Jonah three days—a formulaic unit in biblical narrative, as we have seen in the instance of the sojourn in the fish's belly—to proclaim his message throughout the city.

4. *Forty days more, and Nineveh is overthrown.* The number is formulaic, as in the forty days of the Flood, the forty days Moses spends on the mountain, and the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Unless we are to construe Jonah's prophecy as a highly elliptical report, it is unconditional: in forty days, Nineveh is to be utterly devastated (and Jonah uses the participial form, not the future, to heighten the immediacy), with the verb "overthrown" the same one that is applied to Sodom. But, as the next verse makes clear, the people of Nineveh understand this dire prediction as implying a reversal of the disaster if they change their ways.

5. *And the people of Nineveh trusted God.* That is, they trust God's word delivered by Jonah that they will be annihilated unless they turn back from their evil ways. This translation avoids the use of "believe" for the Hebrew term because the general meaning of this word in the Bible—as opposed to the postbiblical usage of *he'emin*—suggests an act of trust, not belief. One should not imagine that the Ninevites have become monotheists, but rather that they have taken seriously the word of YHWH that He is prepared to destroy the city. The claim of some scholars that this verb when followed by the preposition *b*^{e} means "believe" does not stand up under analysis. The few cases where it occurs with this preposition are at best ambiguous, and in Micah 7:5, the usage is unambiguously a statement about trust, not belief: "Do not trust in evil," and then in the poetic parallelism, "nor place confidence (*tivteḥu*) in a leader."

6. *And the word reached the king of Nineveh.* First, a wave of penitence sweeps through the populace as Jonah continues his three days' walk through the city, crying out his grim prophecy, then word of it comes to the king in his palace.

his mantle. Elsewhere the noun *ʾaderet* can be any sort of mantle or cloak, but here it is clearly a royal mantle with the designation perhaps playing on the word *ʾadir*, "majestic," that might be discerned in its root.

7. *had it proclaimed.* Literally, "caused to be shouted."

By the authority. The term *mitaʿam* is appropriate for the introduction of a royal decree and also is one of the reflections in our text of Late Biblical Hebrew.

man and beast, cattle and sheep, shall taste nothing. The bracketing, a virtual equation, of man and beast becomes a thematic thrust of the story. It is, of course, bizarre that a fast should be imposed on animals, another reflection of the fabulous character of the story, and that bizarreness will be heightened in the next verse.

graze. Although this word ordinarily apply only to the animals, here it seems, almost comically, to refer to humans as well.

8. *And man and beast shall cover themselves with sackcloth.* The translation closely follows the wording of the Hebrew, which intimates an image, against all logic, of the beasts voluntarily covering themselves with sackcloth. In the next clause, even though "call out" should refer to the humans only, its syntactical placement comes close to inviting us to imagine the beasts calling out as well. All this amounts to a kind of hyperbolic farcical representation of the penitence of Nineveh: after Jonah's message, the city is so caught up in a profound impulse of penitence that a fast with sackcloth is imposed on beasts as well as on human beings.

turn back. The verb *shuv,* repeated three times in two verses, becomes the thematic focus of this episode: the people turn back from evil, and God then turns back from His baleful intentions.

10. *God relented from the evil that He had said to do to them.* "Evil" here means "harm," as often elsewhere in biblical usage, but it is a measure-for-measure response to the evil of the Ninevites, and thus the translation follows the repetition of the word in the Hebrew. As in the previous episode, God is

seen first as a wrathful God—sending the terrible storm that threatens the sailors' lives as well as Jonah's—and then as a merciful God—rescuing Jonah from the belly of the fish to give him a second chance as a prophet, and now canceling the decree to destroy Nineveh.

CHAPTER 4

[1]And the thing was very evil for Jonah, and he was incensed. [2]And he prayed to the LORD and said, “I beseech You, LORD, was it not my word when I was still in my land? Therefore did I hasten to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in kindness and relenting from evil. [3]And now, LORD, take my life, pray, from me, for better my death than my life.” [4]And the LORD said, “Are you good and angry?” [5]And Jonah went out of the city and sat down to the east of the city and made himself a shelter there and sat under it in the shade till he might see what would happen in the city. [6]And the LORD God set out a *qiqayon* plant, and it rose up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to save him from his evil plight. And Jonah rejoiced greatly over the *qiqayon*. [7]And God set out a worm as dawn came up on the morrow, and it struck the *qiqayon* and it withered. [8]And it happened, as the sun rose, that God set out a slashing east wind, and the sun struck Jonah’s head, and he

grew faint and wanted to die, and he said, “Better my death than my life.” [9]And God said to Jonah, “Are you good and angry over the *qiqayon*?” And he said, “I am good and angry, to the point of death.” [10]And the LORD said, “You—you had pity over the *qiqayon*, for which you did not toil and which you did not grow, which overnight came and overnight was gone. [11]And I, shall I not have pity for Nineveh the great city, in which there are many more than one hundred twenty thousand human beings who do not know between their right hand and their left, and many beasts?”

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And the thing was very evil for Jonah.* Various translations seek to reconcile this clause with English idiomatic usage by representing Jonah here as “dejected,” “depressed,” or “displeased.” But the repetition of the term *raʿah*, “evil,” is important for the writer’s purpose. When the Ninevites decide to turn away from evil, their very repentance so upsets Jonah that it becomes, ironically, an evil—which is to say, a bitter vexation for him.

2. *hasten.* The basic meaning of the Hebrew *qidem* is to anticipate something by acting before it can happen. As Sasson notes, there is an interplay between this term and *miqedem*, “to the east of,” in verse 5 as well as with the “east wind,” *ruaḥ qadim*, in verse 8.

You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in kindness. These words are a direct quotation of Exodus 34:6. One may infer

that by the late moment of the writing of Jonah, the Torah was already canonical and these words were familiar as a kind of doxology. Jonah, knowing God's compassionate nature from such an authoritative text, did not want to undertake the prophetic mission because he did not want to be an instrument in saving Israel's hated archenemies from destruction. At this late point in the story, he remains an unreconstructed Israelite nationalist, in contradiction to the universalist outlook of the book.

3. *take my life.* Facing the galling fact that he has enabled the despised Ninevites to survive, which was God's intention all along but not his, Jonah does not want to go on living. This becomes the story of a prophetic mission that is a great success (unlike those of the historical prophets), with the success being intolerable to the prophet.

4. *Are you good and angry?* God's response in this first exchange with Jonah is scarcely a response, only a provocation that leaves Jonah simmering.

5. *till he might see what would happen in the city.* Jonah hopes that either the Ninevites will yet abandon their repentance and suffer cataclysmic destruction, with him as a privileged spectator, or he will be confirmed in what he must see as God's perverse compassion as he watches Nineveh prosper. Jonah must be situated on a hilltop or promontory, so he has gone up after the repeated and emphatic going-downs. The verb "to go up" will be repeated in this episode, but it is not attached to Jonah.

6. qiqayon *plant*. The term appears only in this passage. The King James Version renders this as "gourd," which is as good as anybody's guess; however, since the plant has not been confidently identified, it seems prudent to preserve the Hebrew name in the translation. Why does Jonah need the *qiqayon* if he has already set up a shelter to give him shade? The most reasonable explanation is that the shelter, assembled no doubt from the materials he could scrape together from what was on hand, provided rather imperfect shade whereas the *qiqayon*, miraculously sprung up overnight, offered luxuriant foliage.

7. *God set out.* God in this story repeatedly assigns elements of nature to do His bidding, alternately protecting and destroying.

8. *slashing.* The adjective *ḥarishit* occurs only here. Because it appears to recall the verb *heḥerish*, "to be silent," one understanding, which becomes ensconced in later literary Hebrew, is that it means "silent" here. But that scarcely accords with the present context because the wind—the hot wind called the *hamsin* that blows from the eastern desert—has an obviously devastating effect. The translation guesses, picking up a cue from some of the medieval Hebrew exegetes, that the adjective is related to the verb *ḥarash*, "to plow" and perhaps by extension "to shear or cut through something."

the sun struck Jonah's head. What happened to the shade of the shelter? Sasson plausibly suggests that the shelter was swept away by the powerful east wind.

9. *Are you good and angry over the* qiqayon? God repeats the words he spoke in the earlier exchange, adding "over the *qiqayon*."

I am good and angry, to the point of death. Jonah bounces back to God the provoking words He has just spoken, adding, in a pattern of incremental repetition, "to the point of death."

10. *You—you had pity for the* qiqayon. God points an emphatic vocative finger at Jonah by using the second-person singular pronoun, normally not required in front of the conjugated verb. With similar pronominal emphasis, He contrasts "I, shall I not" at the beginning of the next verse. The choice of the verb "pity" is pointedly not quite appropriate. Jonah not does pity the plant for withering; rather, he is furious that he has been stripped of its vitally necessary shade. His "pity" for the *qiqayon* is by no means disinterested, whereas God's pity for all the living creatures of Nineveh flows from His compassion.

Micah

CHAPTER 1

[1]The word of the LORD that came to Micah the
Morashtite in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah,
kings of Judah, which he saw in visions concerning
Samaria and Jerusalem.

[2]Listen, all you peoples,
    hearken, earth and its fullness,
that the Master, the LORD, be
    witness against you forever,
    the Master from His holy temple.
[3]For the LORD is about to come out
    from His place,
    and go down and tread on earth's
        high places,
[4]and the mountains shall melt
    beneath Him
    and the valleys split open,
like wax before the fire,
    like water pouring down a slope.

[5]For Jacob's trespass all this has
happened
and for the house of Israel's
offenses.
What is Jacob's trespass
if not Samaria?
And what Judah's high places
if not Jerusalem?
[6]And I will make Samaria a ruined
heap in the field,
a place for the planting of
vineyards.
And I will pour down her stones to
the valley
and her foundations I will lay
bare.
[7]And all her idols shall be shattered,
and all her whore's pay burned in
fire,
and all her icons I will make a
desolation.
For from a whore's pay she amassed
it,
and to a whore's pay it shall
revert.

[8]For this would I lament and would
wail,
I would go naked and bare.
I would raise a lament like the
jackals
and mourning like the ostriches.
[9]For grievous is her wound,
for it has come as far as Judah,
has reached My people's gate,
as far as Jerusalem.
[10]Tell it not in Gath,
surely do not weep.
In Beth-Leaphrah
wallow in the dust.
[11]Pass on, you who dwell in Shapier
Did not Zaanan's dweller go out in
shame?
Lament in Beth-Ezel.
He shall take his station from you.
[12]Though the dweller of Maroth
had hoped for good,
evil came down from the LORD
to the gate of Jerusalem.
[13]Harness the steed to the chariot,
you who dwell in Lachish.

It is the source of offense for Zion's
Daughter
for in you are found the trespasses
of Israel.
[14]Therefore give parting gifts
for Moresheth-Gath.
Achziv's houses betray
the kings of Israel.
[15]Yet will I bring to you the
dispossessor,
you who dwell in Mareshah.
As far as Adullam he shall come—
the glory of Israel.
[16]Shave the pate and shear your hair
over your pampered children.
Make yourself bald as an eagle,
for they are gone from you into
exile.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Listen, all you peoples, / hearken, earth and its fullness.* The beginning of Micah's prophecies is close to the formulaic beginning of long poems (compare Isaiah 1 and Deuteronomy 32), although instead of invoking the heavens and the earth, it invokes the sundry peoples of the earth.

5. *For Jacob's trespass all this has happened.* Because the imagery of the preceding lines has expressed a global upheaval, Micah appears to be making a theologically novel point—that the offenses of Israel are so grave that they will trigger a cataclysm that will roil the whole earth.

Judah's high places. Micah's chief emphasis will be on social injustice, but this is a reference to cultic disloyalty, the "high places" being the rural hilltop shrines. The Septuagint, however, reads here "offense" instead of "high places."

6. *And I will make Samaria a ruined heap in the field.* Jotham, the first of the three kings under whom Micah prophesied, began his reign in 758 B.C.E. The last of the three, Ahaz, ended his reign in 698 B.C.E. While there is no way of knowing when in this span Micah began and completed his prophetic mission, the mention in this prophecy of the future destruction of Samaria would have to occur before its conquest by Assyria in 721 B.C.E.

a place for the planting of vineyards. Where once a city stood, there will be only a flat field suitable for such planting.

I will pour down her stones to the valley. The unusual verb for "pour" is the same one used at the end of verse 4 and is surely meant to pick up the image of water pouring down a slope.

8. *ostriches.* This is what the Hebrew term used here generally means, though some scholars think it may indicate a kind of screech owl.

9. *it has come as far as Judah, / has reached My people's gate.* Micah uses the Prophetic past in his verbs—that is, events predicted are represented as though they had already been accomplished, perhaps just now (hence the present perfect in this translation). Reaching the gate is a clear indication of an invading army coming up to the walls of the city.

10. *Tell it not in Gath.* This line is an obvious citation of David's lament over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:20).

surely do not weep. In keeping with the preceding verset, this would mean: don't show your grief outwardly lest your enemies see it.

In Beth-Leaphrah / wallow in the dust. The Hebrew puns on the name of the place and *ʿafar,* "dust."

11. *He shall take his station from you.* The "he" is the invader, but the wording of the Hebrew is obscure.

13. *Lachish.* Lachish was a major fortified Judahite town, destined to be destroyed by Sennacharib in 701 B.C.E. That conquest is celebrated in a famous Assyrian bas-relief. The inhabitants of Lachish are enjoined to harness their chariots in order to flee the town.

for in you are found the trespasses of Israel. The nature of these trespasses is not spelled out. Some interpreters have surmised that these would be linked to Lachish's confidence in its own military strength, but that is not clear.

14. *parting gifts.* The use of the Hebrew *shiluḥim* is probably ironic. Ordinarily, it means "betrothal gifts," but the verbal stem suggests "sending away," and here that would be into exile.

Achziv's houses betray. The Hebrew puns on "Achziv" and *ʾakhzav,* "betrayal," a word used especially for wadis that flow with water during the winter rains and then "betray" by turning dry in the summer.

15. *the glory of Israel.* This phrase modifies Adullam, a town linked with Lachish and evidently thought of, because of its military strength, as redounding to the national glory.

16. *over your pampered children.* A more literal rendering would be "the children of your pleasures."

CHAPTER 2

[1]Woe, who plot crime
and work evil on their couches.
In the morn they do it,
for they have the power.
[2]They covet fields and rob them,
houses, and bear them away.
They exploit a man and his home,
a person and his estate.

[3]Therefore, Thus said the LORD: I am about to plot evil against this clan, that you shall not be able to pull out your necks from it, and you shall not walk with high heads, for it is an evil time. [4]On that day this theme shall be sounded about you, and sobbing shall be sobbed. One shall say:

Ravaged, we are ravaged.
My people's portion is passed to another.

How it is taken away from me,
to a miscreant our fields are
shared out!

5 Therefore there shall not be among you any who casts
a lot by cord in the LORD's assembly.

6 "Do not preach—they preach.
They shall not preach these things.
Shame shall not overtake us.
7 What is said of the house of Jacob
—
will the LORD's patience be
short,
are these His acts?
Will not His words do well
with him who goes upright?"
8 But against My people
an enemy arises.
From him without cloak
you strip the mantle,
from those who pass by thinking
themselves safe
returning from the war.
9 My people's wives you drive out

from their luxurious homes.
From their infants you take away
My glory for all times.
10 Rise up and go,
for this is not a resting place.
Because she has defiled herself,
dire destruction shall descend.
11 Were a man to go
after wind and cheating lies,
"I would preach to you
for wine and for strong drink."
He would be this people's
preacher.

12 I will surely assemble Jacob, all of
you.
I will surely gather Israel's
remnant.
I will make him like sheep in the
pen,
like a flock within the fold.
They shall bustle with people.
13 He who makes the breach shall go
up before them,

they shall break out and pass
through the gate and go out
there.
And their king shall pass through
before them,
the LORD at their head.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *plot evil.* The word that usually means "evil" carries its related sense of "harm" here, but it is worth repeating as "evil" because it reflects a measure-for-measure response to "plot crime" and "work evil" in verse 1.

you shall not be able to pull out your necks from it. What is elliptically implied is the image of a restraining yoke.

4. *sobbing shall be sobbed.* This deliberately odd phrasing echoes the Hebrew, which in fact shows a triple occurrence of a single verbal stem: *wenahah nehi nihyah.*

How it is taken away from me. The initial "how" is the formal sign of a lament, occurring here atypically not in the first line of the lament but in the second. It should be noted that both versets of this line as well as the second verset of the preceding line employ a third-person singular verb as the equivalent of a passive, which is fairly common biblical usage.

5. *any who casts a lot by cord.* This is a procedure for dividing territory, but in the destruction there will be no territory to divide.

6. *Do not preach.* These words, and what follows through the end of verse 7, are spoken by Micah's recalcitrant audience. As abundantly elsewhere, there is acute tension between the prophet and those he addresses, who do not want to hear the harsh things he has to say.

7. *What is said of the house of Jacob.* The Hebrew wording is obscure.

Will not His words do well / with him who goes upright? The translation, in accordance with the Septuagint, reads "His words" instead of the Masoretic "my words." What the prophet's challengers are expressing is a confidence that they are the ones who go upright and that God will be patient with them and reward them.

8. *against.* The translation assumes that the anomalous *ʾetmul* should be broken into *ʾet,* the accusative particle, and *mul,* "opposite," but the meaning remains questionable.

From him without cloak. The enigmatic *mul* recurs here, and the translation is again conjectural.

thinking themselves safe. The Hebrew uses an ellipsis, saying only "safe."

9. *My people's wives you drive out.* The "enemy" of the previous verse is clearly the enemy within, who strips of their remaining garments those who can barely cover themselves and despoils people returning from battle who imagine themselves safe. Here they expropriate the homes of once pampered wives (perhaps now widowed).

My glory. This term sounds somewhat odd in context. It would have to indicate something like security and prosperity, as the women are driven from their homes with their infants.

10. *she has defiled herself.* The reference is to the collective nation, Judah.

dire destruction shall descend. Although this is the clear gist of the three Hebrew words, the syntax is somewhat problematic.

11. *I would preach to you.* These are the words of the prophet sarcastically representing the intention of his hostile audience. The third verset, "He would be this people's preacher," would thus suggest that someone who exhorts his audience to get drunk would be the fitting preacher for such people.

12. *They shall bustle with people.* The unspecified "they," the subject of a feminine plural verb, has to refer to the towns (feminine in Hebrew) of Judah.

13. *He who makes the breach.* Since this is a prophecy of national restoration after a dispersal (verse 12), the breach would be in a wall enclosing the exiles. The same verb is used for "break out" in the next verset, but it is slightly

puzzling that they then go out through a gate, not a breach in the wall. Perhaps passing through the gate is to be understood as “passing, as if through a gate,” which would indicate a very wide breach.

CHAPTER 3

[1]And I said:
Listen, pray, chieftains of Jacob
and captains of the house of
Israel.
Is it not yours
to know what is right?
[2]Haters of good and lovers of evil,
who flay their skin from them
and their flesh from their bones.
[3]Who devour My people's flesh
and strip their skin from them
and crack open their bones.
And they cut it like flesh in the pot
and like meat in the cauldron.
[4]Then shall they cry to the LORD,
and He shall not answer them.
He shall hide His face from them at
that time
as they did evil through their acts.

[5]Thus said the LORD concerning the prophets who
lead My people astray; who bite with their teeth and
proclaim peace, and as to him who gives nothing for
their mouths, they declare war against him.

[6]Therefore shall it be night for your
vision
and darkness for you for divining,
and the sun shall set on the prophets,
and the day turn to gloom upon
them.
[7]And the seers shall be shamed
and the diviners disgraced,
and all of them cover their
moustaches,
for there shall be no response
from God.
[8]And yet, I have been filled with
power,
with the spirit of the LORD,
with justice and valor,
to tell to Jacob his trespass
and to Israel his offense.
[9]Hear this, pray, chieftains of the
house of Jacob

and captains of the house of
Israel,
who despise justice
and everything straight they twist,
10 Who build Zion with bloodshed
and Jerusalem with wickedness.
11 Her chieftains judge with bribes,
and her priests instruct for
payment,
and her prophets divine for silver
and on the LORD they lean,
saying,
“Is not the LORD in our midst?
No harm will come upon us.”
12 Therefore, because of you,
Zion shall be plowed like a field,
and Jerusalem become heaps of
ruins
and the Temple mount a high
forest.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *who flay their skin from them / and their flesh from their bones.* This pair of versets is a startling instance of intensification and specification of material

from the first verset to the second and third. Initially, we get the general terms of hating good and loving evil, then this horrific image of flaying and cannibalism.

3. *crack open.* The verb patseaḥ is a devastating strategic choice: what it suggests is cracking open the bones in order to suck the marrow.

like flesh. the Masoretic Text has *kaʾasher,* "as," but the Septuagint shows *keshaʾeir,* "like flesh" (a simple reversal of the two middle consonants), which seems far more likely.

5. *who bite with their teeth.* This image of voraciousness is in all likelihood motivated by the editorial placement of this prophecy here, immediately after the metaphorical use of cannibalism in the previous prophecy.

6. *night for your vision.* These false prophets pretended to see into the future or exercise clairvoyance; now they will be enveloped in the darkness of a prophetic eclipse.

7. *cover their moustaches.* This bizarre-sounding phrase refers to a mourning practice in which the face was covered down to the upper lip. Compare Ezekiel 24:17.

8. *And yet, I have been filled with power.* Having excoriated the false prophets, Micah now sets himself antithetically as a prophet actually imbued by the spirit of YHWH.

11. *Her chieftains judge with bribes.* Having previously represented the leaders of the people preying cannibalistically upon those they rule, Micah now translates the metaphor into literal acts: the judges pervert justice by taking bribes; the priests fulfill their role as teachers—perhaps, unreliable teachers—only for gain; and the prophets turn themselves into merchants of divination.

on the LORD they lean. While merely pursuing the accrual of wealth, these purported spiritual leaders claim to enjoy the full benevolent support of God in what they do.

12. *a high forest.* Some have questioned the meaning of *bamot yaʿar,* literally, "high places of a forest." The first of these two nouns can designate a topographical height and is also used for the rural altars despised by the

Deuteronomist. The New Jewish Publication Society version renders the phrase in the latter sense, imagining that the holy Temple will be turned into a simple pagan hilltop shrine, but that seems unlikely. There are some biblical instances in which the two nouns joined in a construct state show a reversal of the semantic relation between the two. In this perspective, *bamot yaʿar* would mean the same as *yaʿar bamot,* "a forest of high places," which is to say, a high forest. Since the Temple was built on a mountain, after being razed, it would be replaced by the wild growth of a "high forest."

CHAPTER 4

[1]And it shall happen in future days
that the mount of the LORD's
house shall be firm-founded
at the top of the mountains and
lifted over the hills.
And the people shall flow to it,
[2]and many nations shall go and
say:
Come, let us go up to the mount of
the LORD,
and to the house of Jacob's God,
that He may teach us of His ways
and that we may walk in His
paths.
For from Zion shall teaching come
forth
and the LORD's word from
Jerusalem.
[3]And He shall judge among many
peoples

and be arbiter to vast nations from
far away.
And they shall grind their swords
into plowshares
and their spears into pruning
hooks.
Nation shall not raise sword against
nation,
nor shall they learn war anymore.
4 And they shall dwell each man
beneath his vine
and beneath his fig tree, with none
to make him tremble,
for the mouth of the LORD of
Armies has spoken.
5 For all the peoples shall walk
each in the name of his god.
But we shall walk
in the name of the LORD our
God
forevermore.

6 On that day, said the LORD:
I will gather the lame one,
and the outcast I will take in

and to whom I did harm.
[7]And I will make the lame one a
remnant
and the failing one a vast nation,
and the LORD shall reign over them
on Mount Zion, from hence and
forever.
[8]And you, watchtower of the flock,
rampart of Zion's Daughter,
to you shall come the former
kingdom,
and the kingship of Jerusalem's
Daughter shall arrive.
[9]Now, why should you scream so
loud?
Is there no king in you?
Is your councillor gone,
that pangs seize you like a woman
in labor?
[10]Writhe and groan,
Zion's Daughter, like a woman in
labor,
for now will you go from the city
and dwell in the field.
And you shall come as far as
Babylonia.

There you shall be saved.
There shall the LORD redeem you
from the clutch of your enemies.
[11]And now many nations
have gathered against you, saying:
"Let her be tainted, that we
may gloat over Zion."
[12]But they do not know
the plans of the LORD,
and they do not understand His
counsel,
for He has gathered them like a
sheaf on the threshing floor.
[13]Rise and thresh, Zion's Daughter!
For I will make your horn like
iron
and your hooves I will make
like bronze,
and you shall grind down many
peoples,
and I will devote to the LORD
their riches
and their wealth to all the
earth's Master.

[14]Now gash yourself, gashing's
Daughter
they have laid a siege against us.
With a rod they strike on the cheek
the judge of Israel.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And it shall happen in future days.* The first four verses of this chapter duplicate Isaiah 2:2–4, constituting the most extensive such duplication between two prophets. There are only minor differences (e.g., when Isaiah says "nations," Micah says "peoples"). Different explanations have been offered for the duplication: that Micah borrowed from Isaiah, that Isaiah borrowed from Micah, that both drew on a common source, that a later editor inserted the passage in both books. This last alternative seems the least likely; and an unknown common source is merely a conjectural hypothesis. These two prophets were roughly contemporaneous, but given the fact that Isaiah was the more prominent figure—see, for example, the narrative in 2 Kings 20, where the king turns to him at a moment of crisis—it may be more plausible that Micah took from Isaiah. Scrolls of the prophecies evidently had some circulation in the prophet's lifetime. One point where there are two small additions as well as a substituted term in Micah may provide a clue: verse 3 reads "And He shall judge among many peoples / and be arbiter to vast nations from far away." In Isaiah it is: "And He shall judge among the nations / and be arbiter for many peoples." Micah adds "many" in the first verset, heightens "many" to "vast" in the second, and inserts "far away" at the end. By and large, this kind of amplification is a telltale sign of adopting and "improving" a preexisting text. Otherwise, since there are no substantive divergences between the two passages, the comments on Isaiah will be repeated here.

in future days. Older translations represent this Hebrew phrase as "in the end of days," giving it an emphatically eschatological meaning it does not have. The Hebrew *ʾaḥarit*, derived from the word that means "after," refers to an indefinite time after the present.

2. *the mount of the* LORD. Mount Zion in Jerusalem is imagined as a kind of second Sinai, from which God's teaching will go out.

3. *many peoples.* The universalist note struck here is new. It will be elaborated and expanded in the visions of the anonymous prophet of the Babylonian exile whose writing is appended to the Book of Isaiah, beginning with chapter 40.

Nation shall not raise sword against nation. God's teaching from Zion, then, is to have the effect of inaugurating a reign of universal peace. There is an imaginative boldness, or perhaps rather the courage of desperation, in this vision because it was articulated at a historical moment of continual warfare among imperial powers when the land of Israel itself was threatened with destruction by Assyria.

learn war. Fighting was a skill that required training, as noted in Psalms and elsewhere.

4. *And they shall dwell each man beneath his vine.* This evocation of an era of tranquillity and peace is stereotypical and does not appear in the Isaiah passage.

5. *For all the peoples shall walk / each in the name of his god.* This sentence, which appears to express the idea that polytheism will persist, however much the nations take instruction from Zion, is not present in Isaiah.

But we shall walk / in the name of the LORD *our God / forevermore.* This line, too, has no direct equivalent in Isaiah, though it may have been inspired by the use of the same verb in the concluding line of the Isaiah passage: "O house of Jacob, / come, let us walk in the LORD's light."

7. *the failing one.* The Masoretic *nahalaʾah* is obscure. Two ancient versions appear to read *nahalah* or *nilʾah,* and either of those terms could be rendered as "failing."

8. *come . . . / arrive.* The two Hebrew words appear in immediate sequence in the first verset, leaving the second verset without a verb. This translation assumes that one of the verbs should be moved to the second verset.

10. *groan.* The meaning of the Hebrew verb is obscure.

And you shall come as far as Babylonia. This is not a prophecy of the Babylonian exile. In the eighth century B.C.E., the threat was Assyria, and there were amicable relations between Judah and Babylonia. Thus it figures here as a place of refuge.

11. *gloat.* As before, this translation represents a Hebrew idiom that means to look upon with schadenfreude.

13. *I will make your horn like iron.* Although "horn" is idiomatic for "strength," here the dead metaphor is revived by the addition of the hooves in the next verset. Thus Zion's Daughter is turned into an ox or bull performing the threshing.

14. *Now gash yourself.* This verse clearly does not belong to the preceding passage, which is a prophecy of triumphal redemption, whereas this is a prophecy of doom. The gashing is a mourning practice, forbidden by biblical law but licit as poetic expression.

gashing's Daughter. The phrase *bat-gedud* is peculiar. Normally, *gedud* means "troop," but immediately following the verb *titgodedi* here, it would have to refer to gashing. Perhaps a pun is intended: Zion's Daughter, now mourning, has become "the troop's daughter," subject to the ravages of the invading forces.

CHAPTER 5

[1]And you, Bethlehem of Ephrath,
the least of Judah's clans,
from you shall one come forth for
Me
to be ruler of Israel
whose origins are from ancient
times,
from days of yore.
[2]Therefore shall He give them over
till the time the woman in labor
bears her child,
and the rest of his brothers shall
come back
with the Israelites.
[3]And he shall stand and shepherd
them by the might of the LORD,
by the pride of the name of the
LORD his God.
And they shall dwell secure,

for then shall he be great to the
ends of the earth.
[4]And thus shall be the peace:
Assyria shall not enter our land
nor tread in our citadels.
And we shall set up against him
seven shepherds
and eight princes of the peoples,
[5]and they shall smash the land of
Assyria with the sword
and the land of Nimrod in its
gateways.
And they shall save us from Assyria
should he enter our land
and should he tread within our
borders.
[6]And the remnant of Jacob shall be
in the midst of many peoples
like the dew from the LORD,
like gentle rain upon the grass,
as he shall not place hope in man
nor expectation in humankind.
[7]And the remnant of Jacob shall be
in the midst of many peoples
like a lion among forest beasts,

like a young lion among the flocks
of sheep
that passes through and tramples
and tears apart with none to save.
[8]Your hand shall loom over your foes
and all your enemies be cut off.
[9]And it shall happen on that day, said
the LORD:
I will cut off your horses from
your midst,
and I will destroy your chariots.
[10]And I will cut off the towns of your
land
and reduce to ruins all your
fortresses.
[11]And I will cut off sorcery from
your hands,
nor soothsayers shall you have.
[12]And I will cut off your idols
and your cultic pillars from your
midst.
And no more shall you bow down
to the work of your hands.
[13]And I will uproot your cultic poles
from your midst,
and I will destroy your icons.

[14]And I will act in anger and in
vengeful wrath
toward the nations that did not
heed.

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Bethlehem.* This is David's hometown, and so the idea of a ruler coming forth from this place is a signal of the future continuity of the Davidic dynasty.

2. *give them over.* The Hebrew says, somewhat enigmatically, merely "give them," but this is probably an ellipsis for "give them into the hands of their enemies." The kingdom of Judah, then, is to be subjugated until a crucial moment of transition, when the ideal Davidic ruler will be born.

3. *dwell secure.* "Secure" is merely implied.
for then shall he be great to the ends of the earth. It is highly unlikely that this is a prophecy of global empire commanded by the Davidic king. Rather, his reign will be so glorious that the fame of it will reach the ends of the earth.

4. *seven shepherds / and eight princes of the peoples.* The numeric progression from first verset to second is a familiar convention of biblical poetry. The seven shepherds and eight princes are in all likelihood foreign rulers allied with Judah. "Princes of the peoples" is literally "princes of humankind," which would mean "non-Judahites."

7. *like a lion among forest beasts.* The "beasts" are deer and other forest creatures vulnerable to the fierce predation of the lion. In any case, there is a striking contradiction between the imagery of this verse and the preceding one. First, the people of Israel is figured as a gentle blessing—dew and rain—

for all the nations. Now it is depicted as a furious force destroying nations. Some have tried to reconcile the contradiction temporally: first Judah will be a militant power, then, after its victory, a beneficent presence. But if that is the prophet's intention, it remains puzzling that the dew image should precede the lion image.

9. *And it shall happen on that day.* This is clearly a new prophecy, not of redemption but of doom. The editorial signal for inserting it here is probably the occurrence of the verb "cut off" in the second line of this prophecy, which picks up the use of the same verb at the end of the preceding prophecy.

11. *sorcery from your hands.* "From your hands" (the Hebrew uses a singular) probably means "that you possess," although it may also refer to the actual manipulation of divinatory instruments in the hands of the soothsayer. For this reason, the translation renders the idiom literally.

12. *idols / . . . cultic pillars.* The castigation of paganism is somewhat unusual for Micah, whose main focus is on social injustice.

13. *I will destroy your icons.* The Masoretic Text reads "I will destroy your towns [ʿ*areykha*]." This looks rather odd in a catalogue of destruction of pagan cultic objects and may well be an inadvertent scribal replication of the destruction of "towns" in verse 10. This translation assumes the original text reads ʿ*atsabeykha,* "your icons."

14. *I will act in anger . . . / toward the nations.* This last verse does not seem to belong to a prophecy about the devastation of idolatrous Israel. It may have been added editorially in order to mitigate the grimness of the prophecy of doom. Alternately, the prophet might be saying that the same dire fate which will overtake Israel awaits the nations that do not heed God's word.

CHAPTER 6

[1]Listen, pray, to what the LORD has
said.
Rise, plead a case before the
mountains,
and let the hills hear your voice.
[2]Hear, O mountains, the case of the
LORD,
and you mighty pillars of the
earth.
For the LORD has a case against His
people,
and with Israel He would dispute.
[3]“My people, what have I done to
you,
and in what did I do you in?
Testify against Me!
[4]For I brought you up from the land
of Egypt,
and from the house of slaves I
redeemed you,

and sent before you
Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.
5 My people, recall, pray, what Balak
king of Moab devised
and what Balaam son of Beor
answered him,
from Shittim to Gilgal,
that the LORD's bounties would
be known."

6 With what shall I come before the
LORD
bow to the most high God?
Shall I come before Him with burnt
offerings,
with yearling calves?
7 Is the LORD pleased with
thousands of rams,
myriads of streams of oil?
Shall I give Him my firstborn for my
trespass,
the fruit of my loins for my
offense?
8 It was told to you, man, what is
good

and what the LORD demands of
you—
only doing justice and loving
kindness
and walking humbly with your
God.

9 The voice of the LORD calls out to
the town,
and a man of insight shall see
Your name.
Heed the rod—and who
brought it about?
10 Can there yet be in the house of the
wicked
treasures of wickedness
and an accursed short *ephah*?
11 Could I declare innocent who has
wicked scales
and in his pouch cheating weight-
stones?
12 Whose rich are filled with outrage
and those who dwell in her speak
lies

and their tongue in their mouth
is cheating.
13 And I on My part have made you
ill, have smitten you,
made you desolate for your
offenses.
14 As for you, you shall eat and not be
sated
and your filth shall be within you.
She will conceive and not give birth
and what she bears, to the sword I
will give.
15 As for you, you shall sow and not
reap.
You, you shall trample the olives
and not use the oil,
get fermented juice and not
drink the wine.
16 And the practices of Omri are kept
and all the acts of the house of
Ahab,
and you go by their counsels,
so that I turn you into a desolation
and those who dwell in her into
hissing,

and My people's disgrace you
shall bear.

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the mountains, / . . . the hills.* These are conventionally exhorted to listen to the discourse at the beginning of biblical poems. Here, they are called upon to act as witnesses in a legal contestation between God and the Judahites.

3. *do you in.* The basic meaning of this verbal stem in its intransitive form is "to be unable." Some opt here for its secondary meaning, "to exhaust."

5. *Balak.* His story is told in Numbers 22–24. Balak hired Balaam as a professional seer to put a hex on Israel but instead, following God's bidding, Balaam blessed them.

from Shittim to Gilgal. These are, respectively, the last way station of the Israelites east of the Jordan and their first encampment after crossing the Jordan.

6. *With what shall I come before the LORD.* Although some interpreters prefer to link this with what precedes, it looks like a new literary unit.

7. *Is the LORD pleased with thousands of rams.* There is a pattern of intensification in these lines: first, simply burnt offerings and yearlings; then, in a hyperbolic flourish, thousands of rams and tens of thousands of streams of oil; and, in the crowning extravagance, child sacrifice—the most a person can give.

8. *It was told to you.* The Hebrew seems to say "he told you," and almost all interpreters assume the implied subject of the verb is God. But third-person singular verbs are often used as the equivalent of the passive, and the passive makes smoother sense in this line, obviating the necessity to have "the LORD" here tell what the LORD demands in the next verset.

only doing justice and loving kindness / and walking humbly with your God. This is a succinct and especially beautiful expression of the view Micah shares with Isaiah that ethical behavior is far more important than the mechanics of sacrificial rites.

9. *a man of insight shall see Your name.* From this point through to verse 14, textual problems abound. "A man" is added in this translation as an interpretive guess. The expression "see Your name" might mean something like "recognize Your power," but it remains obscure.

Heed the rod. One surmises this is "the rod of wrath" that recurs in Prophetic literature.

who brought it about. This may mean that the addressee is responsible for the disaster that has overtaken the people, but that is conjectural.

10. *Can there.* The Hebrew *haʾish,* with no medial *yod,* is odd, but Shmuel Vergon has made a persuasive case that it is archaic orthography for *hayeish,* and he cites a clear instance of this spelling in 2 Samuel 14:19 ("there is [*ʾish*] no turning right or left").

short ephah. The literal sense is "an *ephah* of thinness," that is, a measure used to shortchange the buyer.

11. *Could I declare innocent.* This translation reads, with the Vulgate, *haʾazakeh,* the transitive form of the verb, instead of the Masoretic *haʾezkeh,* "could I be innocent."

14. *your filth.* The Hebrew term yeshaḥ occurs only here. This is the meaning scholars have proposed on the basis of an Arab cognate: the victim of the curse gets no satisfaction from what he eats and is unable to evacuate.

She will conceive. The grammar also allows this to be construed as "you will conceive," but because the person addressed has been masculine, it may be preferable to understand this as an unspecified woman (your wife).

15. *trample the olives.* Olives, of course, are pressed, not trampled, but this is probably a simple extension of the idiom used for grapes.

get fermented juice. The verb is merely implied.

16. *Omri.* Along with Ahab, Omri is one of the monarchs of the northern kingdom singled out in the Book of Kings for his abominations.

and My people's disgrace you shall bear. It is possible, though not entirely certain, that Micah is drawing a distinction between the person addressed in the prophecy, a stand-in for the whole group of malefactors who have lied and cheated and used false scales and measures, and "My people," who have been victimized, reduced to disgrace, by this group.

CHAPTER 7

[1]Alas for me,
as I have become like the leavings
of summer fruit,
like the last gleanings of the
vintage—
there is no cluster for eating,
no ripe figs that my palate has
longed for.
[2]The faithful has vanished from the
land,
and the upright among men is
gone.
They all lie in wait to shed blood,
each man hunts his brother with a
net.
[3]For evil their hands are skilled.
The noble and the judge ask
payment.
The great one speaks the disaster he
wants,

and they pervert it for him.
[4]Their good is like a thornbush,
no straighter than a hedge.
The day those who look for You, of
Your reckoning, has come.
Now shall their confounding take
place.
[5]Do not trust in a friend,
nor place confidence in a leader.
From her who lies in your lap
guard your lips.
[6]For the son reviles the father,
the daughter rises against her
mother,
the daughter-in-law against her
mother-in-law—
a man's enemies are the people of
his household.
[7]But I look for You,
I await the God of my rescue
May the LORD hear me.

[8]Rejoice not, O my enemy.
Though I fall, I will arise.
Though I sit in darkness,

the LORD is a light for me.
9 The LORD's wrath I will bear
for I have offended against Him,
till He takes up my case
and renders Me justice.
He shall bring me out to the light,
I will see His vindication.
10 And my enemy shall see
and shame shall cover her,
who has said to me,
"Where is the LORD your God?"
I will gloat over her—
now she shall be trampled
like the mud of the streets.
11 The day for rebuilding your walls,
that day the borders shall widen,
12 that day—and to you shall it come,
from Assyria and the towns of
Egypt
and from Egypt to the Euphrates
and from sea to sea and mountain
to mountain.
13 And the earth shall become a
desolation
with its dwellers, as the fruit of
their acts.

[14]Shepherd Your people with Your staff,
the flock of Your estate,
that dwells secure in the forest
in the midst of the farmland.
They shall feed in Bashan and Gilead
as in days of yore.
[15]As the days when you came out
from the land of Egypt,
I will show him wonders.
[16]Nations shall see and be shamed
of all their valor.
They shall put hand over mouth,
their ears shall be deafened.
[17]They shall lick the dust like a snake,
like the crawlers on the ground.
They shall be shaken out from their enclosures
to the LORD our God.
They shall dread and fear You.
[18]Who is a God like You dismissing crime
and forgiving trespass for the remnant of His estate?

He does not cling forever to His
    wrath,
    for He desires kindness.
[19]Again He shall have mercy on us.
    he shall cleanse our crimes.
And You shall fling into the depths
    of the sea
    all our offenses.
[20]Grant truth to Jacob,
    kindness to Abraham,
as You swore to our fathers
    in ancient days.

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *my palate.* Although *nafshi* might simply be an intensive alternative for the first-person pronoun, the context of a desire to eat suggests that it carries its other sense of either “throat” or “appetite.” Hence “palate” is proposed here as a readable English equivalent.

2. *with a net.* Nets were used for catching birds and, of course, also for catching fish.

3. *For evil their hands are skilled.* The Hebrew wording is odd, and thus the translation is only an educated guess.

The great one speaks the disaster he wants. Again, the Hebrew is opaque, and the text may be corrupt. This sentence does not properly scan as a line of poetry.

pervert it for him. The object would probably be a case in law. “For him” is added in the translation.

4. *no straighter than a hedge.* In modern horticulture, hedges are usually straight, but what is envisioned here is an informal hedge made of brambles.

5. *guard your lips.* The literal sense is “guard the openings of your mouth.”

6. *the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.* The inclusion of this item suggests that in ancient Israel, as in many other societies, the mother-in-law exercised authority over her son’s wife.

8. *Rejoice not, O my enemy.* In the Hebrew, all the verbs and nouns are in the feminine singular, reflecting the representation of the enemy people as a female figure. This conventional mode of representing a nation becomes a means of dramatizing the relation between Israel and its enemies: the hostile nation is a woman who would gleefully mock Israel in its downfall but who is destined to be humiliated and trampled upon.

10. *I will gloat over her.* As before, this translation conveys the general sense of the idiom that is literally “my eyes will see in her.”

11. *the borders.* The Hebrew *ḥoq* usually means “limit,” “fixed measure,” or “statute,” but the vision of a utopian expansion of the kingdom of Judah in the next two lines argues for the sense of “border.”

13. *And the earth shall become a desolation.* If in fact this verse belongs at the end of this prophecy of a grand expansion of Judah, it would mean that nations across the known earth will be subject to cataclysmic devastation as Judah triumphs.

15. *I will show him wonders.* The first-person verb means that God is now speaking. Many scholars prefer to emend this phrase to an imperative: “Show him wonders.”

16. *their ears shall be deafened.* It is obvious why they should cover their mouths—because in the face of God’s great wonders there is nothing they

could possibly say. Why they should be deafened is less clear. Perhaps it is because of the great uproar in the cataclysm God brings upon the nations.

17. *their enclosures.* This noun, derived from the verbal stem that means "to close," is not the ordinary term for "fortress," but that seems to be its meaning here.

18. *Who is a God like You dismissing crime.* After prophecies that sharply accuse Judah for its sundry misdeeds, the collection of Micah's writing fittingly ends with a celebration of YHWH as a forgiving God.

19. *he shall cleanse our crimes.* The verb in the received text, *yikhbosh* means something like "suppress" or even "squash." This translation reads instead *yekhabeis,* the same Hebrew consonants with different vowel-points.

our offenses. The Masoretic Text has "their offenses," but three ancient versions as well as some Hebrew manuscripts read "our offenses."

20. *truth . . . / kindness.* This is a common instance of the so-called break-up pattern, where a known collocation—in this case, "truth-and-kindness," i.e., faithful, unswerving kindness—is broken up and distributed between the two versets.

Nahum

CHAPTER 1

[1]A portent concerning Nineveh, the book of the vision
of Nahum the Elkoshite.

[2]A jealous and vengeful God is the
LORD;
vengeful, the LORD and master
of wrath.
The LORD is avenged of His foes,
and bears a grudge against His
enemies.
[3]The LORD is slow to anger and
great in power,
but the LORD surely does not
acquit.
In tempest and whirlwind His way,
and a cloud is the dust at His feet.
[4]He rebukes the sea and it dries up,
and all rivers He turns to dry land.
Bleak are Bashan and Carmel,

and Lebanon's blossom is bleak.
[5]Mountains shake before Him,
and the hills melt.
The earth lies in ruins before Him,
the world and all who dwell in it.
[6]Before His fury who can stand,
and who can arise in His
smoldering ire?
His wrath pours out like fire,
and the rocks are shattered by it.
[7]The LORD is a good stronghold on
a day of distress,
and He embraces those who trust
Him.
[8]And in his sweeping torrent He puts
an end to His foes,
and His enemies the dark pursues.
[9]What could you plot against the
LORD?
An utter end He brings about—
not twice shall the foe arise.
[10]For like tangled thorns—
as they swilled they were besotted
—
they were consumed like heaps
of dry straw.

[11]From you has come forth
one who plots evil against the
LORD,
a worthless councillor.
[12]Thus said the LORD:
Though they be joined in a pact and
many,
yet shall they be done with and
gone.
I afflicted you but will afflict
you no more.
[13]And now I will break his shaft from
upon you
and snap your cords.
[14]And the LORD has charged
concerning you:
There shall be no seed of your
name anymore.
I will cut off from the house of
your god
idol and molten image.
I will lay out your grave,
for you are of no account.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *A portent concerning Nineveh.* Unlike the other prophets, Nahum concentrates exclusively on the impending fate of Judah's enemy and includes no rebuke of his own people. The focus on the imminent destruction of the capital city of Assyria would place these prophecies close to 616 B.C.E., when Nineveh was conquered by the Medes and the Babylonians.

3. *surely does not acquit.* He exacts retribution against His enemies.

4. *He rebukes the sea.* There is a kind of *a fortiori* argument here: if God is so powerful that he can dry up the sea and wither Bashan, Carmel, and Lebanon, He can surely overwhelm Assyria.

5. *The earth lies in ruins.* The Masoretic Text reads "the earth bears," *watisaʾ*, but two ancient versions reflect, more plausibly, *watishaʾ*, which in the Hebrew involves merely moving the dot over the letter *shin* from the left side to the right.

8. *His foes.* The received text reads, incomprehensibly, *meqomah,* "her place," but both the ancient Greek and Latin versions used texts that evidently have *beqamav,* literally, "those who rise against him."

9. *What could you plot against the LORD?* The "you" (plural) is clearly the Assyrians.

not twice shall the foe arise. The noun here, *tsarah,* usually means "distress," and so, if one adheres to the received text, it could mean that Judah will not find itself in straits a second time. But it could be a collective noun for "foe" or perhaps might be corrected to *tsar.* Given the surrounding emphasis on the destruction of the enemy, "foe" seems the likely meaning.

10. *as they swilled they were besotted.* This verset interrupts the metaphor of combustible thorns, switching from figure to its referent, which would be the drunken Assyrian army unprepared to defend itself.

like heaps of dry straw. The Hebrew seems to say "like dry straw full," but this translation assumes that the sense is "like a fully packed heap of dry straw."

12. *joined in a pact.* The Hebrew *shleimim* usually means “complete,” but the related *shlomim* can mean “party to a pact or alliance”; either *shleimim* may mean that as well, or it could be revocalized as *shlomim.*

13. *shaft . . . / cords.* The image is of a harnessed draft animal.

14. *concerning you.* The lines that follow make clear that the person addressed is the Assyrian emperor.

CHAPTER 2

[1]Look, upon the mountains
are the feet of the herald
announcing good tidings.
Celebrate, Judah, your pilgrim
feasts,
fulfill your pledges.
For no more shall the base man pass
through you—
he is cut off altogether.
[2]The battering ram has come up
against you.
Put up a watch. Look out to the
road.
Brace yourself, flex all your
strength.
[3]For the LORD has brought back the
pride of Jacob
like the pride of Israel.
For marauders have blighted them
and have ruined their branches.

[4]His warriors' shields are reddened,
the soldiers are stained crimson.
Like torch-fire are the chariots
on the day they are made ready,
and the cypress shafts are
poisoned.
[5]Through the streets the chariots run
wild,
they rumble through the squares.
Their look is like torches,
like lightning they race.
[6]He calls out his staunch men—
they stumble as they go.
They rush to the wall,
and mantlets are set up.
[7]The gates of the rivers are opened
and the palace is swept away.
[8]And the mistress is brought out,
exiled,
and her slavegirls moan like
doves,
beating on their chests.
[9]And Nineveh in time past was like a
pool of water,
but now they flee.

“Stop! Stop!” but none turns
round.
10 Loot the silver, loot the gold!
and there is no end to the horde,
treasure of every precious
vessel.
11 Stripped and distraught and
despoiled,
fainting heart and buckling knees
and shuddering in all loins,
and all faces lose their luster.
12 Where now is the den of the lions,
the cave of the king of beasts?
There the lion walked, the maned
beast there,
the lion’s cub, with none to make
them tremble.
13 The lion tearing prey for its cubs
and breaking necks for his lioness,
he filled his lair with prey
and his den with torn-apart flesh.
14 Here am I against you,
said the LORD of Armies.
I will burn up your chariots in
smoke,

and your maned beasts the sword
shall devour,
and I will cut off from the earth your
prey,
nor shall the sound of your envoys
be heard again.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *pledges.* The "pledges" or "vows" are pledges to offer particular sacrifices in the Temple, and for this reason they are paired with "pilgrim feasts."

2. *The battering ram has come up against you.* After the preceding verse, there is some ambiguity as to whether "you" is Judah or Assyria, but the sequence of lines that follows makes it clear that it is Assyria (or Nineveh) that is about to be destroyed.

Put up a watch. Look out to the road. These exhortations are ironic: no measure of self-defense will avail the besieged Nineveh.

3. *For the LORD has brought back the pride of Jacob.* This would be a corollary of the destruction of Assyria.

4. *reddened, / . . . stained crimson.* Several modern translations have understood this as the color of the shields and of the warrior's garments. But the first of these two Hebrew words means "reddened," not "red," and in light of the havoc of battle evoked in the next few lines, it makes far better sense to see this as a depiction of the fighters and their shields splattered with gore.

the cypress shafts. That is, the shafts of the spears.

6. *mantlets.* The mantlet, *sokheikh,* is a movable shelter devised to protect the besiegers as they approach the walls.

7. *The gates of the rivers are opened.* The evident reference is to moats around the city.

8. *And the mistress is brought out, exiled.* The Masoretic Text is not coherent here. It begins with a masculine verb, *wehutsav,* "and it was stationed, set up," followed by two feminine verbs. This translation is based on a frequently proposed emendation, but without great confidence, and there are no ancient versions that reflect it.

9. *like a pool of water.* The implication is a tranquil pool of water. Perhaps we are invited to imagine Nineveh once securely surrounded by its moats.

10. *Loot the silver, loot the gold.* The poem, after having addressed "Stop! Stop!" to the fugitives (or having quoted words addressed to them), turns to exhort the conquerors.

11. *Stripped and distraught and despoiled.* The Hebrew sound-play is more intense: *buqah umevuqah umevulaqah.* The basic meaning of the recurring root is to be hollowed out, emptied, but the replicated sounds go beyond lexical meaning.

13. *breaking necks.* The usual meaning of this verb is "to strangle," but lions don't strangle. This translation follows the solution of the Revised English Bible.

14. *your maned beasts the sword shall devour.* These two concluding lines obviously pick up the metaphor of the lion from verses 12–13, the lion being a standard trope for a warrior exercising martial prowess. An apt understanding of this line is reflected in the battle poems of Shmuel Hanagid, the great medieval Hebrew poet of Granada, who uses the same word for "lions," *kefirim,* as an epithet for "warriors."

CHAPTER 3

[1]Woe, city of bloodshed,
    all of it deceit.
Filled with plunder,
    prey never gone from it.
[2]The sound of the whip
    and the sound of the wheel's
        clatter,
galloping horse
    and chariot bounding.
[3]Rearing charger
    and blade of the sword
        and flash of the spear,
and many the slain
    and the press of the corpses—
there is no end to the bodies,
    they stumble on the bodies.
[4]Because of all the whoring of the
    whore,
    the beguiling sorceress,

who ensnares nations with her
    whoring
    and clans with her spells,
[5]here am I against you, said the
    LORD of Armies—
    I will lay bare your skirts over
        your face
and show nations your nakedness
    and kingdoms your shame.
[6]And I will fling foul things upon you
    and make you vile and make a
        spectacle of you.
[7]And it shall be that all who see you
    shall shrink from you and say:
“Nineveh is ravaged!
    Who will grieve for her,
and where can I seek
    comforters for her?”
[8]Are you better than No-Amon
    that sits by the Nile,
        water all around her,
that has a sea as a rampart,
    water is her wall?
[9]Nubia the vast
    and Egypt without end,
Put and the Lybians

were her allies.
[10]Yet she, too, went captive into
exile.
Her babes, too, were smashed
at every street corner,
and for her notables they cast lots
and all her great men were
shackled in chains.
[11]You, too, shall be drunk,
you shall be overcome.
You, too, shall seek a
stronghold against the
enemy.
[12]All your fortresses are figs,
ripe fruit.
If they are shaken, they fall
into the mouth of the eater.
[13]Look, your people are women
in your midst for your enemies.
The gates of your land are wide
open.
Fire has consumed their bolts.
[14]Siege water draw for yourself,
reinforce your fortresses.
Come into the mud
and trample the clay,

grasp the brickwork.
15 There shall fire consume you,
the sword shall cut you off,
shall consume you like locusts.
Be as many as locusts,
be as many as grasshoppers.
16 You had merchants more numerous
than the stars of the heavens—
locusts spread out and flew off.
17 Your commanders were like
grasshoppers
and your officers like swarms of
locusts
that settle on stone fences
on a cold day.
When the sun rises, they go off,
and where their place is no one
knows.
18 Your shepherds have slumbered,
Assyrian king,
your staunch men are asleep,
your people scattered over the
mountains, none gathering
them.
19 There is no healing for your
disaster,

your wound is grievous.
All who hear the report of you
clap hands over you.
For over whom has not passed
your constant evil?

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *plunder.* The Hebrew *pereq* in this context means "something ripped apart" and thus is a parallel to "prey" in the next verset.

2. *The sound of the whip / and the sound of the wheel's clatter.* Nahum's power as a poet is especially manifested in his ability to evoke battle scenes—in this case, the invading army with all its accoutrements charging through the streets of Nineveh.

3. *they stumble on the bodies.* The Hebrew says "their bodies," meaning the bodies of their own people.

4. *the whore.* This is the female personification of Nineveh.

5. *I will lay bare your skirts over your face.* The condign punishment for the promiscuous woman is to publicly expose her sexual parts. This is a recurrent trope in the Prophets. Compare, for example, Ezekiel 16:37.

6. *I will fling foul things upon you.* The whoring Nineveh is first shamefully exposed and then has filth piled on her.

8. *No-Amon.* This is the major city of northern Egypt.
that has a sea as a rampart. A canal cut from the Nile ("that sits by the Nile") is used as a moat to surround the city.

water is her wall. The Masoretic Text reads *miyam,* "from the sea," but a simple revocalization of those three consonants to *mayim* yields the more coherent "water."

9. *Nubia . . . / Put and the Lybians.* These are all contiguous nations presumed here to have been allied with No-Amon.

11. *You, too, shall be drunk.* The trope of the poison chalice is so common that the simple verb "be drunk" is sufficient to convey its presence to the audience.

12. *All your fortresses are figs.* The prophet exhibits a boldness of metaphoric imagination in turning fortresses—solid stone structures—into ripe figs that fall from the branches when they are shaken.

they fall / into the mouth of the eater. This image conveys the ease with which Nineveh's bastions will be taken: a little shake, and the fruit falls right into the mouth of the eater, with scarcely any effort involved.

13. *Fire has consumed their bolts.* The Hebrew says "your bolts," altered in the translation to "their" in order to make clear that these are the bolts used to bar the gates of the city walls. This is an instance in which the relation of second verset to first is explanatory: the gates are wide open because their wooden bars have been burned away. Fire was often used in the assault on cities.

14. *Siege water.* This is evidently water used in the making of bricks to reinforce the ramparts, as the next line indicates.

15. *consume you like locusts.* That is, as locusts consume everything before them. The locust simile will then be put to a different use.

16. *merchants.* Nineveh is mentioned as a great commercial center. But its trade relations with other countries may also be associated with the "whoring."

stars . . . / locusts. First, the huge number of merchants is compared to the stars, a conventional biblical simile. But in the next verset, their numerousness moves from the lofty stars to swarms of nasty locusts that spread out over all the earth and then fly off, so the representation of the now vanished

merchants is hardly flattering. In the next verse, Nineveh's military commanders are represented in the same harsh light.

18. *Your shepherds.* As elsewhere, this means "leaders"—probably, the military officers.

are asleep. The received text shows *yishkenu,* "dwell," but this is probably a scribal error for *yashnu,* an emendation that involves merely dropping the middle consonant.

19. *All who hear the report of you.* This is obviously the report of Nineveh's downfall, depicted in the preceding lines.

clap hands. The clapping is an expression of delighted schadenfreude.

Habakkuk

CHAPTER 1

[1]The portent that Habakkuk the prophet saw in a vision.

[2]How long, O LORD, shall I cry out,
yet You do not listen?
I scream “outrage” to You,
and You do not rescue!
[3]Why do You show me mischief,
and You look upon wretchedness?
Plunder and outrage are before me,
quarrel and contention I bear.
[4]Therefore teaching fails,
and justice never comes forth.
For the wicked surrounds the
righteous.
Therefore perverted justice comes
forth.
[5]See among the nations and look,
and be altogether astonished.

For a deed is being done in your
time,
you would not believe it were it
told.
6For I am about to raise up the
Chaldeans,
the harsh and headlong nation
that goes to the wide reaches of the
earth
to take hold of dwellings not
theirs.
7Fearsome he is and frightful,
from him his rule and his majesty
come forth.
8And his horses are swifter than
leopards
and quicker than the wolves of the
steppes.
And his horsemen spread out,
his horsemen come, they fly from
afar,
like a vulture pouncing on prey.
9All of them come for outrage,
devastation is before them,
and they gather captives like the
sand.

[10]And he is scornful of kings,
and rulers are a mockery for him.
He mocks every fortress,
piles up earth and captures it,
[11]then passes on like the wind
and attributes his might to his god.
[12]Are you not of old, O LORD,
my holy God? You shall not die!
LORD, You have arraigned him for justice
and Rock, You set him aside for censure.
[13]Too pure of eyes to see evil,
and You cannot look on wretchedness,
Why do You look upon traitors and stay silent,
when the wicked destroys one more righteous than he?
[14]And You make humankind like the fish of the sea,
like creeping things that have no ruler.
[15]They are all brought up with a line,
swept up in a net,

and he gathers them in his trawl,
    therefore he rejoices and exalts.
[16]Therefore he sacrifices to his net
    and burns incense to his trawl,
for through them his share is rich,
    and his food is fat.
[17]Thus does he ever unsheathe his
    sword
    to slay nations with no pity.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *How long, O LORD.* These initial words of complaint are borrowed directly from the psalms of supplication.

3. *You look upon.* This is the set meaning of this verb, but it is possible that here it is used, unusually, in a causal sense: "You have made [me] look upon."

6. *the Chaldeans.* These are the Babylonians.
the harsh and headlong nation. The Hebrew uses internal rhyme as well as alliteration: *mar wenimhar.*

7. *from him his rule and his majesty come forth.* Although the gist of this clause is clearly that the Chaldeans are an imposing and powerful nation, the wording of the Hebrew is a little obscure, and this translation replicates the grammatical structure of the original.

8. *the wolves of the steppes.* While the Hebrew might appear to say "the wolves of evening," in this context *ʿerev* probably is a shortened poetic form of *ʿaravah,* "steppe."

9. *devastation.* The Hebrew *megamah* appears only here, and its meaning is uncertain. Some scholars have linked it with the rabbinic root *g-m-m,* which means "to cut," and thus it might have something to do with destruction. The likelihood of such a meaning is reinforced by the parallelism. Modern Hebrew, drawing on a different understanding of the term, uses *megamah* to mean "direction" or "tendency."

10. *piles up earth.* The reference is to ramps built of earth that were used to assault a besieged city.

11. *attributes.* The Masoretic Text reads *we'asheim,* "guilty," but the Qumran Pesher Habakkuk shows the more likely *wayasem.*

12. *Are you not of old, O* LORD. The prophet, just having mentioned the false god of the Chaldeans, now invokes the eternity of the God of Israel.

You shall not die. The Masoretic Text shows "We shall not die," but this is a *tiqun sofrim,* a euphemistic scribal correction so as to eliminate the necessity of saying "God shall not die," when all know that death is not a category that applies to God.

14. *You make humankind like the fish of the sea.* The prophet now launches an extended metaphor of fish caught in a net to convey the helplessness of humanity in the face of the forces of destruction that God unleashes in history.

that have no ruler. The fish might seem to differ from human communities—which have kings to offer them a modicum of protection from predatory nations, while the fish have no monarch, government, or army to parry the ensnaring nets of the fishermen—but in the end that is the plight of humans as well.

16. *Therefore he sacrifices to his net.* It is unclear whether this reflects any actual cultic practice of ancient fishermen or is merely a poetic hyperbole. In any case, it picks up "attributes his might to his god" from verse 11.

17. *unsheathe his sword.* The received text has "his net," *ḥermo,* but the Qumran Pesher Habakkuk reads *ḥarbo,* "his sword." This is more likely both because the verb *yariq* is one used for unsheathing swords and the second verset is concerned with slaying nations, not with catching fish. The error in

transcription probably occurred when a scribe inadvertently reproduced a word from the fish metaphor here in the concluding line, which actually moves from the metaphor to its referent.

CHAPTER 2

[1]On my watch let me stand,
and let me take my station at the watchtower and look out
to see what He will speak to me
and what He will respond to my complaint.
[2]And the LORD answered me and said:
Write the vision, make it clear on the tablets,
so that one may read it readily.
[3]For there is yet a vision for the appointed time
and a witness for the end who is not false.
Though it tarries, wait for it,
for it shall surely come, it shall not delay.
[4]Look, the spirit within him is callous, not upright,

but the righteous man lives
through his faithfulness.
[5]How much more so the arrogant
treacherous one who presumes
and who does not prosper,
who gapes open his maw like Sheol
and like death he is never sated.
And he rounds up for himself all the
nations,
gathers in to him all the peoples.
[6]Will not all these an adage
pronounce against him,
verses and maxims against him,
and say:
Woe, who amasses what is not his—
for how long?—
and weighs himself down with
debt.
[7]Will not your creditors suddenly
rise
and those who will shake you will
awake?
[8]For as you despoiled many nations,
the remnant of nations shall
despoil you

for the bloodshed of people and the
outrage of lands,
the town and all who dwell in it.
9 Woe, who takes illicit gain,
through evil, to his house
to set his nest on high
to be saved from the clutch of
harm.
10 You have counseled shame for your
house
when you maimed many peoples
and gravely offended.
11 For a stone from the wall shall
shriek
and a wooden beam answer it:
12 Woe, who builds a town with
bloodshed
founds a city with wrongdoing.
13 Is it not from the LORD of
Armies?
And peoples shall strive for the
fire
and nations for naught shall be
wearied.
14 For the earth shall be filled
with knowing the LORD's glory

as water covers the sea.

15 Woe, who gives drink to his friend,
adding venom and making him
drunk
so as to look on his nakedness.
16 You shall be sated with shame
instead of glory.
You, too, drink and expose
yourself.
The cup of the LORD's right hand
shall come round to you,
and noxious shame instead of
your glory.
17 For the outrage of Lebanon shall
cover you,
and the plunder of beasts shall
dismay you
for the bloodshed of people and the
outrage of lands,
the town and all who dwell in it.
18 What will the idol avail when its
fashioner carves it,
the molten image that gives false
oracles,

Though its fashioner puts his trust in
it,
making speechless ungods.
[19]Woe, who says to wood, “Awake,”
“Bestir” to lifeless stone.
“It will give oracles.” Look, it is
inlaid with gold and silver
and no spirit is there within it.
[20]But the LORD is in His holy
palace.
Hush before Him all the earth!

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *On my watch let me stand.* Although the prophet here is on the lookout for God’s response to his complaint, he draws on a familiar trope of the prophet as watchman of Israel.

2. *so that one may read it readily.* The literal sense is: so that he may run in reading it.

3. *For there is yet a vision.* Some prefer to emend *ʿod,* “yet,” to *ʿeid,* “witness,” yielding a neat parallelism with the second verset, a vision for the appointed time, the end. This phraseology was picked up by Daniel and imbued with apocalyptic meaning, but the reference here is simply to the time when Babylonian domination will come to an end, as is made clear in the verses that follow.

4. *callous.* The meaning of *ʿuplah* is uncertain, but it probably relates to a root that means "to wrap," and so the surmise reflected in this translation is that it indicates being enveloped, impervious to true perception.

the righteous man lives through his faithfulness. The probable sense of "lives" here is "survives and thrives."

5. *who presumes.* The translation reads *heihin* instead of the Masoretic *hayayin,* "the wine."

And he rounds up for himself all the nations. At this point it becomes evident that the referent of the insatiable figure is the Babylonian empire.

6. *weighs himself down with debt.* Babylonia has incurred "debt" by seizing from the nations what does not belong to it and which it thus "owes" to them.

9. *illicit gain.* The Hebrew *betsaʿ* is literally "a slice cut off"—evidently, from an ingot of silver in a cheating practice.

house / . . . nest. The exploiter, which is to say, the Babylonian empire, carts off his loot to his home (Babylonia), foolishly imagining he will be safe within his house.

10. *maimed.* The translation of this Hebrew verb is conjectural.

13. *And peoples shall strive for the fire.* What they strive for will be consigned to destruction. This entire verse approximately duplicates Jeremiah 51:58.

15. *venom.* Given the context of drinking, this sense for *ḥeimah* rather than "wrath" seems probable.

his nakedness. The Hebrew, veering between grammatical persons, has "their nakedness."

16. *expose yourself.* This is the plausible understanding of the verb *heʿareih* (instead of the Masoretic *heʾareil*, of obscure meaning), reflected in the Targum Yonatan and in at least one medieval interpreter. What is involved is measure-for-measure justice.

noxious shame. The unique *qiqalon* looks as if it is a portmanteau word coined by Habakkuk from *qiʾ*, "vomit," and *qalon,* "shame" (the same word that is used near the beginning of this verse).

17. *the outrage of Lebanon / . . . the plunder of beasts.* The reference is to the many trees from the Lebanon forests cut down by the Babylonians for their building projects and the animals slaughtered for their consumption.

18. *gives false oracles.* This could be rendered as "teaches falsely," but the cultic context makes the sense of oracle likely. The denunciation of idol worship in this verse and the next, reminiscent of passages in Second Isaiah and elsewhere, is not entirely in keeping with the prophecy of the downfall of Babylonia. It is possible that the prophet sees the devotion to inert wood and stone as part and parcel of the unreflective and misguided character of the Babylonian empire.

20. *But the LORD is in His holy palace.* This evocation of God's majesty as He dwells in His celestial abode is calculated as a strong contrast to the witless idolators: instead of lifeless stone and wood, here is the God of heaven and earth, and all the earth is struck with silent awe in His presence.

CHAPTER 3

[1]A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, on the *shigyonot.*

[2]LORD, I have heard the report of
You,
am in awe, O LORD, of your
acts.
In these very years revive them,
in these very years make them
known.
In anger, remember to show
mercy.
[3]God shall come from Teman
and the Holy One from Mount
Paran. selah.
His majesty covers the heavens,
and His splendor fills the earth.
[4]And the radiance is like light.
Beams from His hand He has,
and there His might is hidden.

[5]Before Him pestilence goes,
and plague comes forth at His feet.
[6]He halts, and He makes the earth rock,
looks, and makes nations leap,
and the age-old mountains crumble,
the ancient hills collapse.
The ancient marches are His.
[7]The tents of Cushan are shattered,
shaken the tent curtains of Midian's land.
[8]With Neharim is the LORD incensed,
against Neharim Your wrath,
against Yamm Your fury,
when You ride Your horses,
Your chariots of victory.
[9]Laid bare is Your bow,
and the seven Rods of Eimar.
selah.
You split the earth with rivers.
[10]The mountains see you, shudder.
A stream of water surges.
The deep sends forth its voice.

The sky swears solemnly.
[11]Sun and moon stand still at the
zenith
by the light of Your arrows they
go,
by the radiance of the gleam of
Your spear.
[12]In wrath You stride across earth,
in fury You trample nations.
[13]You sally forth to Your people's
rescue,
to the rescue of Your anointed.
You smash the top of the wicked's
house,
You raze the foundation down to
bedrock. selah.
[14]You pierce the head with a rod.
His troops storm in their glee to
scatter me
as one devours the poor in
ambush.
[15]You made Your horses tread in the
sea—
the great waters were roiled.
[16]I heard and I quaked within,
at the sound my lips quivered.

Rot comes into my bones
and I quake where I stand.
Will You rest on the day of distress
when a people comes up to assault
us?
[17]For the fig tree does not bud,
and there is no yield from the
vines.
The olive tree's crop is shriveled
and the fields do not grow grain.
The sheep are gone from the fold,
and no cattle are in the barns.
[18]But I in the LORD will exult,
will rejoice in the God of my
rescue.
[19]The LORD Master is my strength,
He makes my feet like the
gazelle's
and has me tread upon the
heights.

For the lead player, on stringed instruments.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *A prayer.* This is actually a psalm, celebrating the power of YHWH as a warrior god. It looks very much like an editorial coda attached to Habakkuk's prophecies, perhaps because whoever assembled the text felt that these brief poems needed a kind of rounding out. Some of the references are mythological and archaic, leading one to suspect this could be a much older poem. At several points the text looks badly scrambled, either because a scribe did not understand all of its archaic language or he tried to alter its mythological content.

the shigyonot. As is often the case in the Book of Psalms, the identity of this musical instrument is not known, although the verbal stem could suggest a rhapsodic or elevated state.

2. *In these very years revive them.* The argument is as follows: we have heard tell of Your great deeds on behalf of Israel in the past; now, in this moment of crisis, is the time to renew these deeds.

3. *selah.* This is a musical notation, again of unknown character, that often appears in Psalms.

4. *the radiance is like light.* The Hebrew *nogah* is poetic diction and often used for some sort of supernal light. Thus the poet explains that the *nogah* has the quality of what we usually identify as light.

Beams from His hand. While *qarnayim* usually means "beams of light," here it probably indicates lightning bolts, wielded as a weapon by the warrior-god in many mythologies. That would explain the reference to hidden might in the next verset.

6. *The ancient marches.* The term *halikhot* can mean "ways," "goings," or "processions." Given the martial context here, it probably refers to God's marching fearsomely across the earth.

8. *Neharim . . . / Yamm.* Although in other contexts these two words can mean, respectively, "rivers" and "sea" (the usual plural of the former is *neharot*), here they hark back to Canaanite mythology, where they figure as different names for the primordial sea monster that must be subdued by Baal (in Israelite literature, by YHWH).

9. *the seven Rods of Eimar.* The Hebrew has *'omer,* "saying," but the scribe has either erased or was ignorant of the mythological reference that has been identified by Umberto Casutto: in Ugaritic literature, Baal wields two rods called Eimar with which he strikes Nahar or Yamm.

10. *The sky swears solemnly.* This is a little puzzling. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "the sky raised its hand," which is a gesture for taking a solemn oath. Perhaps the sky is swearing to witness, or participate in, the cataclysmic events unfolding.

11. *Sun and moon stand still.* They stand still in astonishment, but also their light is not needed because the radiance of God's weapons lights up the world.

13. *down to bedrock.* The Masoretic Text has *tsaw'ar,* "neck," but razing has to move downward, not upward, so this is in all likelihood a mistake for *tsur.* The error would have been triggered by the fact that the word translated as "top" in the preceding verset has the more common meaning of "head."

15. *You made Your horses tread in the sea.* This maneuver continues the cosmogonic battle between YHWH and Yamm that was invoked above.

16. *I quaked within.* Literally, "my belly quaked."

Rot comes into my bones. This sounds odd, but the idea is probably that the bones became squishy, as though they had been eaten away by rot.

Will You rest. The Masoretic Text has "I will rest," which would be peculiar, given the speaker's terror at this moment. The translation adopts the proposal of Yitzhak Avishur that the Masoretic reading is a *tiqun sofrim,* a scribal euphemism, to avoid an expression that might seem to impugn God's majesty.

17. *For the fig tree does not bud.* Some take this entire verse as a reference to a plague of locusts because of a certain similarity to the language of Joel, but it is perfectly plausible that the fields and the livestock would be devastated by an invading army, "when a people comes up to assault us" (verse 16).

18. *But I in the LORD will exult.* As in many of the psalms, there is a sharp reversal at the end: After the evocation of a landscape of terror, the speaker

affirms his confidence in God's rescuing power.

19. *He makes my feet like the gazelle's / and has me tread upon the heights.* The language here is close to Psalms 18:34, which is a victory psalm. It seems that the celebration of YHWH as warrior god has slid into the proclamation of a human victor who praises God for giving him strength on the battlefield.

For the lead player, on stringed instruments. This is actually a superscription for introducing a psalm, not a formula for concluding it. One suspects that this chapter was copied from a noncanonical manuscript of psalms and that the copyist inadvertently included at the end a line that in fact belonged to the next psalm in the manuscript.

Zephaniah

CHAPTER 1

[1]The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah son
of Cushi son of Gedaliah son of Amariah son of
Hezekiah in the days of Josiah son of Amon king of
Judah.

[2]I will surely sweep away everything
from the face of the earth, said
the LORD.
[3]I will surely sweep away man and
beast,
sweep away the fowl of the
heavens and the fish of the sea
—
with stumbling blocks for the
wicked.
And I will cut off humankind
from the face of the earth, said
the LORD.

[4]And I will reach out My hand
against Judah
and against all who dwell in
Jerusalem.
And I will cut off from this place
the remnant of Baal,
the name of the pagan priests with
the priests,
[5]and those bowing on the roofs to
the array of the heavens
and those bowing and swearing to
the LORD
and yet swearing by Milcom,
[6]and those falling back from the
LORD
and who did not seek the LORD
and did not search for Him.
[7]Hush before the LORD!
—for the day of the LORD is
near.
For the LORD has readied a
slaughter,
has invited His guests.
[8]And on that day there shall be a
slaughter for the LORD,

and I will make a reckoning with
the nobles
and with the sons of the king
and with all who don
the garb of the foreigner.
9 And I will make a reckoning with
all who hop
over the threshold on that day,
who fill the house of their Master
with outrage and deceit.
10 And it shall happen on that day—
the sound of outcry from the Fish
Gate
and wailing from the Mishneh
and a great disaster from the
hills.
11 Wail, you who dwell in the Ravine,
for the people of traders is
destroyed,
all weighers of silver are cut
off.
12 And it shall happen at that time—
I will search out Jerusalem with
lamps
and make a reckoning with the
men

who sit still on their lees
saying in their hearts,
“The LORD does neither good
nor evil.”
13 And their wealth shall become
plunder
and their homes a desolation,
and they shall build homes and not
dwell in them
and plant vineyards and not drink
their wine.
14 The great day of the LORD is near,
near and very swift.
The sound of the day of the LORD
is bitter,
on it the warrior shrieks.
15 A day of wrath is that day,
a day of distress and discomfort,
a day of devastation and desolation,
a day of darkness and deep dusk,
and a day of cloud and fog.
16 a day of ram’s horn and trumpet
blast
against the fortress towns
and against the lofty corner-
towers.

[17]And I will bring humankind into straits,
and they shall walk about like the blind,
for they have offended against the LORD.
And their blood shall be spilled like dust
and their flesh like turds.
[18]Neither their silver nor their gold
shall avail to save them.
On the day of the wrath of the LORD
all the land shall be consumed in His zealous fire,
for a ghastly end
shall He make of all who dwell in the land.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Zephaniah son of Cushi son of Gedaliah son of Amariah son of Hezekiah.* No other prophet is given such a long pedigree, and the reason for it is by no means apparent. Two items are problematic: “Cushi” means “Nubian,” which would be odd for an Israelite first name, and “Hezekiah” could be the name of

the Judahite king, as some commentators, traditional and modern, have proposed, but that remains questionable.

in the days of Josiah. His reign was from 640 to 609 B.C.E., so that would make Zephaniah an approximate contemporary of Isaiah. Zephaniah's angry denunciation of idolatry in Jerusalem suggests that he prophesied before the sweeping reforms of Josiah, which began in 622.

2. *I will surely sweep away everything.* Zephaniah's great power as a prophet-poet is in his evocations of the landscape of disaster.

from the face of the earth. Although presumably the impending destruction is to fall upon the inhabitants of the kingdom of Judah, the prophet's language makes the disaster sound global. In the next verse, he will pointedly echo the language of the Creation story, implying a reversal of creation itself ("man and beast, / . . . the fowl of the heavens and the fish of the sea"). This is an instructive instance in which the language of Prophetic poetry, with its commitment to hyperbole, pushes beyond its intended subject to an incipiently apocalyptic horizon.

3. *with stumbling blocks for the wicked.* These words fit into the prophecy rather awkwardly and may be an editorial gloss.

4. *the remnant of Baal, / the name of the pagan priests.* The two Hebrew words *she'ar* and *shem,* "remnant" and "name," are a hendiadys meaning "any remnant at all" and they appear here in the two versets in what scholars call a break-up pattern. That explains the slight oddness of "the name of the pagan priests." The term for "pagan priests," *kemarim,* designates celebrants of alien cults. Its bracketing here with *kohanim,* "priests," suggests that the officiants of the cult of YHWH were joining forces with their pagan counterparts in syncretistic practices, as the Book of Kings reports.

5. *those bowing on the roofs to the array of the heavens.* There is abundant evidence that in the seventh century B.C.E. worship of astral deities, through Assyrian influence, had become widespread in Israel.

Milcom. The Masoretic Text has *malkam,* "their king," but this is almost certainly a scribal substitution in order not to mention the name of the pagan deity.

7. *a slaughter.* The Hebrew means both "slaughter" and "feast," and Zephaniah intends the former while playing on the latter as he goes on to represent God inviting guests to the slaughter-feast.

8. *all who don / the garb of the foreigner.* The prophet probably associates the use of foreign attire with pagan practices.

9. *all who hop / over the threshold.* This appears to have been a pagan practice when entering sanctuaries. An etiology for it is offered in 1 Samuel 5:5.

10. *the Mishneh.* This is a quarter in Jerusalem. The name means "the addition" or "the annex."

11. *the Ravine.* This would have to be a valley running through Jerusalem, perhaps the Valley of Ben-Hinnom, just west of the walls of the city.

the people of traders. The epithet sounds derisive and may point to sharp trading practices.

14. *on it the warrior shrieks.* Even the battle-hardened fighter will be terrified.

15. *A day of wrath is that day.* The power of this prophecy of doom is focused in the anaphoric insistence on "day" throughout these lines. It is the day of the LORD, now heightened (in verse 14) to "the great day of the LORD" rushing down bitter and swift on the kingdom of Judah.

distress and discomfort. The Hebrew sound-play is *tsarah umetsuqah.*

devastation and desolation. The Hebrew sound-play is *shoʾah umeshoʾah.*

17. *And their blood shall be spilled like dust / and their flesh like turds.* The similes are purposefully unpleasant. Liquid blood turns into dry dust as it might be spilled, say, from a shovel. Solid flesh becomes turds dropping to the ground. The word used for "flesh," *leḥum,* is not the standard term but poetic diction, its initial consonant alliterating with the double *l* sound of *gelalim,* "turds."

CHAPTER 2

[1]Gather yourselves, O gather,
nation undesired,
[2]before the decree is born—
the day slips by like chaff—
before it comes upon you,
the day of the LORD's fury.
[3]Seek the LORD,
all you humble of the land
who have fulfilled His law.
Seek justice, seek to be humble.
Perhaps you will be sheltered on
the day of the LORD's fury.
[4]For Gaza shall be abandoned
and Ashkelon a desolation.
Ashdod shall be banished at noon,
and Ekron be uprooted.
[5]Woe, you who dwell in the coastal
region,
nation of Cherithites.

The word of the LORD is
against you.
Canaan, land of the Philistines,
I will destroy you with none
dwelling there.
6And the coastal region shall become
meadows for shepherd's feasts and
sheep pens.
7And it shall become a region
for the remnant of the house of
Judah.
On these they shall graze their
flocks,
in the houses of Ashkelon at
evening they shall bed down,
for the LORD their God shall single
them out
and restore their fortunes.

8I have heard the insult of Moab
and the jibes of the Ammonites,
who insulted My people
and gloated over their lands.
9Therefore, as I live, said the LORD
of Armies, God of Israel:

Moab shall be like Sodom
and the Ammonites like
Gomorrah—
nettle growth and salt mine
and a desolation for all time.
The remnant of My people shall
despoil them,
and the remains of the nation
inherit them.

10 This comes to them for their pride because they
insulted and gloated over the people of the LORD of
Armies. 11 Fearsome is the LORD over you, for He
holds sway over all the gods of the earth, and all the
coastlands of the nations shall bow to Him, each man
in his place.

12 You, too, Cushites,
are slain by My sword.
13 And He shall reach out His hand in
the north
and destroy Assyria
and make Nineveh a desolation,
parched land like the desert.

[14]And flocks shall bed down in her
midst,
all the beasts of the nations.
Both jackdaw and owl
on her capitals shall roost.
The screech owl shall hoot in the
window,
the raven on the threshold,
for the cedarwood is laid bare.
[15]This the merry city,
dwelling secure,
saying in her heart,
"I and none besides me,"
how has she become a desolation,
a bedding-down place for beasts!
All who pass by her shall hiss,
wag a mocking hand.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Gather yourselves.* This verbal stem is generally used for the gathering of firewood and the like. Here it might suggest that the people have fallen apart, become disparate sticks or limbs, and need to be pulled together.

undesired. Though other meanings have been proposed, this verb elsewhere clearly means "to long for."

2. *the day slips by like chaff.* The day is moving rapidly down on Judah, like wind-borne chaff.

4. *Gaza shall be abandoned / . . . Ekron be uprooted.* The Hebrew exhibits untranslatable wordplay for both of these: *ʿazah ʿazuvah* and *ʿeqron teʿaqeir.*

5. *Cherithites.* This probably means "Cypriots," Cyprus being the approximate or putative place of origin of the Philistines.

7. *they shall bed down.* Because the verb used is for the bedding down of animals, the reference is still to the flocks. But, in the fluidity of pronominal reference characteristic of biblical Hebrew, "them" in the next line is the Judahites, not their flocks.

8. *gloated.* The Hebrew says merely "made big," but this is in all likelihood an ellipsis for "made their mouths big," which is to say "gloated." The same verb is used in verse 10, where it clearly has the sense of "gloated."

11. *holds sway.* The verb *razah* in the received text is problematic. The meaning of this root is "thin," and so some imagine that it means YHWH has "shriveled" the gods of the nations, but that sounds odd, and nowhere else does this verbal stem occur as a transitive verb with a direct object. It is more plausible to emend it to *radah* (*d* and *z* being phonetically close and interchangeable between Hebrew and Aramaic).

12. *Cushites.* These are the Nubians, dwelling south of Egypt. God's reaching out to the north in the next verse makes this a geographically comprehensive assault on the nations.

14. *jackdaw . . . owl / . . . screech owl.* As elsewhere, the precise identification of these wild birds is uncertain.

the raven. Here it is assumed in the translation that *ḥorev,* which has a far more common homonym that means "dry place," is the equivalent of *ʿorev,* "raven."

the cedarwood is laid bare. The meaning of the two Hebrew words is not entirely certain. The unusual noun *ʾarzah* is assumed to be derived from *ʾerez,* "cedar," and would thus refer to the cedarwood paneling of Nineveh's palatial

buildings. The verb *ʿeirah* means “he laid bare,” but as elsewhere, the third-person masculine singular is probably the equivalent of the passive.

15. *wag a mocking hand.* The literal meaning of the Hebrew is simply “wag their hand,” but in biblical parlance this is a gesture of mockery or contempt, and so “mocking” has been added in the translation in order not to baffle the English reader.

CHAPTER 3

[1]Woe, sullied and besmirched,
oppressive city!
[2]She heeded not the voice,
did not accept reproof.
In the LORD she did not trust,
nor drew near to her God.
[3]Her nobles within her
are roaring lions
Her judges are wolves of the
steppes,
they gnawed all the bones by
morning.
[4]Her prophets are unsteady,
men of treachery.
Her priests profaned the holy,
did outrage to the teaching.
[5]The LORD is righteous in her
midst,
He does not do wrong.

Morning after morning He brings
His justice to light—
it never lacks.
But the wrongdoer knows no
shame.
6 I have cut off nations,
their corner-towers are devastated.
I have destroyed their streets
with none passing by.
Their towns are demolished,
with no men, without dwellers.
7 I said, “If you but fear Me,
if you accept reproof,
her abode will not be cut off,
all that I had summoned against
her.”
Yet they continued acting ruinously
in all their deeds.
8 Therefore, wait for Me, said the
LORD,
for the day I rise as witness,
for My judgment is to gather in
nations,
to assemble kingdoms,
to pour out My wrath upon them,
all my smoldering anger.

For in My zealous fire
all the earth shall be consumed.

[9]For then will I transform peoples
with a pure language
for them all to call in the name of
the LORD,
to serve Him with single intent.
[10]From beyond the rivers of Cush
they who entreat Me, whom I
dispersed,
shall bring My tribute.
[11]On that day:
You shall not be shamed by all your
acts
in which you trespassed against
Me,
for then will I remove from your
midst
those merry with your pride,
and no longer shall you be haughty
on My holy mountain.
[12]And I will leave in your midst
a poor and lonely people,

and they shall shelter in the
LORD's name.
[13]They shall do no wrong
nor speak lies,
and there shall be in their mouth
no tongue of deceit,
but they shall graze and bed down,
and none shall make them
tremble.

[14]Sing gladly, Daughter Zion,
shout out, Israel.
Rejoice and delight with whole
heart,
O Daughter Jerusalem.
[15]The LORD has set aside your
judgments
removed your enemy.
The King of Israel, the LORD, is in
your midst.
You need no longer fear evil.
[16]On that day shall it be said to
Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion,
let not your hands fall slack.

The LORD your God is in your
midst,
a rescuing warrior.
He delights over you with rejoicing,
He renews His love,
He exults over you with glad
song.
17 Those sorrowing from lack of
festivals, bearing her disgrace,
I will gather from you.
I am about to deal with all your
tormentors at that time.
18 And I will rescue the lame,
and the scattered I will gather,
and I will make them a glorious
name
through all the land of their
shame.
19 At that time I will bring you,
at that time gather you,
for I will make you a glorious name
among all the peoples of the earth
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes.
—said the LORD.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *She heeded not the voice, / did not accept reproof.* This entire verse reflects a tendency here to rely on formulaic language.

3. *they gnawed all the bones by morning.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "they did not gnaw by morning"—that is, they had finished gnawing.

4. *Her priests profaned the holy, / did outrage to the teaching.* The two main functions of the priests are to perform the cult within the Temple scrupulously and to provide proper instruction to the people. In both of these tasks, they have failed miserably.

6. *I have cut off nations.* This is another verse composed entirely of formulaic language.

8. *For in My zealous fire / all the earth shall be consumed.* This is another instance in which the orientation of Prophetic poetry toward hyperbole pushes a statement about judging the nations into language that is incipiently apocalyptic.

9. *a pure language.* There is an interesting idea here that perverse or harmful behavior is entrammeled with a corruption of language—a notion George Orwell would develop in a celebrated essay written during World War II about how Nazi totalitarianism had subverted the German language. Thus, the gift of a pure language is necessary so that the peoples can truly call to God.

10. *Cush.* As elsewhere, this is Nubia, south of Egypt.

12. *a poor and lonely people.* This is an obvious antithesis to the haughty and the proud invoked in the previous verse. The sins of Judah are associated with the arrogance and self-importance of its ruling class, which will be replaced by the simple people who preserve the true values of the nation.

13. *there shall be in their mouth / no tongue of deceit.* This picks up the idea of the need for a transformation of language as a precondition of moral transformation.

they shall graze and bed down. Both verbs invoke the familiar metaphor of the people as a flock to be led by a faithful shepherd, the just king.

16. *He renews His love.* The Masoretic Text reads *yaḥarish beʾahavato,* "He is silent in His love," but it is unclear why the living God should be silent. The translation follows the reading of the Septuagint, which appears to have used a Hebrew text that showed *yeḥadesh ʾahavato* (the Hebrew graphemes for *r* and *d* being quite close).

17. *Those sorrowing from lack of festivals.* This rather awkward English phrase translates two compact Hebrew words, *nugey mimoʿeid.* What they mean is not altogether certain, but it is most plausible to understand the prefix *mi,* which usually means "from," in its other sense of "without." The sorrowful ones, then, are sad because they have been deprived access to the Temple to celebrate the pilgrim festivals.

19. *when I restore your fortunes before your eyes.* The prophecies of Zephaniah begin with a vision of doom threatening the kingdom of Judah, the terrible "day of the LORD." They end here with a promise of restoration after exile. Either this chapter is by the hand of a prophet writing after 586 B.C.E., as some scholars conclude, or Zephaniah is following out the logic of the scenario he has been sketching: first catastrophe will overtake the kingdom, resulting in its destruction and the exile of its people; then the people will be restored to its land.

Haggai

CHAPTER 1

[1]In the second year of King Darius in the sixth month,
on the first day of the month, came the word of the
LORD through Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel son
of Shealtiel, the prefect of Judah, and to Joshua son of
Jehozadak the high priest, saying, [2]Thus said the
LORD of Armies, saying, “This people have said, ‘The
time has not come, the time for rebuilding the house
of the LORD.’” [3]And the word of the LORD came
through Haggai the prophet, saying: [4]“Is this the time
for you to sit in your paneled houses when this house
is in ruins?” [5]And now, thus said the LORD of
Armies, “Pay mind to your ways. [6]You have sown
much and brought in little; eaten, but were not sated;
drunk, but not to intoxication; were clothed, but
without warmth from it. And he who earns wages
earns for a purse with holes.” [7]Thus said the LORD of
Armies, “Pay mind to your ways. [8]Go up to the
mountain and bring timber and build the house, and I
will be pleased with it, that I may be honored, said the
LORD. [9]You have sought much and, look, there was

little and brought it home, and I blew it away. Because of what, said the LORD of Armies? Because of this house that lies in ruins while you rush off each to his home. [10]Therefore, the heavens have held back dew from you, and the earth has held back its yield. [11]And I called forth a drought upon the land and upon the mountains and upon the new grain and upon the new wine and upon the new oil and upon what the soil brings forth and upon man and upon beast and upon all the effort of your hands." [12]And Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, and with him Joshua son of Jehozadak the high priest and all the remnant of the people, heeded the voice of the LORD and the words of Haggai the prophet as the LORD their God had sent him, and the people feared the LORD. [13]And Haggai, the LORD's messenger, on the LORD's mission, said to the people, saying, "I am with you, said the LORD." [14]And the LORD roused the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel prefect of Judah and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people, and they came and performed the tasks in the house of the LORD of Armies their God, [15a]on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month,

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *In the second year of King Darius.* This is 520 B.C.E. Small groups of exiles have returned, under the initial authorization of Cyrus, to the kingdom of Judah, now the Persian province of Yehud. As Haggai immediately makes clear, little progress as yet has been made in rebuilding the Temple.

Zerubbabel . . . the prefect . . . Joshua . . . the high priest. These are the principal secular authority and the principal religious authority, respectively. Haggai's mission, unlike that of the earlier prophets, is to the leaders, not to the people, and only through the leaders to the general populace.

2. *The time has not come, the time for rebuilding.* The Hebrew syntax is somewhat distorted, and similar problems will occur as the book progresses.

6. *You have sown much and brought in little.* The comprehensive catalogue initiated by these words suggests that these are metaphorical assertions to the following effect: whatever you have done has been futile and has given you no satisfaction. Nevertheless, in the background of these assertions are the dire material circumstances of the returned exiles at this moment.

8. *Go up to the mountain and bring timber.* Solomon's temple was built with fine cedarwood imported from Lebanon. In the present reduced circumstances, such luxurious materials are not an option, so the people are asked to cut down trees from a local mountain.

9. *I blew it away.* The intention behind the choice of this verb is unclear. It is the verb generally used for blowing on a fire, as with a bellows.

11. *I called forth a drought upon the land.* The failure to rebuild the Temple is conceived as a collective sin that brings disaster upon the land, in a way analogous to the presence of Oedipus, the incestuous parricide, bringing a plague on Thebes.

13. *the LORD's messenger.* Although this is basically how the role of the prophet is conceived, the use of the term is rare. It will, however, be picked up as the fictive name of the prophet Malachi, "my messenger."

14. *roused the spirit.* This is a different formulation from the “descent” of the spirit on prophets and judges. It suggests the instilling of motivation and morale.

15a. *on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month.* This is when they begin work on the Temple. The second half of this brief verse actually belongs at the beginning of the next chapter, where it has been moved in this translation, and which explains why this chapter ends with a comma.

CHAPTER 2

1:15b in the second year of Darius 1 in the seventh month,
on the twenty-first of the month, the word of the
LORD came through Haggai the prophet, saying,
2 "Say, pray to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel the prefect
of Judah and to Joshua son of Jehozadak the high
priest and to the remnant of the people, saying, 3 'Who
among you remains who saw this house in its former
glory? And how do you see it now? Is it not as nothing
in your eyes?' 4 And now, be strong, Zerubbabel, said
the LORD, and be strong, Joshua son of Jehozadak
the high priest, and be strong, all the people, said the
LORD, and act, for I am with you, said the LORD of
Armies. 5 Remember this word that I sealed with you
when you came out of Egypt and My spirit was
standing in your midst. Do not fear. 6 For thus said the
LORD of Armies: Soon I will shake the heavens and
the earth and the sea and the dry land. 7 And I will
shake the nations, and the precious things of all the
nations shall come, and I will fill this house with glory,
said the LORD of Armies. 8 Mine is the silver and

mine the gold, said the LORD of Armies. [9]Great shall be the glory of this house, the latter more than the former, said the LORD of Armies, and in this place I will bestow peace, said the LORD of Armies."

[10]On the twenty-fourth of the ninth month in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to Haggai the prophet, saying, [11]"Thus said the LORD of Armies: Inquire, pray, teaching of the priests, saying, [12]If a man carries sacrificial flesh in the skirt of his garment and touches with his skirt bread or stew or wine or oil or any food, is it sanctified? And the priests answered and said, 'No.'" [13]And Haggai said, "If someone unclean from a corpse touches any of these, does it become unclean?" And the priests answered and said, "It becomes unclean." [14]And Haggai answered and said, "So is this people and so is this nation before Me, said the LORD, and so is all the work of their hands and what they sacrifice there—it is unclean. [15]And now, put your mind, pray, to it; from this day forward, from before stone was put upon stone in the LORD's Temple, [16]from when they were coming to a heap of twenty measures and it was ten, coming to the wine vat to draw out fifty measures from the winepress and it was twenty, [17]I smote you with blight

and with mildew and with hail—all the work of your hands—and there was none with you for Me, said the LORD. [18]Put your mind, pray, to it: from this day forward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, from the day that the foundation of the LORD's Temple was laid, [19]when the seed was still in the granary, and the vine and the fig tree and the pomegranate tree and the olive tree had not yet borne fruit, from this day will I grant blessing."

[20]And the word of the LORD came again to Haggai on the twenty-fourth of the month, saying, [21]"Say to Zerubbabel the prefect of Judah, saying, 'I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, [22]And I will overturn the thrones of kingdoms, and I will destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and I will overturn chariot and its riders, and horses and their riders shall go down, each by the sword of his fellow. [23]On that day, said the LORD of Armies, I will take you, Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, My servant, said the LORD, and I will set you as a seal, for you have I chosen,'" said the LORD of Armies.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *Who among you remains who saw this house in its former glory?* There could be a few in Haggai's audience who had actually seen the First Temple, but they would be very old because sixty-seven years had passed since its destruction.

Is it not as nothing in your eyes? The foundation for the Temple, according to the Book of Ezra, had been laid during the reign of Cyrus, but the work did not go forward, so what met the eye was a half-finished foundation and no structure above it.

5. *Remember.* In the received text, this verse begins with the particle *ʾet*, which ordinarily is placed before the direct object of a verb, but there is no verb. It is assumed in this translation that a verb such as "remember" was dropped from the text.

7. *I will shake the nations.* Through the authorization of Cyrus, exiles had returned from Babylonia, but their material existence was meager and their Davidic ruler was merely a functionary of the Persian empire. Against this background, Haggai envisages a grand triumphal moment when all the nations will be shaken and their riches flow to Zion.

the precious things of all the nations shall come. When the Temple was destroyed, its precious vessels were carried off by the conquerors.

9. *peace.* Others construe this as "well-being" or "prosperity."

11. *Inquire, pray, teaching of the priests.* From what follows, it becomes clear that the "teaching," *torah,* that the priests are to provide involves issues of religious law, what the rabbis later would call *halakhah.* In this case, however, the teaching becomes an analogy for the condition of the people in its relation to God.

14. *So is this people . . . before Me.* At first, it may seem puzzling that Haggai should proclaim the uncleanness of the people before God when he has just urged them to devote themselves to the rebuilding of the Temple and has reported that God had roused a spirit within them. The answer to the ostensible contradiction may be in the phrase "what they sacrifice there." Although "there" is left vague, if the people have been sacrificing—and worship without sacrifice would be difficult for ancient Israelites to imagine—

this would have to take place on improvised altars, for there was as yet no temple. Such unauthorized sacrifices would then be the source of impurity.

16. *when they were coming to a heap of twenty measures and it was ten.* This harks back to 1:6: "You have sown much and brought in little." The Hebrew shows only numbers in this verse but "measure," or perhaps a specific unit of measure, is implied.

18. *from this day forward.* As the work of rebuilding the Temple moves ahead, a new era is launched. Now there will again be people for the LORD, and the sundry blights that had stricken the community will come to an end.

the day that the foundation of the LORD's temple was laid. Rashi's explanation in light of the earlier foundation work is apt: "They were now beginning again to add to the first foundation that had been built in the time of Cyrus."

19. *not yet.* This translation reads *ʿod,* "yet," for the Masoretic *ʿad*, "until."

21. *I am about to shake the heavens and the earth.* The passage that begins here is a kind of concluding recapitulation of 2:6–9. In this instance, explicit battle imagery is introduced—the overturning of chariots and horses and riders.

22. *each by the sword of his fellow.* What is suggested is a general panic in the armies of the nations in which confusion and mutual slaughter take place.

23. *I will set you as a seal.* The expression is elliptical. The ellipsis is elucidated in Song of Songs 8:6: "Set me as a seal on your heart, / as a seal on your arm."

for you have I chosen. While neither "king" nor "anointed" appears in the text—might Haggai have feared these could be politically dangerous terms?—the strong implication is that Zerubbabel, as a descendant of the line of David now presiding over the rebuilding of the Temple, is the chosen heir to David's throne.

Zechariah

CHAPTER 1

[1]In the seventh month, in the second year of Darius,
the word of the LORD came to Zechariah the prophet
son of Berechiah son of Iddo, saying, [2]“The LORD
was very furious with your fathers. [3]And you shall say
to them, Thus said the LORD of Armies: Turn back to
Me, said the LORD of Armies, that I may turn back to
you, said the LORD of Armies. [4]Do not be like your
fathers to whom the former prophets called saying,
Thus said the LORD of Armies: Turn back, pray,
from your evil ways and from your evil acts. But they
did not listen to Me, said the LORD. [5]Your fathers,
where are they?” “And the prophets, did they live
forever?” [6]“But My words and My statutes that I
charged to My servants the prophets, did they not
overtake your fathers?” And they turned back and
said, “As the LORD of Armies aimed to do to us
according to our ways and according to our acts, so He
has done with us.”

[7]On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month,
which is the month of Shebat, in the second year of
Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah the
prophet son of Berechiah son of Iddo, saying, [8]"I saw
at night, and, look, there was a man riding on a bay
horse, and he was standing among the myrtles that are
by the deep, and behind him were bay, sorrel, and
white horses. [9]And I said, 'What are these my lord?'
And the messenger speaking to me answered, 'I shall
show you what these are.' [10]And the man standing
among the myrtles answered and said, 'It is these that
the LORD has sent to go about the earth.' [11]And they
answered the LORD's messenger who was standing
among the myrtles and they said, 'We have gone about
the earth, and, look, all the earth dwells tranquilly.'
[12]And the LORD's messenger answered and said, 'O
LORD of Armies, how long will You show no mercy
to Jerusalem and to the towns of Judah against which
You have been wrathful now seventy years?' [13]And the
LORD answered the messenger who was speaking to
me good words, comforting words. [14]And the
messenger who was speaking to me said to me, 'Call
out, saying, Thus said the LORD of Armies: I have
been greatly zealous for Jerusalem and for Zion. [15]And
I am very greatly furious with the nations resting quiet;
as I was but a little furious yet they piled on the harm.

[16]Therefore, thus said the LORD, I have turned back in mercy to Jerusalem, and a building line shall be stretched over Jerusalem. My house shall be built in her.’” [17]Call out again, saying, Thus said the LORD of Armies: “Again shall my towns spread out from bounty, and again shall the LORD comfort Zion, and again shall He choose Jerusalem.”

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

4. *the former prophets.* Zechariah has in mind especially Jeremiah but probably also Isaiah, Ezekiel, and perhaps others. He thus inserts himself at this late date, 520 B.C.E., in the long line of prophecy. It was the failure of the earlier generations to listen to their prophets that brought upon them the national catastrophe, and he implores his own audience to make a new start by listening to him.

5. *And the prophets, did they live forever?* This is best construed as the people’s rejoinder to Zechariah: if their forefathers are now gone, so are the prophets who inveighed against them.

6. *As the LORD of Armies aimed to do to us.* The people now concede the justice of the prophet’s argument: not only our fathers but we as well have suffered for our acts, as our present reduced condition bears witness, and we are thus ready to change our ways.

7. *On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month.* This is just two months after the foundation work for the Temple had begun, with Haggai’s exhortation to Zerubbabel and Joshua.

8. *I saw at night, and, look.* Though the word "dream" does not appear, this is manifestly a dream-vision, using the formulaic language that reports the beginning of a dream.

a bay horse. While this is the realistic color for a horse, the Hebrew *ʾadom* could also mean, more surrealistically, "red." This would be the color of blood, perhaps a prelude to God's fury with the nations expressed in verse 15.

standing among the myrtles that are by the deep. These details may be evocative but their purpose is mystifying.

9. *the messenger.* Now the mysterious "man" on the bay horse is explicitly identified as a divine messenger. The Book of Daniel will use "man" in this same sense.

10. *to go about the earth.* The horses, then, are themselves agents of the divine, sent to see what is happening on earth. In a moment, they will speak, delivering their reconnaissance report.

15. *as I was but a little furious yet they piled on the harm.* God had used them as an instrument to punish Israel, but in their vicious treatment of the conquered people, they exceeded all limits. The literal sense of "they piled on harm" is "they helped for harm [or, for evil]."

16. *a building line.* These were lines used to assure the straight rectilinear contours of the building.

CHAPTER 2

[1]And I raised my eyes and saw and look, there were four horns. [2]And I said to the messenger speaking to me, “What are these?” And he said to me, “These are the horns that scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem.” [3]And the LORD showed me four smiths. [4]And I said, “What have these come to do?” And he said, saying, “These are the horns that scattered Judah, so no man could raise his head, and these have come to rattle them, to hurl down the horns of the nations that bore horns against the land of Judah to scatter it.” [5]And I raised my eyes and saw, and, look, there was a man and in his hand a measuring cord. [6]And I said, “Where are you going?” And he said to me, “To measure Jerusalem, to see what is its width and what is its length.” [7]And, look, the messenger speaking to me was going out and another messenger was coming out to meet him. [8]And he said to him, “Run, speak to that lad, saying: ‘Jerusalem shall dwell as an unwalled city because of all the people and beasts within her. [9]And I will be for her, said the LORD, a wall of fire all

around, and for glory will I be within her. [10]Away, away, flee from the land of the north, said the LORD, for like the four corners of the heavens did I spread you out, said the LORD. [11]Away, Zion, escape, you who dwell with the Daughter of Babylon.' [12]For thus said the LORD of Armies Whose glory sent me to the nations that despoil you. For he who touches you touches the apple of His eye. [13]For I am about to swing My hand against them, and they shall be spoil for their slaves, and you shall know that the LORD of Armies sent me. [14]Sing gladly and rejoice, Daughter of Zion, for I am coming and will abide in your midst, said the LORD. [15]And many nations shall join the LORD on that day and become My people, and I will abide in your midst, and you shall know that the LORD of Armies sent me to you. [16]And the LORD shall bestow upon Judah its portion on the holy soil and again choose Jerusalem. [17]Hush, all flesh before the LORD, for He has stirred from His holy abode!"

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *four horns.* Throughout biblical literature, horns are an image of power—in this instance, destructive power.

2. *scattered.* This verb, generally used for the winnowing of grain, is one of several somewhat odd choices of verb in this passage. It obviously refers to the exiling of the Judahites.

Judah, Israel. Three centuries have passed since the exile of the population of Israel, the northern kingdom, but Zechariah preserves, as do other prophets, a utopian hope for its restoration.

3. *smiths.* They are probably ironsmiths, who could fashion weapons to hack horns.

4. *rattle.* As in verse 2, this is an unusual word choice. The verb generally means "to shake" or "to strike with terror." One might have expected a verb like "to cut down."

to hurl down. This verb usually means "to cast stones."

7. *the messenger speaking to me was going out and another messenger was coming out to meet him.* The apparatus of the vision becomes complicated: it seems that there are teams, or perhaps hierarchies, of divine messengers.

8. *speak to that lad.* The probable referent is Zechariah, the recipient of all these prophetic messages. "Lad" would not necessarily indicate his age but rather his (necessarily) subservient position in relation to the celestial messengers.

an unwalled city. Every important city in the ancient Near East had walls to protect it against enemies. Jerusalem, however, will have no walls because its spectacular expansion cannot be contained within walls. Instead, God will be a wall of fire all around it.

10. *Away, away.* The Hebrew *hoy* usually means "woe," but here it has to be an interjection of urging. This is the solution of at least two modern translations.

flee. This imperative is prefixed by the particle that means "and." Either that is a scribal error, or, as Kimchi proposes, a word such as "go out" was dropped.

11. *Away, Zion, escape.* One could also construe this as "to Zion escape," with the particle for "to" omitted by ellipsis.

12. *Whose glory sent me.* The Masoretic Text reads, enigmatically, "after glory He sent me." This translation adopts a frequently proposed emendation.

the apple of His eye. The Midrash Tanhuma lists this as a scribal euphemistic correction for "the apple of My eye," introduced to avoid anthropomorphism. But if, as in several modern languages, "apple of the eye" is an idiom for what is most precious to a person, its use would not necessarily imply that God has an eye with a pupil.

13. *sent me.* The first person, which at the beginning of this verse was God, now refers to the prophet. Such unmarked transitions are common biblical usage.

14. *will abide in your midst.* This is in all likelihood a reference to the Temple, in the process of being rebuilt, for the Temple was conceived as God's terrestrial abode, His "house."

15. *And many nations shall join the LORD on that day.* The idea of a universal acceptance of YHWH as God strikes a new note in this passage. It is in keeping with a theme in Third Isaiah.

17. *Hush, all flesh before the LORD.* "All flesh" means "all humankind" and so continues the idea of a conversion of the nations introduced in verse 15.

CHAPTER 3

[1]And he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before a messenger of the LORD, and the Adversary was standing on his right to accuse him. [2]And the LORD said to the Adversary, “The LORD rebuke you, Adversary, the LORD, Who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you. Is not this a brand saved from the fire? [3]And Joshua was clothed in foul garments and was standing before the messenger. [4]And he spoke out and said before all those standing before him, saying, “Remove the foul garments from him.” And he said to him, “See, I have taken away your guilt from you and dressed you in fine raiment.” [5]And he said, “Let them put a pure diadem on his head.” And they put a pure diadem on his head and dressed him in fit garments with the LORD’s messenger standing by. [6]And the LORD’s messenger warned Joshua, saying, [7]“Thus said the LORD of Armies: If you walk in My ways and if you keep My watch, and also if you oversee My house and also guard My courts, I will let you come and go among these attendants. [8]Listen, pray, Joshua, high

priest, you and your companions sitting before you, for they are men who have had a portent that I am about to bring My servant, Branch. [9]For, look, the stone that I set before Joshua, on a single stone are seven eyes. I am about to engrave its engraving, said the LORD of Armies, and I will wipe away the guilt of this land on a single day. [10]On that day, said the LORD of Armies, you shall invite, each man his fellow, to come under the vine and under the fig tree."

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the Adversary.* This is the *satan* (note the definitive article, indicating someone filling a role rather than a proper name), not to be confused with the later mythological Satan. In Job, this translation renders the term as "the Adversary," but "accuser" would also work here to pick up the link with the cognate verb at the end of this sentence. The Accuser, a kind of prosecuting attorney who belongs to the divine entourage ("the sons of God" in Job), carries out the task of calling attention to the sundry trespasses of the people, but now he is rebuked because God is ready to remove the guilt of the people.

3. *foul.* The Hebrew word is associated with excrement. It is not that the high priest is personally culpable, but as chief sacerdotal officiant for the people, the residue of all their heinous acts clings to him.

4. *all those standing before him.* The idiom means "standing in attendance."

5. *fit garments.* "Fit" is merely implied in the Hebrew, but that must be the sense.

7. *if you oversee My house and also guard My courts.* This injunction to see to the maintenance of the Temple anticipates its rebuilding, which at this moment has just begun.

I will let you come and go among these attendants. This is an extraordinary promise because the attendants are divine beings.

8. *men who have had a portent.* The literal sense is "men of a portent." But it is hard to see how Joshua's priestly colleagues could be the portent, as they are represented in most translations. The rendering here follows the Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 93A, which says "for whom a portent was performed." Perhaps they have witnessed Joshua's change from foul garments to fine raiment, which would be the portent.

My servant, Branch. The Hebrew term for "Branch," tsemaḥ, has clear dynastic associations. There is a debate among interpreters as to whether this refers to an eschatological Davidic ruler or to Zerubbabel, but the latter seems more likely because the grand restoration appears to be imminent. Political considerations may have led Zechariah to suppress his name.

9. *seven eyes.* These will recur in a different context in chapter 4.

wipe away. The verbal stem *m-w-sh* indicates "removal," but it does not appear elsewhere in this conjugation as a transitive verb. The Hebrew *mashti* could be a mistake for *maḥiti,* the verb usually employed for the expunging of guilt.

10. *to come under the vine.* "Come" is supplied in the translation for idiomatic coherence in English. Sitting under the vine and under the fig tree is a proverbial expression for a time of peace and prosperity. Only later would it take on an eschatological meaning, as in the mention of Jesus sitting under the fig tree in the first chapter of John's gospel.

CHAPTER 4

[1]And the messenger speaking to me came back and
woke me as a man wakes from his sleep. [2]And he said
to me, “What do you see?” And I said, “I have seen,
and, look, a lampstand all of gold and a bowl on its
top, and its lamps were on it, seven pipes for the lamps
on its top. [3]And there were two olive trees by it, one to
the right of the bowl and one to its left.” [4]And I spoke
out and said to the messenger speaking to me, saying,
“What are these, my lord?” [5]And the messenger
speaking to me answered and said, “Why, you know
what these are.” And I said, “No, my lord.” [6]And he
answered and said to me, saying, “This is the word of
the LORD to Zerubbabel, saying, Not by might and
not by power but by My spirit, said the LORD of
Armies. [7]What are you, great mountain? Before
Zerubbabel you become a plain. And he shall bring out
the capstone—shouts of ‘lovely, lovely’ for it.” [8]And
the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[9]“Zerubbabel’s hands laid the foundation for this
house, and his hands shall complete it, and you shall

know that the LORD of Armies sent me to you. [10]For who has despised the day of small things? They shall rejoice and see the stone of separation in Zerubbabel's hand. These seven are the eyes of the LORD that roam through all the earth." [11]And I spoke out and said to him, "What are these two olive trees on the right of the lampstand and on its left?" [12]And I spoke out again and said to him, "What are these two branches of the olive trees that are by the golden tubes emptying out the gold?" [13]And he said to me, saying, "Why, you know what these are." And I said, "No, my lord." [14]And he said, "These are the two men consecrated with oil who attend upon the Master of all the earth."

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *woke me as a man wakes from his sleep.* There is a pointed ambiguity in this statement because all of these visions convey a sense of things seen in a dream. He awakes, then, from one dream to another.

2. *a bowl.* This is probably a receptacle for the oil.
seven pipes. The oil would be conducted through these pipes.

6. *Not by might and not by power but by My spirit.* These memorable words have great resonance, but how do they follow from the vision of the golden lampstand? The golden lampstand, with its seven burning oil lamps, is to be a focal point in the Temple, its light a token of God's radiant presence in His house, in the midst of His people. Thus the rebuilding of the Temple, in

difficult material conditions and perhaps with some resistance from the Persian imperial power, will be consummated through God's spirit, which is symbolized in the lampstand. The idea of imposing obstacles that are set as naught is spelled out in the next verse.

7. *And he shall bring out the capstone—shouts of "lovely, lovely" for it.* What is imagined here is the completion of the rebuilding of the Temple, with Zerubbabel setting the capstone in place and the assembled people bursting out in cheers.

10. *For who has despised the day of small things?* This rather crabbed formulation probably means: you who have dismissed the humble beginning of the construction as unimpressive will be filled with joy when you witness its completion by Zerubbabel.

the stone of separation. The Hebrew, *haʾeven habedil,* is enigmatic ("the tin stone"?). Most scholars emend the second word to *hamavdil*, "separating." It could be identical with the capstone, *ʾeven haro'shah,* though it is not clear what it separates—perhaps, two large sections of the roof.

12. *I spoke out again.* Perhaps Zechariah is obliged to repeat his question by the divine messenger because the initial formulation is insufficiently specific.

the golden tubes emptying out the gold. The entire lampstand is golden, but the color of the fine olive oil is also golden. The tubes presumably empty out into the receptacles of the seven lamps.

14. *the two men consecrated with oil.* The literal sense is "the two sons of oil." It should be recalled that "sons" has many broad applications in biblical Hebrew. The word for "oil" used is not the common *shemen* but *yitshar,* perhaps adopted as a literary effect or perhaps an encoding device, so as not to make too explicit a reference to anointing. The two men are Zerubbabel and Joshua, so the anointing of the former would be royal, not sacerdotal.

CHAPTER 5

[1]And again I raised my eyes and saw and, look, a
flying scroll. [2]And he said to me, “What do you see?”
And I said, “I see a flying scroll, twenty cubits long
and ten cubits wide.” [3]And he said to me, “This is the
imprecation going out to all the land. Whoever steals,
as on one side of it, has not been condemned, and
whoever swears, as on the other side of it, has not been
condemned. [4]I have brought it out, said the LORD of
Armies, and it shall enter the house of the thief and
the house of him who swears falsely in My name and
lodge within his house and make an utter end of it,
with its timbers and with its stones.” [5]And the
messenger speaking to me came out and said to me,
“Raise your eyes, pray, and see what is this going out.”
[6]And I said, “What is this?” And he said, “This is a
measuring basin going out.” And he said, “This is their
crime through all the land.” [7]And, look, an ingot of
lead was being lifted, and there was a certain woman
seated in the basin. [8]And he said, “This is
Wickedness,” and he flung her down within the basin

and flung the lead stone over its opening. [9]And I raised my eyes and saw and, look, two women were going out, and there was wind in their wings, and they had wings like the wings of a stork. And they lifted the basin between the earth and the heavens. [10]And I said to the messenger speaking to me, “Where are they taking the basin?” [11]And he said to me, “To build a house for it in the land of Shinar, and it shall be founded, and they shall set it down there on its firm place.”

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *and, look, a flying scroll.* By this point, it is evident that Zechariah’s mode of prophecy is essentially different from that of his predecessors. They occasionally experience enigmatic visions that are then explained, but their principal vehicle is direct address—castigations for trespasses, predictions of doom, prophecies of consolation—usually cast in poetry. Zechariah, by contrast, witnesses a series of puzzling visions shown him by a divine emissary, and they seem to become progressively more bizarre, as this chapter abundantly illustrates.

2. *twenty cubits long and ten cubits wide.* This computes to roughly thirty-three feet by seventeen feet, making this a decidedly supernatural scroll.

3. *going out.* This verb recurs insistently throughout the visions here. It conveys a sense of mysterious visual objects emerging before the eyes of the prophet, as well as of the agencies of divine judgment (as here) or divine scrutiny going out over the land.

as on one side of it . . . as on the other side of it. The Hebrew formulation is terse and somewhat opaque, but the probable sense is that the injunctions against theft and false swearing are written on the two sides of the huge scroll—another manifestation of its supernatural character. Until now, the violators of these injunctions have gone scot-free, but that is about to change.

6. *a measuring basin.* The Hebrew reads *ʾefah,* the most common unit of dry measure, but this object is clearly a receptacle that is one *ʾefah* in capacity.

This is their crime. The Masoretic Text has *ʿeynam,* "their eye," but two ancient versions and one Hebrew manuscript show the more likely *ʿawonam.* The *ʾefah,* then, either is associated with their crooked practices, using a false measure, or indicates the measure of justice that will now be applied to them.

7. *an ingot of lead was being lifted.* This probably means that the ingot of lead was covering the basin. Lead on a measuring basin would make it yield a falsely large weight and so might be associated with cheating by means of a crooked *ʾefah.*

8. *flung the lead stone over its opening.* In this fashion, Wickedness is now trapped within the basin.

9. *two women.* The enigma of the vision is compounded. After the woman embodying wickedness, we have two winged women—clearly divine agents and not ordinary women—who are to carry off the basin.

11. *To build a house for it in the land of Shinar.* Shinar is the archaic name for Babylonia, and the designation used at the beginning of the story of the Tower of Babel, in Genesis 11:2. Many commentators conclude that Wickedness is transported to Shinar because that is the location of humankind's transgressive presumption in seeking to build a tower with its top in the heavens.

they shall set it down. The Masoretic Text has a hybrid and grammatically impossible vocalization, *wehuniḥah,* but the Septuagint shows *wehiniḥuha,* a grammatically correct form that is reflected in this translation.

CHAPTER 6

[1]And again I raised my eyes and saw and, look, four chariots were going out from between two mountains, and the mountains were mountains of copper. [2]The first chariot had bay horses and the second chariot black horses. [3]And the third chariot had white horses and the fourth chariot dappled, spotted horses. [4]And I spoke out and said to the messenger speaking to me, “What are these, my lord?” [5]And the messenger answered and said to me, “These are the four winds of the heavens going out from standing in attendance before the Master of all the earth [6]in which the black horses go out to the land of the north and the white ones have gone out to the western sea, and the dappled ones have gone out to the land of the south, [7]and the red ones have gone out and sought to go about on the earth. And he said, ‘Go, go about on the earth,’ and they went about on the earth.” [8]And He summoned me and spoke to me, saying, “See, the ones going out to the north have pleased Me in the land of the north.”

[9]And the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
[10]“Take from the exiles, from Hildi and from Tobiah and from Jediah, who have come from Babylonia, and as for you, on that day you shall come to the house of Josiah son of Zephaniah. [11]And you shall take silver and gold and make diadems and put one on the head of Joshua son of Jehozadak the high priest. [12]And you shall say to him, saying, “Thus said the LORD of Armies, saying: Here is the man named Branch, and from his place it shall branch out, and he shall build the LORD’s Temple. [13]And he shall build the LORD’s Temple, and he shall assume majesty, and he shall sit on his throne and rule. And the priest shall be by his throne, and there shall be a counsel of harmony between the two of them. [14]And the diadems shall be in the LORD’s Temple as a memorial, for Tobiah and Jedaiah and Hen son of Zephaniah. The far-away shall come and build in the LORD’s Temple, and you shall know that the LORD of Armies has sent me to you. And it shall happen, if you heed the voice of the LORD your God.”

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *two mountains . . . mountains of copper.* It is probably wise not to translate these details into any symbolism. The gap between the two mountains provides a dramatic entrance point for the chariots, and the fact that the mountains are copper highlights their supernatural character.

5. *the four winds of the heavens.* Though this is the idiomatic expression for "the four corners of the heavens" ("wind" can mean "direction" in Hebrew), the literal sense needs to be preserved in this case because the four chariots rushing off in four directions appear to be the embodiment of the winds, which have been "standing in attendance" before God.

6. *to the western sea.* As elsewhere, this is the Mediterranean. The Masoretic Text reads *ʾel-ʾaḥareyhem,* "to after them," which is ungrammatical and also confusing. This translation supposes that the original reading was *ʾel hayam haʾaḥaron* or an equivalent phrase.

7. *the red ones.* The received text has *haʾamutsim,* "the spotted ones," but this is a synonym for "the dappled ones," who have already been accounted for, and the red horses seem to have disappeared. The translation therefore reads *haʾadumim,* "the red ones."

have gone out and sought to go about on the earth. This is somewhat puzzling because one would expect that these horses would head off in the fourth direction. Some scholars correct the phrase to "had gone out to the east," but there is only a logical warrant for the emendation, not a textual one.

8. *the ones going out to the north have pleased Me.* It is from the north that the destruction comes, and this is probably a prophecy of doom.

10. *Take from the exiles.* The object of the taking does not appear until the beginning of the next verse. It seems that some of the returning exiles brought substantial riches with them.

11. *diadems.* The Hebrew *ʿatarot* is not the word generally used for royal crowns, and the high priest would be wearing a diadem, not a crown.

put one. "One" is merely implied in the Hebrew.

13. *the priest shall be by his throne.* The preposition could also mean "on," but priests do not have thrones, and this translation follows an interpretation

proposed by Kimchi and many others.

there shall be a counsel of harmony between the two of them. This prophecy of smooth cooperation between Zerubbabel and Joshua probably reflects a sense that there might be some tension between them. Zerubbabel is of the Davidic line but an appointee of the Persian rulers, whereas Joshua is the legitimate heir to the high priesthood with no foreign intervention. Zechariah repeatedly elevates Zerubbabel's importance as Davidic ruler.

14. *The far-away.* The most likely reference is to returning exiles (who have already provided silver and gold for the Temple). Zechariah may be seeking to promote a unity of purpose between those who have remained in Jerusalem and those who have recently come back from Babylonia.

CHAPTER 7

[1]And it happened in the fourth year of King Darius
that the word of the LORD came to Zechariah on the
fourth of the ninth month, Kislev. [2]And Beth-El Sar-
Ezer and Regen-Melech and his men had sent to
entreat the LORD, [3]saying to the priests who were in
the house of the LORD of Armies and to the prophets,
saying, “Shall I weep and practice abstinence in the
fifth month as I have done for years?” [4]And the word
of the LORD of Armies came to me, saying, [5]“Say to
the people of the land and to the priests, saying,
‘Though you fasted and mourned in the fifth month
and the seventh these seventy years, have you actually
fasted for Me? [6]And if you eat and if you drink, are
you not the ones who eat and you the ones who drink?
[7]Are not these the words that the LORD proclaimed
through the former prophets when Jerusalem was
dwelling tranquil and her towns round about her and
the Negeb and the lowland dwelled tranquil?’”

[8]And the word of the LORD came to Zechariah,
saying, [9]“Thus said the LORD of Armies, saying:
Judge true justice, and do kindness and mercy each
man with his fellow. [10]And do not exploit widow and
orphan, sojourner and poor man, and do not plot evil
in your heart, each man against his fellow.” [11]But they
refused to listen and turned their backs in defiance,
and their ears they stopped up from hearing. [12]And
they made their heart adamantine against hearing the
teaching and the words that the LORD of Armies had
sent with His spirit through the former prophets, and
there was a great fury from the LORD of Armies.
[13]“And just as He had called and they would not hear,
so shall they call and I will not hear, said the LORD of
Armies. [14]And I will whirl them out over all the
nations that they did not know, and the land behind
them shall be desolate of passersby. They turned a
precious land into a desolation.”

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Beth-El.* Though this was the location of one of the two principal sanctuaries of the northern kingdom, it cannot be a place-name here, and it is also not used as a designation for the Temple (its literal meaning is “house of God”). On the evidence of documents from the Jewish community of Elephantine in Egypt from this period, it was also used as a man’s name.

3. *the fifth month.* This is the month of Av, when the destruction of the First Temple occurred.

5. *in the fifth month and the seventh.* The latter would be the fast commemorating the assassination of Gedaliah, who was appointed governor of Judah after the Babylonian conquest. Neither of these fasts, of course, has any basis in the Torah, and so the people understandably want a directive from God ("to entreat the LORD," verse 2) through the Temple priests and the Temple prophets about whether these fasts should be observed.

have you actually fasted for Me? God has not enjoined these fasts, and they are no more than a human initiative to express collective grief, which is not the thing God wants.

6. *are you not the ones who eat and you the ones who drink?* Eating and drinking, like abstention, are a human affair that does not really concern God.

7. *Are not these the words that the LORD proclaimed through the former prophets.* The words are not spelled out, but Zechariah would have in mind such prophecies as the one in Isaiah 1, where God proclaims that He does not want people to trample through the courts of the Temple when their hands are filled with blood.

dwelled tranquil. "Tranquil" does not appear here in the Hebrew. Either it was dropped in scribal transmission or "tranquil" in the preceding clause was meant to do double duty.

9. *Judge true justice.* Although this appears to be a new prophecy, the editorial logic of its placement here is that these demands for social justice are God's "words," what He wants rather than fasts.

14. *And I will whirl them out over all the nations.* Given Zechariah's role promising a Davidic restoration and urging the rebuilding of the Temple, it is unlikely that he could be addressing this blistering prophecy of exile to his contemporaries. Rather, this would be a citation of God's pronouncement of doom on the rebellious generation seven decades earlier. This situation of the prophecy in the historical moment leading up to 586 B.C.E. is spelled out in the last sentence here, which uses a past tense (the so-called converted future) for its report of turning the land into a desolation. The grandparents of Zechariah's audience, then, ignored God's teaching and consequently reduced

their land to ruins. Now the people of Zechariah's time, inhabiting the ruins, have been summoned to the task of rebuilding.

CHAPTER 8

[1]And the word of the LORD of Armies came, saying,
[2]“Thus said the LORD of Armies: I have been very
jealous for Zion, and with great wrath I have been
jealous for her. [3]Thus said the LORD: I have come
back to Zion and abided within Jerusalem, and
Jerusalem shall be called the City of Truth, and the
Mountain of the LORD, the Holy Mountain. [4]Thus
said the LORD of Armies: Again shall old men and
old women sit in the squares of Jerusalem, each with
his staff in hand because of their many years. [5]And the
squares of the city shall be filled with boys and girls
playing in her squares. [6]Thus said the LORD of
Armies: Does it seem beyond the remnant of this
people in these days? So it would be beyond Me, said
the LORD of Armies. [7]Thus said the LORD of
Armies: I am about to rescue My people from the land
of the east and from the land of the sunset, and I will
bring them, and they shall abide in Jerusalem and be
My people and I will be their God in truth and in
righteousness. [8]Thus said the LORD of Armies: May

your hands be strong, you who hear in these days these words from the prophets who are in the time the foundation of the house of the LORD of Armies was laid for the Temple to be rebuilt. [9]For before these days the wages of man was naught and the wages of beast was nothing, and for him coming and going there was no peace from the foe, and I set each man against his fellow. [10]And now not as in the former days am I to the remnant of this people, said the LORD of Armies. [11]For the peaceful sowing—the vine shall give its fruit and the land shall give its yield and the heavens shall give their dew, and I will bestow on the remnant of this people all these. [12]And it shall be, as you were a curse among the nations, house of Judah and house of Israel, so will I rescue you and you shall become a blessing. Do not fear, and may your hands be strong. [13]For thus said the LORD of Armies: As I devised to do harm to you when your fathers infuriated me, said the LORD of Armies, and I did not repent, [14]so I have again devised in these days to do good for Jerusalem and for the house of Judah. Do not fear. [15]These are the things that you should do: Speak truth, each man to his neighbor, and render truth and justice in your gates. [16]And do not plot evil in your hearts, each man against his fellow, and do not love a false vow, for all these do I hate, said the LORD."

[17]And the word of the LORD of Armies came to me,
saying, [18]"Thus said the LORD of Armies: the fast of
the fourth month and the fast of the fifth month and
the fast of the tenth month shall become a rejoicing for
the house of Judah and gladness and good festivals.
And love truth and peace."

[19]Thus said the LORD of Armies: "Peoples and the
dwellers of many towns yet shall come, and the
dwellers of one town shall go to another, saying, 'Let
us go to entreat the LORD and to seek the LORD of
Armies—I, too, shall go.' [20]And many peoples and vast
nations shall come to seek the LORD in Jerusalem and
to entreat the LORD." [21]Thus said the LORD of
Armies: "In those days ten people from all the tongues
of the nations shall grasp the border of a Jew's
garment, saying, 'Let us go up with you, for we have
heard that God is with you.'"

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *Jerusalem shall be called the City of Truth.* Zechariah here follows the practice of Third Isaiah, who attributes new names to Jerusalem in keeping with its dramatically transformed nature in the restoration of Zion.

4. *each with his staff in hand because of their many years.* In the new era of peace and prosperity, the city will be filled with people who will have lived to a ripe old age. The complement to this multiplication of elders is the children playing in the squares.

6. *Does it seem beyond the remnant of this people in these days?* This rhetorical question is addressed to those who might doubt the capacity of the people to complete the project of rebuilding the Temple. It is surely not beyond God to conceive such a consummation, and it should not be beyond the people. One might note that many scholars view the recurrent phrase "the remnant of this people" as a designation for those who remained in Judah after its conquest by the Babylonians.

7. *I am about to rescue My people from the land of the east.* The plausible inference from these words is that a substantial population of exiles from Judah remained in Babylonia after Cyrus's decree permitting return, and this seems historically very likely. "The land of the sunset" is added to convey the sense "everywhere."

8. *May your hands be strong.* These words, which will be repeated in verse 12, are an exhortation to those engaged in the arduous effort of rebuilding the Temple, as the reference to the rebuilding in the second part of this verse makes clear.

these words from the prophets. The reference is probably to Haggai and to Zechariah himself.

9. *the wages of man was naught and the wages of beast was nothing.* Man reaped no profit for his labor, and there was no food for his beasts of burden.

and for him coming and going there was no peace from the foe. Although other identifications have been proposed, the language sounds like a reference to siege. The same Hebrew phrase (literally, "going out and coming in") is used to describe the besieged Jericho in Joshua.

I set each man against his fellow. If these lines in fact refer to Jerusalem besieged by the Babylonians, what this formulation reflects is the bitter divisions within the people during that moment of crisis. Jeremiah, one recalls, was the object of a murderous conspiracy.

12. *a curse . . . a blessing.* Zechariah invokes common biblical usage, in which "curse" means a byword of calamity and "blessing" the opposite.

18. *the fast of the fourth month.* This reversal of a whole series of fasts addresses the question of the people in Jerusalem as to whether they should continue to keep two particular fasts.

good festivals. This rather odd use of "good" with "festivals" may be influenced by the Late Biblical *yamim tovim*, "good days," for "festivals," which occurs in Esther and becomes standard in rabbinic Hebrew.

And love truth and peace. Abraham ibn Ezra aptly observes that what God really wants of His people is not the awkward practice of fasts but the love of truth and peace, a life of ethical behavior.

19. *Peoples and the dwellers of many towns yet shall come.* This vision of the nations coming to seek out the God of Israel is in keeping with a recurrent theme in Third Isaiah and may well be influenced by him.

21. *ten people from all the tongues of the nations shall grasp the border of a Jew's garment.* This vivid image conveys the sense of throngs of foreigners desperate to join the people with whom God dwells. The term *yehudi,* "Jew," never appears in earlier biblical literature, although it occurs frequently in Esther, which also belongs to the Persian period. *Yehudi* is palpably moving toward the meaning of "Jew" because it is now hard to speak of a "Judahite" (Hebrew, *ben yehudah*), given that the kingdom of Judah no longer exists, having been replaced by the Persian province of Yehud.

CHAPTER 9

[1]A portent.

The word of the LORD in the land of Hadrach, and
Damascus is His resting place, for toward the LORD
is the eye of humankind and all the tribes of Israel.
[2]And Hamath, too, borders on it, Tyre and Sidon,
though they have great wisdom.

[3]And Tyre built herself a fortress
and piled up silver like dust
and finest gold like sand in the
streets.
[4]Look, the LORD shall beggar her
and strike her wealth down into
the sea,
and she shall be consumed by
fire.
[5]Ashkelon shall see and be afraid
and Gaza greatly tremble

and Ekron, for her stronghold
has failed.
[6]And a bastard shall be enthroned in
Ashdod,
and I will cut off the Philistines'
pride.
[7]And I will take away the blood from
his mouth
and the disgusting things from
between his teeth,
and he, too, shall remain for our God
and become like a friend in Judah
and Ekron like the Jebusite.
[8]And I will camp at My house
against armies,
against any who pass by,
and no more shall oppressors pass
over them,
for now I have seen their
affliction.
[9]Greatly exult, Zion's Daughter,
shout for joy, Jerusalem's
Daughter.
Look, your king shall come to you,
victor and triumphant is he,
a lowly man riding on an ass,

on a donkey, the foal of a she-ass.
[10]And I will cut off the chariots from
Ephraim
and the horses from Jerusalem,
and the bow of battle shall be cut
off,
and he shall parley for peace with
the nations,
and they shall rule from sea to sea
and from the Euphrates to the
ends of the earth.
[11]You, too, through the blood of the
covenant,
I have freed your prisoners from
the waterless pit.
[12]Go back to the fortress,
you prisoners of hope.
This very day proclaiming,
double I will give back to you.
[13]For I have bent Me Judah as a bow,
strong Ephraim as an arrow.
And I have roused your sons, O
Zion,
against your sons, O Javan,
and made you as a warrior's
sword.

[14]And the LORD shall be seen over
them,
and His arrow come out like
lightning,
and the Master, the LORD, shall
blast the ram's horn
and go forth in the storms of the
south.
[15]The LORD of Armies shall defend
them,
and the slingstone shall consume
and conquer
and drink blood like wine
and be filled like ritual basins,
like the corners of an altar.
[16]And the LORD shall rescue them
on that day—
His people like sheep—
for they are crown jewels that
gleam on His soil.
[17]How goodly and how lovely
the young men like new grain
and the virgins like lush new
wine.

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *A portent.* The very anomaly of this "heading" signals that we have moved on to a new unit of prophecies. In regard to both style and subject matter, these last chapters of the book are quite different from the prophecies of Zechariah, and the mention of Javan (which is to say "Ion," or Greece) in verse 13 is a possible indication that this text was composed after the conquest of the region by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C.E., more than a century after the time of Zechariah. Although the first two verses are in prose, these prophecies continue in poetry, unlike the prose writing of Zechariah.

Hadrach. This is a city in Syria north of Damascus.

2. *though they have great wisdom.* The "wisdom," in keeping with one prevalent sense of the Hebrew *ḥokhmah,* is their skill in shipbuilding and in the construction of buildings, perhaps especially fortifications, as the next verse suggests. While these Phoenician cities are famed for their "wisdom," they are doomed to fall through the sovereign decree of the God of all the earth.

4. *beggar her.* If one construes the Hebrew verb as deriving from a different root, it might mean "dispossess her," but the mention in the preceding line of silver and gold argues for the sense of "beggar."

her wealth. The Hebrew *ḥayil* has three different meanings—"wealth," "wall," and "military force"—and one must concede that any of these three senses would work here. This translation opts for "wealth" because of the invocation of silver and gold.

5. *Ashkelon . . . / Gaza . . . / Ekron.* These are Philistine cities, like Tyre and Sidon on the Mediterranean coast but considerably to the south. When the Philistines hear of the fall of the Phoenician towns, they are seized with panic.

7. *take away the blood from his mouth / and the disgusting things from between his teeth.* The consumption of blood is explicitly forbidden in the Torah. The "disgusting things" are probably pork, a staple of the Philistine diet, as the evidence of bones uncovered in Philistine sites indicates. The

Philistines, in this utopian scenario, will put aside their odious practices and join the people of Israel.

a friend. The Hebrew *ʾaluf,* which also means "guide," does have the sense of "friend" or "companion."

Ekron like the Jebusite. The Jebusites, after their city Jerusalem was conquered by David, appear to have had amicable relations with the Israelites.

8. *I have seen their affliction.* The Masoretic Text has "I have seen with My eyes" (*beʿeynay*), but the Septuagint seems to have used a Hebrew text that showed *beʿonyam,* "their affliction," and that makes better sense.

9. *a lowly man riding on an ass.* This is the surprising switch: though a victor, the king comes as a lowly man. In the earlier biblical period, donkeys were actually the mount of royalty, but at this late moment, horses would have been used. The introduction of the ass here anticipates the elimination of horses from Jerusalem in the next verse.

10. *I will cut off the chariots from Ephraim / and the horses from Jerusalem.* Ordinarily, this language would signal a prophecy of doom. Here, however, it conveys the idea that the implements of warfare will be cast aside because the ideal ruler will be able to "parley for peace with the nations."

from sea to sea. Although this could mean from the Dead Sea to the Mediterranean, given the expansive dimensions of the province of rule, it may instead refer to the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, far to the south.

11. *through the blood of the covenant.* In all likelihood, this is the blood of the covenant of circumcision. Because Israel has remained faithful to its covenant with God, He will now liberate its captives.

12. *the fortress.* The Hebrew word might instead be a place-name, Bitsaron.

you prisoners of hope. This evocative phrase so caught the imagination of the great medieval Hebrew poet Judah HaLevi that he used it several times in his poems.

13. *I have bent Me Judah as a bow, / strong Ephraim as an arrow.* This follows from the idea that horses and chariots are put aside, for Judah itself now is embodied as a weapon.

14. *blast the ram's horn.* This is a call to battle.

15. *drink blood like wine.* The Masoretic Text has "drink and roar [*hamu*] like wine," but the Septuagint reads *dam,* "blood," which is more plausible. Drinking blood like wine is a topos of ancient Hebrew martial poetry.

like ritual basins, / like the corners of an altar. Blood was collected in basins as part of the animal sacrifices, and it was also sprinkled at the four corners of the altar.

16. *His people like sheep.* Though the syntactic placement is a little odd, the clear sense is that God will rescue Israel as a shepherd rescues his sheep.

17. *lush.* The Hebrew uses a verb, *yenoveiv,* that means something like "to bring forth produce."

CHAPTER 10

[1]Ask of the LORD rain
in the season of the latter rains.
The LORD makes lightning
and drenching rain.
He gives to every man
the grass of the field.
[2]For the household gods spoke
deceit,
and the sorcerers envisioned lies,
and vain dreams do they speak,
with mere breath they console.
Therefore they have strayed like
sheep,
wandered, for there is no
shepherd.
[3]Against the shepherds I am incensed
and with the he-goats I will make
a reckoning.
For the LORD of Armies has
singled out His flock,

the house of Judah,
and made them like a stallion,
His glory in battle.
[4]From them the cornerstone and
from them the tent peg,
from them the bow of battle,
from them all commanders
together.
[5]And they shall be as warriors
trampling the mud of the streets
in battle,
and they shall battle, for the LORD
is with them,
and they shall put the horsemen to
shame.
[6]And I will make the house of Judah
mighty,
and the house of Joseph I will
make victorious.
And I will restore them, for I have
mercy upon them,
and they shall be as though I never
forsook them,
for I am the LORD their God
and will answer them.

[7]And Ephraim shall be like a
warrior,
and their heart shall rejoice as
from wine,
and their children shall see and
rejoice,
their heart shall exult in the
LORD.
[8]I will whistle to them and gather
them,
for I will ransom them, and they
shall increase as before.
[9]And I will sow them among the
peoples, in far places they shall
recall Me,
and they shall thrive with their
children and return.
[10]And I will bring them back from
the land of Egypt
and from Assyria I will gather
them.
And to the land of Gilead and
Lebanon I will bring them,
and still it shall not suffice for
them.

[11]And he shall pass through the sea
against the foe
and strike waves in the sea,
and all the depths of the Nile shall
dry up,
and the pride of Assyria be
brought down,
and the scepter of Egypt shall
vanish.
[12]And I will make them mighty in
the LORD,
and in His name they shall go
about
—said the LORD.

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *drenching rain.* In the Hebrew, two synonyms, *metar-geshem,* are joined in the construct state, signifying intensification.

2. *the household gods.* These domestic icons, *terafim,* were used for divination.

wandered. The Masoretic Text reads *yaʿanu,* "answered" or "were afflicted." This translation supposes a reversal of consonants and reads instead *yanuʿu.*

3. *the shepherds.* This stock epithet for "leaders" picks up the sheep metaphor of the previous line. In the second verset, "he-goats" is another fixed epithet

for leaders.

make a reckoning / . . . singled out. The same verb, *paqad,* is used for both, but because it has both a positive and a negative meaning, divergent English equivalents are necessary.

4. *cornerstone . . . tent peg, / . . . bow.* These are all metaphors for the leaders or champions of the people. At the end of the line, the literal referent of all these is introduced in "commanders." It should be noted that the Hebrew term used for "commander," *nogeis,* generally has a negative meaning ("taskmaster," "overseer"), but that cannot be the case here. The shift in meaning may reflect the fluidity of Late Biblical Hebrew.

5. *trampling the mud of the streets in battle.* It is not entirely evident why the warriors should be trampling mud. Perhaps this is intended as an image of conquest—the troops stomp through the streets of the conquered city, overwhelming all that stands in their way. It is also possible that an object of the verb has dropped out (the literal sense of the Hebrew is "in the mud of the streets") and that the original text read: "trampling *the slain like* the mud of the streets."

8. *I will whistle to them.* Whistling appears elsewhere as a signal for the marshaling of troops, a sound that may have been produced with some sort of wooden whistle.

they shall increase as before. More literally, "they shall increase as they increased."

9. *sow.* The idea is that the exiles are planted far and wide in order to flourish.

10. *And I will bring them back from the land of Egypt / and from Assyria.* This invocation of lands to the south and to the far northeast is meant to express the comprehensiveness of the ingathering of exiles. In the fourth century B.C.E. there was a substantial diaspora community in Egypt. Assyria no longer existed, but it had become a byword for distant exile.

11. *And he shall pass through the sea against the foe.* The "he" would be Israel, transformed by God into a mighty warrior. But the three Hebrew words of this verset, *weʿavar bayam tsarah,* are cryptic. One possible literal rendering would be: "And he shall pass through the sea [in?] straits." Given

the militant context, the last of these three words has been construed as a collective noun meaning “foe,” and “against” is assumed to be implied by ellipsis.

CHAPTER 11

[1]Open, O Lebanon, your doors,
that fire consume your cedars.
[2]Wail, O cypress,
for the cedar has fallen,
as the majestic ones are
ravaged.
Wail, O Bashan oaks,
for the dense forest is taken down.
[3]Hark! The wailing of shepherds,
for their majesty is ravaged.
Hark! The roar of lions,
for Jordan's bends are ravaged.

[4]Thus said the LORD my God: "Look after the sheep to be slaughtered, [5]whose buyers will slaughter them and bear no guilt and whose sellers will say, 'Praise the LORD, and I will get rich.' And their shepherds show no pity for them. [6]For I will no longer show pity for the dwellers of the land, said the LORD, and I am about to deliver every man into the hand of his fellow and

into the hand of his king, and they shall grind up the land, and I will not save it from their hand.” [7]And I looked after the sheep to be slaughtered for the sheep traders, and I took me two staffs. One I called Pleasantness and the other I called Bruising, and I looked after the sheep. [8]But I got rid of the three shepherds in a single month and lost patience with them, and they on their part were disgusted with me. [9]And I said, “I will not look after you.” The sheep dying will die, and the missing will go missing, and those rescuing, each will eat the other’s flesh. [10]And I took my staff Pleasantness and broke it apart to annul my covenant that I had sealed with all the peoples. [11]And on that very day it was annulled, and the sheep traders watching me knew that it was the word of the LORD. [12]And I said to them, “If it is good in your eyes, give me my wages, and if not, don’t.” And they weighed out my wages, thirty silver shekels. [13]And the LORD said to me, “Fling it into the potter’s kiln,” this majestic sum that I was worth to them. And I took the thirty silver shekels and flung them into the potter’s kiln at the house of the LORD. [14]And I broke apart my second staff, Bruising, to annul the brotherhood between the house of Judah and the house of Israel. [15]And the LORD said to me once again, “Take you the gear of a foolish shepherd. [16]For I am about to raise up

a shepherd in the land of the missing sheep. The lad
shall not count them nor seek for them, and the injured
he shall not heal nor the immobile one sustain, but the
fat one he shall eat and break off their hooves."

[17]Woe, O useless shepherds,
forsakers of the sheep.
Let a sword be over his arm
and over his right eye.
Let his arm entirely wither
and his right eye go utterly dark.

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Open, O Lebanon, your doors.* There is a double meaning here. These are the doors of the kingdom within which are the great stands of cedar; and they are the gates of the city within which are buildings with sumptuous cedarwood paneling.

2. *dense forest.* Though *batsir* usually means "vintage," a forest is not a vineyard, and hence in this instance the word may reflect the verbal stem that means "fortified" or, by implication, "impenetrable."

3. *shepherds, / . . . lions.* As in many other lines of poetry, these are the leaders (in the case of the lions, perhaps military commanders).

4. *the sheep to be slaughtered.* The prophet continues the metaphor of the leaders as shepherds and the people as their flock. Here, the flock is bought and sold and slaughtered with impunity.

7. *the sheep traders.* The received text reads *aniyey hatsoʾn,* "the poor of the sheep," but poverty seems an odd attribute for sheep. The Septuagint, which appears to have used a Hebrew text that had *likhenaʿaney hatsoʾn,* "for sheep traders," is followed in this translation.

Bruising. The Hebrew *ḥovlim* reflects one of two homonymous verbal stems, one meaning "to bruise" and the other "to bundle together." Some translations opt for the latter and render the name as Unity. But there is a biblical notion of antithetical staffs, one for mercy and one for punishment, and the present translation assumes that this is reflected here.

8. *the three shepherds.* They are introduced without explanation.

9. *I said.* It appears that the prophet is now speaking, not God.

each will eat the other's flesh. The metaphor of the flock now takes a fantastic, and grisly, turn: the herbivore sheep, reflecting the nature of the people they represent figuratively, turn into voracious carnivores consuming each other's flesh.

10. *my covenant that I had sealed with all the peoples.* The reference is by no means transparent. First, since it would be strange for Zechariah to have a covenant with all the peoples, he may have segued into speaking on behalf of God, such slippage being not uncommon in biblical usage. But the content of the covenant is unclear. It might be a tacit agreement—not at all like God's covenant with Israel—that the peoples are not to destroy Israel. "Pleasantness" might then be linked with this covenant through its pacific connotation.

12. *If it is good in your eyes.* That is, if you accept my breaking of the staff, even though as a shepherd I would need it.

give me my wages. In the metaphor of the flock, the prophet, observing what is happening to the flock, is represented as someone hired by the sheep traders.

13. *the potter's kiln.* The Hebrew noun *hayotseir* is opaque. Many interpreters understand it as though it were *haʾotsar,* "the treasury," but there is scant evidence for interchangeability between those two terms, despite a limited phonetic similarity, and the violent verb "fling" for putting something in a treasury would be surprising. *Yotseir* means "potter," and perhaps here,

through metonymy, it refers to the potter's kiln, where the weights of silver would be smelted.

14. *to annul the brotherhood between the house of Judah and the house of Israel.* This is still another anomalous detail in this enigmatic prophecy, because the northern kingdom of Israel ceased to exist three centuries before this prophet wrote.

15. *a foolish shepherd.* His foolishness is spelled out in the next verse.

16. *The lad.* This word, *naʿar*, is used because it was often young men (alternately, subalterns) who tended the flocks, as we see at the beginning of David's career in 1 Samuel 16. Again, the reference is to the king.

the immobile one. The Hebrew *hanitsavah* is unclear. It would ordinarily mean "one who is standing," hence the guess of this translation.

CHAPTER 12

[1]A portent.

The word of the LORD concerning Israel, said the LORD, Who stretches out the heavens and founds the earth and fashions the spirit of man within him. [2]I am about to make Jerusalem a bowl of poison to all the peoples round about, and Judah, too, shall be caught in the siege against Jerusalem. [3]And it shall happen on that day that I will make Jerusalem a burdensome stone for all the peoples. All who lift her burden shall surely be scraped, while all the nations of the earth gather against her. [4]On that day, said the LORD, I will strike every horse with confusion and its rider with madness, but upon the house of Judah I will open My eyes, while all the horses of the peoples I will strike with blindness. [5]And the leaders of Judah shall say in their heart, “The dwellers of Jerusalem are strength for me through the LORD their God.” [6]On that day I will make the leaders of Judah like a flaming brazier

among wood and like a flaming torch among sheaves,
and they shall consume on the right and on the left all
the peoples round about, and Jerusalem shall again
dwell in its place. [7]And the LORD shall rescue the
tents of Judah first so that the glory of the house of
David and the glory of Jerusalem's dwellers shall not
surpass Judah. [8]On that day, the LORD shall defend
Jerusalem, and the faltering among them on that day
shall be like David and the house of David like a god,
like the LORD's messenger at their head. [9]And on that
day I will set about to destroy all the nations coming
against Jerusalem. [10]And I will pour out upon the
house of David and upon Jerusalem's dwellers a spirit
of grace and graciousness, and they shall look upon
those who were stabbed and mourn for them like the
mourning for an only child, and they shall grieve
bitterly for them as one grieves bitterly for a firstborn.
[11]On that day the mourning in Jerusalem shall be as
great as the mourning for Hadad-Rimmon in the
Valley of Megiddo. [12]And the land shall mourn clan by
clan, the house of Nathan by itself and their women by
themselves, [13]the clan of the house of Levi by itself
and their women by themselves, the house of Shimei
by itself, and their women by themselves, [14]all the
remaining clans, clan by clan by itself, and their
women by themselves.

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *I am about to make Jerusalem a bowl of poison.* The besiegers will imagine that they are about to overwhelm Jerusalem, but instead they themselves will be destroyed.

Judah, too, shall be caught in the siege. There is no "caught" in the Hebrew, but this translation follows the precedent of two other modern English versions in adding it in order to avoid the impression that the kingdom of Judah is to take part in the siege against Jerusalem. Though one can lay siege only to a city, not to a kingdom, the obvious sense is that Judah, too, will be attacked by invaders.

3. *a burdensome stone.* This is a complementary metaphor to the bowl of poison. The stone is too heavy to be lifted (by the invaders), and those who attempt it will only injure themselves.

4. *I will strike every horse with confusion.* Now the two metaphors are translated into military facts: the enemy's horses will run amok and then go blind, and their riders will lose their minds, and thus the invading army will fall into fatal disarray.

5. *strength for me.* The Hebrew *ʾamtsah,* a familiar verbal stem but an anomalous form, is best construed as a noun.

6. *a flaming brazier . . . a flaming torch.* This is the third figurative representation of Jerusalem's destructive force and the most violent of the three.

7. *And the LORD shall rescue the tents of Judah first.* The prophet introduces a somewhat surprising political note here: even though Jerusalem is the capital, it should not think of itself as the exclusively important domain of God's people, and, to that end, He will rescue the regions outside Jerusalem first. But the next verse offers a counterbalance to this statement.

8. *like a god.* The Hebrew uses the polyvalent *ʾelohim,* which can mean "God," "god," or "divine being." The first of these three senses should be excluded because it would be too extravagant, and theologically inadmissible, to say that the house of David was like God.

10. *grace and graciousness.* Two cognates appear in the Hebrew, *ḥein* and *taḥanunim.* While the latter elsewhere means "supplications," the present context suggests that here it has sense close to *ḥein*.

look upon. The Masoretic Text has "look to Me [*ʾeilay*], revocalized here as *ʾeiley* ["to" or "upon"].

mourn for them like the mourning for an only child. It is puzzling that a prophecy promising the destruction of Judah's enemies and the pouring out of a spirit of grace upon the people should conclude in this wave of desperate mourning. The least complicated explanation is Rashi's: in the battle to defend the city, many have fallen by the sword, and so the triumph is darkened by a deep sadness over these terrible losses.

11. *as great as the mourning for Hadad-Rimmon.* These are two Canaanite gods, here conflated, as they may have been in popular religion. The mourning indicates that Hadad-Rimmon was a dying god, like Tammuz and like the Greek Adonis, whose annual descent into the underworld was marked by rites of grief.

CHAPTER 13

[1]On that day shall a spring be opened for the house of
David and for Jerusalem's dwellers for the cleansing of
offense and impurity. [2]And it shall happen on that day,
said the LORD of Armies, that I will cut off the names
of the idols from the land, and they no longer shall be
recalled, and the prophets, too; and the spirit of
uncleanness I will take away from the land. [3]And it
shall happen that should a man still prophesy, his
father and his mother, his begetters, shall say, "You
shall not live, for you have spoken lies in the name of
the LORD." And his father and his mother shall stab
him for his prophesying. [4]And it shall happen on that
day that the prophets shall be shamed, each of his
visions when he prophesies, and they shall not wear a
hairy mantle in order to deceive. [5]And he shall say, "I
am no prophet. I am a tiller of the soil, for the soil has
been consigned to me from my youth." [6]And one shall
say to him, "What are these wounds on your chest?"
And he shall say, "Because I was struck in the house
of my lovers."

[7]Sword, rouse against My shepherd,
against My companion man
—said the LORD of Armies.
Strike the shepherd
and let the sheep be scattered,
and I will bring My hand back
against the shepherd lads.
[8]And it shall happen throughout the land,
said the LORD,
two-thirds within it shall be cut off, perish,
and a third shall be left within it.
[9]And I will bring the third into fire
and purge them as silver is purged
and try them as gold is tried.
He shall call out in My name.
As for Me, I will answer him.
And he shall say, “The LORD
is my God.”

CHAPTER 13 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *for the cleansing of offense and impurity.* “Cleansing” is merely implied in the Hebrew through ellipsis.

2. *the names of the idols.* Not only will the idols be destroyed but their very names will be expunged—thus, "they no longer shall be recalled." One should note that invoking the name of a deity in a vow was considered to be a very weighty act.

the prophets. These are false prophets, as the mention immediately afterward of "the spirit of uncleanness" makes clear.

3. *his father and his mother, his begetters.* This extreme case highlights the terrible gravity of the crime of false prophecy: his own parents condemn him to death and then carry out the sentence.

for his prophesying. An alternate construction of this single Hebrew word is "when he prophesies."

4. *a hairy mantle.* There is some indication that the early prophets (that is, earlier than the so-called Literary Prophets) wore hairy mantles, and so this would be the outward show of his status as a prophet.

5. *I am no prophet. I am a tiller of the soil.* Confronted with the charge of false prophecy, which is a capital crime, he pretends to have nothing to do with prophecy but to be only a simple farmer.

for the soil has been consigned to me. The noun in the received text is *ʾadam,* "man" or "humankind," but this is probably an error for *ʾadamah,* "soil," the final *heh* having been lost through haplography because it is also the first letter of the next word.

6. *What are these wounds on your chest?* His own body bears evidence against him. The wounds would be gashes, self-inflicted or made by others, as one sees with the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18:28, in a pagan rite to rouse the attention of a deity.

Because I was struck in the house of my lovers. Most translators render the last word as "friends," but its general meaning is "lovers." The usage is probably influenced by the common representation in Prophetic literature of pagan deities as "lovers" of the adulterous Israel. The wounds do not reflect any homosexual sadomasochistic practice but rather the cultic excesses of a pagan ritual.

7. *My shepherd.* Once again, the shepherd is the king.

the shepherd lads. The Hebrew *tsoʿarim* means “assistant shepherds,” which would refer figuratively to people in the royal court and administration.

9. *He shall call out.* As often happens in biblical usage, the pronouns switch from plural to singular, Israel now imagined as a collective.

CHAPTER 14

[1]Look, a day is coming for the LORD when what is
despoiled from you shall be shared out in your midst,
[2]and I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem for
battle. And the city shall be captured and the houses
looted and the women ravished. And half the city shall
go out in exile, but the rest of the people shall not be
cut off from the city. [3]And the LORD shall sally forth
and do battle with those nations as on the day He
fought, on the day of battle. [4]And His feet shall stand
on that day on the Mount of Olives, which faces
Jerusalem from the east. And the Mount of Olives
shall split in half, from east to west, into a very great
valley, and half the mountain shall shift to the north
and half to the south. [5]And the valley of My mountains
shall be blocked, as the valley of the mountains
reaches as far as Azal, and it shall be blocked as it was
blocked by the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king
of Judah. And the LORD my God shall come, all the
holy ones with Him. [6]And it shall happen that on that
day there shall be no daylight nor chill moonlight.

[7]And it shall be a single day—it shall be known to the
LORD—neither day nor night, and it shall be, at
eventide there shall be light. [8]And it shall happen on
that day, fresh waters shall come out from Jerusalem,
half of them toward the eastern sea and half of them
toward the western sea, in summer and in winter it
shall be. [9]And the LORD shall be king over all the
earth. On that day the LORD shall be one and His
name one. [10]All the land shall become as a plain, from
Geba to Rimmon south of Jerusalem, but the city shall
rise high and sit in her place, from the Benjamin Gate
to the site of the Former Gate as far as the Armor
Gate and from Hanamel Tower as far as the king's
winepress. [11]And they shall dwell within her, and no
more shall there be devastation, and Jerusalem shall
dwell secure. [12]And this shall be the plague with which
the LORD shall strike all the peoples that marshaled
against Jerusalem: their flesh shall rot as they stand on
their feet, and their eyes shall rot in their sockets, and
their tongues shall rot in their mouths. [13]And it shall
happen on that day, the panic from the LORD among
them shall be great, and every man shall seize his
fellow, and his hand shall be raised against the hand of
his fellow. [14]And Judah, too, shall do battle in
Jerusalem, and the wealth of the nations round about
shall be gathered in—gold and silver and very many

garments. [15]And so shall there be a plague against horse and mule and camel and donkey and every beast that will be in those camps, like this plague. [16]And it shall happen that all who remain of the nations coming up against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to bow to the King, the LORD of Armies, and to celebrate the Festival of Booths. [17]And it shall happen that he who does not go up from the clans of the earth to Jerusalem to bow to the King, the LORD of Armies, no rain shall fall on him. [18]And if the clan of Egypt does not go up and does not come, upon them shall be the plague with which the LORD shall strike all the nations that do not go up to celebrate the Festival of Booths. [19]This shall be the punishment for the offense of Egypt and for the offense of all the nations that do not go up to celebrate the Festival of Booths. [20]On that day there shall be on the bells of the horses “Holy to the LORD,” and the pails in the house of the LORD shall be like the basins before the altar. [21]And every pail in Jerusalem and in Judah shall be “Holy to the LORD of Armies.” And all those offering sacrifice shall come and take from them and cook in them, and there shall no longer be a merchant in the house of the LORD of Armies on that day.

CHAPTER 14 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *the city . . . the houses . . . the women.* The panorama of conquest moves inward, and intensifies, in concentric circles: first the city falls, then the homes are ransacked, and—worst of all—within the homes the women are raped.

but the rest of the people shall not be cut off. This prepares the ground for the great pivot, in which the LORD sallies forth as a warrior-god to route the enemies.

4. *the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem from the east.* The enemies would have come from the east.

And the Mount of Olives shall split in half. God's principal weapon in this battle is a cataclysmic earthquake.

5. *shall be blocked.* The Masoretic Text reads *wenastem,* "and you shall flee," but the strong scholarly consensus is that the word should be revocalized to show *wenistam,* as it does in some Hebrew manuscripts and in three ancient versions.

all the holy ones. These would be the divine entourage.

with Him. The Masoretic reading is "with you," but almost all the ancient versions have "with Him."

6. *there shall be no daylight nor chill moonlight.* This is the construction of many modern versions, but the Hebrew is cryptic.

8. *fresh waters shall come out from Jerusalem.* Jerusalem thus becomes a source of fructification for all its distant environs. The vision may be inspired by the stream flowing out from the Temple in Ezekiel 47.

10. *the city.* The Hebrew says only "she," but "the city" is added in the translation in order to avoid the impression that it is the land that rises high.

12. *And this shall be the plague.* The prophet is not content with the evocation of Jerusalem dwelling secure but goes on to describe the ghastly fate of its enemies.

their flesh. The Hebrew uses a masculine singular throughout the plague passage, but this is basically a collective noun, hence the plural in the

translation.

14. *Judah, too, shall do battle in Jerusalem.* Hebrew usage also allows one to construe this as "do battle against Jerusalem," and a few scholars have proposed a background of bitter enmity between the population in Jerusalem and the inhabitants of the outlying districts, but this seems unlikely.

15. *like this plague.* That is, the plague in which the living body rots.

16. *all who remain of the nations . . . shall go up year after year to bow to the King, the LORD of Armies.* This passage picks up the idea proclaimed in Third Isaiah that all the nations will embrace the worship of YHWH. It is for this reason that God here is given the epithet King, for He is king of all the earth.

the Festival of Booths. This is the fall festival, which, because it was celebrated after the labor of harvesting was completed, drew the largest throngs of pilgrims. Evidently, the obligation of the sundry nations is just this festival and not all three pilgrim festivals.

17. *who does not go up . . . to bow to the King.* Unlike the parallel passages in Third Isaiah, this call to universalism is accompanied by a threat to those who do not comply.

18. *the clan of Egypt . . . upon them shall be the plague.* The withholding of rain is not a threat to Egypt because it has the Nile as its water source, so the Egyptians will be punished by plague.

19. *the punishment for the offense.* "Punishment" is merely implied in the Hebrew.

20. *Holy to the LORD.* This is the formulaic phrase that indicates consecration to the Temple. The horses will no longer serve as mounts for battle but will be part of the sacred service.

the pails in the house of the LORD shall be like the basins before the altar. The intention of this statement is obscure. Since the next verse goes on to say that all the pails (others translate the Hebrew term as "pots)—in the kingdom will be inscribed with the words dedicating them to the sanctuary, perhaps the meaning may be that even receptacles commonly used for mundane purposes will be devoted to the service of God.

21. *there shall no longer be a merchant in the house of the* LORD. The presence of merchants was required in order to exchange gold and silver for chattel that could be offered as sacrifice. Jesus, it will be remembered, objected to such commercial activity in the Temple and drove out the money changers. It would appear that this prophet was actuated by that same impulse of purism or zealotry.

Malachi

CHAPTER 1

[1]A portent: the word of the LORD through Malachi.

[2]I have loved you, said the LORD,
and you said, “How have you
loved us?”
Is not Esau Jacob’s brother? said the
LORD.
And I loved Jacob,
[3]but Esau I hated,
and I made his mountains a
desolation
and his estate—for the desert
jackals.
[4]Should Edom say, “We are
beggared,
but once more we will build the
ruins,”
thus said the LORD of Armies:
They shall build but I will destroy,

and they shall be called the region of
wickedness
and the people the LORD cursed
for all time.
5 And your own eyes shall see and
you shall say,
"May the LORD be great beyond
the region of Israel."
6 A son honors his father,
and a slave his master,
but if I am a father,
where is My honor,
and if I am a master,
where is the fear of Me?
said the LORD of Armies to you,
priests who despise My name.
And you said, "How have we
despised Your name?"
7 Bringing on My altar
defiled food,
and you say, "How have we
defiled You?"
When you say the LORD's table
is despised,
8 and when you bring a blind beast to
sacrifice—

“there is nothing wrong.”
And when you bring a lame and
sickly beast—
“there is nothing wrong.”
Offer it, pray, to your prefect.
Will he be pleased with you or
favor you?
said the LORD of Armies.
9 And now, entreat, pray,
God, that He be gracious to us
From your hand this was.
Will He show favor to you?
said the LORD of Armies.
10 Who then among you would close
double doors
and not light fire on My altar in
vain?
I have no desire of you,
said the LORD of Armies,
and with grain offering from
your land I will not be
pleased.
11 For from the sun’s rising to its
setting
great is My name among the
nations,

and in every place incense is offered
to My name
and pure grain offering,
for great is My name among the
nations,
said the LORD of Armies.
12 But you profane it
when you say, “The Master’s table
is defiled,
and the food on it despised.”
13 And you say, “How tiresome,”
and you insult Me, said the LORD
of Armies.
And you bring the stolen and the
lame and the sickly,
and you bring the grain offering.
Will I be pleased with it from your
hand?
said the LORD.

14 And cursed be the schemer who has in his flock a sound male but pledges and sacrifices a damaged one to the Master. For I am a great king, said the LORD of Armies, and My name is fearsome among the nations.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Malachi.* In contrast to many of the other prophets, no father's name is given, and no indication of the years of his prophecy is offered. This suppression of identifying context lends support to the inference that "Malachi" is not actually a name but a common noun designating a role, "My messenger."

3. *but Esau I hated.* Esau is Edom, and the bitter lingering memory of the Edomites' collaboration with the Babylonians in the destruction of Jerusalem informs these lines.

5. *May the LORD be great beyond the region of Israel.* This idea that God's kingship will be reverentially recognized by the nations of the earth is picked up in verse 11.

6. *priests who despise My name.* The prophecy began by addressing the people of Israel. Now attention is focused on the priests and their abuse of the Temple cult. Since the prophet assumes that the Temple service is being conducted, his own discourse would have to occur at some point after the completion of the rebuilding of the Temple around 514 B.C.E.

How have we despised Your name? This articulation of the prophecy through challenge and response (compare verse 2) is characteristic of Malachi.

8. *blind . . . / lame . . . sickly.* All such maimed animals are forbidden as offerings in the sacrificial cult. The priests may be passing off cheaply acquired beasts of this sort while keeping the sound animals for their own consumption.

your prefect. The Hebrew word used here, *peḥah,* is a loanword taken from the Persian (compare the English "pasha," which entered the language through a Turkish intermediary) and is thus linguistic evidence of the setting of this prophecy in the Persian period.

10. *close double doors / and not light fire on My altar.* Given the egregious abuse of the Temple cult, what needs to be done is to close the doors of the sanctuary and stop lighting the lampstands on the altar.

11. *in every place incense is offered to My name / and pure grain offering.* While the offerings in the Jerusalem temple are contaminated, elsewhere the nations serve God with pure sacrifices. One must construe the assertion either as a rhetorical maneuver or as a monotheistic fantasy.

12. *when you say, "The Master's table is defiled."* The priests, of course, would not actually make such an open declaration of their own contempt for the sacred altar, but the prophet attributes to them words that expose the effect of their actions.

the food on it despised. The received text includes a word, *nivo* ("its fruit"?), that has not been translated because it is syntactically awry and looks like a scribal error. It may be a dittography triggered by the next word in the text, *nivzeh.*

13. *How tiresome.* The Masoretic Text shows an odd formation, *matlaʾah,* and this translation follows many critics in breaking it into two words, *mah telaʾah.*

14. *a sound male.* "Sound" is merely implied in the Hebrew.

My name is fearsome among the nations. The prophet reverts here to the idea introduced in verse 11 that the sundry nations fear and worship Him with the appropriate sacrifices while the priests in Jerusalem offer up tainted beasts.

CHAPTER 2

[1]And now, for you is this command, O priests. [2]If you
do not heed and do not pay mind to give honor to My
name, said the LORD of Armies, I will let loose the
curse among you and make your blessings curses, yes,
make them curses, for you do not pay mind. [3]I am
about to rebuke your seed and scatter dung on your
faces, the dung of your festival offerings, and it shall
carry you off to where it is. [4]And you shall know that I
have sent you this command, for My covenant to be
with Levi, said the LORD of Armies. [5]My covenant
has been with him, life and peace, and I have given
them to him—fear, and he did fear Me, and before My
name he was awestruck. [6]A teaching of truth was in
his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. In
peace and in uprightness he walked with Me, and
many did he bring back from crime. [7]For the lips of
the priest preserved knowledge, and teachings they
sought from his mouth, for he was the messenger of
the LORD of Armies. [8]Yet you yourselves swerved
from the way; you made many stumble through

rulings. You made a ruin of the covenant of the Levite,
said the LORD of Armies. [9]And I on My part made
you despised and lowly to every people, as you have
not been keeping My ways, and you have been
showing favoritism in rulings.

[10]Do we not all have one father,
did not one God create us?
Why should we each betray our
brothers
to profane the covenant of our
fathers?

[11]Judah has betrayed, and an abomination was done in
Israel and in Jerusalem. For Judah profaned the
LORD's sanctity that He had loved and coupled with
the daughter of an alien god. [12]May the LORD cut off
for the man who does this, a witness and answerer
from the tents of Jacob and bringer of grain offering to
the LORD of Armies. [13]And this, besides, did you do:
cause to cover with tears the LORD's altar, with
weeping and groans, because there is no more turning
to the grain offering or accepting with favor from your
hand. [14]And you say, "Why?" Because the LORD bore
witness between you and the wife of your youth. It was

you who betrayed her when she was your friend and your covenanted wife. [15]And did not one do [right], who has exceeding spirit? And what does the one seek?—seed of God. And you should guard yourselves with your spirit and not betray the wife of your youth. [16]For I hate divorce, said the LORD God of Israel, and one who covers his garb with outrage, said the LORD of Armies. And you shall guard yourselves with your spirit and not betray. [17]You have wearied the LORD with your words, and you say, "How have we wearied Him?" In your saying, "All evildoers are good in the eyes of the LORD, and them He desires," or, "Where is the God of justice?"

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *give honor to My name.* This phrasing reflects a tendency in the Second Temple period to substitute God's "name" for direct references to the deity.

make your blessings curses. The literal sense is "curse your blessings," but this is the obvious meaning. An important function of the priests was to bless the people.

3. *your seed.* It is not entirely clear whether the reference is to the offspring of the priests or to anything, literal or figurative, that they plant.

scatter dung on your faces. Though shameful and disgusting for anyone, this is particularly disgraceful for priests, who are obliged to remain in a condition of purity.

it shall carry you off to where it is. The translation reflects the obscurity of the Hebrew. What might be intended is the dung-heap, but it remains puzzling how dung scattered on a face could carry a person off.

6. *A teaching of truth.* An important responsibility of the priests was to provide instruction (*torah*) to the people concerning the laws and moral imperatives they were obliged to observe. But the term also has the sense of judicial ruling, as in verses 7, 8, and 9.

9. *showing favoritism in rulings.* This perversion of justice is precisely what a judge is enjoined not to do.

11. *coupled with the daughter of an alien god.* The prophet here, like Ezra, inveighs against mixed marriages, though he may be referring simply to sexual relations with foreign women. Calling such a woman "daughter of an alien god" is a way of stressing the involvement of non-Israelite women in paganisim.

12. *a witness and answerer.* The received text says *ʿer,* "one awake," which this translation, following one version of the Septuagint, emends to *ʿed.* Given the parallelism with "bringer of grain offering to the LORD," this would then refer to a priestly function—perhaps, bearing witness in legal matters.

13. *cause to cover with tears.* While the literal sense of the Hebrew is simply "cover with tears," this could not be the act of the priests, for that would suggest profound contrition. Rather, by consorting with alien women, the priests impel God to reject their offerings on the altar, and thus the people they serve are stricken with despair and weep in the Temple.

14. *It was you who betrayed her when she was your friend and your covenanted wife.* Since the next verse explicitly mentions divorce, one must conclude that the prophet actually rejects divorce as a "betrayal" of one's wife. This view puts aside the legislated provision for divorce in the Torah. It is an attitude adopted by Jesus in Matthew.

15. *And did not one do [right].* The entire sentence is obscure. Some interpreters think that "one" refers to God, but that seems strained. The understanding reflected in this translation is: although many among you have

betrayed your spouses by divorcing them (and perhaps taking foreign women as mates), there is one—implicitly, a few—among you of "exceeding spirit" who does the right thing. (The word "right" has been added speculatively, in brackets.) What this person seeks is the "seed of God," which would be pure Israelite offspring. If in fact this whole passage is addressed to the priests, it may be that Malachi objects only to divorce among priests, not to divorce in general. The wording, however, at the beginning of the next verse, "For I hate divorce, said the LORD," does sound like a generalizing statement.

16. *I hate divorce.* Unfortunately, the "I" is lacking in the Hebrew text, opening up a window of ambiguity as to what these words mean.

17. *You have wearied the LORD.* This verse might be the introduction to the prophecy recorded in the next chapter because the malfeasance now is not divorce but a general perversion or rejection of divine justice.

CHAPTER 3

[1]I am about to send My messenger,
and he shall clear the way before
Me.
In a trice He shall enter His Temple,
the Master Whom you seek,
and the covenant's messenger whom
you desire,
look, he comes, said the LORD
of Armies.
[2]And who can bear the day of His
coming
and who can stand when He
appears?
For He is like the smelter's fire
and like the launderers' lye.
[3]And the smelter shall sit and purify
silver,
and purify the sons of Levi,
and refine them like gold and silver,

and they shall become grain
offerings to the LORD in
righteousness.
4And the grain offering of Judah and
Jerusalem
shall be sweet to the LORD
as in days of yore and in former
years.
5But I will approach you for
judgment,
and I will be a swift witness
against sorcerers and against
adulterers
and against those who swear
falsely,
and against those who extort the
hired man's wages,
who wrong widow and orphan and
sojourner
and do not fear Me,
said the LORD of Armies.
6For I am the LORD, I have not
changed,
and you, sons of Jacob, have not
come to an end.

[7]From your fathers' days you
swerved from My statutes
and you did not keep them.
Turn back to Me, that I may turn
back to you,
said the LORD of Armies.
But you said, "How shall we
turn back?"
[8]Can a human cheat God?
For you are cheating Me.
And you said, "How did we cheat
You?"
—in tithes and in donations.
[9]Despite the curse with which you
are cursed,
Me you cheat, the whole nation.
[10]Bring the whole tithe
to the treasure house
that there be provision in My
house.
and test Me, pray, in this,
said the LORD of Armies.
I will surely open for you
the casements of the heavens
and shower upon you
blessings without end.

[11]And I will rebuke for you the
devourer,
and it shall not ruin for you the
fruit of the soil,
nor shall the vine of the field lose its
yield,
said the LORD of Armies.
[12]And all the nations shall call you
happy,
for you shall be a land desired,
said the LORD of Armies.

[13]Your words against Me have been
harsh,
said the LORD.
And you said, “How did we
speak against You?”
[14]You said, “It is for naught to serve
God,
and what profit if we keep His
watch
and if we walk downcast
because of the LORD of
Armies?

[15]And now we see the arrogant
happy,
evildoers actually flourish,
actually test God and escape.”
[16]Then did the LORD-fearers speak
together,
each man to his neighbor,
and the LORD hearkened and
He heard,
and a book of remembrance was
written before Him
for the LORD-fearers who value
His name.
[17]And they shall become for Me, said
the LORD of Armies,
a treasure on the day that I
prepare.
And I will have pity on them
as a man has pity
on his son who serves him.
[18]And you shall turn back and see
between righteous and wicked,
between him who serves God
and him who does not serve Him.
[19]For, look, the day is coming,
burning like a kiln,

when all the arrogant and all the
evildoers shall be straw.
And the day that is coming shall
set them ablaze,
said the LORD of Armies,
shall not leave them root or
branch.
[20]But to you who fear My name shall
dawn
a sun of righteousness with
healing in its wings,
and you shall go forth and become
plump
like stall-fed calves.
[21]And you shall trample the wicked,
for they shall be ashes
beneath the soles of your feet
on the day that I prepare,
said the LORD of Armies.

[22]Recall the teaching of Moses My
servant
that I charged him on Horeb,
for all Israel, statutes and laws.
[23]Look, I am about to send to you

Elijah the prophet
before the coming of the day of the
LORD,
great and fearsome.
[24]And he shall bring fathers' hearts
back to sons
and the sons' hearts to their
fathers—
lest I come and strike the land
with utter destruction.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *My messenger.* Although this is the designation of the prophet responsible for the book (*mal'akhi*), here the obvious reference is to a divine messenger who will herald God's entrance into the Temple.

2. *the day of His coming.* Because of the fiery power of the one who comes, it is most probably God, even though grammatically the pronominal references might be attached to the divine messenger.

the smelter's fire / . . . the launderers' lye. Malachi may have borrowed these images of purification from Isaiah.

5. *But I will approach you for judgment.* While this sharp antithesis to what precedes could signal the beginning of a new prophecy, it could also be a dialectic swing within a continuous prophetic utterance: God will restore the purity of the Levites when He comes back to the Temple, but He will also make a reckoning with the sundry wrongdoers in Israel.

against those who extort the hired man's wages. Until now, Malachi has been concerned chiefly with the corruption of the Temple cult, but now he moves into the denunciation of the sundry social injustices familiar from the First Commonwealth prophets.

8. *How did we cheat You?* Malachi again invokes his favored form of dialogic challenge and response.

in tithes and in donations. Now he returns to the dominant theme of abuse of the cult. In this instance, the object of critique is the failure to deliver tithes and donations to the Temple—or, perhaps, shortchanging in the delivery.

9. *Despite the curse.* The people palpably suffer as punishment for their misdeeds but still persist in them.

10. *that there be provision in My house.* The tithe was not currency—this was still not a money economy—but a tithe of agricultural products and livestock, hence "provision."

I will surely open for you / the casements of the heavens. Approximately the same phrasing occurs at the beginning of the Flood in Genesis 7:11. In Genesis, it designates a devastating deluge, but here it is rain that fructifies the land.

shower upon you. More literally, "empty out upon you."

11. *the devourer.* This is an epithet for the locust, as becomes clear in what immediately follows.

14. *if we walk downcast because of the* LORD *of Armies.* The Hebrew represented here as "downcast" suggests something like "gloomy." The idea is contrition in the presence of God, which, according to these naysayers, is pointless.

15. *And now we see the arrogant happy.* This subversive perception by the rebellious people turns out to be quite similar to the recurrent argument against the traditional moral calculus articulated in the Book of Job.

17. *the day that I prepare.* This is the prophetic Day of the LORD, when the evildoers will be punished and the righteous redeemed.

his son who serves him. What is envisaged is a stable social order in which sons dutifully serve their fathers. Malachi will give the theme of the union of fathers and sons a grand flourish in his concluding prophecy.

18. *him who serves God.* The service of son to father is now transposed into the service of God by man. At the beginning of the book (1:6), God identifies Himself as father to humankind.

19. *shall not leave them root or branch.* Though "root or branch" is idiomatic for "all of it," these are combustible materials, like the straw just mentioned.

20. *a sun of righteousness with healing in its wings.* This beautiful phrase takes advantage of the multivalent Hebrew *kenafayim,* "wings" and also "hems of a garment." The dawning sun of righteousness has wings either because of the radiant beams around it or because it sails through the sky. The Near Eastern sun can be blistering and lethal, as we are often reminded in the Bible, but this sun instead gives restorative warmth and brightness.

21. *trample.* The unusual word used in the Hebrew generally means "knead."

22. *Horeb.* This is another name for Sinai.

23. *I am about to send to you / Elijah the prophet.* This verse inaugurates a rich legendary tradition in which Elijah is imagined as the harbinger of the messiah. Elijah would appear to be a different harbinger from the "messenger" mentioned in 3:1, and it is by no means certain that these concluding verses are from the same hand as the rest of the book. Whether this text is drawing on an already existent folk tradition is a matter of speculation. Elijah, because of the stories of his miraculously aiding common people, would have been a likely candidate for a folk hero, and his seclusion on Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:8ff.), where he is vouchsafed an epiphany, aligns him with Moses, who is invoked in the previous verse.

24. *lest I come and strike the land with utter destruction.* This grim warning, immediately after the vision of perfect harmony between fathers and sons, seems a discordant note on which to conclude the book. The framers of Jewish tradition recognized the discordance and ruled that when this passage

was chanted in synagogue, one must end by going back to repeat from the preceding verse the lines about the coming of Elijah.

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Detail of *Ayin Samekh Nun* from *The Creation,* ca. 1978-1980, a series of ten tapestries designed by Mordecai Ardon (1896-1922). The tapestries, executed at the Georges Goldstein Atelier, Jerusalem, were donated by Ardon to Shaare Zedek Medical Center, Jerusalem, where they are permanently exhibited. © Mordecai Ardon / Courtesy Ardon Estate / Photo: Courtesy Shaare Zedeck Medical Center, Jerusalem.

THE HEBREW BIBLE

VOLUME 3

THE WRITINGS

KETUVIM

■

A TRANSLATION WITH COMMENTARY

ROBERT ALTER

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For Jonas, Judah, Amos, and, especially, Michael, dear friends now gone whose presence in my life made a difference in all this.

About the Author

Robert Alter's translation of the Hebrew Bible, the magnificent capstone to a lifetime of distinguished scholarly work, has won the PEN Center Literary Award for Translation and the Koret Jewish Book Award. His immense achievements in scholarship ranging from the eighteenth-century European novel to contemporary Hebrew and American literature earned Alter the Robert Kirsch Award for Lifetime Achievement from the *Los Angeles Times*. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society, Alter is Emeritus Class of 1937 Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley.

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Introduction to the Hebrew Bible

I. THE BIBLE IN ENGLISH AND THE HERESY OF EXPLANATION

Why, after so many English versions, a new translation of the Hebrew Bible? There is, as I shall explain in detail, something seriously wrong with all the familiar English translations, traditional and recent, of the Hebrew Bible. Broadly speaking, one may say that in the case of the modern versions, the problem is a shaky sense of English and in the case of the King James Version, a shaky sense of Hebrew. The present translation is an experiment in re-presenting the Bible —and, above all, biblical narrative prose—in a language that conveys with some precision the semantic nuances and the lively orchestration of literary effects of the Hebrew and at the same time has stylistic and rhythmic integrity as literary English. I shall presently give a more specific account of the kind of English I have aimed for and of the features of the Hebrew that have prompted my choices, but I think it will be helpful for me to say something first about why

English translations of the Bible have been problematic—more problematic, perhaps, than most readers may realize.

It is an old and in some ways unfair cliché to say that translation is always a betrayal, but modern English versions of the Bible provide unfortunately persuasive evidence for that uncompromising generalization. At first thought, it is rather puzzling that this should be the case. In purely quantitative terms, we live in a great age of Bible translation. Several integral translations of the Bible have been done since the middle of the twentieth century, and a spate of English versions of individual biblical books has appeared. This period, moreover, is one in which our understanding of ancient Hebrew has become considerably more nuanced and precise than it once was, thanks to comparative Semitic philology aided by archaeology, and also thanks to the careful reanalysis of the formal structures—syntax, grammar, morphology, verb tenses—of biblical Hebrew. One might have expected that this recent flurry of translation activity, informed by the newly focused awareness of the meanings of biblical Hebrew, would have produced at least some English versions that would be both vividly precise and closer to the feel of the original than any of the older translations. Instead,

the modern English versions—especially in their treatment of Hebrew narrative prose—have placed readers at a grotesque distance from the distinctive literary experience of the Bible in its original language. As a consequence, the King James Version, as Gerald Hammond, an eminent British authority on Bible translations, has convincingly argued, remains the closest approach for English readers to the original—despite its frequent and at times embarrassing inaccuracies, despite its archaisms, and despite its insistent substitution of Renaissance English tonalities and rhythms for biblical ones.

Some observers have sought to explain the inadequacy of modern Bible translations in terms of the general decline of the English language. It is certainly true that there are far fewer people these days with a cultivated sensitivity to the expressive resources of the language, the nuances of lexical values, the force of metaphor and rhythm; and one is certainly much less likely to find such people on a committee of ecclesiastical or scholarly experts than one would have in the first decade of the seventeenth century. There are, nevertheless, still some brilliant stylists among English prose writers; and if our age has been graced with remarkable translations of Homer, Sophocles, and Dante, why not of the Bible?

Part of the explanation, I suspect, is in the conjunction of philological scholarship and translation. I intend no churlish disrespect to philology. On the contrary, without it, our reading of the Bible, or indeed of any older text, is no better than walking through a great museum on a very gloomy day with all the lights turned out. To read the Bible over the shoulder of a great philological critic, like Abraham ibn Ezra (1092–1167), one of the earliest and still eminently worth studying, is to see many important things in fine focus for the first time. There is, however, a crucial difference between philology as a tool for understanding literary texts and philology as an end in itself, for literature and philology work with extremely different conceptions of what constitutes knowledge. To be fair to the broad enterprise of philology, which has included some great literary critics, I use the term here as shorthand for "biblical philology," a discipline that, especially in its Anglo-American applications, has often come down to lexicography and the analysis of grammar.

For the philologist, the great goal is the achievement of clarity. It is scarcely necessary to say that in all sorts of important, but also delimited, ways clarity is indispensable in a translator's wrestling with the original text. The simplest case, but a pervasive

one, consists of getting a handle on the meaning of particular terms. It is truly helpful, for example, to know that biblical *naḥal* most commonly indicates not any sort of brook, creek, or stream but the kind of freshet, called a *wadi* in both Arabic and modern Hebrew, that floods a dry desert gulch during the rainy months and vanishes in the heat of the summer. Suddenly, Job's "my brothers betrayed like a *naḥal*" (Job 6:14) becomes a striking poetic image, where before it might have been a minor puzzlement. But philological clarity in literary texts can quickly turn into too much of a good thing. Literature in general, and the narrative prose of the Hebrew Bible in particular, cultivates certain profound and haunting enigmas, delights in leaving its audiences guessing about motives and connections, and, above all, loves to set ambiguities of word choice and image against one another in an endless interplay that resists neat resolution. In polar contrast, the impulse of the philologist is—here a barbarous term nicely catches the tenor of the activity—"to disambiguate" the terms of the text. The general result when applied to translation is to reduce, simplify, and denature the Bible. These unfortunate consequences are all the more pronounced when the philologist, however acutely trained in that discipline, has an

underdeveloped sense of literary diction, rhythm, and the uses of figurative language; and that, alas, is often the case in an era in which literary culture is not widely disseminated even among the technically educated.

The unacknowledged heresy underlying most modern English versions of the Bible is the use of translation as a vehicle for *explaining* the Bible instead of representing it in another language, and in the most egregious instances this amounts to explaining away the Bible. This impulse may be attributed not only to a rather reduced sense of the philological enterprise but also to a feeling that the Bible, because of its canonical status, has to be made accessible—indeed, transparent—to all. (The one signal exception to all these generalizations is Everett Fox's 1995 American version of the Torah. Emulating the model of the German translation by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig [begun in 1925, completed in 1961], which flaunts Hebrew etymologies, preserves nearly all repetitions of Hebrew terms, and invents German words, Fox goes to the opposite extreme of other modern versions: his English has the great virtue of reminding us verse after verse of the strangeness of the Hebrew original, but it does so at the cost of often being not quite English and consequently of becoming a text for study rather than

a fluently readable version that conveys the stylistic poise and power of the Hebrew.) Modern translators, in their zeal to uncover the meanings of the biblical text for the instruction of a modern readership, frequently lose sight of how the text intimates its meanings—the distinctive, artfully deployed features of ancient Hebrew prose and poetry that are the instruments for the articulation of all meaning, message, insight, and vision.

One of the most salient characteristics of biblical Hebrew is its extraordinary concreteness, manifested especially in a fondness for images rooted in the human body. The general predisposition of modern translators is to convert most of this concrete language into more abstract terms that have the purported advantage of clarity but turn the pungency of the original into stale paraphrase. A good deal of this concrete biblical language based on the body is what a linguist would call lexicalized metaphor—imagery, here taken from body parts and bodily functions, that is made to stand for some general concept as a fixed item in the vocabulary of the language (as "eye" in English can be used to mean "perceptiveness" or "connoisseur's understanding"). Dead metaphors, however, are the one persuasive instance of the resurrection of the dead—for at least the ghosts of the

old concrete meanings float over the supposedly abstract acceptations of the terms, and this is something the philologically driven translators do not appear to understand. “Many modern versions,” Gerald Hammond tartly observes, “eschew anything which smacks of imagery or metaphor—based on the curious assumption, I guess, that modern English is an image-free language.” The price paid for this avoidance of the metaphorical will become evident by considering two characteristic and recurrent Hebrew terms and the role they play in representing the world in the biblical story.

The Hebrew noun *zeraʿ** has the general meaning of “seed,” which can be applied either in the agricultural sense or to human beings, as the term for semen. By metaphorical extension, semen becomes the established designation for what it produces, progeny. Modern translators, evidently unwilling to trust the ability of adult readers to understand that “seed”—as regularly in the King James Version—may mean progeny, repeatedly render it as offspring, descendants, heirs, progeny, posterity. But I think there is convincing evidence in the texts themselves that the biblical writers never entirely forgot that their term for offspring also meant semen and had a precise equivalent in the vegetable world. To cite a distinctly

physical example, when Onan "knew that the seed would not be his," that is, the progeny of his brother's widow should he impregnate her, "he would waste his seed on the ground, so to give no seed to his brother" (Genesis 38:9). Modern translators, despite their discomfort with body terms, can scarcely avoid the wasted "seed" here because without it the representation of spilling semen on the ground in coitus interruptus becomes unintelligible. E. A. Speiser substitutes "offspring" for "seed" at the end of the verse, however, and the Revised English Bible goes him one better by putting "offspring" at the beginning as well ("Onan knew that the offspring would not count as his") and introducing "seed" in the middle as object of the verb "to spill" and scuttling back to the decorousness of "offspring" at the end—a prime instance of explanation under the guise of translation. But the biblical writer is referring to "seed" as much at the end of the verse as at the beginning. Onan adopts the stratagem of coitus interruptus in order not to "give seed"—that is, semen—to Tamar, and, as a necessary consequence of this contraceptive act, he avoids providing her with offspring. The thematic point of this moment, anchored in sexual practice, law, and human interaction, is blunted by not preserving "seed" throughout.

Even in contexts not directly related to sexuality, the concreteness of this term often amplifies the meaning of the utterance. When, for example, at the end of the story of the binding of Isaac, God reiterates His promise to Abraham, the multiplication of seed is strongly linked with cosmic imagery—harking back to the Creation story—of heaven and earth: "I will greatly bless you and will greatly multiply your seed, as the stars in the heavens and as the sand on the shore of the sea" (Genesis 22:17). If "seed" here is rendered as "offspring" or "descendants," what we get are two essentially mathematical similes of numerical increase. That is, in fact, the primary burden of the language God addresses to Abraham, but as figurative language it also imposes itself visually on the retina of the imagination, and so underlying the idea of a single late-born son whose progeny will be countless millions is an image of human seed (perhaps reinforced by the shared white color of semen and stars) scattered across the vast expanses of the starry skies and through the innumerable particles of sand on the shore of the sea. To substitute "offspring" for "seed" here may not fundamentally alter the meaning but it diminishes the vividness of the statement, making it just a little harder for readers to sense why these ancient texts have been so compelling down through the ages.

The most metaphorically extended body part in biblical Hebrew is the hand, though head and foot are also abundantly represented in figurative senses. Now it is obvious enough, given the equivalent usages in modern Western languages, that "hand" can be employed figuratively to express such notions as power, control, responsibility, and trust—to which biblical Hebrew adds one meaning peculiar to itself, commemorative monument. But most modern translators substitute one or another of these abstract terms, introducing supposed clarity where things were perfectly clear to begin with and subverting the literary integrity of the story. In the two sequential episodes that end with Joseph's being cast into a pit—the first is a dry cistern, the second an Egyptian prison, but the two are explicitly linked by the use of the term *bor* for both—the recurrently invoked "hand" is a focusing device that both defines and complicates the moral themes of the story. Reuben, hearing his brothers' murderous intentions, seeks to rescue Joseph "from their hands." He implores his brothers, "Lay not a hand upon him," just as, in the other strand of the story, Judah says, "Let not our hand be against him." E. A. Speiser, faithful to the clarifying impulse of the modern Bible scholar's philological imagination, renders both these phrases as "do away with,"

explaining that it would be illogical to have Reuben, or Judah, say “Don’t lay a hand on him,” since in fact the counsel proffered involves seizing him, stripping him, and throwing him into the pit. But in fact this alleged illogic is the luminous logic of the writer’s moral critique. Reuben pleads with his brothers not to lay a hand on Joseph, that is, not to shed his blood (this is the phrase he uses at the beginning of his speech), but neither his plea nor Judah’s proposal is an entirely innocent one: although each urges that the brothers lay no hand on Joseph, there is a violent laying on of hands necessitated by the course of action each proposes. Even more pointedly, once Joseph is headed south with the caravan, those same fraternal hands will take his ornamented tunic (the King James Version’s “coat of many colors”), slaughter a kid, dip the garment in the blood, and send it off to Jacob.

The image of hands holding a garment belonging to Joseph that is turned into false evidence brilliantly returns at the climactic moment of the next episode involving him, in Genesis When Joseph flees from the lust of his master’s wife, “he left his garment in her hand” because she has virtually torn it off his back in trying to effect her reiterated “Lie with me” by seizing him. In her accusation of Joseph, she alters the narrator’s twice-stated “in her hand” to “by me,”

implying that he disrobed deliberately before attempting to rape her. But the narrator's cunning deployment of repeated terms has conditioned us to zero in on these two pivotal words, *waya'azov beyad,* "he left in the hand of," for in the six initial framing verses of the story, "hand" appears four times, with the last, most significant occurrence being this summary of the comprehensiveness of Joseph's stewardship: "And he left all that he had in Joseph's hands" (39:6). (Hebrew idiom allows the writer to use "hand" in the singular, thus creating an exact phrasal identity between the figurative reference to the hand in which the trust of stewardship is left and the literal reference to the hand in which the garment belonging to the object of sexual desire is left.) The invocation of "hand" in chapters 37 and 39—the story of Judah and Tamar lies between them—forms an elegant A B A B pattern: in chapter 37 hands are laid on Joseph, an action carried forward in the resumptive repetition at the very beginning of chapter 39 when he is bought "from the hands of the Ishmaelites"; then we have the supremely competent hand, or hands, of Joseph, into which everything is placed, or left, and by which everything succeeds; then again a violent hand is laid on Joseph, involving the stripping of his garment, as in the episode with the brothers; and at the end of the

chapter, Joseph in prison again has everything entrusted to his dependable hands, with this key term twice stated in the three and a half verses of the closing frame. A kind of dialectic is created in the thematic unfolding of the story between hand as the agency of violent impulse and hand as the instrument of scrupulous management. Although the concrete term is probably used with more formal precision in this particular sequence than is usually the case elsewhere, the hands of Joseph and the hands upon Joseph provide a fine object lesson about how biblical narrative is misrepresented when translators tamper with the purposeful and insistent physicality of its language, as here when "hand" is transmuted into "trust" or "care." Such substitutions offer explanations or interpretations instead of translations and thus betray the original.

There are, alas, more pervasive ways than the choice of terms in which nearly all the modern English versions commit the heresy of explanation. The most global of these is the prevalent modern strategy of repackaging biblical syntax for an audience whose reading experience is assumed to be limited to *Time, Newsweek,* the *New York Times* or the *Times* of London, and the internet. Now, it is often asserted, with seemingly self-evident justice, that the

fundamental difference between biblical syntax and modern English syntax is between a system in which parallel clauses linked by “and” predominate (what linguists call “parataxis”) and one in which the use of subordinate clauses and complex sentences predominates (what linguists call “hypotaxis”). Modern English has a broad array of modal and temporal discriminations in its system of verbs and a whole armament of subordinate conjunctions to stipulate different relations among clauses. Biblical Hebrew, on the other hand, has only two aspects† (they are probably not tenses in our sense) of verbs, together with one indication of a jussive mode—when a verb is used to express a desire or exhortation to perform the action in question—and a modest number of subordinate conjunctions. Although there are certainly instances of significant syntactic subordination, the characteristic biblical syntax is additive, working with parallel clauses linked by “and”—which in the Hebrew is not even a separate word but rather a particle, *waw*‡ (it means “hook”), that is prefixed to the first word of the clause.

The assumption of most modern translators has been that this sort of syntax will be either unintelligible or at least alienating to modern readers, and so should be entirely rearranged as modern

English. There are two basic problems with this procedure. First, it ignores the fact that parataxis is the essential literary vehicle of biblical narrative: it is the way the ancient Hebrew writers saw the world, linked events in it, artfully ordered it, and narrated it, and one gets a very different world if their syntax is jettisoned. Second, rejection of biblical parataxis presupposes a very simplistic notion of what constitutes modern literary English. The implicit model seems to be, as I have suggested, the popular press, as well as perhaps high-school textbooks, bureaucratic directives, and ordinary conversation. But serious writers almost never accept such leveling limitation to a bland norm of popular usage. If one thinks of the great English stylists among twentieth-century novelists—writers like Joyce, Nabokov, Faulkner, and Virginia Woolf—there is not one among them whose use of language, including the deployment of syntax, even vaguely resembles the workaday simplicity and patly consistent orderliness that recent translators of the Bible have posited as the norm of modern English. It is also well to keep in mind that literary style, like many other aspects of literature, is constantly self-recapitulative, invoking recollections of its near and distant literary antecedents, so that modernists like Joyce and Faulkner sometimes echo biblical language and

cadences, and a mannered stylist like Hemingway, in making “and” his most prominent connective, surely has the King James Version of the Bible in mind. And in any event, the broad history of both Semitic and European languages and literatures evinces a strong differentiation in most periods between everyday language and the language of literature.

The assumption of biblical philologists that parallel syntax is alien to modern literary English is belied by the persistent presence of highly wrought paratactic prose even at the end of the twentieth century and beyond. A variety of self-conscious English stylists in the modern era, from Gertrude Stein to Cormac McCarthy, have exhibited a fondness for chains of parallel utterances linked by “and” in which the basic sentence-type is the same structurally as that used again and again in biblical prose. What such a style makes manifest in a narrative is a series of more or less discrete events, or micro-events, in a chain, not unlike the biblical names of begetters and begotten that are strung one after another in the chains of the genealogical lists. The biblical writers generally chose not to order these events in ramified networks of causal, conceptual, or temporal subordination, not because hypotaxis was an unavailable option, as the opening verses of the second Creation story (Genesis

2:4–5) clearly demonstrate. The continuing appeal, moreover, for writers in our own age of this syntax dominated by "and," which highlights the discrete event, suggests that parallel syntax may still be a perfectly viable way to represent in English the studied parallelism of verbs and clauses of ancient Hebrew narrative.

Since a literary style is composed of very small elements as well as larger structural features, an English translator must confront the pesky question of whether the ubiquitous Hebrew particle that means "and" should be represented at all in translation. This is obviously not a problem when the *waw* simply connects two nouns—as in "the heavens and the earth"—but what of its constant use at the beginning of sentences and clauses prefixed to verbs? The argument against translating it in these cases is that the primary function of the *waw* appended to a verb is not to signify "and" but to indicate that the Hebrew prefix conjugation, which otherwise is used for actions yet to be completed, is reporting past events (hence its designation in the terminology of classical Hebrew grammar as "the *waw* of conversion"). It is far from clear, as modern Bible scholars tend to assume, that the fulfillment of one linguistic function by a particle of speech automatically excludes any others; on the

contrary, it is entirely likely that for the ancient audience the *waw* appended to the verb both converted its temporal aspect and continued to signify "and." But, semantics aside, the general practice of modern English translators of suppressing the "and" when it is attached to a verb has the effect of changing the tempo, rhythm, and construction of events in biblical narrative. Let me illustrate by quoting a narrative sequence from Genesis 24 first in my own version, which reproduces every "and" and every element of parataxis, and then in the version of the Revised English Bible. The Revised English Bible is in general one of the most compulsive repackagers of biblical language, though in this instance the reordering of the Hebrew is relatively minor. Its rendering of these sentences is roughly interchangeable with any of the other modern versions—the Jerusalem Bible, the New Jewish Publication Society, Speiser—one might choose. I begin in the middle of verse 16, where Rebekah becomes the subject of a series of actions.

> And she came down to the spring and filled her jug and came back up. And the servant ran toward her and said, "Pray, let me sip a bit of water from your

> jug.” And she said, “Drink, my lord,” and she hurried and tipped down her jug on one hand and let him drink. And she let him drink his fill and said, “For your camels, too, I shall draw water until they drink their fill.” And she hurried and emptied her jug into the trough, and she ran again to the well to draw water and drew water for all his camels.

And this is how the Revised English Bible, in keeping with the prevailing assumptions of most recent translations, renders these verses in what is presumed to be sensible modern English:

> She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and came up again. Abraham’s servant hurried to meet her and said, “Will you give me a little water from your jar?” “Please drink, sir,” she answered, and at once lowered her jar on her hand to let him drink. When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, “I shall draw water also for your camels until they have had enough.” She quickly emptied her jar into the water trough, and then hurrying again to the well she drew water and watered all the camels.

There is, as one would expect, some modification of biblical parataxis, though it is not so extreme here as elsewhere in the Revised English Bible: “And she let him drink his fill” is converted into an introductory adverbial clause, “When she had finished giving him a drink” (actually in consonance with the otherwise paratactic King James Version): “and she hurried” is compressed into “quickly”; “and she ran again” becomes the participial “hurrying again.” (Moves of this sort, it should be said, push translation to the verge of paraphrase—recasting and interpreting the original instead of representing it.) The most striking divergence between these two versions is that mine has fifteen “and’s,” corresponding precisely to fifteen occurrences of the particle *waw* in the Hebrew, whereas the Revised English Bible manages with just five. What difference does this make? To begin with, it should be observed that the *waw,* whatever is claimed about its linguistic function, is by no means an inaudible element in the phonetics of the Hebrew text: we must keep constantly in mind that these narratives were composed to be *heard*, not merely to be decoded by a reader’s eye. The reiterated “and,” then, plays an important role in creating the rhythm of the story, in phonetically punctuating the forward-driving movement of the prose. The elimination of the “and”

in the Revised English Bible and in all its modern cousins produces—certainly to my ear—an abrupt, awkward effect in the sound pattern of the language, or to put it more strictly, a kind of narrative arrhythmia.

More is at stake here than pleasing sounds, for the heroine of the repeated actions is in fact subtly but significantly reduced in all the rhythmically deficient versions. She of course performs roughly the same acts in the different versions—politely offering water to the stranger, lowering her jug so that he can drink, rapidly going back and forth to the spring to bring water for the camels. But in the compressions, syntactical reorderings, and stop-and-start movements of the modernizing version, the encounter at the well and Rebekah's actions are made to seem rather matter-of-fact, however exemplary her impulse of hospitality. This tends to obscure what the Hebrew highlights, which is that she is doing something quite extraordinary. Rebekah at the well presents one of the rare biblical instances of the performance of an act of "Homeric" heroism. The servant begins by asking modestly to "sip a bit of water," as though all he wanted were to wet his lips. But we need to remember, as the ancient audience surely did, that a camel after a long desert journey can drink as much as twenty-five

gallons of water, and there are ten camels here whom Rebekah offers to water "until they drink their fill." The chain of verbs tightly linked by all the "and's" does an admirable job in conveying this sense of the young woman's hurling herself with prodigious speed into the sequence of required actions. Even her dialogue is scarcely a pause in the narrative momentum, but is integrated syntactically and rhythmically into the chain: "And she said, 'Drink, my lord,' and she hurried and tipped down her jug. . . . And she hurried and emptied her jug into the trough, and she ran again to the well to draw water and drew water for all his camels." The parallel syntax and the barrage of "and's," far from being the reflex of a "primitive" language, are as artfully effective in furthering the ends of the narrative as any device one could find in a sophisticated modern novelist.

Beyond these issues of syntax and local word choice lies a fundamental question that no modern translator I know of has really confronted: What level, or perhaps levels, of style is represented in biblical Hebrew? There is no reason, I believe, to be awestruck by the sheer antiquity of the text. If biblical Hebrew could be shown to reflect a pungent colloquial usage in the ancient setting, or a free commingling of colloquial and formal language, it would be only logical to render

it with equivalent levels of diction in modern English. As a matter of fact, all the modern translators—from Speiser to Fox to the sundry ecclesiastical committees in both America and England—have shown a deaf ear to diction, acting as though the only important considerations in rendering a literary text were lexical values and grammatical structures, while the English terms chosen could be promiscuously borrowed from boardroom or bedroom or scholar's word hoard, with little regard to the tonality and connotation the words carried with them from their native linguistic habitat.

Whatever conclusions we may draw about the stylistic level of biblical Hebrew are a little precarious because we of course have no record of the ancient spoken language, and if, as seems likely, there were extracanonical varieties or genres of Hebrew writing in the ancient world, the vestiges have long since crumbled into dust. Did, for example, the citizens of Judah in the time of Jeremiah speak in a parallel syntax, using the *waw* consecutive, and employing roughly the same vocabulary that we find in his prophecies, or in Deuteronomy and Genesis? Although there is no proof, my guess is that vernacular syntax and grammar probably differed in some ways from their literary counterparts. In regard to vocabulary, there is evidence that what we see in the canonical

books would not have been identical with everyday usage. First, there is the problem of the relative paucity of vocabulary in biblical literature. As the Spanish Hebrew scholar Angel Sáenz-Badillos has observed in his *History of the Hebrew Language* (1993), the biblical lexicon is so restricted that it is hard to believe it could have served all the purposes of quotidian existence in a highly developed society. The instance of the poetry of Job, with its unusual number of words not found elsewhere in Scripture, is instructive in this regard: the Job-poet, in his powerful impulse to forge a poetic imagery that would represent humankind, God, and nature in a new and even startling light, draws on highly specific language from manufacturing processes, food preparation, commercial and legal institutions, which would never be used in biblical narrative. The plausible conclusion is that the Hebrew of the Bible is a conventionally delimited language, roughly analagous in this respect to the French of the neoclassical theater: it was understood by writers and their audiences, at least in the case of narrative, that only certain words were appropriate for the literary rendering of events.

There is evidence, moreover, that people in everyday life may have had different words for many of the basic concepts and entities that are mentioned in

the Bible. This argument was persuasively made by the Israeli linguist Abba ben David in his still indispensable 1967 study, available only in Hebrew, *The Language of the Bible and the Language of the Sages*. Ben David offers a fascinating explanation for one of the great mysteries of the Hebrew language—the emergence, toward the end of the pre-Christian era, of a new kind of Hebrew, which became the language of the early rabbis. Now, it is widely recognized that this new Hebrew reflected the influence of the Aramaic vernacular in morphology, in grammar, and in some of its vocabulary, and that, understandably, it also incorporated a vast number of Greek and Latin loanwords. But what is puzzling is that rabbinic Hebrew also uses a good many indigenous Hebrew terms that are absent from the biblical corpus, or reflected only in rare and marginal biblical cognates. The standard terms in rabbinical Hebrew for sun and moon, and some of its frequently used verbs like to look, to take, to enter, to clean, are entirely different from their biblical counterparts, without visible influence from any of the languages impinging on Hebrew. Where did these words come from? Ben David, observing, as have others before him, that there are incipient signs of an emergent rabbinic Hebrew in late biblical books like Jonah and

the Song of Songs, makes the bold and, to my mind, convincing proposal that rabbinic Hebrew was built upon an ancient vernacular that for the most part had been excluded from the literary language used for the canonical texts. This makes particular sense if one keeps in mind that the early rabbis were anxious to draw a line between their own "Oral Torah" and the written Torah they were expounding. For the purposes of legal and homiletic exegesis, they naturally would have used a vernacular Hebrew rather than the literary language, and when their discourse was first given written formulation in the Mishnah in the early third century C.E., that text would have recorded this vernacular, which probably had a long prehistory in the biblical period. It is distinctly possible that when a ninth-century B.C.E. Israelite farmer mopped his brow under the blazing sun, he did not point to it and say *shemesh,* as it is invariably called in biblical prose texts, but rather *ḥamah*, as it is regularly designated in the Mishnah.

There is, of course, no way of plotting a clear chronology of the evolution of rabbinic Hebrew from an older vernacular, no way of determining how far back into the biblical period various elements of rabbinic language may go. It is sufficient for our effort to gauge the level of style of the Bible's literary prose

merely to grant the very high likelihood that the language of the canonical texts was not identical with the vernacular, that it reflected a specialized or elevated vocabulary, and perhaps even a distinct grammar and syntax. Let me cite a momentary exception to the rule of biblical usage that may give us a glimpse into this excluded vernacular background of a more formal literary language. It is well-known that in biblical dialogue all the characters speak proper literary Hebrew, with no intimations of slang, dialect, or idiolect. The single striking exception is impatient Esau's first speech to Jacob in Genesis 25: "Let me gulp down some of this red red stuff." Inarticulate with hunger, he cannot come up with the ordinary Hebrew term for "stew," and so he makes do with *haʾadom haʾadom hazeh*—literally "this red red." But what is more interesting for our purpose is the verb Esau uses for "feeding," *halʿiteini*. This is the sole occurrence of this verb in the biblical corpus, but in the Talmud it is a commonly used term with the specific meaning of stuffing food into the mouth of an animal. One cannot be certain this was its precise meaning in the biblical period because words do, after all, undergo semantic shifts in a period of considerably more than a thousand years. But it seems safe to assume, minimally, that even a millennium before the rabbis *halʿit* would have

been a cruder term for feeding than the standard biblical *haʾakhil*. What I think happened at this point in Genesis is that the author, in the writerly zest with which he sought to characterize Esau's crudeness, allowed himself, quite exceptionally, to introduce a vernacular term for coarse eating or animal feeding into the dialogue that would jibe nicely with his phrase "this red red stuff." After the close of the biblical era, this otherwise excluded term would surface in the legal pronouncements of the rabbis on animal husbandry, together with a host of vernacular words used in the ancient period but never permitted to enter the canonical texts.

All this strongly suggests that the language of biblical narrative in its own time was stylized, decorous, dignified, and readily identified by its audiences as a language of literature, in certain ways distinct from the language of quotidian reality. The tricky complication, however, is that in most respects it also was not a lofty style, and was certainly neither ornate nor euphemistic. If some of its vocabulary may have reflected a specialized literary lexicon, the language of biblical narrative also makes abundant use of ordinary Hebrew words that must have been in everyone's mouth from day to day. Just to mention the few recurrent terms on which I have commented,

“hand,” “house,” “all,” and “seed” are primary words in every phase of the history of Hebrew, and they continue to appear as such in the rabbinic language, where so much else is altered. Biblical prose, then, is a formal literary language but also, paradoxically, a plainspoken one, and, moreover, a language that evinces a strong commitment to using a limited set of terms again and again, making an aesthetic virtue out of the repetition. It should be added that the language of the Bible reflects not one level of diction but a certain range of dictions, as I shall explain presently.

What is the implication of this analysis for an appropriate modern English equivalent to ancient Hebrew style? The right direction, I think, was hit on by the King James Version, following the great model of Tyndale a century before it. There is no good reason to render biblical Hebrew as contemporary English, either lexically or syntactically. This is not to suggest that the Bible should be represented as fussily old-fashioned English, but a limited degree of archaizing coloration is entirely appropriate, employed with other strategies for creating a language that is stylized yet simple and direct, free of the overtones of contemporary colloquial usage but with a certain timeless homespun quality. An adequate English version should be able to indicate the small but

significant modulations in diction in the biblical language—something the stylistically uniform King James Version, however, entirely fails to do. A suitable English version should avoid at all costs the modern abomination of elegant synonymous variation, for the literary prose of the Bible turns everywhere on significant repetition, not variation. Similarly, the translation of terms on the basis of immediate context —except when it becomes grotesque to do otherwise —is to be resisted as another instance of the heresy of explanation. Finally, the mesmerizing effect of these ancient stories will scarcely be conveyed if they are not rendered in cadenced English prose that at least in some ways corresponds to the powerful cadences of the Hebrew. Let me now comment more particularly on the distinctive biblical treatment of diction, word choice, syntax, and rhythm and what it implies for translation.

The biblical prose writers favor what we may think of as a primary vocabulary. They revel in repetition, sometimes of a stately, refrainlike sort, sometimes deployed in ingenious patterns through which different meanings of the same term are played against one another. Elegant synonymity is alien to biblical prose,

and it is only rarely that a highly specialized term is used instead of the more general word. Here is a characteristic biblical way of putting things: “And God made the two great lights, the great light for dominion of day and the small light for dominion of night, and the stars” (Genesis 1:16). In addition to the poised emphasis of the internal repetitions in the sentence, one should note that the primary term for a source of light—*maʾor,* transparently cognate with *ʾor*, the light that is divided from the darkness in 1:4—is placed in the foreground. In fact, there are half a dozen biblical synonyms for “light,” suggesting a range roughly equivalent to English terms like “illumination,” “effulgence,” “brilliance,” and “splendor,” but these are all reserved for the more elaborate vocabulary of poetry, whereas in prose the writer sticks to the simplicity of *ʾor* and *maʾor,* and everywhere it behooves a translator to do the same with English equivalents.

Some biblical scholars might object that my example is skewed because it is taken from the so-called Priestly source (P), which has a stylistic predilection for high decorousness and cadenced repetitions. But the stylistic difference in this regard between P and the two other conjectured source documents of the Pentateuch, designated J and E, is

one of degree, not kind. Thus, when the second version of the Creation story, commonly identified as J's, begins in Genesis 2:4, we do get some greater degree of specification in the language, in keeping with the way creation is here imagined. Instead of the verbs "to create" (*bara'*) and "to make" (*'asah*) that accompany God's speaking the world into being in chapter 1 we are given the potter's term "to fashion" (*yatsar*) and the architectural term "to build" (*banah*). These remain, however, within the limits of a primary vocabulary. The nuanced and specialized lexicon of manufacturing processes one encounters in the poetry of Job and of Deutero-Isaiah is firmly excluded from the stylistic horizon of this narrative prose, though the subject might have invited it.

The translator's task, then, is to mirror the repetitions as much as is feasible. Let me cite one small example, where I learned from my own mistake. When Joseph's brothers recount to Jacob what happened on their first trip to Egypt, they say, in the English of my first draft, "The man who is lord of the land spoke harshly to us and accused us of being spies in the land" (Genesis 42:30). (The verb "accused" is also used in the New Jewish Publication Society translation.) On rereading, I realized that I had violated the cardinal principle, not to translate

according to context. The Hebrew says, very literally, "gave us as spies," "give" in biblical usage being one of those all-purpose verbs that variously means "to set," "to place," "to grant," "to deem." I hastened to change the last clause to "made us out to be spies" because "to make," with or without an accompanying preposition, is precisely such a primary term that serves many purposes and so is very much in keeping with biblical stylistic practice.

What is surprising about the biblical writers' use of this deliberately limited vocabulary is that it can be so precise and even nuanced. Our own cultural preconceptions of writers scrupulously devoted to finding exactly the right word are associated with figures like Flaubert and Joyce, who meticulously choose the terms of their narratives from a large repertory of finely discriminated lexical items. Biblical prose often exhibits an analogous precision within the severe limits of its primary vocabulary. There are, for example, two paired terms, masculine and feminine, in biblical Hebrew to designate young people: *naʿar*/*naʿarah* (in this translation, "lad" and "young woman") and *yeled*/*yaldah* (in this translation, "child" and "girl"). The first pair is somewhat asymmetrical because *naʿar* often also means "servant" or anyone in a subaltern position, and sometimes means "elite

soldier," whereas *naʿarah* usually refers to a nubile young woman, and only occasionally to a servant girl. Though there are rare biblical occurrences of *yeled* in the sense of "young man," it generally designates someone younger than a *naʿar*—etymologically, it means "the one who is born," reflecting a development parallel to the French *enfant*.

With this little to work with, it is remarkable how much the biblical writers accomplish in their deployment of the terms. In the first part of the story of the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 21), Ishmael is referred to consistently as "the child," as was his infant half brother Isaac at the beginning of this chapter. The grief-stricken mother in the wilderness says to herself, "Let me not see when the child dies." From the moment God speaks in the story (verse 17), Ishmael is invariably referred to as "the lad"—evidently with an intimation of tenderness but also with the suggestion that he is a young man, *naʿar,* who will go on to have a future. In the elaborately parallel episode in the next chapter that features Abraham and Isaac in the wilderness, Isaac is referred to by man and God as "the lad," and the term is played off against "the lads" who are Abraham's servants accompanying him on his journey, and not his flesh and blood ("And Abraham said to his lads, 'Sit you

here with the donkey and let me and the lad walk ahead' ").

In the story of the rape of Dinah (Genesis 34), she is first referred to as "Leah's daughter"—and not Jacob's daughter, for it is Leah's sons, Simeon and Levi, who will exact vengeance for her. The initial designation of "daughter" aligns her with both "the daughters of the land" among whom she goes out to see, and Shechem, Hamor's son ("son" and "daughter" are cognates in Hebrew), who sees her, takes her, and rapes her. After the act of violation, Shechem is overcome with love for Dinah, and he implores his father, "Take me this girl [*yaldah*] as wife." Speaking to his father, then, he identifies—tenderly?—the victim of his own lust as a girl-child. When he parleys with Dinah's brothers, asking permission to marry her, he says, "Give me the young woman [*naʿarah*] as wife," now using the term for a nubile woman that is strictly appropriate to betrothal negotiations. After the brothers stipulate their surgical precondition for the betrothal, the narrator reports, "And the lad [*naʿar*] lost no time in doing the thing, for he wanted Jacob's daughter." Suddenly, as the catastrophe of this gruesome tale becomes imminent, we learn that the sexually impulsive man is only a lad, probably an adolescent like Dinah—a discovery that is bound to

complicate our task of moral judgment. And now Dinah is called Jacob's daughter, not Leah's, probably because that is how Shechem sees her, not realizing that the significant relationship is through her mother to her two full brothers who are plotting a terrible retribution for her violation.

It should be clear from all this that a translation that respects the literary precision of the biblical story must strive to reproduce its nice discrimination of terms, and cannot be free to translate a word here one way and there another, for the sake of variety or for the sake of context. It must be admitted, however, that some compromises are inevitable because modern English clearly does not coincide semantically with ancient Hebrew in many respects. The stuff from which the first human is fashioned, for example, *ʾadamah,* manifestly means "soil," and it continues to have that meaning as it recurs at crucial junctures in the story of the Garden and the primordial banishment. But, alas, *ʾadamah* also means "land," "farmland," "country," and even "earth," and to translate it invariably as "soil" for the sake of terminological consistency (as Everett Fox does) leads to local confusions and conspicuous peculiarities. To take a more extreme example, a term that has no semantic analogue in English, the Hebrew *nefesh,*

which the King James Version, following the Vulgate, often translates as “soul,” refers to the breath of life in the nostrils of a living creature and, by extension, “lifeblood” or simply “life,” and by another slide of association, “person”; and it is also used as an intensifying form of the personal pronoun, having roughly the sense of “very self.” In the face of this bewildering diversity of meaning, one is compelled to abandon the admirable principle of lexical consistency and to translate, regretfully, according to immediate context.

Finally, though many recurring biblical terms have serviceable English equivalents (like “lad” for *naʿar*), there are instances in which a translation must make another kind of compromise because, given the differences between modern and biblical culture, the social, moral, and ideological connotations of terms in the two languages do not adequately correspond. Consider the tricky case of verbs for sexual intercourse. In English, these tend to be either clinical and technical, or rude, or bawdy, or euphemistic, and absolutely none of this is true of the verbs used for sex in the Bible. In Genesis, three different terms occur: “to know,” “to lie with,” and “to come into.” “To know,” with one striking antithetical exception, indicates sexual possession by a man of his legitimate

spouse. Modern solutions such as “to be intimate with,” “to cohabit with,” “to sleep with,” are all egregiously wrong in tone and implication. Fortunately the King James Version has established a strong precedent in English by translating the verb literally, and “carnal knowledge” is part of our language, so it is feasible to preserve the literal Hebrew usage in translation. (There is, I think, a good deal to be said for the general procedure of Tyndale and the King James Version in imitating many Hebrew idioms and thus giving the English a certain Hebraic coloration.) “Lie with” is a literal equivalent of the Hebrew, though in English it is vaguely euphemistic, whereas in Hebrew it is a more brutally direct or carnally explicit idiom for sexual intercourse, without, however, any suggestion of obscenity.

The most intractable of the three expressions is “to come into” or “to enter.” In nonsexual contexts, this is the ordinary biblical verb for entering, or arriving. “To enter,” or “to come into,” however, is a misleading translation because the term clearly refers not merely to sexual penetration but to the whole act of sexual consummation. It is used with great precision—not registered by biblical scholarship—to indicate a man’s having intercourse with a woman he has not yet had as a sexual partner, whether she is his wife, his

concubine, or a whore. The underlying spatial imagery of the term, I think, is of the man's entering the woman's sphere for the first time through a series of concentric circles: her tent or chamber, her bed, her body. A translator, then, ought not surrender the image of coming into, but "come into" by itself doesn't quite do it. My own solution, in keeping with the slight strangeness of Hebraizing idioms of the translation as a whole, was to stretch an English idiom to cover the biblical usage: this translation consistently renders the Hebrew expression in question as "come to bed with," an idiom that in accepted usage a woman could plausibly use to a man referring to herself ("come to bed with me") but that in my translation is extended to a woman's reference to another woman ("come to bed with my slavegirl") and to a reference in the third person by the narrator or a male character to sexual consummation ("Give me my wife," Jacob says to Laban, "and let me come to bed with her").

Biblical syntax, beyond the basic pattern of parallel clauses, provides another occasion for what I have called a slight strangeness. The word order in biblical narrative is very often as finely expressive as the lexical choices. In many instances, the significant sequence of terms can be reproduced effortlessly and idiomatically in English, and it is a testament to the

literary insensitivity of modern translators that they so often neglect to do so. Here, for example, is how the narrator reports Abimelech's discovery of the conjugal connection between Isaac and the woman Isaac had claimed was his sister: "Abimelech . . . looked out the window and saw—and there was Isaac playing with Rebekah his wife" (Genesis 26:8). The move into the character's point of view after the verbs of seeing is signaled by the so-called presentative, *wehineh* (rather like *voici* in French), which in this case I have represented by "there" but usually render as "look" (following the King James Version's "behold" and so deliberately coining an English idiom because the biblical term is so crucial for indicating shifts in narrative perspective). What follows "and there" is the precise sequence of Abimelech's perception as he looks out through the window: first Isaac, then the act of sexual play or fondling, then the identity of the female partner in the dalliance, and at the very end, the conclusion that Rebekah must be Isaac's wife. All this is perfectly fluent as English, and modern translations like the Revised English Bible, the New Jewish Publication Society, and Speiser that place "wife" before Rebekah spoil a nice narrative effect in the original.

But biblical syntax is also more flexible than modern English syntax, and there are hundreds of instances in the Hebrew Bible of significant syntactical inversions and, especially, emphatic first positioning of weighted terms. Syntactical inversion, however, is familiar enough in the more traditional strata of literary English, and if one adopts a general norm of decorous stylization for the prose of the translation, as I have done on the grounds I explained earlier, it becomes feasible to reproduce most of the Hebrew reconfigurations of syntax, preserving the thematic or psychological emphases they are meant to convey. The present translation does this, I think, to a greater degree than all previous English versions.

God repeatedly promises the patriarchs, “To your seed I will give this land” (e.g., Genesis 12:7), pointedly putting “your seed” at the beginning of the statement. Less rhetorically, more dramatically, when Hagar is asked by the divine messenger in the wilderness where she is going, she responds, “From Sarai my mistress I am fleeing” (Genesis 16:8), placing Sarai, the implacable source of her misery, at the beginning of the sentence. Still more strikingly, when Jacob is told by his sons that Simeon has been detained as a hostage in Egypt and that the Egyptian regent insists Benjamin be brought down to him, the

old man begins his lament by saying, “Me you have bereaved” (Genesis 42:36). It is profoundly revelatory of Jacob’s psychological posture that he should place himself as the object of suffering at the very beginning of his utterance (and again at the end, in a little formal symmetry). Normally, biblical Hebrew indicates a pronominal object of a verb by attaching a suffix to the verb itself. Here, however, instead of the usual accusative suffix we get an accusative first-person pronoun—*ʾoti*—placed before the verb, a procedure that beautifully expresses Jacob’s self-dramatization as anguished and resentful father continually at the mercy of his sons. The “me” urgently needs to be thrust into the ear of the listener. Many translations simply suppress the inversion, but to put it decorously as “It is I” (Everett Fox) or paraphrastically as “It is always me” (New Jewish Publication Society) is to dilute the dramatic force of the original.

The sharpness and vividness of biblical style are also diluted when it is represented in English, as virtually all the versions do, by a single, indifferent level of diction. As I noted earlier, there seems to be nothing genuinely colloquial in the prose used by the narrator; but there is a palpable variation between passages that are more cadenced, more inclined to balanced structures of terms and elevated language,

like the narrative of the Flood, and looser, more stylistically flexible passages. There are many instances, more-over, of single word choices that pointedly break with the stylistic decorum of the surrounding narrative, and for the most part these are fudged by the sundry English translations. When Hagar and Ishmael use up their supply of water in the wilderness, the despairing mother "flung the child under one of the bushes" (Genesis 21:15). The verb here, *hishlikh,* always means "to throw," usually abruptly or violently. This is somewhat softened by the King James Version and Fox, who use "cast." The Revised English Bible is uncomfortable with the idea of throwing a child and so translates "thrust." Speiser and the New Jewish Publication Society Bible altogether disapprove of spasmodic maternal gestures and hence dissolve "flung" into a gentler "left." In all such manipulation, the violence of Hagar's action and feelings disappears. When Laban berates Jacob for running off with his daughters, he says, "What have you done, . . . driving my daughters like captives of the sword?" (Genesis 31:26). All the English versions represent the verb here as "carrying away" or some approximation thereof, but *nahag* is a term for driving animals, and is used precisely in that sense earlier in this very chapter (verse 18). To translate it otherwise

is to lose the edge of brutal exaggeration in Laban's angry words. In the throes of the great famine, the destitute Egyptians say to Joseph, "Nothing is left for our lord but our carcasses and our farmland" (Genesis 47:18). Most English versions use "bodies" instead of "carcasses," with a couple of modern translations flattening the language even more by rendering the term as "persons." But the Hebrew *gewiyah,* with the sole exception of one famous mythopoeic text in Ezekiel, invariably means "corpse" or "carcass." What the miserable Egyptians are saying to their great overlord is that they have been reduced to little more than walking corpses, and he might as well have those. This sort of pungency can be conveyed if the translator recognizes that the Hebrew does not operate at a single bland level and that literary expression is not inevitably bound to decorous "logic."

These last two examples were taken from dialogue, and it is chiefly in dialogue that we get small but vivid intimations of the colloquial. Again, these are eliminated in the flat regularity of conventional Bible translation. When God rebukes Abimelech for taking Sarah into his harem, the king vehemently protests that he has acted in good conscience: "Did not he say to me, 'She is my sister'? and she, she, too, said, 'He is my brother'" (Genesis 20:5). The repetition of "she,

she, too" is a stammer or splutter of indignation clearly indicated in the Hebrew. In some English versions, it disappears altogether. The King James Version turns it into a rhetorical flourish: "she, even she herself." Everett Fox, because of his commitment to literalism, comes closer but without quite the requisite feeling of colloquial mimesis: "and also she, she said." The seventeen-year-old Joseph reports the first of his dreams to his brothers in the following manner: "And, look, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, look, my sheaf arose and actually [*wegam*] stood up, and, look, your sheaves drew round and bowed to my sheaf" (Genesis 37:7). The language here is surely crafted mimetically to capture the gee-gosh wonderment of this naïve adolescent who blithely assumes his brothers will share his sense of amazement at his dream. The presentative *hineh* ("look") is the conventional term dreamers use to report the visual images of their dreams, perhaps partly because it readily introduces a surprising new perception, but here Joseph repeats the term three times in one breathless sentence, and the effect of naïve astonishment is equally expressed in his redundant "arose and actually stood up" (the Hebrew adverb *gam* most often means "also" but fairly frequently serves as well as a term of emphasis or

intensification). The point is that the adolescent Joseph speaking to his brothers does not at all sound like the adult Joseph addressing Pharaoh, and a translation should not reduce either dialogue or narrator's language to a single dead level.

In the range of diction of the biblical text, the complementary opposite to these moments of colloquial mimesis occurs in the poetic insets. Most of these in the Torah are only a line or two of verse, though Genesis and Deuteronomy conclude with relatively long poems, and Exodus incorporates the Song of the Sea as Numbers does Balaam's oracles. Now, it has long been recognized by scholarship that biblical poetry reflects a stratum of Hebrew older than biblical prose: some of the grammatical forms are different, and there is a distinctive poetic vocabulary, a good deal of it archaic. No previous English translation has made a serious effort to represent the elevated and archaic nature of the poetic language in contradistinction to the prose, though that is clearly part of the intended literary effect of biblical narrative. The present translation tries to suggest this contrast in levels of style—through a more liberal use of syntactic inversion in the poetry, through a selective invocation of slightly archaic terms, and through the occasional deployment of rhetorical gestures broadly associated

with older English poetry (like the ejaculation “O”). I wish I could have gone further in this direction, but there is a manifest danger in sounding merely quaint instead of eloquently archaic, and so the stylistic baggage of “anent” and “forsooth” had to be firmly excluded.

Two minute examples will illustrate how these discriminations of stylistic level are made in the Hebrew and how they might be conveyed in English. The enigmatic notice about the Nephilim, the human-divine hybrids of the primeval age, concludes with these words: “They are the heroes of yore, the men of renown” (Genesis 6:4). This line could conceivably be a fragment from an old mythological poem; more probably, it reads in the original as a kind of stylistic citation of the epic genre. The clearest clue to this in the Hebrew is the word “they,” which here is *hemah* rather than the standard *hem*. This variant with the extra syllable is in all likelihood an older form: it occurs four times more often in poetry than in prose, and even in prose is often reserved for rather ceremonial gestures. There is no English variant of “they” that is similarly marked as poetic diction, and my translation compensates by using “of yore” instead of the phrase “of old” adopted by the King James Version and by most later English versions. In the next

chapter, the unleashing of the Deluge is reported in this line of verse, with emphatic semantic parallelism and four Hebrew accents against three in the two halves of the line: “All the well-springs of the great deep burst, / and the casements of the heavens opened” (7:11). In order to convey a sense that this is poetry, beyond the mechanics of typography, a translator of course has to create a good deal of rhythmic regularity, but there remains a problem of diction. The Hebrew word represented by “casements” is *ʾarubot*. It is a rare term, occurring only a few times elsewhere in the Bible, and it clearly means “window” or “window-like niche.” The decision of several different modern translators to render it as “sluices” or “floodgates” has no philological warrant and is a conspicuous instance of translation by context. “Windows” in the King James Version is on target semantically but not stylistically. The occurrence of a cognate of *ʾarubot* in Ugaritic poetry, several centuries before the composition of Genesis, is further indication that the term is poetic and probably somewhat archaic for the later Hebrew audience. “Casements,” with its echoes of Keats and of Shakespeare behind Keats, seemed like a happy solution to the problem of diction. Though not all shifts in stylistic level in the Hebrew can be so readily

represented by English equivalents, a translation that tries to do justice to the richness of the Hebrew must aim for some approximation of the nuances of diction in the original.

The most pervasive aspect of the magic of biblical style that has been neglected by English translators is its beautiful rhythms. An important reason for the magnetic appeal of these stories when you read them in the Hebrew is the rhythmic power of the words that convey the story. The British critic A. Alvarez has aptly described the crucial role of rhythm in all literary art: "the rhythm—the way the sounds move, combine, separate, recombine—is the vehicle for the feeling. . . . And without that inner movement or disturbance, the words, no matter how fetching, remain inert. In this way at least, the dynamics of poetry—and probably of all the arts—are the same as the dynamics of dreaming." I know of no modern English translation of the Bible that is not blotted by constant patches of arrhythmia, and the result is precisely the sense of inertness of which Alvarez speaks. The King James Version, of course, has its grand rhythmic movements —cultivated people around 1611 clearly had a much firmer sense of expressive sound in language than has been true of recent generations. But these rhythms are more orotund, less powerfully compact, than those of

the Hebrew, and in fact there are far more local lapses in rhythm than nostalgic readers of the King James Version may recall.

The final arbiter of rhythmic effectiveness must be the inner ear of the sensitive reader, but I would like to show that there is a vital dimension of biblical prose that translation has to engage by quoting a couple of verses in transliteration and then in three English versions, together with my own. In regard to the transliteration, it should be kept in mind that we have an approximate notion, not an exact one, of how biblical Hebrew was originally pronounced. There is some question about vowels in particular because vowel-points were added to the consonantal texts by the Masoretes—the Hebrew scholars of sixthto tenth-century Tiberias who fixed the text of the Bible, with full punctuation, standard since then—more than a millennium after the texts were composed. There was, however, a continuous tradition for recitation of the texts on which the Masoretes drew, and anyone who has listened to the Masoretic Text read out loud can attest to its strong rhythmic integrity, which argues that its system of pronunciation was by no means an arbitrary imposition. Here is the narrative report of Noah's entering the ark as the Deluge is unleashed (Genesis 7:13–14). (Acute accents are used to indicate

accented syllables. *W* is used for the letter *waw* [pronounced as *v* in modern Hebrew but as *w* in biblical times], especially to distinguish it from *bet* without *dagesh,* pronounced as *v*. *Ḥ* indicates a light fricative [something like Spanish *j*]; *kh* represents a heavier fricative, like the German *ch* in Bach.)

13. *Beʿétsem hayóm hazéh baʾ nóaḥ weshém-weḥám wayéfet benei-nóaḥ weʾéshet nóaḥ ushlóshet neshéi-vanáwʾitámʾel hateváh.* 14. *Hémah wekhol-haḥayáh lemináh wekhol-habehemáh lemináh wekhol-harémes haroméśʿal-haʾárets leminéhu wekhol-haʿóf leminéhu kól tsipór kol-kanáf.*

The Hebrew rhythm unfolds in groupings of three or four words marked by three or four stresses, usually with no more than one or two unstressed syllables between the stressed ones, and the sense of the words invites a slight pause between one grouping and the next. The overall effect is that of a grand solemn sweep, a sort of epic march, and that effect is reinforced in the diction by the use of *hémah* instead of *hem* for “they” at the beginning of the second verse.

Here is the King James Version:

13. In the selfsame day entered Noah, and Shem, and Ham, and Japheth, the sons of Noah, and Noah's wife, and the three wives of his sons with them, into the ark; 14. they, and every beast after its kind, and all the cattle after their kind, and every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth after his kind, and every fowl after his kind, every bird of every sort.

The first of the two verses (up to "into the ark") is nearly perfect. I envy the freedom of the King James Version to follow the Hebrew syntax and write "entered Noah," an inversion feasible at the beginning of the seventeenth century but a little too odd, I am afraid, at the beginning of the twenty-first. But in the second verse rhythmic difficulties emerge. The repeated "after its kind," with its sequencing of a trochee and an iamb and its two stresses, is an ungainly equivalent of the Hebrew *leminάh*; "every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth" is a whole mouthful of syllables in exchange for the compactness of the Hebrew; and "every bird of every sort" falls flat as a final cadence (apart from being inaccurate as a translation).

Here is E. A. Speiser's version of these two verses —a version, to be sure, intended to be accompanied by a philological commentary, but one that helped set a norm for recent Bible translations:

> 13. On the aforesaid day, Noah and his sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, Noah's wife, and the three wives of his sons had entered the ark—14. they as well as every kind of beast, every kind of creature that creeps on earth, and every kind of bird, every winged thing.

The initial phrase, "on the aforesaid day," is an ill-starred beginning in regard to diction as well as to rhythm. Something as mechanical as the list of the passengers of the ark is divided up in a way that undercuts its rhythmic momentum: at best, one can say that this version has intermittent moments of escape into rhythm.

Everett Fox, the most boldly literal of modern Bible translators, does a little better, but his attention to rhythm is by no means unflagging.

> 13. On that very day came Noah, and Shem, Ham, and Yefet, Noah's sons, Noah's wife and his three

sons' wives with them, into the Ark, 14. they and all wildlife after their kind, all herd-animals after their kind, all crawling things that crawl upon the earth after their kind, all fowl after their kind, all chirping-things, all winged-things.

The first short clause, with the courageous inversion of verb and subject, rings nicely in the ear. But the simple deletion of the "and" between Shem and Ham collapses the rhythm, and Fox's grouping of the list is not much better rhythmically than Speiser's. As in the King James Version, the decision to use "after" four times introduces a series of unwelcome extra syllables, and rhythm is virtually lost in "all herd-animals after their kind, all crawling things that crawl upon the earth after their kind."

Here is my own version, far from perfect, but meant to preserve more of the phonetic compactness of the Hebrew and to avoid such glaring lapses into arrhythmia:

13. That very day, Noah and Shem and Ham and Japheth, the sons of Noah, and Noah's wife, and the three wives of his sons together with them, came into the ark, 14. they as well as beasts of

each kind and cattle of each kind and each kind of crawling thing that crawls on the earth and each kind of bird, each winged thing.

Biblical Hebrew, in sum, has a distinctive music, a lovely precision of lexical choice, a meaningful concreteness, and a suppleness of expressive syntax that by and large have been given short shrift by translators with their eyes on other goals. The present translation, whatever its imperfections, seeks to do fuller justice to all these aspects of biblical style in the hope of making the rich literary experience of the Hebrew more accessible to readers of English.

II. ON TRANSLATING THE NAMES OF GOD

The God of Israel is referred to through a variety of names in these texts, and it is by no means self-evident how to render the names in English. The most difficult of them is the Tetragrammaton, YHWH. Modern biblical scholarship has agreed to represent this as "Yahweh," but there are problems with using that form in translation. The original Hebrew texts of the Bible were entirely consonantal, vowel-points having been

added well over a millennium after the original composition of the texts. Because by then the Tetragrammaton was deemed ineffable by Jewish tradition, it was revocalized to be pronounced as though it read *ʾadonai*, LORD. The confidence of biblical scholarship that the original pronunciation was in fact Yahweh may not be entirely warranted. (See the comment on Exodus 3:14.) In any case, "Yahweh" would have given the English version a certain academic-archaeological coloration that I preferred to avoid, and it would also have introduced a certain discomfort at least for some Jewish readers of the translation. I rejected the option of using "YHWH" because it cannot be pronounced whereas the dimension of sound seemed to me vital to the translation. I have therefore followed the precedent of the King James Version in representing YHWH as the LORD, the last three letters in small uppercase to indicate that, like *ʾadonai*, it is an anomaly, a substitution for another name.

The other most common designation of the deity is *ʾelohim*, a word that is plural in form (perhaps, though this is far from certain, a plural of "majesty") but that is generally treated grammatically as a singular. "God" is the natural English equivalent, but in some contexts, where the generic character of the name seems

prominent, I have rendered it with a lowercase *g* as "god," and when the name is treated as a plural, especially when the narrative context involves polytheism, I have translated it as "gods." Three other names for the deity, all borrowed from the Canaanite pantheon, occur in these books—El, Elyon, and Shaddai. Especially in poetry and at narrative moments of high solemnity, the writers appear to play on the archaic resonances of these names, and so for the most part I have given them in their Hebrew form, for in the particular contexts in which they typically appear a touch of linguistic archaeology seemed to me entirely appropriate.

Admittedly, any of the choices I have described may be debatable, but in all of them my aim has been to name the deity in English in ways that would be in keeping with the overall concert of literary effects that the translation strives to create.

III. ABOUT THE COMMENTARY

My original intention when I set out to translate Genesis in the mid-1990s had been simply to provide brief translator's notes. Puns, wordplay in the sundry

naming-speeches, and other untranslatable maneuvers of the Hebrew needed to be glossed. The reader also had to be informed, I felt, of the occasional junctures where I adopted a reading that varied from the Masoretic Text, the received Hebrew text of the Bible. Similarly, it seemed proper to offer some explanation for translation choices that were likely to surprise either the general reader or the scholarly reader, or both. In some instances, such a choice reflects a proposed new solution to a crux in the Hebrew text. More often, it is an effort to represent a more precise understanding of the Hebrew than previous translations have shown (e.g., the tree of knowledge is "lovely to look at," not "lovely to impart wisdom"; Pharaoh puts a "golden collar" around Joseph's neck, not a "gold chain"). And most pervasively, the little surprises in the translation are attempts to find English equivalents for the nuances of implication and the significant changes of diction in the Hebrew that have not been much regarded by previous translators. Finally, since this translation is, within the limits of readable English style, quite literal—not out of fundamentalist principle but in an effort to reproduce some of the distinctive literary effects of the original—when the interests of English intelligibility compelled me to diverge from a literal translation, I have alerted

readers to the divergence and given the literal sense of the Hebrew words in a note. And beyond all such considerations of word choice and level of style, I thought it necessary to offer succinct explanations of some of the ancient Near Eastern cultural practices and social institutions that are presupposed by the narratives, for without an understanding of them it is sometimes hard to see exactly what is going on in the story.

This last category of explanation is, of course, standard fare in modern Bible commentaries, where it is sometimes dished out in very large portions, and it is admittedly intended here as an aid for the relatively uninitiated. But as I got caught up once again in this endlessly fascinating text, it struck me that there were important features that by and large had been given short shrift in the modern commentaries. In fact, a good many of my observations on stylistic choices already shaded into a discussion of the literary vehicle of the biblical narratives, and this was the point at which the tightly cinched annotation I had originally intended began to loosen its bonds and reach out to commentary. There were whole orders of questions, it seemed to me, that had been neglected or addressed only intermittently and impressionistically by the modern commentators. Where are there detectible

shifts of stylistic level in the Hebrew, and why do they occur? What are the reasons for the small poetic insets in the prose narratives? What are the principles on which dialogue is organized, and how are the speakers differentiated? Where and why are there shifts from the narrator's point of view to that of one of the characters? What are the devices of analogy, recurrent motifs, and key words that invite us to link and contrast one episode with another? How is the poetry formally constructed? And do these books, granted their composite origins, exhibit overarching thematic and structural unities or lines of development?

On all these challenging questions I have surely not said the last word. Rather I have aspired to say some helpful first words in a commentary that I have sought to hold to modest proportions. Clearly, there is no way of separating a literary illumination of the biblical text from a confrontation with philological issues, on the one side, and, perhaps more indirectly, with historical issues, on the other. In any case, the exploration of the Bible as literary expression is the central focus of this commentary, and I would hope it would be of interest to everyone, from reader at large to scholar, who is drawn to the imaginative liveliness, the complexities, the stylistic vigor, and the sheer inventiveness of these

splendid ancient stories and poems and legal and moral discourses.

* The symbol ʿ represents the Hebrew consonant *ayin,* a glottal stop that might sound something like the Cockney pronunciation of the middle consonant of “bottle,” in which the dentalized *t* is replaced by a gulping sound produced from the larynx.

† Instead of a clear-cut expression of the temporal frame in which actions occur—past, present, future, past perfect, and so forth—aspects indicate chiefly whether the action has been completed or is to be completed.

‡ The modern Hebrew pronunciation is *vav,* with the vowel sounding like the short *a* in a French word like *bave,* with which it would rhyme.

Introduction to The Writings

The ostensibly bland title for this last of the three major divisions of the Hebrew Bible is in fact a perfectly accurate rubric for what is incorporated in it. One might justifiably expand the translation of the Hebrew title to read "Miscellaneous Writings." If the Torah is relatively unified in regard to genre and if *Nevi'im* is a composite of two different blocks of material, the first narrative and the second properly prophetic, *Ketuvim* is manifestly a miscellany.

Two of the longer books in this unit, Psalms and Proverbs, are anthological. This means that each encompasses both early and late texts. There are many psalms, perhaps even the majority, that were composed in the First Temple period, though some are clearly late, in some instances referring to historical settings subsequent to 586 B.C.E. The case is similar for Proverbs: the composition of proverbs is an old and well-attested activity in ancient Israel and in adjacent cultures, and a good deal of this material in all likelihood goes back to the First Temple period (one

sequence of chapters is even an adaptation of a much older Egyptian Wisdom text), even though the canonical collection almost certainly includes later material. But all of the other books in The Writings belong to what scholars call the Late Biblical period—that is, after the destruction of the kingdom of Judah in 586 B.C.E.

A telltale sign of the lateness is the language. Biblical Hebrew, like other languages, evolved through the centuries, and this intrinsic dynamic was reinforced by the influence of the cognate language Aramaic, which began to have some currency as early as the sixth century B.C.E. and by the very end of the biblical period was replacing Hebrew as the vernacular. Different words began to be used for everyday verbs and nouns such as "to receive," "to take," "to marry," and even the noun for "word." The classical Hebrew system of verb aspects was unsettled; syntactic usage was altered and, in some instances, loosened; and new idioms were introduced. These changes are by no means uniform from one Late Biblical book to the next. The consciously archaizing author of the Book of Ruth, seeking to make his writing sound as though it were produced in the period of the Judges, resists most of these changes—nonetheless, despite his intentions, a dozen or so Late

Biblical usages leak through in his text. The language of Esther, by contrast, is unabashedly Late Biblical, as different from the Hebrew of Genesis or Samuel as is the prose of John Updike from the English of Milton's essays.

These linguistic developments are useful guides for approximate dating of the sundry books, but they may be of greater interest to the historian of the Hebrew language than to the general reader. What is more broadly fascinating about the texts pulled together in *Ketuvim* is the efflorescence of literary genres they exhibit. The Hebrew writers of the Late Biblical period no longer felt constrained to tell a story in a particular traditional way, to embrace a well-established set of narrative conventions. Nor did they feel limited to a particular kind of writing or a particular range of subjects. The literature of the First Temple period essentially encompasses five genres: narrative, law, prophecy, psalms, and proverbs. The literature collected in The Writings includes a poetic argument on divine justice (Job), a meditation in prose poetry about the nature of human existence that is as close to philosophy as we find in the Bible (Qohelet), an assemblage of richly sensual love poems with no mention of God (the Song of Songs), a memoir (Nehemiah), and much more.

The editorial process of the literature produced in the First Common-wealth period appears to have taken place chiefly in priestly circles, and the same may have been true for the composition of some, perhaps even a good many, of the texts. In Late Biblical literature, this is true only for Chronicles. The plausible inference is that the social base of literary activity expanded considerably in this period, perhaps in tandem with an expansion of literacy itself. Thus, one cannot ascribe books such as Job or Qohelet to a school or to a broad trend: both works—each emphatically dissenting from the biblical consensus in a different way—are the products of boldly independent writers. Similarly, the author of the Book of Ruth, polemicizing against the separatist nationalism of Ezra and Nehemiah that would in the end prevail in the community of returning exiles, manifestly articulates his own dissenting perspective, and does so with the panache of a gifted writer. The Book of Esther, with its essentially secular outlook, may have been framed to justify the new carnivalesque holiday of Purim, but it conveys a strong impression that it was also written to serve as entertainment. The Song of Songs might well reflect a long folk tradition of Hebrew love poetry, but if it does have some sort of collective background, it is

scarcely that of the nationally and theologically driven view that dominates the Hebrew Bible.

What readers, then, whether their interests are literary or religious, should be grateful for in *Ketuvim* is its striking variety. These sundry short books offer perspectives and provide insights and satisfactions beyond the purview of the Hebrew literature created in the First Temple period. And they vividly remind us that the biblical world was far from monolithic, that it tolerated and perhaps even sometimes encouraged a bracing variety of value systems expressed through a wide spectrum of styles and literary modes.

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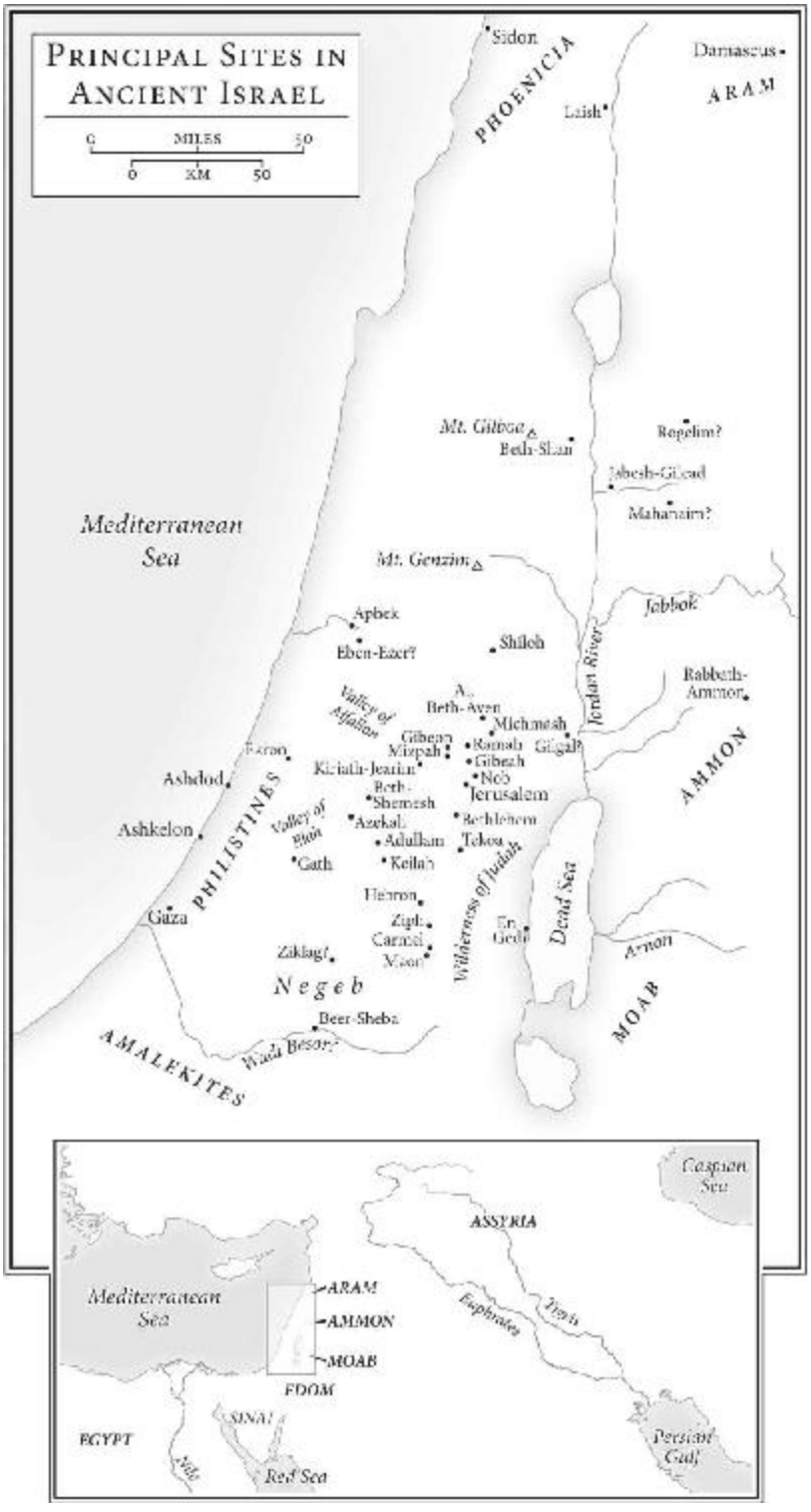
PRINCIPAL SITES IN ANCIENT ISRAEL
0 MILES 50
0 KM 50
Sidon
PHOENICIA
Damascus
ARAM
Laish
Mt. Gilboa
Beth-Shan
Rephaim?
Jabesh-Gilead
Mahanaim?
Mediterranean Sea
Mt. Gerizim
Jabbok
Aphek
Eben-Ezer?
Shiloh
Jordan River
Rabbath-Ammon
Valley of Aijalon
Beth-Aven
Michmash
Gibeon
Mizpah
Ramah
Gibeah
Gilgal?
Taanach
Kiriath-Jearim
Nob
Ashdod
Beth-Shemesh
Jerusalem
AMMON
Ashkelon
PHILISTINES
Valley of Elah
Azekah
Bethlehem
Adullam
Tekoa
Gath
Keilah
Hebron
Ziph
Carmel
Maon
Wilderness of Judah
Dead Sea
En Gedi
Gaza
Arnon
Ziklag
Negeb
MOAB
Beer-Sheba
Wadi Besor?
AMALEKITES
Caspian Sea
ASSYRIA
Mediterranean Sea
ARAM
AMMON
MOAB
EDOM
Euphrates
Tigris
SINAI
EGYPT
Nile
Red Sea
Persian Gulf

PSALMS

Introduction

I. HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

Through the ages, Psalms has been the most urgently, personally present of all the books of the Bible in the lives of many readers. Both Jewish and Christian tradition made it part of the daily and weekly liturgy. Untold numbers have repeatedly turned to Psalms for encouragement and comfort in moments of crisis or despair. The inner world of major Western writers from Augustine, Judah HaLevi, and George Herbert to Emily Dickinson and Paul Celan was inflected by the reading of Psalms. But for all the power of these Hebrew poems to speak with great immediacy in many tongues to readers of different eras, they are in their origins intricately rooted in an ancient Near Eastern world that goes back to the Late Bronze Age (1600–

1200 B.C.E.) and that in certain respects is quite alien to modern people.

The prose narratives of the Hebrew Bible, despite the sundry links with the surrounding literatures that scholarship has identified, are formally innovative in striking ways. Indeed, it is arguable that at least as a set of techniques and conventions, they constitute the most original literary creation of the biblical writers. Psalms, on the other hand, or psalmlike cultic hymns and celebrations of the gods, were common in Egypt and Mesopotamia, and in Syro-Canaanite literature. We know this literature chiefly through the trove of texts found at the site of Ugarit, on the Mediterranean coast of present-day Syria, dating roughly from 1400 to 1200 B.C.E.—several centuries earlier than the main body of biblical writings. As previously unknown texts in the various ancient Near Eastern languages have been unearthed and deciphered over the past century, it has become clear that the psalmists not only adopted the formal system of poetry (about which more is said later) from the antecedent literature of the region but also tapped their predecessors for verbal formulas, imagery, elements of mythology, and even entire sequences of lines of poetry. Some scholars have gone so far as to claim that a few psalms are essentially Hebrew translations of pagan poems,

though a comparison with the proposed originals suggests rather that what the psalmists did was to adapt, briefly cite, or even polemically transform the polytheistic poems, which is, after all, what poets everywhere do with their predecessors—both building on them and emphatically making something new out of them.

In any case, the imaginative and verbal affiliation of many of the psalms with the pagan literary tradition —particularly the Canaanite tradition—that came before them is quite strong, and surely would have surprised pious readers of the canonical book over the centuries. Although God is often entreated in Psalms as a compassionate God, healer of broken hearts, and sustainer of the lowly, a good many of these poems represent the deity as a warrior-god on the model of the Canaanite Baal riding through the skies with clouds as his chariot, brandishing lightning bolts as his weapons. Famously, a triadic line in one of the Ugaritic texts is virtually replicated in Psalm 92:10, with little more than the name of the god changed: "Look, your enemies, O Baal, / look, your enemies you will smash, / look, you will destroy your foes."

The council of the gods, a regular feature of Canaanite mythology, makes an appearance in a number of psalms and with it the notion of either

lesser gods over whom YHWH the God of Israel presides, or of a celestial entourage ("the sons of God") that serves Him. At the great temporal remove from which we read these texts, it is hard to know to what extent such residues of polytheism were literally embraced as items of belief or were simply used as vivid poetic resources. Some of the psalms seem to reflect an ambiguous oscillation between those two possibilities. Another theme drawn from Canaanite mythology that recurs frequently in Psalms, the cosmogonic conquest of a monstrous sea god—intimating chaos—by a warrior-god—associated with order—is on the whole more firmly assimilated into a monotheistic outlook. Although the various names of the primordial sea monster—Leviathan, Rahab, Yamm, Tanin—conquered by God do appear here, the originally mythological conflict is characteristically figured in more naturalistic terms as God's subduing the breakers of the sea. In Psalm 104 the fearsome Leviathan is actually reduced to an aquatic pet with whom YHWH can play.

Many of the psalms, then, derive some of their poetic force from the literary antecedents on which they draw. But the Hebrew poems were manifestly framed for Israelite purposes that were in many regards distinctive and at best no more than loosely

parallel to the polytheistic texts that served as poetic precedents.

When were the various psalms composed and to what ends? The dating of individual psalms has long been a region of treacherous scholarly quicksand. The one safe conclusion is that the writing of psalms was a persistent activity over many centuries. The Davidic authorship enshrined in Jewish and Christian tradition has no credible historical grounding. It was a regular practice in the Late Biblical period to ascribe new texts to famous figures of the past. Although many psalms include the name David in the superscription supplied by the editors, the meaning of the Hebrew particle *l*^{e} that usually prefixes the name is ambiguous. It is conventionally translated as "of," and in ancient seals and other objects that have been discovered, it does serve as a possessive. But *l*^{e} also can mean "for," "in the manner of," "suitable to," and so forth. The present translation seeks to preserve this ambiguity by translating *mizmor l*^{e}*dawid* as "a David psalm." David was no doubt identified by the editors of the collection as the exemplary psalmist because in his story, as told in 1 and 2 Samuel, he appears as a poet and the player of a stringed instrument, and at the end of the narrative is given the epithet "the sweet singer of Israel." But the editors themselves ascribed psalms to

different poets—Asaph, Ethan the Ezrahite, Heyman the Ezrahite, the Korahites, and others. One cannot categorically exclude the possibility that a couple of these psalms were actually written by David, although it is difficult to gauge the likelihood (and some scholars altogether doubt David's historicity).

In any case, a few of the psalms might be as early as the Solomonic court, or even the premonarchic period. Many of these poems appear to have been written at some indeterminate point during the four centuries of the First Commonwealth (approximately 996 to 586 B.C.E.). Many others offer evidence in their themes and language of composition in the period of the Return to Zion (that is, after 457 B.C.E.). One famous instance, Psalm 137, which begins with the words "By Babylon's streams," was clearly written when the pain of exile was fresh, not long after the national trauma of 586 B.C.E. There is no way to date what may be the latest psalms, and the texts found at Qumran indicate that some sort of psalm writing was still a literary activity in the last two centuries before the Christian era. But the extravagant scholarly hypothesis that many of the psalms were composed in the Hasmonean period in the second century B.C.E. is now generally rejected—among other reasons because the Septuagint, the Greek

translation of the Bible completed during the third century B.C.E., already has virtually the same contents (with the exception of one additional psalm) as the canonical Hebrew collection passed down to us. These poems, then, were produced by many different poets over more than half a millennium, probably beginning during or even before the tenth century B.C.E., even though the precise dating of most individual psalms remains elusive. It seems unlikely that any of the psalms is later than the fifth or fourth century B.C.E. By the late first century C.E., the Book of Psalms was considered such a cornerstone of the scriptural canon that in Luke 24:44 it is mentioned together with the Torah and the Prophets as one of the three primary categories of the sacred writings.

Many but by no means all the psalms were composed for use in the Temple cult, though it is worth noting that the elaborate instructions for the conduct of the cult in Leviticus and elsewhere include all sorts of regulations for the preparation and offering of sacrifices but no mandate for songs or liturgical texts. (The post-exilic Chronicles does represent David appointing levitical singers.) Such songs, however, were part of the rituals celebrated throughout the region, and their attractiveness as an enhancement to the cult, with the words performed by singers to

orchestral accompaniment (as many of the psalms indicate) was irresistible. What should be resisted is the inclination of many scholars, beginning in the early twentieth century, to turn as many psalms as possible into the liturgy of conjectured Temple rites—to recover what in biblical studies is called the "life-setting" of the psalms. Perhaps the chief offender among these conjectures is a purported enthronement rite, marking an annual festival in which God was crowned as king. Although Mesopotamian analogies have been cited as evidence, there is simply no indication in the biblical corpus or in the archaeological record that such a ritual existed in ancient Israel, and surely the Israelites were not such literalists as to be incapable of acclaiming God's kingship without a cultic ceremony of enthronement.

Some psalms nevertheless offer strong evidence of their use as liturgical texts. Several psalms, for example Psalm 118, bear indications that three distinct groups of participants in the temple service—"Israel," "the house of Aaron," and "those who fear the LORD"—were called on to chant the refrain "forever is His kindness." Several other psalms follow the progress of pilgrims climbing Mount Zion, then entering the gates of the sacred precincts. Some psalms celebrate a national victory or pray for God's

intercession in a time of national danger. Many of the psalms, however, have an individual rather than a collective focus—prayers of thanksgiving after a person has escaped a deadly illness or some other danger, and supplications imploring God to intervene on behalf of someone threatened by enemies or ailments. At least the thanksgiving psalms would probably have accompanied a cultic act, the offering of a thanksgiving sacrifice. It is conceivable, though not entirely demonstrable, that there were professional psalm poets in the vicinity of the Temple from whom a worshipper coming to Jerusalem could have purchased a psalm that he would recite to express his own particular need. Such compositions might have provided a nucleus for the different collections of psalms that were put together in the canonical anthology. There are, however, other psalms that show no evident connection with any temple ritual. The most clear-cut instances of this category are the psalms that are general reflections on the nature of human existence or on the role of morality in human affairs (most of these would also probably not have been performed to musical accompaniment). Still other psalms have a political or public subject that has no obvious link with worship, such as the royal psalms

(including one composed to celebrate a king's wedding) and the psalms in praise of Zion.

From all this, one may reasonably infer that the psalm was conceived in the ancient period as a fairly flexible poetic form. Sung and played in the Temple service, it could be a liturgical text in the strict sense. It could also accompany individual ritual acts of thanksgiving, confession, and supplication, or perhaps express these various themes outside a ritual context. (Jonah in Jonah 2 and Hannah in 1 Samuel 2 are assigned psalms by the redactor to recite at critical moments in their life stories that have no connection with a cult.) The psalm could serve as a poetic vehicle for philosophic reflection or didactic instruction or the commemoration of national history or for the celebration of the monarch and the seat of the monarchy. Psalm 137, announcing its own composition in Babylonian exile, is an instructive instance of how far the literary concept of psalm could be pushed. It amounts to an anti-psalm, declaring from the beginning that it is impossible to sing Zion's songs "on foreign soil." Yet the editors thought it appropriate for inclusion in the Book of Psalms, alongside poems that were explicitly framed for use in the Temple ritual. The case of this poem should alert us to the limits of one of the most common scholarly modes of

analysis of Psalms, the form-criticism that identifies distinct genres of psalms (supplication, thanksgiving, Wisdom psalm, royal psalm, historical psalm, Zion psalm, psalm of praise). While these generic categories are sometimes useful for understanding the thrust of a particular text, there is more fluidity of genre than they allow, with many psalms being hybrids or switching genre in midcourse and at least a few psalms, such as Psalm 137, standing outside the system of genre. What can be concluded from all this variegated evidence is that the psalm was a multifaceted poetic form serving many different purposes, some cultic and others not, and that it played a vital role in the life of the Israelite community and of individuals within that community throughout the biblical period.

II. ASSEMBLING THE BOOK

The anthology that became the Book of Psalms was put together in the Second Temple period, perhaps in the fifth century B.C.E. but probably no later than the fourth century B.C.E. The decision to assemble the disparate psalms in a book may have been motivated

by the redaction of the Torah in the fifth century B.C.E. as a canonical book intended for public reading. We have no precise knowledge about the identity of the editors, though the usual suspects—priestly circles in Jerusalem—seem plausible candidates, because they would have had a particular interest in making the psalms authoritatively available for use in worship.

The canonical collection is divided into five books, 1–41, 42–72, 73–89, 90–106, 107–The end of each book is marked by a brief prose doxology praising God that is not part of the psalm after which it is inserted. The fifth book lacks this doxological coda, perhaps because Psalm 150 as a whole, a string of exhortations to praise God in song, was thought to serve that purpose. The first three books seem to have originally been independent collections of psalms, and in all likelihood what is now the fourth and fifth books was at first a single additional book. Psalms 1 and 2 are usually considered to be a prologue to the Book of Psalms as a whole and not part of the collection that constitutes the first book of Psalms. Two duplications of psalms (Psalms 14 and 53, Psalm 40:14–18 and Psalm 70) in different books of the collection offer evidence that these were originally separate anthologies that evolved independently. Further

evidence for the independence of the precanonical collections is the conclusion of the second book with the words, “the prayers of David son of Jesse are ended,” a formula that is then contradicted by psalms in the next three books, many of which are in fact ascribed to David. The division into five books was clearly in emulation of the Five Books of Moses. Perhaps this division was merely a formal device to help confer canonical status on Psalms, following the precedent of the recently canonized Torah. Some scholars have inferred that it was motivated by a practical need to facilitate the public reading of Psalms in coordination with the public reading of the Torah according to a triennial cycle, although the crucial consideration for such reading would be not the number of books (three would have worked better than five) but the number of psalms, 150, allowing for approximately a psalm each week over the three-year cycle. (The number was not absolutely fixed at 150 but rather hovered somewhere around 150 because a few of the psalms that are now separate units may be the result of the joining together of two psalms, and Psalms 9 and 10 were originally a single psalm.)

There are also a few smaller groupings of psalms, such as the psalms attributed to Asaph, the “songs of ascents” (the meaning of that term is in dispute), and

the hallelujah psalms at the end of the collection (the term *hallelujah*, "praise God," appears only in the fourth and fifth books and is a sign that they once were a single collection distinct from the other three books). It is possible that these shorter sequences of psalms were once small separate scrolls that were incorporated into the books where they now appear, which in turn were put together to make the five-part Book of Psalms.

The title given to this book by Hebrew tradition reflects a particular view of what was its essential subject. The Hebrew term for "psalm" is *mizmor*, which means "something sung," cognate with the verb *zamer*, "to sing" or "to hymn." It is possible but by no means certain that this verb designates singing accompanied by a musical instrument. It is definitely singing associated with praise or jubilation; one would never use it for the chanting of a dirge. The noun *mizmor*, whether or not attached to the name David, appears in the heading of a large number of the psalms. And yet the book as a whole has never been called Mizmorim, "Psalms," but Tehilim, "Praises" (a rabbinic plural of the noun *tehilah* that appears in the collection with some frequency in the singular). Now, the two preponderant genres in the book are psalms of thanksgiving, which overlap significantly with psalms

of praise, and supplications, but there are more supplications than psalms of thanksgiving or praise. Nevertheless, the idea of calling the book Tehilim, "Praises," reflects an insight into what is going on in most though not all of the poems. Again and again, the psalmists tell us that man's ultimate calling is to use the resources of human language to celebrate God's greatness and to express gratitude for His beneficent acts. This theme is sometimes given special urgency by being joined with an emphasis on the ephemerality of human life: only the living can praise God. There are moments of such praise, or at least expressions of readiness to turn to praise, even in many of the psalms of supplication. The editorial decision to conclude the book with six psalms of praise, each of the last five beginning with "hallelujah" (two words in the Hebrew —an imperative verb "praise" and its object Yah, "God"), all coming to a grand orchestral climax in the last psalm, is surely an effort to define the whole collection as a gathering of songs of praise. Despite the variegated character of the sundry psalms, it is a definition to a large extent justified by the poems themselves.

III. THE POETRY OF *PSALMS*

It has been generally understood since the eighteenth century, and among some Jewish scholars still earlier, that biblical poetry is based on a parallelism of meaning between the two halves of the line (or, in the minority of lines that are triadic, among the three parts of the line). There is no requirement of rhyme (very occasionally one encounters an ad hoc rhyme) and no regular meter of the kind manifested in Greek and Latin poetry, though some Bible scholars in recent decades have made misguided attempts to impose such a meter by counting syllables or other proposed phonetic units. The best account of the formal system of biblical poetry is the concise article by Benjamin Hrushovski (later Harshav) under the rubric "Prosody, Hebrew," in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Hrushovski calls the system "semantic-syntactic-accentual parallelism." That is to say, between the two halves of the line there may be some equivalence of meaning ("semantic"), an equivalent number of stressed syllables ("accentual"), and a parallelism of syntax. Some lines may manifest a neat parallelism in all three categories, but that is not obligatory. As to the parallelism of meaning that has chiefly absorbed the attention of scholars since the idea was first expounded by the Anglican bishop Robert Lowth in the eighteenth century, such parallelism is prevalent, but many

divergences are allowed, in the same way, for example, that Shakespeare often permits himself to modify or swerve from strict iambic pentameter in his deployment of blank verse. Finally, much of the force of ancient Hebrew poetry derives from its rhythmic compactness, something one could scarcely guess from the existing English versions. A typical line of biblical poetry has three beats in each verset (I borrow this term for the half lines from Hrushovski, who uses it instead of “hemistich” or “colon” to avoid confusion with other systems of prosody). Some lines exhibit a three-beat four-beat pattern; sometimes a verset may have only two beats. Typically, given the compact structure of biblical words, there are usually only one or two unaccented syllables between the accented ones. In the next section, I will consider the implications of this prosodic system for translating the Hebrew poems.

Although, as systems of prosody go, biblical poetics remains relatively conservative with the passage of time, it is worth noting that over the six centuries or more during which the canonical psalms were composed, some evolution in the system is observable. The oldest stratum of biblical poetry, as evidenced in the Song of Deborah (Judges 5), shows a fondness for patterns of incremental repetition. These

occur in Psalms as well, whether because the poem is old or because the poet has chosen to use an archaizing device. Here is an instance of incremental repetition in a verse I alluded to earlier without quoting: “For, look, Your enemies, O LORD, / for, look, Your enemies *perish* . . .” (92:10). The increment in the repetition is italicized. The archaic poetic style here can be attributed to the adoption by the psalmist, as we noted, of a line from an old Canaanite poem. At the other end of the historical spectrum, in the Second Temple period semantic parallelism is somewhat weakened. Many lines show no parallelism of meaning between versets; in numerous instances, this lack is compensated for by a semantic parallelism between two whole lines in sequence, but this is not invariably the case. One observes, for example, such interlinear parallelism in Psalm 27:3:

Though a camp is marshaled against me,
my heart shall not fear.
Though battle is roused against me,
nonetheless do I trust.

Since the pioneering work of Bishop Lowth, scholars have been inclined to imagine semantic parallelism as a deployment of synonyms between the two versets. Sometimes this is actually the case. Thus, Psalm 6:2 reads, “LORD, do not chastise me in Your wrath, / do not punish me in Your fury.” The two versets are neatly parallel in meaning, term for term, and the syntax is parallel as well (in the Hebrew the verb comes at the end of each clause). The only divergence in the strict symmetry between the two clauses is that the first verset begins with the vocative “LORD.” The immediately following verse of this psalm, on the other hand, exhibits a far more prevalent use of semantic parallelism: “Have mercy on me, LORD, for I am wretched. / Heal me, for my limbs are stricken.” This is synonymity with a difference, or, one should say, with a development. The general plea “Have mercy on me” (*ḥoneini*) becomes the physically concrete “Heal me” (*refaʾeini*), and a general condition of misery (“for I am wretched”) is translated into the somatically specific “for my limbs are stricken.” This is how poetic parallelism usually works in the Bible. Poets in any language are rarely content simply to repeat the same thing in different words. If the more common or general term for a concept appears in the first verset, as is usually the case, the “synonym” in the

second verset is often a more unusual term, a stronger word, some sort of specification of the first term, or a metaphorical substitution for it that carries with it the vividness or heightening involved in figurative language. Thus, from the first verset to the second, there is typically an intensification or concretization (as in the line just quoted from Psalm 6), a focusing of the initial idea, and sometimes a narrative development of it.

This building of semantic momentum from verset to verset is one of the sources of the distinctive power of biblical poetry. Here is a simple and graphically clear instance of narrative progression between versets: "Who shall go up on the mount of the LORD, / and who shall stand up in His holy place?" (24:3). The units of syntax and meaning are neatly parallel, but a process is going forward in time. In the first verset, the pilgrim is imagined making his way up the slope of Mount Zion; in the second verset, he has arrived within the sacred precincts of the Temple and no longer "goes up" but "stands" (literally "rises" or "stands up"). In the following line of poetry, an intensification is effected in the second verset through the addition of figurative language: "Shuddering seized them there, / pangs *like a woman in labor*" (48:7). (The meaning of this line, part of a celebration of a

victory at sea, is amplified by its allusion to the Song of the Sea, Exodus 15:14.) The tendency to focus meaning in the second verset, often accompanied by some narrative development from the first verset to the second, manifests itself again and again in these poems, as it does elsewhere in biblical poetry. Here is a sequence of three such lines that can stand for many others.

I have sunk in the slime of the deep,
and there is no place to stand.
I have entered the watery depths,
and the current has swept me
away.
I am exhausted from my calling out.
My throat is hoarse. (69:3–4a)

The speaker, vividly evoking the experience of near death through the imagery of drowning regularly associated with death in Psalms, first reports sinking into the muddy deep, then the panicky sensation that his feet find nothing firm on which to stand. In the next line, first he enters the watery depths; then, in the second verset, he discovers that the current (perhaps in this instance an undertow) is sweeping him away. In

the third line, first he cries for help to the point of exhaustion; then, in the second verset, he notes the concrete physical consequence of all this desperate shouting—a hoarse throat. Although some psalms are laden with stereotypical language in which both the parallelism within the line and the poem as a whole are relatively static, the strong forward thrust in many of these lines of poetry as well as from line to line means that this is by and large a highly dynamic poetic system in which ideas and images are progressively pushed to extremes and themes brought to a crisis and a turning point. It is a formal aspect of the poetry of Psalms that helps make it an abiding resource for readers, whether they are in the grip of stark despair or on the crest of elation.

For all these features of the poetry of Psalms that are common to the general system of poetics in the Bible, there are also ways in which the kind of poetry deployed here is distinct from what we see in other poetic texts of the Bible. As poetry often framed for use in worship, it flaunts its own traditionalism. It rarely seeks startling effects, and again and again it deliberately draws on a body of familiar images. In Job, one encounters an astonishing inventiveness in the use of figurative language; that is often true in the Prophets as well. In Proverbs, didactic points are

frequently made through sharp thrusts of wit in the metaphors. But the psalmists, to a large extent composers of liturgical and devotional texts, have no desire to surprise or disorient the pilgrims and supplicants and celebrants for whose use the texts are intended. If a person is threatened with death, the danger is represented, as we have seen, by the depths of the sea, swirling waves, waters that come up to the neck, and the "originality" of the poem inheres in the imaginativeness and freshness with which the poet reworks familiar images, as is strongly evident in Psalm 69, from which I have quoted. This notion of putting a fresh spin on stock images is common in other bodies of poetry: one might recall, for example, the Renaissance tradition of love sonnets from Petrarch to Spencer, in which the fair beloved is both fire and ice, her hair pure gold, her lips coral, and so forth. In similar fashion, God in the psalms of thanksgiving is a rock and a fortress, a shield and a buckler, a sheltering wing and a hiding place on an evil day. (Psalm 91 strikingly illustrates how great poetry can be created out of such stock images.) Each genre of psalms draws on its own reservoir of conventional images. In the many supplications that are also complaints, the speaker's enemies, even if their enmity is in the civic realm, lay snares and dig pits for the

speaker's feet, speak words like piercing arrows with a tongue that is a sharpened sword and drips poison like serpents. In the psalms of praise, because the subject is God, figurative language is often less central, but God is represented in stereotypical phrases performing the same acts—keeping truth forever, making heaven and earth, rendering justice to the oppressed, giving bread to the hungry, and, in a mythological register, riding on the clouds, crushing Leviathan, subduing the waves of the sea.

The reliance of these poems, however, on a repertoire of traditional images and stereotypical phrases does not preclude the creation of fresh and moving poetry. Granted, there are poems in the collection that are largely a stringing together of psalmodic clichés. What is remarkable is the poetic beauty and eloquence of many of the psalms, qualities that have made this book one of the primary models for lyric poetry in the Western tradition, leading many English Renaissance poets to use the verse rendering of Psalms as a basic exercise for the composition of poetry. Some of the poetic power of the psalms derives from their strategically effective use of fairly simple archetypal imagery. Thus, the first psalm sets up a strong antithesis between the just man, likened to a fruit-bearing tree deeply rooted alongside streams of

water, and the wicked, who are like chaff driven by the wind. The similes are grounded in a familiar agricultural world in which the difference between what is rooted and perennially productive and what is a mere waste product that is blown away would be clear to everyone, but these images still speak to us. In many of the psalms, the simple directness of statement in the use of traditional figurative language becomes affectingly eloquent, as readers through the ages have attested. Here, for example, is the initial verse of Psalm 27 (two lines of poetry exhibiting a compact three-beat two-beat rhythm in the Hebrew):

> The LORD is my light and my
> rescue.
> Whom should I fear?
> The LORD is my life's stronghold.
> Of whom should I be afraid?

God as light for someone plunged in darkness and God as a fortress for someone under assault are recurrent metaphors in Psalms. But the succinctness with which these familiar terms are set here opposite the speaker's declaration that he has nothing to fear, coupled with the reinforcing effect of the interlinear parallelism,

gives these lines striking expressive power. One sees why such psalms have meant so much to countless people in their own hour of uncertainty and dread.

Often, the sequencing of observation and poetic statement produces the most moving effects. Memorably, the speaker in Psalm 8 looks up at the night sky and reflects:

> When I see Your heavens, the work
> of Your fingers,
> the moon and the stars You fixed
> firm,
> "What is man that You should note
> him,
> and the human creature, that You
> pay him heed,
> and You make him little less than the
> gods,
> with glory and grandeur You
> crown him?" (verses 4–6)

The first line here incorporates a reminiscence of the creation of the celestial bodies in Genesis 1 with an elegantly apt variation on a biblical idiom. Instead of "the work of Your hands," we have "the work of Your

fingers," in keeping with the delicate tracery of the stars. In the next two lines, the speaker's exclamation of astonishment hurtles downward in the cosmic hierarchy from the heavens above, where the celestial beings (perhaps *ʾelohim* here is an ellipsis for "sons of God") would dwell, to man down below. The synonymous parallelism of the middle line ("What is man . . .") is counterpointed by the focusing parallelism of the line that follows ("You make him little less . . ., / with glory and grandeur You crown him"). The idea that humankind is to have dominion over the created world is prominent in the first Creation story, but in the last line of this sequence, it is poetically realized in a little fanfare of royal imagery.

Poetically effective sequencing may be combined with the semantic dynamics to which lines of parallelistic verse lend themselves. Psalm 90:4 offers a remarkable expression of the overwhelming disparity between the divine perspective of eternity and the fleeting temporal experience of ephemeral man: "For a thousand years in Your eyes / are like yesterday gone, / like a watch in the night." This triadic line offers us a vision of time from God's end of the telescope. In a pattern of diminution, it takes us from a thousand years to a yesterday that has already vanished to a

single watch in the night, barely four hours. And Psalm 90 as a whole uses a poetic strategy frequently observable in these poems by repeating key words with a thematic point. In this meditation on temporality, the psalmist rings the changes on "years" and "days," "morning" and "evening," all the way to the plea just before the end, "Give us joy as the days You afflicted us, / the years we saw evil" (90:15).

Finally, although much of the figurative language is manifestly taken from a traditional repertoire, there are moments of striking metaphoric inventiveness. Water, as we saw in the case of the first psalm, is a potent metaphor in this culture, existing often precariously in a semiarid climate. It is understandable that Jeremiah should represent God as the source of living waters. What the poet in Psalm 42:2–3 does with this traditional background is nevertheless utterly arresting:

> As a deer yearns for streams of
> water,
> so I yearn for You, O God.
> My whole being thirsts for God,
> for the living God.

The thirsting reflects a distinctive aspect of Psalms. These poems, even if many of them were written to be used in the Temple cult, exhibit an intensely spiritual inwardness. Yet that inwardness is characteristically expressed in the most concretely somatic terms. Here is another example of the psalmist's longing for God articulated as thirst:

> God, my God, for You I search.
> My throat thirsts for You,
> my flesh yearns for You
> in a land waste and parched, with
> no water. (63:2)

The King James Version, and most modern translations in its footsteps, has the "soul" thirsting for God, but this is almost certainly a mistake. The Hebrew *nefesh* means "life-breath" and, by extension, "life" or "essential being." But by metonymy, it is also a term for the throat (the passage through which the breath travels) or, sometimes, for the neck. As the subject of the verb "thirst" and with the interlinear parallelism with "flesh," *nefesh* here surely has its physical meaning of "throat." The very physicality, of

course, makes the metaphor of thirsting all the more powerful.

Let me offer one last example of the force of figurative language in Psalms within a framework of traditional language. God, as we noted in a verse quoted from Psalm 27, is associated with light—in that instance, because light, archetypally, means safety and rescue to those plunged in fearful darkness, but also because radiance is a mythological property of deities and monarchs. Psalm 104 is a magnificent celebration of God as king of the vast panorama of creation. It begins by imagining God in the act of putting on royal raiment: "Grandeur and glory You don" (*hod wehadar lavashta*). The psalmist then goes on: "Wrapped in light like a cloak, / stretching out the heavens like a tent cloth" (verse 2). What makes the familiar figure of light for the divinity so effective is its fusion with the metaphor of clothing. The poet, having represented God donning regalia, envisages Him wrapping Himself in a garment of pure light (the Hebrew verb used here is actually in the active mode, "wrapping"). Then, associatively continuing the metaphor of fabrics, he has God "stretching out the heavens like a tent cloth," the bright sky above becoming an extension of the radiance that envelopes God. This is a small but vivid instance of the

imaginative energy that produces poetry of the highest order in Psalms. The figurative invention is not meant to startle or disorient the reader, who is invited to participate in the mood of exaltation of the psalmist, but it is fresh enough, and tightly enough woven into a texture of related images, that it serves to convey a strong vision of God as king of creation and of the luminous enchantment of the created world. These poems retain their eloquence and liveliness after two and a half millennia or more, for believers and simply for people who love poetry.

IV. THE CHALLENGE OF TRANSLATING *PSALMS*

It is a constant challenge to turn ancient Hebrew poetry into English verse that is reasonably faithful to the original and yet readable as poetry. Perhaps the most pervasive problem is the intrinsic structural compactness of biblical Hebrew, a feature that the poets constantly exploit musically and otherwise. Biblical Hebrew is what linguists call a synthetic language, as opposed to analytic languages such as English. Pronominal objects of verbs are usually

indicated by an accusative suffix attached to the verb. The pronominal subject of verbs is usually indicated by the way the verb is conjugated, without need to introduce the pronoun, unless it is added for emphasis. Thus, “He will guard you” is a single word, *yishmorkha*. Instead of using possessive pronouns, nouns are declined with possessive suffixes. And the verb “to be” has no present tense, instead being merely implied by the juxtaposition of a subject noun and a predicate noun (hence the King James Version constantly italicizes *is* because there is no literal equivalent in the Hebrew text). Thus, “The LORD is my shepherd” is only two words, four syllables, in the Hebrew: YHWH *roʿi*.

There is no way of consistently getting this terrific rhythmic compactness into English, but I am convinced that a more strenuous effort to approximate it is called for than the existing translations have made. The King James Version is often (though not invariably) eloquent, but it ignores the rhythms of the Hebrew almost entirely. The various modern English versions are only occasionally eloquent and sometimes altogether flat-footed and, more often than not, arrythmic. Thus, the concluding verset of Psalm 104:1, quoted with a transliteration of the Hebrew in the last paragraph of the preceding section, reads in

the King James Version as follows: “thou art clothed with honour and majesty.” This is dignified, though “honour” for *hod* is wrong. What is notable is that the 1611 version has seven words for the three in the Hebrew, and no equivalent for the strong alliterative effect of the Hebrew. The New Jewish Publication Society translation, “You are clothed in glory and majesty,” is simply a modernization of the King James Version. The Revised English Bible has “clothed in majesty and splendour,” which does eliminate two words, “You are,” but at the cost of diminishing the active sense of God’s putting on the royal raiment. In my translation I render the verb as “You don,” the monosyllable allowing a phrase of just two syllables that brings the whole verset close to the Hebrew rhythm: “Grandeur and glory You don.”

The question of syntax here and throughout these poems also deserves a comment. Biblical syntax is more flexible than English syntax, often adjusting the order of terms for emphasis or for other expressive purposes. The object of the verb can precede it, as it does in the verset we are considering, or follow it, as it does repeatedly in the next several lines of Psalm 1The syntactic fronting of *hod wehadar*, “grandeur and glory,” is a way of highlighting these accoutrements of majesty that the God of creation dons. The reversal of

normal English word order is, it seems to me, idiomatically viable because traditional English poetry makes abundant use of syntactic inversions; and, given that all biblical poetry incorporates a more archaic stratum of the ancient language than one encounters in the prose, the appropriate English style and diction for representing it should have a slightly antique coloration.

Let me offer as a test case for the issue of rhythm a single line that, in the King James Version, has probably become the most famous set of words from the whole Book of Psalms. The initial line—there are two in the verse—of Psalm 23:4 grandly reads in the 1611 translation: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." This beautiful line has understandably moved readers for four centuries, but it is the stately beauty of a leisurely prose amble, not of a line of poetry (or, if one prefers, the beauty of a proto-Whitmanesque line of poetry rather than of biblical poetry). The Hebrew sounds like this: *gam ki-ʾelekh begeyʾ tsalmawet / loʾ-ʾiyraʾ raʿ*. If we ignore the Masoretic hyphenation, the Hebrew comes to eight words, eleven syllables. The King James Version weighs in with seventeen words, twenty syllables. My version reads, "Though I walk in the vale of death's shadow, / I fear no harm." When I showed

the line in draft to a discriminating friend, he objected that I had flagrantly done it this way simply to be different from the King James Version. I had to explain, and add the explanation to my notes, that I was impelled by the desire to get a better approximation of the Hebrew rhythm—more concise, with the intimation of dachtylic cadence in the first verset, and actually matching the cinched effect of the Hebrew's four stark syllables in the second verset.

This preoccupation with rhythm, which will be self-evidently justified to any serious reader of poetry and probably seem odd to anyone else, is inseparable from the underlying aspiration of this translation. I do not want to make the poetry of Psalms sound like Shakespeare or Keats or Whitman or Yeats. Milton, one of the great virtuosos of English poetry (and one of the very few who actually read biblical Hebrew), translated a small selection of psalms into rhyming couplets, A B A B rhymes, *terza rima*, and other intricate patterns. It is an astonishing performance, and less far removed from the literal sense of the Hebrew than one might imagine. But it is nothing like biblical poetry. What I have aimed at in this translation—inevitably, with imperfect success—is to represent Psalms in a kind of English verse that is readable as poetry yet sounds something like the Hebrew—

emulating its rhythms wherever feasible, reproducing many of the effects of its expressive poetic syntax, seeking equivalents for the combination of homespun directness and archaizing in the original, hewing to the lexical concreteness of the Hebrew, and making more palpable the force of parallelism that is at the heart of biblical poetry. The translation is also on the whole quite literal—something that the King James Version has probably conditioned English readers to expect—in the conviction that the literal sense has a distinctive poetic force and that it is often possible to preserve it in workable literary English. Where English usage has compelled me to depart from a literal rendering, I have noted the divergence in my commentary.

An observation about the concreteness of language is in order here. Biblical Hebrew uses few abstractions. In most instances a term anchored in physical existence, some metonymy or synecdoche, serves in place of an abstraction. There is no real biblical word for "progeny" or "posterity"; poets and prose writers as well prefer to say "seed," which also means "semen" and, by metonymy, the product of semen. It should also be observed that the Hebrew word for "seed" is two syllables, as against the two polysyllabic Greco-Latinate equivalents just cited. Wherever possible, the translation resists substituting an abstraction for the

concrete term in the Hebrew. I have tried to avoid ponderous Latinate terms such as “iniquity” and “transgression,” which misrepresent the tone and sound of the Hebrew equivalents if not their denotations; I have preferred instead more everyday terms such as “wrongdoing” and “crime.” What is at stake in this preference is not just a matter of phonetics or aesthetics but a worldview that informs these poems. We are all accustomed to think of Psalms, justifiably, as a religious book, but its religious character is not the same as that of the Christian and Jewish traditions that variously evolved over the centuries after the Bible. The psalmists are constantly concerned with the relationship between man and God, or Israel and God, which is more than sufficient to qualify their poetry as religious. But this relationship is often imagined in social, political, and even physical terms rather than in the framework of what Protestant theology calls “salvation history.” “Crime” is frequently a more apt English equivalent for the Hebrew *ʾawen* than “iniquity” because what triggers the indignation of the supplicant is the bribing of judges, defamation, theft, conspiracy to murder, and other violations of the law. Another Hebrew term, *ḥetʾ*, which repeatedly figures in both older and modern English versions as “sin,” is translated here as

"offense." I do not mean to say that there is no notion of sin in Psalms, but the fraught theological connotations of the English term are not quite right. Etymologically, *ḥetʾ* comes from a verb that means "to miss the mark." In the prose narratives, it is the word used in political contexts for the rebellion of a vassal people against its overlord and, in court settings, for when a subject person causes displeasure to his superior. Giving offense to God as king is connotatively different from sinning, with the associations of that English term with spiritual degradation leading to contrition, self-flagellation, and penance.

The two most notable instances of resistance to inappropriately theological language in this translation are the pointed absence in it of "soul" and "salvation." The avoidance of these terms, which many English readers may automatically associate with Psalms, is not the result of contrariness on my part but reflects a commitment to philological fidelity and to the notions of reality manifested in the Hebrew words. *Nefesh*, as I observed above, has a core meaning of "life-breath," but the Vulgate generally rendered it as *anima*, and that in turn predisposed the King James translators to represent it as "soul." It covers so many different meanings that it is impossible to translate in all

contexts with the same English equivalent, something I attempt to do with all the Hebrew terms that will allow it. The possessive "my *nefesh*" is often chiefly an intensive form of the first-person singular pronoun and, given the lack of any analogous term in English, is usually rendered here simply as "I." When *nefesh* is the object of a verb such as "to save," the reasonable English translation is "life." Because it is the very breath that quickens a person with life, it sometimes carries the sense of "essential being," and in these cases it is usually rendered here as "being." I am aware that "my being" is more awkward than "my soul," but "soul" strongly suggests a body-soul split—with implications of an afterlife—that is alien to the Hebrew Bible and to Psalms in particular. (There are indications of a Hades-like underworld, Sheol, a shadowy realm of non-being into which the dead descend, but this remains far from the distinct afterworld of later Judaism and Christianity.) As such, "soul" is a word that has to be avoided if we are not to get a misleading idea of what the psalmists are saying.

As previously noted, *nefesh* often occurs in Psalms as an anatomical term for the part of the body between the head and the shoulders. This usage is widely recognized by modern scholars, though in my view it is more frequently applied in Psalms than is generally

allowed. Here is an instance where there is scant disagreement: Psalm 69 begins with these words in the King James Version: “Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul.” This image of internal seepage is picturesque if mystifying, but what the Hebrew really says, in a vivid depiction of threatened drowning, is “for the waters have come up to my neck.” Most modern versions have seen this, but in Psalm 44:26, where the King James Version has “For our soul [*nafsheinu*] is bowed down to the dust: our belly cleaveth unto the earth,” modern translators opt for a simple “we” instead of “soul,” missing the strong physical parallelism with “belly” (a word that in the New Jewish Publication Society translation vanishes into the prim generality of “body”). The present translation renders this line as “For our neck is bowed to the dust, / our belly clings to the ground,” in fidelity to the poet’s strong concrete image of a person thrust into a prostrate position on the ground from neck to belly.

“Salvation” is the term that the translators in 1611 chose to represent the Hebrew *yeshuʿah*, and it has shown more than a little persistence in the various modern versions. “Salvation” is a heavily fraught theological term, pulling in its tow all sorts of associations of eschatological redemption or radical

spiritual transformation and sublime elevation of the individual sinner. In Christianity, it also strongly implies a particular Savior (whose name is derived from this verbal stem); in postbiblical Judaism as well, the Hebrew word *yeshuʿah* comes to designate a global process of messianic redemption. But in Psalms this noun and its cognate verb *hoshiʿa* are strictly directed to the here and now. *Hoshiʿa* means to get somebody out of a tight fix, to rescue him. When the tight fix involves the threat of enemies on the battlefield, *yeshuʿah* can mean "victory," and *hoshiʿa* "to make victorious"; more commonly, both the noun and the verb indicate "rescue." It will no doubt take getting used to for some readers to feel comfortable with "the God of my rescue" instead of "the God of my salvation," but that is precisely the sort of readjustment of mind-set that this translation aims to effect. The relationship between man and God is as urgent as readers of Psalms in English have always imagined, but it is not enacted in the kind of theological theater that has conventionally been assumed. The psalms of supplication, where rescue is the central issue, are poems emerging from the most pressing sense of personal or collective crisis. The speakers in these poems, however, do not seek some transport to a different spiritual realm, some radical transformation

of their inward self. Instead, they implore God to extricate them from terrible straits, confound their enemies, restore them to wholeness and safety. Notions of the heavens opening and flights of angels in glorious raiment bearing redeemed souls on high have their own excitements, but they are not within the purview of these Hebrew poets. This translation is an effort to reground Psalms in the order of reality in which it was conceived, where the spiritual was realized through the physical, and divine purposes were implemented in social, political, and even military realms.

V. THE TEXT OF *PSALMS*

With all the intrinsic challenges of conveying the poetry of Psalms in English, it would be reassuring if we knew that the Hebrew words passed down to us were dependably what the ancient Hebrew poets wrote. Alas, that is often not the case. It is a nettlesome truth about scribal transmission that any text copied by scribes from century to century accumulates errors over time. A copyist's eye can easily skip over a letter, a word, even a whole phrase.

He may inadvertently duplicate a letter occurring at the end of one word at the beginning of the next word in the text (what is called “dittography”), or, alternately, he may mistakenly drop a letter that actually belongs because he has just copied the same letter in a preceding word (what is called “haplography”). Consonants can get reversed, or even words or phrases. The standard Hebrew text of the Bible, the Masoretic Text (from *masoret* or *masorah*, meaning “tradition”), was fixed by a school of Jewish grammarians and editors in Tiberias between the sixth and tenth centuries C.E. They also added vowel-points and cantillation marks (the latter serving to parse the syntax) to the ancient unpunctuated consonantal text. The evidence suggests that they were scrupulous in the work they did, but a millennium or more had passed since the original composition of most of the texts, and in that period a host of errors had crept in, and they themselves were hardly immune to error in their editorial decisions. The biblical texts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls as well as the versions that appear to have been used by the ancient translators of the Bible into Greek, Aramaic, Syriac, and Latin all show local divergences from the Masoretic Text, though it is often not easy to determine which is more authoritative than the others, and any translator, as I can attest from

experience, might be tempted to “improve” the text when it is difficult.

Textual errors cluster far more heavily in biblical poetry than in the prose. A straightforward explanation for this difference offers itself. Biblical poetry uses a specialized poetic vocabulary incorporating many words that never occur in prose and in some instances are rare or archaic. When a copyist is confronted with an unfamiliar word or idiom, he runs the risk of scrambling it or substituting a more familiar term. Let us imagine for a moment that the poetry of T. S. Eliot was composed before the invention of the printing press and so was exposed to the vagaries of scribal transmission. What would a poor scribe do when he encountered in “Sweeney Among the Nightingales” the following line: “Swelling to maculate giraffe”? Many speakers of English, apart from zoologists and perhaps other scientists, have never seen or heard the word “maculate.” Our hypothetical scribe would be doing a perfectly natural thing if he replaced this puzzler, either unconsciously or because he thought he was correcting an error, with the familiar “immaculate,” although by so doing he would have his version say the opposite of what the poet wrote and would entirely lose the image of the giraffe’s spots. Moving on to “Gerontion,” he would be perplexed by “Spawned in

some estimanet of Antwerp" because "estimanet" is a French word (a shabby tavern), and he might be tempted to make sense of it by substituting "estimate," thus reducing the whole line to gibberish. A similar borrowing from French a few lines down in the same poem, "Rocks, moss, stonecrop, iron, merds" (the last word from *merde*, here plural without the *e*, used to mean "turds") would produce further incomprehension, and the scribe, a sensible man, might therefore replace it with the blander, if context-appropriate, "mud."

There is abundant evidence that slips or blunders of this sort occurred again and again in the copying of the psalms, rendering some phrases or whole lines or even sequences of lines almost unintelligible. I don't mean to exaggerate. Many psalms, including some of the most famous, such as the first, the twenty-third, and the last psalm in the collection, are beautifully transparent in the original from beginning to end, inspiring considerable confidence that there was no slip between the pen of the poet and the pens of the long line of scribes. But there are also many instances in which the meaning of the text as it stands is quite opaque, with no easy path of reconstruction back to what the poet might have originally written.

Psalms 9 and 10 are a striking illustration of these textual problems. In the Septuagint, these appear as a single psalm. Internal evidence for their unity is the fact that together they form an alphabetic acrostic. Psalm 9 begins with the initial letters of the alphabet in proper order, though it lacks a line beginning with *dalet*, the fourth letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The acrostic vanishes in the last two verses of Psalm 9, reappears at the beginning of Psalm 10, only to vanish again, then resurfaces toward the end of the psalm, which has lines beginning respectively with the last four letters of the Hebrew alphabet (verses 12–17), though interspersed with lines that are not part of the acrostic pattern. This scrambling of the acrostic is accompanied by a slide into incoherence in 9:21 and 10:3–6. It is reasonable to infer that something happened here to the text more extensive than a scribal inadvertence. Perhaps a purportedly authoritative manuscript used by the line of scribes that led to the Masoretic Text was damaged—by moisture, fire, or otherwise. With bits missing and the continuity of the acrostic no longer in clear sight, some later editor may not have realized that these two segments of the text were the halves of a single psalm. Moreover, at least in the four verses I have just cited, there may have been missing or illegible elements in the text, and a

desperate scribe might have copied the incoherent fragments or, in an effort to make sense of them, created nonsense on the order of "spawned in an estimate of Antwerp."

What is a translator to do with these many places where the text has been corrupted? The standard scholarly resource is to emend the text in an effort to restore it as it originally read. Some scholars have not hesitated to reconstruct clauses or whole lines and sequences of lines, but such extensive emendation usually looks more like an exercise in ingenuity than a reliable means of recovering the original text. This translation is relatively conservative in adopting emendations, and some biblical scholars may look askance at this cautiousness. Small-scale emendations seemed the safest: reversals of consonants, single-letter changes as in evident dittography or haplography or in the confusion of *dalet* and *resh*—letters that look similar in Hebrew script. I was especially encouraged to follow such divergences from the Masoretic Text when they were confirmed by one or more of the ancient translations, or by the Qumran texts, or by variant Hebrew manuscripts. Where no plausible modest emendation of an unintelligible word or phrase suggested itself, I have done what most previous translators of the Bible have done, which is to try to

make some sense out of the Hebrew words as they stand by an interpretive stretch. Occasionally, when the stretch seemed too extravagant and no viable emendation was available, I have actually reproduced the incoherence of the Hebrew in my translation, duly explaining the difficulties in my commentary. These moments will be a perhaps disconcerting novelty for English readers of Psalms, but they are intended to remind the audience of this translation that there are spots and patches where unfortunately we do not have the text that the poets originally wrote. We must nevertheless be grateful that such problems, though persistent, are not pervasive, and that a large part of these remarkable poems remains eminently readable despite all the textual vicissitudes of many centuries.

PSALM 1

[1]Happy the man who has not walked in the wicked's
counsel,
nor in the way of offenders has stood,
nor in the session of scoffers has sat.
[2]But the LORD'S teaching is his desire,
and His teaching he murmurs day and night.
[3]And he shall be like a tree planted by streams of
water,
that bears its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither—
and in all that he does he prospers.
[4]Not so the wicked,
but like chaff that the wind drives away.
[5]Therefore the wicked will not stand up in
judgment,
nor offenders in the band of the righteous.
[6]For the LORD embraces the way of the righteous,
and the way of the wicked is lost.

PSALM 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *walked / . . . stood / . . . sat.* It is easy to understand why the ancient editors set this brief, eloquent psalm at the head of the collection. In content, it is a Wisdom psalm, affirming the traditional moral calculus (to which Job will powerfully object) that it pays to be good, whereas the wicked will be paid back for their evil. (Wisdom literature is an international genre in the ancient Near East. It reflects, in an approximately philosophical manner, on the uses of human life, and one of its major thrusts is the didactic inculcation of the principles of proper living. It tends to be universal rather than national in its perspective.) In style, this psalm is a lovely instance of the force of familiar imagery favored by the psalmists. Walking on a way is a traditional metaphor for pursuing a set of moral choices in life. In this verse, that idea is turned into an elegant narrative sequence in the triadic line—first walking, then standing, then sitting, with the attachment to the company of evildoers becoming increasingly more habitual from one verset to the next. Nahum Sarna raises the interesting possibility that the first word of the psalm, *ʾashrei*, "happy," may pun on *ʾashurim*, "steps," and hence reinforce the walking metaphor.

2. *murmurs.* The verb *hagah* means to make a low muttering sound, which is what one does with a text in a culture where there is no silent reading. By extension, predominantly in postbiblical Hebrew, it has the sense of "to meditate."

3. *like a tree planted by streams of water.* These words inaugurate the second traditional image of the poem. In a semiarid climate, everyone recognized that a tree had to be near a water source to flourish, and this becomes a standard metaphor for perdurable success, fruitfulness, blessing. All this is succinctly invoked in the bearing of fruit and the evergreen leaf of the second and third versets. The image of the windblown chaff then makes a neat contrast to the rooted, well-watered, leafy tree.

in all that he does he prospers. The masculine verb could refer to the man or the tree, but "prosper" (*yatsliaḥ*), despite its occasional application to horticulture, is a verb that probably jibes better with a person than with a plant.

5. *the wicked will not stand up in judgment.* These words glance back at the beginning of the psalm, although "stood" there and "stand up" here are two entirely different Hebrew verbs. Against the self-destructive sitting in the sessions of scoffers, the court of judgment is a place where the wicked will have no leg to stand on (like chaff).

6. *embraces.* The Hebrew—literally, "knows"—is a verb often used for intimate connection, including, when the subject is a man and the object is a woman, the sexual one.

the way of the wicked. In a kind of envelope structure, this phrase loops back to "the way of offenders" at the beginning. Now we see the fate of oblivion to which such a way is condemned.

PSALM 2

[1]Why are the nations aroused,
and the peoples murmur vain things?
[2]Kings of the earth take their stand,
and princes conspire together
against the LORD and against His anointed.
[3]“Let us tear off their fetters,
let us fling away their bonds!”
[4]He Who dwells in the heavens will laugh,
the Master derides them.
[5]Then will He speak to them in His wrath,
in His burning anger dismay them:
[6]“And I—I appointed My king
on Zion, My holy mountain.”
[7]Let me tell as is due of the LORD.
He said to me: “You are My son.
I Myself today did beget you.
[8]Ask of me, and I shall give nations as your estate,
and your holdings, the ends of the earth.
[9]You will smash them with a rod of iron,
like a potter’s jar you will dash them.”

[10]And now, O you kings, pay mind,
be chastened, you rulers of earth.
[11]Worship the LORD in fear,
and exult in trembling.
[12]With purity be armed,
lest He rage and you be lost on the way.
For His wrath in a moment flares up.
Happy, all who shelter in Him.

PSALM 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Why are the nations aroused.* This is one of many psalms that seems to have been composed in response to a specific historical situation, but attempts to identify the circumstances or to date them have been unavailing. What one can make out is an alliance of nations intending to attack Judah, or perhaps merely to rebel against their condition of subjugation to it (see verse 3).

2. *Kings of the earth.* The hyperbolic sweep of biblical poetic idiom already transposes what might well have been a local political uprising into something like a grand global confrontation.

His anointed. The term *mashiaḥ* clearly is used here in its political sense as the designation of the legitimate current heir to the Davidic dynasty, without eschatological implications.

6. *I appointed My king / on Zion, My holy mountain.* The geo-theological paradox of these words runs through many of the psalms. Zion is a modest mountain on the crest of which sits a modest fortified town, the capital of a rather small kingdom, surrounded by vast empires. Yet, the poet boldly imagines it as God's chosen city, divinely endorsed to be queen of nations and the splendor of humankind.

7. *Let me tell.* As the next two versets make clear, the speaker now is God's chosen king . . . who reigns on Mount Zion.

I Myself . . . did beget you. Despite Christological readings of this verse over the centuries, it was a commonplace in the ancient Near East, readily adopted by the Israelites, to imagine the king as God's son. The Hebrew emphasis of this concept seems to be more political than theological.

8. *nations . . . / the ends of the earth.* The large sweep of the initial threat from "kings of the earth" is picked up.

9. *smash them with a rod of iron.* The rod, *shevet*, would be the ruler's scepter, but here it becomes a battle-mace, pulverizing the enemies that thought to assault Judah.

10. *And now, O you kings, pay mind.* This is another variety of envelope structure. The poem began by asking the nations and their kings why they were so stirred up. It closes by enjoining them to keep in mind the LORD'S overwhelming power, which is the guarantee of Zion's continuing dominion.

12. *With purity be armed.* The two Hebrew words *nashqu bar* are the first of a long series of textual cruces in Psalms. As they stand, they make little sense, and the most elaborate efforts have been undertaken—none very convincing—to make the text mean something by extensive reconstructive surgery. The present translation hews to the Masoretic Text, merely revocalizing *bar* (son? wheat?) as *bor*, "purity." The usual sense of the verb *nashqu* is "to kiss," but it also means "to bear [or wield] arms" (compare its use in Psalm 78:9, 1 Chronicles 12:2, and 2 Chronicles 17:17). As an idiom, to arm oneself with purity is not otherwise attested to in the Bible, but it might make sense here as a counterpoint to the implied raising of arms against Zion at the beginning of the psalm.

PSALM 3

[1]A David psalm, when he fled from Absalom his son.
[2]LORD, how many are my foes,
many, who rise up against me.
[3]Many, who say of my life:
“No rescue for him through God.”
selah
[4]And You, LORD, a shield are for me,
my glory, Who lifts up my head.
[5]With my voice I cry out to the LORD,
and He answers me from His holy mountain.
selah
[6]I lie down and I sleep.
I awake, for the LORD has sustained me.
[7]I fear not from myriads of troops
that round about set against me.
[8]Rise, LORD! Rescue me, my God,
for You strike all my foes on the cheek,
the teeth of the wicked You smash.
[9]Rescue is the LORD’S!
On Your people Your blessing.

PSALM 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *A David psalm.* The traditional rendering is "a psalm of David," which tends to imply authorship. The Hebrew preposition *l*^{e} is ambiguous: It could mean "of" or "by"; it often means "belonging to"; another common meaning is "for"; or it might refer to something as loose as "in the manner of." The choice of translation is intended to preserve these ambiguous possibilities.

when he fled from Absalom his son. Such ascriptions have no historical authority. Because the psalm is spoken by someone beset by relentless enemies, it would have seemed plausible to the editor to tie it in to this moment of David's flight after Absalom had usurped the throne (2 Samuel 16).

3. *selah.* Although there is general agreement that this is a choral or musical notation, there is no way of determining the meaning or the etymology.

4. *You, LORD, a shield are for me.* Remarkably, this is the only metaphor in the entire poem (unless one chooses to include the borderline case of "glory" in the next verset). The palpable strength of this psalm resides in its sheer simplicity and directness. The speaker, a man beleaguered by bitter foes, is first mocked by them when they tell him no god will rescue him. Ignoring the mockery, he cries out to the LORD for help (verse 5), sure he will be answered. Surrounded by enemies, he can sleep undisturbed (verse 6).

8. *Rise, LORD! Rescue me, my God.* As though answering the mocking foes to whom he never speaks directly, the speaker exhorts God to extend him the very rescue (verbal stem *y-sh-*ʿ) that the enemies had said would be denied him. And the rescuing act is to be manifested by bashing in the very mouths ("strike all my foes on the cheek, / the teeth of the wicked You smash") that had uttered the jeering words he quoted.

9. *Rescue is the LORD's! / On Your people Your blessing.* While it is pleasing to have "rescue" reiterated at the end, the line doesn't scan, and the sudden

appearance of a national perspective at the conclusion of an exclusively first-person poem looks odd. One may suspect that this is a textual tag from somewhere else introduced in redaction, perhaps because of the initial words, "Rescue is the LORD'S."

PSALM 4

[1]For the lead player, with stringed instruments, a David psalm.

[2]When I call out, answer me, my righteous God.
In the straits, You set me free.
Have mercy upon me and hear my prayer.
[3]Sons of man, how long will My glory be shamed?
You love vain things and seek out lies.
selah
[4]But know that the LORD set apart His faithful.
The LORD will hear when I call to Him.
[5]Quake, and do not offend.
Speak in your hearts on your beds, and be still.
selah
[6]Offer righteous sacrifices
and trust in the LORD.
[7]Many say, “Who will show us good things?”
Lift up the light of Your face to us, LORD.
[8]You put joy in my heart,
from the time their grain and their drink did abound.

[9]In peace, all whole, let me lie down and sleep.
For You, LORD, alone, do set me down safely.

PSALM 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *lead player.* The Hebrew *menatseaḥ* probably means "leader," evidently the person directing the music.

with stringed instruments. This identification, as is the case with all the musical terms in Psalms, is no more than a guess. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "melodies," but the verbal stem is often associated with plucking strings.

2. *When I call out, answer me.* This phrase, or some variation on it, is an identifying formula for the psalm of supplication and often appears, as here, at the beginning of the psalm.

4. *But know that the* LORD *set apart His faithful.* Here the situation rather than the language is a formula for the supplication. The speaker, beset by mocking enemies who say he is beyond hope (compare Psalm 3), affirms that God will confound them by answering the cry of those who are faithful to Him.

5. *Quake . . . / Speak in your hearts . . . be still.* The syntax of this entire verse is choppy, and the semantic logic behind it remains somewhat obscure. If in fact the text as we have it reflects what the psalmist wrote, the sense would be as follows: The auditors of the poem are exhorted to tremble as an act of conscience that will dissuade them from acts of transgression, then commune with themselves in the solitude of their beds and speak no more. The verse thus moves from a state of troubled agitation ("quake") to silence at the end.

7. *Lift up the light of Your face.* The spelling of the verb *n^{e}sah* deviates from the normative *n^{e}sa'*, but the image of God's lifting up the light of His face as a gesture of divine favor (as in the priestly blessing) is so common in biblical idiom that one is compelled to construe the verb here as "lift up."

8. *from the time their grain and their drink did abound.* Although the flourishing of crops is understandably a cause for joy in an agricultural society, it must be said that the syntactic link between the initial clause and this one is obscure, and one suspects the text has been damaged. Among the difficulties are the odd temporal indication in “from the time” and the third-person plural references (“their grain and their drink”).

9. *In peace, all whole, let me lie down and sleep.* This prayer for tranquil sleep at the end of the psalm may be a deliberate counterpoint to the image of those who quake, then speak to themselves on their beds. Restful sleep as a restorative manifestation of the speaker’s trust in God’s protection is a recurrent motif in Psalms. It is the precise antithesis to the tormented “blank nights” without rest of which Job speaks.

PSALM 5

[1]To the lead player, on the *neḥilot*, a David psalm.
[2]Hearken to my speech, O LORD,
attend to my utterance.
[3]Listen well to my voice crying out, my king and my God,
for to You I pray.
[4]LORD, in the morning You hear my voice,
in the morning I lay it before You and wait.
[5]For not a god desiring wickedness are You,
no evil will sojourn by You.
[6]The debauched take no stand in Your eyes,
You hate all the wrongdoers.
[7]You destroy the pronouncers of lies,
a man of blood and deceit the LORD loathes.
[8]As for me—through Your great kindness I enter Your house,
I bow to Your holy temple in the fear of You.
[9]Guide me, O LORD, in Your righteousness.
On account of my foes, make my way straight before me.

[10]For there is nothing right in their mouths,
within them—falsehood.
An open grave their throat,
their tongue, smooth-talking.
[11]Condemn them, O God.
Let them fall by their counsels for their many sins.
Cast them off, for they have rebelled against You.
[12]Let all who shelter in You rejoice,
let them sing gladly forever—protect them!
and those who love Your name exult in You.
[13]For You bless the just man, O LORD.
Like a shield You crown him with favor.

PSALM 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the* neḥilot. This particular musical instrument has defied identification and hence is offered here in transliteration.

2. *Hearken to my speech, O LORD.* These initial words are another formula for beginning a psalm of supplication.

4. *in the morning I lay it before You.* The idiom suggests sacrifice, but instead of sacrifice it is a prayer of supplication that the speaker lays before God. The reference in verse 8 to entering God's house is an indication that the supplicant has come into the Temple to offer his prayer.

6. *The debauched.* For the moment, all we can conclude is that the speaker emphatically dissociates himself from this crowd of reprobates with whom

God has no truck. From verse 10, we infer that these sinister figures have been actively menacing the speaker, so the poem is an entreaty to God to extricate him from their vicious plots and confound them.

7. *a man of blood and deceit.* Here we begin to get some concrete sense of the nature of these plotters of evil: they are prepared to do violence to the speaker, to deceive and despoil him.

8. *As for me.* The Hebrew pronoun *waʾani* sets out the speaker in strong contrast to the evildoers.

10. *An open grave their throat.* This startling image suggests how lethal are the intent and the effect of the smooth-talking deceivers. The smoothness (the Hebrew idiom is literally "they smooth with their tongue") intimates a kind of slippery slope of language into the open grave of the throat.

11. *Cast them off.* The Masoretic cantillation marks place this (one word in the Hebrew) at the end of the previous clause, but the whole line scans much better—and makes better sense—if the word is set at the beginning of the third verset of a triadic line.

12. *sing gladly.* The choice of this verb might express not only a state of exultation but the poetic prayer that the speaker has laid before God.

13. *Like a shield You crown him with favor.* The "favor" vouchsafed the man who has come into God's Temple in prayer with a clean conscience is theologically self-evident. The comparison of this condition of favor (*ratson*) with a shield picks up at the end the supplicant's urgent sense that he needs protection against malefic and bloody-minded enemies.

PSALM 6

[1]For the lead player, on stringed instruments, on the eight-stringed lute, a David psalm.
[2]LORD, do not chastise me in Your wrath,
do not punish me in Your fury.
[3]Have mercy on me, LORD, for I am wretched.
Heal me, for my limbs are stricken.
[4]And my life is hard stricken.
—and You, O LORD, how long?
[5]Come back, LORD, deliver my life,
rescue me for the sake of Your kindness.
[6]For death holds no mention of You.
In Sheol who can acclaim You?
[7]I weary in my sighing.
I make my bed swim every night,
with my tears I water my couch.
[8]From vexation my eye becomes dim,
is worn out, because of all my foes.
[9]Turn from me, all you wrongdoers,
for the LORD hears the sound of my weeping.
[10]The LORD hears my plea,

the LORD will take my prayer.
[11]Let all my enemies be shamed and hard stricken,
let them turn back, be shamed in an instant.

PSALM 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *do not chastise me . . . / do not punish me.* This psalm is another variation of the supplication pattern. The speaker is in dire straits not because he is beset by enemies (although, as we shall see, they do come into the picture) but because God has "chastised" him—which would have been a typical ancient interpretation of illness.

3. *for my limbs are stricken.* Here the condition of acute physical infirmity is made explicit. The two versets of this line reflect one prevalent pattern of biblical poetry: a general statement in the first verset ("I am wretched") followed by a more concrete image in the second verset ("my limbs are stricken").

4. *and You, O LORD, how long?* This cry of desperation to God is a recurrent verbal formula in the supplications.

6. *For death holds no mention of You.* The speaker, gravely ill, fears he is on the brink of death, and that is why he offers this prayer. It is man's calling in the biblical world to celebrate or acclaim God's greatness. Hence in the psalms of supplication the speakers often remind God in their entreaty for life that the dead—those who go down to the underworld, Sheol—cannot praise God.

8. *From vexation my eye becomes dim, / is worn out, because of all my foes.* The syntax of this line is arranged in an elegant chiasm: vexation (a), becomes dim (b), is worn out (b'), because of all my foes (a'). The tendency of the second verset to intensify an image or idea in the first verset is strikingly reflected in the move from "becomes dim" to the violent and hyperbolic "is worn out," which more literally means "is torn out."

because of all my foes. Now, somewhat surprisingly, enemies appear. The most plausible way to understand their introduction in the poem is that the supplicant imagines that malicious enemies are exulting over his deathly illness. It is of course conceivable that the physical wretchedness invoked at the beginning of the poem is not a symptom of illness but a somatic consequence of being harassed by enemies, but such a construction does not accord well with the assertion that the physical misery is God's chastisement.

10. *The LORD hears my plea, / the LORD will take my prayer.* This line is another neat illustration of how the two versets of a line are typically deployed. "My plea" (*teḥinati*) and "my prayer" (*tefilati*) make a clear semantic parallelism, reinforced by the phoneticmorphological similarity of the two terms. The two verbs, on the other hand, form a miniature narrative sequence: first God "hears" (or "has heard"), in the perfective mode of the verb, the plea or supplication. Then, as a result of hearing it in all its desperate sincerity, He "will take" (or "accept") it, in the imperfective mode of the verb that here has the force of a future tense.

11. *Let all my enemies be shamed.* Presumably, they will be shamed for crowing in triumph over the gravely ill supplicant when God restores him to health.

hard stricken. This verb pointedly looks back to the use of the same term in verses 3 and 4. In the speaker's return to health, he and his enemies will change places.

PSALM 7

[1]A David *shiggayon*, which he sang to the LORD
regarding Cush the Benjamanite.
[2]LORD, my God, in You I sheltered.
Rescue me from all my pursuers and save me.
[3]Lest like a lion they tear up my life—
rend me, with no one to save me.
[4]LORD, my God, if I have done this,
if there be wrongdoing in my hands.
[5]If I paid back my ally with evil,
if I oppressed my foes without reason—
[6]may the enemy pursue and overtake me
and trample to earth my life
and make my glory dwell in the dust.
selah
[7]Rise up, O LORD, in Your anger,
Loom high against the wrath of my enemies.
Rouse for me the justice You ordained.
[8]A band of nations surrounds You,
and above it to the heights return.
[9]The LORD will judge peoples.

Grant me justice, LORD, as befits my
righteousness
and as befits my innocence that is in me.
[10]May evil put an end to the wicked;
and make the righteous stay unshaken.
He searches hearts and conscience,
God is righteous.
[11]My shield—upon God,
rescuing the upright.
[12]God exacts justice for the righteous
and El utters doom each day.
[13]If a man repent not, He sharpens His sword,
He pulls back his bow and aims it.
[14]And for him, He readies the tools of death,
lets fly His arrows at the fleers.
[15]Look, one spawns wrongdoing,
grows big with mischief,
gives birth to lies.
[16]A pit he delved, and dug it,
and he fell in the trap he made.
[17]His mischief comes down on his head,
on his pate his outrage descends.
[18]I acclaim the LORD for His righteousness,
let me hymn the LORD's name, Most High.

PSALM 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *A David* shiggayon. Like so many of the technical terms in Psalms, it is unclear exactly what subcategory of psalm is indicated. Because the probable verbal root of this noun suggests emotional excess, it might mean something such as "rhapsody," though that is not necessarily borne out by the body of the poem. The reference to Cush the Benjamanite here is equally enigmatic.

3. *Lest . . . they tear up.* The Hebrew at this point switches from plural enemies to a singular, a fluidity common in biblical idiom.

4. *if I have done this.* The two "if" clauses are a formula for making a vow, the sense being "I swear I have not done this."

7. *Rise up, O LORD in Your anger.* This psalm's treatment of the supplication gives special prominence to martial imagery. The enemy pursues and would tear its quarry to pieces; the leonine metaphor is common in ancient Near Eastern martial poetry. Now God is enjoined to rise up to a towering height in angry deployment against the battalions of enemies.

8. *A band of nations.* The language of this verse is obscure, and one suspects that the text is defective. It is unclear whether the band of nations consists of the assembled foes or God's terrestrial allies.

9. *that is in me.* The Hebrew *ʿalai* literally means "upon me" and does not sound idiomatic.

10. *May evil put an end to the wicked.* The Hebrew is rather crabbed, hence the meaning is in doubt. Another possible construction: "May the evil of the wicked come to an end."

conscience. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "kidneys." The kidneys were thought to be the seat of conscience.

11. *My shield—upon God.* The translation replicates the odd use of the preposition in the Hebrew.

13. *If a man repent not.* This and the next several verses spell out what is implied in the negative second half of the previous verse ("El utters doom"). Although Psalms repeatedly divides the world into the doomed wicked and the righteous who will flourish, it also allows for the possibility that those bent

on evil may turn back (the literal meaning of the verb rendered as “repent”) to the way of righteousness.

14. *He readies the tools of death.* Some interpreters understand all the lethal acts enumerated here to refer to the evildoers, but it seems more plausible to see them as images of the doom that God prepares for the wicked.

15. *spawns . . . / grows big . . . / gives birth.* In the midst of battle imagery, the actions of the wicked are likened to the birth process in order to stress the idea that there is a quasibiological causality in which evil acts, like seed quickening in the womb, will inevitably lead to disastrous consequences. The nature of these consequences is spelled out in the next verse, which moves antithetically from womb to pit. One detects a satiric intention in comparing the fierce evildoer to a parturient woman.

17. *His mischief comes down on his head, / on his pate his outrage descends.* In biblical idiom, it is often *blood* that comes down on the head of the person who has shed blood. This biblical metonymy for murder is thus a hidden echo in this line, as we move from “mischief” (*ʿamal*) in the first verset to a term more directly associated with violence, *ḥamas*, “outrage,” in the second verset.

18. *I acclaim . . . / let me hymn.* This concluding formula actually belongs to the psalm of thanksgiving (*todah*, a noun cognate with the verb translated here as “acclaim”). Such crossovers of genre are fairly common in Psalms. The poem began with a supplication for help from a man pursued by murderous enemies. Now, having conjured up a whole series of images of how the wicked will come to a terrible end through their own nefarious plots, the speaker can conclude by celebrating God in thanks.

PSALM 8

[1]For the lead player, on the *gittith*, a David psalm.
[2]LORD, our Master,
how majestic Your name in all the earth!
Whose splendor was told over the heavens.
[3]From the mouth of babes and sucklings
You founded strength
on account of Your foes
to put an end to enemy and avenger.
[4]When I see Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
the moon and the stars You fixed firm,
[5]"What is man that You should note him,
and the human creature, that You pay him heed,
[6]and You make him little less than the gods,
with glory and grandeur You crown him?
[7]You make him rule over the work of Your hands.
All things You set under his feet.
[8]Sheep and oxen all together,
and also the beasts of the field,
[9]birds of the heavens and fish of the sea,

what moves on the paths of the seas.”
[10]LORD, our Master,
how majestic Your name in all the earth!

PSALM 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the* gittith. This is another musical instrument that has eluded persuasive identification.

2. *Master / . . . majestic.* The alliteration seeks to mirror the strong alliterative effect between the two Hebrew words *ʾadonenu* and *ʾadir*.

was told. The Masoretic Text has *tenah*, which appears to be an imperative of the verb “to give,” and does not make much sense in context. I have revocalized it as *tunah*, yielding “was told.” The beauty of the night sky, which the psalmist contemplates in verse 4, speaks out God’s glory wordlessly.

3. *From the mouth of babes and sucklings.* The meaning of this phrase, however proverbial it has become, has not been satisfactorily explained. One distant possibility: God draws strength from consciously aware humankind, made in His image, even from its weakest and youngest members, against the inhuman forces of chaos. Perhaps the innocence of infants is imagined as a source of strength.

to put an end to enemy and avenger. Because this is a psalm celebrating creation, there is plausibility in the identification proposed by some scholars between this implacable foe and the primordial sea monster, who, in Canaanite myth, must be subdued by the god of order so that the world can come into stable being. Imagery taken from that cosmogonic battle between gods is borrowed by a good many psalms.

4. *the work of Your fingers.* The “work of Your hands,” as in verse 7, is a common idiom, but this variation of it is unique, probably meant to suggest the delicate tracery of the starry skies.

5. *What is man.* At the exact center of the poem, we find a poetic parallelism not based on any semantic development or focusing from verset to verset (as, for example, in the immediately preceding line) but rather on balanced synonymity, producing a stately emphasis through the equivalence between the two halves of the line.

6. *the gods.* The ambiguous Hebrew *ʾelohim*, which could refer to gods or celestial beings but probably not in this context to the single deity, sets humankind in a hierarchical ladder: God at the very top, the gods or celestial beings below Him, then man, and below man the whole kingdom of other living creatures.

with glory and grandeur You crown him. All these terms appropriate to royalty establish the image of man ruling over nature, with all things "under his feet," a common ancient Near Eastern image of subjugation.

8–9. *Sheep and oxen / . . . birds of the heavens and fish of the sea.* The language of this compact but embracing catalogue is a deliberate recasting in somewhat different words of the first Creation story (even "fish of the sea" is a slight variation on *degat hayam* in Genesis 1, the phrase used here being *degey hayam*), but the audience of the poem is surely meant to hear in all this a beautiful poetic reprise of Genesis 1. The eye moves downward vertically in the poem from the heavens to the divine beings who are God's entourage to man's feet and, below those, to the beasts of the field and then to what swims through the sea (which no longer harbors a primordial sea beast). The last term in the catalogue is a neat poetic kenning for sea creatures, "what moves on the paths of the seas."

10. *LORD, our Master, / how majestic Your name in all the earth.* Although biblical literature, in poetry and prose, exhibits considerable fondness for envelope structures, in which the end somehow echoes the beginning, this verbatim repetition of the first line as the last, common in other poetic traditions, is unusual. It closes a perfect circle that celebrates the harmony of God's creation. The "all" component of "all the earth," which at first might have seemed like part of a formulaic phrase, takes on cumulative force at the very end of the poem. God's majesty is manifest in all things, and the creature fashioned in His image has been given dominion over all things. The integrated harmony of the created world as the poet perceives it and the integrated harmony of the poem make a perfect match.

PSALM 9

[1]For the lead player, ʿ*almut laben*, a David psalm.
[2]I acclaim the LORD with all my heart,א
let me tell of all His wonders.
[3]Let me rejoice and be glad in You,
let me hymn Your name, Most High,
[4]when my enemies turn back,ב
when they stumble and perish before You.
[5]For You upheld my justice, my right,
You sat on the throne of the righteous judge.
[6]You rebuked the nations, destroyed the wicked,ג
their name You wiped out forever.
[7]The enemy—ruins that are gone for all time,ד
and the towns you smashed, their name is lost.
[8]But the LORD is forever enthroned,
makes His throne for justice unshaken.
[9]And He judges the world in righteousness,
lays down law to the nations in truth.
[10]Let the LORD be a fortress for the downcast,ו
a fortress in times of distress.
[11]And those who know Your name will trust You,

for You forsook not Your seekers, O LORD.
12 Hymn to the LORD Who dwells in Zion,ז
tell among the peoples His deeds.
13 For the Requiter of blood recalled them,
He forgot not the cry of the lowly.
14 Grant me grace, O LORD,ח
see my torment by my foes,
You Who raise me from the gates of death.
15 So that I may tell all Your praise
in the gates of the Daughter of Zion.
Let me exult in Your rescue.
16 The nations sank down in the trap that they made,ט
in the snare that they made their foot was
caught.
17 The LORD is known for the justice He did.
By his own handiwork was the wicked ensnared.
higayon
selah
18 The wicked will turn back to Sheol,י
All the nations forgetful of God.
19 For not forever will the poor man be forgotten,כ
the hope of the lowly not lost forever.
20 Arise, O LORD, let not man flaunt his strength,
let nations be judged in Your presence.
21 O LORD, put fear upon them,
let the nations know they are mortal.

selah

PSALM 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

This psalm and the next one are a striking testimony to the scrambling in textual transmission that, unfortunately, a good many of the psalms have suffered. The Septuagint presents Psalms 9 and 10 as a single psalm, and there is formal evidence for the fact that it was originally one poem. Psalm 9 in the Hebrew begins as an alphabetic acrostic: verses 2 and 3, *aleph* (four times); verse 4, *bet*; verse 6, *gimmel* (*dalet*, the next letter, is missing); verse 7, *heh*; verses 8–11, *waw*; verse 12, *zayin*; verse 14, *ḥet*; verse 16, *tet*; verse 18, *yod*; verse 19, *kaf*. It is notable that some lines of poetry have been interspersed between the acrostic lines, unlike other acrostic psalms in which the sequential letters of the alphabet occur in consecutive lines. Then Psalm 10 begins with the next letter of the alphabet, *lamed*, after which the acrostic disappears, to surface near the end of the psalm with the last six letters of the alphabet—verse 7, *peh*; verse 8, *ayin*; verse 12, *qof*; verse 14, *resh*; verse 15, *shin*; and verse 17, *taw*. Now, what accompanies this confusion is a whole series of points, especially in the second half of the psalm, at which the text is not intelligible and is in all likelihood defective. Something along the following lines seems to have happened to our psalm: at some early moment in the long history of its transmission, a single authoritative copy was damaged (by decay, moisture, fire, or whatever). Lines of verse may have been patched into the text from other sources in an attempt to fill in lacunae. Quite a few phrases or lines were simply transcribed in their mangled form or perhaps poorly reconstructed. When the chapter divisions of the Bible were introduced in the late Middle Ages, the editors, struggling with this imperfect text, no longer realized that it was an acrostic and broke it into two separate psalms. The result of this whole process, alas, is that we are left with a rather imperfect notion of what some of the text means.

1. *ʿalmut laben.* This is another opaque musical term. The second word seems to say “to the son,” but it may be a reversal of letters, *n-b-l*, for *nevel*, a kind of lyre.

2. *I acclaim the* LORD. The initial verb, *ʾodeh*, announces the status of the poem as a thanksgiving psalm (*todah*, the cognate noun)—in this case because God has caused the speaker to triumph over his enemies.

7. *The enemy—ruins that are gone for all time.* The syntax here seems confused, and "ruins that are gone" (or "ended") is odd as an idiom. This entire verset looks textually suspect.

15. *So that I may tell all Your praise / in the gates of the Daughter of Zion.* The poet develops here a familiar idea in Psalms: Those who descend to the underworld (verse 14) cannot tell God's praise, so after God has raised the speaker from the gates of death—presumably because enemies were threatening to destroy him—he is able to stand in the gates of Jerusalem and publicly celebrate God's greatness. The gates of the city were a place of assembly and, especially relevant to the imagery of God as judge in this poem, a place where justice was conducted. The personification of Jerusalem as Daughter of Zion is common in the Prophets.

17. *The* LORD *is known for the justice He did.* The translation assumes an ellipsis in the Hebrew. The literal sense of the four Hebrew words in sequence here is: "The LORD is known justice He did."

18. *The wicked will turn back to Sheol.* This stands in contrast to the fate of the speaker, who has been raised from the gates of death. The form of the Hebrew *l^{e}she^{ʾ}ola* is anomalous, because it incorporates both the preposition "to" at the beginning and the directional suffix that means "to" at the end.

19. *the hope of the lowly not lost forever.* The Hebrew seems to say "will be lost forever," but this may not be a scribal omission because the "not forever" of the first verset could be doing double duty for the second verset as well.

PSALM 10

[1]Why do You stand far off, O LORD,ל
turn away in times of distress?
[2]In the wicked man's pride he pursues the poor,
but is caught in the schemes he devised.
[3]For the wicked did vaunt in his very lust,
grasping for gain—cursed, blasphemed the LORD.
[4]The wicked sought not in his towering wrath—
"There is no God" is all his schemes.
[5]His ways are uncertain in every hour,
Your judgments are high up above him.
All his foes he enflames.
[6]He said in his heart, "I will not stumble,
for all time I will not come to harm."
[7]His mouth is full of oaths,פ
beneath his tongue are guile and deceit,
mischief and misdeed.
[8]He waits in ambush in a sheltered place,
from a covert he kills the blameless,
for the wretched his eyes look out.ע

[9]He lies in wait in a covert like a lion in his lair,
lies in wait to snatch up the poor,
snatch the poor as he pulls with his net.
[10]The lowly bow down,
and the wretched fall into his traps.
[11]He said in his heart, “God has forgotten,
has hidden His face, never more to see.”
[12]Rise, O LORD, raise Your hand,ק
forget not the lowly.
[13]Why has the wicked despised God,
has said in his heart, “You shall not seek out”?
[14]For You have seen mischiefר
and have looked on vexation.
The wretched leaves his fate in Your hands.
It is You Who help the orphan.
[15]Break the arm of the wicked,ש
and seek out evil,
let wickedness not be found.
[16]The LORD is king for all time,
nations are lost from His land.
[17]The desire of the poor You have heard, O LORD,ת
You make their heart firm, Your ear listens.
[18]To do justice for the orphan and the wretched,
and let none still oppress man in the land.

PSALM 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Why do You stand far off, O LORD?* This note of distress does not match the mood of thanksgiving of the first half of the psalm. It is possible that material from other sources was spliced into the text at this point.

2. *he devised.* The Hebrew here switches from singular to plural. The scheming of the wicked against the vulnerable poor reflects a recurrent theme in Psalms of a plea for social justice.

3. *the wicked did vaunt . . . / grasping for gain—cursed, blasphemed the LORD.* The translation seeks to rescue some meaning from the received text, but the whole verse as it stands is not very intelligible.

4. *The wicked sought not in his towering wrath.* Syntax and idiom are confusing. The text that has come down to us again looks suspect.

5. *His ways are uncertain.* The textual difficulties continue through this patch of the poem. The meaning of the verb *yaḥilu* (rendered as "are uncertain") is uncertain. "Your judgments are high up above him" is literally "Height Your judgments before him." The meaning of the verb *yafiaḥ* ("enflames") is no more than an educated guess, and it could even be a noun, "witness."

6. *I will not come to harm.* The Hebrew (literally, "that is not in harm [or, evil]") is crabbed and unclear.

9. *as he pulls with his net.* At this point the poet abandons the lion simile and represents the evildoer as a human schemer lying in wait with a net to entangle his victim.

10. *The lowly.* Instead of the enigmatic *widkeh* (the *qeri*, the marginal notation of how to sound the word, here is *yidkeh*, "he will be low") of the Masoretic Text, this translation assumes the original reading was *nidkeh* or *w^{e}dakh*, either of which means "the lowly."

14. *The wretched leaves his fate in Your hands.* The Hebrew is far less smooth than this. A literal representation of the sequence of Hebrew words would be: "to give in Your hands upon You the wretched leaves." This could scarcely be the original form of the text.

17. *The desire of the poor.* The conclusion of the psalm, formally signaled by the initial letter *taw*, the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, returns to the thanksgiving theme that was sounded at the beginning and thus appears to be part of the original poem.

18. *let none still oppress man in the land.* The very last words of the psalm once more are not entirely transparent in the Hebrew. The concluding phrase in the Hebrew is literally “from the land,” which seems better suited to a verb such as “wipe out” or “drive out” than “oppress,” but the Hebrew verb used means rather “to oppress” or “to terrorize.”

PSALM 11

[1]For the lead player, for David.
In the LORD I sheltered.
How could you say to me,
"Off to the hills like a bird!
[2]For, look, the wicked bend back the bow,
they fix to the string their arrow
to shoot from the gloom at the upright.
[3]The foundations destroyed,
what can a righteous man do?"
[4]The LORD in His holy palace,
The LORD in the heavens His throne—
His eyes behold,
His look probes the sons of man.
[5]The LORD probes the righteous and wicked,
and the lover of havoc He utterly hates.
[6]He rains fiery coals on the wicked,
sulfur and gale winds their lot.
[7]For righteous the LORD is,
righteous acts He does love.
The upright behold His face.

PSALM 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *How could you say to me.* Unusually, this psalm begins with a triadic verset, and one in which the three parts are linked by sequentiality rather than semantic parallelism. The speaker of this personal psalm at the outset announces that he trusts in God's sheltering protection. Thus he has no need to flee to the hills like a bird, as his friends have enjoined him.

Off to the hills like a bird. The literal sense is: wander [to] your hill [or mountain], bird. The translation follows the Septuagint, which reads *har kemo tsipor* instead of the Masoretic *harkhem tsipor* ("your hill, bird").

2. *the wicked bend back the bow.* The archery imagery picks up the image of the fleeing bird of the previous line: the bowmen aim at the bird in flight. Here and elsewhere in this psalm the poet favors archaic-poetic grammatical forms: *yidrekhun* instead of the standard *yidrekhu* for "bend back," and *b^{e}mo* instead of the standard *b^{e}* for "from" (or "in").

the upright. Literally, "the straight of heart."

3. *what can a righteous man do?* It makes sense to view everything from "Off to the hills . . ." (verse 1) through to the end of this verse as the words of the fearful and despairing friends of the speaker. With the vicious and destructive enemies prevailing, they say, there is no recourse for the helpless righteous person except flight.

4. *The LORD in His holy palace.* These words mark the turning point of the poem. The terrestrial landscape may be littered with the depredations of the wicked, who imagine they will continue to have the upper hand, but above it all God looks down, sorting out the evil from the good and preparing retribution for those who deserve it. Given this context, and given the parallelism with the second verset, "His holy palace" here must refer to God's celestial abode and not to the Temple in Jerusalem.

look. The literal meaning is "eyelids," a parallel term to "eyes" in the first verset, but in English one cannot see with the eyelids.

5. *He utterly hates.* The adverb "utterly" is added to pick up the intensive equivalent of the first-person pronoun in *nafsho* (literally, "His life" or "His essential being").

6. *He rains fiery coals on the wicked.* This whole line, of course, alludes to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, which figures as a canonical demonstration of God's determination to administer justice and not allow evil to go unpunished. *Paḥim*, the word rendered as "coals," everywhere else means "traps" or "pitfalls," but this translation assumes, following one ancient Greek version, that the original reading was *peḥamey*, which in fact means "coals [of]." The Masoretic Text puts a syntactic pause at "coals," then has "fire and sulfur." This makes the second verset inordinately long. It is much more likely that a scribe reversed the *mem* and *yod* of *peḥamey* ("coals of," which is then attached to *ʾesh* "fire"), yielding *paḥim*.

gale winds. The Hebrew *ruah zilʿafot* is literally "raging wind," the second term being a derivative form from *zaʿaf*, "rage."

their lot. Literally, "the portion of their cup."

7. *The upright behold His face.* With the wicked disposed of in the previous verse, the psalm ends on this positive note of the upright beholding God—even as God from the heavens beholds all humankind. In the Hebrew, the noun is singular and the verb is plural; presumably one of the two (probably the verb) should be adjusted. The Masoretic Text reads "their face," with no obvious antecedent for the plural, but variant Hebrew versions have "His face."

PSALM 12

[1]To the lead player, on the eight-stringed lyre, a David psalm.

[2]Rescue, O LORD! For the faithful is gone,
for vanished is trust from the sons of man.
[3]Falsehood every man speaks to his fellow,
smooth talk, with two hearts they speak.
[4]The LORD will cut off all smooth-talking lips,
the tongue that speaks of big things,
[5]those who said, “Let us make our tongue great,
our own lips are with us—who is master to us?”
[6]“From the plunder of the poor, from the wretched men’s groans,
now will I rise,” says the LORD.
[7]“I will set up for rescue a witness for him.”
The LORD’s sayings—pure sayings,
silver tried in a kiln in the earth
refined sevenfold.
[8]You, LORD, will guard him,
will keep him from this age for all time.
[9]All around go the wicked,

they have dug deep pits for the sons of men.

PSALM 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Rescue, O LORD! For the faithful is gone.* Although this psalm falls into the general category of supplication, it reflects a subgenre in which the speaker scans his society in a harsh light of moral castigation. Poetry is thus marshaled for a purpose similar to that of the literary prophets, and one might describe such a poem as a Prophetic supplication.

for vanished is trust from the sons of man. To the despairing speaker, it looks as though all humankind has turned treacherous. The noun *ʾemunim* is an abstraction and hence refers to the quality, not the people, as many translations have it.

3. *with two hearts they speak.* This vivid image for duplicity is especially effective, because it opposes the organ of speech ("smooth talk" is literally "lips of smooth things") to the organ of intention and understanding, which is itself divided.

4. *The LORD will cut off all smooth-talking lips.* Although "cut off" is a standard verb for "destroy," it has a violent concreteness here because one gets an image of lips being cut off or cut away.

5. *Let us make our tongue great.* The idea is to make speech a weapon (the root of the verb used, *g-b-r*, suggests "warrior" and "warfare"). Some take this to mean, "Let us become great by our tongue," but that would require the preposition *b*^{e} ("in," "through," or "by"), whereas the preposition used here is *l*^{e} ("to," or "for" but also sometimes the prefix of a direct object). Or the letter *lamed* here might be a mistaken scribal duplication of the *lamed* that immediately follows it.

our own lips are with us—who is master to us? These clauses continue the idea that language serves as a weapon or rather an army for the wicked.

6. *From the plunder of the poor.* God's speech signals the turning point of the poem, when the exploiters of lying language will at last be confounded.

7. *I will set up for rescue a witness for him.* This verset has been variously construed, or misconstrued. It might make sense to understand the difficult term *yafiaḥ* not as a verb but as a noun, "witness," at least conjecturally. That particular meaning is a plausible one in light of what has preceded: the persecuted man has been surrounded by an army of liars, but now God will provide someone to bear true witness for him and thus rescue him from his plight.

kiln. The term *ʿalil* appears only here, and the understanding of it as "kiln" goes back to the Aramaic translation of Onkelos in Late Antiquity. The meaning, however, is not certain; it should be said that the rabbis construed it as an adverb, "clearly." In any case, there is a pointed contrast between the LORD's sayings, pure as refined silver, and the lying words of cheating men.

8. *guard him / . . . keep him.* The Hebrew uses first a plural, then a singular object of the verb.

9. *All around go the wicked.* This whole line, which reverts to the triumphalist wicked, looks tacked on, because the declaration of God's guarding the just in the previous line is a characteristic upbeat psalm ending. The dubiety of the line is reinforced by the first two words of the second verset, *kerum zulot*, which make no evident sense and can be understood only through an exegetical somersault (for example, the New Jewish Publication Society, "when baseness is exalted"). Some emendation seems necessary, and the present translation, conjecturally, presupposes that the final *mem* of *kerum* should be moved forward to begin the next word, thus yielding an intelligible *karu*, "dug," a verb often associated in Psalms with the wicked. The object of the verb might then be *metsulot*, "depths," or perhaps *metsudot*, "traps," although if such a word once stood here, it has been lost in scribal transmission.

PSALM 13

[1]To the lead player, a David psalm.
[2]How long, O LORD, will You forget me always?
How long hide Your face from me?
[3]How long shall I cast about for counsel,
sorrow in my heart all day?
How long will my enemy loom over me?
[4]Regard, answer me, LORD, my God.
Light up my eyes, lest I sleep death,
[5]lest my enemy say, “I’ve prevailed over him,”
lest my foes exult when I stumble.
[6]But I in Your kindness do trust,
my heart exults in Your rescue.
Let me sing to the LORD,
for He requited me.

PSALM 13 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *How long, O LORD, will You forget me always?* The cry of desperation —“How long?”—from a person whose anguish seems protracted indefinitely

is a recurrent feature of the psalms of supplication. The apparent logical contradiction between "how long" and "always" actually makes psychological sense: from the speaker's tormented perspective, it feels as though God is forgetting him forever.

4. *Light up my eyes, lest I sleep death.* The antithesis between light for the eyes and the implied darkness of death is striking, and the poet uses a jolting elliptical form, "lest I sleep death" (not "the sleep of death") that is worth preserving in translation.

5. *lest my enemy say.* As elsewhere in the supplications, the pain of imagined death is made more bitter by the imagined schadenfreude of the enemy, who will delight in this death.

6. *But I in Your kindness do trust.* This affirmation of faith in God's readiness to stand by the supplicant and rescue him from his distress is a turning point in mood, and perhaps even in genre, in this short poem. The speaker, no longer fearing that God will forget him forever, is suddenly sustained by a sense of trust in God, and he conjures up God's intervention on his behalf almost as though it were an accomplished fact. In this way, the poem that began as desperate supplication concludes on a note of celebration, in the manner of a thanksgiving psalm, "Let me sing to the LORD, / for He requited me." The fluidity of genres of many of the psalms is an expression of their psychological dynamism—they express not one static attitude but an inner evolution or oscillation of attitudes. Perhaps the prayer itself served as a vehicle of transformation from acute distress to trust.

PSALM 14

[1]For the lead player, for David.
The scoundrel has said in his heart,
“There is no God.”
They corrupt, they make loathsome their acts.
There is none who does good.
[2]The LORD from the heavens looked down
on the sons of humankind
to see, is there someone discerning,
someone seeking out God.
[3]All turn astray,
altogether befouled.
There is none who does good.
There is not even one.
[4]Do they not know,
all wrongdoers?
Devourers of my people devoured them like bread.
They did not call the LORD.
[5]There did they sorely fear,
for God is with the righteous band.
[6]In your plot against the poor you are shamed,

for the LORD is his shelter.
[7]Oh, may from Zion come Israel's rescue
when the LORD restores His people's fortunes.
May Jacob exult,
May Israel rejoice.

PSALM 14 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The scoundrel has said in his heart, / "There is no God."* The thrust of this line is more moral than theological. The concern is not a philosophical question of God's existence but the scoundrel's lack of conscience, his feeling that he can act with impunity, because he thinks he need not fear divine retribution. This psalm, then, is a "prophetic" psalm, lacking any element of supplication because the speaker who denounces the society he observes does not put himself forth as victim.

2. *The LORD from the heavens looked down / on the sons of humankind / to see.* These three versets are remarkable for involving enjambments from verset to verset (a rare maneuver) and avoiding semantic parallelism, which appears only at the end ("discerning, / . . . seeking out"). Thus, the eye is drawn downward in a miniature narrative sequence, following the divine gaze, from the heavens to the human sphere. The illusion of the scoundrel that there is no God examining human actions is here spectacularly refuted.

3. *There is none who does good. / There is not even one.* The sentence repeated from verse 1 is less a refrain than a dumbfounded pronouncement by the dismayed speaker, who cannot find a single good person—"There is not even one." The brevity of the versets here (two beats, four syllables in each in the Hebrew), as well as elsewhere in the poem, should be noted. In the face of such dismaying, pervasive corruption, the speaker is moved to register a response in stark, brief statements, without ornamentation.

4. *devoured them like bread.* The words “them like” do not appear in the Hebrew and are added for clarity.

5. *sorely fear.* The Hebrew is literally “feared a fear.”

6. *In your plot against the poor you are shamed.* The Hebrew is crabbed because a necessary preposition seems to be missing, so the translation is somewhat conjectural.

7. *Oh, may from Zion come Israel’s rescue.* Although “my people” has been mentioned in the poem, it was chiefly an indication of the populace that is subjected to the depredations of the wicked. The national perspective, then, with the reference to some sort of restoration—perhaps after defeat or exile—of the nation, a restoration that will emerge from its capital, looks like a formulaic tag, of the sort that sometimes ends the psalms of Zion, which has been added here editorially as a conclusion.

PSALM 15

[1]A David psalm.
LORD, who will sojourn in Your tent,
who will dwell on Your holy mountain?
[2]He who walks blameless
and does justice
and speaks the truth in his heart.
[3]Who slanders not with his tongue
nor does to his fellow man evil
nor bears reproach for his kin.
[4]The debased in his eyes is repugnant
but to LORD-fearers he accords honor.
When he vows to his fellow man,
he does not revoke it.
[5]His money he does not give at interest
and no bribe for the innocent takes.
He who does these
will never stumble.

PSALM 15 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *LORD, who will sojourn in Your tent, / who will dwell on Your holy mountain?* The reference, of course, is to Mount Zion, but this line need not be understood literally, as some scholars propose, as a kind of entrance quiz for people coming into the Temple—that is, a set of questions posed by priests or Levites to the arriving pilgrims. Those who deserve to be in God's special place are the people who exhibit the moral virtues that the psalm will enumerate. Although the two versets in fact refer synonymously to the same place, there is a progression in the language. The first verset uses a verb of temporary residence, *gur*, "sojourn," appropriately paired with "tent," originally the characteristic form of nomadic habitation, whereas the second verset uses "dwell" (*sh-k-n*), and by mentioning God's holy mountain invokes the solid structure of the Temple.

2. *He who walks blameless.* The answer to the opening question is a catalogue of moral attributes. It is noteworthy that these are presented as an objective list of items without figurative elaboration; there is not a single metaphor in the poem. The enumerated virtuous acts all pertain to a person's moral obligations to others. Neither cult nor covenant is involved.

3. *Who slanders not with his tongue.* This verset is absent in the text of Psalms discovered at Qumran. But the previous line is a stately triad; thus, there is poetic logic in this line's being triadic as well.

nor bears reproach for his kin. The translation reproduces the cryptic formulation of the Hebrew. The meaning might be: When his kin behave badly, he does not pass over the misdeed in silence because of the kinship.

4. *When he vows to his fellow man, / he does not revoke it.* The Masoretic Text here is problematic. It appears to read: "he vows to do evil / and will not revoke it," which is hardly an attribute one would attach to the moral person. But three ancient translations—the Septuagint, the Syriac, and the Peshitta—read here instead of *lehara'*, "to do evil," *lere'eihu*, "to his fellow man," which merely reverses the order of the consonants. It is the sort of error a scribe could have easily made.

5. *no bribe for the innocent takes.* The evident meaning is that he takes no bribe to declare the innocent guilty.

He who does these / will never stumble. This brief line succinctly—indeed, almost abruptly—summarizes the happy fate of the person who follows the moral path traced by the poem.

PSALM 16

[1]A David *michtam*.
Guard me, O God,
for I shelter in You.
[2]I said to the LORD,
"My Master You are.
My good is only through You."
[3]As to holy ones in the land
and the mighty who were all my desire,
[4]let their sorrows abound—
another did they betroth.
I will not pour their libations of blood,
I will not bear their names on my lips.
[5]The LORD is my portion and lot,
it is You Who sustain my fate.
[6]An inheritance fell to me with delight,
my estate, too, is lovely to me.
[7]I shall bless the LORD Who gave me counsel
through the nights that my conscience would lash me.
[8]I set the LORD always before me,

on my right hand, that I not stumble.
[9]So my heart rejoices and my pulse beats with joy,
my whole body abides secure.
[10]For You will not forsake my life to Sheol,
You won't let Your faithful one see the Pit.
[11]Make me know the path of life.
Joys overflow in Your presence,
delights in Your right hand forever.

PSALM 16 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *David* michtam. What sort of composition is indicated by this term remains uncertain. The Septuagint translators thought it was an inscription incised in stone.

Guard me, O God, / for I shelter in You. The subject of this psalm, a confession of faith, is unusual. Some scholars, because of the apparent references to pagan worship in verses 3 and 4, have imagined that the poem is the self-dedication of a Canaanite convert to the worship of YHWH, but this is by no means a necessary inference, and it must be said that much of verses 3 and 4 is obscure. In any case, a native Israelite could easily have been immersed in pagan practices.

2. *is only through You.* The textual difficulties of this whole segment of the poem begin here, because the Hebrew *bal-ʿaleikha* is unclear.

3. *holy ones . . . / mighty.* Any translation here is guesswork. These terms might refer to local deities, as many interpreters have supposed, or they might indicate Canaanite (?) potentates who were idol worshippers.

who were all my desire. The "were" is an interpretive addition, on the assumption that the speaker at a point in the past had attachments to paganism. But the phrase in context is enigmatic.

4. *let their sorrows abound.* Again, the translation is conjectural.

another did they betroth. The translation assumes, with other interpreters, that "another" refers to another god and that the verb *maharu* means to espouse or betroth, but neither reading is certain.

I will not pour their libations of blood. At last, the text becomes transparent. This is a clear affirmation that the speaker will distance himself from pagan rites.

6. *inheritance . . . / estate.* Given the emphasis of the previous verse on the LORD as the speaker's portion and lot, the inheritance he now celebrates is probably not a reference to real estate but to his being happy in his sense of sustaining connection (see the next verse) with the God of Israel.

7. *conscience.* The Hebrew says "kidneys," thought to be the seat of conscience. It is not clear how peoples of the ancient Near East arrived at the ascription of sundry functions to the various internal organs.

8. *my pulse beats with joy.* The Masoretic Text has *kevodi*, "my glory," but some manuscripts show *keveidi*, "my liver." Elsewhere I have translated this word as "heart," but that inner organ already appears in the immediately preceding phrase, and to keep the strong somatic imagery of the line, the translation here substitutes "pulse," yielding the sequence heartpulse-body. Though the prevalent meaning of *basar* is "flesh," it does appear frequently in Leviticus in the sense of "body."

11. *Joys overflow in Your presence.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "a satiety of joys in Your presence."

PSALM 17

[1]A David prayer.
Hear, O LORD, a just thing.
Listen well to my song.
Hearken to my guileless prayer.
[2]From before You my judgment will come,
Your eyes behold rightness.
[3]You have probed my heart, come upon me by night,
You have tried me, and found no wrong in me.
I barred my mouth to let nothing pass.
[4]As for human acts—by the word of Your lips!
I have kept from the tracks of the brute.
[5]Set firm my steps on Your pathways,
so my feet will not stumble.
[6]I called You, for You will answer me, God.
Incline Your ear, O hear my utterance.
[7]Make Your mercies abound, O rescuer of those who shelter
from foes at Your right hand.
[8]Guard me like the apple of the eye,

in the shadow of Your wings conceal me
[9]from the wicked who have despoiled me, my
deadly enemies drawn round me.
[10]Their fat has covered their heart.
With their dewlaps they speak haughty words.
[11]My steps now they hem in,
their eyes they cast over the land.
[12]He is like a lion longing for prey,
like the king of beasts lying in wait.
[13]Rise, LORD, head him off, bring him down,
save my life from the wicked with Your sword,
[14]from men, by Your hand, from men,
from those fleeting of portion in life.
And Your protected ones—fill their bellies,
let their sons be sated,
and let them leave what is left for their young.
[15]As for me, in justice I behold Your face,
I take my fill, wide awake, of Your image.

PSALM 17 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *A David prayer.* This is one of several times in Psalms in which *tefilah*, "prayer," is used instead of the anticipated *mizmor*, "psalm." The generic distinction is not clear because this poem is essentially a psalm of supplication. The speaker is beset by enemies who threaten to destroy him as he entreats God to confound his foes and rescue him. Perhaps the note of

inwardness in the first part of the poem, in which the speaker proclaims the integrity of his prayer (*tefilah* is the term he uses), and his having met the challenge of God's probing are what qualify this text as prayer.

my guileless prayer. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "my prayer without lips of deceit."

3. *come upon me by night.* This succinct phrase suggests some sort of nocturnal inner wrestling, a dark night of the soul.

found no wrong in me. "Wrong" is merely implied in an ellipsis.

I barred my mouth. The Hebrew verb is the one used for a muzzle. The speaker has not only stood God's inward testing but refused to allow any word of doubt or bad faith to pass the barrier of his lips.

4. *As for human acts—by the word of Your lips!* The meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain. Perhaps the idea is that whereas the speaker seals his lips, God's words determine human events or guide humankind.

6. *Incline Your ear, O hear.* These verbs pick up the imperative verbs of listening from the beginning of the poem.

7. *Make Your mercies abound.* The translation follows the Masoretic Text. A small emendation of *ḥasadekha,* "Your mercies," to *ḥasidekha* would yield "set aside Your faithful ones."

10. *Their fat has covered their heart.* "Heart," if it is indeed the intended object, is only implied. The heart is the seat of understanding and feeling; fat over the heart (presumably, a token of the offensive prosperity of the wicked) insulates it from perception and feeling.

With their dewlaps. The Masoretic Text reads *pimo*, a grammatically archaic form meaning "their mouth." Because of the prominent fat image in the first verset, this translation emends that word to *pimatam* (or, in an undeclined form, simply *pimah*), a term that refers to folds of fat under the chin.

11. *My steps.* The Hebrew text says "our steps."

their eyes they cast over the land. The Hebrew is somewhat obscure. A very literal rendering would be: their eyes they set to incline in the land. Given the predatory nature of their activity, made explicit in the next verse, the most probable sense to extract from these words without emendation is that they look all about the land for objects of prey.

14. *from men, by Your hand, from men, / from those fleeting of portion in life.* This line employs the strategy of incremented repetition that is common in the oldest stratum of biblical poetry—as, for example, in the Song of Deborah. The idea of the line is to remind God that these bloody-minded enemies are mere mortals, and of a sort whose actions warrant that their fate of mortality be instantly fulfilled. The reference to God's hand is motivated by the fact that this hand wields a sword.

Your protected ones. Literally, "Your hidden ones"—that is, those concealed in the shadow of God's wings (verse 8).

fill their bellies. This reference at the end to food may suggest that the wicked, while fattening themselves, have been starving out the righteous in beleaguering them.

let them leave what is left for their young. This verset is either a kind of gloss on the two preceding verses or envisages a third generation: God's protected ones, their sons, the infants of the sons.

15. *As for me, in justice*. The appearance of the noun *tsedeq*, "justice," at the end of the poem makes a neat envelope structure, for the speaker began his prayer by asking God to hear "a just thing" (also *tsedeq*). The envelope structure is reinforced by the occurrence of "behold" here and in verse 2.

I take my fill, wide awake, of Your image. The speaker has just invoked full bellies nd sated sons, but now at the end it is God's image—not in a dream vision but in complete wakefulness—that sates him. The sensual concreteness of this concluding clause is so striking that it led Judah Halevi, the great medieval Hebrew poet, to adopt it for a homoerotic poem in which the speaker awakes and sees his beloved friend's face by his side.

PSALM 18

[1]For the lead player, for the LORD's servant, for
David, who spoke to the LORD the words of this
song on the day the LORD saved him from the
grasp of all his enemies and from the hand of
Saul.
[2]And he said:
I am impassioned of You, LORD, my strength!
[3]The LORD is my crag and my bastion,
and my deliverer, my God, my rock where I
shelter,
my shield and the horn of my rescue, my fortress.
[4]Praised I called the LORD
and from my enemies I was rescued.
[5]The cords of death wrapped round me,
and the torrents of perdition dismayed me.
[6]The cords of Sheol encircled me,
the traps of death sprung upon me.
[7]In my strait I called to the LORD,
to my God I cried out.
[8]He heard from His palace my voice,

and my outcry before Him came to His ears.
[9]The earth heaved and shuddered,
the mountains' foundations were shaken.
They heaved, for smoke rose from His nostrils,
and fire from His mouth consumed,
coals blazed up around Him.
[10]He tilted the heavens, came down, dense mist
beneath His feet.
[11]He mounted a cherub and flew,
and He soared on the wings of the wind.
[12]He set darkness His hiding place round Him,
His abode water-massing, the clouds of the
skies.
[13]From the brilliance before Him His clouds moved
ahead—
hail and fiery coals.
[14]The LORD thundered from on high.
Elyon sent forth His voice—
hail and fiery coals.
[15]He let loose His arrows, and scattered them,
lightning bolts shot, and He panicked them.
[16]The channels of water were exposed,
and the world's foundations laid bare
from the LORD's roaring,
from the blast of Your nostrils' breath.
[17]He reached from on high and took me,

pulled me out of the many waters.
[18]He saved me from my daunting enemy
and from my foes who were stronger than I.
[19]They came at me on my day of disaster,
but the LORD became my support
[20]and brought me out to a wide-open space,
set me free, for His pleasure I was.
[21]The LORD dealt with me by my merit,
for my cleanness of hands He requited me.
[22]For I kept the ways of the LORD
and did no evil before my God.
[23]For all His laws were before me.
From His statutes I did not swerve.
[24]And I was blameless before Him,
and I kept myself from crime.
[25]And the LORD requited me for my merit,
by my cleanness of hands in His eyes.
[26]With the faithful You deal faithfully,
with a blameless man, act without blame.
[27]With the pure one, You deal purely,
with the perverse man, deal in twists.
[28]For it is You Who rescues the lowly folk
and haughty eyes You bring low.
[29]For You light up my lamp, O LORD,
my God illumines my darkness.
[30]For through You I rush at a barrier,

through my God I can vault a wall.
31The God, His way is blameless,
the LORD's utterance unalloyed.
32For who is god except the LORD,
and who the Rock except our God?
33The God who girds me with might
and keeps my way blameless,
34makes my legs like a gazelle's,
and stands me on the heights,
35trains my hands for combat,
makes my arms bend a bow of bronze.
36You gave me Your shield of rescue, Your right
hand did sustain me,
and Your battle cry made me many.
37You lengthened my strides beneath me,
and my feet did not trip.
38I pursued my enemies, caught them,
turned not back till I wiped them out.
39I smashed them, they could not rise,
they fell beneath my feet.
40You girt me with might for combat.
You laid low my foes beneath me,
41and You made my enemies turn back before me,
my foes, I demolished them.
42They cried out—there was none to rescue,
to the LORD—He answered them not.

[43]I crushed them like dust in the wind,
like mud in the streets I ground them.
[44]You saved me from the strife of peoples,
You set me at nations' head,
a people I knew not served me.
[45]At the mere ear's report they obeyed me,
aliens cringed before me.
[46]Aliens did wither,
filed out from their forts.
[47]The LORD lives and blessed is my Rock,
exalted the God of my rescue.
[48]The God who grants vengeance to me
and crushes peoples beneath me,
[49]frees me from my enemies,
yes, from those against me You raise me,
from a man of violence You save me.
[50]Therefore I acclaim You among nations, O LORD,
and to Your name I would hymn,
[51]making great the rescues of His king,
keeping faith with His anointed,
for David and his seed forever.

PSALM 18 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *For the lead player, for the LORD's servant, for David*. The superscription of this psalm is extraordinarily long. Perhaps this reflects an editorial desire to fit this into the biography of David, from which in fact the entire psalm was borrowed. It is essentially the same poem as the one that appears as 2 Samuel 22. Still, there are many small differences between the two versions. Those that throw some light on the reading of our psalm are noted in the comments below. The textual evidence suggests that the version in 2 Samuel 22 is the older one: Certain unusual forms have been regularized or glossed here, and there are also signs of some errors in scribal copying. Because David is represented in his narrative as a poet, it is even conceivable, though in no way demonstrable and perhaps unlikely, that this particular psalm might have been composed by him.

2. *I am impassioned of You, LORD, my strength!* This clause lacks a parallel verset to make it a line of poetry, and it is absent from the text in 2 Samuel. The verb for "impassioned" (*raḥam* in the *qal* conjugation) is an Aramaic usage that appears only here in the Bible.

3. *The LORD is my crag and my bastion*. This is of course a victory poem, bristling with martial imagery. At the same time, it exhibits considerable overlap with the thanksgiving psalm: the experience of near death attested to by the speaker, the celebration of God's saving power, the occurrence of the verbs *hodah*, "acclaim," and *zamer*, "hymn," at the end.

8. *He heard from His palace*. The outcry of the beleaguered warrior ascends all the way to the highest heavens, thus launching a downward vertical movement that is followed through the narrative sweep of the next several verses.

9. *The earth heaved and shuddered*. The seismic imagery of this line begins a powerful anthropomorphic representation of God, drawing freely on pre-Israelite mythological poetry. The heaving of the earth functions as a kind of preliminary artillery barrage before God's direct assault on the speaker's enemies.

for smoke rose from His nostrils, / and fire from His mouth consumed, / coals blazed up around Him. God Himself is imagined as a kind of erupting volcano. In an intensifying narrative sequence through this triadic line, first we see the smoke from the nostrils, then consuming flame from the mouth, and God is altogether so incandescent that everything around him ignites.

10. *He tilted the heavens*. The heavens are imagined as a flat slab. God tilts them to begin His downward course, and our eye is thus led downward here to God's feet at the end of the line.

11. *He mounted a cherub and flew, / and He soared on the wings of the wind*. The cherub is a fierce winged beast, the charger ridden by the sky god in Canaanite mythology (not the dimpled darling of Renaissance painting). The verb "soar" here is one point where the text of Psalms seems better than that of 2 Samuel, which has "was seen"—a word that differs by one consonant (*resh* instead of the similar-looking *dalet*).

12. *water-massing*. The translation follows 2 Samuel 22, which has *ḥashrat-mayim*, as against *ḥeshkat-mayim* here ("darkness of water"). This appears to be an instance in which the copyist substituted a familiar term for a rare one that he may not have understood. The mistake would have been triggered by the graphic similarity between *resh* and *kaf*.

14. *Elyon*. This is the designation of a Canaanite deity ("the Most High") that has been co-opted by the monotheistic poet. It is preserved here in its Hebrew form in the translation to suggest the archaic effect of the original.

hail and fiery coals. This recurrence of the phrase used at the end of the previous verse looks suspiciously like an inadvertent scribal repetition. It is entirely absent from 2 Samuel 22.

16. *The channels of water were exposed*. 2 Samuel 22 has "The channels of the sea" (a difference of only one letter in the Hebrew), which makes stronger sense as an image of the sea dried up or driven back by God's fiery descent.

17. *pulled me out of the many waters*. Although it is enemies on the battlefield who threaten the speaker, the image of drowning in the depths of the sea recurs in thanksgiving psalms as a metaphoric representation of near death.

20. *brought me out to a wide-open space*. The "wide-open space," *merḥav*, is the antithesis to the "strait" (*tsar*, as in verse 7) in which the speaker felt trapped.

21. *The LORD dealt with me by my merit*. These words initiate a confession of virtue that continues for six verses. The explanation for God's spectacular intervention to rescue the speaker from his implacable and powerful enemies is that he has been careful to follow God's precepts.

35. *trains my hands for combat*. This follows the quickening and steadying of the legs in the previous line. The second verset here, in a nice focusing development, then shows the warrior's arms bending a bow of bronze.

36. *Your battle cry made me many*. The version here has *ʿanwatkha* ("Your humility"?), which does not make evident sense. The text in 2 Samuel has *ʿanotkha*; one of the meanings of *ʿanot* is a crying out. (The consonantal text is the same in both readings.) The likely sense is that the warrior's use of a battle cry, probably incorporating the name YHWH, terrified the enemy and made his own force seem many even if it may have been outnumbered. In sequence, then, God gives his protected warrior three formidable implements of war—a bow, a shield, and a battle cry incorporating the divine name.

41. *turn back before me*. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "gave to me [their] nape."

43. *I crushed them like dust in the wind*. The wind image is a little odd, and some manuscripts of this psalm read, as does 2 Samuel 22, "like dust of the earth."

44. *the strife of peoples, / . . . nations' head, / a people I knew not served me*. All this might conceivably fit David's creation of a mini-empire, but perhaps it is no more than formulaic language for military victory.

45. *aliens cringed before me*. The meaning of the Hebrew verb is somewhat conjectural.

46. *filed out from their forts*. Both the verb and the noun are in doubt, so the translation is an educated guess. The verb *ḥ-g-r* could mean "to come out" or "slip out," and the noun suggests something like "enclosure."

50. *Therefore I acclaim You . . . / and to Your name I would hymn*. Having completed the account of the glorious victory that God has granted him, the speaker now moves to a formal conclusion, in keeping with the convention of the thanksgiving psalm, announcing that he has here celebrated God's greatness.

51. *making great the rescues of His king*. The version in 2 Samuel has "tower of rescue" (*migdol yeshuʿot*) instead of *magdil yeshuʿot* here. The image of a tower is more striking, and it picks up the fortress metaphors of the beginning of the poem.

PSALM 19

[1]To the lead player. A David psalm.
[2]The heavens tell God's glory,
and His handiwork sky declares.
[3]Day to day breathes utterance
and night to night pronounces knowledge.
[4]There is no utterance and there are no words,
their voice is never heard.
[5]Through all the earth their voice goes out,
to the world's edge, their words.
For the sun He set up a tent in them—
[6]and he like a groom from his canopy comes,
exults like a warrior running his course.
[7]From the ends of the heavens his going out
and his circuit to their ends,
and nothing can hide from his heat.
[8]The LORD's teaching is perfect,
restoring to life.
The LORD's pact is steadfast,
it makes the fool wise.
[9]The LORD's precepts are upright,

delighting the heart.
The LORD's command unblemished,
giving light to the eyes.
[10]The LORD's fear is pure,
outlasting all time.
The LORD's judgments are truth,
all of them just.
[11]More desired than gold,
than abundant fine gold,
and sweeter than honey,
quintessence of bees.
[12]Your servant, too, takes care with them.
In keeping them—great reward.
[13]Unwitting sins who can grasp?
Of unknown actions clear me.
[14]From willful men preserve Your servant,
let them not rule over me.
Then shall I be blameless
and clear of great crime.
[15]Let my mouth's utterances be pleasing
and my heart's stirring before You,
LORD, my rock and redeemer.

PSALM 19 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *The heavens tell God's glory*. The locus of contemplation of the speaker in this poem resembles that of the speaker in Psalm 8: he contemplates the splendid design of the heavens overhead and sees in it a manifestation of God's beautiful work as creator. But the imagery and the movement of cosmic vision here immediately swerve in a very different direction from that of Psalm 8.

3. *Day to day . . . / night to night*. In the complementary parallelism of this line, we get a sense that the splendor of the creation is steadily manifested through the whole diurnal cycle, from the brilliance of sunlight to the lovely illumination of moon and stars. But as the poem proceeds, it focuses on the sun.

breathes. The literal, or at least etymological, sense of the Hebrew verb *yabiʿa* is to "well forth," though it is used a few times in the biblical corpus in the extended sense of "express," the meaning it bears in postbiblical Hebrew.

4. *There is no utterance and there are no words*. This seeming contradiction of verses 3 and 4 is, of course, only the underlining of a moving paradox. The heavens speak, but it is a wordless language, what the great twentieth-century Hebrew poet H. N. Bialik, in a poem akin to this one, would call "the language of images." Thus the psalmist can go on from this affirmation of speechlessness and silence to the declaration in the next verse of speech going out to the ends of the earth.

5. *For the sun He set up a tent in them*. The poet now proceeds to a grandly mythological image of the sun—residing in a celestial pavilion, emerging from it at dawn like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and then, in a switch of imagery, racing across the sky to the west like a warrior dashing across the battlefield. Some interpreters have viewed this section of the poem as a pagan hymn to a solar deity simply borrowed by the monotheistic poet from a poem written in Egypt by Judahites or Samaritans influenced by Egyptian religion. It makes better sense to view it as a monotheistic adaptation of mythological imagery. (The contemporary American scholar Nahum Sarna even suggests it may be a polemic against paganism.) Because the only plausible antecedent for the verb "set up" is God, the poet does seem to be saying that it is God who has ordained the circuit of the sun, and that the images in which we cast this daily celestial road of light—the bridegroom emerging from his canopy, the warrior racing on his way—are but poetic expressions of how the heavens tell God's glory day after day.

7. *and nothing can hide from his heat*. The Hebrew conceals a neat pun, for the word that means "heat," *ḥamah*, is also another name for the sun.

8. *The LORD's teaching is perfect*. With these words, the psalm switches gears, from a celebration of the splendor of the heavens to praise for the life-sustaining perfection of God's commandments. There has been some debate among scholars as to whether in fact Psalm 19 might be a splicing together of two unrelated poems belonging to different genres. Because cut and paste is a standard technique of literary composition in the Bible, one can say minimally that the redactor—or, perhaps, redactor-poet—saw the two parts of the poem as constituting a single whole. Sarna, pursuing the idea of a polemic response to pagan solar poetry, notes that the sun god, Shamash, is often associated with justice and truth or enlightenment. (In the Greek tradition, precisely this linkage appears in the figure of Apollo.) This poem, Sarna proposes, is a pointed transference of those attributes from the sun god to YHWH, the one God.

11. *More desired than gold, / . . . and sweeter than honey*. Until this point, the general quality of perfection of God's teaching and its restorative force have been stressed. But with the images of this verse, the divine precepts are represented as sensually luscious—an object of desire and a source of sweetness.

quintessence of bees. Both halves of this compound term for honey, *nofet* and *tsufim*, mean "honey." As elsewhere in biblical usage, when two synonyms are combined, as here, in a construct form ("*x* of *y*"), the semantic effect is to create a hyperintensification—the sweetest of imaginable honeys. The English equivalent offered here may sound like a turn of phrase one might encounter in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, but it offers a good semantic match for the Hebrew.

13. *Unwitting sins*. The speaker, having affirmed the supreme value of God's commandments, is impelled to confess that, even with the best of intentions, an imperfect human being can scarcely be sure of never having violated any of them. So he requests God's indulgence for any unwitting transgressions of the laws he holds dear.

15. *Let my mouth's utterances*. This verse forms an apt formal coda to the psalm, or at least to its second half, and has appropriately been adopted as the conclusion to the silent prayer recited three times daily in Jewish worship.

my heart's stirring. The root of the noun *higayon* suggests murmuring (the same verb prominently used in Psalm 1), but that English term is avoided here because of the unfortunate suggestion of cardiac irregularity.

PSALM 20

[1]To the lead player, a David psalm.
[2]May the LORD answer you on the day of distress,
the name of Jacob's God make you safe.
[3]May He send help to you from the sanctum,
and from Zion may He sustain you.
[4]May He recall all your grain offerings,
and your burnt offerings may He relish.
selah
[5]May He grant you what your heart would want,
and all your counsels may He fulfill.
[6]Let us sing gladly for Your rescue
and in our God's name our banner raise.
May the LORD fulfill all your desires.
[7]Now do I know
that the LORD has rescued His anointed.
He has answered him from His holy heavens
in the might of His right hand's rescue.
[8]They—the chariots, and they—the horses,
but we—the name of the LORD our God
invoke.

[9]They have tumbled and fallen
but we arose and took heart.
[10]O LORD, rescue the king.
May He answer us on the day we call.

PSALM 20 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *May the LORD answer you*. The "you" in the Hebrew here and throughout the poem is in the masculine singular. Verses 7 and 10 make clear that the person addressed is the king. In genre, then, this text is a royal psalm, the first in a series of such psalms in the canonical collection that are prayers for the welfare of the anointed king. The language of this particular royal psalm is repeated through many phases in a pagan hymn written on papyrus and composed in second-century B.C.E. Egypt in Aramaic. The pagan hymn may have borrowed from this one, or both may have drawn on an earlier Canaanite polytheistic poem.

the name of Jacob's God make you safe. This is the first of three references to "the name of God" in the poem. The usage may reflect a growing belief in the Late Biblical period that God's name in itself was an efficacious agent, and also a kind of intermediary, between the deity and Israel. The verb *s-g-b*, "make you safe," is cognate with *misgav*, "fortress"—etymologically, an elevated place.

3. *the sanctum / . . . Zion*. The theo-geographical logic is that Jerusalem is both the capital city, where the king and his government are headquartered, and the location of God's sanctuary.

4. *your burnt offerings may He relish*. The verb *yedashneh* is somewhat obscure. Perhaps it means "to regard as *dashen*, rich, ripe, full of nutrients." If so, this is a linguistic survival (not necessarily a theological one) of the pre-monotheistic idea that the gods took pleasurable nourishment from the sacrifices offered them.

5. *what your heart would want*. The literal sense is “according to your heart.”

6. *our banner raise*. The translation is an educated guess, assuming that the verb *nidgol* is cognate with the noun *degel*, “banner.”

May the LORD fulfill all your desires. This verset looks out of place because it does not belong with the exulting exhortation to sing out and raise banners, and it makes this the only triadic line in the poem. Perhaps it is an inadvertent scribal duplication of the second verset of verse 5, which it more or less repeats.

7. *Now do I know*. These words signal the turning point of the poem, when the speaker is flooded with certainty that God has in fact rescued the king from his straits.

in the might of His right hand’s rescue. The language strongly suggests that the “distress” of the king is a military threat.

8. *They—the chariots, and they—the horses*. The whole line is a neat instance of a strong periodic sentence in which the verb that gives everything meaning —“invoke”—is withheld until the very end. “They” are the enemies of the Israelite king, who foolishly “invoke” or depend on their chariots and horses, instruments of power that are no match for the name of the LORD.

10. *O LORD, rescue the king*. The Masoretic cantillation marks place a full stop at “rescue,” thus turning “king” into a vocative in apposition with “LORD.” This construction, however, produces an uncharacteristically unbalanced line (two beats in the first verset and four in the second). In keeping with all the indications in the poem that this is a royal psalm, it makes better sense to have “the king” here at the end as the direct object of the verb “rescue.” One should note that the psalm exhibits a neatly concise envelope structure, beginning “answer you on the day of distress” and here concluding with “answer us on the day we call.”

PSALM 21

[1]To the lead player, a David psalm.
[2]LORD, in Your strength the king rejoices,
and in Your rescue how much he exults!
[3]His heart's desire You gave to him,
and his lips' entreaty You did not withhold.
selah
[4]For You met him with blessings of bounty,
You set on his head a crown of pure gold.
[5]Life he asked You—You gave him,
length of days for time without end.
[6]Great is his glory through Your rescue.
Glory and grandeur You bestowed upon him.
[7]For You granted him blessings forever,
cheered him with joy in Your presence.
[8]For the king puts his trust in the LORD,
through Elyon's kindness he will not fail.
[9]Your hand will find out your enemies,
your right hand find out your foes.
[10]You will make them like a fiery kiln
in the hour of Your wrath.

The LORD will devour them in His anger,
and fire will consume them.
[11]Their fruit from the land You destroy
and their seed from among humankind.
[12]For evil they plotted against you,
devised schemes they could not fulfill.
[13]For you will make them turn back,
with your bowstring you aim at their face.
[14]Loom high, O LORD, in Your strength.
Let us sing, let us hymn Your might.

PSALM 21 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *in Your strength the king rejoices*. The poem announces itself at its very beginning as a royal psalm. There is no definite article in the Hebrew before "king," but biblical poetry fairly often elides the article. "Strength" (*ʿoz*) has a military sense in many psalms, as does the parallel term "rescue" (*yeshuʿah*), which implies something like extricating a person or an army from enemies who appeared to have the upper hand.

5. *length of days for time without end*. The formulation is intended as a hyperbole—what the king has been granted is not immortality but a long life. That life had run the danger of being cut off prematurely by the threatening enemies from whom God has rescued him.

6. *Great is his glory through Your rescue*. The king, beleaguered by powerful enemies, emerges victorious in battle through God's help. As a result, he suddenly grows in regal stature, now a figure of kingly glory and grandeur in his triumph.

8. *through Elyon's kindness he will not fail*. It is also possible to construe this clause to mean "through Elyon's kindness [or keeping faith] that will not fail."

9. *Your hand will find out your enemies*. Until this point, the second-person singular pronoun has been addressed to God, and the king has been referred to in the third person. From this point, it is the king who is addressed, although in verse 10 God is invoked in the third person as agent of destruction. All the verbs refer to future acts of routing the enemies, whereas in the first half of the poem the victory is invoked as a recently accomplished fact. Perhaps the poet means to say that the king, already empowered, will go on to future triumphs of this nature, even though the possibility suggests itself that two different psalms (verses 2–8, verses 9–13) have been spliced together.

10. *in the hour of Your wrath*. The Hebrew appears to say, literally, "in the hour of your face," but "face" is sometimes used elliptically to mean grim or hostile face, angry aspect—and that meaning makes sense here. The cantillation marks of the Masoretic Text put "LORD" (YHWH) together syntactically with "wrath" ("in the hour of Your wrath, O LORD"). That construction, however, introduces confusion by having two different referents for "you" in the same sentence. It is preferable to understand YHWH as the subject of the first verb in the next clause, "devour."

13. *make them turn back*. The literal anatomical reference is to the back of the shoulder. The idiom does not occur elsewhere, but it clearly refers to making the enemy turn around and flee. (The verb *tashit*, to put, make, grant, which occurs four times in the psalm, is one that the poet—or, if there were two, both poets—favored.) The aimed bows of the second verset are what makes the enemy flee.

14. *LORD, in Your strength*. This phrase marks the closing of the envelope structure, for the psalm began with "LORD, in Your strength." The poem then concludes with the thanksgiving formula, "Let us sing, let us hymn."

PSALM 22

[1]To the lead player, on *ayeleth hashahar*, a David
psalm.
[2]My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?
Far from my rescue are the words that I roar.
[3]My God, I call out by day and You do not answer,
by night—no stillness for me.
[4]And You, the Holy One—enthroned in Israel's
praise.
[5]In You did our fathers trust,
they trusted, and You set them free.
[6]To You they cried out, and escaped,
in You they trusted and were not put to shame.
[7]But I am a worm and no man,
a disgrace among men, by the people reviled.
[8]All who see me do mock me—
they curl their lips, they shake their head.
[9]Who turns to the LORD, He will set him free.
He will save him, for He delights in him.
[10]For You drew me out from the womb,
made me safe at my mother's breasts.

[11]Upon You I was cast from birth,
    from my mother's belly You were my God.
[12]Do not be far from me,
    for distress is near,
for there is none to help.
[13]Brawny bulls surrounded me,
    the mighty of Bashan encompassed me.
[14]They gaped with their mouths against me—
    a ravening roaring lion.
[15]Like water I spilled out,
    all my limbs fell apart.
My heart was like wax,
    melting within my chest.
[16]My palate turned dry as a shard
    and my tongue was annealed to my jaw,
and to death's dust did You thrust me.
[17]For the curs came all around me,
    a pack of the evil encircled me,
they bound my hands and my feet.
[18]They counted out all my bones.
    It is they who looked, who stared at me.
[19]They shared out my garments among them
    and cast lots for my clothes.
[20]But You, O LORD, be not far.
    My strength, to my aid O hasten!
[21]Save from the sword my life,

from the cur's power my person.
[22]Rescue me from the lion's mouth.
And from the horns of the ram You answered me.
[23]Let me tell Your name to my brothers,
in the assembly let me praise You.
[24]Fearers of the LORD, O praise Him!
All the seed of Jacob revere Him!
And be afraid of Him, all Israel's seed!
[25]For He has not spurned nor has despised
the affliction of the lowly,
and has not hidden His face from him;
when he cried out to Him, He heard.
[26]For You—my praise in the great assembly.
My vows I fulfill before those who fear Him.
[27]The lowly will eat and be sated.
Those who seek Him will praise the LORD.
May you be of good cheer forever.
[28]All the far ends of earth will remember
and return to the LORD.
All the clans of the nations
will bow down before You.
[29]For the LORD's is the kingship—
and He rules over the nations.
[30]Yes, to Him will bow down
all the netherworld's sleepers.

Before Him will kneel
all who go down to the dust,
whose life is undone.
[31]My seed will serve Him.
It will be told to the Master for generations to come.
[32]They will proclaim His bounty to a people aborning,
for He has done.

PSALM 22 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *on* ayeleth hashahar. The name elsewhere means “morning star” (or, literally, “dawn doe”). One assumes it refers to a musical instrument of some sort or, alternately, to a melody.

2. *My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?* These famous words are the ones pronounced by Jesus in his last agony—though in Aramaic, not in the original Hebrew. That moment in Matthew is a kind of *pesher*, or fulfillment interpretation, of this psalm, because there are other details here (for example, verses 16–19) that could be connected with the crucifixion.

4. *And You, the Holy One—enthroned in Israel’s praise*. This whole verse looks oddly out of place. Indeed, it lacks the parallelism and the rhythmic regularity of a line of poetry.

7. *But I am a worm and no man*. This impulse of self-revilement puts the speaker in contrast to the meritorious forefathers, who trusted in God and were rescued by Him. The speaker wonders: Could I possibly be worthy of God’s intervention in my state of utter abasement?

9. *Who turns to the* LORD. After the assertion of desperate doubt, the speaker affirms the sustaining idea that those who put their full faith in the LORD will be answered by Him.

10. *For You drew me out from the womb*. Having stated the general principle, the speaker now thinks retrospectively about how in his own life God has sustained him from birth onward—a palpable proof that his present state of abjection will not continue.

11. *from birth*. The Hebrew uses one of two terms for the uterus ("womb," "belly") that alternate in these lines.

12. *Do not be far from me, / for distress is near*. The far–near polarity, first announced in "Far from my rescue are the words that I roar" (verse 2), defines the urgent plea that runs through the poem.

13. *Brawny bulls*. The Hebrew adjective *rabim* usually means "many" but sometimes "big" or "large." The latter meaning makes better sense here, especially in parallel with another epithet for powerful beasts (or men), "the mighty of Bashan" (Bashan being famous for the breeding of bulls).

14. *a ravening roaring lion*. To the modern eye, this might look like a contradictory image. But the sequence works as follows: First the crowd of enemies is likened to a herd of brawny bulls; then the poet focuses on the gaping mouths, presumably imagined as human mouths (because bulls gore but are not carnivorous). In the final step, these rapacious men ready to swallow him are likened to lions.

15. *Like water I spilled out*. This verse and the next describe the psychological impact of sheer terror and impotence induced by the menacing foes.

melting within my chest. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "melting within my innards."

16. *My palate turned dry as a shard*. The translation adopts an emendation proposed by many interpreters, medieval and modern, reading *ḥiki*, "my palate," for the Masoretic *koḥi*, "my vigor" (a simple reversal of letters in the consonantal text). Palate and tongue recur as parallel terms in biblical poetry.

17. *curs*. While the Hebrew is the ordinary word for dog, because dogs were not domesticated in ancient Israel (though they had long been domesticated elsewhere) and roamed about in packs as scavengers, the biblical term is wholly negative. Hence a pejorative English equivalent seems justified.

they bound my hands and my feet. The received Hebrew text—literally "like a lion my hands and feet"—makes no sense. The translation adopts one proposed emendation—reading *karkhu*, "they bound," for *kaʾari*, "like a lion"—though there is admittedly no ancient textual warrant for this reading.

18. *They counted*. The received text has "I counted," which is puzzling. The small emendation is made in the interest of coherence and on the basis of the parellelism with the second verset.

20. *My strength*. The Hebrew term *ʾeyalut* is an unusual epithet for the deity. Some have argued that it brings out the etymology of the ordinary word for God, *ʾel*. It has even been suggested that the term may play on *ayeleth* in the superscription of this psalm.

21. *from the cur's power*. The literal sense is "from the cur's hand," but because dogs don't have hands, the translation here adopts the extended sense of "hand."

22. *You answered me*. This is how the received text reads, though we might have expected an imperative parallel to "rescue me"—that is, "answer me." Because the rest of the psalm is devoted to praising rather than imploring God, perhaps the verb in the past tense is intended as a compact turning point: God has indeed answered the speaker's prayer.

26. *My vows I fulfill*. This phrase refers regularly in Psalms to a votive offering that the speaker, his prayers having been answered, offers in the Temple. Thus "my praise in the great assembly" invokes the crowd of worshippers in the Temple.

27. *May you be of good cheer forever*. The Hebrew says literally, "May your heart live forever." The conjectural translation depends on a recurrent idiomatic use of "heart" in expressions that refer to mood, good or bad.

30. *Yes, to Him will bow down / all the netherworld's sleepers / . . . all who go down to the dust*. The received text seems to say, "They ate and bowed down," *ʾakhlu wehistaḥawu*, which does not make much sense. The translation adopts a commonly proposed emendation that involves merely a respacing of the consonants and one change in a vowel, *ʾakh lo hishtaḥawu*. This inclusion of the dead among God's worshipful subjects is unusual because a reiterated theme in Psalms is that the dead, mute forever, cannot praise God. Perhaps the poet, having imagined God's dominion extending to the far ends of the

earth, also wants to extend it downward—against common usage—into the very underworld. The Masoretic Text continues to be incoherent here, reading *kol-dishney-ʾarets*, "all the fats [?] of the earth." The translation assumes a widely accepted emendation, *kol-yesheiney-ʾarets* (the last word, *ʾarets*, means both "earth" and "netherworld").

whose life is undone. Again, the Hebrew is enigmatic—literally: "and his life he did not cause to survive." This sounds unidiomatic, but in all probability the reference is to the condition of death. Beginning with this phrase, everything in the Hebrew through the end of the next verse (and the psalm) is opaque, bearing the look of a word salad tossed by a bewildered scribe.

31. *My seed*. The Masoretic Text simply says, unidiomatically, "seed," but there are manuscripts that show "my seed."

for generations to come. The received text places *yavoʾu* (literally, "they will come") at the beginning of the next verse. But *dor yavʾo*, "a generation to come," makes good sense. (The *waw* at the end that turns it into a plural, *yavʾou*, is probably a dittography from the *waw* at the beginning of the next word, *w^{e}yagidu*, "they will proclaim.")

32. *to a people aborning*. Again, the Hebrew is a little strange—literally, "a people born." The translation is based on my inference that the reference is to futurity, parallel to "a generation to come."

for He has done. The abruptness reflects the Hebrew. What God has done, in any case, would have to be His bounty or kindnesses (Hebrew *tsedaqot*) to those who fear Him

PSALM 23

[1]A David psalm.
The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
[2]In grass meadows He makes me lie down,
by quiet waters guides me.
[3]My life He brings back.
He leads me on pathways of justice
for His name's sake.
[4]Though I walk in the vale of death's shadow,
I fear no harm,
for You are with me.
Your rod and Your staff—
it is they that console me.
[5]You set out a table before me
in the face of my foes.
You moisten my head with oil,
my cup overflows.
[6]Let but goodness and kindness pursue me
all the days of my life.
And I shall dwell in the house of the LORD

for many long days.

PSALM 23 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The LORD is my shepherd*. Although the likening of God or a ruler to a shepherd is a commonplace in this pastoral culture, this psalm is justly famous for the affecting simplicity and concreteness with which it realizes the metaphor. Thus, in the next line the shepherd leads his sheep to meadows where there are abundant grass and riverbanks, from which the sheep can drink of the quiet waters running by.

2. *makes me lie down*. The verb used here, *hirbits*, is a specialized one for making animals lie down; hence the sheep-shepherd metaphor is carefully sustained.

3. *My life He brings back*. Although "He restoreth my soul" is time-honored, the Hebrew *nefesh* does not mean "soul" but "life-breath" or "life." The image is of someone who has almost stopped breathing and is revived, brought back to life.

pathways of justice. With this phrase, the speaker glides from the sheep metaphor to speaking of himself in human terms.

4. *in the vale of death's shadow*. The intent of the translation here is not to avoid the virtually proverbial "in the shadow of the valley of death" but rather to cut through the proliferation of syllables in the King James Version, however eloquent, and better approximate the compactness of the Hebrew—*begey tsalmawet*. While philologists assume that the Masoretic *tsalmawet* is actually a misleading vocalization of *tsalmut*—probably a poetic word for "darkness" with the *ut* ending simply a suffix of abstraction—the traditional vocalization reflects something like an orthographic pun or a folk etymology (*tsel* means "shadow," *mawet* means "death"), so there is justification in retaining the death component.

I fear no harm. The imbalance between this extremely brief verset and the relatively long first verset, equally evident in the Hebrew, gives these

words a climactic effect as an affirmation of trust after the relatively lengthy evocation of the place of fear.

You are with me. / Your rod and Your staff. At this crucial moment of terror in the valley of the shadow, the speaker turns to God in the second person, though the rod and staff are carried over from the shepherd image.

5. *You moisten my head with oil*. The verb here, *dishen*, is not the one that is used for anointment, and its associations are sensual rather than sacramental. Etymologically, it means something like "to make luxuriant." This verse, then, lists all the physical elements of a happy life—a table laid out with good things to eat, a head of hair well rubbed with olive oil, and an overflowing cup of wine.

6. *for many long days*. This concluding phrase catches up the reference to "all the days of my life" in the preceding line. It does not mean "forever"; the viewpoint of the poem is in and of the here and now and is in no way eschatological. The speaker hopes for a happy fate all his born days, and prays for the good fortune to abide in the LORD's sanctuary—a place of security and harmony with the divine—all, or perhaps at least most, of those days.

PSALM 24

[1]A David psalm.
The LORD's is the earth and its fullness,
the world and the dwellers within it.
[2]For He on the seas did found it,
and on the torrents set it firm.
[3]Who shall go up on the mount of the LORD,
and who shall stand up in His holy place?
[4]The clean of hands and the pure of heart,
who has given no oath in a lie
and has sworn not in deceit.
[5]He shall bear blessing from the LORD
and bounty from his rescuing God.
[6]This is the generation of His seekers,
those who search out your presence, Jacob.
selah
[7]Lift up your heads, O gates,
and rise up, eternal portals,
that the king of glory may enter.
[8]Who is the king of glory?
The LORD, most potent and valiant,

The LORD Who is valiant in battle.
9Lift up your heads, O gates,
and lift up, eternal portals,
that the king of glory may enter.
10Who is he, the king of glory?
The LORD of Armies, He is the king of glory.
selah

PSALM 24 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The LORD's is the earth and its fullness*. The cosmological proclamation of this and the next verse looks like an editorial introduction to the structure of question and response that makes up the rest of the psalm.

2. *For He on the seas did found it*. This is one of many psalms that invoke the Creation story—harking back to Canaanite mythology—of the deity who establishes the world by subduing the threatening power of the sea and setting a firm limit between land and sea.

3. *Who shall go up on the mount of the LORD*. These questions and responses, as scholarship has long recognized, are liturgical in nature. (Compare the parallel questions in Psalm 15.) One can easily imagine a procession of pilgrims ascending the Temple mount while a chorus chants these questions, perhaps with an antiphonal response.

4. *given no oath in a lie*. The Masoretic Text reads *nafshi*, which would yield the literal meaning of "has not borne My self [name?] in a lie." Several manuscripts, however, read *nafsho*, "his self," to "bear oneself" meaning to take an oath. There is really no place in this question-and-response structure for God's speaking in the first person.

7. *Lift up your heads, O gates*. Scholarly consensus views verses 7–10 as an originally separate poem. It is formally linked with the previous poem by the

liturgical questions and responses, but now the questions are directed not to the moral fitness of worshippers coming up the Temple mountain but rather to the identity of the king of glory who is entering the gates of the Temple. Many scholars have proposed that this second set of questions refers to a different procession, in which the Ark of the Covenant is brought into the Temple. If in fact the Ark was sometimes carried out to the battlefield, as it is in the early chapters of 1 Samuel, that would provide a special motivation for the reference here to God as a warrior.

9. *Lift up your heads, O gates, / and lift up, eternal portals*. In a manner appropriate to the liturgical occasion, as a refrain the language of the two preceding verses is repeated almost verbatim. (It is in keeping with the original biblical occasion of this psalm that later Jewish tradition should have adopted it to be sung when the Torah scroll is about to be returned to the Ark and carried around the congregation.) There is one small variation in the repetition here: The verb "lift up," *seʾu*, is identical in both halves of the line, whereas in verse 7 it is used in two different conjugations (*seʾu* and *hinasʾu*).

10. *Who is he, the king of glory? / The* LORD *of Armies, He is the king of glory*. In this repetition of verse 8, the pronoun "he" (*huʾ*) is added for climactic emphasis, whereas "the LORD of Armies" is a kind of generalizing substitution for "most potent and valiant / . . . valiant in battle." Whether or not this second part of the psalm was framed to celebrate a ceremonial bearing of the Ark into the Temple, it clearly envisages a triumphant return of YHWH as warrior-god to His terrestrial abode. Many psalms sound this military note: the Temple within the lofty walled city of Jerusalem is not only the cultic place where Israel is joined with God through harmonious worship but also the citadel from which Israel prevails against its enemies.

PSALM 25

[1]For David.
To You, O LORD, I lift my heart.א
[2]My God, in You I trust. Let me be not shamed,ב
let my enemies not gloat over me.
[3]Yes, let all who hope in You be not shamed.ג
Let the treacherous be shamed, empty-handed.
[4]Your ways, O LORD, inform me,ד
Your paths, instruct me.
[5]Lead me in Your truth and instruct me,ה
for You are the God of my rescue.
In You do I hope every day.
[6]Recall Your mercies, O LORD,ו
and Your kindnesses—they are forever.
[7]My youth's offenses and my crimes recall not.ז
In Your kindness, recall me—You;
for the sake of Your goodness, O LORD.
[8]Good and upright is the LORD.ט
Therefore He guides offenders on the way.
[9]He leads the lowly in justice׳
and teaches the lowly His way.

10 All the LORD's paths are kindness and truth כ
for the keepers of His pact and His precepts.
11 For the sake of Your name, O LORD, ל
may You forgive my crime, which is great.
12 Whosoever the man who fears the LORD, מ
He will guide him in the way he should choose.
13 His life will repose in bounty, נ
and his seed will inherit the earth.
14 The LORD's counsel is for those who fear Him, ס
and His pact He makes known to them.
15 My eyes at all times to the LORD, ע
for He draws my feet from the net.
16 Turn to me and grant me grace, פ
for alone and afflicted am I.
17 The distress of my heart has grown great. צ
From my straits bring me out.
18 See my affliction and suffering ר
and forgive all my offenses.
19 See my enemies who are many ר
and with outrageous hatred despise me.
20 Guard my life and save me. ש
Let me be not shamed, for I shelter in You.
21 May uprightness, wholeness, preserve me, ת
for in You do I hope.
22 Redeem, God, Israel from all its straits.

PSALM 25 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

This is one of nine alphabetic acrostics in the Book of Psalms, a form used elsewhere in biblical poetry only in Lamentations. The acrostic may have been favored by psalmists as an aid to memory because of the liturgical use of their texts. The sixth letter of the alphabet, *waw*, is missing here, as is the nineteenth letter, *qof*.

1. *I lift my heart*. The Hebrew noun used is *nefesh*, meaning "essential self" or "life-breath." The clear meaning of the idiom is to pray fervently or plead.

3. *be not shamed / . . . be shamed*. In the Hebrew, the positive and negative use of the verb trace a perfect chiasm, because the first verset ends with *yeivoshu*, "be shamed," or "know shame," and the second verset begins with the same word.

4. *inform me / . . . instruct me*. Though the genre of this psalm is a supplication, instead of the usual central emphasis on the acute distress of the speaker (of which there are some strong expressions in the poem), this text stresses the speaker's sense of having erred (verse 7) and his desire for guidance from God about the way he should follow.

7. *recall me—You*. This startling juxtaposition of "me" (*li*) and "You" (*ʾatah*) is striking in the Hebrew, which otherwise would not idiomatically require the introduction of the second-person pronoun after the imperative verb.

8. *He guides offenders on the way*. The poet may be playing with the etymology of *hataʾim* "offenders," which suggests missing the target and hence, by implication, straying from the right way. The word for "guide," *yoreh*, could also be a pun on "shoot," as Rabbi Israel Stein has suggested to me.

13. *His life will repose in bounty*. The subject of this sentence is the ubiquitous *nefesh*, life or essential self. The orientation of vision is toward existence in the here and now. He who fears God will go to sleep each night (the verb *talin*, "repose") enjoying the good things of this world, and his offspring will have a secure inheritance.

15. *for He draws my feet from the net*. The metaphor, frequently used in Psalms, is taken from the nets used to trap birds and small game.

18. *See my affliction and suffering*. This verse and the next one begin with the letter *resh*. It is a plausible scholarly conjecture that instead of the verb *reʾeh* ("see") at the head of the verse as we have it, there was originally another verb, beginning with the missing letter *qof* (perhaps *qeshov*, "hearken to").

20. *Let me be not shamed*. The repetition, just before the end, of this phrase from verse 2 marks an envelope structure—a form, as we have seen, that is abundantly used in Psalms.

21. *uprightness, wholeness*. The King James Version's "integrity and uprightness" is a good literal rendering of the Hebrew *tom-wayosher* but is unfortunately arrhythmic. Because *tom* and *yosher* are synonyms, the two terms combined may in any case be a hendiadys—two nouns bracketed to convey a single concept—yielding the sense here of "absolute integrity."

22. *Redeem, God, Israel from all its straits*. This concluding verse lacks poetic parallelism and does not scan as a line of poetry. The national theme, moreover, has until this point not been evident in the psalm, which is spoken from the perspective of an individual. For both these reasons, one suspects that the verse was added by an editor as a conclusion from a repertory of stock verses.

PSALM 26

[1]For David.
Judge me, O LORD.
For I have walked in my wholeness,
And the LORD I have trusted.
I shall not stumble.
[2]Test me, O LORD, and try me.
Burn pure my conscience and my heart.
[3]For Your kindness is before my eyes
and I shall walk in Your truth.
[4]I have not sat with lying folk
nor with furtive men have dealt.
[5]I despised the assembly of evildoers,
nor with the wicked have I sat.
[6]Let me wash my palms in cleanness
and go round Your altar, LORD,
[7]to utter aloud a thanksgiving
and to recount all Your wonders.
[8]LORD, I love the abode of Your house
and the place where Your glory dwells.
[9]Do not take my life-breath with offenders

nor with blood-guilty men my life,
[10]in whose hands there are plots,
their right hand full of bribes.
[11]But I shall walk in my wholeness.
Redeem me, grant me grace.
[12]My foot stands on level ground.
In the chorus I bless the LORD.

PSALM 26 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Judge me, O LORD*. Although the explicit mention of thanksgiving, *todah*, in verse 7 has led some interpreters to classify this as a thanksgiving psalm, it is rather a profession of innocence. The speaker expresses his readiness to withstand God's searching gaze into his innermost parts (verse 2) in the confident knowledge that he has lived an upright life (verses 3–5) and hence is fit to celebrate God in His sanctuary (verses 6–8).

For I have walked in my wholeness, / . . . I shall not stumble. The simple, and conventional, metaphor of walking secure is beautifully expressive in this poem. It is picked up at the end, again in an envelope structure, when the speaker proclaims, "My foot stands on level ground (verse 12)."

2. *my conscience*. As elsewhere, the literal sense of the Hebrew is "kidneys," thought to be the seat of conscience.

3. *kindness . . . / truth*. This is a clear instance of what some biblical scholars call a break-up pattern. The phrase "kindness and truth," *ḥesed-weʾemet*, meaning something like "steadfast kindness," is split between the two versets, standing as bookends at the beginning and end of the line.

4. *I have not sat with lying folk*. The avoidance of the company of the wicked articulated in this verse and the next one stands in implicit contrast to enjoying the company of the righteous in the temple ceremony. These two

verses approximately correspond to the profession of innocence at the beginning of Psalm 1.

6. *Let me wash my palms in cleanness, / and go round Your altar, LORD*. Some scholars have conjectured that these words were the text of a temple ceremony in which the celebrant proclaimed his innocence, ritually washing his hands while he marched around the altar. Although the existence of such a ritual is a distinct possibility, one wonders whether the whole conjecture might be an instance of what A. N. Whitehead, in a very different context, called "misplaced concreteness." Washing the palms could simply be an apt metaphor for innocence.

9–10. *blood-guilty men . . . / in whose hands there are plots*. The "lying folk" and "evildoers" referred to in general terms earlier in the poem are now given criminal specificity: they are murderers, schemers, and bribe takers. The speaker has done well to keep a distance from them.

12. *In the chorus I bless the LORD*. As a concrete expression of the sweetness of being able to stand in the place where God's glory dwells, the speaker at the conclusion of the psalm praises God among the many singers (in the Hebrew, "chorus" is in the plural) taking part in the joyous temple rite.

PSALM 27

[1]For David.
The LORD is my light and my rescue.
Whom should I fear?
The LORD is my life's stronghold.
Of whom should I be afraid?
[2]When evildoers draw near me to eat my flesh—
my foes and my enemies are they—
they trip and they fall.
[3]Though a camp is marshaled against me,
my heart shall not fear.
Though battle is roused against me,
nonetheless do I trust.
[4]One thing do I ask of the LORD,
it is this that I seek—
that I dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to behold the LORD's sweetness
and to gaze on His palace.
[5]For He hides me in His shelter
on the day of evil.

He conceals me in the recess of His tent,
on a rock He raises me up.
6And now my head rises
over my enemies around me:
Let me offer in His tent
sacrifices with joyous shouts.
Let me sing and hymn to the LORD.
7Hear, O LORD, my voice when I call,
and grant me grace and answer me.
8Of You, my heart said:
"Seek My face."
Your face, LORD, I do seek.
9Do not hide Your face from me,
do not turn Your servant away in wrath.
You are my help.
Abandon me not, nor forsake me,
O God of my rescue.
10Though my father and mother forsook me,
the LORD would gather me in.
11Teach me, O LORD, Your way,
and lead me on a level path
because of my adversaries.
12Do not put me in the maw of my foes.
For false witnesses rose against me,
outrageous deposers.
13If I but trust to see the LORD's goodness,

in the land of the living—
[14]Hope for the LORD!
Let your heart be firm and bold,
and hope for the LORD.

PSALM 27 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The LORD is my light and my rescue. / Whom should I fear?* This psalm is a supplication in which, as elsewhere, a speaker in great distress implores God to intervene on his behalf. The distinction of emphasis is that the poem begins with a confident affirmation of God as the source of help under all grave threats. This positive note is continued through verses 2 and 3, 5 and 6, and, most extravagantly, in verse 10. But this sense of trust, in a psalm that manifests powerful psychological verisimilitude, does not preclude a feeling of fearful urgency in the speaker's plea to God (see verses 9 and 13).

3. *Though a camp is marshaled . . . / Though battle is roused*. It is not entirely clear whether the speaker is literally under assault by armed enemies seeking to kill him or whether the martial imagery is a metaphor for other kinds of hostility. In verse 12, at any rate, the voracious foes attempt to destroy him by underhanded judicial proceedings rather than military means.

4. *One thing do I ask of the LORD*. In a casual glance, this verse may look like a non sequitur: the speaker, having expressed his firm confidence in God as his rescuer in distress, suddenly declares that his most cherished desire is to spend all his time in the Temple. But, as we have seen in other psalms, the privilege of enjoying God's presence in the Jerusalem sanctuary is a consequence of having followed the ways that God dictates to man. And the Temple itself, within the walled city, is repeatedly seen as a sanctuary in the political sense—a place of secure refuge from threatening foes. There is, then, a logical link between this verse and the next one, in which God provides a shelter and a safe hiding place.

to gaze on. The precise meaning of the verb *baqer* is in dispute, but the cognate noun *biqoret*, used in Leviticus 19:20 in the sense of "observation" or "inquiry," suggests it may mean here "to take in with the eyes," "to enjoy the sight of."

5. *shelter / . . . tent*. The two nouns are drawn from the lexicon of nomadic habitation, but here they are used in subtle metaphorical understatement as designations for a much more solid and imposing structure, as the third term in the sequence, "rock," suggests.

5–6. *He raises me up. / And now my head rises*. The Hebrew plays on the same verbal stem in two different conjugations—*yeromemeini*, then *yarum*—and the translation seeks to approximate that effect.

6. *in His tent*. Here the metaphorical use of "tent" to indicate temple is perfectly clear.

9. *Do not hide Your face from me*. "Face" suggests "presence," but the anthropomorphic concreteness of "face" is palpable. The speaker desperately seeks God's face (a privilege denied Moses). The practical manifestation of God's turning away His face would be abandoning the person to his enemies.

10. *Though my father and mother forsook me, / the* LORD *would gather me in*. The extravagance of this declaration of trust in God, perhaps the most extreme in the whole Bible, is breathtaking and perhaps even disturbing. In the best of circumstance, the most unconditional, unstinting love and care we experience are from a mother and father. We can imagine, the psalmist says, circumstances in which even that love might fail, but God will be both father and mother to him in the most dire straits.

11. *my adversaries*. This term for enemy, *shorerim* (sometimes *shorim*), appears half a dozen times in Psalms and nowhere else in the biblical corpus. It may be derived from a verbal root that means "to watch" (as enemies gleefully watch one's humiliation). It certainly plays on a more common word for "foes," *tsorerim* (or, as in the next verse here, *tsarim*).

12. *the maw of my foes*. Here *nefesh*, "life-breath," shows a secondary meaning, through metonymy—the throat or gullet, through which breath passes.

13. *If I but trust*. This sentence, at least in the textual form passed down to us, seems to be an ellipsis.

14. *Hope for the LORD! / Let your heart be firm and bold*. This last exhortation —whether of the speaker to himself or to an individual member of his audience—is an apt summary of the psychology that informs this psalm. It begins by affirming trust in God and reiterates that hopeful confidence, but the trust has to be asserted against the terrors of being overwhelmed by implacable enemies.

PSALM 28

[1]For David.
To You, O LORD, I call.
My Rock, do not be deaf to me.
Lest You be mute to me
and I be like those gone down to the Pit.
[2]Hear the sound of my pleading
when I cry out to You,
when I lift up my hands
to Your holy shrine.
[3]Do not pull me down with the wicked,
and with the wrongdoers,
who speak peace to their fellows
with foulness in their heart.
[4]Pay them back for their acts
and for the evil of their schemings.
Their handiwork give them back in kind.
Pay back what is coming to them.
[5]For they understand not the acts of the LORD
and His handiwork they would destroy and not
build.

[6]Blessed is the LORD
for He has heard the sound of my pleading.
[7]The LORD is my strength and my shield.
In Him my heart trusts.
I was helped and my heart rejoiced,
and with my song I acclaim Him.
[8]The LORD is His people's strength
and His anointed's stronghold of rescue.
[9]Rescue Your people
and bless Your estate.
Tend them, bear them up for all time.

PSALM 28 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *do not be deaf . . . / Lest You be mute*. The Hebrew uses a pun, the first verb being *teḥerash* and the second *teḥesheh*. (Some interpreters actually understand *teḥerash* as "to be silent.") To follow the logic of the punning language, should God turn a deaf ear to the supplicant, He will not answer the supplicant's prayer and hence will be "mute." In an associative logic, the supplicant himself will then perish, becoming forever silent like all the legions of the dead and hence incapable of imploring God or praising him. In this psalm he does both, because, as elsewhere, the supplication turns into a thanksgiving psalm from verse 6 to the end.

2. *when I lift up my hands*. This is, of course, a gesture of prayer, abundantly attested to in a variety of ancient Near Eastern texts and drawings.

3. *who speak peace to their fellows / with foulness in their heart*. The transition between the end of the first verset and the beginning of the second is marked in the Hebrew by a pun: *reʿeihem* ("their fellows") and *raʿah* (literally, "evil").

The translation choice of fellows / foulness is an attempt to replicate this effect.

4. *schemings*. The Hebrew *maʿalalim* is a synonym for "acts," but with a negative connotation.

6. *Blessed is the LORD / for He has heard the sound of my pleading*. This line strongly marks the turning point of the poem: the imploring "Hear the sound of my pleading" (verse 2) is now an accomplished fact.

7. *with my song I acclaim Him*. Here the speaker completes the expected gesture of the thanksgiving psalm, announcing that he is giving thanks to God in song.

8. *The LORD is His people's strength*. The Masoretic Text reads, "The LORD is their strength," which is puzzling, because there is no obvious antecedent to "their." But the Septuagint, the Peshitta, and some manuscripts show "his people's strength." In the consonantal Hebrew text, this is a difference of just one letter, an added *ayin* that an ancient scribe might easily have dropped in copying. This reading then makes a neat parallelism with the second verset.

His anointed's stronghold. The national-political perspective of this entire line was not evident earlier in the poem. Either it is an editorially introduced ending drawn from a repertory of stock phrases used for codas, or the speaker imagines a seamless continuity between divine intervention to aid the individual and the nation.

9. *Tend them, bear them up*. The first of these two verbs is the one used for a shepherd's looking after his flock. It is likely, then, that the second verb, "bear" or "lift up" (the same word used for the hands in prayer in verse 2) also refers to a pastoral context—the act of a shepherd bearing a lamb in his arms.

PSALM 29

[1]A David psalm.
Grant to the LORD, O sons of God,
grant to the LORD glory and strength!
[2]Grant to the LORD His name's glory.
Bow to the LORD in holy majesty!
[3]The LORD's voice is over the waters.
The God of glory thunders.
The LORD is over the mighty waters.
[4]The LORD's voice in power,
the LORD's voice in majesty,
[5]the LORD's voice breaking cedars,
the LORD shatters the Lebanon cedars,
[6]and He makes Lebanon dance like a calf,
Sirion like a young wild ox.
[7]The LORD's voice hews flames of fire.
[8]The LORD's voice makes the wilderness shake,
the LORD makes the Kadesh Wilderness shake.
[9]The LORD's voice brings on the birth pangs of does
and lays bare the forests.

And in His palace all says glory.
10 The LORD was enthroned at the flood
and the LORD is enthroned as king for all time.
11 May the LORD give strength to His people.
May the LORD bless His people with peace.

PSALM 29 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *O sons of God*. This is the first clue of many that have led a whole line of scholars (H. L. Ginsberg, Moshe Held, Mitchell Dahood, Theodore Gaster) to see this psalm as a translation or close adaptation of a Canaanite psalm. It has been variously claimed that in the original text, it was Baal as thunder-god, not YHWH, who imposed his fearsome voice over the whole world. None of these arguments is entirely convincing. Although there are parallels to certain wordings here in Ugaritic poetry (the one cache of Syro-Palestinian poetry, several centuries prior to the Bible, that has physically survived), that scarcely proves that this poem is a translation. The same is true of the proposed linguistic and prosodic evidence (too technical to take up here) that has been put forth to support the same claim. Canaanite poetry was the literary tradition that constituted the most immediate background for biblical poetry. It would be surprising if the biblical poets did not make use of images, phrasing, and even mythological elements from the antecedent tradition with which they and their audience were acquainted. The relation of this psalm, and a good many others, to the Syro-Palestinian tradition is roughly like that of *Paradise Lost* to the *Aeneid* and the *Iliad*. Virgil and Homer gave Milton a model, and a repertory of devices and *topoi*, with which he could frame a cosmic epic from his own monotheistic perspective, but he was not merely "transposing" the pagan epic poets into English. As to the address to the "sons of God" at the beginning of the psalm, it should be noted that these celestial creatures appear not infrequently elsewhere in the Bible (here they are *beney ʾelim*; more commonly, they appear as *beney ʾelohim*). They are best thought

of as the flickering literary afterlife of a polytheistic mythology—God's royal entourage on high, His *famalia*, as Rashi called them, invoking a Latin term that had entered Hebrew during the time of the Roman empire. Literal belief in them may have survived in popular religion but is unlikely to have been shared by the scribal circles that produced Psalms.

2. *Grant to the LORD*. The verb for "grant" or "give," *y-h-b*, is a relatively rare synonym (though the standard term in Aramaic) for the more common *n-t-n*. Perhaps it may actually have been called out in its imperative form, *havu*, as here, on ceremonial occasions, having something of the effect of "hail!" The use of the whole phrase at the beginning of the psalm in a pattern of incremental repetition may be evidence of the antiquity of the poem because incremental repetition is a device favored in the oldest stratum of biblical poetry (as, notably, in the Song of Deborah, which might date back as far as 1100 B.C.E.).

3. *The LORD's voice is over the waters*. Though the image is a naturalistic one of thunder—often imagined by the Hebrew poets as God's voice—rumbling over the sea, the line registers a recollection of old Canaanite myths, in which creation is effected through the conquest of a primordial sea monster by the god who rules the land. In the incremental repetition here, the phrase "the mighty waters" has an especially mythological resonance in the Hebrew.

5. *the Lebanon cedars*. Throughout biblical poetry, these trees are the great emblem of proud loftiness. An excessive literalism has led some interpreters to see the mention of the northern mountains of Lebanon and Syria as evidence of a Syrian provenance for the poem. These place-names appear equally in the late and distinctly un-Canaanite Song of Songs. Lebanon is not only a place of towering forests but also the northern border of Israel. In verse 8, God's thunder rakes the Wilderness of Kadesh, presumably in the eastern half of the Sinai, so the poet imagines God's power sweeping over the whole land of Israel and beyond from north to south.

8. *makes the wilderness shake, / the LORD makes the Kadesh Wilderness shake*. These two versets are a textbook illustration of incremental repetition, with the added element giving the second verset additional specificity, as is generally true in the use of poetic parallelism in the Bible.

9. *lays bare the forests*. A commonly proposed emendation turns "forests" (*yeʿarot*) into "gazelles" (*yeʿalot*) in the interests of neat parallelism. But then

the verb "lay bare" would have to have something to do with calving, a meaning not otherwise attested. It is certainly possible to imagine the fearsome assault of lightning and thunder triggering birth pangs and also devastating the forests.

And in His palace all says glory. It is probably a mistake to translate *heikhalo* as "His temple" rather than "His palace," because the context suggests God's celestial palace, where, while the earth roils in the storm below, everything bespeaks God's glory. The awesome power manifested on earth in thunder and lightning is celebrated ceremoniously on high in the divine palace populated by angelic or quasidivine courtiers.

10. *The LORD was enthroned at the flood*. The mention of the primordial Flood is a measure not only of the eternity of God's reign but also of His supreme dominion over the forces of nature. It is, of course, in a storm that the poet has imagined God's power in this psalm.

11. *May the LORD give strength to His people*. Whether or not this line is a stock coda added by an editor, it does pick up a verbal motif from the beginning, as the Israeli scholar Yitzhak Avishur has noted. The psalm starts with a verb meaning "to give" or "to grant," an act to be directed from the divine entourage to God, and concludes with the more common synonym for the act of giving, now directed from God to Israel.

PSALM 30

[1]Psalm, song for the dedication of the house, for
David.
[2]I shall exalt You, LORD, for You drew me up,
and You gave no joy to my enemies.
[3]LORD, my God,
I cried to You and You healed me.
[4]LORD, You brought me up from Sheol,
gave me life from those gone down to the Pit.
[5]Hymn to the LORD, O his faithful,
acclaim his holy name.
[6]But a moment in His wrath,
life in His pleasure.
At evening one beds down weeping,
and in the morning, glad song.
[7]As for me, I thought in my quiet days,
"Never will I stumble."
[8]LORD, in your pleasure You made me stand
mountain-strong.
—When You hid Your face, I was stricken.
[9]To You, O LORD, I call,

and to the Master I plead.
10"What profit in my blood,
in my going down deathward?
Will dust acclaim You,
will it tell Your truth?"
11Hear, LORD, and grant me grace.
LORD, become helper to me.
12You have turned my dirge to a dance for me,
undone my sackcloth and bound me with joy.
13O, let my heart hymn You and be not still,
LORD, my God, for all time I acclaim You.

PSALM 30 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *song for the dedication of the house*. The consensus of traditional interpreters is that the reference is to the Temple (the literal sense of the Hebrew for "temple" is "house of the sanctuary") or to a renovated altar or some other structure within it. Some scholars, noting the somewhat odd syntax of the superscription with "psalm" (*mizmor*) separated from "for David" (*l*^{e}*Dawid*), suspect that this entire phrase is an editorial interpolation not originally belonging to the psalm.

2. *for You drew me up*. The Hebrew verb *daloh* is the one used for drawing water from a well. Death, then, is imagined as a deep pit from which the speaker has been drawn up by God. In this fashion, at its beginning the poem announces itself as a thanksgiving psalm.

4. *from those gone down to the Pit*. The Masoretic Text uses a form that does not correspond to biblical grammar, *miyordi*, which would mean "from my going down." Several ancient versions, however, show *miyordey*, "from those

gone down," which not only is grammatical but highlights the idea that the speaker felt he had gone down to death, yet of all who go down there, he alone was raised up.

6. *At evening one beds down weeping, / and in the morning, glad song*. This upbeat vision of life has, of course, been manifested in the recent experience of the speaker.

8. *You made me stand mountain-strong*. The translation is only an educated guess, because the sequence of words in the Hebrew (not the meaning of the individual words) is perplexing. Literally, it would be: You-made-stand-my-mountain-of-strength (or, simply, mountain-of-strength). The translation accords with the understanding of Rashi and Abraham ibn Ezra.

9. *To You, O LORD, I call*. These words, through to the end of verse 11, appear to be self-quotation: the speaker, now rescued from death, recalls the words of desperate supplication that he addressed to God from his straits.

10. *What profit in my blood, / in my going down deathward?* Here the poet sounds, with powerful compactness, the recurrent theme shared by the psalms of thanksgiving and supplication: man cannot fulfill his vocation of celebrating God if he is engulfed by death. It is living human beings whom God needs to sing His praises. It looks as though the giving of praise to God is imagined as a replacement of the pagan idea in which the sacrifices were thought of as food necessary to the gods.

12. *undone my sackcloth and bound me with joy*. The general synecdoches for mourning and rejoicing, dirge and dance, of the first verset are focused concretely through the metaphor of clothing in the parallel second verset: The garment of mourning is undone, or removed, and joy becomes the new garment that God pulls tight or binds (verbal stem *ʾ-z-r*) around the person He has rescued.

13. *O, let my heart hymn You*. This translation, following one ancient Greek version, reads *keveidi*, "my liver" ("heart" being the viable English substitution) instead of *kavod*, "glory." Like many other thanksgiving psalms, this one exhibits an envelope structure, beginning and ending with the declaration that the speaker will exalt God for His mercies granted.

PSALM 31

[1]To the lead player, a David psalm.
[2]In You, O LORD, I shelter.
Let me never be shamed.
In Your bounty, O free me.
[3]Incline Your ear to me.
Quick, save me.
Be my stronghold of rock,
a fort-house to rescue me.
[4]For You are my crag and my bastion,
and for Your name's sake guide me and lead me.
[5]Get me out of the net that they laid for me,
for You are my stronghold.
[6]In Your hand I commend my spirit.
You redeemed me, O LORD, God of truth.
[7]I hate those who look to vaporous lies.
As for me, I trust in the LORD.
[8]Let me exult and rejoice in Your kindness,
that You saw my affliction,
You knew the straits of my life.
[9]And You did not yield me to my enemy's hand,

You set my feet in a wide-open place.
10 Grant me grace, LORD, for I am distressed.
My eye is worn out in vexation,
my throat and my belly.
11 For my life is exhausted in sorrow
and my years in sighing.
Through my crime my strength stumbles
and my limbs are worn out.
12 For all my enemies I become a disgrace,
just as much to my neighbors, and fear to my friends.
Those who see me outside draw back from me.
13 Forgotten from the heart like the dead,
I become like a vessel lost.
14 For I heard the slander of many,
terror all round,
when they conspired against me,
when they plotted to take my life.
15 As for me, I trust in You, O LORD.
I say, “You are my God.”
16 My times are in Your hand—O save me
from the hand of my enemies, my pursuers.
17 Shine Your face on Your servant,
Rescue me in Your kindness.
18 LORD, let me not be shamed, for I call You.
Let the wicked know shame,

and be stilled in Sheol.
[19]Let lying lips be silent,
    that speak haughty against the just
in arrogance and contempt.
[20]How great Your goodness
    that You hid for those who fear You.
You have wrought for those who shelter in You
    before the eyes of humankind.
[21]Conceal them in the hiding place of Your presence
    from the crookedness of man.
Hide them in Your shelter
    from the quarrel of tongues.
[22]Blessed is the LORD,
    for He has done me wondrous kindness
in a town under siege.
[23]And I had thought in my haste:
    "I am banished from before Your eyes."
Yet You heard the sound of my pleading
    when I cried out to You.
[24]Love the LORD, all his faithful,
    steadfastness the LORD keeps
and pays back in good measure the haughty in acts.
[25]Be strong, and let your heart be firm,
    all who hope in the LORD.

PSALM 31 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *In You, O LORD, I shelter, / Let me never be shamed*. Both these clauses, as they stand or with minor variations, are encountered in many other psalms, immediately identifying this one as a supplication. The predisposition of the psalmist to draw on a repertory of stock images and even stock lines is especially evident in this poem, which repeatedly echoes other psalms as well as a sentence from the psalm that occurs in the Book of Jonah and some lines from Jeremiah.

3. *Incline Your ear to me*. The literal sense of the Hebrew verb should be preserved because it suggests an urgently anthropomorphic image of God's bending down to hear the speaker's prayer.

Quick, save me. The abruptness of this verset mirrors the Hebrew, which is truncated (two beats instead of three) to suggest the frantic urgency of the speaker—*meheirah hatsileini*.

a fort-house. The addition of "house" to the conventional "fort" (plural in the Hebrew here) is unusual, and perhaps may be intended to suggest shelter as well as quasi-military protection.

5. *the net*. This conventional image from hunting does not jibe with the prevailing metaphor of military assault.

6. *In Your hand I commend my spirit*. The spirit, *ruaḥ*, is the life-breath (like *nefesh*) and does not imply a "soul" distinct from the body.

7. *I hate those who look to vaporous lies*. The literal sense of these words (which also appear in Jonah) is "those who watch empty [or lying] vapors [or insubstantial things]." The reference is to idols, against which the speaker stresses his trust in YHWH.

9. *wide-open place*. This image (Hebrew, *merḥav*) is the antithesis of the straits or narrow place in which the speaker felt trapped.

10. *my throat and my belly*. Because of the physicality of the whole line, with "eye" on one side and "belly" on the other, the anatomical sense of *nefesh* as "throat" seems plausible, with the line moving down vertically from eyes to throat to belly.

11. *Through my crime*. The translation follows the Masoretic Text, which has *baʿawoni* here. But the Septuagint and the Peshitta read *beʿonyi*, "in my affliction." There are no other confessions of wrongdoing in this psalm.

12. *just as much to my neighbors*. The Hebrew wording (literally, "and to my neighbors very [much?]") is odd. There is probably a problem with the text at this point.

Those who see me outside draw back from me. The whole line, culminating in this concrete image, is reminiscent of Job. The speaker's distress is gravely compounded by the fact that those who know him treat him as a pariah.

13. *like the dead, / . . . like a vessel lost*. In the midst of many stock phrases, a concreteness of somber existential reflection manifests itself. It is a cruel fact of life that the dead and buried, however much lip service is paid them, are often forgotten, no longer part of the continuing considerations of our lives, like some lost possession for which we no longer even look.

19. *Let lying lips be silent*. These words nicely pick up "be stilled in Sheol" of the preceding verset and clearly imply that the silencing of the lying lips is to be effected through death. The general distress of the speaker appears to be that he has been the victim of malicious slander or perhaps even perjury.

21. *the crookedness of man*. The Hebrew, *merukhsey ʾish*, is problematic. The noun elsewhere means "mountaintop" and so might more generally suggest an uneven surface or an obstacle. But all interpretations lean heavily on context, assuming an explicit interlinear parallelism with "the quarrel of tongues," another reference to slander.

22. *in a town under siege*. This abrupt image is metaphorical rather than historical, linking with the military figures early in the poem.

24. *steadfastness*. A general pattern of biblical noun formations argues that this term, *ʾemunim*, is an abstract noun and does not refer—as many translations have it—to a group of people ("the loyal" or "the steadfast").

the haughty in acts. Literally, "who does haughtiness."

PSALM 32

[1]A David *maskil*.
Happy, of sin forgiven,
absolved of offense.
[2]Happy, the man to whom
the LORD reckons no crime,
in whose spirit is no deceit.
[3]When I was silent, my limbs were worn out—
when I roared all day long.
[4]For day and night
Your hand was heavy upon me.
My sap turned to summer dust.
selah
[5]My offense I made known to You
and my crime I did not cover.
I said, "I shall confess my sins to the LORD,"
and You forgave my offending crime.
selah
[6][For this every faithful man prays to You in time of need: only that the rush of mighty waters should not reach him.]

[7]You are a shelter for me.
From the foe You keep me,
with glad songs of deliverance surround me.
selah
[8]Let me teach you, instruct you the way you should go.
Let me counsel you with my own sight.
[9]Be not like a horse, like a mule, without sense,
the bit and the reins his adornment—
to keep him from drawing near you.
[10]Many are the wicked's pains,
but who trusts in the LORD kindness surrounds him.
[11]Rejoice in the LORD and exult, O you righteous,
sing gladly, all upright men!

PSALM 32 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *A David* maskil. This is clearly a category of song, but its precise nature remains unknown. From the word's use in Amos 5:13, it would appear to be a joyous song, though not all the occurrences in Psalms substantiate that connotation. In this particular psalm, there may also be a punning reference to a homonym that means "discerning person" or "giver of instruction" (and my translation in Amos opts for the homonym, rendering the word as "the prudent"). The word translated as "let me teach you" in verse 8 employs the same root. Hermann Gunkel noted that this psalm contains distinct Wisdom elements, especially from verse 8 onward. As to genre, while it has sometimes

been described as a thanksgiving psalm, it is really more of a confession in the perfect tense: the speaker admits he has transgressed, affirms that he has confessed his transgression, and that as a result God has granted him forgiveness.

of sin forgiven, / absolved of offense. The speaker at the outset presents himself through two passive verbs as the object of forgiveness.

3. *When I was silent, my limbs were worn out— / when I roared all day long*. Attempts to resolve the contradiction between silence and roaring here have been unavailing. The text looks suspect. Especially because the second verset is abbreviated, one may guess that a phrase has been dropped out that would have formed a complementary parallelism, such as, "when I roared all day long, my body was wasted."

4. *summer dust*. The Hebrew uses a plural abstraction, impossible in English, that would literally be "summer parchednesses."

6. *For this every faithful man*. It would be misleading to set this verse as poetry because it does not scan and has no true parallelism. One suspects a sentence from another text was introduced through scribal inadvertence. The brackets indicate that this verse is not part of the poem.

7. *From the foe You keep me*. This may be merely a conventional phrase, for no foes appear earlier in the psalm.

glad songs of deliverance. The Hebrew *roney palet* looks odd. The first of the two nouns would seem to be a plural (occurring nowhere else) of *ron*, "glad song."

8. *Let me teach you*. After the second selah, an entirely new movement in the poem (or another poem?) begins in verse 6, in which the speaker, like the figure of the mentor in Proverbs, enjoins the person who listens to heed his counsel.

with my own sight. This rendering, like all others for this phrase, is no more than an interpretive guess. The Hebrew says literally, "Let me counsel you my eye," which is not a biblical idiom.

9. *the bit and the reins his adornment— / to keep him from drawing near you*. This is another cryptic moment in the text. The Masoretic Text breaks the line after "reins," which makes no clear sense. Perhaps the idea is that the bit and reins, which may seem an ornament, are actually put on the

uncomprehending beast simply in order to guide him away from running into people.

PSALM 33

[1]Sing gladly, O righteous, of the LORD,
for the upright, praise is befitting.
[2]Acclaim the LORD with the lyre,
with the ten-stringed lute hymn to Him.
[3]Sing Him a new song,
play deftly with joyous shout.
[4]For the word of the LORD is upright,
and all His doings in good faith.
[5]He loves the right and the just.
The LORD's kindness fills the earth.
[6]By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
and by the breath of His mouth all their array.
[7]He gathers like a mound the sea's waters,
puts in treasure houses the deeps.
[8]All the earth fears the LORD,
all the world's dwellers dread Him.
[9]For He did speak and it came to be,
He commanded, and it stood.
[10]The LORD thwarted the counsel of nations,
overturned the devisings of peoples.

[11]The LORD's counsel will stand forever,
His heart's devisings for all generations.
[12]Happy the nation whose god is the LORD,
the people He chose as estate for Him.
[13]From the heavens the LORD looked down,
saw all the human creatures.
[14]From His firm throne He surveyed
all who dwell on the earth.
[15]He fashions their heart one and all.
He understands all their doings.
[16]The king is not rescued through surfeit of might,
the warrior not saved through surfeit of power.
[17]The horse is a lie for rescue,
and in his surfeit of might he helps none escape.
[18]Look, the LORD's eye is on those who fear Him,
on those who yearn for His kindness
[19]to save their lives from death
and in famine to keep them alive.
[20]We urgently wait for the LORD.
Our help and our shield is He.
[21]For in Him our heart rejoices,
for in His holy name do we trust.
[22]May Your kindness, O LORD, be upon us,
as we have yearned for You.

PSALM 33 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Sing, gladly, O righteous*. Hermann Gunkel long ago plausibly identified this psalm as a hymn. The setting is choral; the form of address is collective; and the perspective, in contrast to the individual thanksgiving psalm, is both global and national. The emphasis on music through the first three verses suggests a public performance of the psalm with orchestra and chorus.

3. *Sing Him a new song*. This phrase is, in a sense, the composer's self-advertisement: God is to be celebrated not with a stock item from the psalmodic repertoire but with a freshly composed piece.

play deftly. This stipulation is surely an indication that the new song must be presented in a technically skilled performance.

6. *By the word of the* LORD *the heavens were made*. The poet, developing a cue he has introduced at the end of the previous line—"The LORD's kindness fills the earth"—takes us back to the Creation story in Genesis 1, for which he offers a kind of poetic interpretation. "Earth" and "heaven" are terms often paired in parallel versets of poetry as well as key terms in the Creation story. God's word as the agent of creation is, of course, a recasting of the narrative in Genesis 1, in which God speaks the world into existence.

by the breath of His mouth. Ostensibly a synonym for "the word of the LORD," this phrase also catches up the image in Genesis of God's breath hovering over the primordial waters.

all their array. The "heavens and all their array," referring to the stars, is still another phrase borrowed from the first Creation story.

7. *He gathers like a mound the sea's waters*. This is a punning double allusion: it recalls God's dividing dry land from water in the Creation story and at the same time picks up an image from the dividing of the waters in the Song of the Sea—"streams stood up like a mound" (Exodus 15:8). Both this text and the one in Exodus use the relatively rare noun *ned* for "mound."

puts in treasure houses the deeps. This psalm shares with Job the mythological image of God's stocking the elemental forces of nature in cosmic caches or storehouses (*'otsarot*).

9. *For He did speak and it came to be, / He commanded, and it stood*. This entire line again picks up the notion from Genesis 1 that God created the world through a series of speech-acts. This was an idea particularly favored by

the Priestly writers, the literary circle that at some midpoint in the First Temple period produced the Creation story of Genesis 1, a variety of passages that occur later in Genesis, and most of Leviticus.

11. *The LORD's counsel will stand forever*. This line makes an obvious but effective antithesis to the previous line, in which the LORD thwarts the counsel of nations.

13. *From the heavens the LORD looked down, / saw all the human creatures*. The viewpoint of this poem manages to be at once national ("the people He chose as estate for Him") and universalist: the God of creation surveys the deeds of men and women throughout the world.

15. *one and all*. This is the idiomatic force of *yaḥad*, which elsewhere, and invariably in postbiblical Hebrew, means "together."

16. *surfeit of might, / . . . surfeit of power*. The impotence of any material power a human being can command stands in vivid contrast to God's overwhelming power, expressed in the preceding lines, over all the earth. It is noteworthy, moreover, that God is seen in this poem creating the world not through sheer force but through speech—not with a big bang but in a series of carefully measured words.

20. *We urgently wait*. The adverb "urgently" is added to suggest the force of emphasis achieved in the Hebrew through the use of *nafsheinu*—"our life-breath," "our very selves"—as an intensive form of the first-person plural pronoun.

PSALM 34

[1]For David, when he altered his good sense before
Abimelech, who banished him, and he went
away.
[2]Let me bless the LORD at all times,א
always His praise in my mouth.
[3]In the LORD do I glory.ב
Let the lowly hear and rejoice.
[4]Extol the LORD with me,ג
let us exalt His name one and all.
[5]I sought the LORD and He answered me,ד
and from all that I dreaded He saved me.
[6]They looked to Him and they beamed,ה
and their faces were no longer dark.
[7]When the lowly calls, God listensז
and from all his straits rescues him.
[8]The LORD's messenger encampsח
round those who fear Him and sets them free.
[9]Taste and see that the LORD is good,ט
happy the man who shelters in Him.
[10]Fear the LORD, O His holy ones,י

for those who fear Him know no want.
[11]Lions are wretched, and hunger,כ
but the LORD's seekers lack no good.
[12]Come, sons, listen to me,ל
the LORD's fear will I teach you.
[13]Whoever the man desiring life,מ
who loves long days to see good,
[14]keep your tongue from evilנ
and your lips from speaking deceit.
[15]Swerve from evil and do good,ס
seek peace and pursue it.
[16]The LORD's eyes are on the righteousע
and His ears to their outcry.
[17]The LORD's face is against evildoers,פ
to cut off from the earth their name.
[18]Cry out and the LORD hears,צ
and from all their straits He saves them.
[19]Near is the LORD to the broken-hearted,ק
and the crushed in spirit He rescues.
[20]Many the evils of the righteous man,ר
yet from all of them the LORD will save him.
[21]He guards all his bones,ש
not a single one is broken.
[22]Evil will kill the wicked,ת
and the righteous man's foes will bear guilt.
[23]The LORD ransoms His servants' lives,

they will bear no guilt, all who shelter in Him.

PSALM 34 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *when he altered his good sense before Abimelech*. The superscription refers directly to 1 Samuel 21:14, where David, surrounded before the city of Gath by the Philistine king and his men, saves himself by playing the madman. The same unusual idiom for feigning madness, "altered his good sense" (*shanot ʾet taʿamo*), is used in Samuel. But the Philistine king there is not Abimelech (who appears in Genesis 20) but Achish. This may be a confusion on the part of the editor, though Rashi and other medieval commentators try to save the text by arguing that Abimelech was a hereditary royal title, not a proper name. Why did the editor detect a link between our psalm and this incident in the David story? In all likelihood, the connection he saw was the psalm's emphasis on God's rescuing power, even when the just man is threatened with imminent death by his enemies. Particularly pertinent are these lines near the end of the poem: "Many the evils of the righteous man, / yet from all of them the LORD will save him. / He guards all his bones, / not a single one is broken." And perhaps the image in 1 Samuel 21 of the future king of Israel scrabbling on the doors and drooling over his beard may have been called to the editor's mind by "Near is the LORD to the broken-hearted, / and the crushed in spirit He rescues."

2. *Let me bless*. The first Hebrew word, *ʾavarakha*, beginning with an *ʾaleph*, signals the start of an alphabetic acrostic. Only the sixth letter, *waw*, is missing. The psalm ends, as does the acrostic in Psalm 25, with a wrap-up verse that begins with the verb *padah*, "redeem."

3. *do I glory*. Although this is the proper sense of the verb *hithalel*, it also plays etymologically with the noun for "praise," *tehilah*, which appears in the previous line.

8. *The LORD's messenger encamps*. The idea that God sends a divine emissary to accompany man, guide him, protect him, and, in some instances, scrutinize his actions, is common in biblical literature, with instances occurring as early

as Genesis and Exodus. When Abraham dispatches his servant to Mesopotamia to find a bride for Isaac, the servant is persuaded that the LORD's messenger has come along with him to show him the right way.

9. *Taste and see that the LORD is good*. The sensory concreteness of the verb is somewhat startling, perhaps intended to suggest the powerful immediacy of experiencing God's beneficence. It also probably puns on the same root—*t-ʿ-m*—used as a noun in the super-scription with the meaning "good sense." If the pun is significant, "tasting" may also mean using good sense.

11. *Lions are wretched, and hunger, / but the LORD's seekers lack no good*. There is a certain smoothness—indeed, a kind of patness—in the formulation of this line and, in fact, in most of the lines of this poem. The language is more formulaic than elsewhere, and the moral calculus invoked is itself a kind of pious formula. All this gives this psalm a measured, choreographed dignity (it is not surprising that this text has been incorporated into the sabbath morning liturgy). But the expression of God's unwavering protection of the just and His punishment of the wicked is precisely the view against which the Job poet will rebel so vehemently.

12. *Come, sons, listen to me*. This introductory phrase and what follows in the next few verses have a distinct coloration of Wisdom literature.

19. *Near is the LORD to the broken-hearted, / and the crushed in spirit He rescues*. If one is inclined to agree with Job that this psalm puts forth a view of the implementation of divine justice that disintegrates in the harsh crucible of experience, the poet nevertheless succeeds, at moments like this, in articulating a moving vision of hope for the desperate. Part of the spiritual greatness of Psalms, part of the source of its enduring appeal through the ages, is that it profoundly recognizes the bleakness, the dark terrors, the long nights of despair that shadow most lives, and, against all this, evokes the notion of a caring presence that can reach out to the broken-hearted.

PSALM 35

[1]For David.
Take my part, LORD, against my contesters,
fight those who fight against me.
[2]Steady the shield and the buckler,
and rise up to my help.
[3]Unsheathe the spear to the haft
against my pursuers.
[4]Let them be shamed and disgraced,
who seek my life.
Let them retreat, be abased,
who plot harm against me.
[5]Let them be like chaff before the wind,
with the LORD's messenger driving.
[6]May their way be darkness and slippery paths,
with the LORD's messenger chasing them.
[7]For unprovoked they set their net-trap for me,
unprovoked they dug a pit for my life.
[8]Let disaster come upon him unwitting
and the net that he set entrap him.
May he fall into it in disaster.

[9]But I shall exult in the LORD.
shall be glad in His rescue.
[10]All my bones say,
"LORD, who is like You?
Saving the poor from one stronger than he
and the poor and the needy from his despoiler."
[11]Outrageous witnesses rose,
of things I knew not they asked me.
[12]They paid me back evil for good—
bereavement for my very self.
[13]And I, when they were ill, my garment was sackcloth,
I afflicted myself with fasting.
May my own prayer come back to my bosom.
[14]As for a friend, for a brother,
I went about as though mourning a mother,
in gloom I was bent.
[15]Yet when I limped, they rejoiced, and they gathered,
they gathered against me,
like strangers, and I did not know.
Their mouths gaped and they were not still.
[16]With contemptuous mocking chatter
they gnashed their teeth against me.
[17]O Master, how long will You see it?
Bring back my life from their violence,

from the lions, my very being.
[18]I shall acclaim You in a great assembly,
in a vast crowd I shall praise You.
[19]Let not my unprovoked enemies rejoice over me,
let my wanton foes not leer.
[20]For they do not speak peace
and against the earth's quiet ones plot words of deceit.
[21]They open their mouths wide against me.
They say, "Hurrah! Hurrah! Our eyes have seen it."
[22]You, LORD, have seen, do not be mute.
My Master, do not keep far from me.
[23]Rouse Yourself, wake for my cause,
my God and my Master, for my quarrel.
[24]Judge me by Your justice, LORD my God,
and let them not rejoice over me.
[25]Let them not say in their heart,
"Hurrah for ourselves."
Let them not say, "We devoured him."
[26]Let them be shamed and abased one and all,
who rejoice in my harm.
Let them don shame and disgrace,
who vaunted over me.
[27]May they sing glad and rejoice,
who desire justice for me,

and may they always say,
"Great is the LORD
Who desires His servant's well-being"
[28]and my tongue will murmur Your justice,
all day long Your praise.

PSALM 35 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Take my part, LORD, against my contesters*. These initial words announce the psalm's status as a supplication. Although military imagery is used in verses 1–4, the Hebrew term for "contesters," *yerivim*, is related to *riv*, a legal disputation. The references to false witnesses and baffling legal interrogations in verse 11 strongly suggest that these implacable enemies are attempting to destroy the supplicant in a trumped-up legal case, with the military imagery being strictly metaphorical.

3. *haft*. The Hebrew *segor* means etymologically "closing" or "seal." But in one of the Qumran scrolls, it has the sense of the join between spear and handle, so "haft" seems a legitimate approximation.

5. *with the LORD's messenger driving*. This is a neat instance of how the second verset is used in biblical poetry to intensify and specify an idea put forth in the first verset. Wind blowing chaff of course scatters it (as in Psalm 1), but this wind is driven by an agent of divine judgment. Similarly in the next line, it is risky to make one's way in the dark on a slippery road, but how much more so when the nocturnal pedestrian is on the run, pursued by God's messenger.

8. *Let disaster come upon him*. In a common idiomatic procedure, the poet slips from referring to the plural enemies of the supplicant to a single figure who is presumably representative of them all.

May he fall into it in disaster. Though the wording sounds odd, the poet has clearly gone out of his way to build a small envelope structure in this

verse, with "disaster" at the beginning and at the end syntactically surrounding the enemy.

13. *And I, when they were ill, my garment was sackcloth*. This profession of innocence has a certain Job-like quality. Not only, the speaker says, did he harbor no ill intention toward his persecutors, but when they themselves were in distress, he went into mourning to plead for their recovery.

May my own prayer come back to my bosom. This clause is somewhat cryptic. The least strained interpretation is that the speaker wishes the prayer he once uttered for the restoration of these people who then persecuted him would now be fulfilled for himself. The problem is that the clause appears to be set in the time now past when the speaker was mourning for his supposed friends.

15. *like strangers*. The Masoretic Text has *nekhim*, "lame people," which makes no sense. The Syriac version has *kenokhrim*, "like strangers," which nicely catches the idea of purported friends acting hostilely. It is possible that a scribe mistook *nokhrim* for *nekhim* because of the reference to limping at the beginning of the line.

Their mouths gaped. As the next clause and the following verse indicate, this is an image of mouths open to pronounce derisive speech, although there is also a suggestion, picked up later in the psalm (verse 25), of swallowing the hapless object of persecution. The Hebrew shows only the verb *qarʿu*, "they tore open," which can be applied to opening the eyes wide. Here, by the suggestion of context, it may refer to an elided "mouth."

16. *contemptuous mocking chatter*. This translation follows a proposal of the medieval Hebrew commentator David Kimchi that the enigmatic noun *maʿog* is related to the Talmudic *ʿugah*, which means "empty talk."

18. *I shall acclaim You in a great assembly*. The reference, as in similar locutions elsewhere, is to pronouncing words of thanksgiving in the temple rite.

22. *You, LORD, have seen*. God's just and omniscient seeing is, of course, neatly contrasted with the evildoers' seeing the desperate plight of their foe and gloating.

23. *my cause, / . . . my quarrel*. The "quarrel" (*riv*) looks back to the *yerivim* of the beginning of the poem, but the term here has an explicitly legal

meaning as it is paired with “cause” (*mishpat*).

26. *Let them be . . . abased / . . . don shame and disgrace*. This line picks up a cluster of terms used at the beginning of the poem as the psalm rounds out toward its conclusion.

27. *May they sing glad and rejoice, / who desire justice for me*. It is important to note that this is a drama that has four groups of players: God, the supplicant, his enemies, and his supporters. To be viciously pursued by legal means is an isolating experience, and Job, who feels he has been condemned without ever having his day in court, repeatedly complains of his withering isolation. The speaker of this poem, on the other hand, can imagine at the end a whole crowd of people who support him and want justice for him; and so he invokes a blessing upon them that is syntactically parallel and thematically antithetical to the curse he has pronounced on his persecutors.

28. *and my tongue will murmur Your justice*. Thus at the very end, the speaker, praising God’s justice, places himself in a community of the upright who celebrate the presence of the divine order in the lives of humankind.

PSALM 36

[1]For the lead player, for the LORD's servant, for
David.
[2]Crime's utterance to the wicked
within his heart:
"There is no fear of God
before my eyes."
[3]For it caressed him with its eyes
to find his sin of hatred.
[4]The words of his mouth are mischief, deceit,
he ceased to grasp things, to do good.
[5]Mischief he plots in his bed,
takes his stand on a way of no good,
evil he does not despise.
[6]LORD, in the heavens, Your kindness,
and Your faithfulness to the skies.
[7]Your justice like the unending mountains,
Your judgment, the great abyss,
man and beast You rescue, LORD.
[8]How dear is Your kindness, O God,

and the sons of men in Your wings' shadow
shelter.
[9]They take their fill from the fare of Your house
and from Your stream of delights You give them
drink.
[10]For with You is the fountain of life.
In Your light we shall see light.
[11]Draw down Your kindness to those who know
You,
and Your justice to the upright.
[12]Let no haughty foot overtake me,
nor the hand of the wicked repel me.
[13]There did the doers of mischief fall.
They were toppled and could not rise.

PSALM 36 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Crime's utterance to the wicked*. The beginning of this psalm adopts an anomalous rhetorical device. "Crime," as a personified figure, is presented speaking its pernicious speech within the heart of the wicked person. The Masoretic Text reads "my heart," which has made interpreters strain to imagine a quasiprophetic speaker who claims to know what Crime says inwardly to the wicked. More plausibly, a couple of ancient versions read "his heart." In any case, this odd beginning also makes the genre of the psalm difficult to identify. It is not a supplication, but it puts into play the supplication's characteristic contrast between the upright and the evil and also

its confidence in God's overarching justice. The translation emends "his eyes" at the end of this verse to "my eyes."

3. *For it caressed him with its eyes*. This line continues the personification of Crime, suggesting its seductive power (though the verb here could be construed differently than this translation does). Perhaps "eyes" is deliberately repeated to play against the eyes of the wicked mentioned in the previous verse.

5. *Mischief he plots in his bed, / takes his stand on a way of no good*. The wicked man is the antithetical parallel of the good Israelite enjoined in Deuteronomy to speak God's words when he lies down and when he gets up and when he goes on his way.

7. *like the unending mountains*. The Hebrew, *harerey ʾel*, might also be construed as "mountains of God," but most interpreters conclude that *ʾel* here is a suffix of intensification, yielding something like "the mighty mountains" or "the unending mountains" and thus constituting a cosmic complement to "the great abyss" at the end of the parallel verset.

9. *the fare of Your house / . . . Your stream of delights*. God's unwavering regimen of justice for humankind is experienced in the language of the poem as concrete sensual pleasure. The drinking imagery continues with "the fountain of life" in the next line. The Hebrew for "delights" is *ʿadanim,* and so it may allude to the streams of Eden.

13. *There did the doers of mischief fall*. Initially, the use of the deictic "there" is puzzling, but it has an emotional rightness. The poem that began with an intimate recording of the wicked man's malicious speech ends with a confounding of the wicked. But this defeat of the wicked happens at a distance, in the past, in a place from which the speaker is happily removed.

PSALM 37

[1]For David.
Do not be incensed by evildoers.א
    Do not envy those who do wrong.
[2]For like grass they will quickly wither
    and like green grass they will fade.
[3]Trust in the LORD and do good.ב
    Dwell in the land and keep faith.
[4]Take pleasure in the LORD,
    that He grant you your heart's desire.
[5]Direct your way to the LORD.ג
    Trust Him and He will act,
[6]and He will bring forth your cause like the light,
    and your justice like high noon.
[7]Be still before the LORD and await Him.ד
    Do not be incensed by him who prospers,
by the man who devises schemes.
[8]Let go of wrath and forsake rage.ה
    Do not be incensed to do evil.
[9]For evildoers will be cut off,

but those who hope in the LORD, they shall
inherit the earth.
10 And very soon, the wicked will be no more.ז
You will look at his place—he'll be gone.
11 And the poor shall inherit the earth
and take pleasure from great well-being.
12 The wicked lays plots for the justי
and gnashes his teeth against him.
13 The Master will laugh at him,
for He sees that his day will come.
14 A sword have the wicked unsheathedכ
and drawn taut their bow,
to take down the poor and the needy,
to slaughter those on the straight way.
15 Their sword shall come home in their heart
and their bows shall be broken.
16 Better a little for the justמ
than wicked men's great profusion.
17 For the wicked's arms shall be broken,
but the LORD sustains the just.
18 The LORD embraces the fate of the blameless,נ
and their estate shall be forever.
19 They shall not be shamed in an evil time
and in days of famine they shall eat their fill.
20 For the wicked shall perish, and the foes of the
LORD,ס

like the meadows' green—gone, in smoke, gone.
21 The wicked man borrows and will not pay,ל
but the just gives free of charge.
22 For those He blesses inherit the earth
and those He curses are cut off.
23 By the LORD a man's strides are made firm,מ
and his way He desires.
24 Though he fall, he will not be flung down,
for the LORD sustains his hand.
25 A lad I was, and now I am old,נ
and I never have seen a just man forsaken
and his seed seeking bread,
26 all day long lending free of charge
and his seed for a blessing.
27 Turn from evil and do goodס
and abide forever.
28 For the LORD loves justice
and will not forsake His faithful.
They are guarded forever,
but the seed of the wicked is cut off.
29 The just will inherit the earth
and abide forever upon it.
30 The just man's mouth utters wisdomפ
and his tongue speaks justice.
31 His God's teaching in his heart—
his steps will not stumble.

32 The wicked spies out the just man צ
and seeks to put him to death.
33 The LORD will not forsake him in his hands
and will not condemn him when he is judged.
34 Hope for the LORD and keep His way ק
and He will exalt you to inherit the earth;
you will see the wicked cut off.
35 I have seen an arrogant wicked man ר
taking root like a flourishing plant.
36 He passes on, and, look, he is gone,
I seek him, and he is not found.
37 Watch the blameless, look to the upright, ש
for the man of peace has a future.
38 And transgressors one and all are destroyed,
the future of the wicked cut off.
39 The rescue of the just is from the LORD, ת
their stronghold in time of distress.
40 And the LORD will help them and free them,
He will free them from the wicked and rescue them,
for they have sheltered in Him.

PSALM 37 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Do not be incensed by evildoers*. The form of this psalm is an alphabetic acrostic, with the letter *ayin* missing. (The Septuagint reflects a Hebrew version in which there appears to have been a line, in verse 28, beginning with *ʿayin*.) Two lines of verse are assigned to each letter of the alphabet, which explains why this acrostic is twice as long as the previous acrostics in the collection of psalms. This is emphatically a Wisdom psalm, expressing in a variety of more or less formulaic ways the idea that the wicked, however they may seem to prosper, will get their just deserts and the righteous will be duly rewarded. The distinctive note in all this is a plea for equanimity: The good person is enjoined not to get stirred up by the seeming success of the wicked. The verb used at the beginning (repeated later in the psalm) is one that derives etymologically from a root that means "to heat up."

2. *For like grass they will quickly wither*. This simile is a stock image in biblical poetry. It is especially concrete for someone living in the climate of the Near East, where, after the rainy season ends in late spring, there is great heat and no precipitation, so that everything green becomes parched and quickly withers.

3. *keep faith*. The literal sense is "shepherd [or chase] trust."

8. *Let go of wrath and forsake rage*. The plea for equanimity in the face of the success of the wicked is especially pronounced here.

16. *Better a little for the just / than wicked men's great profusion*. This line of verse takes the explicit form of a didactic proverb ("Better *x* than *y*") and thus clearly reflects the Wisdom character of the psalm.

18. *embraces*. Literally, "knows," a verb sometimes used sexually that implies intimate knowledge and affection as much as cognition.

20. *like the meadows' green—gone, in smoke, gone*. "Meadows' green" (*yeqar karim*) might be a metaphor (literally, "meadows' splendor") for grass, although this translation prefers to see in *yeqar* ("splendor") a simple reversal of consonants for *yeraq*, "green." Some interpreters understand *karim* as its homonym, "sheep," and so imagine that "sheep's splendor" refers to the fat of the animal burned "in smoke" on the altar, but that reading seems rather strained. The entire verset in the Hebrew is notable for its alliteration and assonance—*kiqar karim kalu beʿashan kalu*—and the translation seeks to approximate that effect.

25. *A lad I was, and now I am old, / and I never have seen a just man forsaken*. The beauty of this line in part explains its presence in Jewish liturgy at the end of the grace after meals, but the questionable moral calculus behind it is precisely what Job argues against so trenchantly. The only way to sustain the idea that no just person is ever in want is to assume that a needy person must somehow be unjust, whatever the appearances to the contrary. This is the very conclusion that Job's friends draw about him: if he is sorely afflicted, he must have done something terribly wrong to deserve it. The Job poet challenges this received wisdom and proposes a more complicated, indeed paradoxical, moral vision.

28. *His faithful / . . . are guarded forever, / but the seed of the wicked is cut off*. This psalm, with its heavy reliance on proverbial wisdom, tends to a good deal of repetitiousness in its formulations.

35. *I have seen an arrogant wicked man / taking root like a flourishing plant*. This line picks up the image from the beginning of the poem of the ephemerality of the triumph of evil as the transience of green growing things. It participates in the exhortation to the listener not to be perturbed by the seeming success of the wicked, for this success will soon be reversed.

40. *And the LORD will help them*. The concluding line of the psalm is triadic, instead of the dyadic pattern of the preceding lines. This is a formal device often used in biblical poetry to mark closure or transition.

PSALM 38

[1]A David psalm, to call to mind.
[2]LORD, do not rebuke me in Your fury
nor chastise me in Your wrath.
[3]For Your arrows have come down upon me,
and upon me has come down Your hand.
[4]There is no whole place in my flesh through Your rage,
no soundness in my limbs through my offense.
[5]For my crimes have welled over my head,
like a heavy burden, too heavy for me.
[6]My sores make a stench, have festered
through my folly.
[7]I am twisted, I am all bent.
All day long I go about gloomy.
[8]For my innards are filled with burning
and there is no whole place in my flesh.
[9]I grow numb and am utterly crushed.
I roar from my heart's churning.
[10]O Master, before You is all my desire
and my sighs are not hidden from You.

[11]My heart spins around, my strength forsakes me,
and the light of my eyes, too, is gone from me.
[12]My friends and companions stand off from my plight
and my kinsmen stand far away.
[13]They lay snares, who seek my life and want my harm.
They speak lies, deceit utter all day long.
[14]But like the deaf I do not hear,
and like the mute whose mouth will not open.
[15]And I become like a man who does not hear
and has no rebuke in his mouth.
[16]For in You, O LORD, I have hoped.
You will answer, O Master, my God.
[17]For I thought, “Lest they rejoice over me,
when my foot slips, vaunt over me.”
[18]For I am ripe for stumbling
and my pain is before me always.
[19]For my crime I shall tell,
I dread my offense.
[20]And my wanton enemies grow many,
my unprovoked foes abound.
[21]And those who pay back good with evil
thwart me for pursuing good.
[22]Do not forsake me, LORD.
My God, do not stay far from me.

[23]Hasten to my help,
O Master of my rescue.

PSALM 38 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *to call to mind*. The Hebrew infinitive *lehazkir* is anomalous in the superscription of a psalm, appearing here and at the beginning of Psalm 70. It may simply refer to the speaker's intention to bring to mind his suffering in his supplication to God. It might also have a connotation of confession: compare the words of Pharaoh's chief cupbearer in Genesis 41:9, "My offenses I recall [*mazkir*] today," and those of the widow from Zarephath to Elijah in 1 Kings 17:18, "You have come to me to recall [*lehazkir*] my crime."

2. *LORD, do not rebuke me in Your fury, / nor chastise me in Your wrath*. This line, with its symmetrical parallelism, is formulaic in supplications.

3. *Your arrows . . . come down . . . / come down Your hand*. The line takes the form of a neat chiasm (a b b' a'), which this translation reproduces.

4. *There is no whole place in my flesh through Your rage*. In most of the Bible, as elsewhere in the ancient Near East, illness was understood to be a punishment by the deity, presumably for some transgression, whether deliberate or unwitting. This psalm goes on to evoke the physical symptoms —festering sores, inward burning, numbness, bodily contortion, dizziness—as well as the social rejection that accompanies the illness.

5. *my crimes have welled over my head*. Literally, "my crimes have passed over my head." The probable implied image is of drowning, abundantly used elsewhere in Psalms. Perhaps the "burden" in the second verset suggests a crushing weight of water bearing down on the head.

13. *They . . . who seek my life*. This sprawling line does not scan in the Hebrew, and the same is true of the English version.

14. *like the deaf I do not hear*. The speaker has already said he was going blind in his illness (verse 11). Here, however, he turns an infirmity to advantage: whether or not he is literally losing his hearing, he is able in the figurative sense to turn a deaf ear to his mocking enemies and concentrate all his expectant attention on God. Evidently, the situation evoked in this psalm is roughly analogous to that of Job. The man has suffered some terrible illness, including repellent malodorous sores visible all over his body. As a result, his friends have kept their distance from him, and others have chosen to revile him.

20. *my wanton enemies*. The Masoretic Text reads *ʾoyvay ḥayim*, literally, "my enemies of life," which some construe as "my mortal enemies," though it is not a biblical idiom as it is worded here. A scroll of Psalms found at Qumran reads *ʾoyvay ḥinam*, "my wanton enemies" (that is, "enemies for no good reason"), which is nicely idiomatic and makes the parallelism in the two versets here exactly that of 35:19 (where *sheqer,* "unprovoked," appears in the first verset and *ḥinam* in the second, rather than the other way around as here).

22. *Do not forsake me . . . / do not stay far from me*. This strictly formulaic line just before the end of the psalm is a counterpart to the formulaic line at the beginning.

PSALM 39

[1]For the lead player, for Jeduthun. A David psalm.
[2]I thought, “Let me keep my ways from offending
with my tongue.
Let me keep a muzzle on my mouth
as long as the wicked is before me.”
[3]I was mute—in silence.
I kept still, deprived of good,
and my pain was grievous.
[4]My heart was hot within me.
In my thoughts a fire burned.
I spoke with my tongue:
[5]Let me know, O LORD, my end
and what is the measure of my days.
I would know how fleeting I am.
[6]Look, mere hand-spans You made my days,
and my lot is as nothing before You.
Mere breath is each man standing.
selah
[7]In but shadow a man goes about.
Mere breath he murmurs—he stores

and knows not who will gather.
[8]And now, what I expect, O Master,
my hope is in You.
[9]From all my sins save me.
Make me not the scoundrel's scorn.
[10]I was mute, my mouth did not open,
for it is You who acted.
[11]Take away from me Your scourge,
from the blow of Your hand I perish.
[12]In rebuke for crime You chastise a man,
melt like the moth his treasure.
Mere breath all humankind.

selah

[13]Hear my prayer, O LORD,
to my cry hearken,
to my tears be not deaf.
For I am a sojourner with You,
a new settler like all my fathers.
[14]Look away from me, that I may catch my breath
before I depart and am not.

PSALM 39 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *for Jeduthun.* This name appears among the lists of Levite choristers in 1 Chronicles 16:41. It is not entirely certain, however, that this is a proper name

here. Some interpreters have conjectured that it might be a musical term.

2. *I thought, "Let me keep my ways from offending with my tongue."* There are elements of the psalm, here at the beginning and later on (see, for example, verse 11, "Take away from me Your scourge") that identify it as a supplication. But the poem takes the distinctive form of a haunting meditation on the ephemerality of human life. Some of the ideas and formulations seem like an anticipation of Qohelet (most notably, the reiterated term *hevel*, "breath," as an image of man's insubstantiality). Other lines sound like Job ("mere hand-spans You made my days," "You . . . melt like the moth his treasure").

as long as the wicked is before me. The predominant form of the line in biblical poetry is dyadic—that is, consisting of two parallel members or versets. This poem is unusual in that triadic lines predominate. Each of the first six lines of poetry has three members. The first dyadic line appears when the speaker in a transition summons up his expectations of God (verse 8). The poem returns to triadic lines in verses 12 and 13. This preference for the triadic is a formal expression of a powerful psychological tension. Whereas the dyadic line encourages balance and symmetry, the addition of a third verset is often used to introduce an element of surprise or to destabilize what has gone before it. Here, after the two parallel versets announcing the resolution to be silent, we discover in the third verset, which is a subordinate clause, that this resolution has been taken in the presence of the wicked and caused by that presence.

3. *I kept still, deprived of good.* The Hebrew is *mitov*, literally, "from good," and the translation risks the assumption that the initial *mem* is a *mem* of deprivation.

and my pain was grievous. The third verset introduces a hitherto unannounced datum—the suffering of the speaker.

4. *I spoke with my tongue.* After two parallel versets expressing acute pain, speech bursts out in the destabilizing third verset—the very thing that the speaker had meant to forswear.

6. *mere hand-spans . . . / as nothing . . . / Mere breath.* Like the Job poet, who so powerfully expresses the fleeting nature of human existence, this psalmist calls on a rich vocabulary of synonyms for ephemerality. The middle term here, "nothing" (*ʿayin*), is what human transience must ultimately come to,

and it is precisely the word (in a declined form, first-person singular) with which the poem ends in the received text.

my lot. The Hebrew *ḥeldi* (undeclined form *ḥeled*), which elsewhere means something like "the existing world," is an obvious play on *ḥadel*, "fleeting," in the previous verse.

Mere breath is each man standing. The term "standing" (*nitsav*) is enigmatic in context. The possible meaning (assuming that the text is correct) is that though a man seems to stand firm and tall, he is mere breath.

7. *he stores / and knows not who will gather.* This is an especially Ecclesiastian note. The literal sense of the last word of the line in the Hebrew is "gather them," "them" evidently referring to the things a man stores.

9. *Make me not the scoundrel's scorn.* This could mean do not make me the butt of the scoundrel who would mock me for my suffering, or do not make me an object of scorn as though I were a scoundrel.

13. *to my tears be not deaf.* This is an interesting use of the third verset in a triadic line. The first two versets are strictly parallel in meaning: Hear/hearken; my prayer/my cry. "Tears" (in the singular in the Hebrew) is of course a metonymy for weeping, but in itself a tear is mute, unlike the prayer and the cry. God here is entreated in a negative formulation, not to hear but rather to be not deaf.

For I am a sojourner . . . / a new settler. This line is a striking instance of the so-called break-up pattern, in which a hendiadys ("sojourner and settler," meaning "resident alien") is split up with each of the component terms set into one of the two parallel versets. The procedure becomes a way of doubling and emphasizing the term for resident alien, thus underscoring the idea of transience associated with it. "New" has been added to "settler" (*toshav*) in the translation to convey the notion of impermanence clearly implied in the Hebrew idiom.

14. *Look away from me, that I may catch my breath.* The entire line sounds distinctly Jobean, and one wonders whether the Job poet (who in all probability wrote at a moment after the composition of this psalm) may have quoted our text. See Job 10:20–21: "let me be. / Turn away that I may have some gladness / before I go, never more to return, / to the land of dark and death's shadow." I follow Raymond Scheindlin in rendering the disputed verb *ʾavligah* as "catch my breath."

and am not. The finality of death that darkens the consciousness of the speaker throughout the poem figures climactically in the single Hebrew word for extinction, *we'eyneni*, with which the poem concludes.

PSALM 40

[1]For the lead player, for David, a psalm.

[2]I urgently hoped for the LORD.
He bent down toward me and heard my voice,
[3]and He brought me up from the roiling pit,
from the thickest mire.
And He set my feet on a crag,
made my steps firm.
[4]And He put in my mouth a new song—
praise to our God.
May many see and fear
and trust in the LORD.
[5]Happy the man who puts
in the LORD his trust
and does not turn to the sea monster gods
and to false idols.
[6]Many things You have done—You,
O LORD our God—Your wonders!
And Your plans for us—
none can match You,

I would tell and I would speak:
they are too numerous to recount.
[7]Sacrifice and grain offering You do not desire.
You opened ears for me:
for burnt offering and offense offering You do not ask.
[8]Then did I think: Look, I come
with the scroll of the book written for me.
[9]To do what pleases You, my God, I desire,
and Your teaching is deep within me.
[10]I heralded justice in a great assembly.
Look, I will not seal my lips.
LORD, You Yourself know.
[11]Your justice I concealed not in my heart.
Your faithfulness and Your rescue I spoke.
I withheld not from the great assembly Your steadfast truth.
[12]You, LORD, will not hold back
Your mercies from me.
Your steadfast truth
shall always guard me.
[13]For evils drew round me
beyond count.
My crimes overtook me
and I could not see—
more numerous than the hairs of my head—

and my heart forsook me.
[14]Show favor, O LORD, to save me.
LORD, to my help, hasten.
[15]May they be shamed and abased one and all,
who seek my life to destroy it,
may they fall back and be disgraced,
who desire my harm.
[16]Let them be devastated on the heels of their shame,
who say of me, “Hurrah! Hurrah!”
[17]Let all who seek You
exult and rejoice in You.
May they always say, “God is great!”—
those who love Your rescue.
[18]As for me, I am lowly and needy.
May the Master account it for me.
My help, he who frees me You are.
My God, do not delay.

PSALM 40 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *He bent down toward me and heard my voice.* Generically, this psalm is a hybrid. These opening words, signaling a prayer already answered, are the gesture of a thanksgiving psalm. Verses 13–18 are the urgent plea of a psalm of supplication. In verses 7–11, the speaker assumes a stance resembling that of the prophets. Indeed, the idea that God wants not sacrifices but truth and

adherence to His teaching (verses 7 and 8) is reminiscent of certain famous passages in Isaiah and Micah.

3. *the roiling pit.* Literally, "the pit of noise." Most interpreters conclude that the noise is the rushing sound of the confluent waters of the abyss.

the thickest mire. The Hebrew is *tit hayawen*. On the assumption that the obscure *yawen* is a synonym of *tit*, which clearly means "mud" or "mire," the conjunction of two synonyms in construct form would indicate a superlative or an intensification of meaning.

5. *the sea monster gods.* The noun *rahav* (here in plural form) is one of the designations of the primordial sea beast of Canaanite mythology.

false idols. The noun here, *satey*, is anomalous, and the common claim that it means "those who turn [to falsehood]" rests on scant philological evidence. This translation, strictly on the basis of the poetic parallel with *rehavim*, "sea monster gods," conjectures that the reference is to false gods or idols.

7. *You opened ears for me.* The phrase literally means, "You dug open ears for [or to]"—that is, vouchsafed me a new acute power of listening to the divine truth. In later Hebrew, this idiom *karah ʾozen* comes to mean "listen attentively." It is also possible to construe this—because "ears" is not declined in the possessive—as God's listening attentively to the speaker.

offense offering. This is the "sin offering" of the traditional translations.

8. *I come / with the scroll of the book written for me.* Some claim that the book is the book of the Torah, which spells out what God requires of man. It is equally possible, however, that this scroll of the book is a kind of personal-prophetic emblem, a miniature vision of how God dictates His will to the speaker.

9. *deep within me.* Literally, "within my bowels."

13. *crimes overtook me . . . / more numerous than the hairs of my head.* There is a counterpoint between God's wonders, too numerous to count, and the speaker's misdeeds, so numerous that they literally overwhelm him, blind him, make him lose heart. In both instances, the same verb for being numerous, *ʿatsmu*, is used in the same form.

18. *As for me, I am lowly and needy.* The speaker, having just conjured up an image of God's rejoicing celebrants who proclaim His greatness, suddenly

remembers that he himself is in a far more unhappy condition, miserable and needy, desperately requiring God's help.

May the Master account it for me. The root *ḥashav* means to plan or to devise (as in verse 6), or to account, to take into consideration. Those who opt for the first meaning here are obliged to imagine a merely implied object of the verb, such as "deliverance," "rescue." Without such strain, one can understand this clause, logically consequent to the preceding clause, to mean: may God take into account my desperate plight of neediness and hasten to my rescue.

PSALM 41

[1]To the lead player. A David psalm.
[2]Happy who looks to the poor.
On the day of evil may the LORD make him safe.
[3]May the LORD guard him and keep him alive.
May he be called happy in the land.
And do not deliver him to his enemies' maw.
[4]May the LORD sustain him on the couch of pain.
—You transformed his whole bed of illness.
[5]I said, "LORD, grant me grace,
heal me, though I offended You."
[6]My enemies said evil of me:
"When will he die and his name be lost?"
[7]And should one come to visit,
his heart spoke a lie.
He gathered up mischief,
went out, spoke abroad.
[8]One and all my foes whispered against me,
against me plotted my harm:
[9]"Some nasty thing is lodged in him.

As he lies down, he will not rise again.”
[10]Even my confidant, in whom I did trust,
who ate my bread,
was utterly devious with me.
[11]And You, O LORD, grant me grace, raise me up,
that I may pay them back.
[12]In this I shall know You desire me—
that my enemy not trumpet his conquest of me.
[13]And I, in my innocence, You sustained me
and made me stand before You forever.

[14]Blessed is the LORD God of Israel
forever and forever,
amen and amen.

PSALM 41 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Happy who looks to the poor*. The verb *maskil*, which more commonly refers to understanding, also can mean to see or look (as “see” idiomatically in many languages can mean “to understand”). The frequent verb in rabbinic and modern Hebrew, *histakel*, “to look,” is derived from the same root.

3. *maw*. More literally, the Hebrew *nefesh* refers to the gullet. In any case, the image is of being swallowed up by the enemy.

4. *You transformed his whole bed of illness*. This switch from verbs in the jussive (“May the LORD sustain him”) to a perfect tense marks the transition from the generality of the prayer for the wretched to the actual subject of the

psalm—thanksgiving for recovery from a grave illness. It must be said that the Hebrew here sounds awkward: literally, "All his bed You turned over in his illness."

5. *I said.* The speaker now launches on a narrative account of the time in the past when he was ill, beginning with a quotation of the prayer he uttered for healing.

9. *is lodged in him.* The literal sense of the Hebrew verb is "poured," a term typically used for the pouring of molten metal into a mold.

10. *was utterly devious with me.* The meaning of the Hebrew is not entirely certain. Because *ʿaqev* suggests crookedness but also means "heel" (because of the crook of the heel), the phrase might also mean "showed me his heels," "left me in the lurch."

11. *And You, O LORD, grant me grace.* This verse and the next appear to be another self-quotation of the speaker's plea to God in the time of his illness. The poem is dramatically structured around three brief speeches: the initial supplication from the bed of suffering; the harsh words of schadenfreude, spoken by the false friends; and a second supplication, which repeats "grant me grace" and adds to the initial prayer the desire to pay back the gloating enemies.

12. *trumpet his conquest.* The Hebrew verb *yariʿa* means "to shout joyously," though in contexts such as this, vocal gloating is clearly implied. The term is also associated with the sound made by trumpets and ram's horns.

14. *Blessed is the LORD . . . / forever . . . / amen and amen.* This verse is not an integral part of the psalm but an editorial flourish to mark the end of the first of the five books (on the model of the Torah) into which the redactors retroactively divided the Book of Psalms.

PSALM 42

[1]To the lead player, a *maskil* for the Korahites.
[2]As a deer yearns for streams of water,
so I yearn for You, O God.
[3]My whole being thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and see
the presence of God?
[4]My tears became my bread day and night
as they said to me all day long, “Where is your God?”
[5]These do I recall and pour out my heart:
when I would step in the procession,
when I would march to the house of God
with the sound of glad song of the celebrant throng.
[6]How bent, my being, how you moan for me!
Hope in God, for yet will I acclaim Him
for His rescuing presence.
[7]My God, my being is bent for my plight.
Therefore do I recall You from Jordan land,

from the Hermons and Mount Mizar.
[8]Deep unto deep calls out
    at the sound of Your channels.
All Your breakers and waves have surged over me.
[9]By day the LORD ordains His kindness
    and by night His song is with me—
prayer to the God of my life.
[10]I would say to the God my Rock,
    "Why have You forgotten me?
Why in gloom do I go, hard-pressed by the foe?
[11]With murder in my bones, my enemies revile me
    when they say to me all day long, "Where is
        your God?"
[12]How bent, my being, how you moan for me!
    Hope in God, for yet will I acclaim Him,
His rescuing presence and my God.

PSALM 42 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *a* maskil. See the comment on this term on 32:1. If the *maskil* is generally a joyous song, the joy in this instance is relegated to the hopeful vision of being reunited with God (verses 6 and 12). This psalm is a supplication in which the speaker presents himself as a man beset by mocking enemies and also banished from God's presence in Zion to surrounding territories (verse 7).

2. *As a deer yearns for streams of water, / so I yearn for You, O God.* The poignancy of this famous line reflects the distinctive tone of this supplication, which instead of emphasizing the speaker's suffering expresses above all his passionate longing for God. He addresses his words to God but feels distant from God, at a painful remove from the Temple and plagued by enemies. The "I" here is the intensive form of the first-person pronoun, *nafshi*, abundantly used in this psalm, and translated in the next verse as "my whole being" (but not in this verse, to avoid what might sound like an awkward repetition in the English). The verb rendered as "yearns" (*ʿarag*) appears only twice in the biblical corpus, so the exact meaning is not certain. Some think it may refer to the sound a thirsty deer makes as it drinks, others to the animal's bending its neck toward water.

3. *thirsts for God, / for the living God.* The verb "thirsts" of course carries forward the simile of the deer yearning for streams of water. The phrase "living God" may also continue the water imagery, because "living water" is idiomatic in biblical Hebrew for fresh water.

and see / the presence of God. Or "and see the face of God." As elsewhere in the Bible when this phrase is used, later editorial tradition, to avoid the anthropomorphism, revocalized the verb so it reads "be seen [in God's presence]." This psalm is the first one in the second book of Psalms, according to the canonical division, and the editors throughout this book generally use "God" (*ʾelohim*) instead of "LORD" (YHWH).

4. *My tears became my bread.* Eating salt tears (in the singular in the Hebrew) instead of food carries on the thirst metaphor of the previous two verses.

5. *pour out my heart.* The Hebrew again uses *nafshi*, "my life-breath" or "my very self."

the procession. The meaning of the Hebrew *sakh* is in doubt.

7. *for my plight.* The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "on me" or "about me."

from Jordan land, / from the Hermons and Mount Mizar. Though some scholars have sought to link this line with a historical exile of the Judahites, the perspective remains first-person singular and the geographical sweep from Jordan in the east to Hermon in the Lebanon region scarcely suggests anything like the Babylonian exile. Anomalously, Mount Hermon appears here as a plural, perhaps because it was the most prominent in a chain of

northern mountains. Mount Mizar has not been identified, but the name means Small Mountain.

8. *Deep unto deep calls out.* This could be an associative leap from the heights to the antithetical depths, from the mountains to the sea, unless one chooses to imagine that the "deeps" (or "abysses") are part of the mountainous landscape of Lebanon.

All Your breakers and waves have surged over me. The geological or cosmic "deeps" of the first verset are transformed into a metaphor for the speaker's distress. The experience of threatened drowning is a familiar image for near death in Psalms, but here it is given startling new power through the linkage with a vast creation in which abyss calls to abyss.

9. *by night His song is with me.* There is a fine ambiguity in the phrasing. This could mean that the speaker hears God's song in the nights ("song" thus directly paralleling "kindness" in the first verset). Or the sense could be that the speaker, mindful of God's kindness, responds in the night with song—such as the song of this psalm. There has been cosmic "sound" in the previous line, and perhaps the Hebrew *leqol tsinoreikha*, "at the sound of Your channels," is intended to make us think of *leqol kinoreikha*, "at the sound of Your lyres."

11. *With murder in my bones.* This shocking phrase is what the Hebrew actually appears to say. The King James Version, with no warrant, puts a sword in the bones. Others seek to relate the Hebrew noun to a root that means "crush," but in fact the verbal stem *r-ts-ḥ* everywhere means "to murder." It is best to take this as an arresting expression of the imminent threat of death. The speaker can feel the murder that others wish to perpetrate on him in his very bones at the moment his enemies revile him.

12. *How bent, my being.* This repetition of verse 6 as a concluding refrain shows two small changes: the word "my God" (*ʾelohai*) is climactically added at the very end, and the Masoretic Text reads "my presence" (*panai*), which does not make a great deal of sense. Two manuscripts as well as a version of the Aramaic Targum read *panaw*, "His presence." This translation takes that as the probably correct reading.

PSALM 43

[1]Grant me justice, O God,
take up my case against a faithless nation,
from a man of deceit and wrong free me.
[2]For You, O God, my stronghold,
why should You neglect me?
Why should I go in gloom, pressed by the foe?
[3]Send forth Your light and Your truth.
It is they that will guide me.
They will bring me to Your holy mountain
And to Your dwelling place.
[4]And let me come to God's altar,
to God, my keenest joy.
And let me acclaim You with the lyre,
O God, my God.
[5]How bent, my being, how you moan for me!
Hope in God, for yet will I acclaim Him,
His rescuing presence and my God.

PSALM 43 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Grant me justice.* This is one of the rare psalms that begins without a superscription. That fact, taken together with the refrain like recurrence of whole clauses and lines from Psalm 42 (the third verset of verse 2 here is almost identical with the third verset of verse 10 in Psalm 42; verse 5 here virtually replicates verses 6 and 12 of Psalm 42), has led most scholars to conclude that Psalms 42 and 43 were originally a single poem, broken up by editors for reasons not entirely clear to us. The opening line here lays out the persecution by enemies evoked in Psalm 42 in explicitly legal terms.

3. *They will bring me to Your holy mountain.* This line of poetry and the two that follow pick up the idea from Psalm 42 that the speaker has been exiled from Zion. In this supplication, which is also a kind of prospective thanksgiving, he longs for the joy of approaching the altar in Jerusalem and celebrating God with song.

4. *my keenest joy.* The Hebrew is a bracketing in the construct state of two synonyms, *simḥat gili*, "joy of my gladness," which has the idiomatic force of an intensification or superlative.

O God, my God. This odd-sounding collocation, *ʾelohim ʾehohay*, appears with some frequency in the second book of Psalms because YHWH has been editorially replaced by *ʾelohim*.

5. *How bent, my being, how you moan for me!* This repeated sentence takes on new meaning here at the end, because the bent being stands in contrast to the celebrant approaching the altar in the previous line, and the low murmuring sound of complaint contrasts with the song accompanied by the lyre.

His rescuing presence. Again, as at the end of Psalm 42, the Masoretic Text has "My presence," and, as there, two manuscripts and a version of the Targum show "His presence."

PSALM 44

[1]For the lead player, for the Korahites, a *maskil*.
[2]God, with our own ears we have heard,
our fathers recounted to us
a deed that You did in their days,
in days of yore.
[3]You, Your hand dispossessed nations—and You
planted them.
You smashed peoples and sent them away.
[4]For not by their sword they took hold of the land,
and it was not their arm that made them
victorious
but Your right hand and Your arm,
and the light of Your face when You favored
them.
[5]You are my king, O God.
Ordain the victories of Jacob.
[6]Through You we gore our foes,
through Your name we trample those against us.
[7]For not in my bow do I trust,
and my sword will not make me victorious.

[8]For You rescued us from our foes,
and our enemies You put to shame.
[9]God we praise all day long,
and Your name we acclaim for all time.
selah
[10]Yet You neglected and disgraced us
and did not sally forth in our ranks.
[11]You turned us back from the foe,
and our enemies took their plunder.
[12]You made us like sheep to be eaten
and scattered us through the nations.
[13]You sold Your people for no wealth
and set no high price upon them.
[14]You made us a shame to our neighbors,
derision and mockery to those round us.
[15]You made us a byword to nations,
an object of scorn among peoples.
[16]All day long my disgrace is before me,
and shame has covered my face,
[17]from the sound of revilers and cursers,
from the enemy and the avenger.
[18]All this befell us, yet we did not forget You,
and we did not betray Your pact.
[19]Our heart has not failed,
nor have our footsteps strayed from Your path,

[20]though You thrust us down to the sea monster's
place
and with death's darkness covered us over.
[21]Had we forgotten the name of God
and spread out our palms to an alien god,
[22]would not God have fathomed it?
For He knows the heart's secrets.
[23]For Your sake we are slain all day long,
we are counted as sheep for slaughter.
[24]Awake, why sleep, O Master!
Rouse up, neglect not forever.
[25]Why do You hide Your face,
forget our affliction, our oppression?
[26]For our neck is bowed to the dust,
our belly clings to the ground.
[27]Rise as a help to us
and redeem us for the sake of Your kindness.

PSALM 44 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *with our own ears we have heard, / our fathers recounted to us.* The first-person plural at the beginning of the psalm identifies it as a collective supplication. The disaster that has occurred is to the nation, and the psalmist remembers times past when God led the people in triumph.

3. *Your hand dispossessed nations—and You planted them.* The fluidity of biblical Hebrew in pronominal reference is especially evident here. The

historical event from “days of yore” referred to is the conquest of the land of Canaan in Joshua’s time. Although “nations” is the object of the verb “dispossessed,” the next clause is disjunctive because “them” must refer to the people of Israel planted in the land after the Canaanites were driven out (at least in this poetic fiction). “Them” in the same position at the end of the next line refers to the peoples of Canaan. In the line after that, “their” refers once more to Israel.

4. *made them victorious.* The verb *hoshiʿa* (and its cognate noun *yeshuʿah*) can mean “rescue” if the object is a person or group in dire straits (the more common usage in Psalms), or, if the situation is one of straightforward military confrontation, it can mean “make victorious, grant victory.” In this psalm, it occurs in both senses. In the present verse, the military sense is required. The context of verse 8 strongly suggests the connotation of “rescue.”

10. *Yet You neglected . . . us.* The initial adverbial *ʾaf* here clearly is an indicator of opposition or contradiction. We praised You continually and kept faith with You, yet You allowed our enemies to triumph over us. Which enemies and what historical period are matters of conjecture. Some commentators, without warrant from the text, have wanted to situate this psalm in the second century B.C.E., under Greek domination; others have put it back somewhere in the first Davidic dynasty. Ancient Israel in all periods had no lack of powerful adversaries, and there is nothing in the language of the poem to enable a confident dating.

14. *You made us a shame to our neighbors.* Repeatedly in Psalms and in the Prophets, the bitterness of defeat is thought to be compounded by a stinging sense of national humiliation, an experience vividly evoked from this verse to the end of verse 17.

15. *an object of scorn.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is “a wagging of the head”—a gesture of contempt.

16. *and shame has covered my face.* The received text reads, “and the shame of my face covered me,” but a change of a single consonant in the Hebrew verb for “covered” yields a more plausible idiom, as translated here.

19. *nor have our footsteps strayed from Your path.* The Masoretic Text reads, “and You made our footsteps stray from Your path,” which makes little sense.

An emendation of *watet* (“made stray”) to *watiteh* (“strayed” [that is, our footsteps strayed]) resolves the difficulty and produces a neat parallelism with “our heart has not failed.”

20. *thrust us down to the sea monster’s place.* This is another allusion to the Canaanite cosmogonic myth of a primordial sea monster conquered by a divine adversary, then forever imprisoned in the seabed.

23. *we are slain all day long, / we are counted as sheep for slaughter.* The insistence of images such as this in the psalm leads one to conclude that the military defeat here is no metaphor but reflects an actual historical situation in which the people of Israel suffered devastation at the hands of an armed enemy.

26. *our neck is bowed to the dust.* The context strongly suggests that the multivalent *nefesh* in this instance is used in its anatomical sense, the neck or throat, in tight parallelism with the belly crushed to the earth in the second verset. The abased figure of the nation, bowed to the earth, is an antithesis to the exhortation to God to rise and conquer.

27. *for the sake of Your kindness.* Here, and virtually everywhere else in Psalms, *ḥesed* equally implies kindness or caring as well as keeping faith, honoring covenantal obligations.

PSALM 45

[1]For the lead player, on *shoshanim*, for the Korahites,
a *maskil*, a song of love.
[2]My heart is astir with a goodly word.
I speak what I've made to the king.
My tongue is the pen of a rapid scribe.
[3]You are loveliest of the sons of man,
grace flows from your lips.
Therefore has God blessed you forever.
[4]Gird your sword on your thigh, O warrior,
your glory and your grandeur.
[5]And in your grandeur pass onward,
mount on a word of truth, humility and justice,
and let your right hand shoot forth terrors,
[6]your sharpened arrows—
peoples fall beneath you—
into the heart of the king's enemies.
[7]Your throne of God is forevermore.
A scepter of right, your kingship's scepter.
[8]You loved justice and hated evil.
Therefore did God your God anoint you

with oil of joy over your fellows.
[9]Myrrh and aloes and cassia
all your garments.
From ivory palaces
lutes gladdened you.
[10]Princesses are your cherished ones,
the consort stands at your right in gold of Ophir.
[11]Listen, princess, and look, incline your ear,
and forget your people, and your father's house.
[12]And let the king yearn for your beauty,
for he is your master,
and bow down to him.
[13]Daughter of Tyre, with tribute
the people's wealthy will court your favor.
[14]All the princess's treasure is pearls,
filigree of gold her raiment.
[15]In embroidered stuff she is led to the king,
maidens in train, her companions.
[16]They are led in rejoicing and gladness,
they enter the palace,
brought to you, king.
[17]In your fathers' stead your sons will be.
You will set them as princes in all the land.
[18]Let me make your name heard in all generations.
Therefore do peoples acclaim you forevermore.

PSALM 45 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *on* shoshanim. This is still another unknown musical term, though the literal meaning is "lilies."

a song of love. This designation for a psalm occurs only here. This is a royal psalm, as the ensuing praise of the king's beauty and his martial prowess makes clear. But what is distinctive about this among the royal psalms is that it appears to celebrate the king's wedding, with a foreign princess (verses 10–16). That occasion would justify "a song of love," *shir yedidut*, making this poem a kind of epithalamium.

2. *My heart is astir with a goodly word.* This psalm differs from all others in the canonical collection both rhetorically and stylistically. Only here do we have a poet who begins by celebrating his own art—a gesture that might well be appropriate for a court poet; he announces at the outset that his tongue is like the pen of a rapid—that is, skilled—scribe.

3. *You are loveliest.* The Hebrew verb *yafyafita*, formed from the adjective *yafeh*, "lovely," is unique to this poem and looks like an elegant stylistic flourish suited to the celebratory language of the psalm.

4. *Gird your sword.* From loveliness and grace, the poem quickly moves on to military might, something the kings of the ancient Near East proverbially needed to exercise in order to maintain securely the grandeur of their courts even in times of peace, such as the wedding occasion for this poem.

5. *pass onward.* The verb *tsalaḥ* can also mean "to prosper," but the juxtaposition with "mount" argues for its other use as a verb of motion.

7. *Your throne of God.* Some construe the Hebrew here to mean "Your throne, O God," but it would be anomalous to have an address to God in the middle of the poem because the entire psalm is directed to the king or to his bride. Others emend the text to keep the throne unambiguously royal.

8. *God your God.* As elsewhere, this odd phrasing is the result of an editorial substitution of *ʾelohim ʾelohekha* for YHWH *ʾelohekha*.

9. *lutes gladdened you.* The Masoretic Text reads *mini* ("from"?), but *minim*, "lutes," with the support of one ancient witness, makes the otherwise enigmatic verse entirely intelligible.

10. *the consort.* The Hebrew *shegal* is probably an Akkadian loanword. Other features of the poem's style are archaic, and some commentators, given the wedding with a Tyrian princess (see verse 13), have been tempted to see the psalm as a product of Solomon's court.

11. *princess.* The Hebrew says "daughter" (*bat*), but the context suggests that this is an ellipsis for *bat melekh*, "princess" because princesses have just been referred to in the plural as *benot melakhim*. The poet, having focused on the royal consort while still addressing the king (verse 10), now turns to the consort and addresses her directly.

12. *And let the king yearn for your beauty, / for he is your master.* This verse offers a capsule version of royal marriage in a patriarchal society. The bride provides the beauty, which rouses the king's desire, but he is her master.

14. *All the princess's treasure is pearls.* The Masoretic Text reads literally "all the princess's treasure is inward," which Jewish tradition has taken as a slogan for the virtuous wife's conjugal modesty. But the immediately following word has a superfluous *mem* at the beginning. If one moves it back to the end of the previous word and inserts a second *nun* for the *mem* in the middle of the word, instead of *penimah*, "inward," the consonantal text would read *peninim*, "pearls," which makes more sense and a much better parallelism. There is also a syntactic problem here, because "princess" would have to be a vocative ("All the treasure, princess"), but because the royal bride is spoken of in the third person in the last half of the verse, the translation does not represent the vocative.

treasure. The Hebrew *kevudah* should be construed as a noun, "treasure," not as an adjective modifying "princess," a construction some interpreters have proposed.

15. *in train.* The Hebrew says literally "behind her."

17. *In your fathers' stead your sons will be.* As in the Renaissance epithalamium, the celebration of the beauty of bride and groom and the evocation of the pomp and circumstance of the wedding is followed by a blessing of fertility on the union about to be consummated.

18. *Let me make your name heard.* Though some interpreters understand "you" to refer to God and read this final verse as a stock psalmodic ending, it is more plausible to see it as a conclusion of the address to the king. This would be in keeping with our understanding of verse 7, "Your throne of God is forevermore," as well as with "Therefore has God blessed you forever" in verse 3.

PSALM 46

[1]For the lead player, for the Korahites, on the *alamoth*
a song.
[2]God is a shelter and strength for us,
a help in straits, readily found.
[3]Therefore we fear not when the earth breaks apart,
when mountains collapse in the heart of the
seas.
[4]Its waters roar and roil,
mountains heave in its surge.
selah
[5]A stream, its rivulets gladden God's town,
the holy dwelling of Elyon.
[6]God in its midst, it will not collapse.
God helps it as morning breaks.
[7]Nations roar and kingdoms collapse.
He sends forth His voice and earth melts.
[8]The LORD of Armies is with us,
a fortress for us, Jacob's God.
selah
[9]Go, behold the acts of the LORD,

Who made desolations on earth,
10 caused wars to cease to the end of the earth.
The bow He has broken and splintered the spear,
and chariots burned in fire.
11 "Let go, and know that I am God.
I loom among nations, I loom upon earth."
12 The LORD of Armies is with us,
a fortress for us, Jacob's God.

selah

PSALM 46 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *on the* alamoth. The preposition seems to indicate that this is a musical instrument, but nothing more is known about it.

2. *God is a shelter and strength for us.* The first-person plural, with the substance of this line picked up in the refrain of verse 8 and verse 12, marks this as a national psalm, evidently a collective thanksgiving after victory over an enemy (see verses 5–8).

3. *we fear not when the earth breaks apart.* An excessive literalism has led some commentators to attach this psalm because of these lines to one of the earthquakes that hit Jerusalem during the First Temple era, mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. The hyperbolic description of mountains collapsing into the sea is hardly a realistic depiction of an earthquake. It is more likely that the images are metaphorical: even when the whole world around us falls apart, we trust in God's help and do not fear. In fact, the seismic cataclysm may be a figurative representation of an assault by enemies because some of

the same terms are used (verses 6 and 7) in the representation of a military upheaval.

4. *Its waters roar and roil.* The translation seeks to approximate the strong alliterative effect of the Hebrew, *yehemu yeḥmeru meymaw*.

selah. The musical notation at the end of this verse also appears to mark the end of a unit in the poem, because "A stream" at the beginning of the next verse carries us, in a sharp antithesis, from the heaving sea to the quiet waters of Zion.

5. *A stream, its rivulets gladden God's town.* There is no actual river in Jerusalem, but there is a partly underground stream, the Shiloah, that provides a water source from the Gihon spring east of the city.

Elyon. Conventionally, the Most High, a Canaanite deity co-opted for monotheistic usage.

6. *it will not collapse.* This line picks up the vocabulary of seismic upheaval from verse 3 but turns around the meaning.

as morning breaks. After the long night of siege, ridden with terrors, God intervenes in a figurative daybreak to rescue His people.

7. *Nations roar and kingdoms collapse.* Both verbs here are drawn from the depiction of seismic cataclysm in verses 3 and 4, now applied to the realm of warfare.

He sends forth His voice. Conventionally, as in Psalm 18, God's voice would be thunder. In Canaanite mythology, as in other traditions, lightning bolts are the weapons of the sky god.

8. *The LORD of Armies.* This common epithet has a special, and reassuring, application to the situation in this psalm of an embattled Zion. Untypically for this section of Psalms, God is referred to as YHWH, perhaps because of the fixed formula of the epithet. YHWH recurs in the next verse, possibly under the influence of this one.

9. *Go, behold the acts of the LORD.* These words, after the selah notation at the end of the preceding line, begin the concluding unit of the poem, in which the God Who rules over nature and men is imagined eschatologically as overmastering all the world and bringing an end to war.

made desolations on earth. This line and the one immediately following telescope history and the glorious end-time to come. God is responsible for

the vast sweeps of destruction that visit the inhabited earth, whether through natural events or military ones. But He also exercises the power to end the era of violence and bring peace to humankind.

10. *caused wars to cease to the end of the earth.* Throughout the poem, *ʾerets* has been used in its broader sense of "earth," not "land." Here, the large global perspective implied in that usage is made explicit.

chariots. Though the Hebrew noun usually means "wagons," the parallelism with "bow" and "spear" suggests a more martial vehicle.

11. *Let go.* This verb—etymologically, it means to relax one's grip on something—is somewhat surprising here. It might be an injunction to cease and desist from armed struggle, to unclench the warrior's fist. At this juncture, which is in effect the end of the poem, the eschatologically triumphant God speaks directly, declaring His supremacy over all the world. The poem concludes by repeating the refrain, "The LORD of Armies is with us, / a fortress for us, Jacob's God."

PSALM 47

[1]For the lead player, for the Korahites, a psalm.
[2]All peoples, clap hands,
shout out to God with a sound of glad song.
[3]For the LORD is most high and fearsome,
a great king over all the earth.
[4]He crushes peoples beneath us
and nations beneath our feet.
[5]He chooses for us our estate,
pride of Jacob whom He loves.
selah
[6]God has gone up with a trumpet blast,
the LORD with a ram's horn sound.
[7]Hymn to God, hymn,
hymn to our king, O hymn.
[8]For king of all earth is God,
hymn joyous song.
[9]God reigns over the nations,
and sits on His holy throne.
[10]The princes of peoples have gathered,
the people of Abraham's God.

For God's are the land's defenders.
Much exalted is He.

PSALM 47 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *For the* LORD *is most high and fearsome, / a great king over all the earth.* The Hebrew ʿ*elyon* is adjectival here and so is translated as "most high" rather than represented as a name for God. This is one of several psalms that take for their subject the celebration of God's kingship. In the first half of the poem, up to the selah that marks the end of verse 5, God's kingship is seen manifested in His granting triumph to Israel over its enemies, a common theme in Psalms. In the second half of the poem, ceremonial flourishes of acclaim for the divine king are explicitly invoked, and God is imagined seated on a throne. Since Sigmund Mowinckel in the early twentieth century, many scholars have contended that this psalm is the text of a New Year ritual (on the model of an annual Babylonian rite of coronation for the god Mardukh) in which God was crowned. It must be said that the existence of an actual ritual of this sort is mere conjecture, and the psalm could simply be a symbolic celebration through song of the idea that God reigns supreme over all. This is precisely how this psalm came to be used in subsequent Jewish tradition in the New Year liturgy.

6. *God has gone up.* God's loftiness or ascent is a theme that sounds through the poem from beginning to end. The psalmist may well be inviting us to imagine God ascending to take His seat on the celestial throne.

trumpet blast, / . . . ram's horn. The fanfare of these instruments marked the coronation of human kings.

8. *joyous song.* The Hebrew term here is *maskil*, the word that appears in several of the superscriptions to individual psalms. The inference that it refers in particular to joyous song is drawn from the way it may be used in Amos 5:13.

10. *For God's are the land's defenders.* This sentence in all likelihood should be linked with "He crushes peoples beneath us / and nations beneath our feet (verse 4)." That is, God has manifested His own regal power by enabling His people to triumph over its enemies, and the warriors who have successfully defended the "estate" of the Land of Israel are victorious through God, or are in effect God's soldiers.

Much exalted is He. The Hebrew here uses a passive verb *naʿalah* (literally, "has gone up") in an adjectival sense. The verb exhibits the same root *ʿ-l-h* detectible in the adjective *ʿelyon*, "most high," in verse 3.

PSALM 48

[1]Song, a psalm for the Korahites.
[2]Great is the LORD and highly praised
in our God's town, His holy mountain.
[3]Lovely in heights, all the earth's joy,
Mount Zion, far end of Zaphon,
the great King's city.
[4]God in its bastions
is famed as a fortress.
[5]For, look, the kings have conspired,
passed onward one and all.
[6]It is they who have seen and so been astounded,
were panicked, dismayed.
[7]Shuddering seized them there,
pangs like a woman in labor.
[8]With the east wind
You smashed the ships of Tarshish.
[9]As we heard, so we see
in the town of the LORD of Armies, in the
town of our God.
May God make it stand firm forever!

selah

[10]We witnessed, O God, Your kindness
in the midst of Your temple.
[11]Like Your name, O God, so Your praise—
to the ends of the earth.
With justice Your right hand is full.
[12]Let Mount Zion rejoice,
let Judah's townlets exult
because of Your judgments.
[13]Go around Zion, encircle it.
Count its towers.
[14]Set your mind to its ramparts,
scale its bastions
to recount to the last generation.
[15]For this is God, our God, forevermore.
He will lead us forever.

PSALM 48 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Great is the LORD and highly praised / in our God's town.* This is a psalm celebrating Zion as God's city, which He protects. Although the first half of the poem, until the division marked by the selah at the end of verse 9, appears to reflect a particular military victory over an invading force from the sea, scholarly attempts to anchor the text in a specific historical event have been unavailing.

3. *all the earth's joy, / . . . far end of Zaphon.* Although Jerusalem, as some archaeologists have argued, may have actually been a small backwater capital (hence the translation here of *ʿir* as "town" rather than "city") among the great cities of the ancient Near East, the poet imagines it in cosmic terms. On its heights, it is a delight to all the inhabited earth, and he calls it "Zaphon" (elsewhere, a term that means "north"), the mountain that is the abode of Baal in Canaanite mythology.

the great King's city. Given the context, it seems more likely that "King" refers to God than to the Davidic ruler.

5. *conspired.* The Hebrew *noʿadu* puns on *nodʿa*, "is famed" (the same three consonants with the order of the *dalet* and *ʿayin* reversed) in the previous line.

6–7. *were panicked, dismayed. / Shuddering seized them.* These words are a pointed allusion to the Song of the Sea, Exodus 15:14–15, which records a different kind of victory at sea over a ruthless enemy through divine intervention.

8. *With the east wind / You smashed the ships of Tarshish.* The east wind, blowing from the desert, proverbially brings trouble. Tarshish, which has been located by different scholars at various places from Asia Minor to Iberia, is somewhere to the west on the Mediterranean, though the phrase could conceivably refer not to the port of embarkation but to the design of the ships.

10. *We witnessed, O God, Your kindness / in the midst of Your temple.* The "witnessing" (or, perhaps, "envisaging," the meaning of the Hebrew verb in this context being somewhat uncertain) is an overlap with the "seeing" of the previous verse. But this line begins a new movement in the poem, an exhortation to pilgrims ascending Mount Zion to behold the town's mighty bastions that manifest God's protecting presence.

11. *to the ends of the earth.* This phrase picks up the global reach of "all the earth's joy" at the beginning of the psalm.

With justice. The Hebrew *tsedeq* can also mean "victory" or "bountiful act."

12. *Judah's townlets.* The literal sense of the phrase is "Judah's daughters," but in urban contexts, "daughters" (*banot*) refers to the outlying townlets, and the city itself is sometimes called "mother."

judgments. This Hebrew term, *mishpat*, is often paired with "justice," which appears just above in this poem.

14. *scale its bastions.* The verb occurs only here, so its meaning is disputed. This translation is based on the fact that the verb appears to reflect the same root as *pisgah*, "mountaintop," although others, relating it to a verb from this root in rabbinic Hebrew, think it may mean "pass through."

to the last generation. Some prefer to construe this as "next generation," but the emphasis at the end on "forever" suggests that it rather means from one generation to another, to the end of time, or at least to the distant future.

15. *He will lead us forever.* The very last word of the poem, *ʿal-mut*, is obscure. It might mean "over death," but the preposition and the vocalization of the noun would be anomalous. Some scholars read it as *ʿalamot*, a musical term (see 46:1), but it would be odd to have such a term at the end of a psalm rather than at the beginning. The translation follows the suggestion of Mitchell Dahood and others that it has the same sense as *leʿolam*, "forever."

PSALM 49

[1]For the lead player, for the Korahites, a psalm.
[2]Hear this, all peoples,
hearken, all who dwell in the world.
[3]You human creatures, you sons of man,
together the rich and the needy.
[4]My mouth speaks wisdom,
my heart's utterance, understanding.
[5]I incline my ear to a saying,
I take up with the lyre my theme.
[6]Why should I fear in evil days,
when crime comes round me at my heels?
[7]Who trust in their wealth
and boast of their great riches—
[8]yet they surely will redeem no man,
will not give to God his ransom.
[9]To redeem their lives is too dear,
and one comes to an end forever.
[10]Will he yet live forever?
Will he not see the Pit?
[11]For he sees the wise die,

both the fool and the stupid man perish,
and they abandon to others their wealth.
[12]Their grave is their home forever,
their dwelling for all generations,
though their names had been called upon earth.
[13]And man will not rest in splendor.
He is likened to beasts that are doomed.
[14]This way of theirs is their foolishness,
and after, in words alone, they show favor.
selah
[15]Like sheep to Sheol they head—
death shepherds them—
and the upright hold sway over them in the morn.
And they wear out their image in Sheol,
a habitation for them.
[16]But God will ransom my life,
from the grip of Sheol He will take me.
selah
[17]Do not fear when a man grows rich,
when he enlarges his house's glory.
[18]For in his death he will not take all,
his glory won't go down behind him.
[19]For his own self he blesses when alive
and acclaims You for giving him bounty.
[20]He will come to the state of his fathers—
forevermore will not see the light.

[21]Man will not grasp things in splendor.
He is likened to beasts that are doomed.

PSALM 49 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Hear this, all peoples.* The address at the beginning to all inhabitants of earth is not from a triumphal national perspective, as in some other psalms, but rather reflects the universalist orientation of this text as a Wisdom psalm. Indeed, there is no other poem in the collection that has such pronounced Wisdom features.

3. *You human creatures, you sons of man.* The vocative "you" attempts to reproduce the emphatic effect of the reiterated *gam* in the Hebrew.

4. *My mouth speaks wisdom, / my heart's utterance, understanding.* This declaration that the speaker is about to pronounce words of instruction is one that often recurs in the Book of Proverbs.

5. *saying, / . . . theme.* These are technical terms for didactic messages cast in poetic form (*mashal* and *ḥidah*) that are frequently repeated in Proverbs (see, for example, Proverbs 1:6).

8. *yet they.* The translation, with some manuscripts, reads *ʾakh*, "yet," for the Masoretic *ʾaḥ*, "brother."

9. *To redeem their lives is too dear, / and one comes to an end forever.* As is often the case in biblical poetry, pronoun reference is confusing, though the meaning of this verse is not in doubt. Those who trust in their wealth but are unwilling to put up money for those in need find it too expensive to redeem the lives of the needy. Before the recalcitrant rich can be prevailed on to help, the poor man in straits will perish, will be gone forever.

10. *Will he . . . live forever?* At this point, it is not entirely certain whether "he" is the poor man (and hence this verse is a direct continuation of the end of the previous verse) or whether the rich man is now being reminded that he

will not live forever. The emphasis on the fate of mortality that awaits even the great of the earth (verses 11 and 12) might favor the latter interpretation.

11. *For he sees the wise die, / both the fool and the stupid man perish.* This notion of death as the grim equalizer between wise and foolish, as between rich and poor, sounds more like Qohelet than Proverbs. The term for "fool," *kesil*, is a distinctive item in the lexicon of Qohelet, just as the whole clause "they abandon to others their wealth" has close parallels in Qohelet.

12. *Their grave.* The translation reads, as do several of the ancient versions, *qivram* for the Masoretic *qirbam*, "their midst." In the Hebrew, this is a simple reversal of two consonants. This reading produces an appropriately sardonic statement—that the dead, whatever their earthly acquisitions and attainments, have only the grave as their everlasting home.

though their names had been called upon earth. The initial "though" is frankly an interpretive guess (the Hebrew says only "and"), yielding the Ecclesiastian sense that these men who were once famous on earth now have only the grave as a habitation.

13. *man will not rest in splendor.* The primary meaning of the verb *yalin* is "to spend the night." The idea would be that a man's earthly glory barely lasts a night, for, like all mere beasts, he is fated to die. But when this line is repeated as a refrain at the end of the poem, the verb used is *yavin*, "understand" or "grasp," and it is not clear which of the two readings is the authentic one, or whether the second reading is a deliberate play on the first. *Yalin*, however, makes more sense in connection with the theme of the ephemerality of human life.

14. *and after, in words alone, they show favor.* The Hebrew of this entire verset is not intelligible. Literally, it reads "and after them in their mouth they show favor." The text has almost certainly been scrambled here, but no attempt to reconstruct the original is very convincing. Even the selah at the end of the line does not mark any logical division in the poem.

15. *and the upright hold sway over them in the morn.* This appears to express an idea, anomalous in the Bible, that the powerful will awake in the underworld to discover that the upright now rule them. A complicated emendation yields "And straight they go down like cattle."

their image. The translation assumes *tsuratam*, "their image," instead of the Masoretic *tsuram*, "their rock." The verb "wear out" attached to this noun

is in the infinitive in the Hebrew, still another oddity in this perplexing text.

a habitation for them. The Hebrew *mizevul lo* is another opaque moment in the text.

16. *from the grip of Sheol He will take me*. "Grip" is literally "hand." But this entire line, invoking a God Who rescues the speaker from the verge of death, seems more appropriate to a thanksgiving psalm and does not jibe well with the meditation on mortality that constitutes the poem.

19. *For his own self he blesses when alive / and acclaims You for giving him bounty*. This is another line of this psalm in which the individual words are comprehensible but not the way they fit together. If the received text is correct, the meaning might be: While he was alive, this man proud of his riches congratulated himself and also conceded thanks to God for his prosperity (revocalizing the verb "acclaim" from its plural form to a singular). The speaker regards such a man as exhibiting a highly dubious piety.

20. *the state of his fathers*. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "the generation of his fathers." The idea is that he who reveled in his earthly possessions will inevitably be reduced to the condition of all who came before him, enveloped in the eternal darkness of death.

21. *Man will not grasp things in splendor*. If the shift from *yalin* to *yavin*, from "rest" to "grasp," was actually intended by the poet, the point at the end is that not only does man barely abide a fleeting night in worldly splendor but also that in his attachment to such splendor, he can have no understanding of the grim end that ineluctably awaits all men.

PSALM 50

[1]An Asaph psalm.
El, the God LORD,
He spoke and called to the earth
from the sun's rising place to its setting.
[2]From Zion, the zenith of beauty
God shone forth.
[3]Let our God come and not be silent.
Before Him fire consumes,
and round about Him—great storming.
[4]Let Him call to the heavens above
and to the earth to judge his people:
[5]"Gather to Me My faithful,
who with sacrifice seal My pact."
[6]And let the heavens tell His justice,
for God, He is judge.
selah

[7]"Hear, O My people, that I may speak,
Israel, that I witness to you.
God your God I am.
[8]Not for your sacrifices shall I reprove you,

your burnt offerings always before Me.
9I shall not take from your house a bull,
nor goats from your pens.
10For Mine are all beasts of the forest,
the herds on the thousand mountains.
11I know every bird of the mountains,
creatures of the field are with Me.
12Should I hunger, I would not say to you,
for Mine is the world and its fullness.
13Would I eat the flesh of fat bulls,
would I drink the blood of goats?
14Sacrifice to God a thanksgiving,
and pay to the High One your vows.
15And call Me on the day of distress—
I will free you and you shall revere me."
16And to the wicked God said:
"Why do you recount My statutes
and bear My pact in your mouth,
17when you have despised chastisement
and flung My words behind you?
18If you see a thief, you run with him,
and with adulterers is your lot.
19You let loose your mouth in evil,
and your tongue clings fast to deceit.
20You sit, against your brother you speak,
your mother's son you slander.

[21]These you have done and I was silent.
    You imagined I could indeed be like you.
I reprove you, make a case before your eyes.
[22]Understand this, you who forget God,
    lest I tear you apart, with no one to save you.
[23]He who sacrifices thanksgiving reveres Me
    and sets out on the proper way.
I will show him God's rescue."

PSALM 50 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *An Asaph psalm.* Asaph was the ancestor of a line of Levites going back to David's time. The rest of the Asaph psalms are grouped together in the third book of Psalms.

El, the God LORD. The grouping of divine names is odd and may be the result of a problem in textual transmission. *ʾEl ʾelohim* ("God God") is an unusual combination, and YHWH, the LORD, ordinarily goes before "God," *ʾelohim*.

2. *God shone forth.* The shining from Zion quickly builds up to a pyrotechnic epiphany as God makes an appearance with consuming fire before Him and storm all around Him.

4. *Let Him call to the heavens above / and to the earth.* The inviting of the heavens and the earth as witnesses is a hallmark of Prophetic and quasi-Prophetic discourse (compare the beginning of Isaiah 1 and the beginning of the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32). This is clearly a Prophetic psalm, with God actually quoted in direct discourse for much of the poem, as in the Literary Prophets.

5. *Gather to Me My faithful.* This verse has encouraged some interpreters to see this psalm as the liturgical text for a rite of renewal of the covenant with

God by a group designated as His "faithful," but the existence of such a ritual at any time in the history of ancient Israel is pure conjecture.

6. *selah.* This notation marks the point before God launches on His long discourse.

8. *Not for your sacrifices.* The idea that God does not require animal sacrifice is a common one in Prophetic literature (most memorably, in Isaiah and Micah).

10. *the herds on the thousand mountains.* This mystifying and evocative phrase has encouraged various emendations, but it may be a proverbial or even mythological reference of which we remain ignorant.

12. *Should I hunger.* The argument against sacrifice differs in emphasis from Isaiah's. The objection is not to the hypocrisy of trampling the courts of the temple with bloodstained hands but to the pagan idea that the deity actually needs the nurture provided through the animals offered up on the altar.

14. *Sacrifice to God a thanksgiving, / and pay to the High One your vows.* It is now made clear that God is not calling for a categorical abolition of sacrifices. If a man needs to give thanks to God, or if he has vowed an offering, the sacrifice (whether animal or grain) is an appropriate act. But no one should imagine that God somehow depends on sacrifice.

18. *run with him.* The Masoretic Text has "show favor with him," the preposition after the verb being somewhat odd. This translation follows the Septuagint, the Targum, and the Syriac in vocalizing the verb differently (*watarots* instead of *watirets*). Running with the wicked and sharing their portion is a better parallelism than favoring and sharing.

22. *tear you apart.* The "you" is merely implied in the Hebrew and has been added for clarity. The implied image, common in biblical poetry as a representation of fierceness, is of a lion tearing its prey to pieces.

23. *and sets out on the proper way.* Although a long tradition of interpretation understands the text here in this fashion, the two Hebrew words it renders, *wesam derekh*—literally, "and he puts the way"—are altogether cryptic.

PSALM 51

[1]For the lead player, a David psalm, [2]upon Nathan the prophet's coming to him when he had come to bed with Bathsheba.

[3]Grant me grace, God, as befits Your kindness,
with Your great mercy wipe away my crimes.
[4]Thoroughly wash my transgressions away
and cleanse me from my offense.
[5]For my crimes I know,
and my offense is before me always.
[6]You alone have I offended,
and what is evil in Your eyes I have done.
So You are just when You sentence,
You are right when You judge.
[7]Look, in transgression was I conceived,
and in offense my mother spawned me.
[8]Look, You desired truth in what is hidden;
in what is concealed make wisdom known to me.
[9]Purify me with a hyssop, that I be clean.
Wash me, that I be whiter than snow.

[10]Let me hear gladness and joy,
    let the bones that You crushed exult.
[11]Avert Your face from my offenses,
    and all my misdeeds wipe away.
[12]A pure heart create for me, God,
    and a firm spirit renew within me.
[13]Do not fling me from Your presence,
    and Your holy spirit take not from me.
[14]Give me back the gladness of Your rescue
    and with a noble spirit sustain me.
[15]Let me teach transgressors Your ways,
    and offenders will come back to You.
[16]Save me from bloodshed, O God,
    God of my rescue.
Let my tongue sing out Your bounty.
[17]O Master, open my lips,
    that my mouth may tell Your praise.
[18]For You desire not that I should give sacrifice,
    burnt offering You greet not with pleasure.
[19]God's sacrifices—a broken spirit.
    A broken, crushed heart God spurns not.
[20]Show goodness in Your pleasure to Zion,
    rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.
[21]Then shall You desire just sacrifices,
    burnt offering and whole offering,
then bulls will be offered up on Your altar.

PSALM 51 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *upon Nathan the prophet's coming to him when he had come to bed with Bathsheba.* The superscription incorporates a barbed pun. The Hebrew verb used for both Nathan and David is "to come to" (or "into"), but in the former instance it refers to the prophet's entering the king's chambers, whereas the latter instance reflects its sexual sense, to have intercourse with a woman (probably intercourse for the first time). The strong character of this poem as a confessional psalm led the editors to attribute it to David when he was stricken with remorse after Nathan rebuked him for sleeping with Bathsheba and murdering her husband (2 Samuel 12). But in all likelihood, this psalm is a general penitential psalm composed centuries after David. If the reference to the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem in the penultimate verse is an integral part of the original psalm and not an editorial addition, the text would have to date to sometime after 586 B.C.E. In any case, the idea of offering God a broken spirit instead of sacrifice looks as though it may have been influenced by the later Prophetic literature. The eloquent confessional mode of this psalm has made it an important liturgical vehicle for both Christians and Jews. It is one of the seven penitential psalms in Church ritual. The wrenching plea of verse 13 is used in the introduction to the penitential prayer during the Jewish Days of Awe.

7. *in transgression was I conceived, / and in offense my mother spawned me.* Christian interpreters through the ages have understood this verse as a prime expression of the doctrine of Original Sin. Some of the early rabbis register a similar notion—as they put it, David's father, Jesse, did not have relations with his wife to fulfill a higher obligation but rather out of sheer lust. Such a reading may be encouraged by the fact that the verb attached to the mother, *yaḥam*, is typically associated with animals in heat. It may, however, be unwarranted to construct a general theology of sinful human nature from this verse. The speaker of this poem certainly feels permeated with sinfulness. He may indeed trace it back to the sexual act through which he was conceived, but there is not much here to support the idea that this is the case of every human born.

8. *You desired truth in what is hidden.* This whole verse is the one line in the poem that is rather obscure. The meaning of *batuḥot*, "what's hidden," or "hidden things," is not certain. Traditional commentators generally think it refers to the inner organs. It is unclear what the line as a whole means to say —perhaps that the speaker feels he may harbor guilt for transgressions of which he is not consciously aware, and asks God to reveal these to him.

9. *Purify me with a hyssop.* Hyssop was used in a ritual of purification. The priest dipped the hyssop branch in the blood of a sacrificial animal, then sprinkled it on the impure object or person to expunge the impurity (see Leviticus 14). (The fine hairs on hyssop leaves may have prevented the blood from congealing.) Alternately, hyssop was used to sprinkle water (Numbers 19:18–22) to remove impurities. The claim made by some scholars that this psalm is therefore a liturgical text for a rite of purification is not altogether convincing because hyssop, familiar to the audience from such ceremonies, could easily have been invoked as a symbol of a process of purification that is spiritual, not ritual, in nature. Such a move from ritual to spiritual is strongly etched in verses 18 and 19.

Wash me, that I be whiter than snow. The same image is used in Isaiah 1:18.

13. *Do not fling me from Your presence.* As elsewhere, this Hebrew verb has a connotation of violent action for which the conventional translation of it as "cast" is too tame.

15. *Let me teach transgressors Your ways.* At the completion of the process of transformation that the confessional speaker envisages, he will be so different from his former condition as a reprobate that he will be able to teach those who err what God requires of them.

19. *God's sacrifices—a broken spirit, / A broken, crushed heart God spurns not.* Although Isaiah and Micah equally stress that what God requires of man is not animal sacrifices but ethical behavior, here there is an arresting new emphasis on an inward condition of contrition. It is a person's remorse over past actions, or perhaps simply his authentic grief over his desperate plight, that God accepts instead of sacrifice.

20. *Show goodness in Your pleasure to Zion, / rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.* The poem until this moment at the end has been entirely concerned with the

remorseful confession of an individual, so this prayer for the rebuilding of Jerusalem looks suspiciously like a conclusion added by an editor.

21. *Then shall You desire just sacrifices.* In the rebuilt Jerusalem—this would seem to be the specific implication of the repeated "then"—with, we may infer, a rebuilt Temple, it will once again be possible to offer sacrifices. The single word "just" might by a stretch harmonize this concluding verse with 18 and 19, but it seems more likely that an editor, uneasy with the outright rejection or at least downgrading of sacrifices expressed in the psalm, added this line at the end to reaffirm the idea that God desires sacrifices, at least if they are just ones.

PSALM 52

[1]For the lead player, a David *maskil*, [2]when Doeg the Edomite came and told Saul and said to him, “David has come to the house of Ahimelech.”

[3]Why boast of evil, O warrior?
—God’s kindness is all day long.
[4]Disasters your tongue devises,
like a well-honed razor, doing deceit.
[5]You love evil better than good,
a lie more than speaking justice.
selah
[6]You love all destructive words,
the tongue of deceit.
[7]God surely will smash you forever,
sweep you up and tear you from the tent,
root you out from the land of the living.
selah
[8]And the righteous shall see and be awed
and laugh over him.
[9]Look, the man who does not make
God his stronghold,

and who trusts in his great wealth,
who would be strong in his disaster!
[10]But I am like a lush olive tree
in the house of our God.
I trust in God's kindness forevermore.
[11]I shall acclaim You forever, for You have acted,
and hope in Your name, for it is good,
before Your faithful.

PSALM 52 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *when Doeg the Edomite came.* Doeg is the informer who sees the fleeing David take refuge with the priest Ahimelech in Nob, then denounces Ahimelech to Saul (1 Samuel 21–22). Saul's response is to massacre all the priests of Nob. The lethal effect of Doeg's words may have especially encouraged the editor to create the connection with this psalm in the superscription, though the fit with the content of the psalm is far from perfect: Doeg causes harm through his report but does not in fact speak in deceit, and the sarcastic address to the man boasting of evil as "warrior" is not exactly appropriate for him.

3. *God's kindness is all day long.* The likely meaning is that God in His perpetual kindness will somehow protect the victims over whom the evildoer vaunts and whom he thinks he can destroy.

7. *sweep you up.* The root of the declined verb *yaḥtekha* is ambiguous. It might instead derive from a verbal stem meaning "reduce to rubble." Either way, the line produces an image of violent destruction of the wicked.

8. *laugh over him.* The "him" is, of course, the evil person, until now addressed in the second person. Such switches in pronoun reference are fairly common in biblical usage.

9. *would be strong in his disaster.* The verb *yaʿoz* obviously plays against the noun *maʿoz*, "stronghold," which has just been used. Its employment here is evidently sardonic: such a man imagines, foolishly, that he will remain strong in his disaster.

10. *But I am like a lush olive tree.* A first-person singular enters the poem only now, at the conclusion. The speaker feels secure against the razor-tongued evil man destined to be uprooted, and he will flourish like an olive tree—a standard symbol for prosperity and peace—within the temple precincts.

I trust in God's kindness forevermore. God's kindness, or keeping faith (*ḥesed*), with humankind, mentioned elliptically at the beginning of the poem, is the quality that the grateful speaker feels manifested in his own life.

11. *I shall acclaim You forever, for You have acted.* This poem, which began as a defiant challenge to the boastful wicked, ends as a thanksgiving psalm. The act of thanksgiving takes place within the Temple, in the presence of God's community of faithful followers. The phrase "hope in Your name" is syntactically parenthetical. It is not the hope but the acclaiming that takes place "before Your faithful."

PSALM 53

[1]To the lead player, on the *mahalath,* a David *maskil*.
[2]The scoundrel has said in his heart,
“There is no God.”
They corrupt and do loathsome misdeeds.
There is none who does good.
[3]The LORD from the heavens looked down
on the sons of humankind
to see, is there someone discerning,
someone seeking out God.
[4]All are tainted,
altogether befouled.
There is none who does good.
There is not even one.
[5]Do they not know,
the wrongdoers?
Devourers of my people devoured them like bread.
They did not call on God.
[6]There did they sorely fear.
—There was no fear,
for God scattered the bones of your besieger.

You put them to shame, for God spurned them.
[7]O, may from Zion come Israel's rescue
when God restores His people's fortunes.
May Jacob exult.
May Israel rejoice.

PSALM 53 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

This psalm is a duplication of Psalm 14. In keeping with the general practice of the editor in the second book of Psalms, God, *ʾelohim*, is consistently substituted for YHWH, the LORD, in Psalm 14. The other changes are limited with the exception of verse 6. The divergences from Psalm 14 are noted below. For other remarks on the poem, the reader is referred to the commentary on Psalm 14.

1. *To the lead player, on the* mahalath*, a David* maskil. This is a different superscription. Psalm 14 has simply, "For the lead player, for David." The *mahalath* is presumably a musical instrument, but its nature is unknown.

2. *and do loathsome misdeeds.* Psalm 14 has *ʿalilah*, "acts," as against *ʿawel*, "misdeed[s]," here. The "and" before the verb is absent in Psalm 14.

4. *All are tainted.* The Hebrew *kulo sag* differs from Psalm 14, *hakol sar*, "all turn astray."

5. *the wrongdoers.* Psalm 14 reads "all wrongdoers."

6. *There was no fear.* The least strained way to construe this clause, which does not appear in Psalm 14, is as implying "but": they—presumably, the Israelites—were afraid, but it turned out that there was no reason to fear.

for God scattered the bones of your besieger. Psalm 14 here reads, "for God is with the righteous band." The word for "besieger" is literally "your camper" (the one encamped against you?). The defeat of besiegers has led

some interpreters to see in this line a reference to the frustrated siege on Jerusalem of Sennacherib, but that is pure conjecture.

You put them to shame, for God spurned them. Psalm 14 reads, “In your plot against the poor you are shamed, / for the LORD is his shelter.” In both psalms, the grammar of the verb of shame is problematic.

PSALM 54

[1]For the lead player on stringed instruments, a David *maskil*,
[2]when the Ziphites came and said to Saul, “Is not David hiding out among us?”

[3]God, through Your name rescue me,
and through Your might take up my cause.
[4]God, O hear my prayer,
hearken to my mouth’s utterances.
[5]For strangers have risen against me,
and oppressors have sought my life.
They did not set God before them.
selah
[6]Look, God is about to help me,
my Master—among those who support me.
[7]Let Him pay back evil to my assailants.
Demolish them through Your truth!
[8]With a freewill offering let me sacrifice to You.
Let me acclaim Your name, LORD, for it is good.
[9]For from every strait He saved me,

and my eyes see my enemies' defeat.

PSALM 54 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *when the Ziphites came.* The story alluded to is reported in 1 Samuel 23. David, in flight from Saul, is denounced by the Ziphites in whose territory he has taken refuge. In the end, he manages to elude Saul's forces. Again, the general plea for God's help, conventional in a supplication psalm, has been editorially linked with a particular incident in the life of David that it fits only in part. The complaint "strangers have risen against me" (verse 5) could scarcely refer to Saul, who is hostile to David but by no means a stranger to him or a foreigner (*zar*) in relation to him.

6. *Look, God is about to help me.* The selah at the end of the immediately preceding line clearly marks a division in this short poem. Verses 3–5 are taken up with the supplicant's urgent plea to God to save him from his dire plight. With the beginning of verse 6, introduced by the presentative *hineh*, "look," the speaker sees God's help already about to happen. The participial form of the verb used could mean either "about to help" or "is helping."

7. *Demolish them.* In a grammatical move perfectly idiomatic in biblical usage, the line switches from a third-person reference to God in the first verset to an imperative address in the second verset.

8. *a freewill offering . . . / Let me acclaim.* Because the deliverance has not yet been accomplished, this gesture of sacrifice and thanksgiving at the end is a promise, not a declaration, as at the end of a thanksgiving psalm.

9. *and my eyes see my enemies' defeat.* The Hebrew uses "eye" in the singular. The rest of the clause says, literally, "see in [or against] my enemies." The idiom *raʾah b*^{e}, "see in," repeatedly occurs in Psalms in the sense of seeing one's enemies defeated and humiliated, so the translation adds the clearly implied "defeat."

PSALM 55

[1]For the lead player, on stringed instruments, a David *maskil*.

[2]Hearken, O God, to my prayer,
and do not ignore my plea.
[3]Listen well to me and answer me.
In my complaint I sway and moan.
[4]From the sound of the enemy,
from the crushing force of the wicked
when they bring mischief down upon me
and in fury harass me,
[5]my heart quails within me
and death-terrors fall upon me,
[6]fear and trembling enter me,
and horror envelops me.
[7]And I say, "Would I had wings like a dove.
I would fly off and find rest.
[8]Look, I would wander far away,
and lodge in the wilderness,
selah
[9]would make haste to a refuge for me

from the streaming wind and the storm.”
[10]O Master, confound, split their tongue,
for I have seen outrage and strife in the town;
[11]day and night they go round it on its walls,
and mischief and misdeeds within it,
[12]disaster within it,
guile and deceit never part from its square.
[13]No enemy insults me, that I might bear it,
no foe boasts against me, that I might hide from him.
[14]But you—a man to my measure,
my companion and my familiar,
[15]with whom together we shared sweet counsel,
in the house of our God in elation we walked.
[16]May death come upon them.
May they go down to Sheol alive.
For in their homes, in their midst, are evils.
[17]But I call to God,
and the LORD rescues me.
[18]Evening and morning and noon
I complain and I moan,
and He hears my voice.
[19]He has ransomed my life unharmed
from my battle,
for many were against me—
[20]Ishmael and Jalam and the dweller in the east,

who never will change and do not fear God.
[21]He reached out his hand against his allies,
profaned his own pact.
[22]His mouth was smoother than butter—
and battle in his heart.
His words were softer than oil,
yet they were drawn swords.
[23]Cast your lot on the LORD
and He will support you.
He will never let the righteous stumble.
[24]And You, O God, bring them down
to the pit of destruction.
Men of bloodshed and deceit
will not finish half their days.
But I shall trust in You.

PSALM 55 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Hearken, O God, to my prayer.* These opening words announce the poem as a psalm of supplication. As the text unfolds, however, the subject of the supplication seems to shift. In verses 4–9, the speaker appears to be set upon by armed enemies who terrify him and make him want to flee. References to battles and political treachery abound in verses 19–22. On the other hand, in verses 13–15, the speaker complains of a once dear friend who has betrayed him, and whom he addresses in the second person. One can only guess whether two poems have been spliced together or in some other fashion confusion has been introduced in the editorial process. The perplexity is

compounded by the fact that there are textual difficulties in verses 19–22, especially in the first half of verse 20.

4. *From the sound of the enemy.* This riveting expression of terror by the man under attack is made all the more powerful by the fact that, in an unusual syntactic pattern, the catalogue of disasters rolls on in a crescendo that is essentially one long sentence, running from the beginning of verse 4 to the end of verse 6.

9. *from the streaming wind and the storm.* The Hebrew represented as "streaming," *soʿah*, appears only here. It is presumably either a very rare word or a nonce word coined to echo the sound of *saʿar*, "storm," a phonetic effect replicated in this translation.

10. *for I have seen outrage and strife in the town.* At this point, and for the next three verses, the subject of complaint is not an external enemy but a band of insolent scoundrels who have taken over in the town.

11. *they go round.* The antecedent is "outrage and strife."

14. *But you—a man to my measure.* Were it a known enemy showing hostility, the speaker would have found a way to bear the insult, but it is his intimate friend who has turned against him.

16. *May death come upon them.* In the context of the preceding verses, it would make no sense for the plural pronoun to refer to the treacherous friend, so the object of this curse would have to be the perpetrators of mischief and deceit mentioned above.

18. *I complain and I moan.* These two terms point back to the terms used in verse 3.

19. *unharmed.* Or "in peace."

for many were against me. The usual sense of the preposition used here, *ʿimadi*, is "with me," but there are some instances in which it, or its shorter form *ʿim*, can mean "against."

20. *Ishmael and Jalam and the dweller in the east.* The translation here adopts an emendation that has considerable scholarly support, turning this into a small list of the enemies arrayed against the speaker. The Masoretic Text reads *yishmaʿ ʾel weyaʿanem weyoshev qedem*, literally, and unintelligibly, "God hears and answers them and is seated as of old." In the reconstruction,

the first two words and the last two remain unchanged, but they are construed as gentilic names rather than as references to God, and *weyaʿanem* is amended to *weyaʿlam*. Jalam is mentioned in Genesis 36:5 as one of the peoples descended from Esau.

21. *He reached out his hand.* The singular reference would be to the implacable enemies who do not fear God, with this particular kind of move from plural to singular clearly allowable in biblical usage.

22. *and battle in his heart.* The cryptic Hebrew literally says "and his heart's battle."

24. *Men of bloodshed and deceit.* These paired terms pick up at the end two different themes of the poem: "bloodshed" recalling the imagery of swords and armed attack, "deceit" harking back to the guile and deceit that never part from the town square.

PSALM 56

[1]For the lead player, on *jonath elem rehokim*, a David *michtam*, when the Philistines seized him in Gath.

[2]Grant me grace, O God,
for a man tramples me,
all day long the assailant does press me.
[3]My attackers trample me all day long,
for many assail me, O High One.
[4]When I fear, I trust in You,
[5]in God, Whose word I praise,
in God I trust, I shall not fear.
What can flesh do to me?
[6]All day long they put pain in my words,
against me all their plots for evil.
[7]They scheme, they lie low,
they keep at my heels
as they hope for my life.
[8]For their mischief free me from them.
In wrath bring down peoples, O God.
[9]My flagrant fate You Yourself have counted out—
put my tears in Your flask.

Are they not in Your counting?
[10]Then shall my enemies turn back
on the day I call.
This I know, that God is for me.
[11]In God, Whose word I praise,
in the LORD Whose word I praise,
[12]in God I trust, I shall not fear.
What can man do to me?
[13]I take upon me, O God, my vows to You.
I shall pay thanksgiving offerings to You.
[14]For You saved me from death,
yes, my foot from slipping,
to walk in God's presence
in the light of life.

PSALM 56 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *on jonath elem rehokim.* This is one of the most mysterious of the musical terms in Psalms. The literal sense of the three Hebrew words is haunting: "the mute dove of distant places." The great medieval poet Judah HaLevi responded to the evocativeness of the phrase in his poetry by turning it into a concrete image of Israel's exile.

a David michtam. This is another unknown category of psalm. In later Hebrew, it comes to mean "aphorism," but that is scarcely its biblical sense.

when the Philistines seized him in Gath. As usual, the connection is tenuous between this specific identification of an episode in David's life and the content of the psalm.

2. *Grant me grace.* The speaker now launches on a set opening formula for the psalm of supplication.

3. *O High One.* The translation here is only a guess, and perhaps a strained one. The Hebrew *marom* means "height" and is not a general designation for God. An alternative would be to read *mimarom*, "from the height," "from above."

5. *in God, Whose word I praise.* The syntax here (and in the refrainlike recurrence in verse 11) is a little crabbed. The Hebrew has no equivalent of "whose" (*ʾasher*), but in poetic grammar *ʾasher* is often elided.

6. *they put pain in my words.* The Hebrew sounds at least as odd as this. Evidence of early struggling with the text is provided by the sundry ancient versions, which variously substitute a different verb for the enigmatic one that appears in the received text.

8. *For their mischief free me from them.* The Hebrew here is obscure. Literally, it says: "For mischief free [from? for?] them." Efforts to interpret the verb *palet* as "cast out" are dubious, because it always means to free or extricate from distress.

9. *My flagrant fate.* The most likely meaning of *nod* here is pain or sorrow, although the same root can also refer to wandering. The alliterative translation, moving from "flagrant" to "flask," is a distant approximation of the Hebrew sound-play, in which *nod* is played against *noʾd*, "flask," at the end of the next verset.

put my tears in Your flask. In the midst of a psalm chiefly made up of familiar formulas, we see a striking image—one that the Midrash duly elaborated—of a compassionate God gathering the tears of the sufferer in a celestial flask and counting every one.

11. *In God, Whose word I praise.* The poem now uses an extended refrain that occupies two whole verses.

13. *my vows to You.* The literal sense of the more compact Hebrew is "Your vows."

PSALM 57

[1]For the lead player, *al-tashchet*, a David *michtam*,
when he fled from Saul into the cave.
[2]Grant me grace, God, grant me grace,
for in You I have taken shelter,
and in Your wings' shadow do I shelter
until disasters pass.
[3]I call out to God the Most High,
to the god who requites me.
[4]He will send from the heavens and rescue me—
he who tramples me reviled me—
selah
God will send his steadfast kindness.
[5]I lie down among lions
that pant for human beings.
Their fangs are spear and arrows,
their tongue a sharpened sword.
[6]Loom over the heavens, O God.
Over all the earth Your glory.
[7]A net they set for my steps,
they pushed down my neck,

they dug before me a pit—
    they themselves fell into it.
selah

[8]My heart is firm, O God,
    my heart is firm.
Let me sing and hymn.
[9]Awake, O lyre,
    awake, O lute and lyre.
I would waken the dawn.
[10]Let me acclaim You among the peoples, Master.
    Let me hymn You among the nations.
[11]For Your kindness is great to the heavens,
    and to the skies Your steadfast truth.
[12]Loom over the heavens, O God.
    Over all the earth Your glory.

PSALM 57 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *al-tashchet.* Evidently, this is still another musical term, the meaning of which has been lost. The medieval Hebrew commentator David Kimchi ingeniously links it with David's rebuke to his men when they came upon Saul sleeping in their cave: *ʾal-tashḥiteihu*, "do him no violence." The tie-in of the superscription with an episode in David's life seems to be an after-the-fact editorial maneuver. The poem is a general psalm of supplication, turning into a thanksgiving psalm at the end, as many others do.

2. *in Your wings' shadow do I shelter.* The speaker thus implicitly casts himself as a fledgling bird, protected by its parent—a recurrent biblical image.

3. *who requites me.* The translation reads, with the Septuagint, *gomel*, "requites," instead of the Masoretic *gomer* ("finishes"?).

4. *he who tramples me reviled me.* The two Hebrew words here, *ḥeref shoʾafi*, seem syntactically out of place and are obscure in meaning. The safest construction, without performing extensive surgery on the text, is to read this clause as a parenthetical remark about the speaker's desperate plight, with the "will send" of the third verset then picking up the "will send" of the first verset both semantically and syntactically.

5. *their tongue a sharpened sword.* The sword image develops, through a pun, the "panting" of the lions, because that verb, *lohatim*, is associated with "the flame [*lahat*] of the whirling sword" in Genesis 3:24.

7. *they pushed down my neck.* The verb in the received text is in the singular. Either it is a scribal error and should be in the plural, or it reflects a use of the third-person singular as an equivalent of the passive ("my neck was pushed down"). The most compelling sense of *nafshi* here is not "my life" or "me" but "my neck," because the whole context is one of physical entrapment—the net and the pit.

8. *My heart is firm.* These words signal a transition, but it is by no means necessary to infer, as some scholars have, that they mark the beginning of a separate poem. The speaker, having brought the expression of his distress to a climax, now affirms his unwavering confidence in God's saving power, a confidence so strong that he can move on from supplication to thanksgiving.

9. *Awake, O lyre.* The Masoretic Text reads *kevodi* ("my glory" or, perhaps, "my being"), but one manuscript as well as the Syriac reads *kinori*, "my lyre," which seems more likely, yielding an incremental repetition of terms for stringed instruments in this verse.

I would waken the dawn. In these beautiful words the speaker imagines himself rising before daybreak with his stringed instrument to rouse the sleeping dawn with his song. Film viewers may recall a similar notion in the classic Brazilian film *Black Orpheus*, where the singer Orfeo explains to the

two boys whom he befriends that it is his song, played on a guitar, that makes the dawn come up.

11. *For Your kindness is great to the heavens, / and to the skies Your steadfast truth.* The rousing of the dawn at the eastern edge of the sky now leads the speaker-singer to envisage God's benign presence over all the heavens. The hendiadys *ḥesed-weʾemet* (as in verse 4) means something like "steadfast kindness" (literally, "kindness and truth"). Here, the two terms have been divided between the first and second verset; "steadfast" is added in the translation to "truth" to suggest something of what they mean when joined together.

12. *Loom over the heavens.* Verse 6 is repeated here verbatim as a closing refrain. But, given the celestial focus of verse 11 and its anticipation at the end of verse 9, God's looming over the heavens takes on added meaning at the end.

PSALM 58

[1]For the lead player *al-tashcheth*, a David *michtam*.
[2]Do you, O chieftains, indeed speak justice,
in rightness judge humankind?
[3]In your heart you work misdeeds on earth,
weigh a case with outrage in your hands.
[4]The wicked backslide from the very womb,
the lie-mongers go astray from birth.
[5]They have venom akin to the serpent's venom,
like the deaf viper that stops up its ears,
[6]so it hears not the soothsayers' voice
nor the cunning caster of spells.
[7]God, smash their teeth in their mouth.
The jaws of the lions shatter, O LORD.
[8]Let them melt away, like water run off.
Let Him pull back His arrows so they be cut down.
[9]Like a snail that moves in its slime,
a woman's stillbirth that sees not the sun,
[10]before their thorns ripen in bramble,
still alive and in wrath rushed to ruin.

[11]The just man rejoices when vengeance he sees,
his feet he will bathe in the wicked one's blood.
[12]And man will say, "Yes, there is fruit for the just.
Yes, there are gods judging the earth."

PSALM 58 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Do you, O chieftains, indeed speak justice.* The English reader should be warned that the Hebrew text of this psalm, from this verse to the end, with the sole exception of the ferocious verses 7 and 11, is badly mangled. As a result, a good deal of the translation is necessarily conjectural or must rely on emendation. A literal rendering of the Hebrew for this verset would be: "Indeed muteness justice you speak." The translation reads *ʾeylim*, "chieftains," instead of *ʾelem*, "muteness."

3. *weigh a case.* The translation is based on a guess that the reference is judicial, although the entire line sounds strange. Another sense of the Hebrew verb in question is "to pave a way."

4. *backslide.* The meaning of the verb *zoru* is in dispute.

5. *like the deaf viper that stops up its ears.* The peculiarity of this simile, which continues into the next verse, could conceivably derive from a piece of ancient folk zoology that we no longer possess. It is possible that the viper was thought to be deaf because it has no external ears. The wicked resemble the viper both in being venomous and in turning a deaf ear—in their case, to the pleas of their victims.

8. *Let Him pull back His arrows.* If in fact God is the subject of this verb (the Hebrew of the entire verset is rather crabbed), the image of shooting an arrow at the wicked is discontinuous with the image of their melting away like water. An alternative construction, somewhat strained in regard to the Hebrew syntax, would be "as they pull back their arrows, they are cut off."

9. *Like a snail that moves in its slime.* The crux here in the Hebrew is the otherwise unattested noun *temes*. It might derive from the root meaning "to melt" (as in the verb at the beginning of verse 8) and so could refer to the slimy secretion of the snail as an image of dissolution or transience.

that sees not the sun. The Hebrew is opaque, especially because the verb as it stands is in the plural.

10. *before their thorns ripen in bramble.* The Hebrew seems to say, "before their thorns understand [*yavinu*] bramble." The translation assumes that two consonants have been transposed in the verb, which should read *yanivu*, "ripen."

still alive and in wrath rushed to ruin. The translation of the cryptic Hebrew is only a guess.

12. *And man will say.* Or "And a person will say." The two Hebrew words are correct as to grammar, though they look odd as an idiom.

there are gods judging the earth. The psalm concludes with another oddity in the Hebrew text. *ʾElohim*, which is always treated as a singular despite its plural form when it refers to the one God, here is joined to a plural verbal form. A traditional view that the term sometimes means "magistrates" stands on shaky ground. Either the usage here is anomalous, with the actual meaning, "there is a God judging the earth," or, as the translation assumes, the concluding statement is from the viewpoint of people in general ("man"), and not necessarily monotheistic people. According to their own theological lights, all will conclude that there are just gods on earth.

PSALM 59

[1]For the lead player *al-tashcheth*, a David *michtam*,
when Saul sent out and they kept watch over the house to put him to death.
[2]Save me from my enemies, my God,
over those who rise against me make me safe.
[3]Save me from the wrongdoers,
and from men of bloodshed rescue me.
[4]For, look, they lie in wait for my life,
the powerful scheme against me—
not for my wrong nor my offense, O LORD.
[5]For no misdeed they rush, aim their bows.
Rise toward me and see!
[6]And You, LORD, God of Armies, God of Israel,
awake to make a reckoning with all the nations.
Do not pardon all wrongdoing traitors.
selah
[7]They come back at evening,
they mutter like dogs.
They prowl round the town.
[8]Look, they speak out with their mouths—

and swords in their lips—
for who would hear?
9 And You, LORD, laugh at them,
You mock all the nations.
10 My Strength, for You I keep watch,
for God is my fortress.
11 My steadfast God will come to meet me,
God will grant me sight of my foes' defeat.
12 Do not kill them lest my people forget.
Through Your force make them wander, pull them down,
our shield and Master.
13 Through their mouth's offense, the word of their lips
they will be trapped in their haughtiness,
and through the oaths and the falsehood they utter.
14 Destroy, O destroy in wrath, that they be no more,
and it will be known to the ends of the earth
that God rules over Jacob.

selah

15 They come back at evening,
they mutter like dogs.
They prowl round the town.
16 They wander in search of food
if they are not sated, till they pass the night.
17 But I shall sing of Your strength,

and chant gladly each morning Your kindness.
For You were a fortress for me,
a haven when I was in straits.
[18]My Strength, to You I would hymn,
for God is my fortress,
my steadfast God.

PSALM 59 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *when Saul sent out.* The reference is to 1 Samuel 19, when Saul sends killers to stake out David's house and murder him. In the event, with the decisive help of his wife, Michal, Saul's daughter, David manages to escape. The tenuous connection with our psalm is the speaker's sense that his life is threatened (for example, verse 4, "they lie in wait for my life"). But as the poem unfolds, it looks as though physical attack is actually a metaphor for vicious slander. David would scarcely refer to Saul's men as "all the nations."

2–3. Both these lines of poetry are cast as neat chiasms: Save me, (a), —from my enemies, (b), —those who rise against me (b'), make me safe (a'); Save me (a), —the wrongdoers, (b), —men of bloodshed (b'), —rescue me (a').

5. *aim their bows.* The object of the verb is merely implied in the Hebrew.

7. *they mutter like dogs.* The muttering or growling anticipates the malicious speech of the next verse. As elsewhere, "dogs" (singular in the Hebrew) is a pejorative concept.

8. *for who would hear?* The implication seems to be that they fear no human or divine judge and so feel free to pronounce harmful slander without compunction.

10. *My Strength.* The Masoretic Text reads "his strength," but several manuscripts show "my Strength."

for You I keep watch. As an idiom for trusting in God, the Hebrew is odd. The choice of verb may be intended to play against its negative sense in the superscription.

11. *My steadfast God.* The Hebrew is *ʾelohey ḥasdi*. For the most part, this translation represents *ḥesed* as "kindness," but it equally means "steadfastness," "commitment to keeping covenantal obligations." The context of a plea to be rescued from enemies suggests that the latter meaning is the more salient one here. The same two Hebrew words occur again at the end of the psalm.

grant me sight of my foes' defeat. As elsewhere, "defeat" is merely implied in the Hebrew idiom.

12. *Do not kill them . . . / make them wander.* The idea is that the frustrated enemies, in a state of exile, neediness, and humiliation, will be a living object lesson to others. But in verse 14, the speaker prays for their destruction.

15. *They come back at evening.* This verbatim repetition of verse 7 is either intended as a refrain or is an inadvertent scribal repetition. It seems ill placed after the wish for total destruction of the enemies in the previous verse. It is conceivable that verse 14 is an interpolation, spliced in from another psalm.

16. *if they are not sated, till they pass the night.* Like the English, the Hebrew is obscure syntactically. Literally, it says "if they are not sated, and they pass the night."

PSALM 60

[1]For the lead player, on *shushan-eduth*, a David
michtam, to teach, [2]when he clashed with Aram
Naharaim and Aram Zobah, and Joab came back and
struck down twelve thousand of Edom in the Valley of
Salt.

[3]God, You have abandoned us, breached us.
You were incensed—restore us to life!
[4]You made the land quake, You cracked it.
Heal its shards, for it has toppled.
[5]You sated Your people with harsh drink,
You made us drink poison wine.
[6]You once gave to those who fear You
a banner for rallying because of the truth.
selah
[7]So that Your friends be set free,
rescue with Your right hand and answer us.
[8]God once spoke in His holiness:
"Let Me exult and share out Shechem,
and the valley of Succoth I shall measure.
[9]Mine is Gilead and Mine Manasseh,

and Ephraim My foremost stronghold,
Judah My scepter.
[10]Moab is My washbasin,
upon Edom I fling My sandal,
over Philistia I shout exultant."
[11]Who will lead me to the beseiged town,
who will guide me to Edom?
[12]Have You not, O God, abandoned us?
You do not sally forth, God, with our armies.
[13]Give us help against the foe
when rescue by man is in vain.
[14]Through God we shall gather strength,
and He will stamp out our foes.

PSALM 60 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *on* shushan-eduth. This is another opaque term that refers to a musical instrument or a musical mode.

to teach. It is not clear whether the song is to be taught or its content involves a moral that should be learned.

2. *when he clashed with Aram Naharaim and Aram Zobah.* This campaign against these armies east of the Jordan is reported in 2 Samuel 10:15–19. The proclamation of God's sovereignty over Moab and Edom in verse 10 may have led to the connection claimed in the superscription, but other details do not entirely fit the episode from the David story.

3. *restore us to life.* The Hebrew says only "restore to us," but an implied object, *nafsheinu*, "our life," seems likely.

4. *You made the land quake.* Though some interpreters have taken this as a literal reference to an earthquake, it is more probably a metaphorical image of devastation by invaders, because the psalm as a whole is concerned with military enemies.

5. *with harsh drink.* The Hebrew says only "with harsh," *qashah*, which may be an ellipsis (or omission) for *kos qashah*, literally, "harsh cup."

6. *You once gave.* "Once" is added for clarity. This verse flatly contradicts the previous one, but the contradiction is resolved if one assumes that the speaker is recalling an earlier time when God stood staunchly by His people.

because of the truth. The Hebrew phrase here is doubtful. The rare term *qoshet* does mean "truth" in Aramaic. The Septuagint and the Syriac understood this to mean "because of [or in the face of] the bow," reading *qeshet* instead of *qoshet*, with the last consonant *taw* instead of *tet*.

8. *God once spoke.* The translation adds "once" for the same reason of clarity cited in the note to verse 6.

9. *Mine is Gilead . . . / Judah my scepter.* This bracketing of northern territories with Judah as the capital city has led some interpreters to infer that the psalm is early, before the breakup of the united kingdom after Solomon's death.

10. *Moab is My washbasin, / upon Edom I fling My sandal.* These are images of contemptuous domination: Moab is a humble receptacle for bathing water, Edom a disregarded place where one casually flings a sandal. The poet intends a shocking contrast between these humble terms and the language of military strength ("stronghold," "scepter") in the previous line.

over Philistia I shout exultant. The received text here reads, "Over Me, Philistia, shout exultant [or, perhaps, break to pieces]." But the duplicate version of this text, Psalm 108:10, has a much more plausible reading, and that is the one used for the translation here. The reference to Philistia might also argue for an early date for this psalm.

11. *Who will lead me to the besieged town, / . . . guide me to Edom.* The speaker, having quoted God's words of triumph over Edom in the past, now returns to his own plight in the present, in a desperate war with Edom and perhaps other peoples, wondering whether he can bring the siege against the enemy to a successful conclusion.

12. *Have You not, O God, abandoned us?* As the poem moves toward its conclusion, the opening phrase, in a slightly altered form, is repeated as part of an envelope structure.

You do not sally forth, God, with our armies. This idea of the deity joining forces with its people in the battlefield is a common one in the ancient Near East. It is much in evidence in Joshua, Judges, and Samuel.

PSALM 61

[1]For the lead player, on stringed instruments, for David.

[2]Hear, God, my song,
listen close to my prayer.
[3]From the end of the earth I call You.
When my heart faints, You lead me to a rock
high above me.
[4]For You have been a shelter to me,
a tower of strength in the face of the foe.
[5]Let me dwell in Your tent for all time,
let me shelter in Your wings' hiding place.
selah
[6]For You, God, have heard my vows,
You have granted the plea of those who fear
Your name.
[7]Days may You add to the days of the king,
his years be like those of generations untold.
[8]May he ever abide in the presence of God.
Steadfast kindness ordain to preserve him!
[9]So let me hymn Your name forever

as I pay my vows day after day.

PSALM 61 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Hear God, my song.* Though the word for "song," *rinah*, usually means "glad song," the present context is one of supplication, the speaker crying out to God as he is beset by life-threatening dangers ("When my heart faints").

3. *You lead me to a rock high above me.* The Hebrew syntax is crabbed, but given that "rock," *tsur*, regularly recurs in Psalms as a synonym for an impregnable fortress, the sense would seem to be that when the speaker's heart fails within him under the murderous assault of the foe (verse 4), God provides him a safe refuge.

5. *Let me dwell in Your tent.* As elsewhere, "tent" is a poetic epithet for the Temple, also conceived as a place of refuge. The cultic context is made explicit in the reference to votary offerings ("vows") in the next line and at the end of the psalm.

6. *granted the plea.* The Hebrew appears to say "inheritance" (*yerushat*), but it seems plausible, as many scholars have proposed, that the original reading was *ʾareshet*, "plea."

7. *Days may You add to the days of the king.* This petition on behalf of the king, which turns the supplication into a royal psalm, is puzzling because the speaker until this point appears to be making an entreaty about his own personal plight. Either he identifies the fate of the nation with his own fate, so that the enemies threatening the nation are imagined as menacing him personally, or these two verses have been spliced in from another psalm.

PSALM 62

[1]For the lead player, on *jeduthun,* a David psalm.
[2]Only in God is my being quiet.
From Him is my rescue.
[3]Only He is my rock and my rescue,
my stronghold—I shall not stumble long.
[4]How long will you demolish a man—
commit murder, each one of you—
like a leaning wall,
a shaky fence?
[5]Only from his high place they schemed to shake him.
They took pleasure in lies.
With their mouths they blessed
and inwardly cursed.
selah
[6]Only in God be quiet, my being,
for from Him is my hope.
[7]Only He is my rock and my rescue,
my fortress—I shall not stumble.
[8]From God is my rescue and glory,

my strength's rock and my shelter in God.
[9]Trust in Him at all times, O people.
Pour out your hearts before Him.
God is our shelter.

selah

[10]Only breath—humankind,
the sons of man are a lie.
On the scales all together
they weigh less than a breath.
[11]Do not trust in oppression
and of theft have no illusions.
Though it bear fruit of wealth,
set your heart not upon it.
[12]One thing God has spoken,
two things have I heard:
[13]that strength is but God's,
and Yours, Master, is kindness.
For You requite a man by his deeds.

PSALM 62 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *on jeduthun*. Either this is an opaque musical term, or it might refer, as some have conjectured, to a particular group of levitical choristers. When the term appears in 39:1, the preposition attached to it is "for," and it is translated as a proper noun. Here the preposition is "on."

2. *Only in God is my being quiet.* The Hebrew says literally "toward" God. The emphatic "only" (*ʾakh*) begins six different lines in this poem—four of them referring to God; one, antithetically, to the relentless malevolent intentions of the speaker's enemies; and one to the ephemerality and insubstantiality of human existence. The references in the poem to enemies connects it generically with the supplication, but its leading edge is an affirmation of trust in God. This feeling is expressed with the most affecting simplicity, beginning here with the idea that in or through God the speaker's inner being (*nefesh*) finds quiet, is at peace.

3. *I shall not stumble long.* The adverbial *rabah* in the Hebrew sounds peculiar. Because it is adjectival in form, meaning "abundant" or "much," one wonders whether there is a missing feminine noun that should precede it, such as *ʿet rabah*, "for long" (literally, "much time").

4. *like a leaning wall, / a shaky fence.* This image refers back to "demolish" (or "cause disaster to"); the intervening mention of murder specifies the nature of the demolition. Proposals to emend the verb "murder" so that it yields "smash" reflect an effort to make the text read more smoothly and more "logically" than the poet may have intended.

5. *from his high place.* The Hebrew *miseʾeito* is obscure, but it might derive from a verb that means "to lift."

6. *Only in God be quiet, my being.* The poem returns in a kind of refrain to its beginning, but now it turns the quietness of the speaker's inner self into an imperative and substitutes "hope" for "rescue."

7. *I shall not stumble.* When these words from verse 3 recur here, they lack the problematic adjective *rabah*.

9. *Trust in Him at all times, O people.* Until this point, the speaker has been expressing his own profound trust in God. Now he turns, in a plural imperative, to his people and enjoins them to share this sustaining trust.

10. *Only breath—humankind.* The psalmist now, after the segment-marking selah, adds a new element to this meditation on the meaning of trust in God —an Ecclesiastian reflection on the flimsy, fleeting nature of human life. The term *hevel* ("breath" or "vapor," what the King James Version abstracts into "vanity") is one that Qohelet uses repeatedly.

On the scales all together. The Hebrew syntax looks scrambled, but the general sense is clear. In a move of intensification, the poet, having invoked the proverbial equation of human life with mere breath, now invites us to visualize all of humanity being placed in one pan of a scales and mere breath in the other. The pan with humankind would rise higher, for even breath is more substantial.

11. *have no illusions.* The verb used is derived from the same root as *hevel*, "breath."

13. *For You requite a man by his deeds.* This line lacks any parallelism (rhythmic, syntactic, or semantic) in the Hebrew. It may be set here as a kind of prose coda to the poem. But it is a fitting conclusion to the quiet eloquence of the psalm, summing up the speaker's sense that he can trust in God because God will mete out to each man according to his deserts.

PSALM 63

[1]A David psalm, when he was in the wilderness of Judah.

[2]God, my God, for You I search.
My throat thirsts for You,
my flesh yearns for You
in a land waste and parched, with no water.
[3]So, in the sanctum I beheld You,
seeing Your strength and Your glory.
[4]For Your kindness is better than life.
My lips praise You.
[5]Thus I bless You while I live,
in Your name I lift up my palms.
[6]As with ripest repast my being is sated,
and with lips of glad song my mouth declares praise.
[7]Yes, I recalled You on my couch.
In the night-watches I dwelled upon You.
[8]For You were a help to me,
and in Your wings' shadow I uttered glad song.
[9]My being clings to You,

for Your right hand has sustained me.
[10]But they for disaster have sought my life—
may they plunge to the depths of the earth.
[11]May their blood be shed by the sword,
may they be served up to the foxes.
[12]But the king will rejoice in God,
all who swear by him will revel,
for the mouth of the liars is muzzled.

PSALM 63 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *when he was in the wilderness of Judah.* The most likely moment for this allusion to the David story is when he is hiding out from Saul, precisely in this region. The superscription latches onto the evocation of a wasteland in verse 2, though that evocation might in fact be only figurative.

2. *My throat thirsts for You.* The multivalent *nefesh* could conceivably mean "being" (King James Version, "soul"), but the parallelism with "flesh" suggests the anatomical sense of the term. The speaker's longing for God is so overwhelmingly intense that he feels it as a somatic experience, like the thirsty throat of a man in the desert, like yearning flesh.

3. *in the sanctum I beheld You.* Given the fluidity of verb tenses in biblical poetry, this could also be construed as a wish for future consummation, but it is at least as plausible that the speaker, achingly longing for a God from whom he feels distant, remembers a time when he stood in the Temple and beheld God's glorious presence.

4. *My lips praise You.* As a thanksgiving psalm, this poem especially focuses on the lips that pronounce God's praise. Verse 6 introduces the memorable phrase *siftey renanot*, "lips of glad song."

6. *ripest repast.* The literal meaning of the Hebrew here is "suet and rich food" (King James Version, "marrow and fatness"), but that scarcely works in English as poetry.

10. *But they . . . have sought my life.* Only now does the familiar element of threatening enemies come into the psalm, but it remains background rather than foreground. And no sooner are the enemies mentioned than their wished-for defeat is imagined—because of the speaker's trust in God's protection—as a virtually accomplished fact.

may they plunge. The literal sense of the Hebrew verb is "enter into."

11. *may they be served up to the foxes.* The literal formulation is "may they be the foxes' portion." For a corpse to lie unburied, to be consumed by scavengers, is an ultimate curse in biblical literature, as it is in Greek.

12. *But the king will rejoice in God.* The appearance of the king at the end of a psalm that all along has expressed the feelings of one person is surprising. Either it has been spliced in editorially as a "public" conclusion, a procedure that appears to have been used for the endings of quite a few psalms, or the speaker somehow associates the enemies threatening him with enemies of the nation.

PSALM 64

[1]For the lead player, a David psalm.
[2]Hear, God, my voice in my plea.
From fear of the enemy guard my life.
[3]Conceal me from the counsel of evil men,
from the hubbub of the wrongdoers,
[4]who whetted their tongue like a sword,
pulled back their arrow—a bitter word—
[5]to shoot in concealment the innocent,
in a flash shot him down without fear.
[6]They encourage themselves with evil words.
They recount how traps should be laid.
They say, Who will see them?
[7]"Let them search out foul deeds!
We have hidden them from the utmost search,
in a man's inward self,
and deep is the heart."
[8]But God will shoot an arrow at them.
In a flash they will be struck down.
[9]And their tongue will cause them to stumble,
all who see them will nod in derision.

[10]And all men will fear
and tell of God's act,
and His deed they will grasp.
[11]May the righteous rejoice in the LORD and shelter
in Him,
and may all the upright revel.

PSALM 64 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Hear, God, my voice in my plea.* These opening words of the poem explicitly announce its status as supplication.

3. *from the hubbub.* The Hebrew *rigshah* indicates an agitated condition (it is the same root as the verb in Psalm 2:1, "Why are the nations aroused"). Given that the malice of the evil men here is expressed in slanderous speech ("who whetted their tongue like a sword"), "hubbub" seems an appropriate term for this particular agitation.

6. *encourage . . . / recount.* The precise meaning of the two verbs *ḥazeq* and *saper*, common enough elsewhere, is obscure in this particular context, and there may be a textual problem.

7. *We have hidden.* The Masoretic Text says *tamnu*, "we are finished," but several manuscripts show *tamanu* (with a *tet* rather than with a *taw*), "we have hidden."

from the utmost search. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "a searched-out search." The apparent meaning is that we have hidden our lethal intentions in the most deeply buried place—the inward heart of man.

8. *God will shoot . . . at them.* In the most explicit manner, the poem reverses the malicious intentions of the slanderers. They sought to shoot the innocent with the bow of their evil talk; instead, God will shoot them down, and their own tongue will actually cause them to stumble.

PSALM 65

[1]For the lead player, a psalm; for David, a song.
[2]To You silence is praise, God, in Zion,
and to You a vow will be paid.
[3]O, Listener to prayer,
unto You all flesh shall come.
[4]My deeds of mischief are too much for me.
Our crimes but You atone.
[5]Happy whom You choose to draw close,
he will dwell in Your courts.
May we be sated with Your house's bounty,
the holiness of Your Temple.
[6]With fearsome acts justly You answer us,
our rescuing God,
refuge of all the earth's ends
and the far-flung sea,
[7]Who sets mountains firm in His power,
—He is girded in might—
[8]Who quiets the roar of the seas,
the roar of their waves and the tumult of
nations.

[9]And those who dwell at earth's ends will fear Your
signs.
The portals of morning and evening You
gladden.
[10]You pay mind to the earth and soak it.
You greatly enrich it.
God's stream is filled with water.
You ready their grain, for so You ready it,
[11]quench the thirst of its furrows, smooth out its
hillocks,
melt it with showers, its growth You will bless.
[12]You crown Your bountiful year,
and Your pathways drip ripeness.
[13]The wilderness meadows do drip,
and with joy the hills are girded.
[14]The pastures are clothed with flocks
and the valleys are mantled with grain.
They shout for joy, they even sing.

PSALM 65 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *To You, silence is praise.* Despite many divergent interpretations of the Hebrew noun *dumiyah*, the most likely meaning, in view of other biblical occurrences of the verbal root it reflects, is "silence." The speaker begins this psalm of praise—in a paradoxical gesture regarding speech and silence familiar in poetry in many languages, all the way to the early modernist

French poet Stéphane Mallarmé—by affirming that the subject of the poem, God's greatness, is beyond what language can express, so that silence alone is due praise. The poet, however, cannot remain silent, and he goes on to celebrate God's goodness.

4. *My deeds of mischief are too much for me.* The sense of human sinfulness gets only fleeting expression in this psalm. The second verset goes on immediately to affirm the speaker's trust in God's atoning power.

5. *the holiness of Your Temple.* The received text says *qedosh*, which would yield "the holy one of Your Temple," but several ancient versions register *qodesh*, "holiness."

6. *all the earth's ends / . . . the far-flung sea.* God's bounty to all creatures is represented in splendidly global terms. This reach across all the earth and the far-flung sea then sets the stage for the depiction of God's watering of the thirsty soil to provide crops.

8. *Who quiets the roar of the seas.* If this phrase and the one that follows draw on Canaanite mythological imagery of subduing the primordial sea monster, that background is held at a great remove. The leading edge of the line is a celebration of God's power over all nature and over humanity as well ("the tumult of nations").

10. *You ready their grain, for so You ready it.* The repetition here seems odd, and its expressive function is not entirely clear.

11. *smooth out its hillocks.* The meaning at least of the verb in this clause is somewhat doubtful, but it may well derive from a root that means "to descend," or in the conjugation used here, "to bring down," hence "smooth out," *naḥet.*

13–14. *girded / . . . clothed / . . . mantled.* The poem concludes with a beautiful figure of attire (perhaps already prefigured in "crown") for the bucolic panorama of the flourishing hills and valleys covered with crops and livestock.

PSALM 66

[1]To the lead player, a song, a psalm.
Shout out to God, all the earth.
[2]Hymn His name's glory.
Make His praise glory.
[3]Say to God, "How fearsome Your deeds.
Before Your great strength Your enemies quail."
[4]All the earth bows down to You,
and they hymn to You, hymn Your name.
selah
[5]Come and see the acts of God,
fearsome in works over humankind.
[6]He turned sea to dry land,
the torrent they crossed on foot.
There we rejoiced in Him.
[7]He rules in His might forever.
His eyes probe the nations.
Let the wayward not rise up.
selah
[8]Bless, O peoples, our God,
and make heard the sound of His praise,

[9]Who has kept us in life,
and not let our foot stumble.
[10]For You tested us, God,
You refined us as silver refined.
[11]You trapped us in a net,
placed heavy cords round our loins.
[12]You let people ride over us.
We came into fire and water—
and You brought us out to great ease.
[13]I shall come to Your house with burnt offerings,
I shall pay to You my vows
[14]that my lips uttered,
that my mouth spoke in my straits.
[15]Fat burnt offerings I shall offer up to You
with the incense of rams.
I shall sacrifice cattle and goats.
selah
[16]Come listen and let me recount,
all you who fear God,
what He did for me.
[17]To Him with my mouth I called out,
exaltation upon my tongue.
[18]Had I seen mischief in my heart,
the Master would not have listened.
[19]God indeed has listened,
has hearkened to the sound of my prayer.

[20]Blessed is God,
Who has not turned away my prayer nor His
kindness from me.

PSALM 66 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Shout out to God.* This initial imperative to acclaim God signals the beginning of a thanksgiving psalm.

6. *He turned sea to dry land, / the torrent they crossed on foot.* As in a number of other psalms, the miraculous crossing of the Sea of Reeds, telescoped with the crossing of the Jordan under Joshua, is evoked as a defining instance of God's intervention in history on behalf of His people. The association of these early water-crossings with military triumph picks up the quailing of enemies in verse 3 and anticipates God's powerful domination of nations in verse 7.

10. *For You tested us, God, / You refined us as silver refined.* Some interpreters have taken the imagery of testing through fire in this verse and the language of the next two verses as expressions of the ordeal of exile that began in 586 B.C.E. There is nothing, however, in the formulations here that explicitly refers to exile, and the poet could easily have in mind any moment of impending disaster when powerful enemies threatened to overwhelm the Judahite state. The speaker from verse 13 onward assumes that the Temple exists. So either the whole psalm is pre-exilic or one must assume that an earlier psalm has been tacked on editorially to a later one. The switch to first-person singular beginning in verse 13 might seem to argue for this assumption, though there are many psalms that move from first-person plural to singular or the other way around, taking for granted that the fate of the individual and the fate of the nation are indivisible.

11. *heavy cords.* The Hebrew *muʿaqah* means, at least etymologically, anything heavy that presses uncomfortably.

12. *to great ease.* The Masoretic Text says *lerewayah*, which would mean "abundant drink" or "satiety." But the Septuagint and two other ancient versions read *lerewaḥah* (a difference of one letter), which seems more likely.

15. *the incense of rams.* What this telescoped phrase means is that the burning flesh of the sacrificial lamb is a fragrant odor to God.

17. *exaltation upon my tongue.* The Hebrew literally says "exaltation under my tongue."

20. *Blessed is God.* This concluding line, as is evident in the translation, is unbalanced and does not scan. Because there are lines like this one at the end of several other psalms, one suspects that it may have been an editorial practice (if not a poetic practice of the original psalmist) on occasion to add a line of prose summary as a kind of coda to the psalm.

PSALM 67

[1]For the lead player, on stringed instruments, a psalm, a song.

[2]May God grant us grace and bless us,
may He shine His face upon us.

selah

[3]To know on the earth Your way,
among all the nations Your rescue.
[4]Nations acclaim You, O God,
all peoples acclaim You.
[5]Nations rejoice in glad song,
for You rule peoples rightly,
and nations on earth You lead.

selah

[6]Nations acclaim You, O God,
all peoples acclaim You.
[7]The earth gives its yield.
May God our God bless us.
[8]May God bless us,
and all the ends of earth fear Him.

PSALM 67 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *a psalm, a song.* Although this psalm begins (verse 2) with a prayer for God's favor, the emphasis quickly becomes celebratory (beginning in verse 3), and it is emphatically a thanksgiving psalm. The scholarly conjecture, first proposed in the early twentieth century, that this is the text for a harvest ritual rests on the slender evidence of the reference to crops at the beginning of verse 7, but the invocation of the nations of the earth scarcely accords with harvests. Yet the psalm does have a liturgical character in its prominent repetition of set formulas and in its symmetrical structure.

2. *shine His face upon us.* The preposition used here in the Hebrew actually means "with," but this could simply be a variation of the idiom not otherwise attested. In any case, "shine upon" seems to be the intended sense. The shining of the face is a sign of favor just as the hiding of the face is its opposite.

5. *rejoice in glad song.* Literally, "rejoice and sing gladly."

6. *Nations acclaim You.* This entire verse precisely mirrors verse 4.

8. *all the ends of earth.* In this set idiom, *ʾerets* shows its most comprehensive sense of "earth," and the echo of the same term in the same sense from verse 3 makes a neat envelope structure. At the same time, the more limited meaning of *ʾerets*, "land," is probably also present in the verset in verse 7 on agricultural blessing, "The earth gives its yield."

PSALM 68

[1]For the lead player, for David, a psalm, a song.
[2]Let God arise, let His enemies scatter,
and let His foes flee before Him.
[3]As smoke disperses may they disperse,
as wax melts before fire,
may the wicked perish before God.
[4]And may the righteous rejoice and exult
before God, and be gladdened in joy.
[5]Sing to God, hymn His name.
Pave the way for the Rider of Clouds,
for Yah is His name, and exult before Him.
[6]Father of orphans and widows' judge,
God in His holy abode.
[7]God brings the lonely back to their homes,
sets free captives in jubilation.
But the wayward abide in parched land.
[8]God, when You sallied forth before Your people,
when You strode through the desert.
selah
[9]The earth shook,

the heavens, too, poured down before God,
Sinai itself before God, God of Israel.
10 A bountiful rain You shed, O God.
Your estate that had languished You made firm.
11 Your cohorts dwelled there,
You made it firm in Your goodness for the
lowly, O God.
12 The Master gives word—
the women who bear tidings are a great host:
13 "The kings of armies run away, run away,
and the mistress of the house shares out the
spoils."
14 If you lie down among sheepfolds . . .
The wings of the dove are inlaid with silver,
and her pinions with precious gold.
15 When Shaddai scattered the kings there,
it snowed on Zalmon.
16 Mountain of God, Mount Bashan,
crooked-ridged mountain, Mount Bashan.
17 Why do you leap, O crooked-ridged mountains,
the mountain God desired for His dwelling?
Yes, the LORD will abide there forever!
18 The chariots of God are myriads beyond count,
thousands of thousands.
The Master among them—
O, Sinai in holiness!

[19]You went up to the heights,
You took hold of your captives,
the wayward as well—
so that Yah God would abide.
[20]Blessed be the Master day after day.
God heaps upon us our rescue.
selah
[21]God is to us a rescuing God.
The LORD Master possesses the ways out from death.
[22]Yes, God will smash His enemies' heads,
the hairy pate of those who walk about in their guilt.
[23]The Master said, "From Bashan I shall bring back,
bring back from the depths of the sea.
[24]That your foot may wade in blood,
the tongues of your dogs lick the enemies."
[25]They saw Your processions, O God,
my God's processions, my King in holiness.
[26]The singers came first and then the musicians
in the midst of young women beating their drums.
[27]In choruses bless God,
the LORD, from the fountain of Israel.
[28]There little Benjamin holds sway over them,
Judah's princes in their raiment,

Zebulun's princes, Naphtali's princes.
[29]Ordain, O God, Your strength,
strength, O God, that You showed for us,
[30]from Your temple, over Jerusalem.
To You the kings bring gifts.
[31]Rebuke the beast of the marsh,
the herd of bulls among calves of the peoples—
cringing with offerings of silver.
He scattered peoples that delighted in battle.
[32]Let notables come from Egypt,
Cush raise its hands to God.
[33]Kingdoms of earth, sing to God,
hymn to the Master.

selah

[34]To the Rider in the utmost heavens of yore.
Look, He makes His voice ring, the voice of strength.
[35]Acclaim strength to God,
over Israel is His pride
and His strength in the skies.
[36]Fearsome, O God, from Your sanctuaries!
Israel's God—He gives strength and might to His people.
Blessed is God.

PSALM 68 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Let God arise, let His enemies scatter.* This entire verse is a quotation of the Song of the Ark, Numbers 10:35. The sole alteration is that the imperative verbs in Numbers become optatives here (mistakenly translated as a simple future in many modern versions, though correctly represented in the King James Version). In keeping with that change, the possessive suffix attached to "enemies" and "foes" is here third person rather than second person. But this initial quotation leaves a question about the genre of the psalm. Some have imagined that this is a liturgical text for a ceremony in which the Ark was carried into the Temple. That notion, however, involves a leap of inference: the citation of the Song of the Ark could easily have been a solemn commemorative gesture in a ceremony that did not actually involve the presence of the Ark. Verses 25–30 explicitly describe a grand procession, presumably ascending the Temple mount. Elsewhere, much of the poem is devoted to the evocation of a great military victory, with God commanding the battlefield. It is possible that the procession is a celebration of the victory, but there are disorienting breaks in the text (noted below). One prominent Bible scholar of the mid-twentieth century proposed that this psalm is a collage of citations from a variety of old poems, but that extreme conclusion may be a strategy of desperation. In any case, the Hebrew text is a mixture of strong and memorable lines with phrases or whole clauses that look fragmentary or scrambled.

5. *Pave the way.* Though a long line of interpreters, from the King James Version to the present, prefers to understand the verb *solu* as meaning "praise" or "extol," the philological evidence for that meaning is scant, and elsewhere (for example, Isaiah 57:14, 62:10, in precisely this imperative form) the verb means "to pave" or "prepare a highway." That would accord with the image of God as a celestial rider mounted on clouds sweeping down over earth.

the Rider of Clouds. The received text says *ʿaravot*, which would appear to mean "plains," "steppes." Either one should read *ʿavot*, "clouds," or *ʿaravot* here is a variant form of *ʿarafot*, a poetic term that means "clouds." An epithet for Baal in Ugaritic is *rkb ʿrpt,* "rider of clouds."

7. *brings the lonely back to their homes.* The translation reads *meshiv*, "brings back," for the Masoretic *moshiv*, "causes to dwell," although the latter would

also make sense.

in jubilation. The translation is no more than a guess. The Hebrew *kosharot* appears only here, and if it is really a word and not a scribal error, nobody knows what it means.

8. *when You sallied forth before Your people.* This marks the beginning of a report of God's fearsome military triumph, accompanied by seismic upheavals and a downpour of rain. To "sally forth before" is a martial idiom that means "to lead an army."

11. *You made it firm.* The reference is to "Your estate" in the previous verse. Because God is imagined striding through the desert in the vicinity of Mount Sinai, these lines appear to evoke the memory of victories in the Wilderness narrative—first over Egypt, then over Amalek, and later over the kingdoms of trans-Jordan. But as the poem continues, these early triumphs appear to blend with other victories that are more difficult for us to identify.

12. *the women who bear tidings are a great host.* Presumably, the women announce the victory, but the entire verset is obscure.

13. *the mistress of the house shares out the spoils.* This verset is a citation of another old poetic text, the Song of Deborah (Judges 5). There, it is the Canaanite women who—falsely—imagine that their men will soon return from the battle with spoils to divide among the women.

14. *If you lie down among sheepfolds.* The citation of the Song of Deborah continues here. In Judges 5, the clause refers derisively to those tribes of Israel that stayed at home and did not join in the struggle against the Canaanites. One would consequently expect these words to be followed by a negative main clause (for example, "you will be shamed in the ranks of Israel"). It looks as though something has dropped out of the text at this point.

The wings of the dove are inlaid with silver, / and her pinions with precious gold. This exquisite line is justly famous (Henry James drew from it the title of one of his later novels), but it is unclear what it refers to. It might be an item of booty brought back by the victorious Israelite soldiers. It could even be a symbolic representation of glorious Israel.

15. *it snowed on Zalmon.* The meterological reference is mystifying. Snow is fairly rare in the land of Israel, so perhaps snowfall on this mountain in the

vicinity of Hebron was remembered as part of the miraculous character of the victory.

17. *Why do you leap, O crooked-ridged mountains.* The leaping of mountains accords with the seismic upheaval of verse 9. Similar imagery occurs in Psalm 114. It should be said that the meaning of the verb is in dispute.

the mountain God desired for His dwelling. Mount Bashan is not otherwise known as a dwelling place of God.

19. *so that Yah God would abide.* This evidently means that God trampled over His enemies to establish for Himself a firm earthly abode, but, as with much of this psalm, the verset is not altogether clear. Yah is another name for the God of Israel. Most scholars regard it as a shortened form of Yahweh, though that is not entirely certain. It occurs frequently as a theophoric suffix to names for men (in English transcription, *-iah*). It is left untranslated here and elsewhere to convey something of the high poetic or perhaps archaic coloration it seems to have in the Hebrew.

21. *possesses the ways out from death.* This phrase is probably both mythological and historical. God holds sway over the realm of death, commanding the exit passages from it. In nonmythological terms, God brings back his people on the battlefield from the brink of death.

23. *bring back.* The implied object is Israel, threatened with captivity or death.

24. *That your foot may wade in blood.* This gory image would seem to be words addressed by God to collective Israel. The reference to dogs in the second verset appears to exclude the possibility that "you" is God because there is no known tradition of the God of Israel keeping dogs.

the tongues of your dogs lick the enemies. The last word in the Hebrew here, *minehu*, is crabbed, but it might mean literally "his portion" (of food). The desecration of the corpse by canine scavengers is part of Elijah's curse of Ahab and a recurrent source of horror in the ancient world.

25. *They saw Your processions.* Without transition, the poem jumps from the victory to a ceremonial march on Mount Zion.

28. *Benjamin . . . / Judah . . . / Zebulun . . . Naphtali.* This brief catalogue of tribes is another link to the Song of Deborah. Benjamin, Zebulun, and Naphtali are mentioned in Judges 5 as tribes that joined in the battle, and

Judah needs to be included here as the tribe of Judahite kings. Perhaps Benjamin's "holding sway" records a recollection, in the interests of celebrating national unity, of the first king of Israel—Saul—who was a Benjaminite. Benjamin is "little" as the youngest of Jacob's sons.

raiment. The translation reads *riqmatam* for the obscure *rigmatam* in the received text.

31. *the beast of the marsh.* Literally, "beast of the reed." Most commentators take this as a symbolic image of Egypt.

the herd of bulls among calves of the peoples. This designation is a negative representation of physical strength, continuing "the beast of the marsh."

cringing with offerings of silver. The meaning of the word translated as "offerings" is uncertain. In any case, the idea is that proud Egypt is now humbled.

32. *notables.* The Hebrew term *ḥashmanim* appears only here. The translation follows a tradition that goes back to the Hebrew commentators of the Middle Ages. Others render it as "tribute-bearers" or as an object of tribute ("bronze vessels").

raise its hands. The translation reads *tarim*, "raise," for the Masoretic *tarits*, "let run."

34. *the utmost heavens.* Literally, "the heavens of the heavens"—a standard construction for indicating a superlative in biblical Hebrew.

He makes His voice ring. That would be in thunder.

PSALM 69

[1]For the lead player, on *shoshanim*, for David.
[2]Rescue me, God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.
[3]I have sunk in the slime of the deep,
and there is no place to stand.
I have entered the watery depths,
and the current has swept me away.
[4]I am exhausted from my calling out.
My throat is hoarse.
My eyes fail
from hoping for my God.
[5]More numerous than the hairs of my head
are my unprovoked foes.
My destroyers grow strong,
my lying foes.
What I have not stolen
should I then give back?
[6]God, You know my folly,
and my guilt is not hidden from You.

[7]Let not those who hope for You be shamed through me.
Master, O LORD of Armies.
Let those who seek You be not disgraced through me,
God of Israel.
[8]Because for You I have borne reproach,
disgrace has covered my face.
[9]Estranged I have been from my brothers,
and an alien to my mother's sons.
[10]For the zeal of Your house has consumed me,
the reproach of Your reproachers has fallen on me.
[11]And in fasting I wept for my being—
it became a reproach for me.
[12]I made sackcloth my garment
and became for them a byword.
[13]I was the talk of those who sit in the gate,
the drunkards' taunting song.
[14]But I–may my prayer to You,
O LORD, come in a favorable hour.
God, as befits Your great kindness,
answer me with Your steadfast rescue.
[15]Save me from the mire, that I not drown.
Let me be saved from my foes and from the watery depths.

[16]Let the waters' current not sweep me away
and let not the deep swallow me,
and let the Pit not close its mouth on me.
[17]Answer me, LORD, for Your kindness is good,
in Your great compassion turn to me.
[18]And hide not Your face from Your servant,
for I am in straits. Hurry, answer me.
[19]Come near me, redeem me.
Because of my enemies, ransom me.
[20]It is You who know my reproach,
and my shame and disgrace before all my foes.
[21]Reproach breaks my heart, I grow ill;
I hope for consolation, and there is none,
and for comforters, and do not find them.
[22]They gave for my nourishment wormwood,
and for my thirst they made me drink vinegar.
[23]May their table before them become a trap,
and their allies a snare.
[24]May their eyes grow too dark to see,
make their loins perpetually shake.
[25]Pour out upon them Your wrath,
and Your blazing fury overtake them.
[26]May their encampment be laid waste,
and in their tents may no one dwell.
[27]For You—whom You struck they pursued,
and they recounted the pain of Your victims.

[28]Add guilt upon their guilt,
and let them have no part in Your bounty.
[29]Let them be wiped out from the book of life,
and among the righteous let them not be written.
[30]But I am lowly and hurting.
Your rescue, O LORD, will protect me.
[31]Let me praise God's name in song,
and let me extol Him in thanksgiving.
[32]And let it be better to the LORD than oxen,
than a horned bull with its hooves.
[33]The lowly have seen and rejoiced,
those who seek God, let their hearts be strong.
[34]For the LORD listens to the needy,
and His captives He has not despised.
[35]Let heaven and earth extol Him,
the seas and all that stirs within them.
[36]For God will rescue Zion
and rebuild the towns of Judah,
and they will dwell there and possess it.
[37]And the seed of His servants will inherit it,
and those who love His name will dwell there.

PSALM 69 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Rescue me, God.* This is a common opening formula for a supplication. As in many other cases, the supplication toward the end is converted into a thanksgiving psalm (beginning with verse 31).

for the waters have come up to my neck. In this psalm, the familiar image of drowning as a metaphorical representation of near death is elaborated with arresting physiological concreteness: the rising waters come up to the neck; the speaker feels his feet slipping from under him in the water as he sinks into the mire; then the current sweeps him away.

5. *my lying foes.* At this point, the referent of the metaphor of drowning is spelled out: the speaker feels overwhelmed—his very life threatened—because of the calumny of his many enemies. If the end of this verse is textually sound (the Hebrew is cryptic), at least one of their false accusations is that he is guilty of theft.

10. *For the zeal of Your house has consumed me, / the reproach of Your reproachers has fallen on me.* Some interpreters have argued that this verse refers to a specific historical context—the early period of the Return to Zion after the Babylonian exile, when there were divisions within the Judahite community as to whether to rebuild the Temple. In this reading, the speaker would be one of the advocates of rebuilding. Some support for this interpretation may be offered by the last two verses of the psalm, which seem to address a situation in which the towns of Judah have been destroyed and its inhabitants are in the process of returning from exile.

11. *it become a reproach for me.* The speaker's grief and his acts of mourning (compare the next verse) make him an object of mockery.

14. *steadfast rescue.* As so often elsewhere, the paired terms *ḥesed* and *ʾemet* (literally, "kindness" and "truth" but with the idiomatic sense of "steadfast kindness," "dependability as partner in a covenant") are broken up and distributed between the two versets.

15. *Save me from the mire . . . / from the watery depths.* In a movement back to the beginning, the poem returns here and in the next verse to the imagery of drowning introduced in verse 2.

17–18. *Answer me, LORD . . . / hide not Your face from Your servant.* The formulaic nature of the language of the poem is particularly pronounced here.

21. *Reproach breaks my heart.* The theme of humiliation and reproach was stressed from verse 7 onward. At this point, the speaker says that he has been so devastated by the revilement to which he has been subjected that it has made him physically ill.

I grow ill. The Hebrew verb here is unusual but, on philological grounds, could plausibly mean to be ill. A revocalization of the word would yield an adjective, *ʾanushah*, "grave," referring to a feminine noun such as *makah*, "affliction," which does not actually appear in the text.

23. *their allies.* The meaning of the Hebrew *shelomim* is disputed. This translation construes it as an ellipsis for *ʾanshey shelomim,* "allies"; others read it, because of the proximity of "table," as *sheleimim*, "sacrificial feasts."

27. *whom You struck they pursued.* The evident meaning of this somewhat crabbed line is that these malicious men persecuted people whom God had already singled out to punish. The idea is close to the proverbial kicking someone who is lying down.

they recounted. The Septuagint, by altering one consonant in the Hebrew verb, reads "they added to."

30. *Your rescue, O* LORD, *will protect me.* These words are the turning point of the psalm. The verb is surely not an optative but a confident declaration of what God is about to do.

31. *song, / . . . thanksgiving.* "Thanksgiving," *todah*, in this psalm is clearly not a thanksgiving offering but the psalm itself, a tight parallel to "song."

32. *than oxen.* The point is made through a shrewd pun: the Hebrew for "song" is *shir* and for "oxen" (literally, a singular, "ox") is *shor*, so *shir* is offered as an efficacious substitute for *shor*. The idea that God will gladly accept song instead of sacrifice could reflect, as some scholars have claimed, the influence of the Prophets; but if the Temple still needs to be rebuilt, in any case there would be no way to offer animal sacrifice.

34. *His captives.* This term in all likelihood refers to the Judahites who were sent into Babylonian captivity. The medieval Hebrew poet Judah HaLevi picks up on this term by using it to refer to all Jews in exile, whom he equally designates as "your [Zion's] captives" and "the captives of hope."

PSALM 70

[1]For the lead player, for David, to call to mind.
[2]God, to save me,
LORD, to my help, hasten!
[3]May those who seek my life be shamed and reviled.
May they fall back and be disgraced,
who desire my harm.
[4]Let them turn back on the heels of their shame,
who say “Hurrah, hurrah!”
[5]Let all who seek You
exult and rejoice,
and may they always say “God is great!”
—those who love Your rescue.
[6]As for me, I am lowly and needy.
God, O hasten to me!
[7]My help, the one who frees me You are.
LORD, do not delay.

PSALM 70 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *to call to mind.* For a possible explanation of this unusual phrase, see the comment on Psalm 38:1.

2. *God, to save me, / LORD, to my help, hasten!* This entire psalm is replicated, with only minor variations of wording, by Psalm 40:14–18. The indications are that this compact, powerful psalm is the original version, and that the editors of Psalm 40 decided to incorporate it into a longer psalm. The reader is referred to the comments on Psalm 40:18. It is worth noting that syntactically, this opening line uses a double-duty verb at the end of the second verset (in general, double-duty verbs occur in the first verset). The result is a periodic sentence in which the crucial verb, "hasten," which completes the meaning, does not occur until the end.

4. *Let them turn back on the heels of their shame.* This clause illustrates why this psalm is the primary version and Psalm 40 the secondary one. The Hebrew verb here is *yashuvu*, "let them turn back." Turning back on the heels (singular in the Hebrew) is an understandable image that jibes with the falling back or retreating of the previous line. Psalm 40:16 reads *yashomu*, "Let them be devastated," which does not make altogether good sense with "on the heels of their shame." One suspects that a scribe made an error in the process of copying Psalm 70. Some ancient versions correct *yashomu* in Psalm 40 to *yashuvu*, evidently with an eye to Psalm 70.

PSALM 71

[1]In You, O LORD, I shelter.
    Let me never be shamed.
[2]Through Your bounty save me and free me.
    Incline Your ear to me and rescue me.
[3]Be for me a fortress-dwelling
    to come into always.
You ordained to rescue me,
    for You are my rock and my bastion.
[4]My God, free me from the hand of the wicked,
    from the grip of the wicked and the violent.
[5]For You are my hope, Master,
    O LORD, my refuge since youth.
[6]Upon You I relied from birth.
    From my mother's womb You brought me out.
To You is my praise always.
[7]An example I was to the many,
    and You are my sheltering strength.
[8]May my mouth be filled with Your praise,
    all day long Your glory.
[9]Do not fling me away in old age,

as my strength fails, do not forsake me.
10For my enemies said of me,
who stalk me counseled together,
11saying, “God has forsaken him.
Pursue and catch him, for no one will save
him.”
12God, do not keep far from me.
My God, hasten to my help!
13May my accusers be shamed, may they perish—
may they be clothed with shame and reproach,
who seek my harm.
14As for me, I shall always hope
and add to all Your praise.
15My mouth will recount Your bounty,
all day long Your rescue,
for I know not numbers.
16I shall come in the power of the Master, the
LORD.
I shall call to mind Your bounty—You only.
17God, You have taught me since my youth,
and till now I have told Your wonders.
18And even in hoary old age,
O God, do not forsake me.
Till I tell of Your mighty arm to the next generation,
to all those who will come, Your power,
19and Your bounty, O God, to the heights,

as You have done great things,
O God, who is like You?
[20]As You surfeited me with great and dire distress,
You will once more give me life,
and from earth's depths once more bring me up.
[21]You will multiply my greatness
and turn round and comfort me.
[22]And so I shall acclaim You with the lute.
—Your truth, my God.
Let me hymn You with the lyre,
Israel's Holy One.
[23]My lips will sing glad song when I hymn to You,
and my being that You ransomed.
[24]My tongue, too, all day long
will murmur Your bounty.
For they are shamed, for they are disgraced,
those who sought my harm.

PSALM 71 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *In You, O LORD, I shelter. / Let me never be shamed.* Without superscription, this psalm begins immediately with the formulaic language of the psalms of supplication. But as early as verse 7, the speaker announces that God has been his support, so the theme of thanksgiving takes over.

5. *my refuge since youth.* A distinctive quasi-autobiographical emphasis begins at this point. The speaker, who evidently is on the brink of old age (verses 9

and 17–18) looks back on his life from its earliest moment, recollects how God has constantly sustained him, and thus declares that he has always been, and will continue to be, devoted to praising God.

6. *From my mother's womb You brought me out.* The verb in the Masoretic Text, *gozi*, is enigmatic. This translation reads *goḥi*, which would make this whole clause almost identical with Psalm 22:10. Because there are a few verses here that closely echo verses in other psalms, it should be noted that such use of stereotypical phrases and even whole clauses is characteristic of the poetry of psalms and provides no convincing evidence, as some scholars have claimed, that this psalm is merely an assemblage of snippets from other psalms.

7. *An example.* Some interpreters construe this negatively, in the sense of "byword" or "object of mockery," but the Hebrew *mofet* (in other contexts, "portent," "sign of divine power") generally has a positive connotation, and the positive meaning is confirmed by the second verset.

14. *add to all Your praise.* The probable meaning is that the speaker has been praising God all his life and is resolved to continue doing so.

15. *for I know not numbers.* The Hebrew is as obscure as this English version. *Seforot*, the noun that is the object of the verb, appears to derive from the root that means to count or number, but the form of the word here is anomalous. Perhaps the sense is "I know not the numbers of Your bounty," but that is only a guess.

18. *Till I tell of Your mighty arm to the next generation.* Again and again in Psalms, it is the preeminent calling of humankind to praise God. Here the speaker pleads for strength in old age so that even then he can continue his task of praise.

mighty arm. "Mighty" is merely implied in the Hebrew.

20. *As You surfeited me with . . . distress, / You will once more give me life.* This verse perfectly encapsulates the combination of a plea for help and thankful praise. The speaker has experienced dark hours, but, remembering God's beneficence to him from childhood on, he is confident that God will once again sustain him.

24. *they are shamed.* This verse at the very end picks up, in a counterpoint envelope structure, "Let me never be shamed" from the first line of the poem.

PSALM 72

[1]For Solomon.
God, grant Your judgments to the king
and Your righteousness to the king's son.
[2]May he judge Your people righteously
and Your lowly ones in justice.
[3]May the mountains bear peace to the people,
and the hills righteousness.
[4]May he bring justice to the lowly of the people,
may he rescue the sons of the needy
and crush the oppressor.
[5]May they fear you as long as the sun
and as long as the moon, generations untold.
[6]May he come down like rain on new-mown grass,
like showers that moisten the earth.
[7]May the just man flourish in his days—
and abundant peace till the moon is no more.
[8]And may he hold sway from sea to sea,
from the River to the ends of the earth.
[9]Before him may the desert-folk kneel,
and his enemies lick the dust.

[10]May kings of Tarshish and the islands
bring tribute,
may kings of Sheba and Siba
offer vassal gifts.
[11]And may all kings bow to him,
all nations serve him.
[12]For he saves the needy man pleading,
and the lowly who has none to help him.
[13]He pities the poor and the needy,
and the lives of the needy he rescues,
[14]from scheming and outrage redeems them,
and their blood is dear in his sight.
[15]Long may he live,
and the gold of Sheba be given him.
May he be prayed for always,
all day long be blessed.
[16]May there be abundance of grain in the land,
on the mountaintops.
May his fruit rustle like Lebanon,
and may they sprout from the town like grass of
the land.
[17]May his name be forever.
As long as the sun may his name bear seed.
And may all nations be blessed through him, call
him happy.

[18]Blessed is the LORD God, Israel's God,
performing wonders alone.
[19]And blessed is His glory forever, and may His
glory fill all the earth
Amen and amen.
[20]The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended.

PSALM 72 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *For Solomon.* This is one of the most magisterial of the royal psalms. The editorial linkage with Solomon at the beginning no doubt reflects the tradition regarding the imperial grandeur of the Solomonic reign. The last line of the postscript (verse 20) appears to encourage the notion that David is the author. Thus, the medieval Hebrew exegete David Kimchi, noting the coupled terms "king" and "king's son": "This psalm was composed by David about his son Solomon." Although there is a line of interpreters who read this text as a "messianic" psalm, the poem itself offers no compelling evidence for that reading. Court poetry everywhere revels in flattering hyperbole, so the vision of the king's reigning forever to the ends of the earth and dispensing perfect justice could easily be a prayer on behalf of a flesh-and-blood monarch, without eschatological intentions.

judgments. Solomon, one recalls, is a legendary figure of the wise judge, but the administration of justice is the mandate of every king of Israel.

5. *May they fear you.* The second-person pronoun is anomalous. As the text stands, it makes better sense to apply "you" to the king, with "they" referring to anyone who would be tempted to be an oppressor. The Septuagint offers an attractive alternative reading: by a simple reversal of consonants in the verb (*yaʾarikh* instead of *yiyraʾukha*), the Greek translators render this as "May he live long."

6. *May he come down like rain.* Kimchi plausibly understands this as a simile for the king's beneficent presence: "This king will come to the people for their good and for their rescue like rain."

8–10. *And may he hold sway from sea to sea.* The poet now begins a grand geographical sweep that touches all points of the compass. "From sea to sea" would be from the Dead Sea to the Mediterranean. The "River" is the Euphrates. The "desert-folk" would be some-where to the east or to the south. "Tarshish and the islands" are to the west far out in the Mediterranean realm. "Sheba and Siba" are to the far south, in the region of the Red Sea. The mention of Sheba might be another reason for the editorial connection of the psalm with Solomon.

15. *May he be prayed for . . . / be blessed.* The Hebrew uses a third-person singular verb in the active voice with no subject specified ("may [one] pray for him"), which is a common equivalent of the passive in biblical usage. The same form is employed at the beginning of this verse in "the gold of Sheba be given him."

16. *abundance of grain.* The term translated as "abundance," *pisah*, appears only here, so its meaning is uncertain. This translation follows a conjecture of Abraham ibn Ezra. In any case, the logical complement to a reign of perfect justice in the ancient Near Eastern imagination was the blessings of agricultural fecundity.

on the mountaintops. Although there was terraced farming on the hillsides in the ancient period, this phrase may be hyperbolic: grain will flourish not only in the flat fields but on the very mountaintops.

May his fruit rustle like Lebanon. The poet has in mind the lofty trees of Lebanon rustling in the wind. This is another hyperbole: the heavy ears of grain will spring high up and make as much noise in the wind as the cedars of Lebanon.

may they sprout from the town like grass of the land. What this verset refers to is unclear. Some understand "they" to be the people of the towns, who will multiply like blades of grass. It might also mean that from the cities as well as the mountaintops actual crops will come forth.

17. *As long as the sun may his name bear seed.* In a concluding flourish, the eternal persistence of the sun is once more invoked. This use of the solar and lunar luminaries as images of perdurability also implies an analogy: the king

in his realm is as brilliant as the sun in the heavens; he is a *roi soleil*. The verb *yinon,* "bear fruit," is unique to this psalm, but it most likely is cognate with the noun *nin*, which means "descendant."

18. *Blessed is the* LORD. The three verses that begin here are not part of the psalm but an editorial coda (compare the briefer one at the end of Psalm 41) that marks the conclusion of the second book of Psalms.

PSALM 73

[1]An Asaph psalm.
Only good to Israel is God,
to the pure of heart.
[2]As for me, my feet had almost strayed,
my steps had nearly tumbled.
[3]For I envied the revelers,
I saw the wicked's well-being:
[4]"For they are free of the fetters of death,
and their body is healthy.
[5]Of the torment of man they have no part,
and they know not human afflictions."
[6]Thus haughtiness is their necklace,
outrage, their garment, bedecks them.
[7]Fat bulges round their eyes,
imaginings spill from their heart.
[8]They mock and speak with malice,
from on high they speak out oppression.
[9]They put their mouth up to the heavens,
and their tongue goes over the earth.
[10]Thus the people turn back to them,

and they lap up their words.
[11]And they say, “How could God know,
and is there knowledge with the Most High?”
[12]Look, such are the wicked,
the ever complacent ones pile up wealth.
[13]But in vain have I kept my heart pure
and in innocence washed my palms.
[14]For I was afflicted all day long,
and my chastisement, each new morning.
[15]If I said, Let me talk like them.
Look, Your sons’ band I would have betrayed.
[16]When I thought to know these things,
it was a torment in my eyes.
[17]Till I came to the sanctuaries of God,
understood what would be their end.
[18]Yes, You set them on slippery ground,
brought them down to destruction.
[19]How they come to ruin in a moment,
swept away, taken in terrors!
[20]Like a dream upon waking, O Master,
upon rising You despised their image.
[21]When my heart was embittered,
and my conscience stabbed with pain,
[22]I was a dolt and knew nothing,
like cattle I was with You.
[23]Yet I was always with You,

You grasped my right hand.
[24]You guided me with Your counsel,
and toward glory You took me.
[25]Whom else do I have in the heavens,
and beside You whom would I want upon earth?
[26]Though my flesh and my heart waste away,
God is my heart's rock and my portion forever.
[27]For, look, those far from You perish,
You demolish all who go whoring from You.
[28]But I—God's closeness is good to me,
I make the Master the LORD my shelter,
to recount all Your works.

PSALM 73 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *An Asaph psalm.* This psalm is one out of eleven among the seventeen that make up the third book of Psalms that is ascribed to the Levite Asaph. One may infer that Asaph psalms were the core of this particular collection and the others were added.

to Israel. An emendation proposed by several scholars, reading *layashar ʾel* instead of the Masoretic *leyisraʾel*, yields the following for the whole line: "But good is El to the upright, / God to the pure of heart." Although the received text is perfectly intelligible as it stands, the emendation has two points to recommend it: the unbalanced line (four beats, then two) becomes balanced (three beats in each verset); and the mention of "Israel," which appears to violate the individual perspective of the poem, is eliminated.

3. *For I envied the revelers.* The speaker's near straying, mentioned in the previous verse, is not through an act he committed but in his being tempted

by envying the wicked, who seem to him to prosper even as they complacently disregard any prospect of retribution. The problem laid out here is essentially one that is addressed by Wisdom literature (as in Psalm 1): How is it that the wicked prosper? The answer, in keeping with the assumptions of mainline Wisdom writing, is that the worldly success of the wicked is temporary and illusory.

4. *For they are free of the fetters of death.* At this point, and for much of the psalm, the Hebrew becomes somewhat cloudy. The literal sense of this clause is: for there are no fetters to their death.

their body is healthy. The meaning of the noun here, *ʾul*, is doubtful.

5. *Of the torment of man they have no part.* The entire verse, like the preceding one, expresses the illusion under which the speaker labored when he envied the wicked.

6. *is their necklace.* The Hebrew uses a verb ("necklaces them").

7. *Fat bulges round their eyes.* This is one of several satiric images deployed in Psalms that represents the prospering wicked as physically swollen from the delicacies with which they have been stuffing themselves—here, the eye is imagined peeking out from its envelope of fat. (The Hebrew is somewhat crabbed, but the literal sense is: their eye protrudes from fat.)

imaginings spill from their heart. The Hebrew is obscure, but the noun *maskiot* else-where means "graven images," so the sense might be that in their arrogance they spin out all sorts of presumptuous schemes or images of their own superiority.

8. *from on high.* Despite the mention of the heavens in the next verse, this locution might refer merely to the commanding position of earthly power that the arrogant enjoy.

9. *They put their mouth up to the heavens.* Although the Hebrew preposition can also mean "against," as many interpreters claim, the parallelism with the second verset might rather indicate that the wicked distribute their arrogant speech high and low, up to the heavens and all over the earth.

10. *Thus the people turn back to them.* Any translation of this verset and the next is guess-work, because the Hebrew is not intelligible. Literally, it reads: "Thus [or, therefore] his [His?] people turn back yonder." The meaning might

be that because the arrogant insistently broadcast their speech, people pay attention to them.

and they lap up their words. The literal sense of the very cryptic Hebrew is "and waters of fullness [full waters?] are wrung from them [for them?]." The text has almost certainly suffered mangling in scribal transmission here. This translation adopts an emendation proposed by Hans-Joachim Kraus: instead of the Masoretic *umey malei᾽ yimatsu*, he reads *umileyhem yamotsu*.

13. *But in vain have I kept my heart pure.* This is the culmination of the speaker's despair. He contemplates the triumphal complacency and success of the wicked, while he, though pure of heart, suffers untold afflictions day after day (verse 14).

15. *Let me talk like them.* The Hebrew has only "like" (*kemo* in an undeclined form), which sounds strange. The verb, moreover, usually means "tell" or "recount," but it often has the sense of "talk" in rabbinic Hebrew.

18. *You set them on slippery ground.* At this point the speaker's vindication finally unfolds, for he sees God reversing the good fortune of the wicked.

21. *my conscience.* The Hebrew says "kidneys" (King James Version, "reins"), thought to be the seat of conscience as the heart was thought to be the seat of understanding. The two terms are often joined, either in a collocation ("heart and kidneys") or, as here, in parallel versets.

22. *I was a dolt and knew nothing.* These words refer to the speaker's imagining that the wicked might have the right idea, not realizing that God was about to overturn their fate.

23. *Yet I was always with You.* This is not a contradiction but the persuasive record of inner oscillation. The speaker was on the verge of being seduced by the evident success of the wicked, but he resisted, clinging to God despite all the inducements of his observation to follow the way of the wicked.

24. *and toward glory You took me.* A long line of interpreters, especially in the Christian tradition, read this as a reference to the afterworld. (See the King James Version: "and afterward receive me to glory.") But such a belief is beyond the horizon of Psalms, and it is far more likely in terms of idiomatic usage that the Hebrew *᾽ahar* is a preposition ("after" or "toward") rather than a temporal adverb ("afterward").

27. *those far from You perish.* This line summarizes the view of the fate of evildoers that is put forth in the whole psalm. However they prosper, if they are far from God, in the end they will be destroyed.

who go whoring from You. This metaphor of sexual betrayal is not part of the vocabulary of Wisdom literature but appears typically in cultic and prophetic contexts.

28. *God's closeness is good to me.* This contrast to "those far from You" points to the emotional core of the psalm. The speaker may have suffered, but the feeling of being close to God sustains him, gives him a sense of being protected.

PSALM 74

[1]An Asaph *maskil*.
Why, O God, have You abandoned us forever?
Your wrath smolders against the flock You
should tend.
[2]Remember Your cohort You took up of old,
You redeemed the tribe of Your estate,
Mount Zion where You dwelled.
[3]Lift up Your feet to the eternal ruins,
all that the enemy laid waste in the sanctuary.
[4]Your foes roared out in Your meeting place,
they set up their signs as signs.
[5]They hacked away as one brings down from above
in a tangle of trees with axes.
[6]And its carvings altogether
with hatchet and pike they pounded.
[7]They set fire to Your sanctuary,
they profaned on the ground Your name's
dwelling place.
[8]They said in their heart, "We shall destroy them
altogether."

They burned all God's meeting places in the
land.
[9]Our own signs we did not see.
There is no longer a prophet,
nor any among us who knows until when.
[10]Until when, O God, will the foe insult,
the enemy revile Your name forever?
[11]Why do You draw back Your hand,
and Your right hand hold in Your bosom?
[12]Yet God is my king of old,
worker of rescues in the midst of the earth.
[13]You shattered the sea god with Your strength,
You smashed the monsters' heads on the waters.
[14]You crushed the Leviathan's heads,
You gave him as food to the desert-folk.
[15]You split open a channel for spring and brook,
You dried up the surging torrents.
[16]Yours is the day, also Yours the night.
It was You Who founded the light and the sun.
[17]It was You Who laid down all the boundaries of
earth,
summer and winter, You fashioned them.
[18]Remember this: the enemy insulted,
a base people reviled Your name.
[19]Do not yield to the beast the life of Your dove,
the band of Your lowly forget not forever.

[20]Look to the pact,
for the dark places of earth fill with groans of outrage.
[21]Let not the poor man turn back disgraced.
Let the lowly and needy praise Your name.
[22]Arise, God, O plead Your cause.
Remember the insult to You by the base all day long.
[23]Forget not the voice of Your foes,
the din of those against You perpetually rising.

PSALM 74 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Why, O God, have You abandoned us forever?* As in a number of other psalms, the seeming logical contradiction of using "forever" in a plea to reverse the abandonment has psychological conviction: the tribulations of the nation have gone on so long that they seem eternal to the speaker. This psalm is a national supplication evoking the painful memory of the destruction of the Temple. The stress on the persistence of the catastrophe may suggest a date of composition many decades after 586 B.C.E. Some determined commentators date the poem as late as the Hasmonean period, though the references to the profanation of the sanctuary could just as easily apply to its destruction by the Babylonians.

the flock You should tend. A more literal rendering would be "the flock of Your tending."

3. *the eternal ruins.* As with "forever" in the first verse of the psalm, it appears to the anguished speaker as though the ruins of the Temple are to go on for eternity.

4. *they set up their signs as signs.* The translation preserves the ambiguity of the Hebrew. Some interpreters imagine these to be foreign ensigns or standards that the conquerors plant on the ruins of the Temple. Others see here a reference to pagan icons. But "signs" (*ʾotot*) could also mean portents: they claim that their victory was ordained by portents they received. Compare the beginning of verse 9, where *ʾotot* appears to be used in the sense of portents.

5. *They hacked away as one brings down from above.* The Hebrew is obscure. The Masoretic Text has "it became known" (*yiwadaʿ*), but many textual critics prefer to read *yigadaʿ* (literally, "it was hacked away"). "Brings down from above" is also odd, though the evident image is of a woodsman chopping down branches from a high tree.

8. *We shall destroy them.* The verb *ninam* is anomalous, but it may derive from the root *y-n-y*, which suggests enmity.

all God's meeting places. The indication of sanctuaries throughout the land is surprising because otherwise the psalm appears to assume the centralization of worship in the single temple in Jerusalem effected after 621 B.C.E.

9. *Our own signs we did not see.* While "signs" is ambiguous, this verse clearly alludes to verse 4.

12. *Yet God is my king of old.* As in many psalms of supplication, whether individual or collective, a turning point occurs when the speaker, until that point a voice of desperation, affirms his faith in God's rescuing power.

13. *You shattered the sea god.* As evidence of God's beneficent power "of old," the speaker goes back to the time of creation, invoking imagery from the Canaanite cosmogonic myth in which Baal subdues the chaotic force of the primordial sea monster, here referred to first as Yamm (also the ordinary Hebrew word for "sea"), then as *taninim* ("monsters"), then as Leviathan.

14. *You crushed the Leviathan's heads.* If the plural in our text is authentic, the poet would be alluding to a tradition in which Leviathan is a many-headed monster (not part of its depiction in Job). There is an *a fortiori* logic in this poetic use of the Canaanite myth: if God is powerful enough to have secured the order of the created world by conquering the hideous forces of aqueous chaos, he can surely confound the vile enemy who has laid waste Zion.

You gave him as food to the desert-folk. That is, God's victory over the primordial sea monster was so overwhelming that He could dissect its body and convey its flesh to the far-off dwellers of the desert for their consumption.

15. *You split open a channel . . . / You dried up the surging torrents.* Now God's power as master of creation is represented in natural rather than mythological terms. He creates both the vital water sources and the dry places on earth. He establishes the rhythm of day and night, summer and winter, and sets the heavenly luminaries in their place (verses 16 and 17). This whole sequence of lines beginning in verse 13 uses an emphatic second-person singular pronoun, *ʾatah*, at the head of almost every clause. The semantic effect is something like "It was You Who . . .", but because that formula would make most of the lines excessively long in English, it has been used in the translation only in lines 16b and 17a.

19. *Do not yield to the beast the life of Your dove.* The translation assumes that the noun *ḥayat* (ordinarily, "beast of") is a poetic form of *ḥayah* ("beast" not in the construct state—that is, not attached to the noun that follows it). The question about the text is compounded by the fact that in the second verset *ḥayat* appears to be a homonym, meaning "band" or "military contingent."

20. *with groans of outrage.* The Masoretic Text seems to say, "with habitations of outrage," which sounds odd coming after "dark places of earth." The Septuagint reads—instead of *neʾot*, "habitations"—*ʾenkot*, "groans," and that reading is adopted here.

23. *the din of those against You perpetually rising.* "Perpetually" at the end picks up "forever" at the beginning. As a concluding gesture, the image is powerfully expressive. The speaker's ears are outraged by the insulting, triumphant clamor of Judah's enemies rising up day after day, seemingly without end, and he implores God to arise and finally put a stop to it.

PSALM 75

[1]For the lead player, *al-tashcheth*, an Asaph psalm, a song.

[2]We acclaim You, O God, we acclaim You,
and Your name is near.
They recount Your wonders.
[3]"When I seize the appointed time,
I Myself shall judge rightly.
[4]Earth and its dwellers would melt,
had I not set fast its pillars.
selah
[5]I said to the revelers, Do not revel,
and to the wicked, Lift not your horn.
[6]Lift not your horn on high.
You would speak arrogance against the Rock.
[7]For not from the east and not from the west
and not from the desert is one lifted up.
[8]But God is the judge,
it is He Who brings down and lifts up.
[9]For there is a cup in the hand of the LORD,
with foaming wine full for decanting.

He will pour from it,
    yes, its dregs they will drain,
all the earth's wicked will drink."
[10]As for me, I shall tell it forever,
    let me hymn to the God of Jacob.
[11]"And all the horns of the wicked I shall hack off.
    The horns of the just will be lifted!"

PSALM 75 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *We acclaim You.* The introduction of the verb *hodah* (the common cognate noun is *todah*, "thanksgiving") announces this as a thanksgiving psalm. But it is distinctive in representing God as speaker in the body of the poem as He proclaims the meting out of divine justice, which is the reason for human thanksgiving.

Your name is near. This usage reflects a tendency in the Late Biblical period to interpose the divine name as an intermediary or buffer between humankind and the actual presence of God.

They recount Your wonders. The switch from first-person plural to third-person plural may be slightly confusing, though it is within the limits of biblical idiomatic usage. "They" has the implied meaning of "people."

5. *Lift not Your horn.* This commonplace of biblical poetry, probably drawn from the image of the large curving horns that the ram uses to gore its natural enemies, is a symbol of assertive power. This poem takes up the raising of the horn as its central metaphor, repeating it in the next verse and coming back to it in the concluding line of the psalm.

6. *Lift not your horn on high.* Now the conventional horn image becomes a vivid representation of the arrogant displaying their power presumptuously. Although some interpreters see in "on high" a reference to God or to the

heavens, the image stands effectively enough as a spatial indication of loftiness, of pretension to superiority.

against the Rock. The Masoretic Text has *betsaw'ar*, "with throat," which seems otiose and not altogether idiomatic (literally, "speak arrogance with throat"). This translation follows the reading of the Septuagint, which shows *batsur*, "against the Rock."

7. *not from the desert is one lifted up.* The last two Hebrew words are *mimidbar harim*. In the Masoretic vocalization, the last syllable of *mimidbar* shows a *pataḥ* as the vowel, which would join it to *harim* as the construct state, yielding "from the desert of mountains." Many manuscripts, however, vocalize this syllable with a *qamats*, which would introduce a pause after *mimidbar* and thus make *harim* a verb in the infinitive, "to lift up." This small change gives the sentence an otherwise absent predicate and accords with this poet's fondness for pointed repetition of terms.

10. *As for me.* At this point, just before the end, the speaker breaks into God's speech to proclaim his resolution to sing hymns to God, as is conventional in the conclusion of a thanksgiving psalm. But the next verse appears to switch back to God's speech, for it is clearly God, not the psalmist, who brings low the wicked.

11. *the horns of the wicked I shall hack off.* The violence of this punishing act is an answer to the arrogance of the wicked who have raised their horns on high.

The horns of the just will be lifted. In antithetical symmetry, and with the repetition of the key verb "lift," the just will be triumphant. This closing verse pointedly opposes two judicial terms: "the wicked" being applicable to those with a wrongful case in court, and "just" to the man judicially vindicated.

PSALM 76

[1]For the lead player with stringed instruments, an
Asaph psalm, a song.
[2]God becomes known in Judah,
in Israel His name is great.
[3]And in Salem was set His pavilion,
His dwelling in Zion.
[4]There did He shatter the bow's fiery shafts,
the shield and the sword and the battle.
selah
[5]Refulgent You were,
mightier than the mountains of prey.
[6]The stout-hearted were despoiled,
they fell into a trance,
and all the men of valor could not lift a hand.
[7]By Your roar, O God of Jacob,
chariot and horse were stunned.
[8]You, O fearsome are You,
and who can stand before You, in the strength
of Your wrath?
[9]From the heavens You made judgment heard,

the earth was afraid and fell silent,
[10]when God rose up for judgment
to rescue all the lowly of earth.

selah

[11]Even human fury acclaims You
when You gird on all furies' remains.
[12]Make vows and fulfill them to the LORD your God.
All round Him bring tribute to the Fearsome One.
[13]He plucks the life-breath of princes.
He is fearsome to the kings of the earth.

PSALM 76 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *God becomes known in Judah.* This psalm is a celebration of God's power in history. Perhaps it was composed to mark a particular victory over enemies who assailed Jerusalem, but the text does not provide sufficient evidence for any specific historical identification. As in the Exodus story and elsewhere, God "becomes known" by exerting His triumphant power.

3. *Salem.* This is a variant, perhaps archaic, form of the name Jerusalem, something made clear by the parallelism with "Zion" in the second verset.

5. *mightier than the mountains of prey.* This phrase is strange, powerful, and haunting, and it does not call for emendation, as many scholars have claimed. "The mountains of prey" are the wild mountains where lions and other predatory beasts roam. God is seen here as even more fearsome than that scary realm.

6. *could not lift a hand.* The Hebrew says literally, "could not find their hands." The idiomatic English equivalent, which fits nicely with the idea of the warriors' being stunned, is borrowed from the New Jewish Publication Society translation.

7. *chariot and horse.* The use of this phrase would seem to be a direct allusion to the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15), the paradigmatic poem celebrating God's triumph over the enemies of Israel.

8. *in the strength of Your wrath.* The Masoretic Text shows "since Your wrath," which is problematic, because one would expect a verb to follow. This translation reads—instead of the Masoretic *meʿaz*, "since"—*meʿoz*, "in [or from] the strength of."

11. *Even human fury acclaims You / when You gird on all furies' remains.* The Hebrew, here represented more or less literally, is obscure. Without performing extensive reconstructive surgery on the text, one may tentatively propose the following sense: Even human beings in the momentum of their fury are compelled to acknowledge God when they see Him exercising the mere residue of all the furies at His disposal (or, alternately, exercising all possible furies to their last remains).

12. *the Fearsome One.* The received text reads *moraʾ*, which would mean fear, but several ancient versions reflect *noraʾ*, "fearsome," a term used in verse 8 and again in the concluding line of the poem. That epithet is apt for a triumphant LORD of Armies.

13. *plucks.* The Hebrew verb here, *batsar*, is normally used for the act of harvesting grapes. Perhaps it may by extension mean to sever, to break off or cut off, as the King James translators inferred.

PSALM 77

[1]For the lead player on *jeduthun,* an Asaph psalm.
[2]My voice to God—let me cry out.
My voice to God—and hearken to me.
[3]In the day of my straits I sought the Master.
My eye flows at night, it will not stop.
I refused to be consoled.
[4]I call God to mind and I moan.
I speak and my spirit faints.
selah
[5]You held open my eyelids.
I throbbed and could not speak.
[6]I ponder the days of yore,
the years long gone.
[7]I call to mind my song in the night.
To my own heart I speak, and my spirit inquires.
[8]Will the Master forever abandon me,
and never again look with favor?
[9]Is His kindness gone for all time,
His word done for time without end?
[10]Has God forgotten to show grace,

has He closed off in wrath His compassion?
[11]And I said, it is my failing,
that the High One's right hand has changed.
[12]I call to mind the acts of Yah
when I recall Your wonders of old.
[13]I recite all your works,
Your acts I rehearse.
[14]God, Your way is in holiness.
Who is a great god like God?
[15]You are the god working wonders.
You made known among peoples Your strength.
[16]You redeemed with Your arm Your people,
the children of Jacob and Joseph.
selah
[17]The waters saw You, O God,
the waters saw You, they trembled,
the depths themselves shuddered.
[18]The clouds streamed water.
The skies sounded with thunder.
Your bolts, too, flew about.
[19]Your thunder's sound under the wheel—
lightning lit up the world.
The earth shuddered and shook.
[20]In the sea was Your way,
and Your path in the mighty waters,
and Your footsteps left no traces.

[21]You led Your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

PSALM 77 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *let me cry out / . . . hearken to me.* The psalm begins with the formulaic language of an individual supplication, though in the second half of the poem, beginning in verse 12, when the speaker recalls God's "wonders of old," he reverts to national memory.

3. *My eye flows at night, it will not stop.* The Masoretic Text reads, incomprehensibly, "my hand [*yadi*] flows." The emendation adopted here from "hand" to "eye" (*ʿeyni*) is based not only on the verb used but also on a similar formulation in Lamentations 3:49: "My eye streams and is not still, without respite."

4. *I call God to mind.* This verb (root *z-k-r*) is used four times in the poem: first the speaker recalls his recent nocturnal experiences, then the great story of the national past evidence of God's beneficence.

5. *You held open my eyelids.* This arresting image for insomnia sets the stage for the evocation of long nights of agitation in the next few lines.

6. *I ponder the days of yore.* This nocturnal reflection on the past prepares us for the poetry of national memory that will be introduced from verse 12 onward.

7. *I call to mind my song in the night.* Though the speaker may be remembering some earlier point in his life when, in contrast to his present condition, he sang joyously in the night, it is also possible that "song" (*neginah*, unlike its synonym *rinah*, which is almost always joyous) refers to a heartfelt chanted prayer and so is linked with his present fate of restless nights of anguish.

8. *abandon me.* The object of the verb is merely implied in the Hebrew.

10. *closed off.* The Hebrew verb used is the one for clenching the hand into a fist and hence for withholding.

11. *it is my failing, / that the High One's right hand has changed.* There is an evident problem in the Hebrew text here, which is obscure. Both the grammar and the meaning of the verbal noun (if it is that) *ḥaloti*, "it is my failing," are ambiguous; and while "right hand" is the idiomatic token of efficacious power, it is far from certain that *shenot* means "has changed" (it could also mean "repeated," or could be a noun, "years of "—neither of which possibilities is helpful).

14. *Who is a great god like God?* In the first instance, "god" is *ʾel*, the common noun for a deity. In the second instance, "God" is *ʾelohim*, generally used as a proper name for God. In the next verse, *ʾel* is again the term employed in "the god working wonders."

16. *You redeemed with Your arm.* The translation adds "Your" for clarity. As the subsequent verses make clear, the reference is to the redemption from Egyptian slavery and the victory at the Sea of Reeds.

17. *The waters saw You, O God.* Because this sequence of lines concludes with Moses and Aaron leading the people, the waters in question would be the waters of the Sea of Reeds, first pushed back miraculously to allow the Israelites to cross over, then surging forward to drown the Egyptian army. But the imagery has such a strong cosmic character that the mythological image of God triumphing over the primordial powers of the sea is superimposed on the image of the Exodus story.

18. *The skies sounded with thunder.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "the skies gave out a sound," but *qol*, "sound," when linked to the sky, also means "thunder."

Your bolts. The celestial bolts are lightning, the weapon of the sky god in many mythologies.

19. *Your thunder's sound under the wheel.* Here the poet uses both *qol*, "sound," and *raʿam*, "thunder." Many interpreters take this as a metaphoric comparison between the sound of thunder and the clattering of wheels, but because the sky god in Canaanite mythology sometimes rides a celestial chariot, this could plausibly be a mythic image of God riding across the skies in His fearsome chariot, which rumbles with thunder as it goes.

20. *In the sea was Your way.* This entire passage amounts to a poetic reinterpretation of the story told in Exodus 14. There, no mention was made of God's actually entering the sea; here, He descends from the skies after an artillery barrage of thunder and lightning and strides into the sea, making it shake—and, by implication, pull back.

and Your footsteps left no traces. Literally, "and Your footsteps were not known." In an amusing shift of contexts, this phrase is often applied in modern Hebrew to a fugitive who disappears without trace.

PSALM 78

[1]An Asaph *maskil*.
Hearken, my people, to my teaching.
Lend your ear to the sayings of my mouth.
[2]Let me open my mouth in a rhapsody,
let me voice the verses of old,
[3]that we have heard and we have known,
and that our fathers recounted to us.
[4]We shall not conceal from their sons,
to the last generation recounting
the praise of the LORD and His might
and His wonders that He did.
[5]He established a precept in Jacob
and His teaching put forth in Israel,
this He charged to our fathers
to make them known to their sons,
[6]so that the last generation might know,
sons yet to be born
might arise and recount to their sons,
[7]and place their trust in God
and forget not the acts of God,

and observe His commands.
[8]That they be not like their fathers,
    a wayward, rebellious generation,
a generation that was not firm of heart,
    and its spirit not faithful to God.
[9]The Ephraimites, deft wielders of bows,
    turned tail on the day of battle,
[10]and did not keep God's pact,
    and His teaching refused to follow.
[11]And they forgot His acts
    and His wonders that He showed them.
[12]Before their fathers He did wonders,
    in the land of Egypt, in Zoan's field.
[13]He split open the sea and let them pass through,
    He made water stand up like a heap.
[14]And He led them with the cloud by day
    and all night long with the light of fire.
[15]He split apart rocks in the wilderness
    and gave drink as from the great deep.
[16]He brought forth streams from stone,
    and poured down water like rivers.
[17]And still they offended him more,
    to rebel against the High One in parched land.
[18]And they tried God in their heart
    to ask food for their gullet.
[19]And they spoke against God.

They said: “Can God set a table in the
wilderness?
[20]Look, He struck the rock and water flowed
and currents streamed.
Can He also give bread?
Will He ready flesh for His people?”
[21]Then the LORD heard and was angered,
and a fire was lit against Jacob
and wrath, too, went up against Israel.
[22]For they had no faith in God
and did not trust in His rescue.
[23]And He charged the skies above,
and the doors of the heavens He opened,
[24]and rained on them manna to eat
and the grain of the heavens He gave to them.
[25]Princely bread a man did eat,
provisions He sent them to sate them.
[26]He moved the east wind across the heavens
and drove the south wind with His might,
[27]and rained flesh upon them like dust
and like sand of the seas wingèd fowl,
[28]brought it down in the midst of His camp,
round about His dwelling place.
[29]And they ate and were fully sated,
what they craved He brought to them.
[30]They were not revolted by their craving,

their food was still in their mouths,
31 when God's wrath went up against them,
and He killed their stoutest fellows.
Israel's young men He brought to their knees.
32 Even so, they offended still
and had no faith in His wonders.
33 And they wasted their days in mere vapor
and their years in dismay.
34 When He killed them, they sought Him out,
and came back and looked for God.
35 And they recalled that God was their rock
and the Most High God their redeemer.
36 Yet they beguiled Him with their lips,
and with their tongue they lied to Him
37 and their heart was not firm with Him,
and they were not faithful to His pact.
38 Yet He is compassionate, He atones for crime and does not destroy,
and abundantly takes back His wrath
and does not arouse all His fury.
39 And He recalls that they are flesh,
a spirit that goes off and does not come back.
40 How much they rebelled against Him in the wilderness,
caused Him pain in the wasteland!
41 And again did they try God,

and Israel's Holy One they provoked.
[42]They did not recall His great hand,
the day He ransomed them from the foe,
[43]when He set out His signs in Egypt
and His portents in Zoan's field,
[44]and He turned their rivers to blood,
their currents they could not drink.
[45]He sent against them the horde to consume them
and the frogs to destroy them.
[46]And He gave to the cicada their produce
and their labor to the locust.
[47]He blighted their vines with the hail,
and their sycamores with the frost.
[48]He gave over to the pestilence their beasts,
and their cattle to the murrain.
[49]He sent against them His smoldering fury,
anger, indignation, and distress,
a cohort of evil messengers.
[50]He blazed a path for His fury,
He did not keep them from death,
and to the pestilence He gave their life.
[51]And He struck down each firstborn in Egypt,
first fruit of manhood in the tents of Ham.
[52]And He led His people forward like sheep,
drove them like sheep in the wilderness.
[53]And He guided them safely—they feared not,

and their enemies the sea covered.
[54]And He brought them to His holy realm,
the mount His right hand had acquired.
[55]And He drove out nations before them
and set them down in a plot of estate,
and made Israel's tribes dwell in their tents.
[56]Yet they tried God the Most High and rebelled,
and His precepts they did not keep.
[57]They fell back and betrayed like their fathers,
whipped around like an untrusty bow.
[58]They vexed Him with their high places,
incensed Him with their idols.
[59]God heard and was angry,
wholly rejected Israel.
[60]He abandoned the sanctuary of Shiloh,
the tent where He dwelled among men.
[61]And He let His might become captive,
gave His splendor to the hand of the foe.
[62]He gave over his people to the sword,
against His estate He was enraged.
[63]His young men the fire consumed
and His virgins no wedding song knew.
[64]His priests fell to the sword,
and His widows did not keen.
[65]And the Master awoke as one sleeping,
like a warrior shaking off wine.

[66]And He beat back His foes,
    everlasting disgrace He gave them.
[67]Yet He rejected the tent of Joseph,
    and the tribe of Ephraim He did not choose.
[68]And He chose the tribe of Judah,
    Mount Zion that He loves.
[69]And He built on the heights His sanctuary,
    like the earth He had founded forever.
[70]And He chose David His servant
    and took him from the sheepfolds.
[71]From the nursing ewes He brought him
    to shepherd Jacob His people
and Israel His estate.
[72]And with his heart's innocence he shepherded
  them,
    with skilled hands he guided them.

PSALM 78 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Hearken, my people, to my teaching. / Lend your ear to the sayings of my mouth.* This sort of formal and formulaic beginning to the poem is reminiscent of didactic poetic texts such as Shirat Haʾazinu, the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32). In fact, some of the phrases used (for example, verse 8, "a wayward, rebellious generation") are similar to formulations in Deuteronomy 32. This is a historical psalm, which recapitulates in poetry the Plagues narrative and the victory at the Sea of Reeds from Exodus as well as

certain later events. The narrative purpose is the reason for the lengthiness of the psalm. For once, the scholarly conjecture about a ritual purpose for the psalm seems plausible: it distinctly looks as though it originally served a function of commemoration of national history, cast in the mnemonic form of verse, which might have also lent itself to public chanting, perhaps in a Temple ceremony. The strong didactic bent of the commemoration is reflected in the fact that the hortatory preamble runs to the end of verse 8, much of it in a long, run-on sentence. It must also be said that a good deal of the poetry of this psalm is no more than perfunctory—a recasting in parallelistic verse of the narrative in Exodus, borrowing some terms from the prose story and substituting many synonyms.

2. *the verses of old.* The story goes back to the earliest national traditions, and the poet makes a point of stressing at the beginning the purported antiquity of his poem.

5. *precept . . . / teaching.* The language here (*ʿedut, torah*) may have a Deuteronomistic coloration.

8. *a generation that was not firm of heart.* In the first instance, this is the Ephraimites, but this rebellious generation will then merge with that of the Israelites in the wilderness.

9. *The Ephraimites, deft wielders of bows.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "armed with and shooters of bows," but the conjunction of near synonyms in all likelihood indicates an intensification of the term—hence "deft wielders" in the translation. The specific historical incident has not been identified, though it is clearly one in which the Ephraimites showed cowardice on the battlefield.

13. *made water stand up like a heap.* This is a quotation from the Song of the Sea, Exodus 15:8.

16. *He brought forth streams from stone.* The line alludes to the incident reported in Exodus 17.

18. *to ask food for their gullet.* The stress on gluttony suggests that *nefesh* here has its anatomical sense. The incident referred to occurs in Exodus 16.

24. *and rained on them manna to eat.* The gift of manna is part of the story in Exodus 16.

30. *They were not revolted by their craving, / their food was still in their mouths.* The language here is based on Numbers 11:20 and 11:33.

33. *vapor / . . . dismay.* The Hebrew uses a neat bit of sound-play: "vapor," *hevel*, is followed by *behalah*, the same three consonants (*h-b-l*) with the order of the first two switched.

38. *Yet He is compassionate.* This declaration of God's attributes is too long to scan as a line of poetry. One suspects it may have been a doxological formula inserted into the middle of the poem.

39. *a spirit that goes off.* The simple verb "to go" is sometimes used in the Bible as a euphemism for dying.

41. *And again did they try God.* This reiteration in the poem of the pattern of rebellion picks up the stubborn repetition of acts of rebellion in the Wilderness stories.

provoked. The Hebrew verb *hitwu* ordinarily means "to place a mark on." Its use here, if the text is correct, is puzzling, and the translation is based on context.

42. *great hand.* The Hebrew says only "hand," but the idiomatic force is "exertion of great power."

44. *He turned their rivers to blood.* The term for rivers is taken from the Egyptian word for Nile (Hebrew, *ye'or)*, but here it is used poetically in the plural. This verse begins the narration of the plagues in Egypt, which continues to the end of verse 51. There are only seven plagues mentioned in the psalm, and they are not entirely in the same order as the ones reported in Exodus, though, as in Exodus, turning the Nile into blood is at the beginning, and the killing of the firstborn is at the end. The scholarly inference that these lines reflect a different "tradition" from the one registered in Exodus is by no means necessary. That is, a poetic recapitulation of the familiar Plagues narrative from Exodus would not have been obliged to repeat all the material from Exodus, or to follow the identical order.

47. *frost.* The Hebrew *ḥanamal* occurs only here, and the somewhat conjectural translation is based only on the context.

52. *And He led His people forward like sheep.* The poetic narrative now proceeds from the last of the Ten Plagues to the actual exodus from Egypt.

53. *and their enemies the sea covered.* This verset picks up the story of the miracle at the Sea of Reeds, already evoked in greater detail in verse 13.

54. *He brought them to His holy realm, / the mount His right hand had acquired.* The language of this verse is meant to recall the Song of the Sea, Exodus 15:13 and 15:17.

55. *He drove out nations before them.* The poetic narrative, having alluded to incidents of "murmuring" from the Wilderness stories, now skips directly from the crossing of the Sea of Reeds to the conquest of the land.

57. *whipped around like an untrusty bow.* The image seems to be of a bow that flips out of the hands of the archer, shooting the arrow in the wrong direction, or not shooting it at all.

60. *He abandoned the sanctuary of Shiloh.* The Shiloh sanctuary had been an important one in the period of the Judges. It is here that Elkanah and Hannah come each year to offer sacrifice (1 Samuel 1). Archaeological evidence suggests it was destroyed, probably by the Philistines, in the eleventh century B.C.E. The poet, following what appears to be a Deuteronomistic line of thinking, takes the destruction of the sanctuary as a sign of God's displeasure with Israel.

64. *His priests fell to the sword.* This could be a continuation of the story of the destruction of Shiloh, in which case the priests in question would be Hophni and Phineas, the sons of Eli. Alternately, the sequence from verse 62 to this verse could refer to some other devastating defeat, perhaps later than the destruction of Shiloh.

68. *And He chose the tribe of Judah.* The rejection of Ephraim and the selection of Judah is an endorsement of the Davidic dynasty, sprung from the tribe of Judah, and of the centralization of the cult in Jerusalem ("He built on the heights His sanctuary"). The stigmatization of the "high places" (local rural altars on hilltops) in verse 58 is a distinctly Deuteronomistic notion that reinforces the idea of one exclusive temple in Jerusalem.

69. *on the heights.* The received text, *kemo-ramim*, appears to say "like the high ones." This translation reads here *bemeromim*, "on the heights."

like the earth He had founded forever. This comparison suggests a cosmic conception of the sanctuary in Jerusalem. Just as God eternally founds the earth, the solid foundation of His dwelling place in Zion is to stand forever.

71. *to shepherd Jacob His people.* This is an instance, at the end of the poem, in which the poet in an act of interpretation makes explicit an idea merely implicit in the traditional prose narrative. David's beginnings as a shepherd point to his fitness to be the leader of his people (the figure of shepherd for king is a commonplace in the ancient Near East). That link is made clear here by the twice-used verb "shepherd" for "rule."

PSALM 79

[1]An Asaph psalm.
God, nations have come into Your estate,
they have defiled Your holy temple.
They have turned Jerusalem to ruins.
[2]They have given Your servants' corpses
as food to the fowl of the heavens,
the flesh of Your faithful to the beasts of the earth.
[3]They have spilled their blood like water
all around Jerusalem,
and there is none to bury them.
[4]We have become a disgrace to our neighbors,
scorn and contempt to all round us.
[5]How long, O LORD, will You rage forever,
Your fury burn like fire?
[6]Pour out Your wrath on the nations
that did not know You
and on the kingdoms
that did not call on Your name.
[7]For they have devoured Jacob
and his habitation laid waste.

[8]Do not call to mind against us our forebears'
crimes.
Quickly, may Your mercies overtake us,
For we have sunk very low.
[9]Help us, our rescuing God
for Your name's glory,
and save us and atone for our sins
for the sake of Your name.
[10]Why should the nations say, "Where is their god?"
Let it be known among the nations before our
eyes—
the vengeance for Your servants' spilled blood.
[11]Let the captive's groan come before You,
by Your arm's greatness unbind those marked
for death.
[12]And give back to our neighbors sevenfold to their
bosom
their insults that they heaped on You, Master.
[13]But we are Your people and the flock that You
tend.
We acclaim You forever.
From generation to generation we recount Your
praise.

PSALM 79 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *God, nations have come into Your estate.* This entire psalm, a cry of anguish over the destruction of Jerusalem and the defilement of the Temple, vividly testifies to the use of the psalm form as a poetic vehicle not only for set liturgical occasions but also for a strong response to historical events. Though some interpreters have sought to locate this psalm in the Hasmonean period, the reference to reducing Jerusalem to ruins accords far better with the catastrophe of the Babylonian conquest in 586 B.C.E.

3. *and there is none to bury them.* The object of the verb is merely implied in the Hebrew.

5. *How long, O LORD.* Here the psalmist borrows a set formula from the psalms of supplication for his historical purpose.

6. *Pour out Your wrath.* This verse, memorably recited at the Passover seder service as the door of the house is ceremonially opened, picks up the verb *shafakh*, which is used for the spilling or shedding of blood earlier (verse 3) and later (verse 10).

7. *devoured Jacob / . . . his habitation laid waste.* The poetic parallelism pointedly identifies the two principal disasters of the conquest—the massacre of the population and the razing of the city.

8. *Do not call to mind against us our forebears' crimes.* The speaker palpably feels the weight of the accumulated transgressions of past generations for which the nation has now been punished, and he pleads with God not to hold the devastated survivors accountable for the sins of the past.

10. *before our eyes.* The idiomatic force of this phrase is "here and now."

11. *captive's . . . / those marked for death.* In addition to the killings, those who have survived are being marched off into captivity, to an uncertain fate that could well mean death. This verse tempts one to infer that the psalm may have actually been composed by one of the Judahites taken off to exile in Babylonia.

13. *the flock that You tend.* Literally, "the flock of Your tending."

We acclaim You forever. The conclusion of this psalm gives us a glimpse of the sustaining belief that enabled the exiled Judahites to persist as a

distinctive group. The nation has undergone the most catastrophic defeat, but its God has suffered no diminution. Even in exile, the people acclaims God and is unswerving in its belief in His rescuing power.

PSALM 80

[1]For the lead player, on the *shoshanim*, an *eduth*, an
Asaph psalm.
[2]Shepherd of Israel, hearken,
He Who drives Joseph like sheep,
enthroned on the cherubim, shine forth.
[3]Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh
rouse Your might
and come to the rescue for us.
[4]O God, bring us back,
and light up Your face that we may be rescued.
[5]LORD, God of Armies, how long will You
smolder against Your
people's prayer?
[6]You fed them bread of tears
and made them drink triple measure of tears.
[7]You have put us in strife with our neighbors,
and our enemies mock us.
[8]God of Armies, bring us back,
and light up Your face that we may be rescued.
[9]You carried a vine out of Egypt,

You drove away nations and planted it.
10 You cleared space before it
and struck its roots down,
and it filled the land.
11 The mountains were covered by its shade,
and by its branches the mighty cedars.
12 You sent forth its boughs to the sea
and to the River its shoots.
13 Why did You break through its walls
so all passersby could pluck it?
14 The boar from the forest has gnawed it,
and the swarm of the field fed upon it.
15 God of Armies, pray, come back,
look down from the heavens and see,
and take note of this vine,
16 and the stock that Your right hand planted,
and the son You took to Yourself—
17 burned in fire, chopped to bits,
from the blast of Your presence they perish.
18 May Your hand be over the man on Your right,
over the son of man You took to Yourself.
19 And we will not fall back from You.
Restore us to life and we shall call on Your
name.
20 LORD God of Armies, bring us back.
Light up Your face, that we may be rescued.

PSALM 80 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *an eduth.* The general meaning of this Hebrew term is “precept,” “pact,” or “treaty obligation.” Here it would appear to have a musical or perhaps a literary meaning (“testimony”?), but we have no way of knowing precisely what it indicates.

2–3. *He Who drives Joseph like sheep, / . . . rouse Your might.* “Joseph,” in contrast to “Judah” or “Jacob,” is a reference to the northern kingdom. The Septuagint includes in its superscription for this psalm, “concerning the Assyrians.” It may well have been composed at a moment when the northern kingdom of Israel was threatened but, on the basis of the content of the poem, not yet destroyed by Assyria.

3. *Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.* The two half-tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh were part of the northern kingdom, Benjamin belonging to the southern kingdom.

6. *triple measure.* The Hebrew says “a third”—evidently, a third of some very large unit of measure. Because in English the use of the fraction would suggest smallness rather than large quantity, this translation turns the number three into a multiplier.

7. *mock us.* The received text says “mock them,” but two manuscripts and three ancient translations show “mock us.”

9. *You carried a vine out of Egypt.* The vine as a symbol of the nation would have been a familiar idea to the ancient audience (it is variously deployed in Isaiah, Hosea, and Jeremiah). As the image is elaborated through the next few verses, it develops a logic that the Israelite agriculturalists would have readily grasped: Why would anyone go to the trouble of transplanting a vine from one region to another—clearing the ground all around it, cultivating it so that it grows to splendid proportions—if in the end one breaches its protective wall and allows noxious wild beasts to destroy it?

11. *the mighty cedars.* The phrase *ʾarzey ʾel* has sometimes been misconstrued as "the cedars of God," but *ʾel* here and in a good many other places is a suffix of intensification, not a reference to the deity.

12. *to the River.* The probable hyperbolic reference is to the Euphrates, though it could conceivably be, less grandiosely, the Jordan.

14. *the swarm.* The Hebrew *ziz* suggests "moving thing," in all likelihood a reference to insects and other crawling things. In the quasi-allegorical vehicle of the violated vine, the Assyrian army is imagined as other than human—a wild boar, a ravenous swarm of pestilential crawling creatures.

16. *the son You took to Yourself.* If the received text shows an authentic reading here, there is a slightly disconcerting shift from the vehicle of the metaphor (the vine) to its tenor (the people of Israel as God's son). Some interpreters have understood *ben* as a poetic term for "branch" or as a scribal error for some other word that means "branch," but the verb attached to it—*ʾimatsta*, which suggests adoption of a child—is appropriate for a son, not a plant.

20. *LORD God of Armies, bring us back.* This refrain of supplication, which was introduced near the beginning and then in the middle of the poem, now becomes its apt conclusion.

PSALM 81

[1]For the lead player, on the *gittith,* for Asaph.
[2]Sing gladly to God our strength,
shout out to the God of Jacob.
[3]Lift your voices in song and beat the drum,
the lyre is sweet with the lute.
[4]Blast the ram's horn on the new moon,
when the moon starts to wax, for our festival day.
[5]For it is an ordinance in Israel,
a rule of the God of Jacob.
[6]A decree He declared it for Israel
when He sallied forth against Egypt's land—
a language I knew not, I heard.
[7]"I delivered his shoulder from the burden
his palms were loosed from the hod.
[8]From the straits you called and I set you free.
I answered You from thunder's hiding place.
[9]I tested you at the waters of Meribah.
selah
Hear, O my people, that I may adjure you.

Israel, if You would but hear Me.
10 There shall be among you no foreign god
and you shall not bow to an alien god.
11 I am the LORD your God
Who brings you up from the land of Egypt.
Open your mouth wide, that I may fill it.
12 But My people did not heed My voice
and Israel wanted nothing of Me.
13 And I let them follow their heart's willfulness,
they went by their own counsels.
14 If My people would but heed Me,
if Israel would go in My ways,
15 in a moment I would humble their enemies,
and against their foes I would turn My hand.
16 Those who hate the LORD would cringe before Him,
and their time of doom would be everlasting.
17 And I would feed him the finest wheat,
and from the rock I would sate him with honey."

PSALM 81 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *Lift your voices in song.* The Hebrew says, perhaps elliptically, "Lift song."

4. *Blast the ram's horn on the new moon.* The subject—which will prove to be only an ostensible subject—of the psalm is now made explicit: the glad song

and the sounding instruments are part of the ritual celebration of the new moon, which was a major feast day in biblical times. A whole orchestral ensemble is specified here: singing, stringed instruments, a percussion instrument, and a horn section.

when the moon starts to wax. The Hebrew *keseh* derives from the verb that means "to cover." Although many interpreters understand it as a reference to the full moon, it is something of a stretch to imagine that the festive celebration of the new moon invoked in the first verset somehow goes on to a point in time fourteen days later in the second verset. In any case, "cover" accords far better with the time of month when the moon is only a thin sliver than with the time when it is bright and full.

5. *For it is an ordinance in Israel.* The ordinance referred to is the celebration of the new moon in all its ritual propriety.

6. *A decree He declared . . . / when He sallied forth.* In an associative slide, the antiquity of the regulations governing the new moon carries us back to the beginnings of Israelite history in the Exodus story.

a language I knew not, I heard. These words are a kind of interjection on the part of a speaker who is a representative Israelite, recalling "his" time of enslavement in Egypt when his taskmasters spoke an alien tongue.

7. *I delivered his shoulder from the burden.* The celebratory psalm now segues into a Prophetic psalm, with God addressing the people.

the hod. The Hebrew *dud* refers to the basketlike receptacle in which the laborers carried bricks or material for the manufacture of bricks.

8. *I answered You from thunder's hiding place.* In all likelihood, this fine if somewhat mystifying phrase refers to God's wielding thunder (or lightning) as a weapon, following the precedent of the Canaanite sky god.

10–11. *There shall be among you no foreign god . . . / I am the LORD your God / Who brings you up from the land of Egypt.* The entirety of these two verses is a free paraphrase of the beginning of the Ten Commandments.

12. *But My people did not heed My voice.* This sequence is a thumbnail summary of the Wilderness narrative—and, by implication, of subsequent Israelite history: God generously provides for the urgent needs of the people ("Open your mouth wide, that I may fill it"), but the people repeatedly rebels.

16. *Those who hate the* LORD. These are Israel's enemies. God is still speaking, but, in a grammatical move fairly common in biblical Hebrew, He refers to Himself in the third person.

their time of doom. The Hebrew says only "their time." The translation follows the inference of most interpreters, which, one must concede, is chiefly based on the need to make sense of the term in context. An emendation yields "their terror."

17. *I would feed him the finest wheat.* The "him" must refer to Israel. Such switches without signaling transition in pronominal reference occur frequently in biblical usage. The Masoretic Text also shows a third-person verb ("and He would feed him"), but many scholars emend this to the first person, as does this translation.

I would sate him. The poem concludes with still another grammatical anomaly because the received text reads "I would sate you." It is at least conceivable that the poet wanted to revert at the very end from the historical third-person reference to a direct address to Israel, as in verses 8–11. In English this would be confusing, and one manuscript version as well as the Septuagint and the Syriac reads "him."

PSALM 82

[1]An Asaph psalm.
God takes His stand in the divine assembly,
in the midst of the gods He renders judgment.
[2]"How long will you judge dishonestly,
and show favor to the wicked?
selah
[3]Do justice to the poor and the orphan.
Vindicate the lowly and the wretched.
[4]Free the poor and the needy,
from the hand of the wicked save them.
[5]They do not know and do not grasp,
in darkness they walk about.
All the earth's foundations totter.
[6]As for Me, I had thought: you were gods,
and the sons of the Most High were you all.
[7]Yet indeed like humans you shall die,
and like one of the princes, fall."
[8]Arise, O God, judge the earth,
for You hold in estate all the nations.

PSALM 82 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *God takes His stand in the divine assembly.* Like the psalms of supplication, this poem is concerned with the infuriating preponderance of injustice in the world. It differs from them, however, not only because God is the principal speaker (from verse 2 through verse 7) but also because the psalm is frankly mythological in character. Alternatively, one could describe it as a poem about the transition from mythology to a monotheistic frame of reference because in the end the gods are rudely demoted from their divine status.

in the midst of the gods. The efforts of traditional commentators to understand *ʾelohim* here as "judges" are unconvincing. God speaks out in the assembly of lesser gods and rebukes them for doing a wretched job in the administration of justice on earth.

2. *How long will you judge dishonestly.* The plot of the poem that begins to unfold is a mythological account of the existential problem that would vex the Job poet: Why is it that the just often seem to suffer, whereas the wicked prosper? The answer given here is that the gods, administrators of the old polytheistic order, impose a crooked scheme of justice on humanity, showing favoritism to the wicked and ignoring the pleas of the helpless.

5. *in darkness they walk about.* Ibn Ezra, the past master among exegetes in seeing intra-biblical connections, brilliantly links this image of judges stumbling through darkness with Exodus 23:8—"No bribe shall you take, for a bribe blinds the sighted and perverts the words of the innocent."

All the earth's foundations totter. This is not, as may first appear, a non sequitur. The order of creation itself, in the view of biblical monotheism, is founded on justice. When the lesser gods allow injustice to become rampant, the very foundations of earth are shaken—the perversion of justice is the first step toward the apocalypse.

6. *As for Me, I had thought.* God confesses to have been taken in by the polytheistic illusion. He imagined that these sundry gods entrusted with the administration of justice on earth would prove or justify their divine status by doing the job properly. In the event, He was sadly disappointed.

7. *like humans you shall die, / and like one of the princes, fall.* Because the gods have failed in their crucial role as executors of justice, they are henceforth compelled to relinquish their supposedly divine status and suffer the same fate of mortality as human beings. The parallel term to *ʾadam* ("humans," or "man," though the Hebrew does not imply gender), "one of the princes," reflects a kind of hierarchical logic. One does not readily imagine the ex-gods turning into peasants, but all people know that even the most elevated of human beings—princes and potentates—are fated to die.

8. *Arise, O God, judge the earth.* The psalm concludes, after God's address to the unjust gods, with a speaker who exhorts the one authentic divine being to impose upon earth the reign of true justice to which He alone is committed.

for You hold in estate all the nations. Why does the speaker need to say this at the very end? In the ancient world, the multiplicity of nations is associated with a multiplicity of gods: each nation has its patron god (see, for example, Jephthah's words to the Amorite king about YHWH and the Amorite deity Chemosh in Judges 11:24) as well as a variety of gods and goddesses presiding over the various realms of nature. But that order has now proven to be judicially and morally bankrupt, and it is the God of Israel alone Who holds in estate (the verb could also be construed as a future, "will hold in estate") all the nations of earth.

PSALM 83

[1]A song, an Asaph psalm.
[2]O God, no silence for You!
Do not be mute and do not be quiet, God.
[3]For, look, Your enemies rage,
and those who hate You lift their heads.
[4]Against Your people they devise cunning counsel
and conspire against Your protected ones.
[5]They have said: “Come, let us obliterate them as a nation,
and the name of Israel will no longer be recalled.”
[6]For they conspired with a single heart,
against You they sealed a pact—
[7]the tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites,
Moab and the Hagrites,
[8]Gebal and Ammon and Amalek,
Philistia with the dwellers of Tyre.
[9]Assyria, too, has joined them,
has become an arm for the sons of Lot.

selah

[10]Do unto them as to Midian, as to Sisera,
as to Jabin at the Kishon Wadi.
[11]They were destroyed at En-Dor,
they turned into dung for the soil.
[12]Deal with their nobles as with Oreb
and as with Zeeb and Zebah and Zalmunna, all
their princes,
[13]who said, “We shall take hold for ourselves
of all the meadows of God.”
[14]O God, make them like the thistledown,
like straw before the wind.
[15]As fire burns down forests
and as flame ignites the mountains,
[16]so shall You pursue them with Your storm
and with Your tempest dismay them.
[17]Fill their faces with infamy
that they may seek Your name, O LORD.
[18]May they be shamed and dismayed forever,
may they be disgraced and may they perish.
[19]And may they know that You, Your name is the
LORD.
You alone are most high over all the earth.

PSALM 83 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *For, look, Your enemies rage.* The situation of an alliance of surrounding nations plotting an all-out assault on Judah identifies this as a militant national supplication. Many interpreters have inferred that it was actually composed in a time of national emergency to be recited in public worship in an entreaty to God to intervene on behalf of His people. When that might have been remains a matter of scholarly debate, although the list of hostile peoples in verses 7 and 8 as well as the invocation of the Song of Deborah in verse 10 argues for an early date, close to or even within the period of the Judges (before 1000 B.C.E.). The mention of Assyria, on the other hand, could be an indication of a late-eighth-century date, unless, as has been proposed, "Assyria" in this text is not the great empire—after all, why would it ally itself with these small, mainly trans-Jordanian kingdoms?—but rather a modest-sized eastern nation antecedent to the empire.

7. *the tents of Edom.* Because these are seminomadic peoples, "tents" is an appropriate synecdoche for their concentrations of population.

8. *Philistia.* It is worth noting that the Philistines ceased to be a serious threat to the Israelites not long after the establishment of the Davidic dynasty at the beginning of the first millennium B.C.E.

10. *as to Sisera, / as to Jabin.* Jabin was the Canaanite king whose army, under the command of Sisera, was defeated by Barak, with Deborah behind him, as recorded in Judges 4–5.

12. *Oreb / . . . Zeeb . . . Zebah . . . Zalmunna.* These were the Midianite chieftains defeated by Gideon, as reported in Judges 8.

16. *pursue them with Your storm.* As in Canaanite mythology, the storm is the weapon of the sky god—in particular, the bolts of lightning, clearly implied in the fire imagery of the previous verse.

19. *You alone are most high over all the earth.* YHWH, the God of Israel, is not just a powerful national god but the deity that rules all the earth. This cosmic supremacy of the God of Israel, in the gesture of prayer that concludes the psalm, is a fact that the hostile nations will come to recognize through their own disastrous defeat, just before they perish.

PSALM 84

[1]For the lead player on the *gittith,* for the Korahites, a psalm.

[2]How lovely Your dwellings,
    O LORD of Armies!
[3]My being longed, even languished,
    for the courts of the LORD.
My heart and my flesh
    sing gladness to the living God.
[4]Even the bird has found a home,
    and the swallow a nest for itself,
that puts its fledglings by Your altars,
    LORD of Armies, my king and my God.
[5]Happy are those who dwell in Your house,
    they will ever praise You.

selah

[6]Happy the folk whose strength is in You,
    the highways in their heart,
[7]who pass through the Valley of Baca,
    they make it into a spring—
yes, the early rain cloaks it with blessings.

[8]They go from rampart to rampart,
they appear before God in Zion.
[9]LORD, God of Armies, hear my prayer.
Hearken, O God of Jacob.

selah

[10]Our shield, O God, see,
and regard Your anointed one's face
[11]For better one day in Your courts
than a thousand I have chosen,
standing on the threshold in the house of my God,
than living in the tents of wickedness.
[12]For a sun and shield is the LORD,
God is grace and glory.
The LORD grants, He does not withhold
bounty to those who go blameless.
[13]O LORD of Armies,
happy the man who trusts in You.

PSALM 84 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *How lovely Your dwellings.* The term translated as "lovely," *yedidot*, is associated with *dod*, "lover," and *dodim*, "lovemaking," and conveys a virtually erotic intensity in the speaker's longing for the Temple on Mount Zion. (The King James Version, entirely missing the register, translates *yedidot* as "amiable.") This text, then, is one of the pilgrim psalms, expressing the speaker's powerful longing to enjoy the aura of God's presence in the

Temple. The repeated epithet "LORD of Armies" (YHWH *tsev'aot*) does not appear to tap the military connotations of that designation in the present context.

4. *Even the bird has found a home.* This image provides the most poignant focus for the speaker's longing. Small birds such as swallows may well have nested in the little crevices of the roughly dressed stones that constituted the Temple façade. The speaker, yearning for the sacred zone of the Temple, is envious of these small creatures happy in the Temple precincts, whereas he, like an unrequited lover, only dreams of this place of intimacy with the divine. "Sing gladness" in the previous line may have been the associative trigger for thinking about the birds.

6. *Happy the folk.* The Hebrew *'adam* means "person," "human being," or "man" (as it is translated at the end of the poem). The translation choice here of "folk" is to facilitate the transition, otherwise odd in English, from the singular in this verset to the plural in the second verset ("their heart").

the highways in their heart. If the received text is correct, this would most likely mean, "their every thought is on the pilgrim highways leading to Jerusalem."

7. *they make it into a spring.* It seems that a miraculous manifestation of divine grace is vouchsafed to the pilgrims. As they come through the Valley of Baca on their way up to Mount Zion, springs gush.

the early rain cloaks it with blessings. The descent of the early rain complements the bursting forth of springs. Alternately, as ibn Ezra proposes, *moreh* could be a place-name in parallel with the Valley of Baca. That would yield the following: Moreh is cloaked in blessings.

8. *from rampart to rampart.* "Rampart" is one of several meanings of the Hebrew *hayil* and makes good sense in this context of pilgrims making their way up to Jerusalem. However, *hayil* also means strength, and "to go from strength to strength" has become proverbial in Hebrew as in English.

they appear before God in Zion. The vocalization could be, as elsewhere, a euphemistic substitution for "they see God," although the usual object of the verb, "the face of," is absent, and the preposition *'el* ("to" or "before") is unusually introduced. All this might be the result of tampering by pious scribes.

10. *Our shield.* The reference, as the second verset makes clear, is to the king. The pilgrim longing for Zion, which is also the capital of the kingdom, asks God to show favor to the anointed king. But in verse 12, it is God who is invoked as shield.

11. *than a thousand I have chosen.* "I have chosen," *baharti*, looks redundant in relation to "better than." Some scholars emend it to *beḥadri*, "in my chamber."

than living in the tents of wickedness. The imperfect parallelism with the first verset might be an argument for the proposed emendation, "in my chamber." A private chamber empty of God's presence is a sorry thing, only a step away from the tents of wickedness.

PSALM 85

[1]For the lead player, for the Korahites, a psalm.
[2]You favored, O LORD, Your land,
You restored the fortunes of Jacob.
[3]You forgave Your people's crime,
You covered all their offense.
selah
[4]You laid aside all Your wrath,
You turned back from Your blazing fury.
[5]Turn back, pray, God of our rescue
and undo Your anger against us.
[6]Will You forever be incensed with us,
will You draw out Your fury through all generations?
[7]Why, You—will again give us life,
and Your people will rejoice in You.
[8]Show us, O LORD, Your kindness,
and Your rescue grant to us.
[9]Let me hear what the LORD God would speak
when He speaks peace to His people and to His faithful,

that they turn not back to folly.
[10]Yes, His rescue is near for those who fear Him,
that His glory dwell in our land.
[11]Kindness and truth have met,
justice and peace have kissed.
[12]Truth from the earth will spring up,
as justice from the heavens looks down.
[13]The LORD indeed will grant bounty
and our land will grant its yield.
[14]Justice before Him goes,
that He set His footsteps on the way.

PSALM 85 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *You favored, O LORD, Your land.* There is scarcely a more striking example in the Bible of the temporal ambiguity or fluidity of Hebrew verbs. The verbs used through to the end of verse 4 are in the perfective or "suffix" form, which, lacking an initial *waw* that would convert them into a future, appear to indicate actions completed in the past. But what is reported here as completed action is precisely what the speaker prays for beginning in verse 5. Either he is remembering a time in the past when God forgave His people and favored the land as a precedent for the present plight, or he is imagining what he is about to pray for as though it were already an accomplished fact.

You restored the fortunes of Jacob. The Hebrew *shevut* (or in the variant used here, *shevit*), when it is coupled with the cognate verb *shuv*, means "previous condition." (It is precisely the idiom used at the end of Job, 42:10, to indicate God's restoration of all Job's losses.) The appearance of the expression in this verse, joined with the idea of God's favoring His land after it had fallen out of favor, suggests that the psalm may have been composed

after the Babylonian exile in 586 B.C.E., though references to exile are not entirely explicit. "Turning back" becomes a key phrase of the poem. It is used five times, including verse 7, where the idiomatic sense in context leads this translation to render it adverbially as "again."

5. *Turn back.* The Hebrew text says "Turn us back," which doesn't make much sense in this verse (and the verb in the *qal* conjugation does not take personal objects). The translation reads *shuv naʾ*, "turn back, pray," instead of the Masoretic *shuveinu*.

9. *that they turn not back to folly.* The key verb expresses a kind of quid pro quo: God is implored to turn back from His wrath, and the people will accordingly not turn back to folly.

10. *that His glory dwell in our land.* This rather generalized clause could well refer to the restoration of Judah after exile. Because God's rescue is near at hand, His glory will again be manifest in the land.

11. *Kindness and truth.* The two terms of the familiar hendiadys *ḥesed weʾemet* ("steadfast loyalty") are separated and turned into figures, along with another pair, justice and peace, in a kind of allegory of the ideal moment when God's favor is restored to the land.

justice and peace have kissed. This bold metaphor focuses the sense of an era of perfect loving harmony. Rashi imagines a landscape in which all Israelites will kiss one another.

14. *that He set His footsteps on the way.* Although some scholars have sought to emend this final clause, a vivid image is suggested by the text as we have it. Justice leads the way, and God, preparing to walk about the earth after having withdrawn from it in His wrath, follows the path marked out by justice.

PSALM 86

[1]A David prayer.
Incline Your ear, LORD, answer me,
for lowly and needy am I.
[2]Guard my life, for I am faithful.
Rescue Your servant who trusts in You
—You, my God.
[3]Grant grace to me, Master,
for to You I call all day long.
[4]Gladden Your servant,
for to You, O Master, I lift up my being.
[5]For You, O Master, are good and forgiving,
abounding in kindness to all who call to You.
[6]Hearken, O LORD, to my prayer,
and listen well to the sound of my pleas.
[7]When I am in straits I call You,
for You will answer me.
[8]There is none like You among the gods, O Master
and nothing like Your acts.
[9]All the nations You made
will come and bow before You, Master

and will honor Your name.
[10]For You are great and work wonders.
You alone are God.
[11]Teach me, O LORD, Your way.
I would walk in Your truth.
Make my heart one to fear Your name.
[12]Let me acclaim You, O Master, my God, with all my heart,
and let me honor Your name forever.
[13]For Your kindness to me is great,
and You saved me from nethermost Sheol.
[14]O God, the arrogant rose against me,
and a band of the violent sought my life
and did not set You before them.
[15]But You, Master, are a merciful, gracious God,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast kindness.
[16]Turn to me and grant me grace.
Give Your strength to Your servant
and rescue Your handmaiden's son.
[17]Show me a sign for good,
that those who hate me may see and be shamed.
For You, LORD, have helped me and consoled me.

PSALM 86 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Incline Your ear, LORD, answer me.* The poem begins with a formula of the psalms of supplication, and this psalm is highly formulaic from beginning to end. A reader who has been going through the Book of Psalms in sequence by this point will have encountered almost every line of this poem, with minor variations, elsewhere.

4. *for to You . . . I lift up my being.* The idiom, which occurs elsewhere in Psalms, means to pray, to implore, to long desperately. "My being," *nafshi*, also has the sense of "my very self," "my life-breath."

5. *abounding in kindness to all who call to You.* The epithets for God are borrowed from Exodus 34:6. Verse 15 provides a fuller quotation of God's benevolent attributes spelled out in the same passage in Exodus.

7. *When I am in straits.* Literally, "in the day of my strait."

8. *There is none like You among the gods, O Master.* This line quotes the Song of the Sea, Exodus 15:11. The move from this quotation to verses 9 and 10 traces the trajectory from henotheism to proper monotheism. In the old poem in Exodus, other gods are imagined as existing but are feeble in power compared with YHWH, God of Israel; here the poet goes on to affirm that "You alone are God" (verse 10).

13. *nethermost Sheol.* The addition of the adjective *taḥtiyah*, "nethermost" or "down below," suggest something of the terror of death in this culture oriented toward life in the here and now. Sheol, the underworld, rather like the Homeric Hades, is imagined as a deep pit far below the busy surface where human creatures for a brief time look on the bright sunlight.

16. *Your handmaiden's son.* This is a poetic invention often introduced because of the necessity of having an equivalent term in the poetic parallelism for "servant." *ʿEved*, the word for servant, can also mean, depending on context, "slave," just as *ʾamah*, "handmaiden," often means "slavegirl."

PSALM 87

[1]For the Korahites, a psalm, a song.
His foundation on the holy mountains—
[2]The LORD loves the gates of Zion
more than all the dwellings of Jacob.
[3]Splendid things are spoken of you,
O town of God.

selah

[4]Let me recall Rahab and Babel to my familiars.
Look, Philistia and Tyre together with Cush,
—this one was born there.
[5]And of Zion it shall be said:
every man is born in it,
and He, the Most High, makes it firm-founded.
[6]The LORD inscribes in the record of peoples:
this one was born there.

selah

[7]And singers and dancers alike:
“All my wellsprings are in you.”

PSALM 87 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *His foundation on the holy mountains.* Despite the inclusion of this verset by the medieval editors in the superscription in verse 1, it clearly is the initial element of a triadic line of poetry continuing through verse 2, in semantic parallelism with "the gates of Zion." The third verset, as often happens in triadic lines, is not a semantic parallel but, in this case, a modifier of the predicate "loves." This poem is explicitly a psalm of Zion. Its general sense of exalted celebration of Zion is clear, though some of the particular formulations, as will be noted, are obscure.

4. *Let me recall Rahab and Babel to my familiars.* Rahab, a sea monster, is sometimes used as a poetic epithet for Egypt, and the appearance of that name in a list of surrounding nations makes it likely that this is its meaning here. If, as some claim, the speaker is God, then "my familiars" (*yodʿai*) would have to be rendered as "those who know Me." It seems more plausible that the speaker is a Judahite celebrating Zion's greatness.

Cush. Traditionally identified with Nubia.

4–5. *this one was born there / . . . every man is born in it.* The wording is certainly cryptic, but it might convey a universalist message about Jerusalem. Although as a biographical fact every person is born in his or her native place in the surrounding region, all who come up to Zion to acclaim God's kingship there are considered to be reborn in Zion.

5. *the Most High.* This word, *ʿelyon*, occurs at the end of the sentence in the Hebrew, but it is difficult to construe it as an adjectival object of the verb because it would then have to refer to Zion, which is feminine, whereas *ʿelyon* is masculine.

7. *And singers and dancers alike.* The simplest way to understand this phrase, without tampering with the text, is that there is an elided "say."

All my wellsprings are in you. The "you" refers to Zion. Beginning with some of the ancient translations, sundry readers have variously emended this clause, but it makes a certain degree of sense as it stands. In a semiarid climate, "wellsprings" (*maʿayanim*) is an understandable idiom for sources of life.

PSALM 88

[1]A song, a psalm for the Korahites, for the lead player,
on the *mahalath,* to sing out, a *maskil* for Heman the
Ezrahite.
[2]LORD, God of my rescue,
by day I cried out,
by night, in Your presence.
[3]May my prayer come before You.
Incline Your ear to my song.
[4]For I am sated with evils
and my life reached the brink of Sheol.
[5]I was counted among those who go down to the Pit.
I became like a man without strength,
[6]among the dead cast away,
like the slain, those who lie in the grave,
whom You no more recall,
and they are cut off by Your hand.
[7]You put me in the nethermost Pit,
in darkness, in the depths.
[8]Your wrath lay hard upon me,
and all Your breakers You inflicted.

selah

[9]You distanced my friends from me,
you made me disgusting to them;
imprisoned, I cannot get out.
[10]My eyes ache from affliction.
I called on You, LORD, every day.
I stretched out to You my palms.
[11]Will You do wonders for the dead?
Will the shades arise and acclaim you?

selah

[12]Will Your kindness be told in the grave,
Your faithfulness in perdition?
[13]Will Your wonder be known in the darkness,
Your bounty in the land of oblivion?
[14]As for me—to You, LORD, I shouted,
and in the morn my prayer would greet You.
[15]Why, LORD, do You abandon my life,
do You hide Your face from me?
[16]Lowly am I and near death from my youth
I have borne Your terrors, I am fearful.
[17]Over me Your rage has passed,
Your horrors destroy me.
[18]They surround me like water all day long,
they encircle me completely.
[19]You distanced lover and neighbor from me.
My friends—utter darkness.

PSALM 88 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Heman the Ezrahite.* Scarcely anything is known about the identity of this figure—a choral leader? a psalmist?—or about Ethan the Ezrahite, who appears in the superscription of the next psalm. Both are mentioned in 1 Chronicles 2:6 as sons of Zerah from the tribe of Judah. "The Ezrahite" may be a familial designation derived from "Zerah."

2. *by day I cried out.* The formulas of this verse and the next signal the genre of supplication. What distinguishes this particular supplication is its special concentration on the terrifying darkness of the realm of death that has almost engulfed the supplicant. In consonance with this focus, the psalm deploys an unusual abundance of synonyms for the underworld: Sheol, the Pit, the grave, the depths, perdition, the land of oblivion.

6. *among the dead cast away.* The predominant meaning of the adjective *hofshi* is "free," but a negative sense is surely required here, and in 2 Kings 15:5, *beyt haḥofshit* means the place of quarantine in which those afflicted with the skin disease *tsaraʿat* are segregated. The Ugaritic cognate, moreover, appears to be a designation for the underworld; in fact, in verse 9 the speaker talks of imprisonment.

8. *all Your breakers You inflicted.* As in other psalms, the descent into the Pit of death is imagistically equated with drowning beneath the waves of the sea. Compare the apposition at the end of verse 7, "in darkness, in the depths."

11. *Will You do wonders for the dead?* This is a recurrent idea in Psalms: the dead will not rise, will never again be able to fulfill the ultimate human vocation of praising the Creator.

12. *perdition.* The Hebrew noun *ʾavadon*, transparently derived from the verb that means to perish or to be lost, is probably a mythological proper name for the underworld, like Sheol.

14. *in the morn.* The Hebrew phrase is rendered literally, but its idiomatic sense is "every morning"; therefore, the verb "greet" is translated here as an

iterative.

16. *I am fearful.* The Hebrew verb *ʾafunah* is anomalous and its meaning is uncertain. The translation follows a proposal by ibn Ezra.

18. *They surround me like water.* The water simile conveys the sense of total engulfment and carries forward the idea of death as drowning.

19. *You distanced lover and neighbor from me.* This clause picks up the idea of verse 9, using the same verb: the speaker, perhaps because he has been suffering from a repulsive illness or simply because his fortunes have met with disaster (like Job), has become an object of disgust to his friends.

My friends—utter darkness. "Utter" is added in the translation for the sake of intelligibility. This abrupt statement, just two words in the Hebrew, closes the poem on the theme of darkness that has dominated it throughout. The sense is either that the speaker's friends, because they have rejected him and withdrawn their presence from him, are nothing but darkness to him, or that now the only "friend" he has left is darkness.

PSALM 89

[1]A *maskil* for Ethan the Ezrahite.
[2]Let me sing the LORD's kindnesses forever.
For all generations I shall make known with my mouth Your
faithfulness.
[3]For I said: forever will kindness stand strong,
in the heavens You set Your faithfulness firm.
[4]"I have sealed a pact with my chosen one,
I have sworn to David My servant.
[5]Forevermore I shall make your seed stand firm,
and make your throne stand strong for all generations."
selah
[6]And the heavens will acclaim Your wonder, O LORD,
Your faithfulness, too, in the assembly of the holy.
[7]For who in the skies can compare to the LORD,
who can be like the LORD among the sons of the gods?

[8]A God held in awe in the council of the holy,
mighty and fearsome above all His
surroundings.
[9]LORD, God of Armies, who is like You,
powerful Yah, with Your faithfulness round
You?
[10]You rule over the tide of the sea.
When its waves lift up, it is You who subdue
them.
[11]It is You Who crushed Rahab like one slain—
with the arm of Your might You scattered Your
enemies.
[12]Yours are the heavens, Yours, too, the earth.
The world and its fullness, You founded them.
[13]The north and the south, You created them.
Tabor and Hermon sing glad song in Your
name.
[14]Yours is the arm with the might.
Your hand is strong, Your right hand raised.
[15]Justice and law are the base of Your throne.
Steadfast kindness and truth go before Your
presence.
[16]Happy the people who know the horn's blast.
O LORD, they walk in the light of Your
presence.
[17]In Your name they exult all day long,

and through Your bounty they loom high.
[18]For You are their strength's grandeur,
and through Your pleasure our horn is lifted.
[19]For the LORD's is our shield,
and to Israel's Holy One, our king.
[20]Then did You speak in a vision
to Your faithful and did say:
"I set a crown upon the warrior,
I raised up one chosen from the people.
[21]I found David my servant,
with My holy oil anointed him,
[22]that My hand hold firm with him,
My arm, too, take him in.
[23]No enemy shall cause him grief
and no vile person afflict him.
[24]And I will grind down his foes before him
and defeat those who hate him.
[25]My faithfulness and My kindness are with him,
and in My name his horn will be lifted.
[26]And I shall put his hand to the sea
and his right hand to the rivers.
[27]He will call me: 'My father You are,
my God and the rock of my rescue.'
[28]I, too, shall make him My firstborn,
most high among kings of the earth.
[29]Forever I shall keep My kindness for him

and My pact will be faithful to him.
30 And I shall make his seed for all time
and his throne as the days of the heavens.
31 If his sons forsake My teaching
and do not go in my law,
32 if they profane My statutes
and do not keep My commands,
33 I will requite their crime with the rod,
and with plagues, their wrongdoing.
34 Yet My steadfast kindness I will not revoke for him,
and I will not betray My faithfulness.
35 I will not profane My pact
and My mouth's utterance I will not alter.
36 One thing I have sworn by My holiness—
that David I will not deceive.
37 His seed shall be forever,
and his throne like the sun before Me,
38 like the moon, firm-founded forever—
and the witness in the skies is faithful."
selah
39 And You, You abandoned and spurned,
You were furious with Your anointed.
40 You revoked the pact of Your servant,
You profaned his crown on the ground.
41 You broke through all his walls,

You turned his forts into rubble.
[42]All passersby plundered him,
he became a disgrace to his neighbors.
[43]You raised the right hand of his foes,
You made all his enemies glad.
[44]You also turned back his sword's flint
and did not make him stand up in the battle.
[45]You put an end to his splendor,
and his throne You hurled to the ground.
[46]You cut short the days of his prime.
You enveloped him with shame.
selah
[47]How long, LORD, will You hide forever,
will Your wrath burn like fire?
[48]Recall how fleeting I am,
how futile You made all humankind.
[49]What man alive will never see death,
will save his life from the grip of Sheol?
selah
[50]Where are Your former kindnesses, Master,
that you vowed to David in Your faithfulness?
[51]Recall, O Master, Your servants' disgrace,
that I bore in my bosom from all the many
peoples,
[52]as Your enemies reviled, O LORD,

as Your enemies reviled Your anointed one's
steps.

[53]Blessed be the LORD forever, amen and amen.

PSALM 89 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Ethan the Ezrahite.* According to the list in 1 Chronicles 2:6, he would be the brother of Heman the Ezrahite mentioned in the superscription to Psalm 88.

2. *Your faithfulness.* The Hebrew word *ʾemunah*, "faithfulness," "trustworthiness," "dependability in fulfilling obligations," is the key word of this psalm, repeated seven times in the poem, with an additional two occurrences in adjectival form. The reiteration of this term also suggests why those scholars who claim that this psalm is an amalgam of three different genres are unconvincing. This is a psalm about God's pact with the House of David; if one prefers, it is a royal psalm. But it is clearly composed at a moment when the fortunes of the Davidic king have taken a disastrous turn in the face of victorious enemies. (Exactly when that might have been is difficult to determine, though many scholars set this text in the period of the First Commonwealth.) The psalmist insists on his belief in God's faithfulness to His covenantal commitments in the face of present catastrophes. There is, then, a logical progression in the poem: first, a celebration of God's cosmic power, by virtue of which He could easily rout all the enemies of the Davidic throne if He chose to do so; then the choice of David and his seed by this all-powerful and trustworthy cosmic deity; then the conditional nature of the covenant, which is contingent on the people's adherence to God's laws, and the consequent disaster that has befallen them; and, finally, a plea to God to remember how ephemeral man is and to relent from His seemingly endless wrath against His people and against His anointed king.

3. *stand strong.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "be built."
in the heavens You set Your faithfulness firm. The syntax and the Hebrew of this verset are ambiguous. The literal word sequence is "Heavens You set firm Your faithfulness in them." Various emendations, none entirely convincing, have been proposed.

5. *stand strong.* Again, the Hebrew says, "build."

8. *A God held in awe in the council of the holy.* The council envisaged is a council of the gods—still another instance in Psalms of the survival, at least in poetic imagery, of a pre-monotheistic mythology in which YHWH is not alone but reigns supreme over lesser gods. The same idea is reflected in the previous verse.

11. *It is You Who crushed Rahab.* Rahab is one of several names for the primordial sea beast of Canaanite mythology. Thus, this line is continuous with the more naturalistic image of God's ruling over the tide and subduing the waves of the sea in the previous verse.

19. *For the LORD's is our shield.* "Our shield" refers to the monarch, as the second verset makes clear.

20. *I set a crown.* The Masoretic Text says "help" (*ʿezer*), which does not sound idiomatic coupled with the verb used here. Many scholars read instead *nezer*, "crown," as does this translation.

26. *his hand to the sea / . . . his right hand to the rivers.* This is an image of imperial dominion.

31. *If his sons forsake My teaching.* Here begins the emphatic set of conditions upon which the keeping of the covenant by God is contingent.

38. *the witness in the skies is faithful.* The idea, at least according to the formulation of the received text, is that the moon above will be eternal witness to the abiding pact between God and the House of David. An emendation yields "and as long as the skies, faithful."

44. *his sword's flint.* Some scholars emend *tsur ḥarbo* to *mitsar ḥarbo*, yielding "his sword from the foe." But it is perfectly plausible that "flint" is an archaic linguistic survival from the period when knives and swords were actually made of flint and hence became a poetic designation for the blade of the sword.

45. *his splendor.* The anomalous form *mithar* transparently derives from *tohar*, "purity," but in a few texts *tohar* is associated with brilliance, as pure substances shine brightly.

48. *Recall how fleeting I am.* The grounds for the plea for mercy resemble those that Job repeatedly invokes: If human life lasts but a moment, why should the eternal God persist in making man's life so miserable?

how futile You made all humankind. Most translations follow the lead of the King James Version in understanding this as a question: "Wherefore hast thou made all men in vain?" But the structure of the line both semantically and syntactically is parallel (the first verset uses *meh*, "how," the second, *ʿal-mah*, also "how"): Man's life is ephemeral (first verset); it is without substance, empty, futile (second verset).

49. *What man alive.* The literal structure of the Hebrew is: what man will live and not see death.

51. *from all the many peoples. Kol-rabim ʿamim* in the Hebrew is intelligible but ungrammatical, and there is in all likelihood a textual problem here.

53. This verse is not part of the poem but rather a prose formula of conclusion that marks the end of the third book of the five into which Psalms is divided.

PSALM 90

[1]A prayer of Moses, man of God.
O Master, You have been our abode
in every generation.
[2]Before mountains were born,
before You spawned earth and world,
from forever to forever You are God.
[3]You bring man back to the dust
and say, “Turn back, humankind.”
[4]For a thousand years in Your eyes
are like yesterday gone,
like a watch in the night.
[5]You engulf them with sleep.
In the morn they are like grass that passes.
[6]In the morning it sprouts and passes,
by evening it withers and dies.
[7]For we are consumed in Your wrath,
and in Your fury we are dismayed.
[8]You have set our transgressions before You,
our hidden faults in the light of Your face.
[9]For all our days slip away in Your anger.

We consume our years like a sigh.
[10]The days of our years are but seventy years,
and if in great strength, eighty years.
And their pride is trouble and grief,
for swiftly cut down, we fly off.
[11]Who can know the strength of Your wrath?
As the fear of You is Your anger.
[12]To count our days rightly, instruct,
that we may get a heart of wisdom.
[13]Come back, O LORD! How long?—
and have pity on Your servants.
[14]Sate us in the morn with Your kindness,
let us sing and rejoice all our days.
[15]Give us joy as the days You afflicted us,
the years we saw evil.
[16]Let Your acts be seen by Your servants
and Your glory by their children.
[17]And may the sweetness of the Master our God be upon us
and the work of our hands firmly found for us,
and the work of our hands firmly found!

PSALM 90 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *A prayer of Moses, man of God.* This psalm is unique in attributing the text to Moses. Some interpreters have seen linguistic connections with the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32), but these are tenuous and, if they really exist, are very few. Given the focus of the psalm on the limitations of the human condition, the editor may have been thinking of the reiterated zero-degree epithet for the lawgiver, "the man Moses": Moses is the great founding leader and yet but a man, granted the great life span of 120 years that would become proverbial, yet circumscribed by mortality, never to enter the promised land. Of the eight times that the name of Moses is mentioned in Psalms, seven occur in the fourth book of Psalms, which begins here, so this may have been a signature device on the part of the editor.

2. *from forever to forever You are God.* This evocation of God's eternality introduces the topic of the two temporal scales, God's and man's, which is the fearsome subject of the psalm.

3. *You bring man back to the dust.* The word represented as "dust," *daka*ʾ, is associated with a root that indicates lowness, or crushing down, but is reasonably understood here as a poetic substitute for "dust" (ordinarily, ʿ*afar*). God's abasement of man, followed in the next verset by His exhortation to humankind to turn back, or repent, suggests that this psalm is a collective penitential supplication, perhaps recited at a moment when the community has been overtaken by disaster ("bring man back to the dust"). But the nature of the disaster is not specified, and there is no mention either of Israel or the Temple. Thus the supplication becomes the vehicle for a Wisdom-style meditation on the transience of human life, cast in the universal terms characteristic of Wisdom literature. There is, in fact, a certain kinship between this poem and passages in both Job and Qohelet.

4. *For a thousand years in Your eyes.* In the eloquent triadic structure of this line, the poet moves from a thousand years to a passing day to a watch in the night (a mere third of the night). Thus, he concretizes a vision of time seen from God's end of the telescope.

5. *You engulf them with sleep.* Both the verb and the syntax in the Hebrew sound odd, and there may be a textual problem here, but the sundry efforts to emend it chiefly exhibit the logic of scholars, not of biblical poets.

In the morn they are like grass that passes. The verb translated as "passes" could also mean "changes." The poem here enters the sphere of human

temporality, which is only from morning to evening. Terms marking units of time—days, years—continue to be invoked in the poem.

7. *For we are consumed in Your wrath.* Because the words for both "wrath" and "fury" in the Hebrew suggest hotly burning breath, the language carries forward the image of grass withering and dying.

9. *like a sigh.* The Hebrew *hegeh* also means "murmur."

10. *cut down.* Though the meaning of this word in the Hebrew is clear, the grammar is problematic because the verb is masculine singular and so does not readily attach to the first-person plural subject that follows.

11. *As the fear of You is Your anger.* That is, with good reason are people afraid of You because the manifestations of Your anger are indeed fearsome.

12. *To count our days rightly, instruct.* In effect, this is precisely what the poem as a whole—with its powerful images for representing the limitations of human existence over against God's eternal being—has achieved for its audience.

13. *have pity.* The verb used means literally "change your mind."

14. *Sate us in the morn with Your kindness.* Such an act would enable a different kind of flourishing from the grass that sprouts in the morn and then withers. God's kindness has the power to move human joy beyond the fleeting framework of a few hours to "all our days."

15. *as the days . . . / the years.* God's kindness to humanity makes possible a different order of human temporality, in which the days add up to the years in a round of joyful fulfillment, even within the limited span of seventy or eighty years of a human life.

17. *and the work of our hands firmly found.* The poet uses a triadic line, the third verset a virtual repetition of the second verset, as a concluding flourish. The verb *konen*, "firmly found," is strategically important. It is the word used for keeping dynasties or buildings unshaken. Against the dismaying ephemerality of human existence, in which a life sprouts and withers like grass, God can give fleeting human experience solid substantiality.

PSALM 91

[1]He who dwells in the Most High's shelter,
in the shadow of Shaddai lies at night—
[2]I say of the LORD, "My refuge and bastion,
my God in whom I trust."
[3]For He will save you from the fowler's snare,
from the disastrous plague.
[4]With His pinion He shelters you,
and beneath His wings you take refuge,
a shield and a buckler, His truth.
[5]You shall not fear from the terror of night
nor from the arrow that flies by day,
[6]from the plague that stalks in darkness
nor from the scourge that rages at noon.
[7]Though a thousand fall at your side
and ten thousand at your right hand,
you it will not reach.
[8]You but look with your eyes,
and the wicked's requital you see.
[9]For you—the LORD is your refuge,
the Most High you have made your abode.

[10]No harm will befall you,
nor affliction draw near to your tent.
[11]For His messengers He charges for you
to guard you on all your ways.
[12]On their palms they lift you up
lest your foot be bruised by a stone.
[13]On lion and viper you tread,
you trample young lion and serpent.
[14]"For Me he desired and I freed him.
I raised him high, for he has known My name.
[15]He calls Me and I answer him,
I am with him in his straits.
I deliver him and grant him honor.
[16]With length of days I shall sate him,
and show him my rescue."

PSALM 91 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *He who dwells in the Most High's shelter.* This psalm is one of a number that have no superscription (though the Septuagint shows—or adds—"a David psalm"). It also does not belong to any obvious cultic genre of psalms. The Israeli scholar Yair Hoffman, noting its eloquent expression of God's unflagging providential protection, has interestingly characterized the poem as an "amulet psalm," with the idea that its recitation might help a person attain or perhaps simply feel God's guarding power.

2. *I say of the* LORD. Although the Septuagint corrects this to "He says of the LORD," evidently in the interests of consistency, such unmarked transitions from one speaker to another (it is now the man who shelters in God who speaks) are not uncommon in biblical literature. In fact, there are three speakers in the poem: the poet (verse 1, verses 3–13), the man who trusts in God (verse 2), and God (verses 14–16).

4. *His pinion . . . / His wings.* It may be misguided to conclude that God is imagined as a large mother bird. The sheltering care of the bird for her fledglings is a recurrent biblical image for solicitous protection; thus, the metaphor appears to refer to the function, not to the imagined appearance of the deity. But such metaphorical usages may have had something to do with the later representation of the Shekhinah (the feminine manifestation of the deity) by Jews and the Holy Spirit by Christians as a dove.

7. *Though a thousand fall at your side.* In all likelihood, the setting evoked is a raging epidemic in which vast numbers of people all around are fatally stricken. The image of martial danger, however, introduced by the flying arrow of verse 5 and the shield and buckler of verse 4, is superimposed on the image of danger from the plague, life imagined as a battlefield fraught with dangers.

you it will not reach. In this triadic line, after the formulaic semantic parallelism of "a thousand" and "ten thousand," the third member of the line is not semantically parallel but instead marks a strong contrast—you who will remain untouched over against all those who fall.

8. *the wicked's requital.* This phrase suggests that there is a blending in the poem of danger from the plague and danger from hostile people.

9. *your refuge.* The received text reads, confusingly, "my refuge."

10. *draw near to your tent.* This archaic reference to nomadic existence occurs elsewhere in Psalms and is in keeping with the somewhat archaic coloration of biblical poetic diction. It seems worth preserving in English.

12. *lest your foot be bruised by a stone.* The literal sense of the verb is "bump against." In the rocky landscape of the Judahite hills, in which there were no paved roads until the Romans introduced them, this image of a person lifted up on the palms of divine messengers to protect him from all painful

stumbling has particular force. It is also a concrete focusing of "guard you on all your ways," at the end of the previous line.

13. *lion . . . viper . . . / young lion . . . serpent.* These noxious creatures of the wild would have been actual dangers to the wayfarer passing over the rocky roads of Judah. "Young lion" (following the King James Version) is a translator's strategy of desperation: there are five different terms in biblical Hebrew for "lion," and it is safe to assume that they designated different kinds or categories of lion, in an era when this animal was much more common in the countryside of Judah. But we have no way of recovering the distinctions, and, in any case, there are no synonyms for "lion" in English.

16. *show him.* Some scholars propose emending the Masoretic *weʾareihu* to *weʾarweihu*, "slake his thirst," to make a neat parallelism with "sate him" in the first verset. It is a question, however, whether the biblical poets were always committed to such neatness in deploying parallel versets, and "show him" makes perfect sense.

PSALM 92

[1]A psalm, a song for the sabbath day.
[2]It is good to acclaim the LORD
and to hymn to Your name, Most High,
[3]to tell in the morning Your kindness,
Your faithfulness in the nights,
[4]on ten-stringed instrument and on the lute,
on the lyre with chanted sound.
[5]For You made me rejoice, LORD, through Your acts,
of the work of Your hands I sing gladly.
[6]How great Your works, O LORD,
Your designs are very deep.
[7]The brutish man does not know,
nor does the fool understand this:
[8]the wicked spring up like grass,
and all the wrongdoers flourish—
to be destroyed for all time.
[9]And You are on high forever, O LORD!
[10]For, look, Your enemies, O LORD,
for, look, Your enemies perish,

all the wrongdoers are scattered.
[11]And You raise up my horn like the wild ox.
I am soaked in fresh oil.
[12]And my eyes behold my foes' defeat,
those hostile toward me, my ears hear their fall.
[13]The righteous man springs up like the palm tree,
like the Lebanon cedar he towers.
[14]Planted in the house of the LORD,
in the courts of our God they flourish.
[15]They bear fruit still in old age,
fresh and full of sap they are,
[16]to tell that the LORD is upright,
my rock, there is no wrong in Him.

PSALM 92 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *a song for the sabbath day.* It is a reasonable inference that this psalm was actually sung as part of the Temple rite for the sabbath. In postbiblical Judaism, it was included in the sabbath liturgy, and six other psalms were chosen for recitation on each of the six other days of the week.

2. *It is good to acclaim the* LORD. Although the language of acclaim or thanksgiving (*hodot*) and hymning (*zamer*) immediately aligns this text with the psalms of thanksgiving, it also has a strong Wisdom coloration as an attempt to explain why the wicked seem to flourish and what is the true order of justice in the world.

5. This line of poetry takes the form of a neat chiasm (a b b' a') as do verse 6 and verse 12. The translation mirrors this formal pattern.

6. *Your designs are very deep.* This clause lays the ground for the rest of the poem, and for the next two verses in particular. God's designs are deep. Superficial observation might lead to the conclusion that crime pays, but, despite appearances to the contrary, God prepares due punishment for the wicked. It is this unapparent system of justice that the brutish man is incapable of understanding.

8. *to be destroyed for all time.* The likely force of the metaphor is that grass grows high only the more readily to be mowed or to wither.

9. *And You are on high forever, O LORD!* This verse lacks any parallelism and does not scan in the Hebrew. It would seem to be an interjection in prose inserted at the midpoint of the poem: man is ephemeral; God reigns on high forever.

10. *For look, Your enemies, O LORD, / for, look, Your enemies perish.* The use of incremental repetition in these two versets harks back to the earliest stratum of biblical poetry (as, for example, in the Song of Deborah). In fact, a line occurs in one of the Ugaritic poems that is very close in language and structure to this one, although with "Baal" as the deity addressed rather than YHWH.

12. *my foes' defeat.* As elsewhere, "defeat" is merely implied by the idiom "to see [in or against] my foes." This line is unusual in adding to the seeing a symmetrical element of hearing in the second verset. Again the noun "fall" has been added to make the meaning clear.

13. *like the palm tree, / like the Lebanon cedar.* These proverbially stately trees with their deep roots are an obvious antithesis to the metaphor of ephemeral grass used to represent the wicked. The contrast is akin to the one in the first psalm between the righteous as a tree planted by waters and the wicked as chaff blown by the wind.

15. *fresh and full of sap.* This entire line carries forward the image of the righteous as a flourishing tree. "Fresh"—*raʿanan*, which has a semantic range from vibrant to luxuriant to fresh—is the very term the speaker used in verse 11 to characterize the oil with which he was pleasurably anointed. (The translation reverses the order of the two Hebrew adjectives for the sake of rhythm.) *Raʿanan* is also a term often linked with trees.

16. *to tell that the LORD is upright.* At the very end, the psalm picks up "to tell" from the beginning, thus marking an envelope structure. The poem begins and concludes by affirming what a good and fitting thing it is to tell God's greatness.

PSALM 93

[1]The LORD reigns, in triumph clothed,
clothed is the LORD, in strength He is girded.
Yes, the world stands firm, not to be shaken.
[2]Your throne stands firm from of old,
from forever You are.
[3]The streams lifted up, O LORD,
the streams lifted up their voice,
the streams lift up their roaring.
[4]More than the sound of many waters,
the sea's majestic breakers,
majestic on high is the LORD.
[5]Your statutes are very faithful.
Holiness suits Your house.
The LORD is for all time.

PSALM 93 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The LORD reigns.* This brief, powerful psalm begins without superscription. It is clearly one of a group of psalms that celebrate God's kingship. The once

popular notion, put forth by Sigmund Mowinckel in the early twentieth century, that it is the liturgy for an annual festival in which YHWH was enthroned, has come more and more to seem like a scholarly exercise in historical fiction because there is no evidence for the existence of such a rite in ancient Israel. God's grandeur as king of all the world would have been a perfectly appropriate theme for a Hebrew poet without a cultic apparatus.

triumph. The Hebrew *gei'ut* covers a range from splendor, grandeur, and greatness to the image of surging high (as it is used in the Song of the Sea, playing against the sense of the term as "tide," as is evidently the case in this poem as well).

3. *The streams lifted up.* The rising waters of the sea—it is not until the end of the second verset that the verb receives an object, "their voice" (or "their sound"), which turns it into an idiom used for human speech—are an antithesis to the firmly founded world and divine throne of the two previous verses. Although this poem may glance back, as many scholars have proposed, to Canaanite cosmogonic myths of the conquest of a primordial sea monster, the mythology is no more than a distant memory here. Indeed, the idea that God is "forever," before all national entities, is an implicit argument against a primordial battle of the gods. This notion of creation as assuring the safety and firmness of the land against the sea is one that makes special sense for a culture flourishing along the edge of the Mediterranean (in biblical idiom, "the Great Sea"). The waves pounding against the shore are a reminder of the precarious existence of the land dwellers, but God's majestic power, far greater even than the power of the sea, is a reassuring guarantee of the stability of civilized life. The forceful use of incremental repetition in this line —"the streams lifted up. . . / the streams lifted up their voice, / the streams lift up their roaring"—may be deliberately deployed to suggest a wavelike movement in the formal pattern of the verse.

4. *More than the sound of many waters, / . . . majestic on high is the* LORD. The middle verset in this triadic line ("the sea's majestic breakers") stands in apposition to the first verset. The entire line is a wonderful use of a periodic sentence: at first we are not sure what or who is "more" than the sound of the majestic breakers, and at the end—YHWH is the last word of the line—we learn that it is God. The qualifier "on high" is strategic: the breakers of the sea may rise up terrifically high, inspiring awe or even fear in the observer, but YHWH is high above them.

5. *Your statutes.* The mention of law at the end of the poem is something of a surprise, but perhaps not for the Israelite believer. God's supreme power over nature is followed by His giving to Israel a set of laws that can endow their lives with stable order and moral coherence. He also grants them a Temple ("Your house"), standing firm like God's celestial throne, where Israel can repeatedly affirm a bond with Him.

for all time. The Hebrew *leʾorekh yamim* means literally "for length of days." (It is the same idiom as the one used at the end of Psalm 23, translated differently there because of the context.) Though the temporal frame of reference of the phrase is more human than divine, it may be employed here as a synonymous variation of "forever," which has already been used in verse 2.

PSALM 94

[1]God of vengeance, O LORD,
God of vengeance, shine forth!
[2]Rise up, O judge of the earth,
bring down on the proud requital.
[3]How long the wicked, O LORD,
how long will the wicked exult?
[4]They utter arrogance, speak it,
all the wrongdoers bandy boasts.
[5]Your people, O LORD, they crush,
and Your estate they abuse.
[6]Widow and sojourner they kill,
and orphans they murder.
[7]And they say, “Yah will not see,
and the God of Jacob will not heed.”
[8]Take heed, you brutes in the people,
and you fools, when will you be wise?
[9]Who plants the ear, will He not hear?
Who fashions the eye, will He not look?
[10]The chastiser of nations, will He not punish,
Who teaches humankind knowledge?

[11]The LORD knows human designs,
that they are mere breath.
[12]Happy the man whom Yah chastises,
and whom from His teaching He instructs,
[13]to make him quiet in evil days
until a pit is dug for the wicked.
[14]For the LORD will not abandon His people,
and His estate He will not forsake.
[15]For justice will join with judgment,
and all the upright will follow it.
[16]Who will rise for me against evildoers,
who will take a stand for me against the
wrongdoers?
[17]Were not the LORD a help to me,
I would have almost dwelled in the silent realm.
[18]When I thought my foot had stumbled,
Your kindness, LORD, sustained me.
[19]With my many cares within me,
Your consolations delighted me.
[20]Will the throne of disaster consort with You,
that fashions trouble against the law?
[21]They band together against the just man's life,
and innocent blood condemn.
[22]But the LORD became my fortress,
and my God, my sheltering rock.
[23]He will turn back against them their wickedness,

through their evil He will destroy them,
the LORD our God will destroy them.

PSALM 94 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *God of vengeance.* This boldly aggressive characterization of God, *ʾel neqamot*, which occurs only here, is fudged by the modern translations that render it in mitigating language as "God of retribution." As in many psalms of supplication, to which this poem is roughly allied, the speaker is filled with rage at the dominance of injustice in the world and exhorts God to manifest a spectacular appearance ("shine forth") in order to exact grim vengeance against the perpetrators of evil.

3. *how long will the wicked exult?* In the typical psalm of supplication, this is the kind of question that a beleaguered speaker asks personally, on his own behalf. Here, however, though the speaker does stress the first-person singular toward the end of the poem (verses 16–22), most of the psalm expresses a generalized concern about the prevalence of injustice.

5. *Your people, O LORD, they crush.* Although some interpreters have taken this as a reference to a national disaster, such as conquest by an enemy, the subsequent reference to the murder of the disadvantaged—proverbially, in biblical usage, the sojourner, the widow, and the orphan—suggests that what the speaker has in view is a practice of criminal, social, and economic oppression within the nation. This reading is reinforced by the use of the phrase "You brutes in [or among] the people" (verse 8).

12. *Happy the man whom Yah chastises, / and whom from His teaching He instructs.* This is the turning point in the poem, the moment when a rationale is offered for the present suffering of the innocent. The man who is engulfed in suffering—that is, who is "chastised" by God—can take comfort in the lesson of God's teaching, which is that punishment (the "pit" that is dug) awaits the evildoer. This certain knowledge has the power to give inner calm

to the just man in the midst of his afflictions. This same idea is rephrased in verse 19: “With my many cares within me, / Your consolations delighted me.”

14. *not abandon His people, / . . . His estate . . . not forsake.* This is the one moment in the poem when individual oppression appears to be displaced by (or merge with) the oppression of the nation, especially because “estate,” *naḥalah*, is a common poetic epithet for the people or the land.

15. *For justice will join with judgment.* The Hebrew at this point sounds a little crabbed. A very literal rendering: “For unto justice will judgment come back.”

16. *Who will rise for me against evildoers.* Now we hear a voice in the first-person singular. The immediate answer to these rhetorical questions is that no one will come to the aid of the embattled speaker except God.

17. *in the silent realm.* The Hebrew *dumah* simply means “silence,” implying death. The Vulgate actually renders this as *in inferno*.

20. *that fashions trouble against the law.* Although the meaning of each word and of the clause as a whole is quite transparent, the verset sounds a little strange because one would expect the verb “fashions” (*yotser*, as in the second Creation story) to be attached to a conscious agent, not to a throne. Perhaps the poet is simply thinking of “throne” metonymically as an epithet for the king of evil who sits on it.

21. *and innocent blood condemn.* The paradigmatic crime of the wicked is the perversion of the judicial system, which again leads to the inference that what the speaker complains of is injustice within his own society, not a military assault on it by external powers.

23. *He will turn back against them their wickedness.* The idea is both that the wicked will finally be tripped up by their own vicious scheming and that they will be paid back measure for measure.

the LORD our God will destroy them. As often happens in biblical poetry, a triadic line—here, with incremental repetition of the second verset—is used to mark closure at the end of the poem.

PSALM 95

[1]Come, let us sing gladly to the LORD,
    let us shout out to the Rock of our rescue.
[2]Let us greet Him in acclaim,
    in songs let us shout out to Him.
[3]For a great god is the LORD
    and great king over all the gods.
[4]In Whose hand are the depths of the earth,
    and the peaks of the mountains are His.
[5]His is the sea and He made it,
    and the dry land His hands did fashion.
[6]Come, let us bow and kneel,
    bend the knee before the LORD our maker.
[7]For He is our God
    and we are the people He tends
and the flock of His hand.
If you would only heed His voice!
    [8]"Do not harden your heart as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
[9]when your forefathers tested Me,
    tried Me, though they had seen My acts.

[10]Forty years I loathed a generation,
and I said, ‘They are a people of wayward heart.
And they did not know My ways.’
[11]Against them I swore in My wrath,
‘They shall not come to My resting place.’”

PSALM 95 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Come, let us sing.* Without superscription, like the rest of the sequence of psalms from Psalm 93 to Psalm 99 (with the marginal exception of Psalm 98), the first-person plural exhortation to sing suggests that this is a public celebration of God. NOTES

2. *acclaim.* The Hebrew *todah*, as elsewhere in Psalms, straddles “acclaim” and “thanksgiving.” Some interpreters think it refers here to the thanksgiving sacrifice because the idiom used for “greet,” *qadem ʾet peney*, is sometimes linked with sacrifice. However, the strong poetic parallelism with “songs,” woven in a tight chiastic pattern—greet (a), in acclaim (b), in songs (b'), shout out (a')—argues against this understanding.

3. *For a great god is the LORD, / and great king over all the gods.* The language here harks back to a period when YHWH was thought of not as the one exclusive deity but as the most powerful of the gods, though it is unclear whether the formulation in this psalm reflects active belief or merely a linguistic survival. In any case, the next two verses proceed to proclaim that YHWH alone is the master of depths and heights, the maker of sea and earth, an idea that would seem to preclude the notion of sundry gods having jurisdiction over the various realms of nature. Scholars attached to the

hypothesis of an annual ritual of the coronation of YHWH of course have seized on this psalm as a liturgical text for the rite, but its existence remains conjectural. Later Jewish tradition made this the first in a sequence of psalms chanted as a prelude to the Friday-evening prayer for welcoming the sabbath, evidently because the sabbath was seen as a celebration of creation.

4. *the depths of the earth.* The Hebrew for "depths" is not the ordinary *tehomot* but the more unusual *meḥqerey*, which by etymology means "the utmost reaches that can be searched out."

7. *the flock of His hand.* This unusual phrase may be employed here to pick up the references to God's hand in verses 4 and 5.

If you would only heed His voice. Although this sentence appears at the end of the verse according to the conventional verse breaks, it is actually the initial verset of a new triadic line that continues in verse 8. It marks an abrupt pivot in the poem, as the psalm of acclaim turns into a psalm of prophetic rebuke.

8. *Meribah, / . . . Massah.* These place names, meaning Dispute and Testing, appear in Exodus 17:7 in the story of the Israelites' resentful plea for water in the wilderness. One of the earliest of the episodes of "murmuring," it is invoked here typologically as an image of Israel's wayward, rebellious behavior through all the generations. Perhaps the implicit connection with the acclaiming of God's kingship in the first part of the poem is that Israel can authentically recognize God as king only by obedience to His commands.

10. *Forty years I loathed a generation.* The obvious reference is to God's decree, after the incident of the ten fainthearted spies (Numbers 14), that the people would have to wander in the wilderness forty years, until the whole refractory generation had died out.

11. *They shall not come to My resting place.* The "resting place" is the promised land. The psalm thus ends on a rather stern note of admonition, one that its listeners are expected to take to heart.

PSALM 96

[1]Sing to the LORD a new song!
Sing to the LORD, all the earth.
[2]Sing to the LORD, bless His name,
Bring tidings every day of His rescue.
[3]Recount among the nations His glory,
among all the peoples His wonders.
[4]For great is the LORD and most praised,
fearsome is He over all the gods.
[5]For all gods of the peoples are ungods,
but the LORD has made the heavens.
[6]Greatness and grandeur before Him,
strength and splendor in His sanctuary.
[7]Grant to the LORD, O families of peoples,
grant to the LORD glory and strength.
[8]Grant to the LORD His name's glory,
bear tribute and come to His courts.
[9]Bow to the LORD in sacred grandeur;
quake before Him, all the earth.
[10]Say among the nations: The LORD reigns.
Yes, the world stands firm, will not shake.

He metes out justice to peoples righteously.
[11]Let the heavens rejoice and the earth exult,
    let the sea and its fullness thunder.
[12]Let the field be glad and all that is in it,
    then shall all the trees of the forest gladly sing
[13]before the LORD, for He comes,
    He comes to judge the earth.
[14]He judges the world in justice
    and peoples in His faithfulness.

PSALM 96 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Sing to the LORD a new song.* In this celebration of God's majesty, it is of course in the interests of the psalm poet to proclaim that this is a fresh and original composition. In point of fact, it is a weaving together of phrases and whole lines that appear elsewhere. Yair Hoffman actually characterizes it as a "mosaic" of lines drawn from familiar psalms. The very familiarity, of course, might have enhanced its accessibility to the Israelite worshipper.

3. *the nations . . . / all the peoples.* The perspective of this poem is decidedly global rather than national. All the inhabitants of earth are enjoined to celebrate God's kingship.

5. *For all gods of the peoples are ungods.* The previous line, "fearsome is He over all the gods," which also has a close parallel in Psalm 95:3, looks as though it is a line inherited from an early stratum of Hebrew poetry. In this case, the psalmist immediately attaches a kind of monotheistic rejoinder to it by asserting that all the other gods have no real existence: "ungods," *ʾelilim*, is a polemic coinage that appears frequently elsewhere, punningly formed on *ʾal*, ("no," "not") and *ʾel* ("god"), to which a diminutive or pejorative suffix is

appended. The standard meaning of the term in all subsequent Hebrew is "idols."

6. *Greatness and grandeur.* The alliteration approximates the effect of the Hebrew *hod wehadar*.

8. *bear tribute.* The Hebrew *minḥah* also has the cultic sense of "offering," and a pun is surely intended here, but the emphasis on celebrating God as king of all the earth invites seeing "tribute" as the leading edge of the pun.

10. *righteously.* The Hebrew *meysharim*, which has a Mesopotamian cognate, is an abstract noun derived from *yashar*, "straight" or "upright," and has the sense of fairly, even generously, administered justice.

11. *Let the heavens rejoice.* Given that the poet has already proclaimed God's all-embracing reign over the sundry realms of creation, it is an apt conclusion that, at the end, sky and sea and the fields of earth are all urged to rejoice in God's kingship.

PSALM 97

[1]The LORD reigns—let earth exult,
let the many islands rejoice.
[2]Cloud and dense fog around Him,
justice and judgment the base of His throne.
[3]Fire goes before Him
and all round burns His foes.
[4]His lightnings lit up the world;
the earth saw and quaked.
[5]Mountains melted like wax before the LORD,
before the Master of all the earth.
[6]The heavens told His justice,
and all peoples saw His glory.
[7]All idol worshippers are shamed,
who boast of the ungods.
All gods bow down to Him.
[8]Zion heard and rejoiced,
and Judah's villages exulted
because of Your judgments, LORD.
[9]For You, LORD, are most high over all the earth;
You are greatly exalted over all the gods.

[10]You who love the LORD, hate evil!
    He guards the lives of His faithful.
From the hand of the wicked He saves them.
[11]Light is sown for the just,
    and for the upright of heart there is joy.
[12]Rejoice, O you just, in the LORD,
    and acclaim His holy name.

PSALM 97 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The LORD reigns.* These initial words signal another psalm in this series celebrating God's kingship. All these poems are variations on a theme, using an abundance of set formulas. One difference between this psalm and the preceding ones is that there is no reference to God's conquest of the primordial sea. Instead, deploying a different imagery that goes back to Canaanite mythology, the poet represents God surrounded by fire and hurling lightning bolts down on the world.

the many islands. The Hebrew *ʾiyim* always refers to remote regions.

2. *Cloud and dense fog.* These two overlapping elements, *ʿanan* and *ʿarafel*, traditionally surround God. Compare the occurrence of the same paired terms in Deuteronomy 4:11.

6. *The heavens told His justice.* This particular celebration of God's kingship puts special emphasis not merely on God's overwhelming power but on His bringing a reign of justice to humankind.

7. *All gods bow down to Him.* For the somewhat ambiguous background of formulations of this sort in this sequence of psalms, see the comments on 95:3 and 96:5. At least on the surface, this clause appears to be a flat contradiction of the two preceding versets, which speak of "idol worshippers" and "ungods." (For an explanation of the Hebrew background to this latter

term, see the note on 96:5). One must allow the possibility that the psalmist thought idol worship absurd, not because the idols were mere sticks and stones, as Deutero-Isaiah imagined them, but rather because they were images of deities who had no real power, who were totally subservient to the one supreme God, and therefore were not worthy of worship. In that case, *ʾelilim*, "ungods," would mean something like "paltry pseudo-gods."

8. *Judah's villages.* The Hebrew *banot* has the literal sense of "daughters." It could actually refer to exulting young women, but, given the poetic parallelism with "Zion"—that is, Jerusalem—it is more likely that the term here is used in its other sense of the outlying villages outside a city.

11. *Light is sown for the just, / and for the upright of heart there is joy.* In a resonant envelope structure, the poem that began in rejoicing ends in rejoicing. The delicate agricultural image of light sown—presumably, to bear refulgent fruit—is an elegant counterpoint to the fierce fire that burns up God's enemies and to the lightning that makes the earth quake.

PSALM 98

[1]A psalm.
Sing to the LORD a new song,
For wonders He has done.
His right hand gave Him victory,
and His holy arm.
[2]The LORD made known His victory,
before the nations' eyes He revealed His bounty.
[3]He recalled His kindness and His faithfulness
to the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth have seen
the victory of our God.
[4]Shout out to the LORD, all the earth.
Burst forth in glad song and hymn.
[5]Hymn to the LORD on the lyre,
on the lyre with the sound of hymning.
[6]With trumpets and the sound of ram's horn,
sound loud before the king, the LORD.
[7]Let the sea and its fullness thunder,
the world and those dwelling in it.
[8]Let the rivers clap hands,

let the mountains together sing gladly
[9]before the LORD, for He comes
to judge the earth.
[10]He judges the world in justice
and peoples righteously.

PSALM 98 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *A psalm.* This is a zero-degree superscription. The Septuagint adds "David."

Sing to the LORD a new song. The comment on this same clause at the beginning of Psalm 96 is also relevant to this poem.

gave Him victory. Although the verbal root *y-sh-ʿ* generally means "rescue," in military contexts the meaning shades into "victory," and the invocation of God's right hand clearly suggests the role of divine warrior. The poem does not specify the enemy, but, given its cosmic sweep and the background of similar psalms, the most likely candidate would be the primordial forces of chaos.

2. *bounty.* Though in a good many contexts *tsedaqah* means "righteousness," it also often has the sense in poetry of "bounty" or "beneficent act," and the interlinear parallelism with verse 3 indicates that meaning here.

3. *All the ends of the earth have seen.* As in the other psalms celebrating God's kingship, the perspective is global, for His reign extends over all the earth. But here, in contradistinction to Psalm 97, the poet also invokes God's relationship with his covenanted people ("His kindness and His faithfulness / to the house of Israel").

7. *Let the sea and its fullness thunder.* There is a concordance between the human orchestra—in all likelihood, an actual orchestra accompanying the singing of this psalm—with its lutes and rams' horns, and the orchestra of nature, both groups providing a grand fanfare for God the king. The

thundering of the sea is a percussion section, joined by the clapping hands of the rivers, then the chorus of the mountains. This simple, compact poem, drawing extensively on the formulas of the kingship psalms, is resonantly expressive: the Israelites chanting the poem's words of exaltation, to the accompaniment of musical instruments, are invited to imagine their musical rite as part of a cosmic performance.

PSALM 99

[1]The LORD reigns—peoples tremble,
enthroned upon cherubim—the earth shakes.
[2]The LORD is great in Zion
and exalted over all the peoples.
[3]They acclaim Your name:
"Great and fearful,
He is holy.
[4]And with a king's strength He loves justice."
You firmly founded righteousness,
judgment and justice in Jacob You made.
[5]Exalt the LORD our God
and bow down to His footstool.
He is holy.
[6]Moses and Aaron among His priests
and Samuel among those who call on His name
called to the LORD and He answered them.
[7]In a pillar of cloud did He speak to them.
They kept His precepts and the statute He gave them.
[8]LORD our God, it was You Who answered them,

a forbearing God You were to them,
yet an avenger of their misdeeds.
[9]Exalt the LORD our God
and bow to His holy mountain,
for the LORD our God is holy.

PSALM 99 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The LORD reigns—peoples tremble.* The fearsome power of God as king of all the earth makes both the inhabitants of the earth and the earth itself tremble in fear. But from verse 6 to the end of the psalm, the global perspective switches to a national one, introducing national historical memory and the cult on Mount Zion.

cherubim. Readers should be reminded that these are not the dimpled darlings of Christian iconography but fierce mythological beasts—with the body of a lion, large wings, and a human face—that were imagined as God's celestial steeds and also as the throne on which God sat (cherubim were carved on the top of the Ark of the Covenant).

3. *Great and fearful.* The translation infers that these are the words with which the peoples acclaim God's name. That would provide a ready motivation for the switch from second to third person in the references to God. Such switches, however, often occur in biblical usage, so the assumption that these are the words pronounced by the peoples is not certain.

4. *And with a king's strength.* There appears to be a small glitch in the Hebrew text at this point. The Hebrew *ʿoz melekh* merely says "a king's strength." And "with" in the translation—perhaps there was a deleted particle *b*^{e} in the original text—is added to make sense of the whole clause.

5. *footstool.* A king sitting on a high throne could well have used a footstool on which to rest his feet; in fact, kings are depicted doing this in Egyptian paintings.

6. *Moses and Aaron . . . / and Samuel.* This little catalogue gives us the prototypes of prophet and priest (Samuel was both, and Moses was from a priestly clan). The historical memory invoked provides a rationale and reassurance for the act of cultic celebration carried out through the psalm. Just as Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and Samuel after them, were answered when they called out to God, the throng of celebrants—led by the priests of their own day, and enjoined here to exalt God on Mount Zion—will also be answered.

PSALM 100

[1]A thanksgiving psalm.
Shout out to the LORD, all the earth,
[2]worship the LORD in rejoicing,
come before Him in glad song.
[3]Know that the LORD is God.
He has made us, and we are His,
His people and the flock He tends.
[4]Come into His gates in thanksgiving,
His courts in praise.
Acclaim Him,
Bless His name.
[5]For the LORD is good,
forever His kindness,
and for all generations His faithfulness.

PSALM 100 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *A thanksgiving psalm*. There is a strong cultic emphasis in this psalm, and "thanksgiving," *todah*, probably refers both to the act of giving thanks to or

acclaiming God in song and to a thanksgiving offering. The two would have been imagined as part of the same gesture of gratefulness to God.

2. *come before Him.* The Hebrew preposition also has the sense of "His presence." The spatial reference is to the Temple, where God's presence is conceived to dwell, an idea that will be developed in verse 4.

3. *and we are His.* The translation follows the marginal correcting note of the *qeri*, which the traditional editors use to indicate variant readings. The received consonantal text reads "and not we," which is logically possible but sounds unnatural in the Hebrew. The difference in the Hebrew is between *lo* and *l'o* (the latter having an *aleph*).

4. *Come into His gates . . . / His courts.* The gates are the threshold, the point where the pilgrim crosses from the zone of the profane into the sacred precincts of the Temple. It is understandable that they appear in various psalms as a beckoning image, the place where the lover enters the realm of his desires. The two versets of this line also neatly illustrate the frequent phenomenon of narrative development from the first verset to the second. First, the pilgrims are enjoined to enter the gates; then they are standing within, in the courts of the Temple.

PSALM 101

[1]A David psalm.
Kindness and justice I would sing.
To You, O LORD, I would hymn.
[2]I would study the way of the blameless:
when will it come to me?
I shall go about in my heart's innocence
within my house.
[3]I shall not set before my eyes
any base thing.
I hate committing transgressions.
It will not cling to me.
[4]May a twisted heart turn far from me.
May I not know evil.
[5]Who defames in secret his fellow,
him shall I destroy.
The haughty of eyes and the proud of heart,
him shall I not suffer.
[6]My eyes are on the land's faithful,
that they dwell with me.
Who walks in the way of the blameless,

it is he who will serve me.
[7]Within my house there shall not dwell
one who practices deceit.
A speaker of lies shall not stand firm
before my eyes.
[8]Each morning I shall destroy
all the wicked of the land,
to cut off from the town of the LORD
all the wrongdoers.

PSALM 101 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *I would study the way of the blameless.* The verb *haskil* means both to observe or gaze upon and to get wisdom. This is preeminently a Wisdom psalm, proclaiming in terms reminiscent of the Book of Proverbs the speaker's firm resolution to keep himself from all who do evil and to follow the ways of the just. Many scholars since Hermann Gunkel have claimed that it is a royal psalm, but any language that might be attached to a king is quite oblique—mainly, in the suggestion that the speaker has the power to destroy the wicked and that just men will serve him. It is possible that these are references to the situation of a king, but the inference is not entirely compelling.

when will it come to me? The antecedent would be "the way of the blameless." But it is also possible to construe this clause as "When will You come to me?"

3. *I shall not set before my eyes / any base thing.* It is worth noting that there is no semantic parallelism between the two halves of this line, and the same is true of several other lines in the poem. Perhaps this abandonment of parallelism is driven by the plainly expository nature of this Wisdom psalm.

In any case, as often happens in biblical poetry, the poet compensates for the lack of parallelism between versets by introducing interlinear parallelism (compare verses 6, 7, and 8).

transgressions. The Hebrew *setim* is obscure but might possibly derive from the verbal stem *s-t-h*, which means "to go astray."

5. *the proud of heart.* The literal sense is "the broad of heart."

6. *My eyes are on the land's faithful.* The use of "eyes" here picks up "haughty of eyes" from the previous line and turns around the meaning. My own eyes, the speaker says, are directed toward the land's faithful. In the same fashion, he speaks of studying "the way of the blameless."

it is he who will serve me. This formulation does presuppose that the speaker is someone who enjoys a position of eminence and resolves to staff his house with decent people. It is possible, though far from certain, that it is the royal house that he speaks of.

PSALM 102

[1]A prayer for the lowly when he grows faint and pours
out his plea before the LORD.
[2]LORD, O hear my prayer,
and let my outcry come before You.
[3]Hide not Your face from me
on the day when I am in straits.
Incline Your ear to me.
On the day I call, quickly answer me.
[4]For my days are consumed in smoke,
and my bones are scorched like a hearth.
[5]My heart is stricken and withers like grass,
so I forget to eat my bread.
[6]From my loud sighing,
my bones cleave to my flesh.
[7]I resemble the wilderness jackdaw,
I become like the owl of the ruins.
[8]I lie awake and become
like a lonely bird on a roof.
[9]All day long my enemies revile me,
my taunters invoke me in curse.

[10]For ashes I have eaten as bread,
and my drink I have mingled with tears—
[11]because of Your wrath and Your fury,
for You raised me up and flung me down.
[12]My days inclined like a shadow,
and I—like grass I withered.
[13]And You LORD, forever enthroned,
and Your name—for all generations.
[14]You, may You rise, have mercy on Zion,
for it is the hour to pity her, for the fixed time has come.
[15]For Your servants cherish her stones
and on her dust they take pity.
[16]And the nations will fear the name of the LORD,
and all kings of the earth, Your glory.
[17]For the LORD has rebuilt Zion,
He is seen in His glory.
[18]He has turned to the prayer of the desolate
and has not despised their prayer.
[19]Let this be inscribed for a generation to come,
that a people yet unborn may praise Yah.
[20]For the LORD has gazed down from His holy heights,
from heaven to earth He has looked
[21]to hear the groans of the captive,
to set loose those doomed to die,

[22]that the name of the LORD be recounted in Zion
and His praise in Jerusalem
[23]when peoples gather together
and kingdoms, to serve the LORD.
[24]He humbled my strength on the highway,
he cut short my days.
[25]I say, “O my God.
Do not take me away in the midst of my days!
Your years are for all generations.
[26]Of old You founded the earth,
and the heavens—Your handiwork.
[27]They will perish and You will yet stand.
They will all wear away like a garment.
Like clothing You change them, and they pass away.
[28]But You—Your years never end.
[29]The sons of Your servants dwell safe,
their seed in Your presence, unshaken.”

PSALM 102 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *A prayer for the lowly.* This is unusual as a superscription because it scans nicely as a line of poetry. Consequently, one could infer that it was composed by the poet as the first line of the poem rather than added by an editor.

4. *For my days are consumed in smoke, / and my bones are scorched like a hearth.* This haunting image focuses two ideas, ephemerality and suffering. The supplicant’s days burn away to mere smoke, like any rapidly combustible

substance set on fire, and the result of the blaze of torment within him is bones charred like a hearth after the fire has burned out. This poem is distinctive among the psalms of supplication in its powerful emphasis on the transience and insubstantiality of human life, an emphasis at certain points reminiscent of Job.

6. *my loud sighing.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "the voice of my sighing."

my bones cleave to my flesh. The image is one of emaciation, the person reduced to skin and bones.

7. *the wilderness jackdaw.* As with many biblical terms for fauna, the exact identity of this sad nocturnal bird is uncertain.

8. *like a lonely bird on a roof.* There is something uncanny about the specificity of this location, immediately after the mention of the two wilderness birds. Underneath, on his bed, the insomniac tosses and turns, feeling somehow similar to the lonely bird he imagines on the roof above.

12. *My days inclined like a shadow, / and I—like grass.* The similes again are selected with beautiful aptness. The life span races toward its inevitable end like lengthening shadows toward evening (one should remember that sundials were used in ancient Israel). Then the speaker himself, feeling his waning strength, withers like grass, in an appropriately organic image.

14. *have mercy on Zion.* The sudden introduction of the theme of Zion destroyed by its enemies is surprising because until this point the speaker's complaint has concentrated entirely on his own devastated condition as an afflicted mortal. It is possible, as some interpreters have proposed, that this prayer for the restoration of Zion was grafted onto an earlier psalm of individual supplication—perhaps because the desperate voice of the supplicant was felt to be appropriate for the sense of national desperation after the destruction of Jerusalem and the loss of national sovereignty. It is well to keep in mind that diachronic collage was an accepted technique of composition in biblical literature.

15. *take pity.* The pity of the Judahites for the ruined stones of Zion is meant to be a signpost for the pity God should show.

16. *And the nations will fear the name of the* LORD. This notion that in the return to Zion all nations will recognize the uncontested sovereignty of the

God of Israel has numerous analogues in the prophecies of Deutero-Isaiah.

18. *desolate.* The rare Hebrew term *ʿarʿar* might be related to *ʿariri*, "desolate," or might designate a humble desert bush, used here metaphorically to indicate desolation.

19. *yet unborn.* The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "being created."

20. *For the LORD has gazed down.* These words launch a long complex sentence, unusual in biblical poetry, that runs all the way to the end of verse 23. The syntax follows the long vertical line of the divine gaze from heaven to earth, then takes in the panorama of God's suffering servants and moves on to the prospect and the purpose of His act of liberation.

24. *He humbled my strength.* The antecedent of the masculine pronoun (in the Hebrew indicated merely by the conjugated form of the verb) is the enemy, not God.

25. *Do not take me away in the midst of my days.* With these words, the psalm appears to revert to the prayer of an individual supplicant who fears he is on the brink of death and feels all too keenly the brevity of his life.

27. *You will yet stand.* The "yet" is added to clarify the meaning. God's eternal existence, which makes even the heavens seem ephemeral, provides the stark contrast to the fleeting moment of life vouchsafed the supplicant.

Like clothing You change them, and they pass away. The clothing image is worked two ways. First, it is a garment worn thin or to shreds through long use, then a garment removed to be replaced by another, as God is free to do with the seemingly eternal heaven and earth. At the same time, the verb *ḥ-l-f*, "to change," is used in two different senses—first, to change a garment, then to pass away, to vanish.

29. *The sons of Your servants . . . / their seed.* The poem aptly concludes with the mention of offspring. An individual life lasts only a moment, but a kind of perpetuity may be granted to humanity through its continuing progeny. Thus, the last word of the psalm, the verb *yikon* ("unshaken"), is a word attached in general biblical usage to dynasties, to grand public buildings, and to heaven and earth.

PSALM 103

[1]For David.
Bless, O my being, the LORD,
and everything in me, His holy name.
[2]Bless, O my being, the LORD,
and do not forget all His generous acts.
[3]Who forgives all your wrongs,
heals all your illnesses,
[4]redeems your life from the Pit,
crowns you with kindness, compassion,
[5]sates you with good while you live—
you renew your youth like the eagle.
[6]The LORD performs righteous acts
and justice for all the oppressed.
[7]He makes known His ways to Moses,
to the Israelites, His feats.
[8]Compassionate and gracious, the LORD,
slow to anger and abounding in kindness.
[9]He will not dispute forever
nor nurse His anger for all time.
[10]Not according to our offenses has He done to us

nor according to our crimes requited us.
[11]For as the heavens loom high over earth,
His kindness is great over those who fear Him.
[12]As the east is far from the west,
He has distanced from us our transgressions.
[13]As a father has compassion for his children,
the LORD has compassion for those who fear Him.
[14]For He knows our devisings,
recalls that we are dust.
[15]Man's days are like grass,
like the bloom of the field, thus he blooms—
[16]when the wind passes by him, he is gone,
and his place will no longer know him.
[17]But the LORD's kindness is forever and ever
over those who fear Him
and His bounty to the sons of sons,
[18]for the keepers of His pact
and those who recall His precepts to do them.
[19]The LORD set His throne firm in the heavens
and His kingdom rules over all.
[20]Bless the LORD, O His messengers,
valiant in power, performing His word,
to heed the sound of His word.
[21]Bless the LORD, all His armies,
His servants performing His pleasure.

[22]Bless the LORD, O all His works,
in all places of His dominion.
Bless, O my being, the LORD!

PSALM 103 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Bless, O my being, the* LORD. The speaker's exhortation to his inner self or essential being (*nefesh*) to bless the LORD is an unusual rhetorical move in Psalms, repeated in the next psalm as well. (The Hebrew for "bless" also has something of the force of "praise," but the core meaning of blessing is worth retaining to distinguish it from three other common verbs that emphatically mean "praise.") This exhortation imparts a sense of exaltation to this psalm of thanksgiving, the occasion for which may be the recovery from a grave illness, as verses 3 and 4 suggest.

5. *sates you with good while you live.* The received text here looks dubious. Literally, it seems to say "sates with good your ornament." This translation adopts the text evidently used by the Septuagint, which instead of *ʿedyekh*, "your ornament," reads *ʿodekhi*, "while you live."

like the eagle. This image alludes to the eagle's shedding its feathers and growing new ones.

8. *Compassionate and gracious, the* LORD, */ slow to anger and abounding in kindness.* This entire line is a direct quotation of the revelation of the divine attributes to Moses in Exodus 34:6. It is introduced in the previous line by "He makes known His ways to Moses." What is left out from the passage in Exodus is God's "reckoning the crimes of fathers with sons and sons of sons." Here, on the contrary, the exclusive emphasis is on divine compassion and forgiveness.

10. *Not according to our offenses has He done to us.* The theology of forgiveness that pervades this psalm is based on the idea that as long as Israel is God-fearing, committed to upholding its pact with God, whatever

trespasses, however egregious, it may have committed will not be held against it by God.

11. *For as the heavens loom high over earth.* This vertical simile of vast distance is neatly complemented in the next verse by a horizontal simile of distance, from east to west. Appropriately, the vertical image is for the overtowering kindness of God on high to humankind below, whereas the horizontal image, pertaining to the terrestrial realm, is for the distance between the human transgressors and their own misdeeds.

14. *For He knows our devisings.* The pointed noun, *yester*, is the same one used in Genesis 8:21—"For the devisings of the human heart are evil from youth."

19. *The LORD set His throne firm in the heavens.* The throne is implicitly the throne of justice, the quality by which God rules the world. At the same time, the switch of focus to the celestial realm sets the stage for the grand conclusion of the psalm in which the heavenly powers are exhorted, just as the speaker exhorted himself at the beginning of the poem, to praise God.

20. *His messengers.* This term, traditionally rendered as "angels," designates the celestial beings who form God's royal entourage and carry out his commands. As the next verset makes clear, these figures are imagined as divine warriors, an idea that Milton would pick up in *Paradise Lost.*

21. *all His armies.* This term carries forward the "valiant in power" of the previous line and alludes to God's identity as "LORD of Armies," YHWH *tsev'aot.*

performing His pleasure. In this instance, the King James Version, which also represents the Hebrew *ratson* as "pleasure," is quite accurate, whereas the sundry modern translations that render it as "will" confuse the sense of the term in rabbinic and later Hebrew with its biblical meaning. The idea is that God, as a great monarch, has armies of messengers or courtiers to perform every act that will please Him.

22. *all His works, / in all places of His dominion / . . . O my being.* In a grand concluding flourish, all creation is pulled together in the exhortation to praise God. "All His works" includes all sentient beings, from the celestial armies to humankind. God's dominion extends to all imagined places. And in this vast cosmic setting, the speaker repeats the words of his initial injunction to his

own being to bless God, now making himself part of the great chorus of all creation.

PSALM 104

[1]Bless, O my being, the LORD!
LORD, my God, You are very great.
Grandeur and glory You don.
[2]Wrapped in light like a cloak,
stretching out heavens like a tent cloth.
[3]Setting beams for His lofts in the waters,
making His chariot the clouds,
He goes on the wings of the wind.
[4]He makes His messengers the winds,
His ministers, glowing fire.
[5]He founded earth on its solid base,
not to be shaken forevermore.
[6]With the deep You covered it like a garment—
over mountains the waters stood.
[7]From Your blast they fled,
from the sound of Your thunder they scattered.
[8]They went up the mountains, went down the valleys,
to the place that You founded for them.
[9]A border You fixed so they could not cross,

so they could not come back to cover the earth.
10 You let loose the springs in freshets,
among the mountains they go.
11 They water all beasts of the field,
the wild asses slake their thirst.
12 Above them the fowl of the heavens dwell,
from among the foliage they send forth their voice.
13 He waters mountains from His lofts,
from the fruit of Your works the earth is sated.
14 He makes the hay sprout for cattle,
grass for the labor of humankind
to bring forth bread from the earth,
15 and wine that gladdens the heart of man
to make faces shine brighter than oil,
and bread that sustains the heart of man.
16 The trees of the LORD drink their fill,
the Lebanon cedars He planted,
17 where the birds make their nest,
the stork whose home is the cypresses,
18 the high mountains for the gazelles,
the crags a shelter for badgers.
19 He made the moon for the fixed seasons;
the sun—He appointed its setting.
20 You bring down darkness and it turns to night
in which all beasts of the forest stir.

[21]The lions roar for prey,
seeking from God their food.
[22]When the sun comes up, they head home,
and in their dens they lie down.
[23]Man goes out to his work
and to his labor until evening.
[24]How many Your deeds, O LORD,
all of them You do in wisdom.
All the earth is filled with Your riches.
[25]This sea great and wide,
where creatures beyond number stir,
the little beasts and the large.
[26]There the ships go,
this Leviathan You fashioned to play with.
[27]All of them look to You
to give them their food in its season.
[28]When You give them, they gather it in,
when You open Your hand, they are sated with good.
[29]When You hide Your face, they panic,
You withdraw their breath and they perish,
and to the dust they return.
[30]When You send forth Your breath, they are created,
and You renew the face of the earth.
[31]May the LORD's glory be forever,

may the LORD rejoice in His works,
[32]Who but looks down to earth, and it trembles,
but touches the mountains—they smoke.
[33]Let me sing to the LORD while I live,
let me hymn to my God while I breathe.
[34]Let my speech be sweet unto Him.
As for me, I rejoice in the LORD.
[35]Let offenders vanish from earth
and the wicked be no more.
Bless, O my being, the LORD,
Hallelujah!

PSALM 104 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Bless, O my being, the* LORD. This psalm shares the formula of self-exhortation used at the beginning of Psalm 103, but that formula seems even more appropriate for this poem, which is not a meditation on God's providential justice but rather an ecstatic celebration of God's dominion over the vast panorama of creation.

Grandeur and glory You don. The first two nouns in the translation emulate the strong alliteration of the Hebrew *hod wehadar*. These terms refer to the trappings of majesty, but it will immediately become clear in the next line that God's royal robes and chariot are not the stuff of earthly majesty but the elements of the natural world.

2. *Wrapped in light.* The Hebrew actually uses an active participle ("wrapping"), and this inaugurates an unusual formal pattern in which God is represented in a whole chain of present participles without pronouns. The poet imagines the presence of divinity in the world as a dynamic series of

actions—wrapping, stretching out, setting, making, walking, and so forth. This translation seeks to reproduce some of that participial activity, though the necessities of readable English have led to the introduction of at least a few pronouns and actual verbs (for example, in verse 3c, "He goes on the wings of the wind" instead of the literal "going on the wings of the wind").

3. *Setting beams for His lofts in the waters.* The modern reader may be puzzled as to why the divine builder should set beams in water, but the cosmological image would have been transparent to the ancient audience. Above the vault (*raqiʿa*) of the heavens are the upper waters (see Genesis 1), where God builds His "lofts" or "upper chambers."

making His chariot the clouds. One of God's epithets is "rider on the clouds." The image is borrowed from Canaanite mythology.

6. *With the deep You covered it like a garment.* This evocation of the waters of the primordial abyss (*tehom*) covering all of the dry land refers in all likelihood not to the Flood story (though that remains a possibility or perhaps rather a superimposed image) but to creation itself. One can see that in this particular psalm the idea drawn from Canaanite mythology of a cosmogonic conquest of the sea god or sea monster has been domesticated in monotheistic terms. A primordial engulfing of the land by the sea is envisaged, but without personification or mythic imagery. God is the agent controlling the waters, and His "blast" (or "rebuke") drives the waters back into their appointed bed. Indeed, Leviathan, the sea monster, appears in this poem as nothing more than a tame aquatic pet (verse 26) among the other manifold creatures of the sea.

10. *You let loose the springs in freshets.* Against the potentially destructive waters of the sea, now driven back to their appointed place beyond the shore, God releases on land powerful streams of fresh water to sustain the life of all creatures.

11. *the wild asses slake their thirst.* As in the Voice from the Whirlwind in Job, the wild ass, resistant to all domestication, is an image of unfettered freedom. God's sustenance of His creatures extends to the wild and the tame, to beast and man (again, as in Job).

12. *Above them the fowl of the heavens dwell.* That is, up above all the beasts of the field. The fowl are said to "dwell" because their realm is the sky,

though perhaps one might infer that the force of the verb in context could be something like "glide."

their voice. The Masoretic Text has merely "voice" (*qol*), but one manuscript and some ancient versions read "their voice" (*qolam*).

13. *He waters mountains from His lofts*. The reference of course is to rain, coming down from the celestial chambers above the vault of the heavens. The rain is the complement to the freshets bubbling up from the earth.

from the fruit of Your works. This is odd as a designation for rain, but the various proposed emendations are contorted, without warrant in the manuscripts or ancient versions.

15. *to make faces shine brighter than oil*. Most translators understand the letter *mem* that is prefixed to *shemen*, "oil," as a causative, somehow inferring that oil makes the face brighten. It may be more plausible to construe the *mem* as a *mem* of comparison ("than")—the faces shine brighter than olive oil seen in sunlight.

17–18. *stork . . . / gazelles / . . . badgers*. The sprawling zoological panorama, all of it under God's providential care, again has analogies in the Voice from the Whirlwind in Job.

19. *the sun—He appointed its setting*. The Masoretic Text seems to say, "The sun knew its setting," a less forceful formulation that requires a new subject for the verb in this second verset. By simply revocalizing *yadaʿ*, "knew," as *yidaʿ*, "appointed," a reading warranted by one version of the Septuagint, the line makes better sense theologically and poetically.

20. *You bring down darkness and it turns to night*. Darkness here is not a mythological realm of terrors but part of the diurnal cycle controlled by God.

21. *The lions roar for prey*. The idea that God provides for even the fiercest of predatory beasts is again one that is prominent in the Voice from the Whirlwind. But, as scholarship has abundantly documented, this line, like several others in the psalm, sounds quite close to a line from the fourteenth-century B.C.E. hymn to the sun associated with the Pharaoh Akhnaton that was found at Amarna. Because poetry in all eras works through allusion, it is hardly necessary to understand this poem as an "adaptation" of Akhnaton's hymn. The Hebrew poet may well have borrowed phrases from it, or from a Canaanite intermediary, but in the psalm there is no sun god. On the

contrary, the sun and the moon and the stars and the winds of the heavens are all God's instruments.

23. *Man goes out.* This is a beautifully imagined diurnal cycle of seeking sustenance. The hunting lion returns to its lair at daybreak, and man then goes out to labor until evening.

24. *How many Your deeds.* With these words, the poet launches on a grand summation of the great hymn to God as master of all creation that he has produced.

riches. This translation follows the King James Version. The Hebrew *qinyanim* might mean "creations" because the verb that is cognate to it occasionally means "to create." That sense sounds awkward here, and the word also means "acquisitions"—hence "riches."

25. *This sea great and wide.* As above, this is a postmythological sea, very much part of the map of creation.

where creatures beyond number stir. Literally, "where there are stirring creatures beyond number." The term *remes* is part of the vocabulary of the Priestly Creation story. This poem reads distinctly like a poetic free improvisation on themes from the Creation story at the beginning of Genesis, rendered from the perspective of a human observer rather than through the magisterial omniscience of the narrator in Genesis.

26. *There the ships go.* The sea teems with creatures but also with the works of human civilization. Thus Leviathan can be reduced to a plaything.

29. *their breath.* The Hebrew term equally means "spirit," but the background of Genesis argues for the sense of "breath" because it is God's breath there that brings life into being. The Septuagint reads "Your breath." Either reading makes sense.

31. *May the LORD's glory be forever.* The psalm now concludes with a kind of doxology. This is the explicit meaning of "blessing" the LORD.

33. *while I breathe.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "as long as I [am]."

35. *Let offenders vanish.* This reference to evildoers introduces an issue of transgression and justice nowhere in evidence in the body of the poem. It may be, as is the case with the concluding lines of quite a few psalms, an editorially added gesture of piety.

PSALM 105

[1]Acclaim the LORD, call out His name,
make His deeds known among the peoples.
[2]Sing to Him, hymn to Him,
speak of all His wonders.
[3]Revel in His holy name.
Let the heart of the LORD's seekers rejoice.
[4]Inquire of the LORD and His strength,
seek His presence always.
[5]Recall the wonders that He did,
His portents and the judgments He issued,
[6]O seed of Abraham His servant,
sons of Jacob, His chosen ones.
[7]He is the LORD our God—
through all the earth, His judgments.
[8]He recalls His pact forever—
the word He ordained for a thousand
generations—
[9]which He sealed with Abraham,
and His vow to Isaac,
[10]and He set it for Jacob as a statute,

for Israel an eternal pact,
[11]saying,
“To you will I give the land of Canaan
as the plot of your estate,”
[12]when they were a handful of men,
but a few, and sojourners there.
[13]And they went about from nation to nation,
from one kingdom to another people.
[14]He allowed no man to oppress them
and warned kings on their account:
[15]“Touch not My anointed ones,
and to My prophets do no harm.”
[16]And He called forth famine over the land,
every staff of bread He broke.
[17]He sent a man before them—
as a slave was Joseph sold.
[18]They tortured his legs with shackles,
his neck was put in iron,
[19]until the time of his word had come,
the LORD’s utterance that purged him.
[20]The king sent and loosed his shackles,
the ruler of peoples set him free,
[21]made him master of his house
and ruler of all his possessions,
[22]to admonish his princes as he desired
and to teach wisdom to his elders.

[23]And Israel came to Egypt,
Jacob sojourned in the land of Ham.
[24]And He made His people very fruitful,
made them more numerous than their foes.
[25]He changed their heart to hate His people,
to lay plots against His servants.
[26]He sent Moses his servant,
Aaron, whom He had chosen.
[27]They set among them the words of His signs,
His portents in the land of Ham.
[28]He sent darkness, and it grew dark,
yet they did not keep His word.
[29]He turned their waters to blood
and made their fish die.
[30]Their land swarmed with frogs,
into the chambers of their kings.
[31]He spoke, and the swarm did come,
lice in all their region.
[32]He turned their rains into hail,
tongues of fire in their land.
[33]And He struck their vines and their fig trees
and shattered the trees of their region.
[34]He spoke, and the locust came,
grasshoppers without number.
[35]And they ate all the grass in their land
they ate up the fruit of their soil.

[36]And He struck down each firstborn in their land,
the first yield of all their manhood.
[37]And He brought them out with silver and gold,
and none in His tribes did falter.
[38]Egypt rejoiced when they went out,
for their fear had fallen upon them.
[39]He spread a cloud as a curtain
and fire to light up the night.
[40]They asked, and He brought the quail,
and with bread from the heavens He sated them.
[41]He opened the rock, and water flowed,
it went forth in parched land as a stream.
[42]For He recalled His holy word
with Abraham His servant.
[43]And He brought out His people in joy,
in glad song His chosen ones.
[44]And He gave them the lands of nations,
they took hold of the wealth of peoples,
[45]so that they should keep His statutes,
and His teachings they should observe.
Hallelujah!

PSALM 105 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Acclaim the LORD . . . / make His deeds known.* The initial formulas of this psalm reflect a kinship with the psalms of thanksgiving, but the "deeds" (or "feats") referred to are God's wondrous acts in history on behalf of Israel, as the next few lines make clear. This is, then, a historical psalm, reviewing in versified summary (perhaps as part of a temple ritual) the following sequence of events familiar from Genesis and Exodus: the covenantal promise to the patriarchs (verses 6–15); Joseph's descent into Egypt and his eventually triumphant career there (verses 16–23); the enslavement of the Hebrews, the mission of Moses and Aaron, and the plagues (verses 24–36); the Exodus and God's providence to Israel in the wilderness (verses 37–43); and the inheritance of the promised land (verses 44–45). The length of the psalm is dictated by the necessity to cover all this narrative material. Even more than in the analogous Psalm 78, the poetry does not go much beyond a simple versification of known events.

5. *the wonders that He did.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "His wonders that He did."

the judgments He issued. Literally, "the judgments of His mouth."

6. *O seed of Abraham His servant.* This is almost certainly a vocative, as it is translated here. The whole national community of Israel is exhorted to contemplate and celebrate God's great deeds on behalf of the nation.

11. *saying.* This formulaic term for the introduction of direct speech is used here as a preface to the quotation of God's words that convey the essence of His pact with the patriarchs—the promise of the promised land.

12. *when they were a handful of men.* The unusual phrase used here, *metey mispar*, is a quotation of Jacob's words to his sons in Genesis 34:30 about the vulnerable smallness of his clan as sojourners in the land of Canaan.

14. *He allowed no man to oppress them / and warned kings on their account.* The most likely reference is to the three sister-wife stories (Genesis 12, 20, and 26). The mention in the previous verse of "nation to nation" and "from one kingdom to another people" would refer to Egypt and Gerar, where Abraham and then Isaac went in a time of famine. "Anointed ones" in the next verse then conflates the terminology of the later monarchy with the idea of the patriarchs as God's elected ones.

16. *every staff of bread.* Some scholars think this refers to a pole on which the round, flat loaves of bread were spooled.

18. *his neck was put in iron.* Literally, "his neck came into iron." The Hebrew *nefesh* refers here to the neck (a complementary parallel to the shackled feet) and certainly does not mean "soul."

19. *the time of his word.* The formulation is somewhat crabbed, but this has to mean the prophecy (through the dream-vision) of Joseph's future greatness.

the LORD's utterance that purged him. The translation follows the received text, though the verb used in it is cryptic. The idea seems to be that God's word or promise now exonerates Joseph of the crime of which he had been accused.

20. *shackles.* This is merely implied in the Hebrew.

22. *to admonish.* The translation reads, with the Septuagint, *leyaser* instead of the Masoretic *le'esor*, "to bind." The sense of "bind" is possible (as a counterpoint to Joseph's having been loosed from his shackles), but "admonish" is a much more plausible parallel to "teach wisdom."

24. *very fruitful, / . . . more numerous.* This is a citation of Exodus 1:7.

27. *the words of His signs.* This is a literal representation of the Hebrew, the idea being that the signs are not just spectacles but bear a message. "Signs" and "portents" are key terms in the narrative of the mission of Moses and Aaron in Egypt.

28. *darkness.* The recapitulation of the Plagues narrative does not entirely follow the order of the story in Exodus. It begins here with the ninth plague, then goes back to the first, second, fourth, and third, the seventh, the eighth, and the tenth. The blight of the cattle and the epidemic of burning rash are not mentioned in this version.

40. *They asked.* The received text here has "he asked," but the letter *waw* at the end of the verb, which would make it a plural, in all likelihood was inadvertently dropped in scribal copying because the next word in the text also begins with a *waw*.

43. *in joy, / in glad song.* This could refer to the triumphant Song of the Sea (Exodus 15), even though the stories of the quail and the water from the rock

follow it in Exodus. Its position here might be because it is a grand summary of the story of the Exodus.

44. *He gave them the lands of nations.* The verse narrative now leaps forward to the conquest of the promised land, skipping the Sinai epiphany, for reasons that remain unclear.

the wealth of peoples. The literal sense of the Hebrew *ʿamal* is "toil," wealth being the product of the toil.

45. *so that they should keep His statutes.* The psalm concludes on a didactic, perhaps Deuteronomistic, note. The people's inheritance of the land, the fulfillment of the promise first made to Abraham, is not simply to possess political sovereignty over territory but to observe God's statutes, which is Israel's part in the covenantal agreement.

PSALM 106

[1]Hallelujah!
Acclaim the LORD, for He is good,
for His kindness is forever.
[2]Who can utter the LORD's mighty acts,
can make heard all His praise?
[3]Happy those who keep justice,
who do righteousness at all times.
[4]Recall me, O LORD, when You favor Your people,
mark me for Your rescue,
[5]to see the good of Your chosen ones,
to rejoice in the joy of Your nation,
to revel with Your estate.
[6]We offended like our fathers,
we wronged, we did evil.
[7]Our fathers in Egypt
did not grasp Your wonders.
They did not call to mind Your many kindnesses
and rebelled by the sea, at the Sea of Reeds.
[8]Yet He rescued them for His name's sake,
to make known His might.

[9]He blasted the Sea of Reeds, and it dried up,
and He led them through the deep as through
wilderness.
[10]And He rescued them from the hand of the hostile
and redeemed them from the hand of the
enemy.
[11]And the waters covered their foes,
not one of them remained.
[12]And they trusted His words,
they sang His praise.
[13]Quickly they forgot His deeds,
they did not await His counsel.
[14]And they felt a sharp craving in the wilderness,
they put God to the test in the wasteland.
[15]And He gave them what they had asked,
sent food down their throats.
[16]And they were jealous of Moses in the camp,
of Aaron, the LORD's holy one.
[17]The earth opened and swallowed Dothan
and covered Abiram's band.
[18]And fire burned through their band,
flame consumed the wicked.
[19]They made a calf at Horeb
and bowed to a molten image.
[20]And they exchanged their glory
for the image of a grass-eating bull.

[21]They forgot the God their rescuer,
Who did great things in Egypt,
[22]wonders in the land of Ham,
fearsome deeds at the Sea of Reeds.
[23]And He would have wiped them out
were it not for Moses His chosen one—
he stood in the breach before Him
to turn back His wrath from destruction.
[24]And they despised the land of desires,
they did not trust His word.
[25]And they muttered in their tents,
they did not heed the voice of the LORD.
[26]And He raised His hand against them,
to make them fall in the wilderness,
[27]to disperse their seed among the nations,
to scatter them among the lands.
[28]And they clung to Baal Peor
and ate sacrifices to the dead.
[29]And they provoked Him through their acts,
and the scourge broke out among them.
[30]And Phineas stood and prayed,
and the scourge was held back
[31]and it was counted for him as merit,
generation to generation forever.
[32]And they caused fury over the waters of Meribah,
and it went badly for Moses because of them,

[33]for they rebelled against him,
and he pronounced rash things with his lips.
[34]They did not destroy the peoples
as the LORD had said to them.
[35]And they mingled with the nations
and learned their deeds.
[36]And they worshipped their idols,
which became a snare to them.
[37]And they sacrificed their sons
and their daughters to the demons.
[38]And they shed innocent blood,
the blood of their sons and their daughters
when they sacrificed to Canaan's idols,
and the land was polluted with bloodguilt.
[39]And they were defiled through their deeds
and went whoring through their actions.
[40]And the LORD's wrath blazed against His people,
and He abhorred His estate,
[41]and gave them into the hand of nations,
their haters ruled over them.
[42]And their enemies oppressed them,
and they were subject to their power.
[43]Many times did He save them,
and they rebelled against His counsel
and were brought low through their misdeeds.
[44]And He saw when they were in straits,

when He heard their song of prayer.
45 And He recalled for them His pact,
relented through his many kindnesses.
46 And He granted them mercy
in the eyes of all their captors.
47 Rescue us, LORD our God
and gather us from the nations
to acclaim Your holy name
and to glory in Your praise.

48 Blessed is the LORD God of Israel forever and ever. And all the people say: Amen, hallelujah!

PSALM 106 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Who can utter the LORD's mighty acts*. This invocation of God's "mighty acts" (*gevurot*) in the second line of the poem signals its status as a historical psalm. Once again, the large historical picture leads to a relatively lengthy psalm; and once again, the rehearsal in poetry of familiar events recorded in the Torah produces a rather perfunctory order of poetry. It requires little commentary here, beyond identification of the episodes from the Torah alluded to and observations on a couple of places where the text looks doubtful. Some scholars have characterized this psalm as a companion piece to Psalm 105, perhaps even publicly chanted together with it. Although that remains a possibility, these two historical psalms may simply have been set in sequence in the collection by the editors because of the generic connection between them. In any case, they present antithetical views of the nation's history. Psalm 105 is a celebration of God's providential care of Israel, with

no mention of the people's transgressions. Psalm 106, beginning with verse 6, is an unrelenting account of Israel's rebellious behavior, from the Exodus itself through the wilderness to its later collective life in its national territory. The notion of Israel's betrayal of the covenant unleashing divine retribution may well be colored by Deuteronomy, and there are indications in the psalm of an exilic setting (see, for example, verse 46: "And He granted them mercy / in the eyes of all their captors").

3. *Happy those who keep justice.* This platitude of the Wisdom psalms proves to have, as the psalm unfolds, a particular historical context. It will become clear that the nation as a whole has failed to keep justice and has suffered the consequences.

4. *Recall me, O LORD, when You favor Your people.* It will emerge that the psalmist in exile is specifically awaiting the moment when God will again favor His people and bring them back to their land. That consummation is in all likelihood what is implied in the general language of verse 5.

7. *rebelled by the sea.* In Exodus 14:11, the fearful people at the shore of the Sea of Reeds complain to Moses, "Was it for lack of graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the wilderness?"

8. *Yet He rescued them.* As elsewhere, the oscillation between second person and third person is common in biblical usage.

9. *He blasted the Sea of Reeds.* This image may be poetic license: in the account in Exodus, the sea parts when Moses raises his staff.

11. *not one of them remained.* This clause is a quotation of Exodus 14:28.

12. *they sang His praise.* The poet obviously has in mind the Song of the Sea, Exodus 15.

14. *felt a sharp craving.* The literal sense is "craved a craving." The line refers to the story told in Numbers 11, where this same phrase is used.

15. *sent food down their throats.* The Masoretic Text reads *razon*, "thinness" (or "famine"), which can be justified only by exegetical contortion. This translation follows the Septuagint and the Syriac, which read instead *mazon*, "food." The reference is to the quail sent to the Hebrews by God, which Moses says they will eat "till it comes out of your noses and becomes a loathsome thing to you" (Numbers 11:20).

16. *And they were jealous of Moses.* The incident in view is the double rebellion against Moses reported in Numbers 16.

19. *They made a calf at Horeb.* The poet clearly does not feel obliged to follow the order of events as they occur in the text of the Torah. He now backtracks to the episode of the Golden Calf, Exodus 32.

20. *their glory.* This term in context refers to God.

for the image of a grass-eating bull. This mocking characterization of the idol worshipped by Israel is much in the spirit of the polemic against idolatry in Deutero-Isaiah. The term translated as "bull," *shor*, can equally mean "ox," but the cultic context argues for the sense of bull because images of bulls were objects of worship.

21–22. *did great things in Egypt, / wonders in the land of Ham, /fearsome deeds at the Sea of Reeds.* The perfunctory character of the poetry is especially evident in the stringing together of formulaic phrases here.

23. *he stood in the breach.* Moses's intercession on behalf of Israel is reported in Exodus 32:11–14.

24. *the land of desires.* The Hebrew has "desire" in the singular, but in English that might have an erotic connotation. The despising of the promised land refers to the incident of the ten fainthearted spies sent to scout out the land in Numbers 13.

26. *to make them fall in the wilderness.* This phrase is an approximate quotation of Numbers 14:29.

27. *to disperse their seed among the nations.* The Masoretic Text reads, "to make their seed fall" (*lehapil*), which looks suspiciously like an inadvertent scribal repetition of *lehapil* near the end of the previous verse. This translation reads, with the Septuagint, *lehafits*, "to disperse," a difference of just one consonant.

28. *Baal Peor.* This episode of orgiastic idolatry is recounted in Numbers 25, where the zealous priest Phineas (verse 30) slaughters the cultic traitors, an act not mentioned here.

32. *the waters of Meribah.* This incident of rebellion moves back to Exodus 17, with a matching episode in Numbers 20.

and it went badly for Moses because of them. It was because of Moses's actions in the second episode of bringing water from the rock that he was condemned never to enter the promised land.

33. *and he pronounced rash things with his lips.* The Hebrew merely says, "he pronounced with his lips," but the most reasonable way to make sense of this cryptic clause is to assume that a rash utterance is implied. This line may reflect an interpretive inference from what is succinctly stated in the story in Numbers 20: the rash things would be Moses's words to the people. "Shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?" (Numbers 20:10), implying that it is Moses and Aaron rather than God who will make the water flow from the rock.

34. *They did not destroy the peoples.* This idea has a strong Deuteronomistic tinge: Israel was enjoined to wipe out the idolatrous peoples of the land; instead, it mingled with them and adopted their idolatrous practices.

37. *they sacrificed their sons.* Child sacrifice is strategically invoked as the paradigmatic abomination of the Canaanite idolators.

40. *His estate.* This is an epithet not for the land but for God's people. Compare verse 5.

44. *He saw when they were in straits, /when He heard their song of prayer.* The scenario of the poem is rebellion and betrayal of the covenant followed by defeat and exile, which then lead to contrition and a sincere turning to God, Who is then moved to relent.

46. *granted them mercy /in the eyes of all their captors.* "In the eyes of" is literally "before." This could be a reference to the Persian emperor Cyrus, who authorized the return of the Babylonian exiles to Zion, although that identification is not entirely certain.

47. *Rescue us . . . / gather us from the nations.* The language used here clearly has in view a return from exile. The purpose of the return, as the next line of verse indicates, is again to be able to celebrate God's greatness (an echo of the opening lines of the poem) in the place He has chosen.

48. *Blessed is the* LORD. This verse is not part of the psalm proper but is rather a doxology that marks the conclusion of the fourth book of Psalms.

PSALM 107

[1]Acclaim the LORD, for He is good,
for His kindness is forever.
[2]Let the LORD's redeemed ones say,
whom he redeemed from the hand of the foe,
[3]and gathered them from the lands,
from east and west, from north and south.
[4]They wandered in wilderness, wasteland,
found no road to a settled town,
[5]hungry, thirsty, too,
their life-breath failed within them.
[6]And they cried to the LORD from their straits,
from their distress He saved them.
[7]And He led them on a straight road
to go to a settled town.
[8]Let them acclaim to the LORD His kindness
and His wonders to humankind.
[9]For He sated the thirsting throat
and the hungry throat He filled with good—
[10]dwellers in dark and death's shadow,
prisoners of tormenting iron.

[11]For they rebelled against God's sayings,
the Most High's counsel they despised.
[12]And He brought their heart low in troubles.
They stumbled with none to help.
[13]And they cried to the LORD from their straits,
from their distress He rescued them.
[14]He brought them out from the dark and death's shadow
and their bonds He sundered.
[15]Let them acclaim to the LORD His kindness
and His wonders to humankind.
[16]For He shattered the doors of bronze
and the iron bars He hacked off.
[17]Fools because of their sinful way,
because of their misdeeds they were afflicted.
[18]All food their throat rejected,
they came to the gates of death.
[19]And they cried to the LORD from their straits,
from their distress He rescued them.
[20]He sent forth His word and healed them,
and delivered them from their pit.
[21]Let them acclaim to the LORD His kindness,
and His wonders to humankind,
[22]and offer thanksgiving sacrifices
and recount His deeds in glad song.
[23] Those who go down to the sea in ships,

who do tasks in the mighty waters,
[24]it is they who have seen the deeds of the LORD,
and His wonders in the deep.
[25]He speaks and raises the storm win
and it makes the waves loom high.
[26]They go up to the heavens, come down to the depths,
their life-breath in hardship grows faint.
[27]They reel and sway like a drunkard,
all their wisdom is swallowed up.
[28]And they cry to the LORD from their straits
from their distress He brings them out.
[29]He turns the storm into silence,
and its waves are stilled,
[30]and they rejoice that these have grown quiet,
and He leads them to their bourn.
[31]Let them acclaim to the LORD His kindness
and His wonders to humankind.
[32]Let them exalt Him in the people's assembly
and in the session of elders praise Him.
[33]He turns rivers into wilderness
and springs of water into thirsty ground,
[34]fruitful land into salt flats,
because of the evil of those who dwell there.
[35]He turns wilderness to pools of water,
and parched land to springs of water,

[36]and settles there the hungry,
    firmly founds a settled town.
[37]And they sow fields and they plant vineyards,
    which produce a fruitful yield.
[38]And He blesses them and they multiply greatly,
    and their beasts He does not let dwindle.
[40]He pours scorn upon the princes,
    and makes them wander in trackless wastes.
[39]And they dwindle and are bowed down,
    from harsh oppression and sorrow.
[41]And He raises the needy from affliction,
    and increases his clans like flocks.
[42]Let the upright see and rejoice,
    and all wickedness shut its mouth.
[43]He who is wise will watch these
    and take to heart the LORD's kindnesses.

PSALM 107 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Acclaim.* The first word of this psalm, which has no superscription, is *hodu*, "acclaim" or "give thanks," announcing this as a thanksgiving psalm. In this instance, as the poem unfolds, it is clear that the thanksgiving is collective.

2. *redeemed ones.* The term is not theological but political: these are people who have been redeemed from captivity or from dangerous enemies, "from the hand of the foe."

3. *and gathered them from the lands.* The language suggests some sort of return from exile, and this psalm could conceivably have been recited at a public ceremony of thanksgiving during the return to Zion in the sixth century B.C.E. Some scholars, however, date the text earlier.

south. The received text says *umiyam*, "and from the sea," which would be a second occurrence of west as a direction here. It is preferable to read *umiyamin* (adding just one consonant), "and from the south."

6. *And they cried to the LORD from their straits.* This is the first of two recurring refrains in the poem, a device appropriate for a liturgical text chanted in a public celebration.

8. *Let them acclaim to the LORD His kindness.* This is the second refrain, which is repeated verbatim further on and also picks up phrases from the first line of the psalm.

10. *dwellers in dark and death's shadow.* The second verset of this line speaks of prisoners, so it is plausible, as several interpreters have suggested, that the concrete image is a dark, windowless, dungeon-like place of captivity.

tormenting iron. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "torment and iron," but this translation assumes it is a hendiadys and thus renders the first of the two nouns as a participle.

14. *He brought them out from the dark.* This line is a phrase-by-phrase answer to the condition of distress represented in verse 10.

16. *the doors of bronze /. . . the iron bars.* These heavy bolted doors are what lock up the prisoners in their dark dungeon.

17. *Fools because of their sinful way.* The translation follows the wording of the received text, but the Hebrew looks problematic, with the word for "fools," *ʾewilim*, especially doubtful.

18. *All food their throat rejected.* In their desperate plight, perhaps as prisoners, these miserable people lose all appetite and retch at the thought of food, so that they are on the verge of dying.

20. *from their pit.* The form of the Hebrew noun is plural and also odd. Some scholars emend the word as it stands, *mishe*ḥ*itotam,* to *mishaḥat ḥayatam*, "from the Pit their life," which reads more smoothly. In any case, the reference to near death is not in doubt.

22. *offer thanksgiving sacrifices /. . . recount . . . in glad song.* This verse provides an explicit reference to the Temple ritual that this psalm would have accompanied.

23. *Those who go down to the sea in ships.* These famous lines (Melville recalls them in *Moby-Dick*) about the dangers besetting mariners are only loosely connected with the imagery of captives in foreign lands that has been the center of the poem until this point. Perhaps the sailors belong here as a different but related category of people who have been at death's door but are saved by God. It should be noted that in the Hebrew text, verses 21–26 are marked in the right margin with an inverted letter *nun*, a device that seems to have been used by the ancient scribes to indicate some questioning of the text or even a virtual erasure of it. Although the unit about sea travel continues through verse 30, this scribal indication makes one wonder whether the whole section might have been regarded as a different poem that was somehow inserted into our psalm.

27. *They reel and sway like a drunkard, / all their wisdom is swallowed up.* This line and some of the phrases before and after are put to remarkable use by the twelfth-century Hebrew poet Judah HaLevi in his brilliant sea poems, a kind of poetic chronicle of his voyage from Spain toward the Land of Israel. The biblical word for "wisdom" also means something close to "craft"; thus, the idea here is that all the technical expertise of the sailors is baffled or made futile by the fury of the storm.

30. *their bourn.* This rather antiquated English term reflects a high-poetic locution for "destination" in the Hebrew, which is literally "the realm of their desire."

33. *He turns rivers into wilderness.* God's fearsome powers of transformation work in both directions: He can turn desolation into lush fecundity (verses 35–37), and He can also turn fruitful places into arid desert.

40. *He pours scorn upon the princes.* This verse also shows an inverted *nun* at its right margin, and in this instance that device clearly indicates a glitch in the text. Verse 39 ("And they dwindle and are bowed down") makes no sense immediately after verse 38, which is taken up with the blessings of those redeemed by God. The inverted *nun* is a recognition that this verse is out of place in the received text. If we place it before verse 39 rather than after it,

the whole sequence here becomes perfectly coherent. It is worth noting that this whole clause also appears almost verbatim in Job 12:21a.

39. *they dwindle.* This indication is in pointed contrast to the condition of those favored by God, whose very cattle are not allowed to dwindle.

41. *increases his clans like flocks.* The image of the dwindling of the wicked is sandwiched on both sides with images of the increase of the righteous.

PSALM 108

[1]A song, a David psalm.
[2]My heart is firm, O God.
Let me sing and hymn
with my inward being, too.
[3]Awake, O lute and lyre.
I would waken the dawn.
[4]Let me acclaim You among the peoples, LORD.
Let me hymn You among the nations.
[5]For Your kindness is great over the heavens,
and Your steadfast truth to the skies.
[6]Loom over the heavens, O God.
Over all the earth Your glory,
[7]that Your beloved ones be saved,
rescue with Your right hand, answer me.
[8]God once spoke in His holiness:
"Let Me exult and share out Shechem,
and the valley of Succoth I shall measure.
[9]Mine is Gilead, Mine Manasseh,
and Ephraim My foremost stronghold,
Judah My scepter.

[10]Moab is My washbasin,
upon Edom I fling My sandal,
over Philistia I shout exultant."
[11]Who will lead me to the fortified town,
who will guide me to Edom?
[12]Have You not, O God, abandoned us?
You do not sally forth, God, with our armies.
[13]Give us help against the foe
when rescue by man is in vain.
[14]Through God we shall gather strength,
and He will stamp out our foes.

PSALM 108 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *My heart is firm, O God.* From these initial words of the poem proper to the very end, this text is a stitching together of two previous psalms in the collection. Verses 2–6 here are virtually identical, with only minor variations, to Psalm 57:8–12. Verses 7–14 similarly reproduce Psalm 60:6–14. Psalm 57 is an individual supplication, and Psalm 60 is a national supplication. It remains unclear why sections of both poems should have been spliced together to make the present psalm. Some scholars have speculated, without much evidence, that the composite psalm was intended to serve a new ritual purpose. It is also distinctly possible that the joining of texts was the result of an inadvertency or confusion in the ancient editorial process. Readers are referred to the comments on the relevant verses in Psalm 57 and Psalm 60 for elucidation of the language and imagery. Some brief notes on points of divergence from the duplicated text follow here.

with my inward being. The Masoretic Text has *kevodi*, "my glory," instead of which this translation reads *keveidi*, literally, "my liver." Psalm 57 also has

kevodi, but because the placement of the term is different there, it seemed preferable to read it, following one ancient manuscript, as *kinori*, "my lyre."

5. *great over the heavens.* Psalm 57 has a different preposition, "to the heavens" (*ʿad* instead of *meʿal*, as here).

10. *I shout exultant.* Psalm 60 at this point has a feminine imperative form of the verb rather than the first-person singular. In fact, the imperative does not make sense in context, and the translation of Psalm 60 corrected the verb to read as it does here.

PSALM 109

[1]For the lead player, a David psalm.
God of my praise, do not be silent.
[2]For the wicked's mouth, the mouth of deceit,
has opened against me,
they spoke to me with lying tongue.
[3]And words of hatred swarmed round me—
they battle me for no cause.
[4]In return for my love they accuse me,
though my prayer is for them.
[5]And they offer me evil in return for good
and hatred in return for my love:
[6] "Appoint a wicked man over him,
let an accuser stand at his right.
[7] When he is judged, let him come out guilty,
and his prayer be an offense.
[8] Let his days be few,
may another man take his post.
[9]May his children become orphans
and his wife a widow.
[10] May his children wander and beg,

driven out from the ruins of their homes.
[11]May the lender snare all that he has
and may strangers plunder his wealth.
[12]May no one extend to him kindness
and no one pity his orphans.
[13] May his offspring be cut off,
in the next generation his name wiped out.
[14] May the wrong of his fathers be recalled by the LORD
and his mother's offense not be wiped out.
[15]Let these be ever before the LORD,
that He cut off from the earth their name.
[16]Because he did not remember to do kindness
and pursued the poor and the needy,
the heartsore, to put him to death.
[17]He loved a curse, may it come upon him,
he desired not blessing—may it stay far from him.
[18]He donned curse as his garb—
may it enter his innards like water
and like oil in his bones.
[19]May it be like a garment he wraps round him
and like a belt he girds at all times."
[20]This be the plight of my accusers from the LORD,
and those who speak against my life.
[21]And You, O LORD, Master,

act on my behalf for the sake of Your name,
for Your kindness is good. O save me!
[22]For poor and needy am I,
and my heart is pierced within me.
[23]Like a lengthening shadow I go off,
I am shaken away like the locust.
[24]My knees falter from fasting
and my flesh is stripped of fat.
[25]As for me, I become a reproach to them.
They see me, they shake their heads.
[26]Help me, O LORD, my God
Rescue me as befits Your kindness,
[27]that they may know that Your hand it is,
it is You, O LORD, Who did it.
[28]Let them curse, and You, You will bless.
They will rise and be shamed, and Your servant
will rejoice.
[29]Let my accusers don disgrace,
and let them wrap round like a robe their shame.
[30]I highly acclaim the LORD with my mouth,
and in the midst of the many I praise Him,
[31]for He stands at the needy's right hand
to rescue him from his condemners.

PSALM 109 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *God of my praise, do not be silent.* This opening formula aligns this text with the psalms of supplication. What is unusual about this particular supplication is that the long central section of the psalm, verses 6–19, is, in the most persuasive reading, an extensive quotation of the venomous words of accusation and imprecation that the speaker's accusers pronounce against him.

2. *the wicked's mouth, the mouth of deceit.* The attention here at the beginning to malicious speech prepares us for the words of calumny that follow. Some scholars, in the interest of neatly parallel statement, prefer to revocalize *rashaʿ*, "wicked," as *reshaʿ*, "wickedness."

4. *though my prayer is for them.* The literal sense of the received text is "and I am prayer." The consensus of Hebrew tradition has understood this to mean something like "and I am all prayer." The ancient Syriac version may have worked from a Hebrew text that read *tefilati lahem*, "my prayer is for them." That reading would be more cogent as a parallel to "in return for my love" in the first verset.

6. *Appoint a wicked man over him.* These words inaugurate the hostile speech of the accusers. A clue to the fact that the speaker is the object of the curse is that the reviled man is referred to throughout in the singular, whereas the plural is used for his accusers. Their speech includes both scathing curses against the man and his family and specific indications that they want to frame a case against him in a court of law. The term "accuser," *satan*, which is used as a verb in verse 4 and recurs in the plural at the end of this speech in verse 20 and again in verse 29, has a juridical connotation, as it does in the frame story of Job, where it designates Job's accuser or adversary in the celestial assembly.

7. *and his prayer be an offense.* This is no doubt a malicious antithesis to the mention of benevolent prayer in verse 4.

8. *may another man take his post.* One may infer from these words that the speaker is some sort of official whom his enemies seek to disgrace and unseat through judicial proceedings.

10. *driven out from the ruins of their homes.* The Masoretic Text says, "they seek [bread?] from the ruins of their homes," which is a possible reading, though it sounds cryptic. The translation follows others in emending *wedarshu*, "they seek," to *wegorshu*, "are driven out," a reading shown in the Septuagint.

13. *his name.* The Masoretic Text reads "their name," but many Hebrew manuscripts as well as the Septuagint have the more likely singular possessive suffix.

14. *fathers . . . / mother's.* The biblical imagination tends to conceive human destiny in terms of the familial line. The accusers want the man's posterity to be cut off and presume that his forebears before him have accumulated a large account of transgressions that now deserves sweeping retribution.

15. *their name.* The plural is used here because of the reference to fathers and mother.

18. *enter his innards like water / and like oil in his bones.* It is obvious enough that when you drink water, it quickly goes down into the stomach. Oil in the bones may reflect a notion that oil consumed in food entered into the bone marrow.

20. *This be the plight of my accusers from the* LORD. The most plausible construction of these words is that they mark the end of the quoted speech of the accusers. The speaker now prays that all their vicious curses directed at him be turned against them. The phrase "from the LORD" refers to "plight" (or, more literally, "action"). It is God Who will carry out all these dire curses against the malicious men who pronounced them.

28. *Let them curse, and You, You will bless.* This reversal from negative intention to positive outcome complements the wish the speaker expresses in verse 20 that the curse be turned against the cursers. That wish is picked up again in the second verset of this line.

29. *Let my accusers don disgrace, / . . . wrap round like a robe their shame.* The image of dressing or enveloping oneself in shame answers the garment imagery of verses 18 and 19.

30. *acclaim the* LORD *. . . / in the midst of the many.* The verb "acclaim" (or "give thanks," *ʾodeh*) signals the conversion of the supplication at the end into a psalm of thanksgiving, as happens frequently elsewhere. The speaker in his

trust in God is persuaded that his prayer is already accomplished, for he understands it as a fixed attribute of God that “He stands at the needy’s right hand / to rescue him from his condemners.” The phrase “in the midst of the many” is one of several used by the psalmists to refer to the throng in the Temple where the thanksgiving celebrant is to praise God’s works.

PSALM 110

[1]A David psalm.
The LORD's utterance to my master:
"Sit at My right hand
till I make your enemies
a stool for your feet."
[2]Your mighty scepter
may the LORD send forth from Zion.
Hold sway over your enemies.
[3]Your people rally to battle
on the day your force assembles
on the holy mountains, from the womb of dawn,
yours is the dew of your youth.
[4]The LORD has sworn, He will not change heart.
"You are priest forever.
By my solemn word, my righteous king."
[5]The Master is at your right hand.
On the day of His wrath He smashes kings.
[6]He exacts judgment from the nations,
fills the valleys with corpses,
smashes heads across the great earth.

[7] From a brook on the way He drinks.
Therefore He lifts up His head.

PSALM 110 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *to my master.* Although many translations render this as "my LORD," with a capital *L*, the Hebrew clearly shows *ʾadoni*, with a first-person singular suffix, whereas the noun at the beginning of verse 5 reads *ʾadonai*, showing the plural suffix invariably used when the noun *ʾadon* is a designation for God. This is a royal psalm, and the speaker, by referring to the king as his master, would appear to be a court poet.

till I make your enemies / a stool for your feet. God's protection of the king against the nation's enemies is a prominent theme in most of the royal psalms. Some Egyptian murals actually depict an enthroned pharaoh with feet resting on the heads of kneeling captives.

3. *Your people rally to battle.* It is at this point that the language of this psalm begins to be cryptic, a problem that will persist to the end of the poem. The literal sense of the Hebrew here (just two words) is "your-people acts-of-volunteering." But the noun *ʿam*, "people," and the verbal root *n-d-b*, "to volunteer," "to act nobly," in conjunction are associated with volunteering to do battle, as in the Song of Deborah, Judges 5:9. So this translation assumes an ellipsis with that general sense here.

on the day your force assembles. The Hebrew says only "on the day of your force." Again, an ellipsis is assumed.

holy mountains. The Masoretic Text reads "holy majesties," *hadrey qodesh*, which sounds very odd in the Hebrew. But many manuscripts show *harerey qodesh*, "holy mountains," and the similar-looking letters *dalet* and *resh* are often switched in scribal transcription.

from the womb of dawn. The second of the two nouns here in the Masoretic Text, *mishḥar*, is doubtful in meaning. The translation follows the Septuagint in reading *mireḥem shaḥar*, "from the womb of dawn." A scribe may have inadvertently repeated the *mem* at the end of *reḥem* and at the

beginning of *shaḥar* as well (an instance of dittography). The image is evidently of an army sallying forth at daybreak.

yours is the dew of your youth. This somewhat mystifying phrase might refer to the fresh energy of a young king. Many manuscripts read "I gave you birth" instead of "your youth" (a difference only of vocalization), but this scarcely improves matters because the idea of giving birth to the king like (?) dew is puzzling.

4. *You are priest forever.* At least in the David story, there is some indication of combining the functions of king and priest, though later they would be clearly separated. Some interpreters imagine that this psalm actually refers to David.

my righteous king. This could be a proper noun, Melchizedek, or a punning reference to that name. Melchizedek is the king priest of Jerusalem who participates in Abraham's victory over the alliance of eastern kings in Genesis 14:18.

5. *On the day of His wrath He smashes kings.* In this celebration of the imagined military victory of the king, God appears as a warrior at the king's right hand, crushing the enemy.

6. *fills the valleys with corpses.* The cryptic Hebrew of the received text merely reads "filled with corpses" (*maleiʾ gewiyot*). Something is clearly wrong with the text. The translation, following a suggestion of two ancient Greek versions, reads *mileiʾ geiʾayot gewiyot*, "fills the valleys with corpses." The similarity of the Hebrew words for "valleys" and "corpses" may have led a scribe to skip the former in copying the text.

7. *From a brook on the way He drinks.* This is evidently an image of God as warrior pausing to drink during or after hot pursuit of the enemy.

PSALM 111

[1]Hallelujah.
I acclaim the LORD with full heartא
in the council of the upright and the assembly. ב
[2]Great are the deeds of the LORD, ג
discovered by all who desire them.ד
[3]Glory and grandeur His acts ה
and His bounty stands for all time.ו
[4]A remembrance He made of His wonders, ז
gracious and merciful the LORD.ח
[5]Sustenance He gives to those who fear Him, ט
He recalls forever His pact.י
[6]The power of His deeds He told His people, כ
to give them the nations' estate.ל
[7]His handiwork, truth and justice,מ
trustworthy all His precepts,נ
[8]Staunch for all time, forever,ס
fashioned in truth and right.ע
[9]Redemption He sent to His people, פ
forever commanded His pact.צ
Holy and fearsome His name.ק

[10]The beginning of wisdom—the fear of the LORD,
ר
good knowledge to all who perform it.ש
His praise stands for all time.ת

PSALM 111 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Hallelujah.* Although scholars often classify this as a psalm of thanksgiving, it is more accurate to call it a psalm of praise because it is a list of God's provident attributes rather than an expression of gratitude over a particular act of benevolence, such as being saved from a grave illness. In keeping with this recitation of divine attributes, the psalm is framed as an alphabetic acrostic (one of eight in the Psalter)—in all likelihood as an aid to memory, although it is possible that the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet were also thought of as a manifestation of comprehensiveness. This and the next psalm in sequence are short acrostics: instead of one line of poetry for each letter, each half line, or verset, begins with a different letter of the alphabet in sequence. (By way of contrast, Psalm 119 is a long acrostic, with eight lines of poetry for each letter of the alphabet.) Most of the lines begin with either a noun or an adjective exhibiting the appropriate alphabetical character in its initial letter, and this translation mirrors that syntactic "fronting." For example, in the Hebrew we have *Gedolim maʿsey* YHWH (*gimmel*, "Great are the deeds of the LORD"); *Derushim lekhol ḥeftseyhem* (*dalet*, "discovered by all who desire them"); *Hod wehadar poʿolo ʿheh* ("Glory and grandeur His acts").

the council of the upright and the assembly. The first term suggests an elite group, the second a larger convocation.

2. *who desire them.* The Masoretic Text reads "their desires." The translation revocalizes the word as *ḥafeitseyhem*, "those who desire them."

3. *His acts.* The Hebrew uses a singular.

6. *The power of His deeds He told His people.* The second verset of this line suggests that the "telling" consists of God's giving land to His people.

8. *right.* This word in the Hebrew, *yashar*, is vocalized as though it meant "upright," an adjectival form, but some manuscripts read, more plausibly, *yosher*, the noun "right."

10. *The beginning of wisdom—the fear of the* LORD. This biblical commonplace is a fitting end for this poem, which as a kind of doxology is little more than a versification of standard formulas about God's greatness and His kindness to His people.

PSALM 112

[1]Hallelujah.
Happy the man who fears the LORD.א
His commands he keenly desires.ב
[2]A great figure in the land his seed shall be, ג
the generation of the upright shall be blessed.ד
[3]Abundance and wealth in his home, ה
and his righteousness stands forever.ו
[4]Light dawns in darkness for the upright, ז
gracious and merciful and just.ח
[5]Good is the man who shows grace and lends, ט
he sustains his words with justice. י
[6]For he shall never stumble, כ
an eternal remembrance the just man shall be. ל
[7]From evil rumor he shall not fear. מ
His heart is firm, he trusts in the LORD. נ
[8]His heart is staunch, he shall not fear, ס
till he sees the defeat of his foes. ע
[9]He disperses, he gives to the needy, פ
his righteousness stands forever. צ
His horn shall be raised in glory. ק

[10]The wicked man sees and is vexed, ר
he gnashes his teeth and he quails. ש
The desire of the wicked shall perish. ת

PSALM 112 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Happy the man.* Like the previous psalm, this is a short acrostic, one letter of the Hebrew alphabet in sequence beginning each verset, or two to a line. As in Psalm 111, the last two lines, corresponding to verses 9 and 10, are triadic, thus incorporating three letters of the alphabet instead of two. As a result, in both psalms, we have ten lines of poetry, ten verses, for the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The initial formula, "Happy the man," announces this as a Wisdom psalm (compare Psalm 1). If Psalm 111 is a catalogue of God's attributes of beneficence, this psalm is a catalogue of the exemplary attributes of the virtuous person and the reward they will bring him. Given the subject, it is hardly surprising that the language is stereotypical.

2. *A great figure.* The Hebrew *gibor* usually means "warrior" or "hero," but in Ruth 2:1 it is used to designate Boaz as a prosperous landowner, and prosperity is immediately invoked at the beginning of the next line.

7. *From evil rumor.* This is the counterpoint of the eternal remembrance in the previous line. The name of the good person is always mentioned for the good deeds he has done, even after he is dead. So it goes without saying that in his lifetime he has no reason to fear evil rumor.

8. *the defeat.* As elsewhere, this word is added in the translation to indicate what the elliptical Hebrew idiom implies.

10. *The wicked man sees and is vexed.* As in many Wisdom texts—again, compare Psalm 1—the wicked man is introduced as a neat foil in acts and fate to the prospering just man.

quails. The literal sense of the Hebrew verb is "to melt" or "to dissolve."

PSALM 113

[1]Hallelujah.
Praise, O servants of the LORD,
praise the LORD's name.
[2]May the LORD's name be blessed
now and forevermore.
[3]From the place the sun rises to where it sets,
praised be the name of the LORD.
[4]High over all nations, the LORD,
over the heavens His glory.
[5]Who is like the LORD our God,
Who sits high above,
[6]Who sees down below
in the heavens and on the earth?
[7]He raises the poor from the dust,
from the dung-heap lifts the needy,
[8]to seat him among princes,
among the princes of his people.
[9]He seats the barren woman in her home
a happy mother of sons.
Hallelujah.

PSALM 113 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Hallelujah.* This Hebrew imperative, which has become an English word, of course means "praise God." It is immediately picked up in the next Hebrew word of the psalm, *hallelu*, "Praise." This is the first of six psalms of praise collectively known as the *hallel* that are recited in synagogues during the festival service.

servants of the LORD. Many scholars imagine that this term designates a particular group of priests taking part in the Temple service, although that identification is not certain. The phrase could be a general one for the faithful Israelites assembled to celebrate the cult.

3. *From the place the sun rises to where it sets.* This spatial indication, from east to west, follows the temporal indication of the preceding verset, "now and forevermore." Both in time and space, God's praise extends between all conceivable limits. The next line then complements the horizontal extension of God's greatness with a vertical extension, "High over all nations."

6. *in the heavens and on the earth.* The evident image is that God is above the visible heavens ("over the heavens His glory," verse 4), looking down on them and on the earth far below them. His "sitting" high above suggests being seated on a throne, a meaning of the verb that is also activated in verse 8.

7. *the dust, / . . . the dung-heap.* This is a neat illustration of the operation of intensification in poetic parallelism. The poor dwell not only in a lowly state, in the dust, but in a place where refuse is piled up, yet even from there God will raise them up.

9. *He seats the barren woman in her home.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "He seats the barren woman of the house." There is a further play here on the causative verb "to seat," *hoshiv*. Just as God seats, or enthrones, the needy among princes. He seats, or ensconces, the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of sons. Given the gender divisions of biblical society, it is not surprising that the woman is accorded her triumphant fulfillment within the

house, as childbearer, whereas the man is elevated to a position of political preeminence in the public realm, among princes.

PSALM 114

[1]When Israel came out of Egypt,
the house of Jacob from a barbarous-tongued
folk,
[2]Judah became His sanctuary,
Israel His dominion.
[3]The sea saw and fled,
Jordan turned back.
[4]The mountains danced like rams,
hills like lambs of the flock.
[5]What is wrong with you, sea, that you flee,
Jordan, that you turn back,
[6]mountains, that you dance like rams,
hills like lambs of the flock?
[7]Before the Master, whirl, O earth,
before the God of Jacob,
[8]Who turns the rock to a pond of water,
flint to a spring of water.

PSALM 114 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *When Israel came out of Egypt.* It is unusual for a biblical poem to begin in this way with a subordinate clause (doubled, with the verb elided, in the second verset), given the strong predominance of parallel independent clauses (parataxis) in this body of literature. It is a strategy for sweeping us up from the beginning of the poem in a narrative momentum that invokes but also goes beyond the story of the Exodus. In a famous letter to Can Grande once attributed to Dante, this psalm is used to illustrate the fourfold levels of interpreting a sacred text (literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical or mystic). James Joyce picked up, in a vein of serious parody, the purportedly Dantean view of this psalm, quoting Psalm 114 in Latin in *Ulysses*. The original intention of the psalmist, however, seems clearly literal—which is to say, historical—a celebration of God's spectacular intervention in history on behalf of the people of Israel.

a barbarous-tongued folk. The Hebrew *loʿez* corresponds exactly to the Greek term from which "barbarous" and "barbaric" are derived. Both indicate the utterance of unintelligible sounds instead of the articulate speech of a civilized people. This notion that the anguish of oppression is sharpened by the fact that the oppressor speaks an unintelligible language appears in a number of biblical texts, from Deuteronomy to the Prophets.

2. *Judah became His sanctuary.* The Hebrew term represented as "sanctuary," *qodesh*, also has the more general meaning of "holiness." When Judah becomes God's covenanted people, it is henceforth the vehicle or the place of abode of God's holiness.

3. *The sea saw and fled, / Jordan turned back.* This compact line is a powerful telescoping of two different events linked typologically in biblical narrative but separated by forty years. The first is the parting of the Sea of Reeds, in this poetic version a consequence of the sea's terror before the fearsome presence of God and not as a result of Moses's stretching out his staff over the sea. The second event is the dividing of the Jordan, recounted in Joshua, so that the Israelites could cross over. If there is some recollection here of the mythic conquest of the primordial sea monster (also called *yam*, "sea"), it is no more than a distant allusion in this historical context.

5. *What is wrong with you.* The poetic strategy here is unusual—a repetition of the two previous lines, merely recast as rhetorical questions that register the extraordinary disruption of the order of nature in God's miraculous intervention.

7. *Before the Master, whirl, O earth.* One proposed emendation eliminates the verb and reads "before the Master of all the earth." That emendation, motivated by the formulaic smoothness of the "corrected" version, seems unnecessary. The imperative verb here picks up the imagery of dancing and fleeing from the previous lines. The Hebrew verb *ḥul* could mean "tremble" or "dance," and the choice of "whirl" in this translation is an attempt to convey both these senses.

8. *rock to a pond of water, / flint to a spring of water.* The obvious reference is to Moses's drawing water from the rock in Exodus 17. In keeping with a common pattern of biblical poetry, we move from the general term "rock" in the first verset to a heightened equivalent, the extreme hardness of "flint," in the second verset. The concluding line focuses an underlying development in this psalm: first water fled, then the hills and mountains danced, and now hard rock, through the metamorphic power of God's overwhelming presence, turns into water. At least two contemporary interpreters have detected—in the Hebrew of the last line—sound-play on the beginning of the poem: from *mitsrayim*, "Egypt," to tsur/mayim, "rock/water."

PSALM 115

[1]Not to us, O LORD, not to us
but to Your name give glory
for Your kindness and Your steadfast truth.
[2]Why should the nations say,
"Where is their god?"
[3]when our God is in the heavens—
all that He desired He has done.
[4]Their idols are silver and gold,
the handiwork of man.
[5]A mouth they have but they do not speak,
eyes they have but they do not see.
[6]Ears they have but they do not hear,
a nose they have but they do not smell.
[7]Their hands—but they do not feel;
their feet—but they do not walk;
they make no sound with their throat.
[8]Like them may be those who make them,
all who trust in them.
[9]O Israel, trust in the LORD,
their help and their shield is He.

[10]House of Aaron, O trust in the LORD,
their help and their shield is He.
[11]You who fear the LORD,
trust in the LORD, their help and their shield is He.
[12] The LORD recalls us, may He bless,
may He bless the house of Israel,
may He bless the house of Aaron.
[13]May He bless those who fear the LORD,
the lesser with the great.
[14]May the LORD grant you increase,
both you and your children.
[15]Blessed are you by the LORD,
maker of heaven and earth.
[16]The heavens are heavens for the LORD,
and the earth He has given to humankind.
[17]The dead do not praise the LORD
nor all who go down into silence.
[18]But we will bless Yah
now and forevermore,
hallelujah.

PSALM 115 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2–3. *Why should the nations say, / "Where is their god?" / when our God is in the heavens.* These lines lay the grounds for the polemic against idolatry in verses 4–8. The nations, accustomed to the idea that every deity is represented by carved images, mockingly question the existence of the imageless God of Israel, to which the psalmist rejoins that the true God is not visible because He resides in the heavens, a vantage point from which He exerts absolute power ("all that He desired He has done"). The idea that this psalm goes on to develop of idols as mere impotent chunks of matter has a marked kinship with the polemic against idolatry of Deutero-Isaiah, the prophet of the Babylonian exile. Most scholars in fact place the composition of this text in the Second Temple period.

5. *A mouth they have.* The syntactic positioning of all these body parts at the beginning of a sequence of versets sharpens the polemic edge of these lines. The shape of the idols is anthropomorphic, but the idols, sheer inert stuff, have none of the capacities of sentient life, making those who worship them ridiculous.

8. *Like them may be those who make them.* This statement takes the form of a curse: may the idol worshippers turn to lifeless wood and stone like the objects they have fashioned.

9. *O Israel.* Beginning at this point, the psalm provides a series of indications of its liturgical nature. Different groups of celebrants in the Temple rite are enjoined to trust in the LORD: the general community ("Israel"), the priests and Levites ("the house of Aaron"), and what may be a distinct third group ("those who fear the LORD")—the early rabbis identified these as proselytes, a possibility not to be excluded in the Second Temple period.

12. *may He bless.* As is appropriate for this sort of liturgical text, the concluding section of the psalm is devoted to the invocation of blessings on the community of worshippers.

16. *The heavens are heavens for the LORD, / and the earth He has given to humankind.* This line picks up the idea put forth in verse 3: God is enthroned above in the heavens but has bestowed the realm of earth to humankind for its enjoyment and fulfillment.

17. *The dead do not praise the LORD.* The view of this late poem remains faithful to the outlook of earlier biblical literature: there is only one life, here

and now, and it should be used to celebrate God's greatness. This ending completes a vertical cosmological picture: God above in the heavens; humankind on earth; and still farther below, the realm of death, which is a place of eternal silence, where none can sing or praise.

PSALM 116

[1]I love the LORD, for He has heard
my voice, my supplications.
[2]For He has inclined His ear to me
when in my days I called.
[3]The cords of death encircled me—
and the straits of Sheol found me—
distress and sorrow did I find.
[4]And in the name of the LORD I called.
"LORD, pray, save my life."
[5]Gracious the LORD and just,
and our God shows mercy.
[6]The LORD protects the simple.
I plunged down, but me He did rescue.
[7]Return, my being, to your calm,
for the LORD has requited you.
[8]For You freed me from death,
my eyes from tears,
my foot from slipping.
[9]I shall walk before the LORD
in the lands of the living.

[10]I trusted, though I did speak—
Oh, I was sorely afflicted—
[11]I in my rashness said,
"All humankind is false."
[12]What can I give back to the LORD
for all He requited to me?
[13]The cup of rescue I lift
and in the name of the LORD I call.
[14]My vows to the LORD I shall pay
in the sight of all His people.
[15]Precious in the eyes of the LORD
is the death of His faithful ones.
[16]I beseech You, LORD,
for I am Your servant.
I am Your servant, Your handmaiden's son.
You have loosed my bonds.
[17]To You I shall offer a thanksgiving sacrifice
and in the name of the LORD I shall call.
[18]My vows to the LORD I shall pay
in the sight of all His people,
[19]in the courts of the house of the LORD,
in the midst of Jerusalem.
Hallelujah.

PSALM 116 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *I love the LORD.* The Hebrew syntax is a little odd because "the LORD," YHWH, comes at the end of the verset. This word order makes possible a different construction, "I love when the LORD hears," but that is not a characteristic sentiment of Psalms. In any case, the LORD's hearing a plea announces this as a thanksgiving psalm.

2. *when in my days I called.* An emendation, warranted by one ancient translation, yields "on the day I called," which sounds more idiomatic.

3. *The cords of death encircled me.* This line may be an indication that the speaker has recovered from a near fatal illness. But in Psalm 18:5, a similar formulation refers to danger in battle.

7. *Return, my being, to your calm.* The speaker seems to be exhorting himself to return to a condition of tranquillity after the agitation of the terrible dangers from which he has escaped.

9. *I shall walk before the LORD.* This idiom has a double meaning: to walk about and to perform service. The speaker, restored to life, will do both.

10. *I trusted.* The implied object of the verb is in all likelihood God. The seeming contradiction of the utterance is not difficult to follow: the speaker, in his moment of desperation, rashly declared that all men were false, but even then, he never entirely abandoned his trust in God's goodness.

12. *What can I give back to the LORD.* There is no adequate return that he can offer God, but at least he can participate in the ritual of thanksgiving, which is spelled out in the next two verses.

13. *The cup of rescue.* Given the cultic setting, this in all likelihood refers to the cup from which libation is poured on the altar. It is a "cup of rescue" because the libation expresses the celebrant's thanks for having been rescued by God.

14. *My vows to the LORD I shall pay.* These are vows to offer the thanksgiving sacrifice, as verse 17 makes clear.

19. *in the courts of the house of the LORD.* The reference, of course, is to the courts of the Temple that the worshipper enters to offer the thanksgiving

sacrifice before the assembled people.

in the midst of. The suffix of the preposition could be either a poetic form of the construct state, indicating "of," or a second-person singular feminine ending ("in your midst, O Jerusalem"). An apostrophe to the city does not seem characteristic of the rhetorical stance of this poem, or of Psalms in general, so the construct state is more likely.

PSALM 117

[1]Praise the LORD, all nations;
    extol Him, all peoples.
[2]For His kindness overwhelms us,
    and the LORD's steadfast truth is forever.
Hallelujah.

PSALM 117 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Praise the* LORD. This succinct poem amounts to a kind of zerodegree psalm of thanksgiving. Just two verses long, it is not only the shortest psalm in the collection but also the shortest chapter in the Bible. No specific details of God's beneficence are offered, only the great measure of His kindness and steadfast truth.

all nations / . . . all peoples. The one element of difference in this thanksgiving psalm is that not Israel but all nations are enjoined to praise the God of Israel. The occasion for gratitude, then, is collective rather than individual: God has overwhelmed Israel by keeping faith with His commitment to His people. One could easily imagine that such a concise psalm of thanksgiving might have been composed to celebrate the restoration of the cult in the rebuilt Temple, but the evidence is far too scanty to make any confident identification of this sort.

PSALM 118

[1]Acclaim the LORD, for He is good,
forever is His kindness.
[2]Let Israel now say:
forever is His kindness.
[3]Let the house of Aaron now say:
forever is His kindness.
[4]Let those who fear the LORD now say:
forever is His kindness.
[5]From the straits I called to Yah.
Yah answered me in a wide-open place.
[6]The LORD is for me, I shall not fear.
What can humankind do to me?
[7] The LORD is for me among my helpers,
and I shall see the defeat of my foes.
[8]Better to shelter in the LORD
than to trust in humankind.
[9]Better to shelter in the LORD
than to trust in princes.
[10]All the nations surrounded me.
With the LORD's name I cut them down.

[11]They swarmed round me, oh they surrounded me.
With the LORD's name I cut them down.
[12]They swarmed round me like bees,
burned out like a fire among thorns.
With the LORD's name I cut them down.
[13]You pushed me hard to knock me down,
but the LORD helped me.
[14]My strength and my might is Yah,
and He has become my rescue.
[15]A voice of glad song and rescue
in the tents of the just:
The LORD's right hand does valiantly.
[16]The LORD's right hand is raised,
the LORD's right hand does valiantly.
[17]I shall not die but live
and recount the deeds of Yah.
[18]Yah harshly chastised me
but to death did not deliver me.
[19]Open for me the gates of justice—
I would enter them, I would acclaim Yah.
[20]This is the gate of the LORD—
the just will enter it.
[21]I acclaim You for You have answered me,
and You have become my rescue.
[22]The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.

[23]From the LORD did this come about—
it is wondrous in our eyes.
[24]This is the day the LORD has wrought.
Let us exult and rejoice in it.
[25]We beseech You, LORD, pray, rescue.
We beseech You, LORD, make us prosper.
[26]Blessed who comes in the name of the LORD.
We bless you from the house of the LORD.
[27] The LORD is God and He shines upon us.
Bind the festive offering with ropes
all the way to the horns of the altar.
[28]You are my God, and I acclaim You,
my God, and I exalt You.
[29]Acclaim the LORD, for He is good,
forever is His kindness.

PSALM 118 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Acclaim the* LORD. The initial word, "acclaim" (or "give thanks to") marks the generic identity of the poem as a thanksgiving psalm. Some of its segments seem disjunct with others, and there are medieval manuscripts that divide this text into as many as five different psalms.

2. *Let Israel now say.* As in Psalm 115, this repeated formula reflects a liturgical script involving three different groups—Israel, the house of Aaron, and those who fear the LORD—that are here formally called upon (perhaps by a chorus leader) to recite the refrain "forever is His kindness."

5. *From the straits I called to Yah.* This particular formula is the language of a personal thanksgiving psalm that sounds rather different from the liturgical invocation of verses 1–4. "Yah" is, according to the consensus of biblical scholars, a shortened variant of Yahweh, though it could conceivably be a separate, perhaps archaic name for the deity assimilated with Yahweh by folk etymology.

7. *the defeat.* As elsewhere, this object of the verb is merely implied in the Hebrew.

8. *Better to shelter in the LORD.* This and the next line are cast in a formulation typical of biblical proverbs ("better *x* than *y*").

10. *All the nations surrounded me.* Now the plight from which the speaker has been rescued is expressed in military terms. The "I" thus might be the king, although it is also possible that the image of battling armies is a metaphor for some other kind of distress.

I cut them down. The exact meaning of the Hebrew verb *ʾamilam* is uncertain. This translation follows a widely adopted guess that it is derived from the root *mol*, which in a different conjugation means "to circumcise."

13. *to knock me down.* The literal sense is simply "to fall."

15. *A voice of glad song.* It is also possible to construe the initial Hebrew word *qol* not as a noun but as an interjection meaning "Hark!"

the just. Throughout this section, *tsadiq*, "just," and *tsedeq*, "justice," could also mean, respectively, "victorious" and "victory." The military context might argue for that meaning, but because in the theology of Psalms God vindicates the just and makes them triumph, the other meaning of the root makes at least as good sense. It is perhaps more likely that the Temple gates were thought of as the gates of justice than as the gates of victory, but one cannot be certain about this.

17. *I shall not die but live / and recount the deeds of Yah.* This line picks up in a positive affirmation the recurrent idea in Psalms that only the living can praise God, and that such praise is the true vocation of living men and women.

22. *The stone that the builders rejected.* This metaphor has a metonymic trigger: the speaker, having entered the Temple gates and now standing within the courts of the resplendent building, compares himself in his former abject

state to a stone at first considered unfit by the builders but then made the chief cornerstone of a grand edifice.

25. *We beseech You, LORD.* These words of prayer for divine favor, expressed from a communal point of view, mark still another distinct segment of this psalm.

make us prosper. "Us" is merely implied in the Hebrew.

26. *Blessed who comes in the name of the LORD.* These words, too, sound as though they may have served a formal ceremonial purpose in the Temple ritual. A group—perhaps of levitical choristers—standing within the Temple, "the house of the LORD," intones a blessing to the celebrants who are approaching the altar.

27. *He shines upon us.* This is probably an ellipsis for "shines His face upon us."

Bind the festive offering with ropes. The offering is, of course, an animal that is about to be slaughtered on the altar.

the horns of the altar. Israelite and Canaanite altars were fashioned with carved horns—perhaps symbols of strength—at their four corners.

28. *You are my God, and I acclaim You, / my God, and I exalt You.* The Hebrew uses two different designations for God—first *ʾel*, then *ʾelohim*.

29. *Acclaim the LORD.* It is in keeping with the liturgical nature of this psalm as a hymn of celebration that it uses the identical line at the beginning and at the end as a refrain.

PSALM 119

[1]Happy whose way is blameless,א
who walk in the LORD's teaching.
[2]Happy who keep His precepts,
with a whole heart they seek Him.
[3]Yes, they did no wrong,
in His ways they have walked.
[4]You ordained Your decrees
to be strictly observed.
[5]Would that my ways be firm
to observe Your statutes.
[6]Then I would not be shamed
when I look upon all Your commands.
[7]I shall acclaim You with an honest heart
as I learn Your righteous laws.
[8]Your statutes I shall observe.
Do not utterly forsake me.

[9] How shall a lad make his path worthyב
to observe as befits Your word.
[10]With all my heart I sought You.

Make me not stray from Your commands.
[11]In my heart I kept Your utterance
so that I would not offend against You.
[12]Blessed are You, O LORD.
Teach me Your statutes.
[13]With my lips I recounted
all the laws You pronounced.
[14]I rejoiced in the way of Your precepts
as over all kinds of wealth.
[15]Let me dwell on Your decrees
and let me look upon Your paths.
[16]In Your statutes I delight,
I shall not forget Your word.

[17]Requite Your servant—I shall live,ג
and let me observe Your word.
[18]Unveil my eyes that I may look
upon the wonders of Your teaching.
[19]A sojourner am I in the land.
Do not hide from me Your commands.
[20]I pine away desiring
Your laws in every hour.
[21]You blast the cursed arrogant
who stray from Your commands.
[22]Take away from me scorn and disgrace

for Your precepts I have kept.
23 Even when princes sat to scheme against me,
Your servant dwelled on Your statutes.
24 Yes, Your precepts are my delight,
my constant councillors.

25 My being cleaves to the dust.ד
Give me life as befits Your word.
26 My ways I recounted and You answered me.
Teach me Your statutes.
27 The way of Your decrees let me grasp,
that I may dwell on Your wonders.
28 My being dissolves in anguish.
Sustain me as befits Your word.
29 The way of lies remove from me,
and in Your teaching grant me grace.
30 The way of trust I have chosen.
Your laws I have set before me.
31 I have clung to Your precepts.
O LORD, do not shame me.
32 On the way of Your commands I run,
for You make my heart capacious.

33 Instruct me, LORD, in the way of Your statutes,ה
that I may keep it without fail.

[34] Give me insight that I may keep Your teaching
and observe it with a whole heart.
[35]Guide me on the track of Your commands,
for in it I delight.
[36]Incline my heart to Your precepts
and not to gain.
[37]Avert my eyes from seeing falsehood.
Through Your ways give me life.
[38]Fulfill for Your servant Your utterance,
which is for those who fear You.
[39]Avert my disgrace that I feared,
for Your laws are good.
[40]Look, I have desired Your decrees.
In Your bounty give me life.

[41]And let Your favors befall me, LORD,ו
Your rescue as befits Your utterance,
[42]that I may give answer to those who taunt me,
for I have trusted in Your word.
[43] And do not take the least word of truth from my mouth,
for I have hoped for Your laws.
[44]And let me observe Your teaching always,
forevermore.
[45] And let me walk about in an open space,

for Your decrees I have sought.
46 And let me speak of Your precepts
before kings without being shamed.
47 And let me delight in Your commands
that I have loved.
48 And let me lift up my palms to Your commands
that I have loved, and dwell on Your statutes.

49 Recall the word to Your servant
for which You made me hope.
50 This is my consolation in my affliction,
that Your utterance gave me life.
51 The arrogant mocked me terribly—
from Your teaching I did not turn.
52 I recalled Your laws forever,
O LORD, and I was consoled.
53 Rage from the wicked seized me,
from those who forsake Your teaching.
54 Songs were Your statutes to me,
in the house of my sojourning.
55 I recalled in the night Your name, O LORD,
and I observed Your teaching.
56 This did I possess,
for Your decrees I kept.

[57]The LORD is my portion, I said,ח
to observe Your words.
[58]I entreated You with a whole heart,
grant me grace as befits Your utterance.
[59]I have reckoned my ways,
and turned back my feet to Your precepts.
[60]I hastened, and did not linger,
to observe Your commands.
[61]The cords of the wicked ensnared me—
Your teaching I did not forget.
[62]At midnight I rose to acclaim You
for Your righteous laws.
[63]A friend am I to all who fear You,
and to those who observe Your decrees.
[64]With Your kindness, LORD, the earth is filled.
Teach me Your statutes.

[65]Good You have done for Your servant,ט
O LORD, as befits Your word.
[66]Good insight and knowledge teach me,
for in Your commands I trust.
[67]Before I was afflicted, I went astray,
but now Your utterance I observe.
[68]You are good and do good.
Teach me Your statutes.

69 The arrogant plaster me with lies—
I with whole heart keep Your decrees.
70 Their heart grows dull like fat—
as for me, in Your teaching I delight.
71 It was good for me that I was afflicted,
so that I might learn Your statutes.
72 Better for me Your mouth's teaching
than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.

73 Your hands made me and set me firm.'
Give me insight, that I may learn Your commands.
74 Those who fear You see me and rejoice,
for I hope for Your word.
75 I know, LORD, that Your laws are just,
and in faithfulness You did afflict me.
76 May Your kindness, pray, console me,
as befits Your utterance to Your servant.
77 May Your mercies befall me, that I may live,
for Your teaching is my delight.
78 May the arrogant be shamed, for with lies they distorted my name.
As for me, I shall dwell on Your decrees.
79 May those who fear You turn back to me,
and those who know Your precepts.

[80]May my heart be blameless in Your statutes,
so that I be not shamed.

[81]My being longs for Your rescue,כ
for Your word I hope.
[82]My eyes pine for Your utterance,
saying, “When will You console me?”
[83]Though I was like a skin-flask in smoke,
Your statutes I did not forget.
[84]How many are the days of Your servant?
When will You exact justice from my pursuers?
[85]The arrogant have dug pitfalls for me,
which are not according to Your teaching.
[86]All Your commands are trustworthy,
For no reason they pursued me—help me!
[87]They nearly put an end to me on earth,
yet I forsook not Your decrees.
[88]As befits Your kindness give me life,
that I may observe Your mouth’s precept.

[89]Forever, O LORD,ל
Your word stands high in the heavens.
[90]For all generations Your faithfulness.
You made the earth firm and it stood.
[91]By Your laws they stand this day,

for all are Your servants.
92 Had not Your teaching been my delight,
I would have perished in my affliction.
93 Never shall I forget Your decrees,
for through them You gave me life.
94 I am Yours, O rescue me,
for Your decrees I have sought.
95 Me did the wicked hope to destroy.
I gained insight from Your precepts.
96 For each finite thing I saw an end—
but Your command is exceedingly broad.

97 How I loved Your teaching.מ
All day long it was my theme.
98 Your command makes me wiser than my enemies,
for it is mine forever.
99 I have understood more than all my teachers
for Your precepts became my theme.
All paths of lies I have hated.
100 I gained insight more than the elders
for Your decrees I kept.
101 From all evil paths I held back my feet,
so that I might observe Your word.
102 From Your laws I did not swerve,
for You Yourself instructed me.

103 How sweet to my palate Your utterance,
more than honey to my mouth.
104 From Your decrees I gained insight,
therefore I hated all paths of lies.

105 A lamp to my feet is Your word נ
and a light to my path.
106 I swore and I will fulfill it—
to observe Your just laws.
107 I have been sorely afflicted.
O LORD, give me life, as befits Your word.
108 Accept my mouth's free offerings, LORD,
and teach me Your laws.
109 My life is at risk at all times,
yet Your teaching I do not forget.
110 The wicked set a trap for me,
yet from Your decrees I did not stray.
111 I inherit Your precepts forever,
for they are my heart's joy.
112 I inclined my heart to do Your statutes
forever without fail.

113 The perverted I hated ס
and Your teaching I loved.
114 My shelter and shield are You.

For Your word I have hoped.
115 Turn away from me, evildoers,
that I may keep the commands of my God.
116 Support me as befits Your utterance, that I may live,
and do not shame me in my expectation.
117 Uphold me that I may be rescued
to regard Your statutes at all times.
118 You spurned all who stray from Your statutes,
for their deception is but a lie.
119 Like dross You destroy all the earth's wicked;
therefore I love Your precepts.
120 My flesh shudders from the fear of You,
and of Your laws I am in awe.

121 I have done justice and righteousness;ע
do not yield me to my oppressors.
122 Vouch for Your servant for good.
Let not the arrogant oppress me.
123 My eyes pined for Your rescue
and for Your righteous utterance.
124 Do for Your servant as befits Your kindness
and teach me Your statutes.
125 Your servant I am, grant me insight,
that I may know Your precepts.

126 It is time to act for the LORD—
they have violated Your teaching.
127 Therefore I love Your commands
more than gold, and more than fine gold.
128 Therefore by all Your ordinances I walked a straight line.
All paths of lies I have hated.
129 Wondrous Your precepts,פ
therefore did I keep them.
130 The portal of Your words sends forth light,
makes the simple understand.
131 I opened my mouth wide and panted,
for Your commands I craved.
132 Turn to me, grant me grace,
as is fit for those who love Your name.
133 Make firm my footsteps through Your utterance,
and let no wrongdoing rule over me.
134 Ransom me from human oppression,
that I may observe Your statutes.
135 Shine Your face upon Your servant
and teach me Your statutes.
136 Streams of water my eyes have shed
because men did not observe Your teaching.

137 Just are You, O LORD,צ

and upright are Your laws.
138 You ordained Your just precepts,
and they are most trustworthy.
139 My zeal devastated me,
for my foes forgot Your words.
140 Your utterance is most pure,
and Your servant has loved it.
141 Puny am I and despised,
yet Your decrees I have not forgotten.
142 Your righteousness forever is right,
and Your teaching is truth.
143 Straits and distress have found me—
Your commands are my delight.
144 Right are Your precepts forever.
Grant me insight that I may live.

145 I called out with a whole heart.ק
Answer me, LORD. Your statutes I would keep.
146 I called to You—rescue me,
that I may observe Your precepts.
147 I greeted the dawn and cried out,
for Your word did I hope.
148 My eyes greeted the night-watches
to dwell on Your utterance.
149 Hear my voice as befits Your kindness.

O LORD, as befits Your law, give me life.
150 The pursuers of the loathsome draw near,
from Your teaching they have gone far away.
151 You are near, O LORD,
and all Your commands are truth.
152 Of old I have known of Your precepts,
because You have fixed them forever.

153 See my affliction and free me, ר
for Your teaching I have not forgotten.
154 Argue my cause and redeem me,
through Your utterance give me life.
155 Far from the wicked is rescue,
for Your statutes they have not sought.
156 Your mercies are great, O LORD,
as befits Your laws give me life.
157 Many are my pursuers and my foes,
yet from Your decrees I have not swerved.
158 I have seen traitors and quarreled with them,
who did not observe Your utterance.
159 See that I love Your decrees.
O LORD, as befits Your kindness give me life.
160 The chief of Your words is truth,
and forever all Your righteous laws.

[161]Princes pursued me without cause, ש
yet my heart has feared Your word.
[162]I rejoice over Your utterance
as one who finds great spoils.
[163]Lies I have hated, despised.
Your teaching I have loved.
[164]Seven times daily I praised You
because of Your righteous laws.
[165]Great well-being to the lovers of Your teaching,
and no stumbling block for them.
[166]I yearned for Your rescue, O LORD,
and Your commands I performed.
[167]I observed Your precepts
and loved them very much.
[168]I observed Your decrees and Your precepts,
for all my ways are before You.

[169]Let my song of prayer come before You, LORD.ת
As befits Your word, give me insight.
[170]Let my supplication come before You,
as befits Your utterance, save me.
[171]Let my lips utter praise,
for You taught me Your statutes.
[172]Let my tongue speak out Your utterance,
for all Your commands are just.

[173]May Your hand become my help,
for Your decrees I have chosen.
[174]I desired Your rescue, O LORD,
and Your teaching is my delight.
[175]Let my being live on and praise You,
and may Your laws help me.
[176]I have wandered like a lost sheep.
Seek Your servant, for Your commands I did
not forget.

PSALM 119 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Happy whose way is blameless.* The first Hebrew word, *ʾashrey*, with an initial *aleph* marks the beginning of what we may call the long acrostic—an alphabetic acrostic in which each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet begins eight lines of poetry. The result is the longest psalm in the collection and the longest chapter in the Hebrew Bible, 176 verses or lines of poetry. Perhaps this extravagant mnemonic was deemed appropriate because of the manifestly didactic nature of the poem. The edifying truth of unflagging loyalty to God's word was intended to be inculcated in those who recited the text, inscribed in their memory.

way . . . / teaching. Both these terms—the "way" as an image of the right ordering of life (and the psalm uses three synonyms for it) and "teaching," *torah*—are characteristic of Wisdom literature. It is not entirely certain whether *torah* refers to an actual book or simply to God's instruction to man, though there is some likelihood that the former sense may be used here. This stress on *torah* suggests that the psalm was composed after the promulgation of Deuteronomy in 621 B.C.E., and many scholars date this text to the post-exilic period. Given both the eightfold acrostic and the didactic purpose, it is understandable that the psalm should swarm with synonyms—*torah, ʿedut*

("precept"), *piqudim*("decrees"), *ʾimrah* ("utterance"), *davar* ("word"), *ḥoq* ("statute"), *mishpat* ("law"). In this poetic context, the terms appear to overlap and not to express technical distinctions. One must concede that the poetic language is highly formulaic and rather routine, although occasionally a striking line appears (for example, verse 54, "Songs were Your statutes to me, / in the house of my sojourning," or the unusual simile for suffering of a leather water skin cured over a smoking fire in verse 83, "I was like a skin-flask in smoke"). It also should be said that some of the acrostic composition is mechanical. The most egregious instance is the letter *waw*, which is also the Hebrew particle that means "and." There are very few other Hebrew words that begin with this letter (in the biblical corpus, no more than three), so the poet simply begins each of the eight lines of the *waw* stanza with "and." Because of the repetitiousness and the use of stereotypical language, the brief comments that follow do not engage in poetic analysis and mainly are limited to explaining difficulties in the text. The lines are rhythmically compact, usually having three accented syllables in the first verset and two in the second. The translation tries wherever possible to replicate this rhythm, but often there is one extra accent in the English.

9. *a lad.* This somewhat surprising term probably reflects the Wisdom character of the psalm. At a number of points in Proverbs, a "lad" or an innocent young man needing instruction in the ways of the world is introduced.

18. *Unveil my eyes that I may look / upon the wonders of Your teaching.* Throughout the psalm, the speaker not only affirms his adherence to God's teaching but prays for the capacity to understand it. This desire for insight may suggest that what is at issue is a text to be read and interpreted.

19. *A sojourner am I in the land.* This could also be rendered as "A sojourner am I on earth." In any case, the idea is that the speaker's existence is transient and vulnerable, and therefore he needs the guide of God's commands to show him how to make his way through his fleeting life.

20. *I pine away.* The verb *garas* occurs only here in the biblical corpus; hence the meaning is conjectural, though backed by scholarly consensus.

24. *my constant councillors.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "the men of my counsel."

32. *You make my heart capacious.* The poet clearly refers here to the biblical notion of the heart as the seat of understanding.

33. *without fail.* The Hebrew word *ʿeqev* has puzzled interpreters. As a noun it means "heel." As a subordinate conjunction, it means "because" or "in consequence" (probably because the heel is an image of following after something). The word appears to serve here as an adverb, so it might have the sense of acting consequentially or without fail.

43. *the least word of truth.* The Hebrew says literally, "a word of truth very much."

45. *in an open space.* This is the antithesis of the recurrent "straits," as in verse 143.

48. *lift up my palms.* As elsewhere, this is a gesture of prayer.

71. *It was good for me that I was afflicted.* This is, suffering impels reflection, which in turn leads the sufferer to embrace God's teaching as the guide to turning his life around.

78. *distorted my name.* The Hebrew merely says "distorted me," which does not work as an English idiom.

84. *How many are the days of Your servant?* The logic is similar to that repeatedly invoked by Job: if my life is so brief, why does not God grant me justice before it is over?

91. *By Your laws they stand.* The switch to the plural is slightly disorienting, but the implied antecedent is probably "all created things" or "heaven and earth."

108. *my mouth's free offerings.* The reference is not to the voluntary pledge of a sacrifice but to the words of prayer, which serve instead of sacrifice.

109. *My life is at risk.* The literal sense of the Hebrew idiom is "my life is in my palm."

112. *without fail.* See the comment on this expression in verse 33.

119. *Like dross You destroy.* The Hebrew says simply "dross You destroy." Some scholars emend *hishbata*, "You destroyed," to *ḥashavta*, "You considered."

126. *It is time to act for the* LORD*— / they have violated Your teaching.* The first clause might also be construed as, "It is time for the LORD to act." This entire verse became proverbial in Hebrew, although understandings of what it meant varied. One common if quite unlikely construction: in a time of emergency when one must act for the LORD, it is permissible to abrogate the Torah.

128. *I walked a straight line.* The Hebrew text, which may be doubtful at this point, says literally, "Therefore Your ordinances of all I made straight."

130. *The portal of Your words sends forth light.* Could Kafka have been remembering this verse when, in "Before the Law," he imagined the closed gate in the parable opening to reveal a brilliant light shining from within?

136. *men did not observe.* The Hebrew says only "they," but "men" is introduced here to avoid the possibility that the plural pronoun might refer to "eyes" or even to "streams of water."

147. *greeted.* The Hebrew verb here, *qidem*, and also in verse 148, can equally mean "to anticipate," "to go before." Hence the King James Version renders it as "prevent," using that English verb with precisely this meaning, which is now obsolete.

148. *night-watches.* This verse and the preceding one present us, in reverse chronological order, the picture of a supplicant who spends the whole night in a prayer vigil that lasts until daybreak.

150. *The pursuers of the loathsome.* This phrase, given the different uses of the construct state in Hebrew, could mean either "those who pursue loathsome things" or "loathsome pursuers."

152. *Of old I have known of Your precepts.* The implicit idea is that God's precepts are built into the very order of creation ("because You have fixed them forever"). Rabbinic Judaism would develop out of such hints the concept of an eternal Torah that preexisted creation.

160. *The chief of Your words is truth.* Some understand this to mean "the first of Your words is truth."

169. *Let my song of prayer come before You.* These words, which initiate the last group of eight lines, each beginning with the letter *taw*, mark the

concluding segment as a formal coda in which the speaker asks, in each of the eight lines, that God accept the prayer he has uttered in this psalm.

PSALM 120

[1]A song of ascents.
To the LORD when I was in straits
I called out and He answered me.
[2]LORD, save my life from lying lips,
from a tongue of deceit.
[3]What can it give you, what can it add,
a tongue of deceit?
[4]A warrior's honed arrows
with broom-wood coals.
[5] Woe to me for I have sojourned in Meshech,
dwelled among the tents of Kedar.
[6] Long has my whole being dwelled
among those who hate peace.
[7] I am for peace, but when I speak,
they are for war.

PSALM 120 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *A song of ascents.* This is the first in a sequence of fifteen psalms that bear this heading. Most scholars assume that "ascents" refers to pilgrimages to Jerusalem. (The verb "ascend" or "go up" is the technical term used for pilgrimage.) But among other meanings that have been proposed, it could be a musical term, perhaps referring to an ascent in pitch or a crescendo in the song, or it could refer to the pattern of incremental repetition that is common to many of these poems. There are some linguistic indications that these psalms were composed in the Second Temple period, and one of them, Psalm 126, explicitly invokes the return to Zion.

I called out and He answered me. These words are a formula for the thanksgiving psalm. Because the rest of the poem expresses the anguished plea of a beleaguered person, one must construe what follows as a full quotation of the speaker's "calling out" to God in his time of distress.

2. *lying lips, / . . . tongue of deceit.* This emphatic parallelism clearly indicates that the source of distress is that the speaker has been the target of malicious slander.

4. *A warrior's honed arrows / with broom-wood coals.* At first glance, this line may seem to be a leap without transition, but in Psalms malicious speech is characteristically represented as a sharp arrow or sword. Broom wood was known to burn hot for a long time, even when the surface of the coals had turned to ash, so the image of intense burning complements the image of piercing arrows.

5. *Meshech / . . . Kedar.* These are two far-flung locations. Meshech is to the extreme north-west in Asia Minor, between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea (it is mentioned in the Table of Nations in Genesis 10:2). Kedar is to the southeast, in the Arabian peninsula. One might wonder about the history of peregrinations of the speaker, but because it seems unlikely that a single person would have sojourned in both these places, it may be plausible to understand them as metaphors for living among people who behave like strangers, even if those people were within a stone's throw of Jerusalem (as someone today might say, I felt as though I were living in Siberia or Timbuktu).

6. *those who hate peace.* The Masoretic Text shows a singular noun here, but other Hebrew manuscripts, the Septuagint, and the Syriac have the more likely plural.

7. *I am for peace.* The Hebrew appears to say “I am peace,” but, without emending the text, the most plausible way to understand these two words, *ʾani shalom*, is that they function as though there were an elided “for” (in the Hebrew not a word but the particle *lᵉ*). This antithesis between peace and war at the end neatly picks up the idea that slander is a harmful weapon—piercing arrows and burning coals.

PSALM 121

[1]A song of ascents.
I lift up my eyes to the mountains:
from where will my help come?
[2]My help is from the LORD,
maker of heaven and earth.
[3] He does not let your foot stumble.
Your guard does not slumber.
[4]Look, He does not slumber nor does He sleep,
Israel's guard.
[5]The LORD is your guard,
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
[6]By day the sun does not strike you,
nor the moon by night.
[7]The LORD guards you from all harm,
He guards your life.
[8]The LORD guards your going and your coming,
now and forevermore.

PSALM 121 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *I lift up my eyes to the mountains: / from where will my help come?* Those scholars who think that the "songs of ascents" are psalms framed for pilgrims to Jerusalem see here a specific reference to the mountains around Jerusalem and imagine that the going and coming of the last line refer to the pilgrim's departure from Jerusalem after coming to the Temple, to travel through the potentially dangerous Judahite hill country. All this may be excessively specific. We cannot be sure that these are actually pilgrimage psalms, and the resonant language of the poem is quite general: the speaker, fearful of unspecified dangers—of the sort that any person might encounter in life—looks up at the mountains around him and wonders who or what will help him.

3. *He does not let your foot stumble.* From here to the end of the psalm, we have what looks like a response to the question and affirmation of the speaker at the beginning. The form of the psalm, then, untypically, would be a dialogue. Adherents of the pilgrimage theory claim that the second speaker is a priest.

4. *He does not slumber nor does He sleep.* The beautiful simplicity of the language of the psalm turns on cadenced repetition. The key word of assurance, "guard" (*shomer*), occurs six times in the eight lines of the poem. There is virtually no figurative language here, the sole exception being the lexicalized metaphor (hence a barely visible one) for protection, "shade," to which perhaps the stumbling of the foot might be added as a synecdoche for falling into danger. Without poetic ornamentation, the psalm becomes a moving expression of trust in God, using traditional language and patterned repetition.

6. *By day the sun does not strike you.* The dead metaphor of "shade" is resuscitated in this notion of protection from sunstroke, a real danger in the semi-desert climate of the Land of Israel.

nor the moon by night. In all likelihood these words refer to the danger of being moon-struck, evidently thought to be a cause of madness in ancient Israel, as it has been imagined in many cultures.

7. *The* LORD *guards.* In a climactic pattern of asserted trust, three of the six repetitions of "guard" occur in the last two lines of the poem.

8. *now and forevermore.* This concluding reference to the eternality of God's protection completes an arc begun with the reference to creation at the beginning of the poem in the designation of God as "maker of heaven and earth."

PSALM 122

[1]A song of ascents for David.
I rejoiced in those who said to me:
“Let us go to the house of the LORD.”
[2]Our feet were standing
in your gates, Jerusalem.
[3]Jerusalem built like a town
that is joined fast together,
[4]where the tribes go up,
the tribes of Yah.
An ordinance it is for Israel
to acclaim the name of the LORD.
[5]For there the thrones of judgment stand,
the thrones of the house of David.
[6]Pray for Jerusalem’s weal.
May your lovers rest tranquil!
[7]May there be well-being within your ramparts,
tranquillity in your palaces.
[8]For the sake of my brothers and my companions,
let me speak, pray, of your weal.
[9]For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,

let me seek your good.

PSALM 122 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Let us go to the house of the* LORD. These words are a clear indication that this is a psalm of Zion founded in the pilgrimage experience. But because many of the other "songs of ascents" do not refer to pilgrimage, whereas a good many other psalms do, this text provides no conclusive evidence that "ascents" means "pilgrimage."

2. *Our feet were standing / in your gates, Jerusalem.* As in other psalms of Zion, the liminal experience of crossing into the walled city, or into the Temple precincts, is strongly marked.

3. *joined fast together.* The most probable reference is to the fortifications of Jerusalem or, specifically, to the protective wall that encloses it.

4. *where the tribes go up, / the tribes of Yah.* "Go up" is the technical verb for pilgrimage. Jerusalem as the locus of the central cult is envisaged here as the focus of national unity. All this makes it highly likely that this psalm was composed sometime after the centralization of the cult in Jerusalem by King Josiah around 621 B.C.E.

5. *For there the thrones of judgment stand.* The Hebrew says, "For there the thrones of judgment sit," with the use of that verb perhaps encouraged by the fact that one sits on a throne. It is noteworthy that cultic centrality is here joined with the centralization of judicial authority—and, implicitly, of political authority as well—in the Davidic dynasty's capital. This is very much in line with Josiah's program.

6. *May your lovers rest tranquil.* The "your" is feminine singular in the Hebrew, clearly addressing Jerusalem, after the plural imperative of the first verset directed to the people. Such switches in pronominal reference are common in biblical Hebrew. The verb translated as "rest tranquil," *yishlayu*, richly alliterates with *yerushalayim*, "Jerusalem," and with *shalom*, "weal," "well-being," or "peace." The poet's repeated insistence in the concluding

lines of the psalm on *shalom* is probably an etymological play on the name of the city.

7. *ramparts / . . . palaces.* As in many lines of biblical poetry, there is a narrative progression from the first verset to the second—first the ramparts, then the palaces within them, following the path of the pilgrim coming up to the city.

PSALM 123

[1]A song of ascents.
To You I lift up my eyes,
O dweller in the heavens.
[2]Look, like the eyes of slaves to their masters,
like the eyes of a slavegirl to her mistress,
so are our eyes to the LORD our God
until He grants us grace.
[3]Grant us grace, LORD, grant us grace.
for we are sorely sated with scorn.
[4]Sorely has our being been sated
with the contempt of the smug,
the scorn of the haughty.

PSALM 123 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *To you I lift up my eyes.* This initial gesture of prayer of the psalm of supplication is cast in the first-person singular, but, as sometimes happens elsewhere, the psalm glides easily in the next verse from singular to plural, from individual to collective.

2. *like the eyes of slaves to their masters.* In the affecting simplicity of this compact psalm, virtually the only metaphor (one may exclude the weak metaphoric force of "sated" in verses 3 and 4) is this comparison with the abject dependency of the slave on his master.

like the eyes of a slavegirl to her mistress. It is formulaic in the parallelism of biblical poetry that if *ʿeved* ("slave" or "servant") appears in the first verset, *shifḥah* or *ʾamah* ("slavegirl" or "handmaiden") appears in the second verset. Here, however, the extension to the other gender conveys a sense of inclusiveness: everyone in this community, man and woman, looks urgently to God for a sign of grace.

4. *the contempt of the smug, / the scorn of the haughty.* Unlike other supplications, where the cause of the complaint is specified (slander, illegitimate lawsuits, schemes against the life of the speaker), all we are told here, at the end of the psalm, is that the collective supplicants have been treated with contempt by persons identified only as "the smug," "the haughty." A triadic line is used at the end as a marker of closure.

PSALM 124

[1]A song of ascents for David.
Were it not the LORD Who was for us
—let Israel now say—
[2]were it not the LORD Who was for us
when people rose against us,
[3]then they would have swallowed us alive
when their wrath flared hot against us.
[4]Then the waters would have swept us up,
the torrent come up past our necks.
[5]Then it would have come up past our necks—
the raging waters.
[6]Blessed is the LORD,
Who did not make us prey for their teeth.
[7]Our life is like a bird escaped
from the snare of the fowlers.
The snare was broken
and we escaped.
[8]Our help is in the name of the LORD,
maker of heaven and earth.

PSALM 124 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Were it not the LORD Who was for us / —let Israel now say.* The second of these two versets is a formal exhortation, probably on the part of a choral leader, to the community of worshippers to chant the words of the liturgical text that begins in the first verset and continues in verse 2 through to the end of the psalm. This is a collective thanksgiving psalm, though some of the language is drawn from the traditional formulations of individual thanksgiving psalms. The Hebrew, with its abundant use of incremental repetition, has a strong rhythmic character that would have lent itself to singing or chanting.

2. *when people rose against us.* The reference to "people" (or "humankind," *ʾadam*) is very general, although, given the collective viewpoint, the psalmist is surely thinking of national enemies. He could be alluding specifically to the Babylonian conquest of Judah and the exile of part of its population, but that is not certain.

4–5. These two lines are an especially effective use of the emphatic structure of incremental repetition. Verse 4 displays semantic parallelism without verbal repetition in its two halves ("waters" / "torrent," "swept us up," / "come up past our necks"). Then 5a repeats "come up past our necks" and 5b repeats "the waters" from 4a, adding the adjectival increment "raging" and so producing a climactic effect. Being engulfed by a raging torrent is a metaphor for near death picked up from the psalms of individual supplication and thanksgiving.

6. *prey for their teeth.* This switch from the metaphor of drowning to the metaphor of being consumed by a wild beast follows "they would have swallowed us alive" from verse 3.

7. *The snare was broken / and we escaped.* Although this line looks rather like a gloss on the simile of the previous line of verse, it is perfectly plausible that for a liturgical text to be chanted by the community, the poet wanted to spell things out.

8. *Our help is in the name of the LORD, / maker of heaven and earth.* This concluding line is quite close to Psalm 121:2, and in general some exchange

of language is noticeable among the various songs of ascents. The imposition of “the name of the LORD” between God and Israel as a kind of mediation is a development that becomes progressively pronounced in the Second Temple period.

PSALM 125

[1]A song of ascents.
Those who trust in the LORD
are like Mount Zion never shaken,
settled forever.
[2]Jerusalem, mountains around it,
and the LORD is around His people
now and forevermore.
[3]For the rod of wickedness will not rest
on the portion of the righteous,
so that the righteous not set their hands
to wrongdoing.
[4]Do good, O LORD, to the good
and to the upright in their hearts.
[5]And those who bend to crookedness,
may the LORD take them off with the
wrongdoers.
Peace upon Israel!

PSALM 125 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *like Mount Zion never shaken, / settled forever.* This psalm, which, like the other songs of ascents, appears to have been composed in the exilic or immediately post-exilic period, expresses a national sense of trust in God despite the domination of an oppressive foreign power ("the rod of wickedness," verse 3). The Israelite community as a whole is represented as "the righteous." Jerusalem and the Temple may have been laid waste by the Babylonian invaders, but the solid persistence of the mountain on which the city was built is a token of the perdurability of the people that made its capital on this mountain. Most translations render "settled" here as "endure," "stand," or "abide." Although, by a small stretch, the Hebrew verb *y-sh-b* could have that meaning, it is repeatedly used in the *qal* conjugation as here to mean "be settled" (see, among other examples, Joel 4:20, "and Judah will be settled [*teshev*, exactly as here] forever"). The point is that Mount Zion not only will stand solid forever but will continue to be a place of habitation, despite the exile of some of its population. The reference of this verb to those who trust in God is that they will dwell, be securely settled, forever.

2. *Jerusalem, mountains around it.* The encircling mountains convey a sense of protection as a kind of natural defensive perimeter.

3. *the rod of wickedness.* The Hebrew noun *shevet* equally means "scepter," but the sense of punishing force may be the more relevant one here.

the portion of the righteous. The word for "portion," *goral*, is repeatedly used in Joshua and occasionally in Numbers for the division of the land according to the tribes. The portion of the territory of Judah may have been usurped by invaders, but this is not a condition that will persist.

so that the righteous not set their hands / to wrongdoing. The evident idea of this some-what cryptic clause is that the righteous, deprived of the land that belongs to them, might be tempted to acts of lawlessness in their desperation, whether brigandism or some sort of imitation of the violent aliens who have oppressed them. It is notable that this psalm coopts the language of the Wisdom psalms (the opposition of the righteous and the wicked) for national purposes.

PSALM 126

[1]A song of ascents.
When the LORD restores Zion's fortunes,
we should be like dreamers.
[2]Then will our mouth fill with laughter
and our tongue with glad song.
Then will they say in the nations:
"Great things has the LORD done with these."
[3]Great things has the LORD done with us.
We shall rejoice.
[4]Restore, O LORD, our fortunes
like freshets in the Negeb.
[5]They who sow in tears
in glad song will reap.
[6]He walks along and weeps,
the bearer of the seed bag.
He will surely come in with glad song
bearing his sheaves.

PSALM 126 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Zion's fortunes.* The Hebrew *shivat* (ostensibly, "return," though in the King James Version and other translations rendered as "captivity") is a mistake for either *shevut* or *shevit* (as in verse 4), both attested to in various Hebrew manuscripts. The term means "previous condition." Precisely this idiom for the restoration of a previous condition is used at the end of Job (42:10). The English rendering of the term as "fortunes" is adopted from the New Jewish Publication Society translation.

2. *Then will our mouth fill with laughter.* Given the fluidity of verb tenses in biblical poetry, there is disagreement as to whether the verbs here and in what follows are to be understood as past or future. The prayer for the restoration of national fortunes in verse 4 is a strong argument that the fulfillment indicated here has yet to take place. (The interpretation proposed, among others, by Hans-Joachim Kraus—that the exiles have already returned from Babylonia but are now praying for the full restoration of the national home—seems strained.) The anticipated gladness, then, is imagined to be so intense that it would be like a dream—the realization, we might say, of a wish-fulfillment dream.

4. *like freshets in the Negeb.* This is a familiar detail of topography and climate invoked elsewhere in biblical poetry. The reference is to wadis, or dry water gulches, that with the onset of the rainy season are filled with streams of water. It is an apt image for restoring the previous condition of a desolate Zion, and the idea of rushing water after aridity prepares the ground for the image of sowing and reaping in the last two verses of the psalm.

5. *They who sow in tears / in glad song will reap.* The long cycle of the agricultural year, beginning in the labor of planting and concluding with the fulfillment of the harvest, is an eloquent metaphor for a structure of historical time that moves from a difficult present to a happy future. That idea of reversal through time is neatly reinforced by the tight antithetical chiasm of the line: a ("sow"), b ("in tears"), b' ("in glad song"), a' ("reap"). The term *rinah*, "glad song," is the thematic thread that ties the psalm together, appearing in verse 2, here, and again in verse 6. It is as though this psalm, a prayer for national restoration that is presumably sung or chanted, were striving to turn into glad song.

6. *He walks along . . . / He will surely come in.* The effectiveness of these two concluding lines of the poem, with their neat interlinear antithetical parallelism, is in the unadorned directness of the parallel syntactic-semantic structure, and it seems a mistake to convert the lines into explanatory subordinate syntax (for example, by placing a "though" at the beginning of verse 6, as several modern translations do). Rather, we are invited to envisage two coordinate images, separated in time and precisely antithetical in meaning: "He walks along" (*halokh yelekh*), then "He will surely come in" (*boʾ yavoʾ*, the same emphatic structure of infinitive followed by imperfective verb). "Come in" refers to coming in from the fields after binding the sheaves of grain.

PSALM 127

[1]A song of ascents for Solomon.
If the LORD does not build a house,
in vain do its builders labor on it.
If the LORD does not watch over a town,
in vain does the watchman look out.
[2]In vain you who rise early, sit late,
eaters of misery's bread.
So much He gives to His loved ones in sleep.
[3]Look, the estate of the LORD is sons,
reward is the fruit of the womb.
[4]Like arrows in the warrior's hand,
thus are the sons born in youth.
[5]Happy the man
who fills his quiver with them.
They shall not be shamed
when they speak with their enemies at the gate.

PSALM 127 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *for Solomon.* The ascription to Solomon probably is triggered by the reference to the building of a house at the beginning of the poem, "house" in Hebrew also being the term for the Temple.

build a house. The Hebrew *bayit* equally means "house" and "home." The emphasis in the second half of the psalm on progeny suggests that both senses of the word are in play here.

2. *sit late.* That is, sit to eat (an activity mentioned in the next verset) after a long day of labor. The idea of labor is picked up from verse 1.

eaters of misery's bread. This Hebrew phrase, *leḥem haʿatsabim*, looks like an allusion to Genesis 3:17, "with pangs (*beʿitsavon*) shall you eat from it [of the soil] all the days of your life."

So much He gives to His loved ones in sleep. This whole verset is rather crabbed in the Hebrew. In the Masoretic Text one finds a singular "loved one," though two manuscripts and the Septuagint and Syriac show a plural. The spelling of "sleep," *shenaʾ*, with an *aleph* instead of a *heh* at the end, is odd, and the word lacks the prepositional prefix ("in") that one might expect. The somewhat conjectural meaning, which many interpreters propose, is that while people labor long and hard to earn their bread, God gives just as much to those He favors even while they sleep.

3. *sons.* The Hebrew *banim* can also mean "children" (as in the King James Version), but the martial imagery of the rest of the poem argues for the masculine sense of the term.

4. *Like arrows in the warrior's hand, / thus are the sons born in youth.* This line appears to reflect an idea that sons begotten when a man is young are especially vigorous—hence the simile of swiftly flying missiles—because their begetter is vigorous. (In Lamentations 3:13, "shafts of his quiver" is a kenning for "arrows," and this verse may well be a play on that poetic formula.) The man who begets many sons in his youth creates the equivalent of a little army on which he can depend. In the social structure of ancient Israel, this may not have been an entirely fanciful notion. One might recall that David's original power base was in part a kind of family militia, led by his three nephews.

5. *They shall not be shamed / when they speak with their enemies at the gate.* Some scholars correct the plural verbs of the Masoretic Text to the singular to make them refer to the man who has begotten all these sons. But because the

gate was a place where one confronted attacking enemies, and because “to be shamed” is often linked in Psalms with military defeat, the more likely reference is to the brave sons parleying with the enemy and preparing, if necessary, to do battle.

PSALM 128

[1]A song of ascents.
Happy all who fear the LORD,
who walk in His ways.
[2]When you eat of the toil of your hands,
happy are you, and it is good for you.
[3]Your wife is like a fruitful vine
in the recesses of your house,
your children like young olive trees
around your table.
[4]Look, for it is thus
that the man is blessed who fears the LORD.
[5]May the LORD bless you from Zion,
and may you see Jerusalem's good
all the days of your life.
[6]And may you see children of your children.
Peace upon Israel!

PSALM 128 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Happy all who fear the* LORD. As elsewhere, this initial formula signals the affiliation of this psalm with Wisdom literature (Psalm 1 once more is a useful point of reference). The rewards of the good life are spelled out here in an idyll of domesticity. The language is simple and direct; the only two metaphors, the vine and the young olive trees, link the family (evidently an urban family living in Jerusalem) with the world of productive horticulture. The Hebrew uses a singular subject from the beginning ("Happy everyone who fears . . ."), but the plural has been adopted in the translation for the sake of rhythm.

2. *When you eat of the toil of your hands.* This line stands in contrast to sundry biblical curses, such as those in Deuteronomy 28, that the people will toil and others will eat the fruit of their labor. It should be observed that the good life is not imagined in terms of wealth but of sufficiency—a man's enjoying the fruit of his own labor.

3. *Your wife is like a fruitful vine / in the recesses of your house.* The vocation of the wife is to produce children, as this line and the next make clear. She is removed from the public sphere, in the "recesses" (*yarketayim*, a term for a secluded corner of the house not adequately represented by the conventional translation "within").

olive trees. Like the vine, these are cultural symbols of fruitfulness, and the olive played a significant role in Israelite economy.

6. *may you see children of your children.* In a culture that did not envisage the persistence of a soul after death, perpetuity was imagined through offspring and was thought of as the greatest blessing. It is implied, of course, that the God-fearing man who is privileged to enjoy grandchildren as well as children will be granted the gift of longevity.

PSALM 129

[1]A song of ascents.
Much they beset me from my youth
—let Israel now say—
[2]much they beset me from my youth,
yet they did not prevail over me.
[3]My back the harrowers harrowed,
they drew a long furrow.
[4]The LORD is just.
He has slashed the bonds of the wicked.
[5]May they be shamed and fall back,
all the haters of Zion.
[6]May they be like the grass on rooftops
that the east wind withers,
[7]with which no reaper fills his hand,
no binder of sheaves his bosom,
[8]and no passersby say, “The LORD’s blessing upon you!
We bless you in the name of the LORD.”

PSALM 129 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Much they beset me from my youth.* The first-person language makes this initially sound like an individual complaint, but as the reference to "the haters of Zion" in verse 5 indicates, the first person is speaking on behalf of the nation, and the enemies referred to are probably the foreign oppressors who have conquered Judah.

let Israel now say. As in Psalm 124:1, this interjection would be words of direction called out by the choral leader.

3. *harrowers . . . / furrow.* This agricultural image for laceration and torment, vivid enough in itself, leads (moving chronologically from plowing to reaping) to the agricultural simile of the curse in verses 6–8.

6. *like the grass on rooftops.* Grass uprooted to serve as thatch of course quickly withers.

that the east wind withers. The Masoretic Text, *sheqadmat shalaf yavesh*, is opaque. One might translate it as "before it is pulled up it dries out," but the (Aramaic?) form of the first word is peculiar, and the grammar of the second word (it shows the form of an active transitive verb) is wrong. This translation follows an emendation first proposed by Hermann Gunkel, *sheqadim tishdof*.

7. *no reaper fills his hand, / no binder of sheaves his bosom.* The withered, wind-blasted grass on the rooftops produces an anti-harvest—nothing to grasp, nothing to bind and gather in. This image for the fate of the wicked is related to the one used in Psalm 1:4, "like chaff that the wind drives away."

8. *The LORD's blessing upon you.* These words are fairly close to the exchange of greetings between Boaz and the harvesters in Ruth 2:4, so one may assume that such formulas of mutual blessing were customarily exchanged between reapers and passersby during the harvest, itself a season of blessing through the produce of the fields. For this reason, it makes better sense to construe "We bless you in the name of the LORD" as part of this harvest dialogue and not as a liturgical benediction at the end of the psalm. In Ruth, it should be observed, both Boaz and the harvesters pronounce blessings.

PSALM 130

[1]A song of ascents.
From the depths I called You, LORD.
[2]Master, hear my voice.
May Your ears listen close to the voice of my plea.
[3]Were You, O Yah, to watch for wrongs,
Master, who could endure?
[4]For forgiveness is Yours,
so that You may be feared.
[5]I hoped for the LORD, my being hoped,
and for His word I waited.
[6]My being for the Master—
more than the dawn-watchers watch for the dawn.
[7]Wait, O Israel, for the LORD,
for with the LORD is steadfast kindness,
and great redemption is with Him.
[8]And He will redeem Israel
from all its wrongs.

PSALM 130 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *From the depths I called You.* Repeatedly in Psalms, "the depths" are an epithet for the depths of the sea, which in turn is an image of the realm of death. Generations of readers, Christian and Jewish, have responded to the archetypal starkness of this phrase: the speaker, from the darkness of profound despair, on the verge of death, calls out to God. This psalm, of course, is a penitential psalm, focusing not on the evil of Israel's enemies, as does Psalm 129, but on the wrongs Israel has done. It resembles Psalm 129 in beginning with a first-person singular that turns into the expression of a collective plea, as the last two verses make clear.

3. *watch for wrongs.* The verb *sh-m-r* in this context has the particular sense of "keep track of," but the translation "watch for" preserves the play in the Hebrew with the double occurrence of the same verbal stem in "more than dawn-watchers watch for the dawn," in verse 6.

4. *so that You may be feared.* That is, the fear of or reverence for God is not sheer terror but a response of awe to a deity who is both all-powerful and compassionately forgiving. (The Hebrew verb *y-r-ʾ* covers a semantic range from "fear" to "awe" to "reverence.")

5. *and for His word I waited.* Two manuscripts read "for Your word." This would turn the first clause into a vocative ("I hoped, O LORD"), which is a tempting construction because the verb "hoped" in the first verset is not followed in the Hebrew by a preposition ("for" being assumed in the translation as an ellipsis). The awaited word from God is presumably a word of forgiveness.

6. *My being for the Master— / more than the dawn-watchers watch for the dawn.* Previous translators have all supplied a predicate here ("is eager," "is turned to," or the King James Version's "waiteth," duly italicized to show that it is merely implied in the Hebrew). But the power of the line in the original is precisely that the anticipated verb ("wait" having appeared with its synonym "hoped"in the preceding line) is choked off: my inner being, my utmost self—for God more than watchmen watch for the dawn. (The Hebrew

noun *boqer* also has the more general sense of "morning," but in this context of watchmen through the night awaiting the first light, "dawn" is strongly indicated.) Previous translators render the four Hebrew words *mishomrim laboqer shomrim laboqer* as a simple repetition (for example, the New Jewish Publication Society, "than watchmen for the morning, watchmen for the morning." But *shomrim* can be either a verbal noun ("watchmen") or a plural verb ("watch"). The line becomes more vivid and energetic if the second occurrence is understood as a verb: more than the watchmen watch for the dawn, I watch—elliptically implied—for the LORD. The force of the image is evident: the watchmen sitting through the last of the three watches of the night, peering into the darkness for the first sign of dawn, cannot equal my intense expectancy for God's redeeming word to come to me in my dark night of the soul.

PSALM 131

[1]A song of ascents for David.
LORD, my heart has not been haughty,
nor have my eyes looked too high,
nor have I striven for great things,
nor for things too wondrous for me.
[2]But I have calmed and contented myself
like a weaned babe on its mother–
like a weaned babe I am with myself.
[3]Wait, O Israel, for the LORD,
now and forevermore.

PSALM 131 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *LORD, my heart has not been haughty.* This simple, concise, and affecting expression of humility shows no signs of cultic or public function, and is a good illustration of how the psalm as a poetic form of spiritual expression often stands outside the generic categories that scholars have constructed.

striven for great things. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "gone about in [or among] great things."

2. *I have calmed and contented myself / like a weaned babe on its mother.* There is some margin of doubt about the precise meaning of the two Hebrew verbs. The first sometimes has the sense of "to level" or "to make even," which may be applicable here. The second probably means "to quiet." The evident image is of a newly weaned baby embraced and comforted (the force of the preposition "on") by its mother and therefore calm, even though deprived of the breast.

like a weaned babe I am with myself. The Hebrew says literally "like a weaned babe I am on myself." The wording is cryptic, though the idea that emerges is quite touching: the person content with his lot, who does not aspire to grand things, is able to give himself the kind of reassuring calm that a loving mother gives the weaned child whom she comforts. After the rejection of images of reaching beyond—the eyes looking high, the striving for or going about among great things—the speaker evokes a sense of beautiful self-containment, an embracing of one's self like a child.

3. *Wait, O Israel, for the* LORD. Either this conclusion on a collective note is an editorial addition, or the condition of quiet contentment of the speaker is being proposed as a model for how a trusting Israel should wait for the LORD.

PSALM 132

[1]A song of ascents.
Recall, O LORD, for David
all his torment
[2]when he swore to the LORD,
vowed to Jacob's Champion:
[3]"I will not come into the tent of my home,
I will not mount my couch,
[4]I will not give sleep to my eyes
nor slumber to my lids
[5]until I find a place for the LORD,
a dwelling for Jacob's Champion."
[6]Look, we heard of it in Ephratha,
we found it in the fields of Jaar.
[7]Let us come to His dwelling,
let us bow to His footstool.
[8]Rise, O LORD, to Your resting place,
You and the Ark of Your strength.
[9]Let Your priests don victory,
and let Your faithful sing gladly.
[10]For the sake of David Your servant,

do not turn away Your anointed.
[11]The LORD swore to David
a true oath from which He will not turn back:
"From the fruit of Your loins
I will set up a throne for you.
[12]If your sons keep My pact
and My precept that I shall teach them,
their sons, too, evermore
shall sit on the throne that is yours."
[13]For the LORD has chosen Zion,
He desired it as His seat.
[14]"This is My resting place evermore,
Here will I dwell, for I desired it.
[15]I will surely bless its provisions,
its needy I will sate with bread.
[16]And its priests I will clothe with victory,
and its faithful will surely sing gladly.
[17]There will I make a horn grow for David,
I have readied a lamp for my anointed.
[18]His enemies I will clothe with shame,
but on him—his crown will gleam."

PSALM 132 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Recall, O LORD, for David / all his torment.* The suffering referred to would be the tribulations David underwent as a warrior king until his conquest of Jerusalem and to his self-sacrificing dedication to finding a "resting place" (verse 8) for the Ark of the Covenant. This psalm is related to the royal psalms, but it places a distinctive emphasis on the story about bringing up the Ark to Jerusalem, which is told in 2 Samuel 6–7.

3. *I will not come into the tent of my home, / I will not mount my couch.* The psalmist uses poetic-archaic terms for both "house" ("the tent of my home") and "bed" ("couch," *ʿeres yetsuʿai*).

4. *I will not give sleep to my eyes.* No such vow involving renunciation of sleep is reported in the narrative in 2 Samuel, but this appears to be a widespread literary motif. Several Mesopotamian texts have a monarch vowing not to sleep until he restores the image of his god to its temple.

6. *we heard of it.* The "it" is the Ark. Although the poem reconstructs the moment when the Ark is brought forth from its temporary resting place and carried up to Jerusalem, it is very unlikely that the psalm is actually contemporaneous with David. In fact, verse 10 seems to designate "David," then "Your anointed" as two separate figures: David is the faithful founder of the dynasty for whose sake God is implored to stand by the current incumbent of the throne, the anointed one. Scholars bent on recovering cultic settings for the various psalms have proposed an annual ritual commemorating the introduction of the Ark to Jerusalem, but, as with the theory of an enthronement festival (which has also been applied to this psalm), there is no real evidence for the conjecture.

the fields of Jaar. This place-name ("fields" is in the singular in the Hebrew) seems to be an alternate designation for Kiriath-Jearim, mentioned in 1 Samuel 7:2 as the place where the Ark was kept for two decades. "Jaar" (*yaʿar*) means "forest."

7. *His dwelling / . . . His footstool.* Both terms seem to refer to the Ark itself rather than to Jerusalem, because the move to Jerusalem is introduced only in the next verse.

9. *don victory.* The noun *tsedeq*, which elsewhere in Psalms often means "justice" or "righteousness," here probably has its other sense of "victory" because of the analogous line in verse 16, "And its priests I will clothe with victory" as well as the antithetical line at the end of the psalm, "His enemies I

will clothe with shame." ("Shame" often is used to indicate military defeat, and *tsedeq*, "victory," and *yesha*ʿ, "rescue," are paired terms for triumph in battle.) Perhaps the victory in question is David's original conquest of Jerusalem.

15. *provisions, / . . . bread.* "Bread," as elsewhere, is a synecdoche for "food." Providing sustenance for the city is linked with the theme of victory because a walled town under siege, as many biblical texts remind us, would be reduced to starvation.

17. *make a horn grow.* As elsewhere, the horn is a symbol of strength.

18. *his crown will gleam.* Most scholars construe the verb *yatsits* in this fashion, though its more common meaning is "to blossom." The cognate noun *tsits* means "diadem" (perhaps because the crown was imagined as a glorious efflorescence or was wrought with floral motifs), so perhaps the verb here might mean something like "will be a splendid diadem."

PSALM 133

[1]A song of ascents for David.
Look, how good and how pleasant
is the dwelling of brothers together.
[2]Like goodly oil on the head
coming down over the beard,
Aaron's beard that comes down
over the opening of his robe.
[3]Like Hermon's dew that comes down
on the parched mountains.
[4]For there the LORD ordained the blessing—
life forevermore.

PSALM 133 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Look, how good and how pleasant / is the dwelling of brothers together.* This poem is a kind of idyll celebrating harmonious life together in a fruitful land. A sense of quiet rapture is conveyed at the outset through three words of emphasis—"look" (*hineh*), and then twice "how" (*mah*).

2. *Like goodly oil on the head.* In the Israelite world, as in ancient Greece, rubbing the hair and body with aromatic olive oil was one of the palpable

physical pleasures of the good life.

Aaron's beard that comes down / over the opening of his robe. This initially puzzling line makes good associative sense. The "coming down" of the oil from head to beard is picked up in the "coming down" of the beard itself—a beard of evidently proverbial amplitude, that of the first high priest—over the opening of the robe. The full beard is presumably an image of vigor and abundance.

3. *Like Hermon's dew that comes down.* Now we have a third "coming down"—the dew on this northern mountain. The dew is understood to be an agency of fruitfulness, especially important in the long dry season when no rain falls.

on the parched mountains. The Masoretic Text reads "on the mountains of Zion," which does not make much sense because Mount Hermon is geographically removed from the Judahite mountains around Jerusalem, and dew certainly does not travel in this fashion. The translation adopts a small emendation, reading *tsiyah*, "parched land," for *tsiyon*, "Zion."

PSALM 134

[1]A song of ascents.
Look, bless the LORD,
all you servants of the LORD,
who stand in the LORD's house through the nights.
[2]Lift up your hands toward the holy place
and bless the LORD.
[3]May the LORD bless you from Zion,
He Who makes heaven and earth.

PSALM 134 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *bless the LORD, / all you servants of the LORD.* This extremely succinct psalm, the last of the fifteen songs of ascents, has a pronounced liturgical character. The worshippers are enjoined to bless—that is, to praise—the LORD, and God in turn is asked to bless—that is, to provide bounty to—the individual worshipper. The effect of summarizing liturgical intonation was perhaps deemed appropriate as a conclusion to the cycle of fifteen psalms.

who stand in the LORD's house through the nights. The acts of the sacrificial cult were completed by sundown, but the reference here could be either to the tending of the fires and the Temple lamps through the night or to

those who stayed to pray, or perhaps to partake of the sacrificial feast, through the hours of the night.

2. *holy place.* The Hebrew *qodesh* (“holiness”) is often a designation of the sanctuary, although it might also be an epithet for the heavens, as the poetic parallelism of Psalm 150:1 suggests: “Praise God in His holy place [*qodsho*], / praise Him in the vault of His power.”

PSALM 135

[1]Hallelujah.
Praise the name of the LORD,
O praise, you servants of the LORD,
[2]who stand in the house of the LORD,
in the courts of the house of our God.
[3]Praise Yah, for the LORD is good,
hymn His name, for it is sweet.
[4]For Yah has chosen for Himself Jacob,
Israel as His treasure.
[5]For I know that the LORD is great,
and our Master more than all the gods.
[6]All that the LORD desired He did
in the heavens and on the earth,
in the seas and all the depths.
[7]He brings up the clouds from the ends of the earth;
lightning for the rain He made;
He brings forth the wind from His stores.
[8]Who struck down the firstborn of Egypt
from humankind to beast.
[9]Sent forth signs and portents in the midst of Egypt

against Pharaoh and against all his servants.
10 Who struck down many nations
and killed mighty kings—
11 Sihon, the Amorite king
and Og, king of Bashan,
and all the kingdoms of Canaan.
12 And gave their land as an estate,
an estate to Israel, His people.
13 LORD, Your name is forever,
LORD, Your fame for all generations.
14 For the LORD champions His people,
and for His servants He shows change of heart.
15 The nations' idols are silver and gold,
the work of human hands.
16 A mouth they have and they do not speak,
eyes they have and they do not see.
17 Ears they have and they do not hear,
nor is there breath in their mouth.
18 Like them may their makers be,
all who trust in them.
19 House of Israel, bless the LORD,
House of Aaron, bless the LORD.
20 House of Levi, bless the LORD.
Those who fear the LORD, bless the LORD.
21 Blessed is the LORD from Zion,
Who dwells in Jerusalem.

Hallelujah!

PSALM 135 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Hallelujah. / Praise the name of the* LORD. Formally, this is a psalm of praise or thanksgiving, but it also incorporates historical elements (verses 8–12), and verse 14 may suggest that the nation has fallen on hard times and awaits, or prays for, God's intervention on its behalf.

2. *who stand in the house of the* LORD, */ in the courts of the house of our God.* This clause concretely evokes the Temple setting in which this liturgical exhortation to praise God is enacted.

3. *hymn His name, for it is sweet.* The conjunction of the root *z-m-r* ("hymn," "sing," "make music") and the root *n-ʿ-m* ("sweet" or "pleasant") is idiomatic in biblical Hebrew. Thus, David is called "the sweet singer of Israel" (*neʿim zemirot yisraʾel*), 2 Samuel 23:1.

6. *in the heavens and on the earth, / in the seas and all the depths.* The poet, having just proclaimed that the God of Israel is greater than all other gods, now invokes a postmythological cosmic arena in which YHWH reigns everywhere, without antagonists such as the primordial sea god.

8. *the firstborn of Egypt.* In this rapid poetic summary of God's triumphant acts in history, the psalmist leaps from the victory over Pharaoh in the Exodus story to the victory over the trans-Jordanian kings (verses 10 and 11) reported in Numbers 21.

11. *Og, king of Bashan.* In Deuteronomy 3:11, Og is described as a giant.

13. *LORD, Your name is forever.* The historical summary concludes with this line of praise for God's enduring greatness, which in turn serves as a transition to the implied prayer, or declaration of trust, of the next verse.

14. *For the LORD champions His people, / and for His servants He shows change of heart.* This entire line is virtually identical with Deuteronomy 32:36 and should probably be thought of as a deliberate quotation. There are some

linguistic indications that this psalm is relatively late (for example, the use of the Aramaic-influenced accusative *lamed* before the three nouns in verse 11), though it is not altogether certain that the national disaster after which the psalmist awaits vindication is the Babylonian exile.

15. *The nations' idols are silver and gold.* This and the next three verses repeat, with minor changes, Psalm 115:4–8. The closeness to the anti-idolatry polemic of the anonymous prophet of the exile referred to as Deutero-Isaiah is striking. The thematic connection with what precedes is that God, controller of all realms of creation and of history, will surely now vindicate His people that has been humiliated by worshippers of sticks and stones.

17. *they do not hear.* Unlike the parallel verse in Psalm 115, the verb used here is not *shamaʿ* but *heʾezin*, built from the same root as *ʾozen*, "ear."

18. *Like them may their makers be.* In the implicitly historical context of this psalm, the curse that the idolators be reduced to the nullity of their idols has special force.

20. *House of Levi.* That is, the Levites in distinction to the priests proper ("house of Aaron").

PSALM 136

[1]Acclaim the LORD, for He is good,
for His kindness is forever.
[2]Acclaim the greatest God,
for His kindness is forever.
[3]Acclaim the greatest Master,
for His kindness is forever.
[4]Who alone performs great wonders,
for His kindness is forever.
[5]Who makes the heavens in wisdom,
for His kindness is forever.
[6]Who stamps firm the earth on the waters,
for His kindness is forever.
[7]Who makes the great lights,
for His kindness is forever.
[8]The sun for dominion of day,
for His kindness is forever.
[9]The moon and stars for dominion of night,
for His kindness is forever.
[10]Who strikes Egypt in its firstborn,
for His kindness is forever.

[11]And brings out Israel from their midst,
for His kindness is forever.
[12]With a strong hand and an outstretched arm,
for His kindness is forever.
[13]Who split the Reed Sea into parts,
for His kindness is forever.
[14]And made Israel pass through its midst,
for His kindness is forever.
[15]And shook Pharaoh and his force into the Reed Sea,
for His kindness is forever.
[16] Who led His people in the wilderness,
for His kindness is forever.
[17]Who struck down great kings,
for His kindness is forever.
[18]And killed mighty kings,
for His kindness is forever.
[19]Sihon, king of the Amorites,
for His kindness is forever.
[20]And Og, king of Bashan,
for His kindness is forever.
[21]And gave their land as an estate,
for His kindness is forever.
[22]An estate for Israel His servant,
for His kindness is forever.
[23] Who recalled us when we were low,

for His kindness is forever.
24 And delivered us from our foes,
for His kindness is forever.
25 Who gives bread to all flesh,
for His kindness is forever.
26 Acclaim the God of the heavens,
for His kindness is forever.

PSALM 136 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Acclaim the LORD.* With the initial verb of "acclaim" or "thanks," this text announces itself as a thanksgiving psalm. It takes the form of acclaiming God as creator of heaven and earth, then moving rapidly through God's intervention in history in the Exodus story and in the conquest of Canaan. Because of the emphasis on the Exodus, some scholars have proposed that this was used in a Temple rite on Passover, but that link is not certain because in any case the liberation from Egyptian bondage was thought of as the central instance of God's benevolence in history to Israel.

for His kindness is forever. This repeated refrain clearly must have been an antiphonal response in the liturgy, perhaps by the whole community of worshippers, to the lines of the chorus. As elsewhere, "kindness" also implies steadfast faithfulness.

2. *the greatest God.* The literal Hebrew formulation, "the God of Gods," might mean that the God of Israel is more powerful than all the other supposed gods. But the idiomatic pattern "*x* of *x*s" (as in "Song of Songs") is also a form of superlative, so it probably means "the greatest God." The same is true of the greatest "Master" in the next verse.

6. *stamps firm the earth.* The verb *raqaʿ* means to "pound" or "stamp flat," and is cognate with *raqiʿa*, the term used for the vault of the heavens in Genesis 1. There is, then, a solid slab or "firmament" that is the sky, and

another one below that is the earth. Beneath the earth is the great deep—hence the earth is "on the waters." As is evident in the Flood story, there are waters above the heavens and waters below the earth (see Genesis 7:11).

7. *makes the great lights.* This verse and the next are a virtual citation of Genesis 1:16, though a variant form of the word for "lights" (*ʾorim* instead of *meʾorot*) is used here.

12. *a strong hand and an outstretched arm.* The phrase is quoted from Deuteronomy 4:34, 5:15, and 26:8.

13. *split.* A different verb is used here from the one in Exodus 14, but the meaning is essentially the same.

15. *shook.* This unusual and vivid verb also appears in Exodus 14.

23. *recalled us when we were low.* The reference is vague but must allude to some point in Israelite history after the conquest of the land, when the nation was at the mercy of its enemies. (See the next verse, "And delivered us from our foes.") Because this psalm is probably post-exilic, it could refer to the Babylonian captivity. But in keeping with the overall aim of thanksgiving, national tribulations are no more than glanced at here.

25. *Who gives bread to all flesh.* As elsewhere, "bread" indicates all kinds of food. In an apt gesture of closure, the celebration of God's enduring kindness, having begun with His acts as creator, concludes by moving beyond the national perspective to God's providence to all living creatures.

PSALM 137

[1]By Babylon's streams,
there we sat, oh we wept,
when we recalled Zion.
[2]On the poplars there
we hung up our lyres.
[3]For there our captors had asked of us
words of song,
and our plunderers—rejoicing:
"Sing us from Zion's songs."
[4]How can we sing a song of the LORD
on foreign soil?
[5]Should I forget you, Jerusalem,
may my right hand wither.
[6]May my tongue cleave to my palate
if I do not recall
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my chief joy.
[7]Recall, O LORD, the Edomites,
on the day of Jerusalem, saying:
"Raze it, raze it,

to its foundation!”
[8]Daughter of Babylon the despoiler,
happy who pays you back in kind,
for what you did to us.
[9]Happy who seizes and smashes
your infants against the rock.

PSALM 137 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *By Babylon’s streams, / there we sat, oh we wept.* This psalm was almost certainly composed shortly after the deportation of the Judahites by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E.—the experience of exile is fresh and acutely painful. Scholars committed to seeing a ritual setting for virtually every psalm have proposed a rite of lamentation among the exiles, but there is no persuasive evidence for that in the text, and such a view underestimates the use of the psalm form as a vehicle for the expression of spontaneous emotion —in this case, collective emotion. The first Hebrew noun, *neharot*, generally means “rivers,” but because the more probable reference is to the network of canals that connected the Tigris and the Euphrates, “streams” is a preferable translation here. It should be noted that, in keeping with the evolution of Hebrew poetry in the Late Biblical period, semantic parallelism within the lines in this poem is weak, an absence occasionally compensated for by interlinear parallelism.

2. *On the poplars there.* The literal sense of the Hebrew behind “there” is, as the King James Version has it, “in the midst thereof.” But that is confusing because it is not clear what the “thereof” refers to (presumably the land of Babylon). In any case, *sham*, “there,” is twice repeated, expressing the alienation of the collective speakers from the place they find themselves, which, logically, should be “here” rather than “there.”

we hung up our lyres. This would seem to be a gesture of renunciation of their use, though some commentators have imagined that the exiles are hiding their lyres in the foliage.

3. *our plunderers.* The Hebrew *tolaleinu* is anomalous but is probably a variant form of the familiar term for plunderers, *sholaleinu*, perhaps encouraged—as the Israeli scholar Meir Gruber has proposed—by the opportunity for sound-play with *talinu*, "we hung up," at the end of the preceding line.

Sing us from Zion's songs. The assumption is that the singers of the Jerusalem Temple were known for the beauty of their music, and their captors want to be entertained by them. A bas-relief from the palace of Sennacherib in Nineveh actually shows three prisoners carrying lyres marching under the surveillance of an Assyrian soldier. "Zion's songs" would be any of the songs sung in the Temple and not necessarily the special category of psalm we now call "psalms of Zion," which celebrate the city.

4. *a song of the* LORD. This should not be thought of as a technical category of "Yahweh songs" (Hans-Joachim Kraus), for almost all the psalms are in one way or another directed to the God of Israel and invoke Him. Meir Gruber aptly observes that from the Babylonian perspective, what their captives sing are national songs, "Zion's songs," whereas the Judahites themselves view them as sacred music, "a song of the LORD."

5. *may my right hand wither.* The Masoretic Text reads "may my right hand forget [*tishkaḥ*]." This is problematic because there is no evidence elsewhere for an intransitive use of the verb "to forget"—hence the strategy of desperation of the King James Version in adding, in italics, an object to the verb, "her cunning." But a simple reversal of consonants yields *tikhḥash*, "wither." The loss of capacity of hand and tongue is linked with the refusal of song, for the right hand is needed to pluck the lyre and the tongue to sing the song.

7. *Recall, O* LORD, *the Edomites.* After the solemn vow never to forget the longed-for Jerusalem, the poem moves into a second angry phase that follows the sorrow of the first: a flashback to the terrible moment when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians with the gleeful encouragement of their Edomite allies. Obadiah 1:8–15 provides a vivid picture of the appalling actions of the Edomites at this historical moment.

on the day of Jerusalem. This phrase means the day of the destruction or conquest of Jerusalem, but the painful noun of destruction is suppressed, as though it stuck in the throat of the poet.

8. *Babylon the despoiler.* The Masoretic Text shows *hashedudah*, "the despoiled," a reading that can be saved only by an exegetical contortion in which the passive form of the verb is understood to mean "about to become despoiled." An adjustment of vocalization yields *hashodeidah*, "the despoiler."

9. *Happy who seizes and smashes / your infants against the rock.* No moral justification can be offered for this notorious concluding line. All one can do is to recall the background of outraged feeling that triggers the conclusion: the Babylonians have laid waste to Jerusalem, exiled much of its population, looted and massacred; the powerless captives, ordered—perhaps mockingly—to sing their Zion songs, respond instead with a lament that is not really a song and ends with this bloodcurdling curse pronounced on their captors, who, fortunately, do not understand the Hebrew in which it is pronounced.

PSALM 138

[1]For David.
I acclaim You with all my heart,
before gods I hymn to You.
[2]I bow toward Your holy temple,
and I acclaim Your name
for Your kindness and Your steadfast truth,
for You have made Your word great across all
Your heavens.
[3]On the day I called You answered me,
You made strength well up within me.
[4]All kings of the earth will acclaim You, LORD,
for they have heard the words of Your mouth.
[5]And they will sing of the ways of the LORD,
for great is the LORD's glory.
[6]For high is the LORD yet the lowly He sees,
and the lofty, from a distance, He knows.
[7]Though I walk in the midst of straits,
You give me life in spite of my enemies' wrath.
You stretch out Your hand,
and Your right hand rescues me.

[8] The LORD will requite me.
O LORD, Your kindness is forever.
Do not let go of Your handiwork.

PSALM 138 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *I acclaim You.* As repeatedly elsewhere, the initial verb for acclaim or thanks signals a thanksgiving psalm. The individual who is offering thanks here appears to have been rescued from enemies who sought his undoing (verse 7), though it is unclear whether these are actual martial enemies or hostile people who wanted to harm him in some other way (perhaps judicially).

before gods. This implicitly polytheistic phrase has troubled interpreters through the ages. The Aramaic Targum rendered it, not very convincingly, as "judges." Following this line, Rashi and other medieval exegetes understood it as a reference to the Sanhedrin (!). It is most plausible to see here either a linguistic fossil from polytheism or even an anti-polytheistic polemic gesture: I hymn to You in defiant presence before all those deities that people imagine to be real gods.

2. *for You have made Your word great across all Your heavens.* The Hebrew is problematic. The literal sense of the received text is "for You have made Your word greater than all Your name." This translation adopts a frequently proposed emendation, reading instead of *shimkha*, "Your name," *shameykha*, "Your heavens."

3. *You made strength well up within me.* The verb *hirhiv* is surprising because it would generally mean something like "to make proud." It could have an extended meaning here, or it could be a mistake for *hirḥiv* (literally, "to broaden") or *hirbah* ("to increase"), as several of the ancient versions show.

4. *All kings of the earth . . . / have heard the words of Your mouth.* The background of this line is not self-evident. The idea that the rulers of all the nations will acclaim the God of Israel is in keeping with a reiterated theme of

Deutero-Isaiah, as many scholars have noted. But, at least on the face of it, the saving act of YHWH in this psalm is in the life of one individual, so the kings of the earth would scarcely be aware of it. Perhaps hearing God's words —realizing the truths He has revealed to humankind—is an action entirely independent of the plight from which the thankful speaker of the poem has been rescued. God has shown His kindness to the speaker, and this same attribute, for different reasons, is recognized across the earth.

6. *the lofty, from a distance, He knows.* The Hebrew syntax also allows a different construction, "the Lofty [One] from a distance knows," but that adjective (*gavoah*) is not generally used as an epithet for God, and the pairing of antithetical objects to the verb in each half of the line is much more in keeping with biblical poetic practice.

8. *requite me.* The Hebrew verb *gamar* might also mean "finish" or "complete" (its fixed meaning in later Hebrew), but the context suggests that here it is the equivalent of the verb *gamal*, "requite."

Do not let go of Your handiwork. The Hebrew verb has a concreteness diluted by the conventional translation as "forsake." The verb *hirpah* means to relax the muscles of the hand so that what it holds is dropped or released. The speaker, as a human creature, reminds God that he is God's own handiwork. The use of the "hand" component in all likelihood encouraged the poet to choose this particular verb. God is thus implicitly figured as a potter (as in Genesis 2) who is implored not to loose his hand and allow what he has made to fall and shatter.

PSALM 139

[1] For the lead player, a David psalm. LORD, You searched me and You know,
[2] It is You Who know when I sit and I rise,
You fathom my thoughts from afar.
[3] My path and my lair You winnow,
and with all my ways are familiar.
[4] For there is no word on my tongue
but that You, O LORD, wholly know it.
[5] From behind and in front You shaped me,
and You set Your palm upon me.
[6] Knowledge is too wondrous for me,
high above—I cannot attain it.
[7] Where can I go from Your spirit,
and where from before You flee?
[8] If I soar to the heavens, You are there,
if I bed down in Sheol—there You are.
[9] If I take wing with the dawn,
if I dwell at the ends of the sea,
[10] there, too, Your hand leads me,
and Your right hand seizes me.

[11]Should I say, “Yes, darkness will swathe me,
and the night will be light for me,
[12]Darkness itself will not darken for You,
and the night will light up like the day,
the dark and the light will be one.
[13]For You created my innermost parts,
wove me in my mother’s womb.
[14] I acclaim You, for fearsomely I am set apart,
wondrous are Your acts,
and my being deeply knows it.
[15] My frame was not hidden from You,
when I was made in a secret place,
knitted in the utmost depths.
[16] My unformed shape Your eyes did see,
and in Your book all was written down.
The days were fashioned,
not one of them did lack.
[17] As for me, how weighty are Your thoughts, O God,
how numerous their sum.
[18] Should I count them, they would be more than the sand.
I awake, and am still with You.
[19]Would You but slay the wicked, God—
O men of blood, turn away from me!—
[20]Who say Your name to scheme,

Your enemies falsely swear.
[21]Why, those who hate You, LORD, I hate,
and those against You I despise.
[22]With utter hatred I do hate them,
they become my enemies.
[23]Search me, God, and know my heart,
probe me and know my mind.
[24]And see if a vexing way be in me,
and lead me on the eternal way.

PSALM 139 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *LORD, You searched me and You know.* These words inaugurate one of the most remarkably introspective psalms in the canonical collection. Although the invocation of bloody-minded enemies in verses 19 and 20 indicates a connection with the psalms of supplication, this poem is essentially a meditation on God's searching knowledge of man's innermost thoughts, on the limitations of human knowledge, and on God's inescapable presence throughout the created world. The reflection on the wonder of man's creatureliness in verses 13–16 is reminiscent of Job 10, and certain linguistic features of the Hebrew recall if not Job directly then the late period in which Job was composed.

3. *My path and my lair You winnow.* The word represented as "lair," *rovʿa*, is unusual; interchangeable with the root *r-b-ts*, it generally indicates the place where an animal lies down. The verb here, from the root *z-r-h*, reflects an extension of its agricultural meaning, an extended sense also in usage in English ("winnow" in the sense of "to analyze and critically assess").

5. *From behind and in front You shaped me.* The verb could also mean something like "besiege" or "bring into straits," but the sense of shaping or

fashioning like a potter seems more likely here, especially as the poem moves ahead to the imagining of the forming of the embryo in the womb. In this understanding, "You set Your palm upon me" is not a menacing act but rather the gesture of the potter.

9. *If I take wing with the dawn, / if I dwell at the ends of the sea.* Some interpreters have understood this as a simple indication of east and west (a different Hebrew term for "dawn" means "east," and "sea" can sometimes mean "west"). The image of the line, however, is more vividly mythological than that. The speaker imagines taking wing with the dawn as it appears in the east, then soaring with the sun on its westward path to the limits of the imagined world, "the ends [singular in the Hebrew] of the sea."

11. *darkness will swathe me.* This fantasy of being enveloped in darkness picks up the idea of bedding down in Sheol, the underworld.

and the night will be light for me. That is, I will immerse myself in darkness, acting as though the pitch black of night could be my light, could serve instead of the illumination of daylight existence.

13. *innermost parts.* The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "kidneys." Though the kidneys are generally thought of as the seat of conscience in the Bible, the context here (see the parallel verset, "wove me in my mother's womb") suggests that in this case the term is a synecdoche for all the intricate inner organs of the human creature. The location in the womb is associatively triggered by the idea of being enveloped in darkness expressed in verses 11 and 12.

14. *for fearsomely I am set apart.* The Hebrew *ki noraʾot nifleiyti* is not clear. Most interpreters understand *nifleiyti* as a variant spelling of *nifleiyta*, a verb whose root means "wonder" and render it here as "wondrously made." But there is scant evidence that this verb can mean "wondrously made" rather than simply "was wondrous." Spelled as it is with a *heh* and not an *aleph*, the verb means "to be set apart" or "to be distinct." That meaning might be appropriate for the speaker's reflection on how he evolved in the womb from an unformed embryo to a particular human being with the consciousness of his own individuality.

15. *knitted in the utmost depths.* The literal sense of the Hebrew phrase is "in the depths of the earth." With the movement from the enveloping darkness of a cosmic netherworld to the womb earlier in the poem, at this point there is

an archetypal association between womb and the chthonic depths. (The Aramaic Targum renders this phrase flatly as *kereisa de'ima*, "mother's womb.") This translation chooses an English phrase that might suggest both womb and netherworld.

16. *and in Your book all was written down.* The Hebrew is obscure—an obscurity compounded by the introduction of a plural (literally, "they all are written down").

The days were fashioned. The textual difficulties continue. If the received text is correct, it might mean "the future days of the child to be born were already given shape in the womb."

not one of them did lack. The enigmatic Hebrew text says literally, "and not one in them." The verb "did lack"—in Hebrew, this would be *yeḥsar*—is added as an interpretive guess.

17. *weighty.* The Hebrew root *y-q-r* more often means "precious," but the sense of "weighty" registers an Aramaic influence, reflecting the late composition of this psalm.

18. *I awake.* The effort of many modern interpreters to link the verb with *qets*, "end," is dubious, because *heqitsoti* elsewhere always means "I awake." What the poet may be imagining is that after the long futile effort of attempting to count God's infinite thoughts, he drifts off in exhaustion, then awakes to discover that God's eternal presence, with all those endless divine thoughts, is still with him.

19. *God.* The name used here is *'eloah*, which occurs only in poetry and is especially common in Job.

20. *say Your name.* The Hebrew says only "say You," but "name," as the parallelism with swearing falsely (the same idiom as in the Decalogue) indicates, is implied.

21. *those against you.* Some scholars, with an eye to the symmetry of expression, prefer to read—instead of the Masoretic *tequmemekha*—a noun cognate with the verb, *mitqotetekha*, "those who despise You."

23. *Search me, God, and know my heart.* The echo of verse 1 marks a closure through envelope structure.

my mind. The Hebrew says "my thoughts," but because a different word is used from the one that occurs in verses 2 and 17, the translation opts for

“mind.”

24. *vexing.* Others understand this as “idolatrous,” but the word for “idol” is ʿ*etsev*, whereas the form appearing here, ʿ*otsev*, would usually mean “pain,” “sorrow,” “vexation.” Wayward thoughts are imagined to vex God.

lead me. The very verb that in verse 10 had an ambiguous sense, perhaps of entrapment, here at the end is wholly positive.

PSALM 140

[1]For the lead player, a David psalm.
[2]Free me, LORD, from evil folk,
from a violent man preserve me.
[3]Who plot evil in their heart,
each day stir up battles.
[4] They sharpen their tongue like a serpent,
venom of spiders beneath their lip.
selah
[5]Guard me, LORD, from the wicked man's hands,
from a violent man preserve me,
who plots to trip up my steps.
[6]The haughty laid down a trap for me,
and with cords they spread out a net.
Alongside the path they set snares for me.
selah
[7]I said to the LORD, "My God are You.
Hearken, O LORD, to the sound of my pleas."
[8] LORD, Master, my rescuing strength,
You sheltered my head on the day of the fray.
[9] Do not grant, O LORD, the desires of the wicked,

do not fulfill his devising.
They would rise.

selah

[10]May the mischief of their own lips
cover the heads of those who come round me.
[11] May He rain coals of fire upon them,
make them fall into ravines, never to rise.
[12] May no slanderer stand firm in the land,
may the violent evil man be trapped in pitfalls.
[13]I know that the LORD will take up
the cause of the lowly, the case of the needy.
[14]Yes, the righteous will acclaim Your name,
the upright will dwell in Your presence.

PSALM 140 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Free me, LORD, from evil folk.* The poem immediately launches on a series of formulas of the psalm of supplication that continue to the end.

3. *stir up battles.* The Masoretic Text appears to say "fear [*yaguru*] battles." A minor emendation of the verb to *yegaru*, which is the reading reflected in three ancient translations, yields the more likely "stir up."

8. *on the day of the fray.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "on the day of weapons."

9. *They would rise.* At this point, continuing to the end of verse 12, the text shows numerous signs of mangling in scribal transmission. Attempts to reconstruct it have not been notably successful, though one might adopt the

proposal of adding the negative *ʾal*, yielding "Let them not rise." "They would rise" (a single word in the Hebrew) does not make evident sense in context, and the doubts about its textual authenticity are compounded by the fact that as one word with one accented syllable it does not scan and could not constitute a verset.

10. *May the mischief of their own lips.* The translation of the entire verse is no more than a plausible guess. The syntax looks odd, and "mischief" for *ʿamal* (elsewhere, either "toil" or "trouble") is something of a stretch in order to make sense of these words.

11. *May He rain.* The Masoretic Text has a plural verb, *yimotu*, which means "will slip down" and is not the word that would be used for the coming down from the sky of a shower of fiery coals. This translation follows one version of the Syriac in reading *yamteir*, "May He rain," the same verb used in Genesis to describe the destruction of Sodom.

ravines. The Hebrew *mahamurot* appears only here. It seems to mean a deep pit or a natural crevice, as this translation guesses.

12. *slanderer.* The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "man of the tongue."

may the violent evil man be trapped in pitfalls. The Hebrew here, like the translation, is ungainly and seems too long to constitute a verset. The verb "may be trapped" is literally "may he trap him," though sometimes in biblical Hebrew the third-person singular is used as an equivalent of the passive form of the verb. "Pitfalls," *madḥeifot*, occurs only here but shows a verbal stem that means "to push over."

13–14. The plea to be rescued from the hands of evildoers concludes with an affirmation of trust that God will intervene on behalf of the oppressed and that the righteous will enjoy God's presence, giving thanks to Him as is due.

PSALM 141

[1]A David psalm.
O LORD, I call You. Hasten to me.
Hearken to my voice when I call You.
[2]May my prayer stand as incense before You,
my uplifted hands as the evening offering.
[3]Place, O LORD, a watch on my mouth,
a guard at the door of my lips.
[4]Incline not my heart to an evil word
to plot wicked acts
with wrongdoing men,
and let me not feast on their delicacies.
[5]Let the righteous man strike me,
the faithful rebuke me.
Let no wicked man's oil adorn my head,
for still my prayer is against their evils.
[6] Let their leaders slip on a rock,
and let them hear my words which are sweet.
[7] As when the earth is parted and split,
our bones are scattered in the mouth of Sheol.
[8] For to You, O LORD, my eyes turn.

In You I take refuge. Expose not my life.
[9]Guard me from the trap they laid for me
and the snares of the wrongdoers.
[10]May the wicked fall in their nets.
I alone shall go on.

PSALM 141 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *O LORD, I call You.* This is another highly formulaic psalm of supplication.

3. *a watch on my mouth, / a guard at the door of my lips.* As in many of the supplications, the malicious intention of the speaker's enemies seems to manifest itself in vicious speech. The special emphasis here is on the speaker's prayer that he not answer them in kind, that he keep his own speech from slander and invective.

4. *an evil word.* Although *davar* can also mean "thing," the focus on acts of speaking suggests that its other sense, of "word," is more salient here. A revocalization proposed by Rabbi Israel Stein, *ledaber* instead of *ledavar*, yields "to speak evil."

5. *the faithful rebuke me.* It is at this point that the coherence of the Hebrew text breaks down, and grave textual problems persist until the end of verse 7. The Masoretic Text appears to say literally, "May the righteous man strike me kindness." Attempts to rescue this by interpreting *ḥesed* as "with kind intention" or "in loyalty" are strained. The translation reads instead of *ḥesed* the noun *ḥasid*, meaning "the faithful person" and making it the subject of "rebuke me," dropping the *waw* ("and") before that verb.

Let no wicked man's oil adorn my head. This whole clause is problematic in the Hebrew, which seems to say "Let not oil of the head negate [?] my head." The translation assumes that the first *roʾsh* ("head") has been inadvertently duplicated from the second, and originally read *rashaʿ*, "wicked man." The verb *yani* here is anomalous, lacking the *aleph* at the end that

would make it mean "negate" and not corresponding to any recognizable Hebrew verb formation. The translation guesses it may derive from the root *n-w-h* ("to be beautiful," yielding *noy*, "beauty" in postbiblical Hebrew). Oil on the head was regarded as a pleasure and an enhancement. Whatever the obscurity, the line means to contrast the preferability of being rebuked by the righteous to the pleasures of the wicked.

6. *Let their leaders slip on a rock.* Everything in this segment of text is doubtful. The noun *shoftim* usually means "judges," but in the Book of Judges it designates an ad hoc military leader, and the judicial sense may be unlikely here. The phrase "slip on a rock" is peculiar, especially because the Hebrew says, quite unidiomatically, "in the hands of a rock," and the form of the verb used here does not ordinarily indicate a jussive. Perhaps "rock" belongs somewhere in the splitting of the earth of the next verse.

7. *As when the earth is parted and split.* Here it is the grammar that is baffling because both Hebrew verbs are active and transitive, with no grammatical subject in sight. Rashi proposes an elided "tree" as the subject of the parting and splitting, though the imagery looks more like an earthquake.

our bones are scattered in the mouth of Sheol. As the text stands, this would be an expression of the dire plight of the speaker and his friends (the latter rather suddenly introduced, it must be said) beset by evil people. One version of the Septuagint and the Syriac reads instead "their bones," making this a continuation of the catastrophe that overtakes the wicked in the previous verse.

8. *my eyes turn.* "Turn" is merely implied in the Hebrew.

PSALM 142

[1]A David *maskil*, when he was in the cave, a prayer.
[2]With my voice I shout to the LORD,
with my voice I plead to the LORD.
[3]I pour out my speech before Him,
my distress before Him I tell,
[4]when my spirit faints within me,
You, You know my path.
On the path on which I walk
they have laid a trap for me.
[5]Look on the right and see—
there is no one who knows me.
Escape is gone for me,
no one inquires for me.
[6]I shouted to You, O LORD.
I said, You are my shelter,
my lot in the land of the living.
[7]Listen close to my song of prayer,
for I have sunk very low.
Save me from my pursuers,
for they are too strong for me.

[8] Bring me out from the
    to acclaim Your name.
For the righteous will draw round me
    when You requite me.

PSALM 142 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *A David* maskil, *when he was in the cave.* Because of the urgency of this compact supplication, the editors link it in the superscription with David's moment of distress when he was hiding from Saul (1 Samuel 22).

4. *when my spirit faints within me.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "when my spirit faints upon me."

You, You know my path. The addition of the usually elided pronoun *ʾatah* makes this emphatic.

5. *Look on the right.* In Psalms, help is repeatedly on the right hand, so it is dismaying when there is no one there who knows the speaker.

8. *Bring me out from the prison.* Some scholars have understood this literally, making this psalm a prisoner's supplication. The speaker has been entrapped (verse 4); he is incarcerated with no one around to help him (verse 5); and he pleads to be freed. But all this may be fanciful because prison, like "straits," is a ready metaphor for a condition of acute distress, and the binary opposition between restrictive enclosure and wide-open space is common in the figurative language of Psalms.

the righteous will draw round me. The meaning of the verb *yakhtiru* is in dispute. Normally, it would mean "to crown," but the verbal stem suggests "to go around" (a crown going around the head). Either the Masoretic *yakhtiru* has the sense here of *yekhatru* (the same root in another conjugation), "to surround," or it should be revocalized as *yekhatru* (in the consonantal text, it lacks the *yod*, as the form *yekhatru* does). This is the reading of the Septuagint.

PSALM 143

[1]A David psalm.
LORD, hear my prayer,
hearken to my pleas.
In Your faithfulness answer me, in Your bounty.
[2]Do not come into judgment with Your servant,
for no living thing is acquitted before You.
[3]For the enemy pursued me,
thrust my life to the ground,
made me dwell in darkness like those long dead.
[4]And my spirit fainted within me,
in my breast my heart was stunned.
[5]I recalled the days of old,
I recited all Your deeds,
of Your handiwork I did speak.
[6]I stretched out my hands to You—
my very self like thirsty land to You.
selah
[7]Quick, answer me, O LORD,
my spirit pines away.
Do not hide Your face from me,

lest I be like those gone down to the Pit.
[8]Let me hear Your kindness in the morning,
for in You I trust.
Let me know the way I should go,
for to You I lift up my being.
[9]Save me from my enemies, LORD;
with You is my vindication.
[10]Teach me to do what will please You,
for You are my God.
Let Your goodly spirit guide me
on level ground.
[11]For the sake of Your name, LORD, give me life,
in Your bounty bring me out from the straits.
[12]And in Your kindness devastate my enemies
and destroy all my bitter foes,
for I am Your servant.

PSALM 143 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *LORD, hear my prayer*. From these opening words, the psalm abounds in the stereotypical language of the psalm of supplication.

2. *for no living thing is acquitted before You*. The idea here is in accord with a theme in Job—that no creature (not even the angels, according to Job) can hope to be blameless before God's inexorable judgment. The Hebrew phrase *kol ḥay* is not restricted to humankind, as many translations suggest, but embraces all living creatures.

3. *like those long dead*. The sense of this phrase might also be "like the forever dead."

6. *my very self like thirsty land to You*. Rain in this climate and therefore in this body of literature is characteristically thought of as a desperately needed blessing. Hence God's responsive presence is metaphorically represented as the rain that the parched land awaits to quicken it with growth.

8. *in the morning*. What is implied is waiting through a long, dark night—perhaps, like a city under siege—to discover rescue as day breaks.

for to You I lift up my being. This is a gesture of prayer or entreaty, an idiomatic extension of lifting up the hands in prayer.

9. *with You is my vindication*. This is the one textual crux in the psalm. The Hebrew seems to say "to You I covered" (*ʾelekha kisiti*). This translation revocalizes the second of these two words to read *kesuti*, a term that in Genesis 20:16 has the sense of "vindication." Some scholars, anticipated by at least one medieval Hebrew exegete, prefer to read *ḥasiti*, "I sheltered."

12. *devastate my enemies / . . . destroy all my bitter foes*. The psalm gives no real indication of the identity of these enemies or of the concrete nature—judicial? military?—of their assault on the speaker. Some interpreters have seized on the reference to dwelling in darkness at the beginning as an indication that the supplicant has been cast into prison, but the inference is questionable because darkness is such a general and archetypal image for adversity. The translation adds the adjective "bitter" to "foes" because the Hebrew *tsorerey nafshi*, literally "foes of my life," suggests implacability or the desire to kill the person.

PSALM 144

[1]For David.
Blessed is the LORD, my rock,
Who trains my hands for battle,
my fingers for the fray.
[2]My strength and my bastion,
my fortress and my deliverer.
My shield in which I shelter,
Who tramples down peoples beneath me.
[3]LORD, what is a human creature that You should know him,
the son of man, that You pay him mind?
[4]The human is like unto breath,
his days like a passing shadow.
[5]LORD, tilt Your heavens and come down,
but touch the mountains, that they smoke.
[6]Crack lightning and scatter them,
send forth Your bolts and panic them.
[7]Send forth Your hand from on high,
redeem me and save me from the many waters,
from the foreigners' hand,

[8]whose mouth speaks falsely,
and whose right hand is a right hand of lies.
[9]God, a new song I would sing to You,
on a ten-stringed lute I would hymn to You.
[10]Who grants rescue to kings,
redeems David His servant from the evil sword.
[11]Redeem me and save me from the foreigners'
hand,
whose mouth speaks falsely,
and whose right hand is a right hand of lies.
[12]While our sons are like saplings,
tended from their youth;
our daughters, like corner-pillars
hewn for the shape of a palace.
[13]Our granaries are full,
dispensing food of every kind.
Our flocks are in the thousands,
ten thousands in our fields,
[14]Our cattle, big with young.
There is no breach and none goes out,
and no screaming in our squares.
[15]Happy the people who has it thus,
happy the people whose God is the LORD.

PSALM 144 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Blessed is the LORD, my rock*. From these opening words, this psalm shows a distinct generic kinship with the royal victory hymn that constitutes Psalm 18 (with the image of imperial conquest at the end of verse 2 suggesting that the speaker is a king). Hermann Gunkel once proposed that this poem was an "imitation" of Psalm 18, but, especially because some of the topics it touches on are unlike anything in Psalm 18, it seems more accurate to speak of certain citations from the earlier psalm woven into a different poetic context.

hands . . . fingers. Hands are the obvious body part to train for battle (in poetic parallelism, the more obvious or familiar term almost always occurs in the first verset) because the hand wields the sword. Perhaps the fingers refer to the pulling of the bowstring.

2. *My strength*. The Masoretic Text has *ḥasdi*, "my kindness," which seems unlikely. This translation reads instead, with many scholars, *ḥosni*, "my strength."

tramples down. This is the most likely meaning of the verb *roded*, confused by most translations with *rodeh*, "to hold sway over." "Tramples" also accords better with the term used in the analogous verset in Psalm 18:48, "and crushes [*wayadber*] peoples beneath me."

3. *what is a human creature that You should know him*. This whole line is strongly reminiscent of Psalm 8:5. The meditative theme of this and the next verse seems a little out of keeping with a victory psalm but may be justified as an expression of humility on the part of the royal speaker: What is man, king or commoner, that he should be worthy of such glorious beneficence from God?

4. *The human is like unto breath*. The Israeli scholar Gershon Brin has made the ingenious proposal that the previous verse and this one allude punningly to the first three generations of humankind: *ʾadam* ("the human," or "Adam"), *hevel* ("breath," or "Abel"), and *ben ʾenosh* ("the son of man," or "Enosh"). In a pattern of intensification, this line moves from mere breath to something still more insubstantial, a passing shadow.

5. *LORD, tilt Your heavens and come down*. This verset cites Psalm 18:10.

6. *Crack lightning*. The Hebrew, using a cognate accusative, has a strong onomatopoeic sound, *broq baraq*.

bolts. Lightning flashes, in a variety of ancient mythologies, are imagined as the arrows of the gods. This poem, like Psalm 18, reflects an ancient Near Eastern poetic tradition about warrior gods.

panic them. The reference is to the enemies of the king.

7. *Send forth Your hand*. This is a characteristic move of biblical literature—first "send forth" in the sense of shooting bolts of lightning, then the identical verb in a different, positive sense of reaching out to help. Thanksgiving for victory merges here with a prayer for (further?) help.

the many waters. Or "the mighty waters," an archetypal image of death constantly invoked in Psalms.

8. *a right hand of lies*. Because this is parallel to speaking falsely, many interpreters understand this as raising the right hand to pronounce a false vow—perhaps, if the military context is relevant, in a treaty declaration.

11. *Redeem me and save me*. This verse repeats the last two versets of verse 7 and the second verset of verse 8, scrambling the order, either as a refrain or through scribal duplication.

12. *While*. The initial subordinate conjugation *ʾasher*, which has a variety of functions, is ambiguous, and there is a sudden leap from the plea to be rescued from lying enemies to this idyllic vision of fine sons and daughters and abundant flocks, which concludes the poem. Some scholars have inferred that this is a different poem tacked onto the victory psalm, though it can be argued that peace and prosperity conventionally follow the king's military triumphs in biblical poetry.

like corner-pillars / hewn for the shape of a palace. The pillars at the corners of a building were often the site of carved ornamentation, so the simile probably invokes this architectural feature as an image of the exquisite shapeliness of the young women.

13. *in our fields*. The noun *ḥutsot* typically means "outside areas" in an urban context.

14. *There is no breach and none goes out*. There are divergent interpretations of what this line refers to. Because of the immediately preceding reference to abundant flocks, it is likely that what the poet has in mind is the safe

enclosure of the flocks. There is no breach in the fences that pen in the flocks —hence “none goes out” (a feminine verb, perhaps because the Hebrew for flock, *tsoʾn*, is feminine).

and no screaming in our squares. The obvious reference is to cries of terror or anguish in time of war. The idyllic picture of flourishing sons and daughters and multiplying flocks is completed by this image of secure, untroubled peace. The psalm that began by thanking God for the gift of victory in battle concludes with a vision of the reign of peace.

PSALM 145

[1]A David song of praise.
Let me exalt You, my God the king,א
and let me bless Your name forevermore.
[2]Every day let me bless You,ב
and let me praise Your name forevermore.
[3]Great is the LORD and highly praised,ג
and His greatness cannot be fathomed.
[4]Let one generation to the next extol Your deedsד
and tell of Your mighty acts.
[5]Of the grandeur of Your glorious majestyה
and Your wondrous acts let me treat.
[6]And the power of Your fearsome deeds let them say,ו
and Your greatness let me recount.
[7]The fame of Your great goodness they utter,ז
and of Your bounty they joyously sing.
[8]Gracious and merciful is the LORD,ח
slow to anger, great in kindness.
[9]Good is the LORD to all,ט
and His mercy is over all His creatures.

10 All Your creatures, LORD, acclaim You,
and Your faithful ones bless You.
11 The glory of Your kingship they say,
and of Your might they speak,
12 to make known to humankind His mighty acts
and the grandeur of His kingship's glory.
13 Your kingship is a kingship for all time,
and Your dominion for all generations.
14 The LORD props up all who fall
and makes all who are bent stand erect.
15 The eyes of all look in hope to You
and You give them their food in its season,
16 opening Your hand
and sating to their pleasure all living things.
17 Just is the LORD in all His ways,
and faithful in all His deeds.
18 Close is the LORD to all who call Him,
to all who call to Him in truth.
19 The pleasure of those who fear Him He performs,
and their outcry He hears and rescues them.
20 The LORD guards all who love Him,
and all the wicked He destroys.
21 The LORD's praise let my mouth speak,
and let all flesh bless His holy name
forevermore.

PSALM 145 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *song of praise*. This is the only psalm so designated. The Hebrew term *tehilah* yields in rabbinic Hebrew the plural *tehilim*, which is the set title in Hebrew for the Book of Psalms. Although psalms of supplication are actually more numerous in the canonical collection, the assumption of postbiblical Jewish tradition was that the purpose par excellence of the poetry of psalms was to praise God. This assumption accords with the view of the ancient editors, for the last six psalms, beginning with this one, are all psalms of praise. It should be said that even the psalms of supplication very often contain elements of praise.

Let me exalt. The Hebrew *ʾaromimkha* shows an initial *aleph*, marking the beginning of an alphabetic acrostic. *Nun*, the fourteenth letter of the alphabet, is missing, so the psalm has twenty-one verses instead of twenty-two. But most of the ancient translations as well as a text of this psalm found at Qumran and also one medieval Hebrew manuscript have a verse for *nun*. "Trustworthy [*neʾeman*] is God in all His ways, / and faithful in all His deeds." The evidence strongly suggests that this line was in the original psalm and some-how was dropped in the tradition of scribal transmission that became the Masoretic Text. The mode of the verbs here should be noted. Previous English translations usually render them as simple future verbs. But the suffix *ah* of several verbs in the second versets (verses 1, 2, and 5) indicates a jussive or optative mode ("let me," "may I"), and this translation registers that nuance.

my God the king. Divine kingship is the leading topic of this song of praise, with a special emphasis on terms of kingship in the central lines of the psalm, verses 11–13.

2. *bless . . ./ praise*. In keeping with its generic purpose, the psalm abounds in synonyms for praise. The Hebrew verb *halel*, "praise," is cognate with the noun *tehilah*, "song of praise." The poet does not appear to make distinctions among the synonyms (exalt, bless, extol, praise). In keeping with this deployment of synonymity, there is a prevalence of semantic balance between versets, without much sign of the pattern of intensification from first verset to

second generally characteristic of biblical poetry. Perhaps this poetic style was felt appropriate for this doxological rehearsal of God's virtues as king of the world.

6. *let them say, / . . . let me recount*. The switch from third-person plural to first-person singular is disorienting, and some scholars emend the second verb to read "let them recount." It is quite possible, however, that the received text in shuttling between persons reflects the intention of the poet, which would be to weave his own voice of praise with the universal chorus of praise.

8. *Gracious and merciful is the* LORD. This whole line is a citation of the pronouncement of the divine attributes in Exodus 34:6.

9. *Good is the* LORD *to all*. In keeping with the theme of God's kingship, the perspective of this psalm is universal rather than national. God's beneficent dominion extends over all living creatues, and "all flesh" (verse 21) praises Him.

21. *The* LORD*'s praise*. The psalm that began with the generic rubric of "praise" (*tehilah*) neatly concludes by highlighting the same term.

PSALM 146

[1]Hallelujah.
Praise the LORD, O my being!
[2]Let me praise the LORD while I live,
let me hymn to my God while I breathe.
[3]Do not trust in princes,
in a human who offers no rescue.
[4]His breath departs, he returns to the dust.
On that day his plans are naught.
[5]Happy whose help is Jacob's God,
his hope—for the LORD his God,
[6]maker of heaven and earth,
the sea, and of all that is in them,
Who keeps faith forever,
[7]does justice for the oppressed,
gives bread to the hungry,
the LORD looses those in fetters.
[8]The LORD gives sight to the blind.
The LORD makes the bent stand erect.
The LORD loves the righteous.
[9]The LORD guards sojourners,

orphan and widow He sustains
but the way of the wicked He contorts.
10 The LORD shall reign forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Hallelujah.

PSALM 146 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Praise the* LORD. Although this psalm has a certain kinship with the thanksgiving psalms, it is more precise to view it as a psalm of praise because it is a general celebration of God's benevolent qualities rather than the personal expression of gratitude for having been saved from some plight.

2. *while I breathe*. The literal sense of the Hebrew *beʿodi* is "while I still [am]."

3. *who offers no rescue*. The literal meaning is "who has no rescue."

4. *to the dust*. Literally, this reads "to his soil," with a probable allusion to Genesis 3:19, "till you return to the soil." The continuation of the passage in Genesis emphasizes "dust," *ʿafar*. Here and in Genesis, the clear reference of the phrase is to death.

his plans. The Hebrew *ʿeshtonot* appears only here, but it is related to a verbal stem in Jonah that means "to think" or "to reflect." The use of this word is one of several linguistic indications in the poem that this is Late Biblical Hebrew.

9. *sojourners, / orphan . . . widow*. Repeatedly in biblical literature, these are the exemplary instances of the vulnerable and the disenfranchised in society who are in need of special protection. The "sojourner" is a resident alien.

sustains. The verb *ʿoded* appears only here and in Psalm 147. In modern Hebrew, it means "to encourage," which could conceivably be its meaning here. But it probably is derived from the adverb *ʿod*, "still" (as in the declined

form *ʿodi* in verse 2 that has been commented on). In that case, the likely sense is to enable someone to persist, or to sustain someone.

the way of the wicked He contorts. Again and again in biblical imagery, a straight or level way is a secure way to go. A crooked way—one in which, let us say, there are hairpin turns—is the antithesis, the just deserts of the wicked.

PSALM 147

[1]Hallelujah.
For it is good to hymn to our God,
for it is sweet to adorn with praise.
[2]Builder of Jerusalem, the LORD,
Israel's scattered ones He gathers in.
[3]Healer of the broken-hearted,
He binds their painful wounds.
[4]He counts the number of the stars,
to all of them gives names.
[5]Great is our Master, abounding in power,
His wisdom is beyond number.
[6]The LORD sustains the lowly,
casts the wicked to the ground.
[7]Call out to the LORD in thanksgiving,
hymn to our God on the lyre,
[8]Who covers the heavens with clouds,
readies rain for the earth,
makes mountains flourish with grass,
[9]gives the beast its food,
to the raven's young who call.

[10]Not the might of the horse He desires,
not by a man's thighs is He pleased.
[11]The LORD is pleased by those who fear Him,
those who long for His kindness.
[12]Extol, O Jerusalem, the LORD,
praise your God, O Zion.
[13]For He strengthens the bars of your gates,
blesses your children in your midst.
[14]He bestows peace in your land,
He sates you with choice wheat.
[15]He sends down His utterance to earth,
quickly His word races.
[16]He pours forth snow like fleece,
scatters frost like ash.
[17]He flings His ice like bread crumbs.
In the face of His cold who can endure?
[18]He sends out His word and melts them,
He lets His breath blow—the waters flow.
[19]He tells His word to Jacob,
His statutes and laws to Israel.
[20]He did not thus to all the nations,
and the laws, they did not know.
Hallelujah.

PSALM 147 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *to adorn*. Following a proposal by the Israeli linguist Yehosua Blau, this translation understands *naʾawah* not as an adjective but as an infinitive verb (parallel to *zamrah*, "to hymn") meaning "to adorn" or "to embellish."

2. *Builder of Jerusalem*. This epithet is evidence for the composition of the psalm in the fifth century B.C.E., after the rebuilding of Jerusalem. The gathering in of Israel's scattered ones in the second verset is a reference to the return from exile (and the verb used, *kanes*, is a Late Biblical term). The strengthening of the bars of the city gates in verse 13 is another allusion to the rebuilding and refortification of Jerusalem. It is the gratitude for this national restoration that is the particular reason for praising God in this psalm.

3. *Healer of the broken-hearted*. Although the specific reference is to those who had suffered the despair of exile, the general nature of the formulation points to an embracing celebration of God's benevolent compassion and prepares the way for the comprehensive praise of God's cosmic greatness in the next line.

4. *He counts the number of the stars*. In Genesis 15:5, God invokes the stars as an instance of that which cannot be counted, but of course He is able to count them.

to all of them gives names. This is a neat illustration of the heightening or intensification of an idea in the second verset of the poetic line. God not only can count the multitudinous stars but actually gives a name to each one of them.

5. *His wisdom is beyond number*. The literal sense is "His wisdom has no number." The use of the term "number," *mispar*, pointedly follows God's counting the number of the stars in the preceding line.

8. *covers the heavens with clouds*. After invoking God's mastery over the starry spaces, the poet moves to "heavens" in the sense of sky, then downward to earth where God's providential care is manifested in rainfall, the growth of verdure, and the providing of food to all creatures.

10. *Not the might of the horse . . . / not by a man's thighs*. This is a transitional verse. The horse belongs to the realm of nature, like the raven's young of the

preceding verse, but "the might of the horse" refers to man's use of the horse in battle. From here, the line moves on to the power of the warrior concentrated concretely in the muscles of his thighs (with perhaps as well a metonymic glance at his sexual power). All this brings us back to the historical situation for which the psalm was composed: Israel has been returned to its land not through any feat of arms but because it faithfully revered its God.

12. *Extol, O Jerusalem, the* LORD. In the concluding movement of the poem, the restored city is apostrophized and exhorted to join in the praise of God that has been taken up by its inhabitants in verse 1 and verse 7.

15. *His utterance . . . / His word*. Although it cannot be excluded that both these terms refer to God's commands to Israel, which are explicitly mentioned in verse 19, the context of the next several lines suggests that what is in view here is God's bidding to nature, which He rules absolutely.

16. *scatters frost like ash*. This verset is the alliterative jewel in this splendid evocation of winter in the hill country of the land of Israel. The Hebrew is *kefor kaʾefer yefazer*.

18. *He lets His breath blow*. Although the noun *ruaḥ* could also mean "wind," the anthropomorphic vividness of God's melting the ice and snow by blowing on them makes "breath" the more likely sense here.

PSALM 148

[1]Hallelujah.
Praise the LORD from the heavens,
praise Him on the heights.
[2]Praise Him, all His messengers,
praise Him, all His armies.
[3]Praise Him, sun and moon,
praise Him, all you stars of light.
[4]Praise Him, utmost heavens,
and the waters above the heavens.
[5]Let them praise the LORD's name,
for He commanded, and they were created.
[6]And He made them stand forever, for all time.
He set them a border that could not be crossed.
[7]Praise the LORD from the earth,
sea monsters and all you deeps.
[8]Fire and hail, snow and smoke,
storm wind that performs His command,
[9]the mountains and all the hills,
fruit trees and all the cedars,
[10]wild beasts and all the cattle,

crawling things and wingèd birds,
[11]kings of earth and all the nations,
princes and all leaders of earth,
[12]young men and also maidens,
elders together with lads.
[13]Let them praise the LORD's name,
for His name alone is exalted.
His grandeur is over earth and the heavens.
[14]And may He raise up a horn for His people,
praise of all His faithful,
of the Israelites, the people near Him.
Hallelujah.

PSALM 148 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Praise the LORD from the heavens*. One of the most majestic of these six concluding psalms of praise, the poem expresses a grand cosmic vision, beginning with the heavens and the celestial beings, then moving down to the earth and to humankind, as all created things are enjoined to praise the Creator.

2. *His messengers, / . . . His armies*. The "messengers" (*mal'akhim*) are the "angels" of traditional translations—not to be thought of as winged figures with halos but as perfectly anthropomorphic beings whose function it is to carry out God's sundry instructions and to serve as a celestial entourage to God the king. Though "armies," when they are located in the heavens, usually are the stars, here they appear to be synonymous with "messengers," the messengers conceived as God's battalions.

3. *sun and moon, / . . . stars*. This marks the beginning of a poetic reprise of the creation story in Genesis 1. It continues with the "utmost heavens," "the waters above the heavens," "sea monsters," "deeps," and the "crawling things" and "wingèd birds" in the following verses (4–10).

4. *utmost heavens*. The literal sense is "the heavens of the heavens," a characteristic Hebrew way of forming a superlative. This designation recurs elsewhere in biblical literature and indicates the uppermost reaches (or top level) of the heavens, above which it was thought that there were waters (which appear here in the second verset).

6. *He set them a border that could not be crossed*. Although the noun *ḥoq* in other contexts means "precept" or "law," it can also mean "border" or "limit." The cosmogonic setting here, with primordial waters held in check, strongly argues for the sense of "border." Behind this image lies the old Canaanite myth of the conquest of a sea god, but it has been thoroughly integrated into a monotheistic conceptual framework. Thus, in the next line, "sea monsters" (*taninim*) and "deeps" (*tehomot*), both terms that are associated in Canaanite tradition with the cosmogonic adversaries of Baal, are called on to praise YHWH.

7. *sea monsters*. These are the *taninim* of Genesis 1:21.

deeps. This is the plural of *tehom*, the deep over which God's breath hovers in Genesis 1.

8. *smoke*. The Hebrew *qitor* usually means "smoke," though some scholars argue that here it has the sense of "fog." It is hard to determine how fluid these meanings might have been, but *qitor* elsewhere is the product of burning.

11. *leaders of earth*. The Hebrew *shoftim* means either "judges" or "leaders," but the parallel with "kings" makes the judicial sense less likely.

13. *His grandeur is over earth and the heavens*. This verse nicely recapitulates the movement of the entire poem.

14. *And may He raise up a horn*. Some scholars, with an eye to the cosmic perspective of the poem, think this verse of national blessing is an editorial addition, a kind of epilogue to the psalm proper. But it is possible that the poet felt that a brief prayer for the well-being of the people was an appropriate coda to the celebration of the cosmic God.

praise of all His faithful. The prefix *l*^{e} usually means “for” or “to,” but another common function is to indicate ownership (as on countless ostraca that archaeologists have found), and that is its likely sense here. The praise of God belongs to, is the proper obligation of, His faithful people. In any case, it should be noted that the psalm, which began with the verb “praise” (*halel*), concludes with the noun “praise” (*tehilah*).

PSALM 149

[1]Hallelujah.
Sing to the LORD a new song,
His praise in the faithfuls' assembly.
[2]Let Israel rejoice in its Maker,
Zion's sons exult in their king.
[3]Let them praise His name in dance,
on the timbrel and lyre let them hymn to Him.
[4]For the LORD looks with favor on His people,
He adorns the lowly with victory.
[5]Let the faithful delight in glory,
sing gladly on their couches.
[6]Exultations of God in their throat
and a double-edged sword in their hand,
[7]to wreak vengeance upon the nations,
punishment on the peoples,
[8]to bind their kings in fetters,
and their nobles in iron chains,
[9]to exact from them justice as written—
it is grandeur for all His faithful.
Hallelujah.

PSALM 149 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Sing to the LORD a new song*. The idea of a "new song" is highlighted in several psalms. In a sense, this is a kind of self-advertisement of the psalmist, as if to say "here is a fresh and vibrant psalm that you have never heard before." In this case, the newness of the song is manifested chiefly in the strong emphasis of this psalm of praise on a glorious military victory.

2. *its Maker*. The Masoretic Text oddly has a plural noun here.

4. *He adorns the lowly with victory*. The "lowly" in this poem does not refer to an abject social class, as it usually does elsewhere, but to the people of Israel, once brought low by its powerful enemies but now granted victory through God's favor. *Yeshuʿah*, which is regularly represented in this translation as "rescue," here seems to carry the triumphalist nuance of "victory" because of the lines that follow.

5. *sing gladly on their couches*. The "couches" have bothered some interpreters, but the proposed emendations are unpersuasive. It might mean that the daytime celebrations of God's greatness through dance and song and musical instruments will continue into the night. If this psalm is late (the dating is a little uncertain), the couches could conceivably refer to the couches on which revelers reclined at feasts, as reflected in the Book of Esther.

6. *Exaltations of God in their throat / and a double-edged sword in their hand*. This line vividly carries over the idea of a temple celebration of God with song and dance to an image of warriors going out to battle joyfully praising God. There is a punning link between the two versets in the Hebrew because the term for "double-edged sword" is literally "a sword of mouths," so the line moves from throat to mouth.

7. *to wreak vengeance upon the nations*. Attempts to anchor this prospective vision of a great military triumph in a particular historical context have been unavailing. Indeed, some interpreters have proposed that the victory evoked is intended for an eschatological future.

8. *fetters, / . . . iron chains*. The “fetters” (*ziqim*, a shortened form of the more usual *ʾaziqim*) are handcuffs. The “chains” would be for the feet or to bind prisoners in a line by their necks. Both possibilities are depicted in Mesopotamian bas-reliefs.

9. *to exact from them justice as written*. The reference could be to a canonical text, such as the promise of victory over the nations if Israel is loyal to its covenant that one finds in Deuteronomy. It could also refer to some notion of a divine book of destiny, an idea that occurs in several ancient cultures.

PSALM 150

[1]Hallelujah.
Praise God in His holy place,
praise Him in the vault of His power.
[2]Praise Him for His mighty acts,
praise Him as befits His abounding greatness.
[3]Praise Him with the ram's horn's blast,
praise Him with the lute and the lyre.
[4]Praise Him with timbrel and dance,
praise Him with strings and flute.
[5]Praise Him with sounding cymbals,
praise Him with crashing cymbals.
[6]Let all that has breath praise Yah.
Hallelujah!

PSALM 150 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Hallelujah*. The ancient editors, having chosen to represent the Book of Psalms as above all *tehilim*, songs of praise, by concluding the collection with six psalms of praise, now climactically set at the end this psalm that begins and ends with "hallelujah" (which of course means "praise God") and repeats

the verb *halel*, "praise," in each verset of the poem for a pointed total of ten times, followed by a final repitition in the coda (verse 6), which is not a complete line of poetry.

His holy place, / . . . the vault of His power. There is a harmonious concordance between the "holy place"—the Temple below and the heavens above—both conceived as sites of God's habitation.

3. *the ram's horn's blast*. The catalogue of musical instruments that begins with this phrase is another way in which this psalm is a fitting culmination to the entire collection. The psalms have prominently featured singing with orchestral accompaniment. Here at the very end, we have a grand roll call of the instruments—wind, strings, and percussion—that are used to create this music.

4. *strings*. The Hebrew *minim* is related to the Ugaritic *mnm* and also to the rabbinic *nimim*, both of which refer to strings. Though it could possibly be the name of a particular stringed instrument, the precise identification of which eludes us, it may well indicate the general class of stringed instruments.

flute. Although the term *ʿugav* has been applied to the organ in modern Hebrew, it probably is some sort of straight flute, as the archaeological evidence from Egypt suggests.

5. *sounding cymbals, / . . . crashing cymbals*. In all likelihood, these are not two different percussion instruments but two different sounds produced with the same instrument, the second louder or more penetrating than the first.

6. *Let all that has breath praise Yah*. Appropriately, the psalm and the book conclude on a note of universalism: not Israel alone but every living thing is exhorted to praise the God of all creation. From this grandly resonant conclusion, one can see how the Book of Psalms has spoken to people through the ages across the borders of nations, languages, and sectarian divisions.

A Note on Wisdom Literature

The Wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible are a construct through inference by scholarship and do not figure intrinsically in the constellation of the traditional canon. Although the Babylonian Talmud (Baba Batra 14B) in its ordering of the books does show a direct sequence of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes (henceforth referred to here by its Hebrew title, Qohelet), the Septuagint, followed by the King James Bible, interposes Psalms between Job and Proverbs, while most modern Jewish editions of the Hebrew texts have Proverbs, Job, and then the Song of Songs, Ruth, and Lamentations intervening before Qohelet. There are good empirical grounds for classifying Job, Proverbs, and Qohelet as Wisdom books, but the classification should be adopted with a degree of caution. The eminent German biblical scholar Gerhard von Rad, writing in 1972, expressed serious

reservations about the general rubric: “It belongs . . . to the fairly extensive number of biblical-theological terms whose validity and content are not once [*sic*] for all established. . . . It could even be that scholarship has gone too far in an uncritical use of this collective term; it could even be that by the use of this blanket term it is suggesting the existence of something which never existed and that it is in this way dangerously prejudicing the interpretation of varied material.” Von Rad by no means sustains the sweeping skepticism of this statement, which appears in the prefatory section of a perfectly coherent and plausible book entitled *Wisdom in Israel*. Whatever the definitional problems, there are identifiable features of Wisdom literature that give it a distinctive identity within the biblical corpus.

Abundant evidence has been uncovered, in Egypt and in Mesopotamia as well, that Wisdom writing was a fairly widespread practice in the ancient Near East. The perspective of Wisdom literature is international and, in many instances, one might say, universalist. It raises questions of value and moral behavior, of the meaning of human life, and especially of the right conduct of life. The Wisdom writers of ancient Israel evince some awareness of the activity of their counterparts in the surrounding cultures. In one clear

instance, Proverbs 22:17–24:22, there is extensive borrowing, possibly through the intermediary of an Aramaic translation, of a second-millennium B.C.E. Egyptian Wisdom text. Beyond this particular case, various arguments have been made for other borrowings, though by and large it is safer to speak of analogues and generic connections than of direct adaptations or translations.

In keeping with this international background, there is little in the three biblical Wisdom books that is specifically Israelite. The praise of Solomon's legendary sagacity in 1 Kings 5:11 properly sets it in an international frame of comparison: "And Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the Easterners and all the wisdom of Egypt." The characters in the Book of Job, though monotheists, are themselves "Easterners" and not at all Israelites. Qohelet consists of a series of reflections on the nature of reality and the human condition into which no national considerations enter. God, occasionally referred to at the margins of the book, is always *ʾelohim*, the generic term, and not YHWH, the Israelite proper noun for God; and, as I argue later, the term *ʾelohim* itself may carry a somewhat different semantic freight from the one it bears in earlier biblical texts. The orientation of the Book of Proverbs

toward the meaning and uses of Wisdom is on the whole thoroughly pragmatic (apart from one somewhat enigmatic passage just before the end). The reiterated term *torah* never refers to the revealed text of the Law but simply indicates teaching or instruction; and, as is the case in Job and Qohelet, revelation, covenant, the history of Israel, and national redemption are not part of its concerns. If Job culminates in the Voice from the Whirlwind, which could be construed as a kind of revelation, that vision of a teeming and contradictory nature in which beauty and violence are intertwined has very little in common with the Sinai epiphany, which conveyed ethical and cultic instruction to Israel.

Wisdom writing continued toward the end of the biblical period in some of the texts included in the Apocrypha, and signs of the Wisdom tradition are still detectable in rabbinic literature in the early centuries of the Christian era. It should also be said that Wisdom literature surfaces from time to time in other books of the Bible. Several psalms in the canonical collection have been persuasively identified as Wisdom psalms: among the clear-cut examples are Psalm 1, Psalm 19, and Psalm 1 Many scholars have contended that there are Wisdom motifs in the Joseph story in Genesis. And, of course, the celebration of Solomon

as a great sage, at which we have already glanced, exhibits a background in Wisdom literature.

It is only, however, in Job, Proverbs, and Qohelet that we have books in the Hebrew canon that are Wisdom from end to end. There is no confident way of knowing where or how they originated. One hypothesis that has enjoyed a certain currency among scholars is that there were Wisdom schools in which such texts were both composed and taught. There is some evidence for the existence of Wisdom schools in the surrounding cultures but little direct proof of their existence in ancient Israel. It is a safe assumption that there were scribal schools throughout the region, typically associated with temples and run by priestly scribes, for writing and literary composition are complex skills requiring instruction. Whether these schools should also be thought of as Wisdom academies is unclear.

One passing reference in Proverbs (17:16) would seem to indicate that people paid teachers a fee for instruction in Wisdom, but it is hard to know whether this was a general practice.

A recent study by the Dutch scholar Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, illustrates the danger of conflating scribal schools and Wisdom academies. For van der Toorn,

virtually everything in the Hebrew Bible is the product of scribal schools. Thus, turning a blind eye to literature, he explains the dazzling poetic panoramas of the Book of Job as a reflection of scribal list-making, and he sees the extraordinary lexical richness of the poetry of Job as a reflection of vocabulary exercises for the scribes. In fact, it is difficult to imagine that a book presenting so radical a challenge to the biblical consensus view of reward and punishment and of an anthropocentric creation could have been produced in any school, no less a school associated with a temple. The same thing must be said, for somewhat different reasons, of Qohelet, given its unblinking perception of the futility of human endeavor and its vision of endless cycles of repetition instead of the dominant biblical notion, powerfully inaugurated in Genesis, of linear progression through time toward a horizon of fulfillment.

Proverbs is the only one of the three canonical Wisdom books that might conceivably reflect the activities of some sort of academy. Composed in verse from beginning to end, it often seems to utilize the mnemonic function of poetry to inscribe in memory principles of right and wrong, and one can plausibly imagine a teacher imparting instruction of this sort to his disciples. The poetry in Proverbs, however, is by

no means restricted to serving as an aid to memory, and we shall have occasion to observe a variety of arresting and at times surprising purposes to which poetry is put in this book. Job, apart from the prose frame-story of the first two chapters and the last one, is composed entirely as poetry, and it often proves to be poetry of a highly innovative and sometimes deliberately disturbing kind. Qohelet uses strongly cadenced, evocative prose, perhaps qualifying as prose-poetry, which in two extended passages moves into formal verse. All three books, then, deploy manifestly literary means to shape their visions of human life.

Wisdom literature is as close as the ancient Near East came to Greek philosophy, which was nearly contemporaneous with the latest Wisdom texts of the Hebrew Bible. It shares with Greek philosophy an inquiry into values and a disposition to reflect on the human condition, but it lacks both the purely theoretical and the systematic impulses of the Greek thinkers. Ethical issues are raised, but there is no real ontology, epistemology, anthropology, or metaphysics, and much of the thrust of Near Eastern Wisdom is pragmatic and even explicitly didactic. Job, for all its profundity, is a theological rather than a philosophic text. Its author is God-obsessed and never wonders or

speculates about God's existence but rather expresses his outrage at the spectacular injustice of a world governed by a purportedly just God. Qohelet, concerned as it is with the structure of reality and how ephemeral human life is locked into that structure, is close to a genuinely philosophic work, though it articulates its philosophy through incantatory language and haunting imagery rather than through systematic thought.

What is most striking about Job, Proverbs, and Qohelet is that they are drastically different not only from almost all other biblical texts but also from each other. Proverbs founds its admonitions and observations in what it conceives to be the assured wisdom of tradition and collective knowledge. Precisely that assurance is frontally challenged in Job. Qohelet does not so much challenge traditional wisdom as subvert it, sometimes in the form of sly antiproverbs that have the ring of conventional maxims but express a bleak skepticism antithetical to what one encounters in the Book of Proverbs. These strong disparities among the three Wisdom books vividly illustrate how the Hebrew Bible, contrary to popular preconceptions, is not a book but an anthology spanning almost a millennium and incorporating widely different views of human nature, God, history,

and even the natural world. This very variety is one of the principal sources of the continuing vitality of Hebrew Scripture. The three Wisdom books are, in different ways, worlds apart from Genesis, Deuteronomy, and the Prophets and also far apart from each other. They retain an ongoing relevance to the lives of modern readers, religious and secular alike —Job and Qohelet, through the very boldness of their dissenting views, but Proverbs as well, in the worldliness and the satiric shrewdness of many of its perceptions.

PROVERBS

Introduction

Although Proverbs, in contrast to Job and Qohelet, strikes certain recurrent notes of traditional piety and evinces great confidence in a rational moral order that dependably produces concrete rewards for virtue and wisdom, it is in some ways, like Job and Qohelet, not altogether a likely book for inclusion in the canon. The Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 30B) in fact brackets Proverbs with Qohelet as a text that perhaps might have been excluded from the canon—in particular because it contains contradictory assertions. The sequence of verses 4 and 5 in chapter 26 is a vivid case in point: "Do not answer a dolt by his folly / lest you, too, be like him. /Answer the dolt by his folly, / lest he seem wise in his own eyes." What, then, the earnest reader may wonder, is one to do about answering a dolt? It is probably misguided to argue for a dialectic or subtly complementary relationship

between these two admonitions. The contradiction between them stems from the anthological character of the book: the two sayings have been culled either from folk-tradition or from the verbal repertory of Wisdom schools and have been set in immediate sequence by the anthologist because of the identical wording—first in the negative and then in the positive—of the initial clause of each saying.

The Book of Proverbs is not merely an anthology but an anthology of anthologies. It is made up of six discrete units, each marked editorially as such at the beginning, with notable differences of emphasis and style among the units. chapters 1–9 form a kind of general prologue to the subject of the instruction of wisdom. Michael V. Fox, in his two indispensable Proverbs volumes in the Anchor Bible Series, argues persuasively that this first unit was the last one composed, either in the Persian period or in the Hellenistic period. It is strikingly different from the collections of one-line, two-verset proverbs that follow in deploying poems that extend to all or a good part of a chapter. These include the vivid narrative about the seductress that takes up chapter 7 and the allegorical representation of Lady Wisdom in chapter 8 and of the contrasting figures of Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly in chapter 9. The recurring theme in this initial

unit that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom also sets it apart from the subsequent collections, in which wisdom is more typically thought of without theological trappings as a transmissible human craft. Finally, the prominence here of the Mentor and the inexperienced youth he seeks to instruct recedes or disappears as the book moves on to the one-line proverbs.

The second grouping, introduced like the first with the phrase “the proverbs of Solomon,” runs from the beginning of chapter 10 to 22:Many scholars think that this double ascription of the book to Solomon, celebrated in 1 Kings 5:12 for his prodigious production of proverbs, may have encouraged its inclusion in the canon, though that claim is hard to assess. In the one-line proverb, the symmetrical logic of poetic parallelism predominates, with most of the proverbs exhibiting either neatly matching statements in the two versets or emphatic antitheses. After this unit, which is the longest collection in the anthology of anthologies, a short unit begins that is marked with the exhortation “Bend your ear and hear the words of the wise,” the phrase “the words of the wise” evidently serving as a kind of title. This grouping provides the most vivid evidence of the international character of Wisdom literature because a large part of it, as

scholars have long recognized, is a recasting of the Instruction of Amenemope, a second-millennium B.C.E. Egyptian text, which may have reached the Hebrew writer through the mediation of an Aramaic version. After this, 24:23 begins with the declaration, "These, too, are from the wise," which indicates a new source, of which perhaps only a fragment is included because it ends or breaks off after eleven verses.

The first verse of chapter 25 then provides a valuable historical clue about the editorial process of these collections: "These, too, are the proverbs of Solomon, which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah transcribed." Hezekiah reigned in Jerusalem in the late decades of the eighth century B.C.E. The men of Hezekiah would have been court scribes, and in fact there is a good deal of emphasis in this unit, which runs to the end of chapter 29, on kings and how one should comport oneself in their presence. The verb "transcribed," *heʿetiqu,* does not imply original composition but rather an activity such as collating and copying or transferring from another source, which means that the original formulation of at least some of these proverbs might have occurred generations, perhaps even quite a few generations, before the time of Hezekiah, however unlikely the ascription to Solomon.

Finally, chapters 30 and 31 comprise, as Fox aptly calls them, a series of four "appendices" to the book proper. Each is quite different in style and emphasis from everything that precedes it in the completed anthology, and though the appendices are clearly drawn from different literary sources, there is no confident way of concluding whether they are later sources or just exotic ones. The first appendix, 30:1–14, is "The words of Agur, son of Yaqeh," a figure about whom nothing is known. The style is vatic, and the idea that God alone possesses wisdom runs counter to the prevailing notion in the rest of the book of wisdom as a teachable craft. The second appendix (30:15–33) is made up of a series of riddling epigrams cast in a three-four numerical pattern ("Three things are there that are not sated, / four that do not say, 'Enough!' ") occasionally found elsewhere in biblical poetry and ultimately going back to Canaanite poetic style. The third appendix, 31:1–9, "The words of Lemuel, king of Massa," is a set of instructions of a queen mother to her royal son. At the very end of the book (31:10–31), we have an alphabetic acrostic poem celebrating the ideal wife—an interesting editorial choice for the conclusion of a book that has featured male mentors instructing young men and has

repeatedly warned against seductresses and complained of shrewish wives.

The Book of Proverbs, then, is by no means cut from whole cloth, and consequently generalizations about its outlook and literary character will not hold for all parts of the anthology. By and large, the underlying conception of wisdom is thoroughly pragmatic, and, in keeping with the characteristic direction of Wisdom literature, it does not reflect particular Israelite interests. The recurring term *torah* does not refer to any divinely inspired text but simply means "teaching" or "instruction" and is closely coordinated with the constantly reiterated *musar*, "reproof" or "discipline." This basically untheological orientation, in which neither revelation nor covenant has any role, might conceivably have been another potential obstacle to the book's inclusion in the canon that was nevertheless over-come by the rabbinic sages. (The one brief component of the anthology that does sound fully "canonical" in this regard is Agur's pious poem exalting God's transcendent greatness and affirming the nullity of human wisdom.)

The book is poetry from end to end, but what kind of poetry is it? In line with its composite nature, it is not the same in all its segments. The acrostic poem at the end praising the "worthy woman" is a rapid

sequence of narrative vignettes exhibiting the good woman in a chain of energetic actions on behalf of her household, acquiring flax and wool and weaving them, rising before daybreak to set out on her rounds of commerce, and so forth. The poems of the first nine chapters abound in incipiently narrative developments —Lady Wisdom calling out from the heights to invite the throngs to attend to her instruction, the Mentor spelling out step by step the disasters to which the Stranger Woman (presumably, a lascivious married woman) will lead a young man, the antithetical evocation in an extended metaphor of the delights of conjugal love.

The large central core of the book, however, from chapter 10 to the end of chapter 29, which gathers together one-line proverbs from a variety of sources, is the part of the book in which the poetry is liable to pose the greatest difficulties for modern readers. The one-line proverbs are either didactic admonitions or, somewhat less frequently, observations about social and ethical behavior. Some of the sayings in the second category are quite shrewd and evince lively satiric perceptions. The admonitions, on the other hand, show a good deal of predictability, founded as they are on what the writers assume to be tried-and-true principles for guiding a person through life. As a

result, the poetry is sometimes boilerplate language, a rehearsal of traditional formulas. This is a limitation that the author of Job, perhaps the most original of biblical poets, obviously noticed, putting in the mouths of the three friends many complacent pronouncements about the rightness of the moral order that sound like this line from Proverbs (10:3): “The LORD will not make the righteous man hunger, / but He rebuffs the desire of the wicked.” Poetry in all cultures serves a mnemonic function—in systems that have rhyme, the rhyme helps you remember the line that comes after its rhyming counterpart. In the semantic parallelism of biblical poetry, the match in meaning (and often in rhythm and syntax) helps you remember the second verset after the first. If there were in fact Wisdom schools in ancient Israel, it is easy enough to imagine how the formulation of ethical and pragmatic principles in poetry helped students to memorize them. Thus, the line “Cheating scales are the LORD’s loathing, / and a true weight-stone His pleasure” (11:1) occurs several times with minor variations. Unlike the sundry claims about the righteous and the wicked, it is unassailable as an ethical principle. One would hardly call it great poetry, but the poetic parallelism does serve to inscribe the saying in memory with the aim of being a kind of ethical prophylaxis: should you ever be

tempted to enhance your profits in a sale of goods by using a crooked scale or an underweight marked stone, this saying is meant to come to mind and dissuade you.

Many other proverbs are grounded not in ethics but in purely prudential considerations, such as the reiterated exhortations not to give your bond for someone you don't know—for example, "He will surely be shattered who gives bond for a stranger, / but he who hates offering pledge is secure" (11:15). Here, too, the rather mechanical parallelism is an aid to memory, serving a prophylactic function in the economic sphere rather than in the ethical realm. The least interesting of the proverbs, as the one just cited may suggest, amount to poetic formulations of truisms. It seems scarcely necessary, for example, to be reminded, as we are by several different proverbs, that warfare needs to be conducted with considered strategy and expert military advisors, or that a person too lazy to provide for himself will end up in want.

This last instance of the lazy man, however, also illustrates how poetry in the Book of Proverbs often goes beyond a purely mnemonic function to serve as a vehicle of enlivening perception. Within the tight formal constraints of the one-line aphorism, dynamic and revelatory relationships emerge between the two halves of the line, generating what I have elsewhere

called a poetry of wit. (The frequent celebrations in the book of the power of language invite from the audience a fine attentiveness to the play of language in the poetry.) Very often in biblical poetry, the second verset does not simply echo the first verset, as it does in the three lines quoted above, but instead introduces some sort of heightening or focusing development of it, which in Proverbs frequently is a small surprise or discovery. “A door turns on its hinge, / and a sluggard on his bed” (26:14). Here, as in many other proverbs, the relation between the first verset and the second is that of a riddle to its solution. That is, the assertion in the first half of the line is either so obvious (of course, a door turns on its hinge) that one wonders why it needs to be said at all, or it is perplexing, which makes one wonder for a different reason. The second half of the line then provides a sharply focused (and sometimes satirical) explanation. In this instance, the sluggard is revealed turning back and forth on his bed and getting nowhere, like the door, while the comparison also invites us to think of the contrast between people going in and out of the doorway as the door opens and closes and the sluggard unwilling to move from his bed. Here is a different riddle-proverb about the lazy man, in which the riddling first verset is enigmatic, to be explained in the second verset: “Like

vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, / thus the sluggard to those who send him" (10:26). In formulations of this sort, the riddle form of the line is especially prominent: What is as noxious or irritating as vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes?—a lazy man whom you have the misfortune to use on an errand. A third proverb on the sluggard illustrates the lively variety of the riddle form. The line begins, "The sluggard hides his hand in the dish." This action sounds bizarre, and one wonders why anyone would want to do such a thing. Then the second half of the line explains, "he won't even bring it up to his mouth" (19:24). This is, of course, an extravagant and amusing satiric hyperbole: the man is so lazy that, having plunged his hand into the dish, he is incapable of exerting the effort required to bring the food to his mouth. Thus, the fantastically exaggerated image becomes a representation of how laziness leads to a failure to provide for one's own basic needs, a notion couched in more realistic terms, such as having nothing to harvest when crops are not planted, in other proverbs.

The satiric perspective, to round out this sampling of proverbs on the sluggard, is not limited to riddling but can be brought to bear through a technique of miniaturist caricature: "The sluggard said, 'A lion's

outside / in the square. I shall be murdered!'" (22:13). These words, of course, are a trumped-up excuse for his not leaving his house (or, perhaps, his bed): in the wonderful extravagance of the dialogue that the poet puts in the mouth of the sluggard, he fears that the fictitious lion prowling in the streets threatens not to devour but to murder him, as though it were a malevolent assassin and not merely a beast of prey.

Many of the proverbs set out an antithesis between the first verset and the second, and the tight confines of the one-line aphorism often generate a powerful energy of assertion in the antithesis. Thus: "A worthy woman is her husband's crown, / but like rot in his bones a shameful wife" (12:4). The first verset praising the good wife verges on platitude, but then the antithetical second verset produces a small shock: a crown is a noble thing yet also an external ornament (perhaps an allusion to the fortunate husband's enhanced reputation); rot in the bones is something internal, and devastating. This whole effect is strongly reinforced by the antithetical chiasm: worthy woman (a), crown (b), bone-rot (b'), shaming woman (a'). Sometimes, the contrasting second verset takes on a surprising vividness against the foil of the first verset: "Drawn-out longing sickens the heart, / but desire come true is a tree of life" (13:12). By itself, the

second clause might seem a bland truism, but after the sickening of the heart of unfulfilled desire, it conveys a strong sense of how sustaining it is to have one's longings consummated. In some antithetical proverbs, there is also narrative development from the first verset to the second: "Bread got through fraud may be sweet to a man, / but in the end it fills his mouth with gravel" (20:17). The idea that pleasures reaped through wrongful acts will eventually be followed by a comeuppance for the wrongdoer is a cliché of Wisdom literature. Here, however, the powerfully concrete image of delectable food that turns into a mouthful of gravel endows the familiar idea with poetic force.

A traditional proverb pattern that occurs with some frequency in the collection is "better *x*" (first verset) "than *y*" (second verset). This is actually a variation on the antithetically structured line and similarly draws its expressive power from the bold juxtaposition of opposites. Here are two characteristic examples: "Better a meal of greens where there is love / than a fatted ox where there is hatred" (15:17) and "Better a dry crust with tranquillity / than a house filled with feasting and quarrel" (17:1). Although some of these proverbs may give the impression of the rehearsal of rote learning, many others—perhaps the two instances just cited among them—are arresting not just because

of the concise poetic wit but also because they appear to derive from shrewd and considered reflection on moral behavior and human nature and sometimes from introspection as well. If some of these maxims may seem too pat, one is startled to come across this proverb: “The heart knows its own bitterness, / and in its joy no stranger mingles” (14:10). The book as a whole, after all, works on the assumption that knowledge and experience are eminently transmissible and teachable and that everyone draws on the same fund of set moral principles. In this instance, however, the anthologists have included a very different perception—that each person’s experience is ultimately incommensurable, that one’s inward sorrows and delights have no adequate reflection in the lexicon of the social realm. Occasionally, despite the general adherence of the collection to moral certitude, one encounters a proverb that registers the stubborn ambiguity of human experience, as in this densely packed line: “Like water face to face / thus the heart of man to man” (27:19). The first verset evidently means to say that water gives back a person his own reflected image, and so the second verset would seem to assert that a man may know the heart of another by pondering what is in his own heart. But water, after all, is an unstable mirror, its surface liable to be troubled

by wind or tide, its chromatic layers darkening or transforming the image, and hence the reflection of heart to heart may be a tricky or undependable business.

Rendering these pithy Hebrew maxims in English presents a special challenge. The distinctive lexical stamp of the Book of Proverbs is marked by its use of a set of overlapping terms for wisdom on the one hand and for foolishness or stupidity on the other. Michael V. Fox has exerted heroic scholarly effort to make nice distinctions among these approximate synonyms, but it is doubtful that the precise semantic contours of each of the recurring terms can be recovered with much confidence. The general term for wisdom is *ḥokhmah*, which has a practical orientation, being used in other contexts for the "wise" application of a craft by a skilled worker, but which in chapters 8 and 9 is given cosmic resonance. Three other terms, *ʿormah, mezimah,* and *taḥbulah*, usually have connotations of calculation, shrewdness, or cunning, here put in a positive light. Of the sundry terms for the lack of wisdom, the one that has a clear connotation is *peti*, represented in this translation as "dupe," because it derives from a verbal root associated with seduction and hence suggests gullibility. By and large, the present translation uses the same English equivalent

for each member of these two clusters of related terms, although there are moments when the immediate context has necessitated abandoning consistency.

The more pervasive challenge to the translator of Proverbs is that the expressive vigor of these sayings depends to such a large degree on their wonderful compactness, an effect reinforced by sound-play (alliteration, assonance, an occasional ad hoc internal rhyme). Most of this sound-play inevitably disappears in the English, though some efforts have been made in this version to reproduce it, at least approximately. Because of the fundamental structural difference between biblical Hebrew and modern English, it often takes eight to ten words to say in English what is expressed in four Hebrew words. There is no escape from this linguistic quandary, but I have sought to narrow the gap between the two languages by avoiding (with just a few exceptions) polysyllabic words, by trying wherever possible to keep the number of accents—typically, three per verset—close to that in the Hebrew, and by reproducing something of the compression of formulation of the Hebrew without resort to explanatory or paraphrastic maneuvers in the translation. However imperfect the results, I would hope these procedures will bring readers closer than

do earlier English versions to the concise forcefulness of the Hebrew. The speed, the occasional abruptness, the gnomic character of the original seem worth emulating—hence renderings such as “like water face to face / so the heart of man to man.”

CHAPTER 1

[1]The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel.

[2]To know wisdom and reproof,
to understand discerning maxims.
[3]To accept the reproof of insight,
righteousness, justice, and uprightness.
[4]To give shrewdness to the simple,
to a lad, knowledge and cunning.
[5]Let the wise man hear and gain learning,
and the discerning acquire designs.
[6]To understand proverbs and adages,
the words of the wise and their riddles.
[7]The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.
Wisdom and reproof dolts despise.

[8]Hear, my son, your father's reproof,
and do not forsake your mother's teaching.
[9]For they are a garland of grace on your head
and a necklace round your throat.

[10]My son, should offenders seduce you,
do not be willing.
[11]Should they say,
“Go with us, let us lie in wait for blood,
stalk the innocent for no reason.
[12]Let us swallow them live like Sheol,
and the blameless like those gone down to the
Pit.
[13]All precious treasure we shall find,
we shall fill our houses with loot.
[14]Your lot you should throw in with us,
one purse we all shall have.”
[15]My son, do not go on a road with them,
hold back your foot from their path.
[16]For their feet run to evil,
and they hurry to shed blood.
[17]For the net is spread out for no reason
in the eyes of each wingèd thing.
[18]Yet they lie in wait for their own blood,
they lurk for their own lives.
[19]Thus are the ways of all who chase gain,
its possessor’s life it will take.

[20]Wisdom cries out in the streets,
in the squares she lifts her voice.

[21]At the bustling crossroads she calls,
    at the entrance to the town's gate says her
        sayings:
[22]How long, dupes, will you love being duped,
    and scoffers lust scoffing,
        and fools hate knowledge?
[23]Turn back to my rebuke.
    Look, I would pour out my spirit to you,
        I would make my words known with you.
[24]Because I called and you resisted,
    I reached out my hand and none paid heed,
[25]and you flung aside all my counsel,
    and you did not want my rebuke.
[26]I, too, shall laugh at your ruin,
    I shall mock when what you feared comes,
[27]when what you feared comes like disaster,
    and your ruin like a whirlwind descends,
        when straits and distress come upon you.
[28]Then they will call me and I shall not answer,
    they will seek me and they will not find me.
[29]Because they have hated knowledge,
    and the LORD's fear they did not choose.
[30]They did not want my counsel,
    they spurned all my rebuke.
[31]And they ate from the fruit of their way,
    and from their own counsels they were sated.

[32]For the waywardness of dupes will kill them
and the smugness of fools will destroy them.
[33]But who heeds me will dwell secure,
and tranquil from the fear of harm.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel*. This editorial headnote for the book follows the Late Biblical practice of ascribing texts to famous figures from the national past. In this case, the ascription was obviously encouraged by the legendary wisdom reported of Solomon in 1 Kings, including his having composed many proverbs. In fact, the collections of sayings and longer poems assembled in the book were written in all probability centuries after Solomon, with the earliest stratum going back, perhaps, to the eighth century B.C.E., although some individual proverbs may well have been older.

proverbs. The Hebrew *mishley*—which actually means "proverbs of "—became the prevalent title for the book in Jewish tradition. The term, which suggests some sort of artful expression, usually poetic, has no entirely satisfactory English equivalent because it variously means "proverb," "parable," "poetic theme," "rhapsodic utterance."

2. *To know wisdom and reproof*. The series of infinitive phrases, which runs from here to the end of verse 4 and is picked up again in verse 6, is quite untypical of literary syntax in the Bible. It is presumably used because it lays out an agenda for the book, with everything from the beginning through verse 9 constituting a formal prelude to the book proper. "Reproof," *musar*, and the matching term "rebuke," *tokheḥah* (verses 23,25, and 30), are prominently featured because the pedagogical assumption of the book is that the unsuspecting young need to be warned of life's dangers and scolded for their susceptibility to temptation—a process that will be repeatedly evident, beginning here in verses 10–19.

4. *shrewdness . . . / cunning*. This book uses in a positive sense a cluster of terms—"designs" in the next verse belongs to the cluster—that in other contexts have a connotation of deviousness and scheming. ("Shrewdness," *ʿormah*, for example, is the word used for the primeval serpent in Genesis 3:1.) Such usage fits in with the pragmatic curriculum of Proverbs. Intelligence of the most practical sort, involving an alertness to potential deceptions and seductions, is seen as an indispensable tool for the safe, satisfying, and ethical life, and a fool is repeatedly thought of as a dupe.

6. *riddles*. This is the same term, *ḥidah*, that is used in the Samson story. Some of the one-line proverbs, as we shall see, are actually cast as riddles, with the first verset posing the riddle and the second verset the solution. The burden of the entire line is that fine attentiveness is required to take in fully the words of the wise, and that idea is borne out by the compressed wit exhibited in many of the proverbs.

7. *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge*. This summarizing statement reflects a distinctive Israelite emphasis not evident in analogous Wisdom texts in Egypt and Mesopotamia.

8. *Hear, my son*. The persona of the Mentor now emerges, addressing his inexperienced disciple—as he will repeatedly do later—as "son," in keeping with the precedent of Egyptian Wisdom writings.

10. *offenders*. One immediately sees why the traditional rendering of *ḥataʾim* as "sinners," perpetuated in many modern translations, is not quite right. These are offenders in the strict criminal sense, a gang of violent thugs. This monitory poem runs to the end of verse 19, followed by Wisdom's first speech, which takes up fourteen verses until the end of the chapter. Continuous poems of roughly this length constitute the first nine-chapter unit of the book. Then there is a shift to one-line proverbs.

do not be willing. The two-word Hebrew verset looks textually suspect, reflecting a rhythmic imbalance with the first verset.

11. *Should they say*. This formula for introducing speech, as elsewhere in biblical poetry, seems to be extrametrical.

blood, / innocent. These two terms, distributed between the two versets, are, as Michael V. Fox neatly observes, a breakup of a bound collocation, "blood of the innocent," *dam naqi*.

12. *swallow them live like Sheol*. The implication of "blood" in the previous line is spelled out: the thugs' plan is to murder their victims and then seize their wealth.

14. *one purse we all shall have*. The thugs appeal to the young man not only on the basis of profit ("precious treasure") to be had but also for the camaraderie in crime that they offer.

15. *road / path*. Though these terms and related synonyms are a figure for a way of behavior, they are also literal here: the bandits want to draw the young man with them on a road where they will lie in wait for victims.

17. *For the net is spread out for no reason*. The unwitting birds do not imagine that the fowlers' net spread below them is meant to entrap them.

18. *Yet they lie in wait for their own blood*. Most interpreters, seeing an implied analogy between the unwitting birds and the naïve young drawn into crime, understand this to mean that the criminals do not imagine that they will be caught by the dire consequences of their own crime, do not realize that they are their own ambushers. This would be in keeping with an idea stressed in Proverbs—and vehemently rejected in Job—that there is a built-in moral mechanism that leads from crime to disaster for its perpetrators. Similarly in the next verse, ill-gotten gain is said to take "its possessor's life."

20. *Wisdom cries out in the streets*. Lady Wisdom, an important personage in the first large unit of Proverbs, is as close to an allegorical figure as the Hebrew Bible comes. Attempts to derive her from the Greek Sophia are questionable, and it is by no means clear that any of this book was written as late as the Hellenistic period. Female figures as symbols of nations—most notably, Zion—are common in biblical literature, but not as embodiments of abstractions. Perhaps the centrality of the quality of wisdom in this poetic book led to a feminine personification. The Hebrew *ḥokhmah* is a feminine noun, but here it appears in a plural form, *ḥokhmot*, construed grammatically as a singular (like Behemoth in Job). This could be a plural of intensification or an archaic form.

21. *bustling crossroads*. This translation follows a proposal by Fox. The literal sense is "chief [or head] of the bustlings," which he plausibly construes as an ellipsis.

25. *flung aside*. The verb is elsewhere used for unbinding the hair, so it literally means something like to put in disarray.

27. *straits and distress*. The Hebrew similarly features alliteration, *tsarah umetsukah*.

31. *ate from the fruit of their way*. As in verses 18 and 19, the idea is that they had to taste the bitter consequences of their own evil acts.

from their own counsels they were sated. This verset extends the idea of eating the dire consequences of crime. "Counsels," *moʿetsot*, antithetically picks up the "counsel" of Wisdom (verse 30) that was spurned, the two words here being different noun formations from the same root.

33. *who heeds me will dwell secure*. Again and again, Proverbs pushes the notion that there is a pragmatic payoff for following the precepts of wisdom: those who do so will enjoy untroubled lives, secure from harm.

CHAPTER 2

[1]My son, if you take up my sayings,
and my commands you store within you,
[2]to make your ear hearken to wisdom,
incline your heart to discernment,
[3]for if you call out to understanding,
raise your voice to discernment,
[4]if you seek it like silver,
search for it like treasure,
[5]then will you understand the LORD's fear,
and you will find the knowledge of God.
[6]For the LORD gives wisdom,
from His mouth, discerning knowledge.
[7]He stores for the upright prudence,
a shield to those who walk blameless,
[8]to keep the paths of justice
and He watches the way of His faithful.
[9]Then you will understand righteousness, justice,
and uprightness, each pathway of good.
[10]For wisdom will enter your heart,
and knowledge be sweet to your palate.

[11]Cunning will watch over you,
discernment will keep you,
[12]to save you from a way of evil,
from a man who speaks perversely.
[13]They forsake the paths of uprightness
to go in the ways of darkness,
[14]they rejoice to do evil,
delight in evil's perverseness,
[15]whose paths are crooked,
and twisted in their pathways.
[16]To save you from a stranger-woman,
from a smooth-talking alien woman,
[17]who forsakes the guide of her youth
and the pact of her God forgets.
[18]For her house leads down to death
and to the shades, her pathways.
[19]All who come to her will not return,
and will not attain the paths of life.
[20]So that you walk in the way of the good,
and the paths of the just you keep.
[21]For the upright will dwell on earth
and the blameless survive on it.
[22]But the wicked are cut off from the earth,
and traitors torn away from it.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

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1. *take up my sayings*. Here, as elsewhere, the Mentor presents himself as an authoritative figure who is the dependable source of wisdom for his as yet untutored disciple.

5. *then will you understand the LORD's fear*. Since the fear of the LORD is represented definitionally as the beginning of wisdom, the converse is also true: a person, by making a strenuous and sincere effort to discover wisdom, will come to understand what fear of the LORD is, for He (verse 6) is the one who ultimately imparts all wisdom.

7. *a shield*. The notion that wisdom protects one from mishaps is of a piece with the general conception of wisdom's possessing pragmatic advantages.

10. *For wisdom will enter your heart*. Here and above, in verse 2, the English reader should recall that the heart is conceived as the seat of understanding (rather like "mind"), although it also is associated with emotion.

11. *Cunning*. See the comment on 1:4. It may be useful to keep in mind that "cunning" in English is not always a negative term. Consider, for example, such usages as "cunning design."

12. *perversely*. The Hebrew *tahapukhot* suggests things topsy-turvy, upended from their proper place. Proverbs repeatedly uses antithetical spatial metaphors for the good and the evil life. The former is a straight way; the latter is perverse, topsy-turvy, or, as in verse 15, crooked and twisted.

13. *They forsake the paths of uprightness*. The Hebrew here and in the next verse uses a plural participial form: "forsaking the paths." This entire first piece of admonition to the young man is quite general, warning him to stay away from bad people. The unit that begins with verse 16 is more specific—a warning of the dangers of the sexual seductress.

15. *twisted*. That is, both the paths and the men who go on them are twisted.

16. *stranger-woman*. The meaning of the Hebrew *zarah* has been much debated. The usual English designation, "strange woman," is misleading because it implies that she is strange—that is, somehow bizarre. She is not, as some have claimed, a prostitute because verse 17 indicates that she is married. There is also scant suggestion that, as others have argued, she is a

foreigner, even though the parallel term in this line, *nokhriyah*, "alien woman," often means foreigner. In cultic contexts, a *zar* is someone prohibited from entering the sacred zone of the sanctuary because he is not a priest. That sense is relevant to our text: the married woman, because she is contracted to another man, is prohibited to the susceptible youth. The paired term *nokhriyah*, then, in the poetic parallelism, probably has the force of "another man's wife"—alien in a sexual rather than a national sense.

17. *the guide of her youth*. While some render *ʾaluf* as "companion," the point is, in this patriarchal society, that the husband is expected to provide moral guidance for his wife, which in this case she has flagrantly ignored. The verbal root of the Hebrew noun means "to instruct" and has no association with companionability.

the pact of her God. Given the context of abandoning her husband-guide, the most likely reference is to the marriage contract, or perhaps, by extension, to the divine prohibition of adultery.

18. *her house leads down to death*. More literally, "stoops down" or "tilts down." It is unnecessary to emend *beytah*, "her house," to *netivatah*, "her path," as some have proposed, because the phrase offers a vivid image of the house of the adulteress—her husband may be away on business, as in chapter 7—as a death trap: you enter it and find yourself on a chute sliding down into the realm of death. The writer seems to assume that adultery leads to death as a condign punishment, though he might have in mind the consequence of the husband's vengeance (compare 7:23).

19. *All who come to*. The Hebrew makes a pointed pun because to come into a woman means to have sex with her. The house leading down to death is thus metonymically linked with the woman's body leading to death.

21. *the upright will dwell on earth*. The multivalent Hebrew *ʾerets* here has the sense of "earth," not "land," because what is at issue is survival in life: the person who follows the ethical path marked out by wisdom will live long on earth while the wicked die before their time (the next verse), like the men who succumb to the wiles of the seductress.

CHAPTER 3

[1]My son, do not forget my teaching,
and let your heart keep my commands.
[2]For length of days and years of life
and peace they will add for you.
[3]Kindness and truth will not forsake you.
Bind them round your neck,
write them on your heart's tablet,
[4]and find favor and good regard
in the eyes of God and man.
[5]Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not lean on your discernment.
[6]Through all your ways know Him,
and He will make your paths straight.
[7]Do not be wise in your own eyes,
fear the LORD and swerve from evil.
[8]Let it be healing for your flesh
and a balm to your bones.
[9]Honor the LORD more than your wealth
and than the first fruits of your crop,
[10]and your barns will be filled with abundance,

your vats will burst with new wine.
[11]The LORD's reproof, my son, do not spurn,
and do not despise His rebuke.
[12]For whom the LORD loves He rebukes,
and like a father his son, regards him kindly.

[13]Happy the man who has found wisdom,
and the man who acquires discernment.
[14]For her worth is better than silver's worth,
and her yield better than fine gold.
[15]More precious is she than rubies,
and all your cherished things could not equal her.
[16]Length of days are in her right hand,
in her left hand wealth and honor.
[17]Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
and all her paths are peace.
[18]A tree of life is she to those who grasp her,
and those who hold her are deemed happy.
[19]The LORD through wisdom founded earth,
set heavens firm through discernment.
[20]Through His knowledge the deeps burst open,
and the skies dripped dew.
[21]My son, let these things not slip away from your eyes,

keep prudence and cunning,
[22]and they will be life to your neck
and grace to your throat.
[23]Then you shall walk secure on your way,
and your foot shall not be bruised.
[24]If you lie down, you shall not be afraid.
You shall lie down, and your sleep shall be
sweet.
[25]You shall not fear any sudden fright,
nor the plight of the wicked when it comes.
[26]For the LORD will be your trust,
and will guard your foot from the snare.

[27]Don’t hold back bounty from him who earned it
when it’s within your hand’s power to perform.
[28]Don’t say to your friend, “Go and come back,
and tomorrow I’ll give,” when you have it.
[29]Don’t plot harm against your fellow,
when he dwells secure alongside you.
[30]Don’t quarrel with a man for no reason
if he has done you no harm.
[31]Don’t envy a man of violence
and don’t choose any of his ways.
[32]For a crooked man is the LORD’s loathing,
and the upright are His intimates.

[33]The LORD's blight is on the house of the wicked,
and the abode of the righteous He blesses.
[34]As for the scoffers, He scoffs at them,
but to the humble He grants favor.
[35]The wise inherit honor,
and fools take away disgrace.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *length of days . . . years of life*. This pronouncement continues the central pragmatic theme in Proverbs: that following the path of wisdom leads to physical well-being, prosperity, and longevity.

3. *round your neck, / . . . on your heart's tablet*. The teachings of wisdom are both an external ornament and something to be internalized and permanently retained.

4. *good regard*. The Hebrew *sekhel* can also mean "intelligence" (a usage carried forward in modern Hebrew, where it suggests something like "common sense"). But the verbal root means "to see"—in many languages, there is a link between seeing and understanding—as in Genesis 3:6, "the tree was lovely to look at [*lehaskil*]." In the present context, where the opinions of others is at issue, "regard" seems the likely meaning. Fox comes to the same conclusion.

6. *make your paths straight*. The verb could also mean "level," meaning you can walk on your paths without obstruction, but the antithesis of crooked paths (see 2:15) may make straightening the more likely meaning.

7. *Do not be wise in your own eyes, / fear the* LORD. Behind this admonition is the key idea that fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.

8. *your flesh*. The Masoretic Text reads *shorekha*, "your navel," which sounds bizarre, the navel not being known as a focus of bodily well-being. The

Septuagint evidently used a Hebrew text that read, far more probably, *she'eirkha*, "your flesh," and it seems likely that the medial *aleph* was inadvertently dropped in scribal transmission.

10. *abundance*. Literally, "satiety." The reference is to abundant grain, paired with new wine in the second verset.

13. *Happy the man*. After the general exhortation to follow the words of the wise that takes up verses 1–12, a new unit begins here. The *'ashrey* formula, "happy the man," often marks the beginning of a textual unit, as in the Wisdom psalm (Psalm 1) that stands at the head of the canonical collection. The subject of this poetic sequence, which ends at verse 20, is a celebration of the transcendent powers of wisdom.

14. *her worth*. Although wisdom is not explicitly personified in 1:20–33, she is nevertheless represented as a feminine figure, possessing two hands (verse 16). The term for "worth" here, *saḥar*, implies market value.

15. *rubies*. As with most precious stones in the biblical lexicon, the precise identification is uncertain. In modern Hebrew, *peninim* means "pearls," which might possibly be its biblical sense.

18. *deemed happy*. The word "deemed" has been added because the passive verb *me'ushar* is the condition of the person of whom others say *'ashrey*, "happy is he."

19. *The LORD through wisdom founded earth*. Though this could be read as a poetic flourish, it begins to move toward the idea cultivated by Kabbalists and others that wisdom is a cosmic principle by which God works out the design of creation.

20. *the deeps burst open, / . . . the skies dripped dew*. This figuration of fructifying creation is a benign reversal of the Flood story, where "all the wellsprings of the great deep burst / and the casements of the heavens were opened" (Genesis 7:11).

21. *My son, let these things not slip away from your eyes*. This unit of the text, which runs to verse 26, is a series of exhortations to cling to wisdom and thus enjoy its benefits, which parallels the similar series in verses 1–12, forming a kind of frame around the celebration of the supernal force of wisdom in verses 13–20.

22. *life to your neck / . . . grace to your throat*. Because of the poetic parallelism, the probable sense of the multivalent *nefesh* here, as frequently in Psalms (see, for example, Psalm 69:2), is "neck." The idea of wisdom as an ornament around the neck (compare verse 3) is common in Proverbs, but "life to your neck" sounds odd. The reference might conceivably be to a life-protecting amulet, worn around the neck.

25. *plight of the wicked*. That is, sooner or later, disaster will inevitably overtake the wicked, but a person who follows the ways of wisdom will have no reason to fear such catastrophe.

27. *Don't hold back bounty*. These words initiate a fourth textual unit, which is a miscellany of negative injunctions regarding behavior toward one's fellow man. It must be said that this whole series borders on platitude, rather like Polonius's advice to Laertes in *Hamlet*.

32. *crooked . . . / upright*. The two Hebrew terms are pointed antonyms because "upright," *yesharim*, is literally "straight."

and the upright are His intimates. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "and the upright are with [or part of] His intimate circle."

35. *honor, / . . . disgrace*. The two Hebrew terms are antonyms not only semantically but also etymologically: the word for "honor," *kavod*, derives from a root that means "weighty" or "heavy," and the word for "disgrace," *qalon*, derives from a root that means "light," which is to say, of no importance.

take away. The Hebrew *merim* (ostensibly, "raises") is anomalous and also a singular verb where the plural is required. Efforts to recover an original term by emendation have been unavailing, but the poetic parallelism indicates that a word meaning "to take possession" was intended.

CHAPTER 4

[1]Hear, O sons, a father's reproof,
and listen to discerning knowledge.
[2]For good learning I have given you,
do not forsake my teaching.
[3]For I was a son to my father,
a tender only child for my mother.
[4]And he taught me and said to me:
"Let your heart hold on to my words.
Keep my commands and live.
[5]Get wisdom, get discernment.
Do not forget nor swerve from my mouth's
sayings.
[6]Do not forsake her and she will guard you.
Love her and she will keep you.
[7]The beginning of wisdom is—get wisdom,
and in all that you get, get discernment.
[8]Dandle her and she will exalt you,
will honor you when you embrace her.
[9]She will put on your head a garland of grace,
a crown of splendor she will hand you."

[10]Hear, my son, and take my sayings,
that the years of your life be many.
[11]In the way of wisdom I teach you,
I guide you on pathways of rightness.
[12]When you walk, your step is not straitened.
If you run, you will not stumble.
[13]Hold fast to reproof, don't let go.
Keep it, for it is your life.
[14]On the wicked's path do not enter,
and do not stride on the way of the evil.
[15]Shun it, don't pass upon it,
turn away from it and pass on.
[16]For they do not sleep if they've done no evil,
and they're robbed of sleep if they trip no one up.
[17]For they break the bread of wickedness,
and the wine of outrage they drink.
[18]But the path of the righteous is like light's radiance,
ever brighter till day has come.
[19]The way of the wicked is like darkness.
They know not on what they stumble.

[20]My son, listen to my words,
to my sayings bend your ear.

[21]Let them not slip away from your eyes,
guard them within your heart.
[22]For they are life to those who find them,
and healing to all their flesh.
[23]More than anything watched guard your heart,
for from it are the ways out to life.
[24]Put away from you twisted speech
and lips' contortion keep far from you.
[25]Let your eyes look in front,
and your gaze straight before you.
[26]Level the pathway of your foot,
and all your ways will be sound.
[27]Do not veer to the right or the left.
Keep your foot away from evil.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *For I was a son to my father*. In the tradition-oriented framework of Proverbs, wisdom is a quality that age imparts to youth (a theme repeatedly struck by Job's companions), father to son. That idea is reinforced here by the introduction of a third generation, the grandfather of the young man who is the object of instruction. Just as the Mentor was taught by his father, whose words he goes on to quote, he will teach the young man.

a tender only child. As an only child, he would have been a special object of parental attention and of solicitude for his moral education.

6. *Do not forsake her*. The feminine pronoun refers to wisdom, which, even without explicit personification, is imagined as a female figure.

7. *The beginning of wisdom is—get wisdom*. This sounds tautological, but Fox plausibly explains that it means one must acquire the precepts of wisdom even if at first it may be only by rote, with true comprehension dawning later.

8. *Dandle her*. There has been some exegetical dispute about the precise meaning of the verb *salsel* (the root probably suggests "curling"), but the manifest chiastic structure of the line argues for some physical expression of affection: dandle (a), exalt (b), honor (b'), embrace (a'). The next line exhibits a similar chiastic pattern.

10. *Hear, my son*. This formulaic exhortation, after the citation of the grandfather's admonitions to embrace wisdom, marks the beginning of a new unit. The subject of this unit is the imperative need to avoid the company of the wicked, and its governing metaphor is the two paths—the way of wisdom (verses 11–13) and the way of the wicked (verses 14–19).

12. *your step is not straitened*. The translation picks up a hint from the King James Version, which follows the alliterative effect of the Hebrew, *loʾ-yeitsar tsaʿadekha*.

14. *On the wicked's path do not enter*. The use of "enter" suggests that you should not even think of setting foot on that path.

17. *the bread of wickedness, / and the wine of outrage*. Unwilling to rest until they have done harm, they make their ill-gotten gains their daily diet.

18. *like light's radiance, / ever brighter till day has come*. This translation agrees with Fox, and against many interpreters, that *nekhon hayom* (literally, "the establishment of day") does not refer to noon but to the moment in the morning when the sun is fully risen and the daylight is strong. However, there is no warrant for construing *ʾor*, the primary biblical term for light, as "dawn," as Fox proposes, nor can one accept his understanding of the accompanying term, *nogah*, as a "derivative luminescence," since there are many biblical texts in which it is clearly a bright shining.

20. *My son, listen to my words*. Again this formula signals the beginning of a new textual unit. In this instance it is a miscellany of moral advice, involving the need to cling to the teachings of wisdom (verses 21–23), the avoidance of duplicitous speech (verse 24), and the importance of concentrating on the goal in front of you without glancing at the temptations on all sides (verses 25–27).

23. *More than anything watched guard your heart*. The heart is the seat of understanding or, as we might say, the center of conscious intellection, and so it becomes the repository of the wisdom the young person will imbibe, and it needs to be zealously guarded.

the ways out to life. This expression, which has an antithetical counterpart in Psalm 68:21, "the ways out from death," has a certain mythological resonance, reinforcing the tremendous power of the human heart.

24. *twisted speech*. Literally, "mouth's twistedness."

25. *Let your eyes look in front*. The burden of this and the two subsequent lines that conclude the unit is that since moral dangers and temptations swarm on all sides, one must keep looking straight ahead and also choose a safe level path on which to walk in life. This prudential advice points toward a puritanical outlook, as in the cognate injunction in the Mishnah (Avot), "He who walks on a road and says 'How lovely this tree, how lovely this field,' incurs mortal guilt." The idea of looking only straight ahead of you is also the exact opposite of Qohelet's endeavor to explore all the realms of experience in search of wisdom.

gaze. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "eyelids." The claim of some interpreters, from Late Antiquity to the present, that the term means "eyeballs" is dubious. Because poetic parallelism requires a synonym for "eyes," the word for "eyelids" was enlisted: though one doesn't see with the eyelids, by metonymic extension the word becomes in poetry a stand-in for eyes.

CHAPTER 5

[1]My son, to my wisdom hearken,
to my discernment bend your ear,
[2]to guard cunning
so that your lips may keep knowledge.
[3]For the stranger-woman's lips drip honey,
smoother than oil her open mouth.
[4]But in the end she's as bitter as wormwood,
sharp as a double-edged sword.
[5]Her feet go down to Death,
in Sheol her steps take hold.
[6]No path of life she traces,
her pathways wander, and she does not know.
[7]And now, sons, hear me,
and do not swerve from my mouth's sayings.
[8]Keep your way far from her
and do not go near the entrance of her house,
[9]lest you give to others your glory
and your years to a ruthless man,
[10]lest strangers sate themselves with your vigor,
and your toil—in an alien's house,

[11]and in the end you roar
when your body and flesh waste away.
[12]And you will say, “How I hated reproof,
and my heart despised rebuke.
[13]And I did not heed my teachers’ voice,
to my instructors I did not bend my ear.
[14]Soon I fell into every harm
in the midst of the assembled crowd.”
[15]Drink water from your own well,
fresh water from your cistern.
[16]Your springs will spread to the street,
in the squares, streams of water.
[17]Let them be yours alone
and not for strangers alongside you.
[18]Let your fountain be blessed,
and rejoice in the wife of your youth.
[19]Love’s doe, a graceful gazelle,
her breasts ever slake your thirst,
you will always dote in her love.
[20]And why dote, my son, on a stranger-woman,
clasp an alien woman’s lap?
[21]For before the LORD’s eyes are the ways of a man,
He traces all his pathways.
[22]The crimes of the wicked ensnare him,
in the ropes of his offense he is held.

[23]He will die for want of reproof,
in his great doltishness he will dote.

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *My son, to my wisdom hearken*. This poem begins with the usual formula of exhortation by the Mentor (this verse and the next). In this case, we have one continuous poem until the end of the chapter, a warning about the wiles of the stranger-woman and a celebration of the joys of conjugal sex. The poem is not quite narrative, like the matching poem of chapter 7, despite certain narrative elements, but it is remarkable in the way it elaborates its argument through metaphor.

3. *the stranger-woman's lips drip honey*. The sensual ripeness of the alliteration in the Hebrew *nofet titofna siftey zarah* has a nearly identical counterpart in Song of Songs 4:11. In the translation, "lips drip" is a gesture toward this cluster of sound. The seductive lips are a counterpart to the lips that should keep knowledge in the preceding line.

open mouth. The literal meaning of *ḥeikh* is "palate." Since it is in all likelihood not speech but kisses that are referred to in both halves of the line, the translation adds "open" in keeping with the erotic enticement that the poet surely had in mind. The Hebrew term used, as we shall see, sets up a strategic pun that occurs later in the poem.

4. *double-edged sword*. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "sword of [two] mouths," thus called because in biblical idiom the edge of the sword consumes. The idiom in this way shrewdly loops back, in an antithesis, to the lips and mouth (or palate) of the seductress.

6. *she does not know*. Focused as she is on sexual pleasure and the arts of seduction, she has no sense that she is embarked on a disastrous course, far from the straight way.

7. *And now, sons*. The Mentor temporarily switches to the plural, perhaps to generalize the case of this particular young man, but he then switches back to

the singular in the next verse.

8. *the entrance of her house*. More literally, this would be "the opening of her house." Though the admonition is literally spatial—steer clear of her house, don't even think of approaching the door—an analogy is intimated between the woman's house and her body. (In the Talmud, this Hebrew term, *petah*, becomes a designation of the vagina in some discussions of marital law.)

10. *lest strangers sate themselves with your vigor*. The causal mechanism is ambiguous. If the woman is married, like the stranger-woman in chapter 7, the young man might be stripped of his resources by a husband's suit for damages. If she is single, she could turn out to be a gold digger who, exploiting his sexual obsession, would take him for all he's worth.

11. *your body and flesh waste away*. Presumably, this would be the consequence of his lacking the wherewithal to nourish himself properly, although the possibility of venereal disease should not be excluded.

14. *the assembled crowd*. Literally, "the assembly and congregation," which is here construed as a hendiadys. The idea is that the real harm suffered because of the stranger-woman will be compounded by public shaming.

15. *Drink water from your own well*. The association of the well with female fertility and especially with the womb (or vagina) is reflected both in the Song of Songs and in the recurrent betrothal type-scene, where the young man encounters his future bride by a well. The pure waters of the well are an antithesis to the sweet honey and smooth oil of the seductress's mouth. It is not clear whether the young man is already married or is being urged to enter marriage and its pleasures before he succumbs to the lure of the stranger-woman.

16. *Your springs will spread to the street*. Many critics prefer to follow the reading of the Septuagint, "Lest your springs spread to the street" because of the idea that the husband should enjoy his own private well, within the confines of his house. But since the spring or well is associated with the woman, it is not altogether clear what this would refer to—perhaps, by a stretch, to a prospect that the wife would become promiscuous because of her husband's infidelity, which is not entirely plausible. The line might mean, as we have proposed, that the consequences of the man's drinking from his own

well—which perhaps would be his offspring—will be felt in the public realm. The next verse, however, would seem to argue for the Septuagint reading.

19. *Love's doe, a graceful gazelle*. These delicate animal images are drawn from the same repertory as the animal images repeatedly used in the Song of Songs. The "love," attached to "doe," *ʾahavim*, suggests lovemaking rather than the emotional relationship, *ʾahavah*.

her breasts ever slake your thirst. Some interpreters revocalize *dadim*, "breasts," as *dodim*, "lovemaking," in keeping with the language of the Song of Songs. But given the emphasis in this poem on drinking, the physical image of drinking from the breasts may be more likely.

20. *why dote*. It is a characteristic maneuver of biblical poetry and of biblical narrative to effect the move from one segment of the text to the next by repeating a key word used in a different sense. Here, the core meaning of *sh-g-h*, to give oneself to excess or wild feeling, is retained, but there is a switch from a positive valence (the beloved wife) to a negative one (the stranger-woman).

lap. The Hebrew *ḥeiq* is obviously a metonymy for the woman's sexual part, and it puns on the term for another orifice, *ḥeikh* ("palate" or "mouth"), used at the beginning of the poem and thus registers a small narrative progression. The allure of the seductress's mouth leads to dangerous sexual intimacy.

23. *he will dote*. This concluding verb closes the circle in the representation of the foolish young man who makes the mistake of falling for the seductress: the Hebrew, like the English, is ambiguous, leaving the reader to decide whether he is doting on the stranger-woman in his foolishness or simply doting on the condition of foolishness.

CHAPTER 6

[1]My son, if you stood pledge for your fellow man,
gave your handshake to a stranger,
[2]you've been ensnared by your mouth's sayings,
trapped by your mouth's sayings.
[3]Do this, then, my son, and escape,
for you have fallen into your fellow man's grasp,
go grovel, and pester your fellow man.
[4]Give no sleep to your eyes
nor slumber to your eyelids.
[5]Escape like the deer from the hunter,
and the bird from the fowler's hand.

[6]Go to the ant, you sluggard,
see its ways and get wisdom.
[7]For she has no foreman,
no taskmaster nor ruler.
[8]She readies her bread in summer,
stores up her food at the harvest.
[9]How long, O sluggard, will you lie there.
When will you rise from your sleep?

10 A bit more sleep, a bit more slumber,
a bit more lying with folded arms,
11 and your privation will come like a wayfarer,
your want like a shield-bearing man.

12 A worthless fellow, a wrongdoing man,
goes about with a crooked mouth,
13 winking his eyes, shuffling his feet,
pointing with his fingers,
14 perverseness in his heart, plotting evil,
ever fomenting strife.
15 Therefore his ruin will come suddenly,
he'll be broken all at once beyond cure.
16 Six things are there that the LORD hates,
and seven He utterly loathes.
17 Haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
and hands shedding innocent blood,
18 a heart plotting wicked designs,
feet hurrying to run to evil,
19 a lying deposer, a false witness,
fomenting strife among brothers.

20 Keep, my son, your father's command,
and do not abandon your mother's teaching.
21 Bind them on your heart at all times,

garland them round your neck.
[22]When you walk about, it will guide you,
when you lie down, it will guard you,
when you wake, it will converse with you.
[23]For a command is a lamp and teaching a light,
and the way of life—stern rebukes.
[24]To keep you from your fellow man's wife,
from the smooth tongue of an alien woman.
[25]Do not covet her beauty in your heart,
and let her not take you with her eyelids.
[26]For a whore's price is no more than a loaf of bread,
but a married woman stalks a precious life.
[27]Can a man scoop fire into his lap
without his garments burning?
[28]Can a man walk on glowing coals
without his feet being scorched?
[29]Thus who comes to bed with his fellow man's wife,
whoever touches her will not go scot-free.
[30]Let one not scorn the thief when he robs
to fill his belly when he hungers.
[31]If he is caught, he must pay sevenfold,
all the wealth of his house he must give.
[32]Who commits adultery with a woman is senseless,
ruining his life, it is he who does it.
[33]Blight and disgrace he will find,

and his shame will not be wiped out.
[34]For jealousy turns into a man's wrath,
he will show no pity on the day of vengeance.
[35]He will take no account of ransom,
and will not be content, though you offer large bribes.

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *if you stood pledge*. The first unit of this chapter, ending with verse 5, is another of the Mentor's pragmatic admonitions to the young man—in this instance, not to guarantee loans for others, an imprudent act that could easily lead one to financial ruin.

2. *mouth's sayings, / . . . mouth's sayings*. The characteristic pattern of biblical poetry would be to use a synonymous phrase in the second verset instead of the selfsame words. In fact, the Syriac translation reads for the second verset "by the word of your lips," and that may well have been the original version.

3. *escape*. Literally, "be saved" (in a physical, not spiritual, sense).
go grovel, and pester your fellow man. The advice proffered is practical though scarcely edifying: if you have been foolish enough to get yourself into this sort of fix, use whatever means you can, even if they are humiliating or unpleasant, to extricate yourself from your obligation.

5. *hunter*. The Masoretic Text reads *miyad*, "from a hand." This translation follows the Septuagint, which used a Hebrew text that seems to have had *mitsayad*, "from a hunter."

9. *How long, O sluggard, will you lie there*. The lazybones sprawled inert on his couch is of course a sharp counterpoint to the ants scurrying about to gather their food, with no need of a taskmaster to urge them on.

11. *your privation will come like a wayfarer*. The inevitable consequence of the sluggard's unwillingness to bestir himself and provide for his own needs is destitution. The term used here for poverty, *reish*, is relatively uncommon, and may derive from the verbal stem *y-r-sh*, which can mean to take over someone else's possessions (hence the translation choice of "privation"). "Wayfarer" represents the Hebrew *mehalekh*, which means "one who walks about." The most probable reference is to a passerby or vagabond who breaks into an unprotected house.

a shield-bearing man. This would be an intensification, as is the general case for parallel terms in the second verset, of "wayfarer," probably referring to an armed brigand.

12. *crooked mouth*. While the phrase indicates perverted speech, it also launches the pattern of distorted body parts that is continued in the next line.

13. *eyes . . . feet, / . . . fingers*. These gestures are evidently expressions of attempted seduction or deception, but as they are catalogued, they clearly represent the worthless fellow as someone who makes himself look grotesque.

16. *Six things . . . / seven*. This numerical pattern—six, or indeed seven, and elsewhere, three, or indeed four—is used several times in Proverbs and occasionally in the Prophets. The miscellaneous character of the list accords with the miscellaneous character of this whole unit, which runs from verse 12 through verse 19.

17–18. *eyes . . . tongue, / . . . hands, . . . heart . . . / feet*. These lines pick up the use of body parts in verses 12 and 13 to create a small catalogue of immoral acts and stances, each associated with the agency of a particular physical organ or member.

20. *Keep, my son, your father's command*. The unit that begins here, a warning against the dangers of adultery, is relatively long and has a formal exordium that takes up four verses (20–23). The adding of mother to father points to a solid conjugal couple contrasting to adulterers.

22. *walk about . . . / lie down . . . / wake*. The language alludes to Deuteronomy 6:7, where it is the words of God's teaching (not, as here, that of human mentors) that must be remembered at all times.

23. *stern rebukes*. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "rebukes of reproof," but, as elsewhere, the effect of joining synonyms in the construct state is an

intensification, hence "stern."

24. *your fellow man's wife*. The Masoretic Text reads *ʾeshet raʿ*, "wife of an evil man," but the phrase is semantically problematic. The Septuagint has *reʿa* (merely a difference of vocalization), "fellow man," which is quite convincing as the authentic version.

smooth tongue. Literally, "smoothness of tongue." The clear reference is to her seductive words.

25. *covet*. The Hebrew verb probably has the force here of "lust," but it is the same verb used in the Decalogue in the prohibition of adultery, and so it is appropriate to follow the translation choice adopted for the Decalogue.

her eyelids. Here the common poetic synonym for "eyes" has special relevance—the fluttering of the eyelids seductively.

26. *a whore's price . . . a loaf of bread*. The expression is no doubt hyperbolic (in Genesis 38 Tamar stipulates a kid—rather more valuable than a loaf of bread—as the price of her sexual favors): if you want sex, you could get it from a whore for mere pennies, whereas the real cost of sex with a married woman will be the destruction of your life ("a married woman stalks a precious life"). The poet is not suggesting that the adulteress is a deliberate killer, but rather that her cheating on her spouse will bring down the murderous wrath of her husband (verses 34 and 35) on her lover.

27. *scoop fire into his lap*. Pointedly, "lap" is linked by metonymy to the sexual organ. Fox neatly notes that "the line's assonance and alliteration are evocative of the hissing and crackling of fire"—*hayaḥeteh ʾish ʾesh beḥeiqo*.

29. *who comes to bed with*. Literally, "who comes into." The idiom, however, refers not just to penetration but to the full sexual act, with the usual implication of a man's having sex with a woman for the first time.

not go scot-free. Literally, "not be innocent."

30. *Let one not scorn the thief*. The two verses here on the thief seem to interrupt the disquisition on the dangers of adultery, which resumes with verse 32. The connection may be in the next verset, "to fill his belly [literally, "throat" or "appetite"] when he hungers" and the prospect of impoverishment invoked in the next line: the thief takes what does not belong to him because he is hungry, a more elemental appetite than the lust that impels the adulterer, who takes a woman who is not his; the likely consequence for the thief is

being stripped of all he possesses, whereas the adulterer's fate is shame, possible destitution (if the husband demands damages), and even death (if the husband's jealous rage turns lethal).

32. *adultery with a woman*. The redundant "with a woman" in the Hebrew creates metrical balance with the second verset, but the word also brings us back to the evocation of the seductive married woman in verses 24–26.

senseless. Literally, "lacking heart," the heart here figuring as the seat of reason.

34. *jealousy turns into a man's wrath*. Literally, "jealousy is a man's wrath."

CHAPTER 7

[1]My son, keep my sayings,
and store up my commands within you.
[2]Keep my commands and live,
my teaching like the apple of your eye.
[3]Bind them on your fingers,
write them on the tablet of your heart.
[4]Say to Wisdom, “You are my sister,”
and call Discernment a friend.
[5]To keep you from a stranger-woman,
from a smooth-talking alien woman.
[6]For from the window of my house,
through my lattice I looked down,
[7]and I saw among the dupes,
discerned among the young men a witless lad,
[8]passing through streets, by the corner,
on the way to her house he strides,
[9]at twilight, as evening descends,
in pitch-black night and darkness.
[10]And, look, a woman to meet him,
whore’s attire and hidden intent.

[11]Bustling she is and wayward,
in her house her feet do not stay.
[12]Now outside, now in the square,
and by every corner she lurks.
[13]She seizes him and kisses him,
impudently says to him:
[14]“I had to make well-being offerings,
today I’ve fulfilled my vows.
[15]And so I’ve come out to meet you,
to seek you, and I’ve found you.
[16]With coverlets I’ve spread my couch,
dyed cloths of Egyptian linen.
[17]I’ve sprinkled my bed with myrrh,
with aloes and cinnamon.
[18]Come, let us drink deep of loving till morn,
let us revel in love’s delights.
[19]For the man is not in his house,
he’s gone on a far-off way.
[20]The purse of silver he took in his hand,
at the new moon he’ll return to his house.”
[21]She sways him with all her talk,
with her smooth speech she leads him astray.
[22]He goes after her in a trice,
as an ox goes off to the slaughter,
as a stag prances into a halter.
[23]Till an arrow pierces his liver,

as a bird hastens to the snare,
not knowing the cost is his life.
[24]And now, sons, listen to me,
and attend to my mouth's sayings.
[25]Let your heart not veer to her ways,
and do not go astray on her paths.
[26]For many the victims she has felled,
innumerable all whom she has killed.
[27]Through her house are the ways to Sheol,
going down to the chambers of Death.

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *My son, keep my sayings*. This poem, a unified structure that takes up the entire chapter, is framed by a five-line exordium, with the specific topic introduced in verse 5, and a four-line conclusion (verses 24–27), in which the speaker points the moral of his story. What unfolds in between these frames is the closest to a sustained narrative that one finds in Proverbs.

6. *from the window of my house, / through my lattice I looked down*. The Mentor enjoys a spatially superior position, able to survey the street scene below where sexual dangers await the unwitting, he himself sheltered from curious eyes by the lattice through which he peers. As he goes on with his story, however, he moves from visual observation to novelistic invention in the vivid dialogue he provides for the seductress. His post of observation in his house is a counterpoint to the house of the stranger-woman with its lethal dangers. The narrative will be defined in part by the two thematic key words, "house" and "way."

9. *at twilight . . . / in pitch-black night and darkness*. This line is a vivid instance of the deployment of narrative development from the first verset to the second in lines of biblical poetry. When the young man goes into the streets, heading in the direction of the seductress's house—whether intentionally or inadvertently—evening is falling. In the next moment—one might recall that sunset is quick in the latitude of the land of Israel—it is already night, under the cloak of which the arts of seduction can be exercised with impunity. The word for "pitch-black" is *ʾishon*, otherwise the apple of the eye (as in verse 2)—that is, the darkest part of the eye. It is a characteristic procedure of biblical narrative and poetry to repeat the same word with a different meaning as a move is effected from one segment of the text to the next.

10. *whore's attire*. Since she is a married woman, not a professional prostitute, the reference is probably to provocative attire, not to clothing explicitly marked for the practice of prostitution.

hidden intent. Literally, "guarded of heart." The translation follows an apt suggestion by Michael V. Fox.

11. *in her house her feet do not stay*. In this society, a woman's place is in her home. Her going out into the streets is an expression of her sexual restlessness (no doubt encouraged by the extended absence of her husband).

13. *She seizes him and kisses him*. Her role as sexual aggressor is manifest.

14. *I had to make well-being offerings*. The point is not merely her hypocrisy in launching an overture to adultery fresh from the Temple service but also that she is proposing to him a sumptuous meat dinner as a prelude to sex. The *shelamim*, well-being offerings, would have only in part been burned on the altar with another part of the animal reserved for feasting.

16. *With coverlets I've spread my couch, / dyed cloths of Egyptian linen*. Now she moves to the site of sexual consummation, explaining that she has lavishly prepared her bed with luxurious cloths imported from Egypt, scented with aromatic spices (verse 17) imported from Arabia and the east (probably India). It is clear that the seductress has means of affluence at her disposal, in all likelihood provided by her husband's activities as a merchant (see verse 20).

18. *let us drink deep of loving till morn*. The word for "loving," *dodim*, refers explicitly to lovemaking, and the drinking of *dodim* is a phrase used in the Song of Songs. Counting on his youthful vigor, she is offering him a whole night of continuous sex.

19. *For the man is not in his house*. This reference to her husband—not "my man" or "my husband" but "the man"—is vaguely contemptuous. This line neatly counterparts the two thematic key words, "house" and "way." While the man is "on a far-off way," his house can become a love nest of adultery.

20. *The purse of silver*. This detail equally suggests that the husband is a prosperous merchant and that he will be away for a long time. Some interpreters see in it a hint that she is requesting money from the young man, though that is not a necessary inference.

at the new moon. Many understand the Hebrew *keseh* to mean full moon, but the term clearly reflects the verbal root that means "to cover," which would accord far better with the new moon. If this assumption is correct, the story would unfold in the early days of the lunar month, when the moon is still a sliver and it is quite dark at night. That would give the wayward wife and the young man almost four weeks to drink deep of love's pleasures.

22. *a stag prances into a halter*. The received text at this point is garbled. The New Jewish Publication Society, for example, renders it "as a fool for the stocks of punishment," not translating the first, incomprehensible word *ukheʿekhes*, and producing an unlikely parallel to the preceding verset about the ox going to slaughter. Instead of the Masoretic *ukheʿekhes ʾel-musar ʾewil*, this translation adopts a proposed emendation *ukheʿakes ʾel-musar ʾeyal*, which involves merely a revocalization of the first word and deleting the *waw* in the last word, with revocalization. *Musar* in this animal context would not mean "reproof," as it does elsewhere in Proverbs, but "sash" or "halter" (the meaning of this word in Job 12:18).

23. *an arrow pierces his liver*. This may be simply an image of a fatal wound, though biblical Hebrew links the liver with sexual desire, so it could conceivably refer to venereal disease. Otherwise, the fate of death would be at the hands of the vengeful husband. It is a reflection of the pragmatic orientation of Proverbs that the Mentor warns against adultery not as a violation of a divine commandment but as an act that can have lethal consequences.

27. *Through her house are the ways to Sheol*. Here at the end, the key terms "house" and "way" are pointedly brought together. Her house turns out to hide a kind of metaphoric trapdoor—perhaps underneath that bed with its fancy linens—opening on a chute that takes one down to the realm of death.

CHAPTER 8

[1]Look, Wisdom calls out,
and Discernment lifts her voice.
[2]At the top of the heights, on the way,
at the crossroads, she takes her stand,
[3]by the gates, at the city's entrance,
at the approach to the portals, she shouts:
[4]To you, men, I call out,
and my voice, to humankind.
[5]Understand shrewdness, you dupes,
and fools, make your heart understand.
[6]Listen, for I speak noble things,
my mouth's utterance—uprightness.
[7]For my tongue declares truth
and my lips loathe wickedness.
[8]In the right are all my mouth's sayings,
nothing in them is twisted or crooked.
[9]They are all plain to the discerning
and straightforward for those who find
knowledge.
[10]Take my reproof rather than silver,

and knowledge is choicer than fine gold.
[11]For wisdom is better than rubies,
and precious things can't match her worth.
[12]I, Wisdom, dwell in shrewdness,
and cunning knowledge I find.
[13]Fear of the LORD is hating evil.
Pride, haughtiness, an evil way,
and perverse speech do I hate.
[14]Mine is counsel and prudence,
I am Discernment, mine is might.
[15]Through me kings reign,
and rulers decree righteous laws.
[16]Through me princes hold sway,
and nobles, all the judges of earth.
[17]I, all my lovers I love,
and my seekers do find me.
[18]Riches and honor are with me,
long-lasting wealth and righteousness.
[19]My fruit is better than all fine gold,
and my yield, than the choicest silver.
[20]On the path of righteousness I walk,
within the ways of justice,
[21]to pass substance on to my lovers,
and their storehouses to fill.
[22]The LORD created me at the outset of His way,
the very first of His works of old.

[23]In remote eons I was shaped,
at the start of the first things of earth.
[24]When there were no deeps I was spawned,
when there were no wellsprings, water sources.
[25]Before mountains were anchored,
before hills I was spawned.
[26]He had yet not made earth and open land,
and the world's first clods of soil.
[27]When He founded the heavens, I was there,
when He traced a circle on the face of the deep,
[28]when He propped up the skies above,
when He powered the springs of the deep,
[29]when He set to the sea its limit,
that the waters not flout His command,
when He strengthened the earth's
foundations.
[30]And I was by Him, an intimate,
I was His delight day after day,
playing before Him at all times,
[31]playing in the world, His earth,
and my delight with humankind.

[32]And now, sons, listen to me,
happy who keeps my ways.
[33]Listen to reproof and get wisdom,

and do not cast it aside.
[34]Happy the man who listens to me,
to wait at my doors day after day,
to watch the posts of my portals.
[35]For who finds me has found life,
and will be favored by the LORD.
[36]And who offends me lays waste his life,
all who hate me love death.

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *At the top of the heights, on the way*. The figure of Lady Wisdom positions herself up above—evidently, in a variety of places—where she can be widely heard down below, and she stands by the crossroads and at the entrance to the city (verse 3), where there are many passersby who will hear her voice. The implication is that wisdom is not a hidden or esoteric treasure but something plainly accessible—in the metaphor used here, proclaimed—to all.

6. *my mouth's utterance*. More literally, "my mouth's opening."

7. *my lips loathe wickedness*. Literally, "the loathing of my lips is wickedness."

8. *twisted or crooked*. Throughout the speech of Lady Wisdom, as elsewhere in Proverbs, there is an emphatic thematic contrast between the crooked and the straight.

9. *plain . . . / straightforward*. Again, the notion is stressed that wisdom is universally accessible—indeed, transparent. The term rendered as "straightforward" could also be translated rather literally as "what is straight" or "straightness."

12. *I, Wisdom, dwell in shrewdness*. This is not really tautological. The quality of wisdom is predicated on the exercise of a kind of savvyness—shrewdness or cunning. See the comment on 1:4.

13. *perverse speech*. Literally, "a mouth of perversities."

15. *Through me kings reign*. Here begins a new emphasis about the importance of wisdom, prepared for by the mention of "might" at the end of the previous line. Wisdom is a crucial prerequisite for statecraft, and only through it are rulers able to exercise effective governance.

16. *all the judges of earth*. The Masoretic Text reads "all the judges of justice [*tsedeq*]," but many Hebrew manuscripts as well as two ancient translations show instead "earth" (*ʾerets*), which sounds better in context. It seems likely that a scribe inadvertently reproduced *tsedeq* from the end of the previous line.

19. *all fine gold*. The Hebrew uses two synonyms for gold, neither of them the standard word.

21. *to pass substance on to my lovers*. As elsewhere, Proverbs assumes that the exercise of wisdom leads to prosperity, among other good things.

22. *The LORD created me at the outset of His way*. Although Lady Wisdom is still speaking, the section from here through verse 31 looks like a new poem or, at the very least, a distinct new segment of the same poem. The speech from verse 1 through verse 21 is a celebration by Wisdom of her powers—her gift of plain and accessible discourse, the preciousness of her words, her indispensability as a guide to all who govern, the material benefits she conveys to her followers. It must be said that much of the poetry of this section deploys boilerplate language, echoing quite similar formulations—or even formulas—that one encounters elsewhere in Proverbs. The poem that begins with verse 22 has a cosmic framework rather than a pragmatic one: Lady Wisdom's self-celebration goes back to the role she played as God's intimate before He launched on the work of creation. This cosmic and cosmogonic prominence of Wisdom may well have provided a generative clue for the prose-poem about the Logos ("In the beginning was the word . . .") in the first chapter of John's Gospel. In rabbinic tradition, it was a trigger for the idea that God made the world by following the blueprint of the Torah, which pre-existed creation; and later the Kabbalah would elaborate this notion with a

theosophic apparatus. This cosmic vision, moreover, is articulated in soaring poetry that seems quite unlike the poetry of the preceding section.

the very first of His works of old. Or "before His works of old." It is not entirely clear whether the poet intends this as a literal account of the order of creation, which is how this line was understood by later Jewish and Christian tradition, or whether this whole idea of the primordial presence of Wisdom is a kind of mythic hyperbole to express Wisdom's crucial importance in the order of things.

24. *When there were no deeps*. The story of creation in Genesis 1, of course, begins with God's breath hovering over the face of the deep, so Lady Wisdom wants to take us back to the moment of her gestation that is antecedent to the beginning of creation proper.

water sources. This translation emends the Masoretic *nikhbedey mayim* (heavy with [?] water) to *nivkhey mayim*.

25. *anchored*. The denotation of the Hebrew verb is to set something in its sockets or on its foundations.

27. *traced a circle on the face of the deep*. The reference is probably to the horizon that surrounds the sea, visually marking its limits.

28. *propped up*. Literally, "fortified," "strengthened."

29. *that the waters not flout His command*. The literal configuration of the Hebrew idiom is "not cross His mouth." This is a recurrent notion of cosmogonic poetry in the Bible, ultimately harking back to the Canaanite creation myth in which the sea god, Yamm, is subdued by the weather god, Baal. As in the Voice from the Whirlwind in Job 38 and in many psalms, the LORD pronounces a decree, setting a boundary to the sea and not allowing it to go up on the dry land.

strengthened. The Masoretic Text reads *beḥuqo*, "traced" (or "inscribed"), which looks suspiciously like an inadvertent replication of *beḥuqo* in 27b and is not a verb that makes much sense with "foundations" as its object. The Septuagint evidently had a Hebrew text that read *beḥazqo*, "when He strengthened," the difference between the two readings being a single consonant.

30. *an intimate / . . . His delight . . . / playing before Him*. This line and the next are the most original—and charming—turn that the poet gives to his

cosmogonic myth of the origins of Wisdom. Before there were creatures to occupy God's attention, Wisdom was His delightful and entertaining bosom companion. As Fox aptly notes, Wisdom not only possesses great utility (the burden of the preceding poem) but it is fun—as, say, the scholar takes great pleasure in his research, the naturalist in discovering the intricacies of nature.

31. *playing in the world / . . . and my delight with humankind*. The same delights that winsome Lady Wisdom offered to her Creator she makes available in the created world to those who embrace her. In all likelihood, the possessive "my" attached to delight refers to the capacity to delight that Lady Wisdom possesses and conveys to humankind, though it might also mean the delight she takes in humanity.

32. *And, now, sons, listen to me*. This formulaic language marks the beginning of a five-line formal conclusion, perhaps serving both poems.

34. *to wait at my doors day after day, / to watch the posts of my portals*. This image, as a few interpreters have proposed, hints at the actions of a devoted suitor, whom we might expect to find at the residence of a charmer like Lady Wisdom.

CHAPTER 9

[1]Wisdom has built her house,
she has hewn her pillars, seven.
[2]She has slaughtered her meat,
has mixed her wine,
also laid out her table.
[3]She has sent out her young women,
calls loud from the city's heights:
[4]Whoever the dupe, let him turn aside here,
the senseless—she said to him.
[5]Come, partake of my bread,
and drink the wine I have mixed.
[6]Forsake foolishness and live,
and stride on the way of discernment.
[7]Who reproves the scoffer takes on disgrace,
who rebukes the wicked is maimed.
[8]Rebuke not the scoffer lest he hate you.
Rebuke the wise and he will love you.
[9]Give to the wise, he will get more wisdom,
inform the righteous, he will increase
instruction.

[10]The beginning of wisdom is fear of the LORD,
and knowing the Holy One is discernment.
[11]For through Me your days will be many,
and the years of your life will increase.
[12]If you get wisdom, you get yourself wisdom,
but if you scoff, you bear it alone.
[13]The foolish woman bustles about.
Gullibility!—and she knows nothing of it.
[14]And she sits at the entrance of her house
in a chair on the city's heights,
[15]to call out to the wayfarers
who go on straight paths:
[16]Whoever the dupe, let him turn aside here,
and the senseless—she said to him.
[17]"Stolen waters are sweet,
and purloined bread is delicious."
[18]And he does not know that shades are there,
in the depths of Sheol, her guests.

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Wisdom has built her house*. The poem that constitutes this chapter comprises two antithetical units, the invitation of Lady Wisdom and the invitation of Lady Folly. Wisdom builds a grand, welcoming house with seven pillars. That number is not necessarily a reflection of architectural practice but rather of the formulaic and sacred character of the number seven.

her pillars, seven. The inverted order reflects the poetic flourish of the Hebrew syntax.

2. *slaughtered her meat*. Literally, "slaughtered her slaughter." Meat was not typically everyday fare but was reserved for sumptuous feasts.

3. *her young women*. These are her maidservants. But in the second verset, it is Wisdom herself who calls out her invitation from the heights.

4. *Whoever the dupe*. Wisdom offers her transformative services to the naïve and the foolish, who are very much in need of them.

she said to him. A small emendation, with warrant in the Septuagint, turns this into "I said to him," thus eliminating the third-person interruption of Lady Wisdom's speech.

5. *bread, / . . . wine*. These primary items of food and drink are, of course, symbolic of the feast of wisdom she is offering.

7. *is maimed*. The literal sense would be "it's his maiming [or blemish]."

9. *Give to the wise*. This phrase, which follows on the second verset of the preceding line, is clearly elliptical for "give instruction to the wise."

10. *the Holy One*. The Hebrew uses a plural ("holy ones"), which most interpreters understand as a plural of majesty referring to God. This is not a usage conclusively visible elsewhere, and in some instances *qedoshim* is an epithet for angels. The plural ending might be a scribal error.

12. *If you get wisdom, you get yourself wisdom*. The sense of this seeming tautology is that wisdom is an enduring acquisition, enjoyed by the wise person and benefiting those around him, whereas scoffing isolates a person in self-disgrace and confers no benefit. It should be said that this entire verse, coming after the line of peroration in verse 11, looks out of place.

13. *The foolish woman*. Momentarily, it seems as though the figure invoked is an exemplary instance of human behavior, as in many lines in Proverbs, but the next verse makes clear that, like Lady Wisdom, she is an allegorical representation of a general quality.

14. *she sits at the entrance of her house*. Although she is strictly symmetrical with Lady Wisdom in calling out from a house on the heights of the city, nothing is said about the splendor of a many-pillared house because, understandably, the residence of Folly is not likely to be a grand edifice.

15. *who go on straight paths*. Literally, “who make their paths straight.” Lady Wisdom calls out to the foolish in order to make them wise. Lady Folly calls out to those going on the right path in order to lead them astray.

16. *Whoever the dupe . . . and the senseless*. Lady Folly’s words repeat verbatim those of Lady Wisdom in verse 4 but with an opposite intent. Wisdom calls to the dupes and the thoughtless with the aim of extricating them from their hapless condition through her instruction. Folly calls to them —though in her case she would not plausibly have uttered these derogatory terms but rather thought them, counting on the gullibility of those she addresses—because she intends to exploit their naïveté.

17. *Stolen waters are sweet, / and purloined bread is delicious*. These often quoted words actually constitute an anti-proverb, cast in the compact aphoristic form, with neat poetic parallelism, of the traditional proverb. The line epitomizes Lady Folly’s seductive message: if you want to have a really good time, nothing works better than illicit behavior.

purloined bread. Literally, “secret bread.”

18. *shades are there*. The seemingly inviting house of Lady Folly with her seductive speech spells disaster for whoever goes there, and so is a gateway to death, concealing a trapdoor to the underworld, like the house of the seductress in chapter 7.

CHAPTER 10

[1]The proverbs of Solomon.
A wise son gladdens his father,
but a foolish son is his mother's sorrow.
[2]The treasures of wickedness will not avail,
but righteousness saves from death.
[3]The LORD will not make the righteous man
hunger,
but He rebuffs the desire of the wicked.
[4]A deceitful palm brings privation,
but the diligent hand enriches.
[5]A clever son stores up in the summer,
a disgraceful son slumbers at harvesttime.
[6]Blessings on the righteous man's head,
but outrage will cover the mouth of the wicked.
[7]The memory of the righteous is for a blessing,
but the name of the wicked will rot.
[8]The wise of heart takes commands,
but who speaks stupidly comes to grief.
[9]Who walks in innocence walks secure,
but who walks crooked ways is exposed.

[10]Who winks with his eye gives pain,
and who speaks stupidly comes to grief.
[11]The righteous man's mouth is a wellspring of life,
but outrage will cover the mouth of the wicked.
[12]Hatred foments strife,
but love covers up all misdeeds.
[13]On the discerning man's lips wisdom is found,
but a rod for the back of the senseless!
[14]Wise men lay up knowledge,
but the dolt's mouth is impending disaster.
[15]The rich man's wealth is his fortress city,
the disaster of the poor, their privation.
[16]The effort of the righteous is for life,
the wicked's yield is for offense.
[17]A path for life who observes reproof,
but who forsakes rebuke leads astray.
[18]Who covers up hatred has lying lips,
he who slanders is a fool.
[19]Through much talk misdeed will not cease,
but the shrewd man holds his tongue.
[20]Choice silver—a righteous man's tongue,
but the heart of the wicked is worthless.
[21]The righteous man's lips guide the many,
but dolts die for lack of sense.
[22]The LORD's blessing will enrich,
and one increases no pain through it.

[23]As doing foul things is sport for the fool,
so is wisdom for the man of discernment.
[24]What the wicked dreads will come upon him,
and the desire of the righteous is granted.
[25]When the storm passes, the wicked is gone,
but the righteous is a lasting foundation.
[26]Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes,
thus the sluggard to those who send him.
[27]Fear of the LORD lengthens one's days,
but the years of the wicked are short.
[28]The longing of the righteous is a joy,
but the hope of the wicked will perish.
[29]A stronghold for the blameless is the LORD's way,
but disaster for the workers of crime.
[30]The righteous man never stumbles,
but the wicked will not dwell on earth.
[31]The mouth of the righteous puts forth wisdom,
but a perverse tongue will be cut off.
[32]The lips of the righteous will know to please,
and the mouth of the wicked—perverseness.

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The proverbs of Solomon*. This is a headnote or title for the collection of sayings that runs from here to the end of chapter 23. As is true of the Late

Biblical practice of ascription of texts to famous figures, it is by no means clear that the compiler was claiming actual authorship for King Solomon. The superscription might merely be saying that these proverbs are in the manner of Solomon, the legendary composer of many proverbs. Unlike chapters 1–9, which comprise extended poems, some of them taking up a whole chapter and some of them exhibiting narrative or quasidramatic elements, this collection consists of a miscellany of one-line proverbs, often with no connection from one line to the next. Much of the language is rather pat, consisting of neatly antithetical contrasts from the first verset to the second between the wise man and the fool, the righteous and the wicked, by and large cast in stereotypical terms. Much of this will require scant comment.

A wise son . . . / a foolish son. This initial proverb is a perfect illustration of the neatness of antithetical formulation: wise/foolish, father/mother, gladdens/sorrow.

2. *righteousness saves from death*. This verset would come to be chanted in Jewish funeral processions, though the meaning of *tsedaqah*, "righteousness," had shifted to "charity," which mourners were invited to offer.

3. *desire*. The Hebrew *hawah*, elsewhere "disaster," is here either an equivalent of or a mistake for *ʾawah*, "desire."

5. *A clever son stores up in the summer*. As we have seen elsewhere—most notably, in the observation of the ant in 6:6–8—diligence as well as honesty or probity is seen as a cardinal virtue in Proverbs.

6. *the mouth of the wicked*. Some emend "mouth," *pi*, to "face," *peney*.

8. *who speaks stupidly*. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "the stupid of lips."

9. *who walks crooked ways*. Literally, "who makes his ways crooked."
is exposed. Literally, "is known."

10. *winks with his eye*. The reference is to either a lascivious gesture or a merely grotesque one. According to Fox, it is an expression of hostility.

14. *the dolt's mouth is impending disaster*. This is the case because, by saying stupid things, he brings disaster down on himself and perhaps on those around him as well.

15. *The rich man's . . . / the poor*. This verse illustrates how the conventionality of wisdom in these proverbs tumbles into truism since what is

said here, after all, is that the rich man can depend on his wealth for security whereas the poor man's poverty makes him miserable.

18. *has lying lips*. The Hebrew merely implies "has."

19. *holds his tongue*. More literally, "holds his lips."

22. *one increases no pain*. Many interpreters understand the Hebrew noun ʿ*etsev* to mean "toil" or "labor" because in Genesis 3:17 this word is linked with the pain of working the soil, but ʿ*etsev* everywhere else means "pain" or "pang." This translation therefore understands it not to mean "no toil will increase it [the LORD's blessing]" but that through the LORD's blessing one is painlessly enriched.

25. *When the storm passes*. This is a bedrock assumption of Proverbs—vehemently contested by Job—that adversity sweeps away the wicked while the righteous endure. A different formulation of the same idea occurs in verse 27.

26. *Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes*. This verse exhibits a different, and more interesting, pattern from the neat antithetical parallelism that governs almost all the lines up to this point: the first verset lays out a simile and the second verset reveals the referent of the simile. This looks rather like a riddle form: what is it that is like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, discoloring the former and making the latter smart? The answer to the riddle is: a fool sent on an errand, who is bound to exasperate whoever has sent him.

29. *for the blameless*. The translation, following the precedent of several of the ancient versions, revocalizes the Masoretic *latom*, "for blamelessness," as *latam*, "for the blameless." This small change yields an otherwise missing parallelism: the LORD's way is a stronghold for the blameless but sheer terror for the wicked.

32. *to please, / . . . perverseness*. The antithetical parallelism here provides a clue to one of the connotations of *tahapukhot*, "perverseness," in Proverbs. It involves not only acting or speaking in a wrongheaded or contorted way but disconcerting or dismaying others through such behavior, in contrast to the righteous man, whose speech has the capacity to please others and win their goodwill.

CHAPTER 11

[1]Cheating scales are the LORD's loathing,
and a true weight-stone His pleasure.
[2]With a bold face, there comes disgrace,
but wisdom is with the humble.
[3]The upright's innocence guides them,
but the falseness of traitors destroys them.
[4]Wealth avails not on the day of wrath,
but righteousness saves from death.
[5]The innocent's righteousness makes his way smooth,
but in his wickedness the wicked man falls.
[6]The upright's innocence saves them,
but in disasters are traitors ensnared.
[7]When a wicked man dies, hope perishes,
and the longing of villains will perish.
[8]The righteous is rescued from straits, [9]and the wicked man comes in his stead. Through speech the tainted man ruins his fellow,
but through knowledge the righteous are rescued.

[10]When the righteous do well, the city exults,
and when the wicked perish—glad song.
[11]Through the upright's blessing a city soars,
and by the mouth of the wicked it is razed.
[12]Who scorns his fellow man has no sense,
but a man of discernment keeps silent.
[13]The gossip lays bare secrets,
but the trustworthy conceals the matter.
[14]For want of designs a people falls,
but there is rescue through many councillors.
[15]He will surely be shattered who gives bond for a stranger,
but he who hates offering pledge is secure.
[16]A gracious woman holds fast to honor,
but the arrogant hold fast to wealth.
[17]A kindly man does good for himself,
but a cruel man blights his own flesh.
[18]The wicked man makes a false profit,
but who sows righteousness reaps true reward.
[19]A righteous son is for life,
but the pursuer of evil—for his death.
[20]The LORD's loathing are the crooked of heart,
but His pleasure, whose way is blameless.
[21]Count on it, the evil will not go scot-free,
but the seed of the righteous escapes.
[22]A golden ring in the snout of a pig,

a lovely woman who lacks good sense.
[23]The desire of the righteous is only good.
The hope of the wicked is wrath.
[24]One man is spendthrift and gains all the more,
another saves honestly but comes to want.
[25]A benign person will flourish,
and he who slakes others' thirst, his own thirst is slaked.
[26]Who holds back grain the nation will damn,
but blessing on the provider's head.
[27]Who seeks out good pursues favor,
but who looks for evil, it will come to him.
[28]Who trusts in his wealth, he will fall,
but like a leaf the righteous will burgeon.
[29]Who blights his house will inherit the wind,
and the dolt is a slave to the wise of heart.
[30]The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life,
and the wise man draws in people.
[31]If the righteous on earth is requited,
how much more the wicked offender.

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Cheating scales . . . / a true weight-stone*. Much of the wisdom of Proverbs, as in this verse, is oriented pragmatically toward the world of commerce or

labor. Stones marked with a fixed weight were placed on one of the two pans of the scale and the merchandise to be sold on the other pan.

2. *bold face . . . disgrace*. The translation emulates the rhyme in the Hebrew of *zadon* (literally, "arrogance") and *qalon*, "disgrace."

3. *traitors*. The Hebrew *bogdim* is used not in a political sense but to describe treacherous or untrustworthy people.

4. *righteousness saves from death*. This verset is identical with the second verset of 10:2, leading one to suspect that some of these lines are modular constructs from traditional sayings.

5. *makes his way smooth*. The verb *yasher* can mean to make straight either horizontally (that is, in contrast to crooked) or vertically (in contrast to rough, uneven). Not falling into a pot-hole, like the wicked in the second verset, suggests the vertical sense.

8. *The righteous is rescued from straits, / and the wicked man comes in his stead*. In this instance, the two versets create a miniature narrative with an almost comical didactic effect: the just man is rescued or, more precisely, extricated (*neḥelats*) from a tight spot in which he was jammed, and the wicked is promptly popped into that spot. This little narrative, of course, does not readily correspond to observable reality.

9. *Through speech . . . / through knowledge*. There is a pointed contrast between thoughtless or perhaps devious speech (literally, "mouth") and the knowledge of the wise, which perhaps may not involve speech.

12. *but a man of discernment keeps silent*. The antithesis to the first verset suggests that there are cases where a discerning person may well feel scorn toward someone but is discreet enough not to express it.

14. *a people falls*. Some construe the Hebrew *ʿam* here in the military sense that it sometimes has in narrative prose, where it can mean "troops." In that case, "rescue," *teshuʿah*, in the second verset would reflect its related meaning of "victory."

16. *honor, / . . . wealth*. Elsewhere in Proverbs, these are coordinated terms, not antitheses.

18. *reaps*. The verb is only implied in the Hebrew.

19. *A righteous son*. The Masoretic Text reads *ken tsedaqah*, "thus righteousness," which does not make much sense and produces a poor parallelism with the second verset in a series of proverbs where the parallelism is usually neat, even pat. This translation adopts a reading shown in some Hebrew manuscripts as well as in the Septuagint and Syriac: *ben tsedaqah* (literally, "son of righteousness").

20. *whose way is blameless*. Literally, "the blameless of way."

21. *Count on it*. Literally, "hand to hand." This appears to be a gesture of shaking hands in order to guarantee something.

22. *A golden ring in the snout of a pig*. This is another proverb cast in riddle form. This first verset gives us a bizarre and rather shocking image. The second verset spells out the referent of the image, the beautiful woman devoid of sense, and thus becomes a kind of punch line.

23. *The hope of the wicked is wrath*. Although this clause makes a certain amount of sense as it stands in the Masoretic Text, many scholars adopt the reading of some manuscripts and of the Septuagint, *ʾavdah*, "perishes," instead of *ʿevrah*, "wrath." This would bring the verset in line with 10:28b, which has nearly identical wording.

25. *benign person*. Literally, "person of blessing."

he who slakes. Though this is what the Hebrew verb usually means, the verset is obscure, and the second verb rendered as "slaked" looks textually suspect.

26. *grain . . . / provider's*. Both these terms recall the story of Joseph as viceroy of Egypt providing grain in the famine.

28. *he will fall*. Some prefer to read instead of the Masoretic *yipol* a verb differing by one consonant, *yibol*, "he will wither," which produces a neater antithesis to the burgeoning leaf in the second verset.

30. *The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life*. It is a little problematic that fruit becomes tree, but perhaps the poet was drawn into a certain slackness because "fruit" in biblical usage is so often a lexicalized metaphor for "consequences," what one produces through his acts.

CHAPTER 12

[1]Who loves reproof loves knowledge,
but who hates rebuke is a brute.
[2]The good man finds favor from the LORD,
but He will condemn the cunning schemer.
[3]A man will not be firm-founded in wickedness,
but the root of the righteous is not shaken.
[4]A worthy woman is her husband's crown,
but like rot in his bones a shameful wife.
[5]The plans of the righteous are justice;
the designs of the wicked, deceit.
[6]The words of the wicked are a bloody ambush,
but the mouth of the upright will save them.
[7]Overturn the wicked and they are gone,
but the house of the righteous will stand.
[8]By his insight will a man be praised,
but the crooked of heart is despised.
Better a scorned man who has a slave
than one who fancies himself honored and lacks bread.
[9]The righteous man knows the life of his beast,

but the mercy of the wicked is cruel.
10 Who works his soil is sated with bread,
but who pursues empty things lacks sense.
12 The wicked covets the evil men's trap,
but the root of the righteous stands firm.
13 In the crime of lips is an evil snare,
but the righteous comes out from straits.
14 From the fruit of a man's mouth he is sated with good,
a man gets recompense for his acts.
15 The way of a dolt seems right in his eyes,
but who listens to counsel is wise.
16 The anger of a dolt becomes known in a trice,
but the shrewd man conceals his disgrace.
17 A faithful deposer will tell what is right,
but a lying witness—deceit.
18 One may speak out like sword stabs,
but the tongue of the wise is healing.
19 True speech stands firm always,
but a mere moment—a lying tongue.
20 Deceit is in the heart of plotters of evil,
but councillors of peace have joy.
21 No wrong will befall the righteous,
but the wicked are filled with harm.
22 The LORD's loathing—lying lips,
but who act in good faith are His pleasure.

[23]A shrewd man conceals what he knows,
but the heart of dullards proclaims folly.
[24]The diligent's hand will rule,
and the shiftless put to forced labor.
[25]Worry in a man's heart brings him low,
but a good word will gladden him.
[26]The righteous exceeds his fellow man,
but the wicked's way leads him astray.
[27]The shiftless will not roast his game,
but a man's wealth is precious gold.
[28]On the path of righteousness is life,
but the way of mischief is to death.

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

4. *A worthy woman*. Fox, hewing to the etymology, renders this as "a woman of strength."

her husband's crown, / . . . rot in his bones. In this instance, the antithesis of the two versets diverges from the general pattern of stereotypical predictability, as in the three preceding lines, to exhibit an energy of biting satiric wit. After the crown image, which is conventional and decorous, the antithetical second verset moves from an adornment sitting on the head to something eating away the bones from within, suggesting that the badness of a bad wife has a more intense effect on the negative side than the goodness of a good wife on the positive side. The object of this strong simile, moreover, "a shameful wife" (one Hebrew word, *mevishah*), is held back to the very end of the line, thus becoming a kind of punch word.

6. *save them*. The vague pronominal object would be the victims of the wicked who appear in the first verset.

9. *Better a scorned man . . . /than one who fancies himself*. This formulation of "better *x* than *y*" is a classic proverb pattern in biblical Hebrew.

10. *the mercy of the wicked is cruel*. Here the antithesis between versets takes an interesting turn. The righteous man is so compassionate that he has an intuitive sense of the needs and discomforts of his beast. The wicked person, on the other hand, is so utterly devoid of compassion that even what he affects to be an expression of mercy turns out to be cruel.

12. *The wicked covets the evil men's trap*. The Hebrew is a little obscure. It could mean that he covets whatever is caught in the evil men's trap, or perhaps that he envies the malicious ingenuity that is manifested in contriving the trap.

stands firm. This translation reads, with the Septuagint, *yikon* for the Masoretic *yitein*, "will give."

17. *a lying witness—deceit*. The verb "tell" in the first verset does double duty for this verset, too.

18. *sword stabs, / . . . healing*. Even though the image of malicious speech as a cutting sword is conventional, the antithesis between stabbing and healing at the end of the respective versets produces a striking effect.

23. *what he knows*. Literally, "knowledge." It is notable in this verse that discretion is thought of as a cardinal virtue of wisdom.

24. *the shiftless*. The Hebrew *remiyah* usually means "deceit," but the context requires something like "slackness." Perhaps someone failing to do a job he is given is thought to be deceitful for not honoring his commitment out of laziness.

26. *exceeds his fellow man*. While this is a reasonable construction of the original, the Hebrew looks a little odd and has often invited emendation.

27. *The shiftless will not roast his game*. Though the idea may well be that a slacker will never enjoy the fruits of his highly dubious labor, the Hebrew is cryptic and the text may be suspect.

a man's wealth is precious gold. In the implied antithesis, the assiduous person knows how to hang on to his substance.

28. *but the way of mischief is to death*. The Masoretic Text, *wederekh netivah ʾal-mawet*, seems to say literally "and the way of path un-death." This does not sound like intelligible Hebrew. This translation, following a hint from three ancient versions, reads *meshuvah*, "mischief" (or "waywardness"), for *netivah*, "path," and, in accordance with many Hebrew manuscripts, revocalizes *ʾal* ("not" or "un") as *ʾel*, "to."

CHAPTER 13

[1]A wise son—through a father's reproof,
but a scoffer does not heed rebuke.
[2]From the fruit of a man's mouth he eats goodly things,
but from the throat of traitors comes outrage.
[3]Who watches his mouth guards his own life,
who cracks open his lips knows disaster.
[4]He desires and has naught, the sluggard,
but the life of the diligent thrives.
[5]A lying word the righteous hates,
but the wicked is stinking and vile.
[6]Righteousness keeps the blameless,
but wickedness perverts the offender.
[7]One man feigns riches having nothing at all,
another plays poor, with great wealth.
[8]The ransom for a man's life are his riches,
but the poor man will hear no rebuke.
[9]The light of the righteous shines,
but the lamp of the wicked gutters.
[10]The empty man in arrogance foments strife,

but with those who take counsel is wisdom.
[11]Wealth can be less than mere breath,
but who gathers bit by bit makes it grow.
[12]Drawn-out longing sickens the heart,
but desire come true is a tree of life.
[13]Who scorns a word will be hurt,
but who fears a command is rewarded.
[14]A wise man's teaching is a wellspring of life,
to swerve from the snares of death.
[15]Good insight gives grace,
but the way of traitors is their ruin.
[16]Every shrewd man acts through knowledge,
but a dullard broadcasts folly.
[17]A wicked messenger falls into harm,
but a trusty envoy brings healing.
[18]Privation and disgrace for one spurning reproof,
but he who takes in rebuke will be honored.
[19]Desire fulfilled is sweet to the palate,
but fools' loathing is swerving from evil.
[20]Who walks with the wise gets wisdom,
but who chases fools is crushed.
[21]Harm pursues offenders,
but the righteous are paid back with good.
[22]A good man bequeaths to the sons of his sons,
and stored for the righteous—the wealth of
offenders.

[23]Much food from the furrows of the destitute,
    and some are swept away without justice.
[24]Who spares his rod hates his son,
    but who loves him seeks him out for reproof.
[25]The righteous man eats to satiety,
    but the belly of the wicked will want.

CHAPTER 13 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *A wise son—through a father's reproof*. The Hebrew is still more gnomic, just four words without a verb or a preposition—literally, "wise son father's reproof."

2. *throat*. The parallelism with "mouth" in the first verset and the contrast between virtuous and vicious speech suggests that the multivalent *nefesh* here has the meaning of "throat." The verb "comes" has been added to clarify the Hebrew, which has no verb, or the merely implied verb "is."

3. *who cracks open his lips knows disaster*. Talking can get you into serious trouble, so the prudent man keeps his mouth shut.

4. *thrives*. More literally, "is luxuriant."

6. *the offender*. Reading *ḥataʾ* for the Masoretic *ḥataʾt*, "offense."

7. *feigns riches . . . / plays poor*. This proverb is less explicitly didactic than most of the others in the collection: it merely registers, as a warning not to be taken in by appearances, that in the economic realm some people are not what they seem to be.

8. *the poor man will hear no rebuke*. If the received text is correct, this would mean that whereas the rich man may have to call on his wealth to ransom himself from predators, no one bothers a poor man. Nevertheless, "rebuke," *geʿarah*, is a little odd, and some emend it to *geʾulah*, "redemption," yielding

the sense that the poor man, when he is in a fix, has no resources with which to redeem himself.

9. *shines*. This translation reads *yizraḥ*, "shines," instead of the Masoretic *yismaḥ*, "rejoices," because light rejoicing doesn't make much sense. Others claim that *yismaḥ* has a secondary sense of "shine."

10. *empty man*. With Fox, the translation revocalizes the Masoretic *raq*, "only," to read *reiq*, "empty" or "worthless."

11. *Wealth can be less than mere breath*. Wealth can be evanescent, vanishing overnight, but the person who assiduously gathers it bit by bit—presumably, without undertaking risky ventures with what he has accumulated—will see his resources steadily grow.

13. *Who scorns a word*. The clear implication is that this is a word of reproof.

15. *is their ruin*. The received text reads, oddly, *ʾeytan*, "is staunch [or strong]." The translation follows the Septuagint and the Syriac, which appear to have had *ʾeydam*, "their ruin," in the Hebrew text from which they translated.

17. *brings healing*. The Hebrew says literally "is healing."

19. *to the palate*. The Hebrew *nefesh* would be literally "throat," or at least that is the meaning assumed here because of the verb *yeʿerav*, "is sweet." But it could also mean "to the essential being."

22. *offenders*. The Hebrew uses a singular noun.

23. *Much food from the furrows of the destitute*. This proverb is cryptic. Perhaps, like verse 7, it might be a worldly observation on the contradictory nature of reality: destitute people have fields from which an abundant yield could be extracted, but they can't figure out how to do it; others are suddenly destroyed by disease or disaster for no good reason. The burden of this line sounds more like Qohelet than Proverbs. Fox emends the text to yield "the great devour the tillage of the poor."

24. *Who spares his rod hates his son*. The Hebrew exhibits a pointed compactness, underscored by internal rhyme and assonance, that defies translation: *ḥoseikh shivto sonei beno*.

25. *to satiety*. The literal sense of the Hebrew *nafsho* is “for the sating of his appetite [or gullet].”

CHAPTER 14

[1]Wisdom has built her house,
and Folly with her own hands destroys it.
[2]Who walks in uprightness fears the LORD,
and he of twisted ways does despise Him.
[3]In the mouth of the dolt is a rod of pride,
but the lips of the wise will guard them.
[4]Without any oxen the manger is clean,
but there is much yield in the bull's strength.
[5]A trustworthy witness does not lie,
but the lying deposer is a false witness.
[6]The scoffer seeks wisdom in vain,
but knowledge for the discerning is easy.
[7]Go before a foolish man,
you will not learn from him knowing speech.
[8]The shrewd man's wisdom is to understand his own way,
but the folly of dullards deceives them.
[9]Guilt dwells in the tents of scoffers,
but among the upright—favor.
[10]The heart knows its own bitterness,

and in its joy no stranger mingles.
[11]The house of the wicked will be destroyed,
and the tent of the upright will flourish.
[12]There may be a straight way before a man,
but its end is the ways of death.
[13]Even in laughter the heart may ache,
and the end of joy is sorrow.
[14]From his ways the impure of heart is sated,
and the good man from his deeds.
[15]A dupe will believe everything,
but the shrewd man understands where he steps.
[16]A wise man is cautious and swerves from evil,
but a fool rages and trusts too much.
[17]A short-tempered man commits folly,
but a cunning man will be raised high.
[18]Dupes will inherit folly,
but the shrewd wear a crown of knowledge.
[19]The evil bow before the good,
and the wicked at the gates of the righteous.
[20]The poor man is hated even by his neighbor,
but the rich man has many who love him.
[21]Who scorns his neighbor offends,
but happy he who pities the poor.
[22]Surely those who plan evil do stray,
but steadfast kindness for those who plan good.
[23]In all hard labor there is profit,

but word of the lips is sheer loss.
[24]The crown of the wise is shrewdness;
the garland of dullards is folly.
[25]A true witness saves lives,
a lying deposer fosters deceit.
[26]In fear of the LORD there is a stronghold,
and for one's sons it is a shelter.
[27]Fear of the LORD is a wellspring of life,
to swerve from the snares of death.
[28]In the people's multitude is the king's glory,
but when the nation is absent—the ruler's
disaster.
[29]Patience means great discernment,
but impatience multiplies folly.
[30]A healing heart is life to the body,
but envy is rot in the bones.
[31]Who oppresses the poor insults his Maker,
but he honors Him who pities the wretched.
[32]In his evil the wicked is driven off,
but the righteous finds shelter in his innocence.
[33]In a discerning heart wisdom rests
but is not known in the midst of fools.
[34]Righteousness raises a nation,
but offense leads to want among peoples.
[35]A king's pleasure is a discerning servant,
but his wrath is the shameful man.

CHAPTER 14 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Wisdom has built her house*. This verset is identical with the first verset of 9:1, except that here the Masoretic Text adds *nashim,* "women" or "of women," after "Wisdom." That word looks suspect as idiomatic usage, and one may concur in the proposal of R. B. Y. Scott that it is a scribal gloss. Accordingly, it is omitted in the translation. In any case, the momentary appearance in this section of Proverbs of the allegorical apparatus from the preceding (but presumably later) section, chapters 1–9, is anomalous.

3. *the mouth of the dolt . . . / the lips of the wise*. The contrast is between arrogantly aggressive speech (the "rod of pride") and prudent, self-protective speech.

4. *Without any oxen the manger is clean*. This entire line has the ring of a canny folk saying: your manger may remain clean when you have no oxen to feed, but it is the strength of the ox, however he dirties manger and barn, that enables you to reap a harvest.

5. *A trustworthy witness . . . / the lying deposer*. This is one of those proverbs that verge on tautology.

7. *knowing speech*. Literally, "lips of knowledge."

8. *the folly of dullards deceives them*. Literally, "the folly of dullards is deceit." Given the antithetical parallelism with the first verset, this has to mean not that they are deceitful but that they deceive themselves.

9. *Guilt dwells in the tents of scoffers*. The received text looks defective here. It reads, literally, "dolts scoffs [*sic*] [or "intercedes"] guilt," *ʾewilim yelits ʾasham*. Taking a hint from the Septuagint, this translation instead reads *beʾohaley letsim yalin ʾasham*.

10. *The heart knows its own bitterness*. In the midst of didactic platitudes, we suddenly get an arresting aphorism about the incommensurability of each person's private experience.

12. *its end is the ways of death*. The repetition of "way" from the first verset is a little awkward. That effect might be at least mitigated if one adopted Tur-Sinai's proposed emendation of *ʾaḥarit* to *ʾorḥotaw*, yielding "its paths are the ways to death."

13. *the end of*. The Masoretic Text has "its end."

14. *ways . . . / deeds*. It doesn't seem that an opposition is expressed. We are left with the rather bland statement that both the evil man and the good man live with the consequences of what they do.

17. *will be raised high*. The Masoretic Text reads *yisaneiʾ*, "will be hated," which is questionable. This translation reads, with the Septuagint, *yinaseiʾ*, "will be lifted up" or "will be raised high," a simple transposition of consonants.

19. *at the gates of the righteous*. That is, they court them, bow down to them at the entrance of their homes.

24. *shrewdness*. The received text reads *ʿoshram*, "their wealth," an improbable candidate as the crown of the wise. The Septuagint, more plausibly, has *ʿormah*, "shrewdness."

the garland. The received text reads "The folly of dullards is folly." Instead of this tautology, this translation, following many critics, reads *liwyat*, "garland of," instead of *ʾiwelet*, "folly."

25. *fosters deceit*. The verb—there is none in the Hebrew—is added for clarification.

28. *ruler's*. The translation reads *rozen* for the Masoretic *razon*, "famine."

29. *multiplies*. The received text has "lifts up," *merim*, but three ancient versions show *marbeh*, "multiplies."

30. *A healing heart*. Presumably, the heart is healing because it feels something like equanimity, in contrast to the corrosive envy in the antithetical second verset.

32. *the righteous finds shelter in his innocence*. The Masoretic Text says "in his death," *bemoto*, which is problematic theologically and perhaps grammatically as well. The translation follows the Septuagint and the Syriac, which read *betumo*, "in his innocence," which is a simple transposition of consonants and

thus an error a scribe could easily make, possibly induced by the motive of later piety.

33. *but is not known*. The Masoretic Text lacks the "not," but this is surely a scribal error because it is hard to imagine that there would be a declaration in Proverbs that wisdom is known in the midst of fools.

34. *want*. Following scholarly consensus and the Septuagint, this translation replaces the Masoretic *ḥesed*, "kindness," with *ḥeser*, "want." The difference between the Hebrew graphemes for *d* and *r* is quite small. The phrase "leads to" has been added in the translation for clarification of the Hebrew, which has no verb.

CHAPTER 15

[1]A soft answer turns back wrath,
but a hurtful word stirs anger.
[2]The tongue of the wise improves knowledge,
but the mouth of dullards bubbles with folly.
[3]The eyes of the LORD are everywhere,
watching the evil and the good.
[4]Healing speech is a tree of life,
but perverse speech breaks the spirit.
[5]A dolt will spurn his father's reproof,
but who heeds rebuke gains shrewdness.
[6]Great treasure is in the righteous man's house,
but the yield of the wicked is blighted.
[7]The lips of the wise spread knowledge—
not so, the heart of fools.
[8]The wicked's sacrifice is the LORD's loathing,
but the prayer of the upright, His pleasure.
[9]The LORD's loathing is the way of the wicked man,
but He loves the pursuer of righteousness.
[10]Harsh reproof for him who forsakes the path,

who hates rebuke will die.
[11]Sheol and Perdition are before the LORD,
how much more so the hearts of men.
[12]A scoffer does not love it when one rebukes him,
to the wise he will not go.
[13]A glad heart will brighten the face,
but by the heart's pain the spirit is lamed.
[14]A discerning heart seeks knowledge,
but the mouth of dullards chases folly.
[15]All the days of the poor man are miserable,
but a cheerful man has a perpetual feast.
[16]Better a pittance in the fear of the LORD
than great treasure with turmoil.
[17]Better a meal of greens where there is love
than a fatted ox where there is hatred.
[18]A hot-tempered man stirs up strife,
but a patient man quiets quarrel.
[19]The sluggard's way is like a hedge of thorns,
but the path of the upright is smooth.
[20]A wise son gladdens his father,
but a foolish man scorns his mother.
[21]Folly is joy to the senseless,
but a man of discernment walks straight.
[22]Plans are thwarted where there is no counsel,
but with many advisors they are carried out.
[23]There is joy for a man in an apt answer,

and how good is a timely word!
[24]A path of life upward for the man of insight,
that he may swerve from Sheol below.
[25]The house of the proud will the LORD uproot,
but He sets firm the widow's boundary stone.
[26]An evil man's plots are the LORD's loathing,
but the sayings of the pure are sweet.
[27]He blights his house whose gain is ill gotten,
but the hater of bribes shall live.
[28]The righteous man's heart utters truth,
but the mouth of the wicked bubbles with evils.
[29]The LORD is far from the wicked,
but the prayer of the righteous He hears.
[30]What brightens the eyes gladdens the heart,
and good news puts sap in the bones.
[31]An ear hearing rebuke for life
in the midst of the wise will abide.
[32]Who casts off reproof despises himself,
but he who heeds rebuke gets understanding.
[33]The LORD's fear is wisdom's foundation,
and humility comes before honor.

CHAPTER 15 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

4. *perverse speech breaks the spirit*. The Hebrew wording is crabbed, and there could be a textual problem in this verset. Here is a very literal rendering: "and a perversion in it is a break in the spirit." The translation for clarity repeats "speech" (more literally, "tongue") from the first verset because "in it," *bah*, refers to "speech."

6. *the yield*. The received text has "in the yield," but some Hebrew manuscripts, the Septuagint, and the Syriac do not show "in."

11. *Sheol and Perdition are before the* LORD, */ how much more so the hearts of men*. This line departs from the predominant antithesis between the two versets to employ an *a fortiori* pattern: proposition (first verset) followed by how much more so (second verset). The effect here is quite striking. The vast depths of the realm of death (Sheol and Perdition are synonyms, not distinct entities) lie transparently exposed to the LORD's scrutiny, which therefore can penetrate the human heart with incomparably greater ease. This structure thus produces a powerful statement of how completely God knows all our most innermost thoughts.

13. *by the heart's pain the spirit is lamed*. More literally, "the heart's pain is a lamed spirit."

15. *a cheerful man*. The literal sense is "good-hearted," but in biblical idiom, to be of good heart does not mean kindness or benevolence but rather a good mood.

16. *treasure*. The Hebrew *ʾotsar* means either storehouse or, by metonymy, what it contains.

20. *a foolish man scorns his mother*. In light of the parallelism with the first verset, this does not mean that he deliberately scorns his mother because he is a fool but rather that his being a fool has the effect of humiliating his hapless mother.

22. *Plans are thwarted*. This verse, like several others in this chapter, pronounces a piece of prudential wisdom that verges on truism or banality.

23. *an apt answer*. Literally, "his mouth's answer."

25. *boundary stone*. These were used to mark the borders of a person's property. Thus the possessions of the vulnerable widow are safeguarded by God.

26. *but the sayings of the pure are sweet*. The Hebrew of the received text reads “and the sweet sayings are pure,” *wetehorim ʾimrey-noʿam*. This translation adopts the reading of the Septuagint, which appears to reflect a Hebrew text that showed *weʾimrey tehorim yinʿamu*.

28. *utters truth*. The Masoretic Text reads “utters to answer,” but the Septuagint, the Syriac, and the Targum all seem to reflect a Hebrew text that read *ʾemunim*, “truth,” “true things,” “trustworthiness,” instead of *laʾanot*.

33. *wisdom’s foundation*. The Masoretic Text has *musar ḥokhmah*, “the reproof of wisdom,” which is conceivable but odd. This translation adopts a small, widely proposed emendation, *musad*, “foundation,” for *musar*. This would bring the verset in line with several statements in Proverbs that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.

CHAPTER 16

[1]Man's is the ordering of thought,
but from the LORD is the tongue's
pronouncing.
[2]All a man's ways are pure in his eyes,
but the LORD takes the spirit's measure.
[3]Turn over your deeds to the LORD,
that your plans may be firm-founded.
[4]Each act of the LORD has its own end;
even the wicked, for an evil day.
[5]The LORD's loathing is every haughty man,
be sure of it, he will not go scot-free.
[6]In faithful kindness a crime is atoned,
and in the LORD's fear one swerves from evil.
[7]When the LORD is pleased with the ways of a
man,
even his enemies will make peace with him.
[8]Better a pittance in righteousness,
than abundant yield without justice.
[9]A man's heart may plan his way,
but the LORD will make his step firm.

[10]There is magic on the lips of a king—
his mouth won't betray in judgment.
[11]A balance and just scale has the LORD,
all the weights in His purse are His work.
[12]Wicked acts are the loathing of kings,
for in righteousness a throne stands firm.
[13]Righteous lips are the pleasure of kings,
and they love an honest speaker.
[14]A king's wrath is like death's messengers,
but a wise man may appease it.
[15]In the light of a king's face is life,
and his pleasure like a cloud with spring rain.
[16]Getting wisdom, how much better than gold,
to get discernment is choicer than silver.
[17]The uprights' highway is to swerve from evil,
who guards his life will watch his way.
[18]Pride before a breakdown,
and before stumbling, haughtiness.
[19]Better abjectness with the humble
than sharing spoils with the proud.
[20]Who looks into a matter will come out well,
and who trusts in the LORD is fortunate.
[21]The wise of heart will be called discerning,
and sweet speech will increase instruction.
[22]Insight is a wellspring of life to its possessors,
but the reproof of the foolish is folly.

[23]A wise man's heart will make his mouth clever,
and lips' sweetness increases instruction.
[24]Pleasant sayings are honeycomb,
sweet to the palate, and healing to the bones.
[25]There may be a straight way before a man,
but its end is the ways of death.
[26]The toiler's self toils away
because his own mouth has compelled him.
[27]A worthless man is a furnace of evil,
and on his lips like burning fire.
[28]A perverse man provokes a quarrel,
and a sullen man drives off a friend.
[29]A lawless man gulls his companion
and leads him on a way that is not good.
[30]He closes his eyes plotting perversions,
purses his lips and fixes on evil.
[31]Gray hair is a crown of splendor,
through righteousness attained.
[32]Better patience than a warrior,
and who governs his spirit than a conqueror of towns.
[33]In the lap the lot is cast,
but from the LORD is all the disposing.

CHAPTER 16 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *from the LORD is the tongue's pronouncing*. Throughout Proverbs, apt and articulate speech is conceived as a key to relationships among people and as the indispensable instrument of wisdom. Thus, a person orders his own thought because the autonomy of consciousness is not questioned, but it is a gift from God when thought is translated into fitting speech. The Hebrew rendered here as "pronouncing," *maʿaneh*, can mean either speaking out or answering.

4. *Each act . . . has its own end; / even the wicked*. Reality may seem contradictory or disturbing, but God determines a purpose for all things, so that even the wicked, however outrageous their acts, are destined to come to a bad end, thus confirming the just system of divine purpose in all things.

6. *In faithful kindness . . . / in the LORD's fear*. The combination of complacent piety and platitude, one must say, is manifested in a good many of the proverbs and is especially salient in this chapter.

9. *A man's heart may plan his way*. This proverb is closely analogous to the one in verse 1, except that here it is action ("step") rather than speech that is determined by God.

10. *There is magic on the lips of a king*. In Proverbs the faith in God's authority and justice is repeatedly accompanied by a confidence in the established political order—here the order of justice implemented by kings. This political stance is one of several in Proverbs with which Qohelet takes issue.

11. *balance . . . scale / . . . weights*. These instruments for conducting trade, elsewhere in Proverbs referred to literally, are here a metaphor for the fairness and precision with which God judges the world.

13. *they love*. The Hebrew verb is in the singular and should be either emended to read as a plural or revocalized to read as a passive ("is loved").

17. *The uprights' highway is to swerve from evil*. This verset plays paradoxically with two spatial terms. The "upright" is literally "the straight ones," "those who go straight." Usually to "swerve" (*sur*) means to veer off

from a straight path. Here, however, swerving from evil means going on the straight way.

20. *Who looks into a matter . . . / who trusts in the* LORD. This verse is another instance of the joining of platitude with piety.

23. *make his mouth clever, / . . . lips' sweetness*. In a variation on the proverb of verse 1, here it is wisdom rather than God that produces apt and captivating speech.

24. *sweet to the palate*. The literal sense of the Hebrew noun *nefesh* in this context is "throat."

25. This verse is identical with 14:12.

26. *The toiler's self toils away*. This proverb is a little cryptic. Some interpreters understand "self," *nefesh*, in its sense of "appetite," and then construe "mouth" in the second verset as a metonymy for "hunger"—that is, the laborer is driven to toil by his own hunger. This translation construes the second half of the line as a reference to injudicious speech: because the worker has involved himself in debt by making an indiscreet commitment, he is obliged to labor in order to pay what he owes. This understanding would set this verse in contrast to the celebration of wise speech in verses 23 and 24.

27. *a furnace of evil*. The Masoretic Text reads *koreh raʿah*, "digs up evil." The translation adapts a widely accepted emendation, *kur* ("furnace of ") *raʿah*.

30. *closes his eyes . . . / purses his lips*. Though there is some debate about the meaning of this verse, the likely intention is simply a kind of caricature of the wicked man who exhibits these facial gestures as he plots evil. The received text shows *ʿotseh*, which is not a comprehensible word, for "closes," but the widely accepted emendation of *ʿotsem* yields the ordinary Hebrew verb for closing the eyes.

31. *through righteousness*. The Hebrew says "through the way of righteousness." "The way" has been dropped from the translation to avoid cumbersomeness since it is in any case clearly implied.

33. *In the lap the lot is cast*. Although not much is known about the mechanics of casting lots in ancient Israel, it would seem that the lot was dropped into the lap of a seated person.

CHAPTER 17

[1]Better a dry crust with tranquillity
than a house filled with feasting and quarrel.
[2]A clever slave rules over a son who shames,
and in the midst of brothers will share the
inheritance.
[3]Silver has a crucible and gold a kiln,
and the LORD tries hearts.
[4]An evildoer listens to wicked speech,
a liar hearkens to calamitous talk.
[5]Who mocks the poor insults his Maker,
who rejoices in ruin will not go scot-free.
[6]The crown of the elders is sons of sons,
and the glory of sons, their fathers.
[7]Unfit for a scoundrel, overweening speech,
much less for a nobleman, lying speech.
[8]A bribe is a gemstone in the eyes of its user;
wherever he turns he will prosper.
[9]Who overlooks faults seeks love,
and who repeats a speech drives off a friend.
[10]A rebuke comes down on a discerning man,

more than a hundred blows on a fool.
[11]Sheer rebellion an evil man seeks,
but a cruel agent will be against him.
[12]Better meet a bear bereft of its cubs,
than a dolt in his folly.
[13]Who gives back evil for good,
evil will not depart from his house.
[14]Like opening a sluice is a quarrel's start—
before strife flares up, let it go.
[15]Who acquits the wicked or condemns the just,
the LORD's loathing are they both.
[16]Why is there a fee in the hand of the fool
to buy wisdom when he has no sense?
[17]At all times a companion is loving,
and a brother was born for the hour of trouble.
[18]A senseless man offers his hand,
stands bond for his fellow man.
[19]Who loves crime loves dissension,
who builds a high doorway seeks a downfall.
[20]A crooked man will come to no good,
and the perverse of speech will fall into harm.
[21]One begets a fool to one's own grief,
and a scoundrel's father will not rejoice.
[22]A joyful heart can effect a cure,
but a lamed spirit dries up the bones.
[23]Bribe from his bosom the wicked man takes

to tilt the paths of justice.
[24]Right in front of the discerning is wisdom,
but the fool's eyes are on the ends of the earth.
[25]Vexation to his father, a foolish son,
and gall to her who bore him.
[26]To punish the just is surely not good,
to flog nobles for uprightness.
[27]Who is sparing in speech knows knowledge,
and coolheaded is the man of discerning.
[28]A silent dolt, too, may be reckoned wise,
who seals his lips, may be deemed discerning.

CHAPTER 17 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *feasting*. Literally, "sacrifice," which is to say, choice cuts left over from the sacrifices. See the comment on 7:14.

2. *slave . . . / share the inheritance*. This declaration does not necessarily reflect social or economic reality but is better understood as a kind of hyperbole: cleverness trumps heredity if the heir in question is a fool or a scoundrel.

5. *rejoices in ruin*. On the basis of the phrase used here, *sameaḥ leʾeyd,* modern Hebrew has appropriately adopted *simḥah leʾeyd* as its term for schadenfreude.

7. *overweening speech*. The meaning of *yeter* (related to the term that means "more") is not entirely clear. It could mean something like "highfalutin," though the King James Version's "excellent" is rather unlikely.

8. *a gemstone . . . / wherever he turns he will prosper*. Some interpreters claim, on tenuous contextual grounds, that the Hebrew noun means "magic stone." The more likely meaning is that the bribe, like a precious stone, provides a person a resource that opens doors for him. In any case, the resource is "in the eyes of" the briber, and hence the prospering is not a stated fact but what this person imagines.

10. *a rebuke . . . / a hundred blows*. In this instance, the comparison is vividly effective: a sensitive, discerning person will feel the bite of a verbal rebuke more than the callous fool feels a severe beating.

11. *a cruel agent*. This whole verse reflects the cautiously pragmatic political conservatism of Proverbs: if you are imprudent enough to willfully rebel against the government, it will send its ruthless agents to eliminate you.

12. *Better meet a bear bereft of its cubs*. In this instance, the "better than" (the compact Hebrew lacks the usual *tov*) pattern combines with the riddle form: What could be worse than encountering a bear robbed of its cubs? Running into a fool.

16. *a fee*. In other contexts, this Hebrew noun means "price." It has been plausibly inferred from this line that there was some general practice of paying teachers for wisdom instruction of the kind one finds in Proverbs.

17. *the hour of trouble*. "Hour" has been added for the sake of intelligibility.

18. *offers his hand, / stands bond*. Both phrases refer to offering financial surety for someone, an act considered imprudent in Proverbs.

19. *a downfall*. More literally, "a break," which is to say, disaster.

24. *Right in front of the discerning*. The Hebrew says literally "with the face of [or with the presence of]." The idea is that wisdom is right before the eyes of the discerning, whereas fools misguidedly look for it at the ends of the earth.

27. *coolheaded*. Literally, "cool of spirit." This idiom is not otherwise attested, and hence the meaning is not entirely certain. The marginal gloss in the Masoretic Text corrects *qar*, "cool," to *yeqar*, "precious" or "rare," which does not help matters. Attempts to make this phrase mean "reticent" rest on shaky premises.

28. *A silent dolt, too, may be reckoned wise*. This proverb builds on the preceding one: a wise person is sparing in speech out of good sense and prudence, but a fool may give the appearance of wisdom by keeping his mouth shut.

CHAPTER 18

[1]A loner seeks a pretext,
where one needs prudence, he is exposed.
[2]A fool does not care for discerning
but for exposing his inner thoughts.
[3]When a wicked man comes, scorn comes, too,
and with disgrace, shame.
[4]Deep waters the words a man utters,
a flowing brook, the wellspring of wisdom.
[5]To favor the wicked is not good,
to skew the case of the innocent.
[6]The lips of the fool lead to quarrels,
and his mouth calls out for blows.
[7]A fool's mouth is a disaster for him,
and his lips a snare for his life.
[8]The words of a grumbler are like pounding,
and they go down to the belly's chambers.
[9]He who is slack at his task
is a brother to one who destroys.
[10]The name of the LORD is a tower of strength,
the righteous runs to it and is protected.

[11]The rich man's wealth is his fortress city,
like a high wall within its hedge.
[12]Before a downfall a man's heart is proud,
and before honor, humility.
[13]Who answers a word before hearing it out,
it is folly for him and disgrace.
[14]A man's spirit sustains him in his illness,
but a lamed spirit who can bear?
[15]A discerning heart will get knowledge,
and the ear of the wise will seek knowledge.
[16]A man's gift clears the way for him,
and leads him before the great.
[17]First to speak in his dispute seems right,
till his fellow man comes and searches him out.
[18]The lot puts an end to strife,
and separates the disputants.
[19]A brother wronged is like a fortress city,
and strife like the bolt of a palace.
[20]From the fruit of a man's mouth his belly is sated,
he will sate the yield of his lips.
[21]Death and life are in the tongue's power,
and those who love it will eat its fruit.
[22]Who finds a wife, finds a good thing
and wins favor from the LORD.
[23]Imploringly speaks the poor man,
and the rich man answers harshly.

[24]There is a companionable man to keep company
with,
and there's a friend closer than a brother.

CHAPTER 18 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *A loner seeks a pretext*. The received text reads "desire," *taʾawah*. The translation follows the Septuagint, which reflects *toʾeinah*, "pretext."
where one needs prudence, he is exposed. The Hebrew says merely "wherever prudence, he bursts out," or "is exposed"; "one needs" has been added in translation as an interpretive guess. The sense of the whole verse might be: a person cut off from other people constantly looks for a quarrel and by so doing shamefully exposes his own weaknesses in the very situations that call for prudence.

2. *A fool does not care for discerning*. This proverb on the lack of discretion is paired thematically with the preceding proverb. There are several such pairings in this chapter.
his inner thoughts. Literally, "his heart."

4. *the words a man utters*. Literally, "the words of a man's mouth."

6. *lead to quarrels*. Literally, "enter into quarrel."

7. *A fool's mouth is a disaster for him*. This proverb about the damaging consequences of ill-considered speech is explicitly paired with the preceding proverb.

11. *within its hedge*. This translation follows the Septuagint and three other ancient versions in reading *bemesukato* for the Masoretic *bemaskito* ("in his imagining"?).

14. *A man's spirit sustains him in his illness*. This is one of several declarations in Proverbs about the therapeutic effect of mood or mind—a notion that still seems medically relevant after two and a half millennia.

16. *A man's gift*. The gift in question might be a bribe, or perhaps something resembling the contribution that a lobbyist makes to a legislator.

17. *First to speak in his dispute*. "To speak" is merely implied in the Hebrew.

18. *The lot puts an end to strife*. The evident idea is that when there is a dispute with no clear way to resolve it, something like the toss of a coin can bring it to an end.

19. *A brother wronged*. The formulation in the original is a little cryptic. The most likely meaning: if you wrong someone close to you, he becomes bristlingly defensive, shutting himself off from you like a fortified city.

20. *the fruit of a man's mouth*. As elsewhere, the exercise of speech is seen as decisive, producing consequences for good or for ill with which the speaker must live. This proverb is clearly paired with the one that follows.

21. *those who love it will eat its fruit*. The choice of the verb "love" is revealing in regard to the underlying attitude toward language. A cultivated person delights in language and takes pleasure in its apt use, and this exercise of well-considered expression will redound to his profit. In this fashion, the ethic of articulate speech in Proverbs mirrors the form of the proverbs themselves, which, at least in intention, are finely honed articulations of wisdom, often exhibiting concise wit.

23. *Imploringly . . . / harshly*. The contrast between the hapless poor man and the rich man who has power over him is pointedly expressed in a tight antithetical chiasm (an instance of the use of the power of the tongue by one who loves it): imploringly (a), poor man (b), rich man (b'), harshly (a').

24. *a companionable man . . . / a friend closer than a brother*. Although the chapter divisions are not original to the text, the textual unit from verse 1 to verse 24 is neatly marked by an antithetical envelope structure: in the first verse, we see someone who is isolated or separated from others, focusing on his own desire, and who consequently gets into trouble; this last verse affirms the sustaining power of friendship. Fox suggests a nuance of contrast between the first verset and the second: there are companionable people with whom one may enjoy social intercourse, but there are also intimate friends closer than a brother.

CHAPTER 19

[1]Better a poor man walking in his innocence,
than a man twisted in speech who is a fool.
[2]It is surely not good to lack knowledge,
and who hurries with his feet offends.
[3]A man's folly perverts his way,
and his heart rages against the LORD.
[4]Wealth will give one many friends,
but the poor is parted from his friend.
[5]A false witness will not go scot-free,
and a lying deposer will not escape.
[6]Many court the favor of a nobleman,
and all are friends to a man with gifts.
[7]All a poor man's brothers despise him,
even more, his friends draw back from him.
[They are not pursuers of sayings.]
[8]Who acquires good sense cares for himself,
who guards discernment will find good.
[9]A false witness will not go scot-free,
and a lying deposer will perish.
[10]Unfit for the fool is pleasure,

even more, for a slave to rule princes.
[11]A man's insight gives him patience,
and his glory, to overlook a fault.
[12]A roar like a lion's, the wrath of a king,
but like dew on the grass his favor.
[13]Disaster to his father, a foolish son,
and a maddening drip, a nagging wife.
[14]House and wealth are deeded by parents,
but a clever wife is from the LORD.
[15]Sloth induces slumber,
and a shiftless person will go hungry.
[16]Who keeps a command keeps his own life,
who scorns his own ways will die.
[17]Who pities the poor makes a loan to the LORD,
and his reward He will pay back to him.
[18]Reprove your son while there is hope,
and to his moaning pay no heed.
[19]A very hotheaded man bears punishment,
try to save him—you will make things worse.
[20]Heed counsel and take reproof,
that you get wisdom in the end.
[21]Many are the plans in the heart of a man,
but it's the LORD's counsel that is fulfilled.
[22]A man's desire is his own lack,
and better a poor man than a liar.
[23]Fear of the LORD is for life,

and one rests sated, untouched by harm.
[24]The sluggard hides his hand in the dish,
he won't even bring it up to his mouth.
[25]Beat the scoffer and the dupe becomes shrewd,
rebuke the discerning and he gains knowledge.
[26]Despoiling a father,
putting a mother to flight, is the shaming
disgraceful son.
[27]A son ceases to heed reproof,
murmuring evil sayings.
[28]A worthless witness scoffs justice,
and the mouth of the wicked swallows crime.
[29]Retribution is readied for scoffers,
and blows for the backs of fools.

CHAPTER 19 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *walking in his innocence, / . . . twisted in speech*. Walking in innocence suggests the recurrent image of walking on a straight way and so becomes a neat antithesis of twisted speech.

a fool. A few manuscripts read instead "rich."

2. *It is surely not good*. The Hebrew wording is cryptic.

4. *Wealth will give one many friends*. This whole line is one of the instances in which Proverbs offers not moral instruction but a disenchanted observation (like Qohelet) about the way things are: people flock around the rich and avoid the poor. Verse 6 makes essentially the same point.

7. *They are not pursuers of sayings*. The translation reflects the opaque wording of the Hebrew. The verset is textually suspect and may not belong at all because there are no triadic lines elsewhere in this whole section of Proverbs—hence the brackets here.

10. *Unfit for the fool is pleasure*. A wise person knows how to manage pleasure judiciously, but a fool will choose harmful pleasures or pursue pleasure to excess. This predisposition for the aristocracy of wisdom goes hand in glove with the affirmation of social hierarchy in the second verset.

12. *A roar like a lion's . . . / dew on the grass*. The contrast between the king's wrath and his favorable disposition is effectively highlighted by the move from the simile of the carnivore roaring before it tears apart its prey to the gentle descent of dew on grass.

13. *maddening*. The literal sense of the Hebrew *tored* is "driving away."

a nagging wife. The literal sense is "quarrels of a wife," but the context amply justifies this translation.

14. *a clever wife*. Though this phrase could also be construed as "a clever woman," the proverb suggests that a man may depend on his parents for the inheritance of wealth and house, but God alone can grant him the gift (or good luck) of a clever wife.

19. *A very hotheaded man*. The translation follows the Masoretic marginal correction, *gedol,* instead of the unintelligible *gerol* of the consonantal text.

try to save him. This is another instance in which each Hebrew word of the received text is comprehensible but they make little sense together, so the translation is conjectural. A very literal rendering would be "but if you save and you still would add."

21. *Many are the plans in the heart of a man*. This proverb is manifestly a Hebrew equivalent of "man proposes and God disposes."

22. *his own lack*. The Masoretic Text reads "his own kindness" (*ḥesed*). The translation adopts an emendation proposed by Tur-Sinai, *ḥeser*, "lack," mindful that there are many scribal confusions between the letter *resh* and the similar-looking *dalet*.

23. *one rests sated, untouched by harm*. Again, the Hebrew is rather cryptic and the translation an interpretive guess.

24. *hides his hand in the dish*. In this proverb, one sees a satiric, and hyperbolic, relation between the first verset and the second. The reader initially wonders why the sluggard hides his hand—or, literally, "buries it"—in the dish, and then discovers that he's too lazy to lift it up to his mouth. The hyperbole in this way conveys the reiterated point that a lazy person fails to provide for his own basic needs.

25. *Beat the scoffer . . . / rebuke the discerning*. This proverb is a variation on the idea expressed in 17:10—a whipping may beat sense into a fool, but a word of rebuke suffices for the wise.

27. *A son ceases*. The translation adopts the Septuagint here, reading *ḥadel ben* instead of the Masoretic *ḥadal beni*, "cease, my son."

murmuring evil sayings. The received text reads *lishgot meʾimrey daʿat*, "to dote from [?] sayings of knowledge." The translation follows the Septuagint, which seems to have read in the Hebrew *lahagot maʾamarim raʿim*.

29. *Retribution*. Thus the Masoretic Text. Many scholars prefer to emend *shefatim* to *she-vatim*, "rods," which is to say, "blows."

CHAPTER 20

[1]Wine is a scoffer, strong drink is rowdy,
all who dote on them get no wisdom.
[2]A roar like a lion—a king's terror,
who provokes him mortally offends.
[3]It honors a man to sit back from a quarrel,
but any dolt will jump right in.
[4]After winter the sluggard does not plow,
he asks in the harvest and has nothing.
[5]Deep waters the counsel in a man's heart,
but a man of discernment draws them up.
[6]Many a man is called faithful partner,
but who can find a trustworthy person?
[7]The righteous man goes about in his innocence.
Happy his children after him!
[8]A king seated on the throne of judgment
sifts out all evil with his eyes.
[9]Who can say, "I declare my heart pure.
I am clean of my offense"?
[10]Two different weight-stones, two different
measures—

the LORD's loathing are they both.
[11]In his deeds a lad may dissemble
though his acts be upright and pure.
[12]An ear that hears and an eye that sees,
the LORD made them both.
[13]Do not love sleep, lest you lose all your worth,
keep your eyes open and be sated with bread.
[14]"Bad, bad," says the buyer,
and he goes away and then preens himself.
[15]There is gold with abundance of rubies,
but lips of knowledge are a precious vessel.
[16]Take his garment, for he stood bond for another,
and for strangers, take his pledge.
[17]Bread got through fraud may be sweet to a man,
but in the end it fills his mouth with gravel.
[18]Plans set through counsel will be fulfilled,
and you should make war through designs.
[19]Laying bare secrets the gossip goes round;
don't trust yourself to a blabbermouth.
[20]Who reviles his father and his mother,
his lamp will gutter in pitch darkness.
[21]An estate gained hastily from the start,
its end will not be blessed.
[22]Do not say, "Let me pay back evil."
Hope for the LORD, that He give you victory.

[23]Two different weight-stones are the LORD's
loathing,
and cheating scales are not good.
[24]From the LORD are the steps of a man,
and how can a person grasp his own way?
[25]It's a snare for a man to utter "Sanctified,"
and after the vows to reflect.
[26]A wise king sifts out the wicked
and turns the wheel over them.
[27]The LORD's lamp is the life-breath of man,
laying bare all the inward chambers.
[28]Let a king keep faithful trust,
that he uphold his throne in faithfulness.
[29]The splendor of young men is their strength,
and the glory of elders, gray hair.
[30]With fearsome bruises scour away evil,
and blows to the belly's chambers.

CHAPTER 20 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *strong drink*. A persuasive argument has been made that the Hebrew *sheikhar* is a strong drink made from grapes, which is to say, grappa.

3. *will jump right in*. The general sense of the verb *yitgalaʿ* is to burst out—here, perhaps, in rage. There is some doubt about its meaning in this context.

6. *who can find a trustworthy person*. This proverb is one of many that does not offer direct advice but instead registers a cautionary observation about human behavior. The trust in the moral perceptiveness of the king expressed in verse 8 and elsewhere is the antithesis to this realistic skepticism.

9. *I declare my heart pure*. It is also possible to construe the Hebrew verb here to mean "I have made my heart pure."

11. *In his deeds a lad may dissemble*. The proverb is understood in this translation to be a comment on a paradoxical possibility of human behavior: even though a young person's acts may be perfectly honest, he may nevertheless use them to create a false impression.

14. *he goes away and then preens himself*. What appears to be involved is a satiric vignette of a particular kind of consumer: he dismisses the merchandise as utterly inferior, whether it is or not, and then goes off empty-handed, congratulating himself on his own acumen. Alternately, one could emend the verb *ʾozel,* "goes away," to *huzal*, "is cheapened," as Heinrich Graetz proposed in the nineteenth century. This would yield the following miniature narrative: first the prospective buyer denigrates the merchandise; then the price comes down and he buys it, praising himself for his shrewdness.

16. *Take his garment*. Here the reiterated warning against offering bond for another is cast as an imperative: take his garment or whatever he has put up as security, seeing that he has been foolish enough to expose himself to this sort of risk.

22. *"Let me pay back evil." / Hope for the* LORD*, that He give you victory*. This admonition may recall the story of David and Abigail in 1 Samuel 25. David, enraged when his men are insulted by her husband, Nabal, is on his way to wreak vengeance, but Abigail implores him not to shed blood and have his own hand "rescue" or "give victory" (the same verb as here) but to leave vengeance to the LORD.

25. *to utter "Sanctified," / and after the vows to reflect*. Although the general sense of the verse seems to be that one should not really pronounce vows of sacrifices for the Temple, the Hebrew wording and, in particular, the verb represented here as "utter" are obscure.

26. *the wheel*. The probable reference is to the wheels of a chariot with which a triumphant king would crush the defeated enemy.

27. *laying bare*. The Hebrew verb *ḥofes* seems to say "searching out," which would work for God but not for a lamp, but it should be either read as *ḥosef* (a simple transposition of consonants) or understood to have the sense of *ḥosef*, such reversals of consonants with a retention of the meaning being not infrequent in biblical verbal stems.

all the inward chambers. Literally, "all the belly's chambers."

28. *Let a king keep*. The translation assumes a singular, *yitsor*, for the plural *yitsru* in the received text. This assumption is encouraged by the Masoretic linking of the verb with a hyphen to *melekh*, "king," suggesting that this singular noun is the grammatical subject of the verb.

30. *fearsome bruises*. The Hebrew joins two synonyms in the construct state ("bruises of wound"), which as elsewhere is an intensifier.

scour away. There is some margin of doubt about the meaning of this term, especially since the consonantal text shows it as a verb, *tamriq* (which ordinarily does not appear in this particular conjugation), whereas the Masoretic marginal note corrects it to *tamruq* ("unguent"?). The most likely meaning, if one considers the repeated affirmation of corporal punishment in Proverbs, is that the only appropriate way of dealing with an evil person is to beat the living daylights out of him.

the belly's chambers. This is the same Hebrew phrase that is used at the end of verse 27.

CHAPTER 21

[1]Water-streams, a king's heart in the hand of the LORD,
wherever He desires, He diverts it.
[2]A man's whole way is right in his eyes,
but the LORD takes the measure of hearts.
[3]Doing righteousness and justice
is choicer to the LORD than a sacrifice.
[4]Haughty eyes and overweening heart—
the furrow of the wicked is offense.
[5]The plans of the diligent—only for gain,
and all who hasten—only for loss.
[6]Attaining treasures with a lying tongue
is vanished breath and snares of death.
[7]The plunder of the wicked drags them down,
for they refuse to do justice.
[8]Perverse is the way of a stranger-man,
but a pure one, his deeds are straight.
[9]Better to dwell in the corner of a roof,
than with a quarrelsome wife in a spacious house.

[10]The wicked longs for evil with all his being,
his fellow man gets no pity from him.
[11]When the scoffer is punished, the dupe gets wisdom,
but when a wise man is taught, he gains knowledge.
[12]The righteous fathoms the hearts of the wicked,
subverts the wicked for evil.
[13]Who stops up his ear to the cry of the poor,
he, too, will call unanswered.
[14]A gift in secret allays anger,
and a stealthy bribe, fierce wrath.
[15]A joy to the righteous, the doing of justice,
but disaster to wrongdoers.
[16]A man who strays from insight's way
will repose in the assembly of shades.
[17]The lover of revels is a man in want,
who loves wine and oil will not grow rich.
[18]A ransom for the righteous, the wicked man,
and in place of the upright, the traitor.
[19]Better to dwell in a desert-land
than with a quarrelsome angry wife.
[20]Rare treasure and oil in the wise man's abode,
but a foolish man swallows them up.
[21]Who pursues righteousness and kindness
will find life, righteousness, and honor.

[22]The wise man goes up against a town of warriors
and takes down its mighty stronghold.
[23]Who guards his mouth and his tongue
guards his life from trouble.
[24]The arrogant brazen—scoffer his name,
he acts in arrogant anger.
[25]The sluggard's desire will kill him,
for his hands refuse to act.
[26]All day long he aches with desire,
but the righteous gives unstinting.
[27]The sacrifice of the wicked is loathsome,
even more, as he brings it depraved.
[28]A lying witness will perish,
but a man who listens to counsel will speak.
[29]A wicked man is brazen-faced,
but the upright understands his own way.
[30]There is no wisdom and no discernment
and no counsel before the LORD.
[31]A horse is readied for the day of battle,
but victory is the LORD's.

CHAPTER 21 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Water-streams, a king's heart*. This proverb appears to play on the idea expressed elsewhere (20:5) that there are deep waters in a man's heart. The

proverb is also cast in riddling form: What could it mean that a king's heart is streams of water in God's hand (or power)? That God, like an engineer, can divert the channels into whatever course He chooses.

4. *the furrow of the wicked is offense*. All their endeavors to reap are an offense.

5. *the diligent . . . / all who hasten*. The contrast is between the person who carefully plans his projects and carries them out assiduously and those who do things precipitously, without deliberation. Again, the consequences are purely pragmatic: the diligent reaps a profit; the rash end up penniless.

6. *and snares of death*. The Masoretic Text reads *mevaqshey mawet*, "seekers of death," a problematic reading because the phrase does not accord well with "vanished breath" and the plural creates a syntactic incoherence. The translation follows a reading shown in some variant manuscripts, the Septuagint, and the Vulgate: *umoqshey mawet*, "and snares of death."

8. *a stranger-man*. The Hebrew, literally "man and stranger," looks suspect. Some emend *ʾish wazar* to *ʾish kazav*, "a lying man," which reads smoothly, though it has no textual warrant.

9. *Better to dwell in the corner of a roof*. The "better than" proverb form here is also a kind of riddle: What could possibly be worse than to have to perch (or live) in the corner of a roof? To live with a quarrelsome wife.

a spacious house. The Hebrew *beyt ḥaver* would be literally "house of a friend"—perhaps a welcoming house. But a reversal of the order of consonants yields *bayit raḥav*, "a spacious house."

11. *dupe . . . / wise man*. When the fool sees that the troublemaker has come to grief, he wises up, whereas the wise man needs only instruction to get wisdom.

12. *the hearts of the wicked*. The translation follows the Septuagint, which shows *libot*, "the hearts of," instead of the Masoretic *leveyt*, "to the house of."

14. *a stealthy bribe*. Literally, "a bribe in the bosom"—that is, a bribe that is slipped furtively into the bosom of the bribe taker.

16. *strays from insight's way / will repose in the assembly of shades*. A miniature narrative unfolds between the two versets: a person strays from the

straight way of wisdom and then finds himself in the realm of the netherworld.

17. *wine and oil*. In the good life of the ancient Mediterranean, rubbing the body and head with fine olive oil was a valued luxury, hence its bracketing here with wine as a metonymy for hedonism.

18. *A ransom for the righteous . . . / in place of the upright*. The idea is that whatever disasters might have overtaken the good person will fall instead on the wicked.

19. *Better to dwell in a desert-land*. This proverb is thematically and structurally parallel to verse 9, with the desert replacing the roof corner as a miserable place to live that is preferable to life with a quarrelsome wife.

20. *Rare*. Literally, "desired."

26. *he aches with desire*. Literally, "he desires a desire." The "he" would simply refer to the person who is slave to his own desires. The Septuagint reads "the dolt desires."

27. *depraved*. Literally, "in depravity." Fox argues for the sense of "with a scheme."

28. *a man who listens to counsel will speak*. The Masoretic Text reads "a man who listens will forever [*lanetsah*] speak," which scarcely seems the outcome one would want from an attentive person (presumably, attentive in a court of justice). The translation adopts the emendation of *leʿetsah*, "to counsel."

31. *but victory is the LORD's*. This verset springs a kind of revelatory surprise on the audience of the proverb. After the image of the horse readied for battle, either saddled for its rider or hitched to its chariot, we discover in two Hebrew words, two beats, against the four words and four beats of the first verset, that the outcome of the battle is determined by God alone.

CHAPTER 22

[1]A name is choicer than great wealth—
than silver and gold, good favor.
[2]The rich and the poor come together,
the LORD is maker of both.
[3]The shrewd man sees harm and hides,
but dupes pass on and are punished.
[4]What follows humility is fear of the LORD,
wealth and honor and life.
[5]Thorns and pitfalls in the way of the crooked,
who guards his life keeps far from them.
[6]Train up a lad in the way he should go,
when he grows old he will still not swerve from
it.
[7]The rich rules over the poor,
and the borrower is slave to the man who lends.
[8]Who sows wrongdoing will reap injustice,
and the rod of his wrath will fail.
[9]The generous one, he shall be blessed,
for he gave of his bread to the wretched.
[10]Banish the scoffer and strife will depart,

dispute and demeaning will cease.
[11]Who loves heart's purity,
speaks graciously—the king is his friend.
[12]The LORD's eyes watch over knowledge,
and He confounds the traitor's words.
[13]The sluggard said, "A lion's outside
in the square. I shall be murdered!"
[14]A deep pit is the mouth of stranger-women.
The cursed of the LORD will fall into it.
[15]When folly is bound to the heart of a lad,
the rod of rebuke will remove it from him.
[16]One oppresses the wretched but makes him increase,
one gives to the wealthy but he comes to want.

[17]Bend your ear and hear the words of the wise,
and set your heart on my knowledge.
[18]For it is sweet that you keep them in your belly,
that they all be fit on your lips.
[19]For your trust to be in the LORD,
I have informed you today, even you.
[20]Have I not written for you thirty things
in good counsel and knowledge?—
[21]to inform you the utmost true sayings,
to respond to those who send you.

[22]Do not rob the wretched, for wretched is he,
and do not crush the poor in the gate.
[23]For the LORD will argue their case,
and deprive those who deprived them of life.
[24]Consort not with an irascible man,
and do not join a hotheaded person,
[25]lest you learn his ways
and take on a snare for your life.
[26]Do not be of those who give their hand in pledge,
who back up extortionate loans.
[27]If you have nothing with which to pay,
why should your bedding be taken from under you?
[28]Do not shift the age-old boundary stone
that your forefathers set up.
[29]Have you seen a man who is quick at his task?
Before kings he shall stand.
He shall not stand before the lowly.

CHAPTER 22 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *come together*. More literally, “meet.” Although exegetical energy has been lavished on the question of what it means for the rich and the poor to come together, the obvious sense, dictated by the second clause of this line, is that whatever social and economic differences separate the rich and the poor, in the end they are both God’s creatures and equal before Him.

3. *pass on and are punished*. Evidently, the unreflective dupe passes on in the direction of harm, or moves right through it, not realizing the damage it is inflicting on him. “Punished” in this context suggests something like “come to grief.”

6. *in the way he should go*. While the literal sense is “according to his way,” there is no reason to swerve from the formulation of the King James Version, which catches the intended meaning and has become proverbial.

8. *the rod of his wrath will fail*. The assumption is that the wrongdoer is hurtfully aggressive toward others (“rod,” *shevet*, is the same instrument wielded instructionally against sons, though in that case it is a “rod of reproof “). In the end, when he gets his comeuppance, his power to harm others will fail.

9. *The generous one*. Literally, “good of eye.”

11. *speaks graciously*. The literal sense of the Hebrew, which has no verb, is “graciousness of his lips.”

13. *I shall be murdered*. The inappropriate verb (instead of “eaten up” or “killed”) is probably deliberate. The lazy man, giving free rein to his fantasy in order to find excuses for not leaving his house, imagines that the lion prowling the streets will viciously “murder” him, as though it were a malicious assassin.

14. *A deep pit is the mouth of stranger-women*. As elsewhere, the stranger-woman is somebody else’s (seductive) wife. Her mouth is a dangerous pit because she uses it to speak the sweet talk of seduction (for a vivid example, see chapter 7). It is also prelude and analogue to the lower “pit” in which she seeks to draw the gullible young man.

15. *When folly is bound to the heart of a lad*. In the rather brutal pedagogy of Proverbs, if your child shows foolish inclinations, you need to beat them out of him.

16. *One oppresses . . . / one gives*. This is another proverb that is not a didactic maxim but rather an observation about the sometimes paradoxical nature of human reality: in some cases, a person may seek to take advantage of a poor man and yet the poor man thrives; in some cases, a person may give to someone who already has plenty and somehow the rich man ends up in want.

17. *Bend your ear and hear the words of the wise*. Here begins a formal exordium, running to verse 21, that marks the inception of a new collection of proverbs that comprises two subunits, 22:22–23:11 and 23:12–24:22. The first of these sub-units, as most scholars for nearly a century have agreed, is an adaptation of an Egyptian Wisdom text, the Instruction of Amenemope, and thus bears witness to the international circulation of Wisdom literature. Fifteen of its twenty-four verses have notable parallels in Amenemope, and some of the sequencing of the proverbs is the same. In all likelihood, the Egyptian text was first translated into Aramaic, perhaps in the seventh century B.C.E., by which time Aramaic had become a diplomatic lingua franca in the Near East. Elite circles in Israel at this point certainly knew Aramaic, and so an adaptation from the Aramaic to Hebrew would have been perfectly likely. It is notable that the Hebrew of this section incorporates a number of Aramaic usages.

20. *thirty things*. The Masoretic Text has *shalishim* ("captains"?) in the *ketiv* (consonantal text) and *shelishim* ("threes"?) in the *qeri* (marginal gloss). Neither makes sense, and the translation adopts Michael V. Fox's persuasive emendation to *sheloshim*. Amenemope has thirty maxims, and there are thirty maxims in this subunit, if one counts the exordium as the first maxim.

21. *the utmost true sayings*. The Hebrew strings together synonyms, *qosht* (a borrowing from Aramaic, meaning "truth"), *ʾimrey ʾemet* ("sayings of truth"), with an effect of emphasis or intensification.

22. *do not crush the poor in the gate*. The gate was where courts of justice were held, and the sense of subverting the legal rights of the poor is spelled out in the first verset of the next line.

24. *a hotheaded person*. The Hebrew *ʾish-ḥeimot* is unusual as an idiom but, Fox informs us, is a direct translation of the Egyptian phrase.

27. *why should your bedding be taken from under you*. As the law in Exodus 22:25–26 makes clear, the poor man's bedding was the cloak in which he wrapped himself for sleep—hence one is forbidden to take it away from him at night in pawn for a debt. A letter on behalf of a laborer, found at Yavneh Yam, and dating from the seventh century B.C.E., complains about the deprivation of the cloak for debt. The Hebrew seems to say "why should he take your bedding," but the third-person masculine singular is often used as the equivalent of a passive and thus is translated here as a passive.

28. *Do not shift the age-old boundary stone*. This injunction, which has a close parallel in the Egyptian source-text, reflects the general view that real property should be inalienable.

29. *quick at his task*. The Hebrew adjective *mahir* suggests, as in a number of other occurrences, "adept" or "skilled."

the lowly. A more literal rendering of the Hebrew *ḥashukhim* would be "the obscure," but the sense is not that they lack fame but rather that, unlike kings, they have no social standing.

CHAPTER 23

[1]When you sit to break bread with a ruler,
understand well what is before you,
[2]and put a knife to your gullet,
if you are a gluttonous man.
[3]Do not crave his delicacies,
when they are bread of lies.
[4]Do not strain to become rich,
through your understanding, leave off.
[5]Let your eyes but fly over it, it is gone,
for it will surely sprout wings,
like an eagle fly off to the heavens.
[6]Do not break bread with a stingy man,
nor crave his delicacies.
[7]For like one who gauges in his mind, so he is.
"Eat and drink," he will say to you,
but his heart is not with you.
[8]Your crust that you eat you will vomit,
and you will ruin your pleasant words.
[9]In a fool's ears do not speak,
for he will despise the insight of your words.

[10]Do not shift the age-old boundary stone,
nor enter the fields of orphans.
[11]For their redeemer is strong,
he will argue their case against you.

[12]Bring your heart to reproof,
and your ear to sayings of truth.
[13]Do not hold back reproof from a lad,
when you strike him with the rod, he won't die.
[14]You, with the rod you should strike him
and save his life from Sheol.
[15]My son, if your heart gets wisdom,
my heart, too, will rejoice,
[16]and my inward parts will exult
when your lips speak uprightness.
[17]Let your heart not envy offenders,
but in fear of the LORD all day long.
[18]For if you keep it, there is a future,
and your hope will not be cut off.
[19]Listen, my son, and get wisdom,
and make your heart go straight on the way.
[20]Do not be with the guzzlers of wine,
with those who gorge on meat.
[21]For the guzzler and gorger will lose all,
and slumber will clothe him in rags.

[22]Listen to your father who begot you,
nor despise your mother when she grows old.
[23]Get truth and do not sell it,
wisdom, reproof, and discernment.
[24]The righteous man's father will surely be
gladdened,
the wise man's begetter rejoices in him.
[25]Your father and mother rejoice,
and she who bore you will be gladdened.
[26]Pay mind, my son, to me,
and let your eyes keep my ways.
[27]For a whore is a deep ditch,
and a narrow well, the stranger-woman.
[28]Why, like a kidnapper she lies in wait,
and sweeps up the traitors among men.
[29]For whom "alack," for whom "alas,"
for whom strife, for whom complaint?
For whom needless wounds,
for whom bloodshot eyes?
[30]For those who linger over wine,
who come to try mixed drink.
[31]Do not regard wine in its redness,
when it shows its hue in the cup,
going down smoothly.
[32]In the end it bites like a snake,
and like a viper spews its poison.

[33]Your eyes will see strange things,
and your heart will speak perverseness,
[34]and you will be like one who beds in the sea,
who beds on the top of the rigging.
[35]"They struck me—I felt no hurt;
they beat me—I was unaware.
When will I awake?
I will look for it again."

CHAPTER 23 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *put a knife to your gullet*. This admonition not to gorge oneself when dining with the powerful has numerous parallels in Egyptian Wisdom literature.

3. *they are bread of lies*. The powerful man may seem to be showering you with hospitality in laying out a grand spread before you, but he has his own calculations, and a guest who eats too eagerly may come to regret it.

4. *through your understanding, leave off*. Though the Hebrew is a bit cryptic, this may be the most plausible construction: use your good sense not to strive excessively for wealth. Fox understands this as "Leave off your staring," but construing the noun *binah* as "staring" is somewhat strained, even though the cognate verb sometimes means "to consider" or "to regard."

5. *over it*. The antecedent is an implied noun, "wealth."

7. *but his heart is not with you*. The stingy host, like the ruler, may make a gesture of hospitality, but what he has in mind is anything but generosity. The vivid image of vomiting in the verse that follows may suggest that he will offer his guest questionable food—say, three-day-old fish that has begun to go bad—which he has bought at a very cheap price.

11. *For their redeemer is strong*. Many understand this as a reference to God, Who protects the helpless orphans in their plight. "Redeemer," *goʾel*, is a judicial term (this is how it is used in Job and in Ruth), and so it could refer here to a human redeemer, some hitherto unknown kinsman who will come forth and battle for the rights of the orphan.

12. *Bring your heart to reproof*. This very general admonition signals the beginning of another collection of sayings, but not from Amenemope. As Fox points out, sundry other Egyptian sources are tapped.

14. *save his life from Sheol*. The insistence here and elsewhere on vigorous corporal punishment is linked to the fear of the dire consequences for failing to discipline a young person. Because he will either become involved in dangerous activities or be punished by God, his swerving from the right path can lead to his death.

16. *inward parts*. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "kidneys" (hence the King James Version's "reins"), thought to be the seat of conscience.

17. *but in fear of the* LORD *all day long*. The Hebrew seems to imply an elided verb such as "dwell." Some scholars emend this phrase to "fearers of the LORD," but envy seems the wrong attitude toward such people.

18. *if you keep it*. The Hebrew lacks a verb, and the translation follows the Septuagint, which has a verb to this effect, evidently based on a Hebrew text that showed *tishemrena*. The antecedent of "it," a feminine suffix in the Hebrew, would be "fear of the LORD" in the previous line.

19. *make your heart go straight on the way*. The verb *ʾasher* means literally "make strides," though, as Fox suggests, it probably puns both on *yashar*, "straight," and on its other sense, to declare someone fortunate.

21. *slumber will clothe him in rags*. The Hebrew does not specify an object for the verb, but, contrary to many interpreters, it would have to be the glutton and drunkard, now seen lying in a sated stupor and thus neglecting his possessions, which he comes to lose.

26. *keep*. The translation adopts the correction of the marginal *qeri*. The text proper, reversing the consonants of the verb, erroneously reads "be pleased with."

27. *whore . . . / stranger-woman*. These are complementary possibilities of dangerous liaisons, the prostitute and the adulteress. Each is a trap into which a foolish man can tumble, with the sexual sense of "ditch" and "well" manifest. Chapter 5 offers a contrasting image of conjugal sexuality as a pure well.

28. *a kidnapper*. The Hebrew *ḥetef* is odd but derives from a verbal stem that means "to snatch."

sweeps up. The verb *tosif*, elsewhere meaning "to increase," here seems to derive, as many commentators have concluded, from *ʾasaf*, "to take away" or "gather up."

traitors. At least here, the double standard for sexual behavior is not applied: the married men who frequent promiscuous women are traitors to their own wives, and their involvement with the adulterers will lead them to a bad end.

29. *For whom*. This interrogative phrase, which could equally be rendered as "who has?," begins an extended riddle form: only at the end of the second line here, with the reference to bloodshot eyes, is there an explicit hint that the object of all these mishaps is the drunkard, whose identity is then spelled out in the next verse.

31. *in its redness*. Literally, "as it shows red."

going down smoothly. The phrase *yithalekh bemeysharim* is elucidated by its use in Song of Songs 7:10 in reference to the beloved's palate, which is "like goodly wine." Amusingly, the language of this verse in Proverbs, intended as a warning against wine, is repeatedly used in the Hebrew drinking poems of medieval Andalusia as a celebration of the glories of wine.

33. *Your eyes will see strange things*. The hallucinations and mental confusion of drunkenness are the snakebite of the drink.

34. *like one who beds in the sea, / who beds on the top of the rigging*. The simile provides a striking satiric image of the wobbliness of the drunkard. In a characteristic move of intensification from the first verset to the second, the drunken person is not merely like someone trying to sleep in the surging sea but like someone lying up in the rigging as the ship pitches about.

35. *They struck me—I felt no hurt*. The drinker is too stupefied by alcohol to realize that he has been beaten. These words loop back to the riddle question,

“For whom needless wounds?”

When will I awake? / I will look for it again. At the end of this satiric vignette, the alcoholic remains true to his addiction: still in a half-stupor as he pronounces these words, he is in no condition to go out and get more wine, but as soon as his mind clears a bit, that is just what he means to do.

CHAPTER 24

[1]Do not envy evil men,
and do not desire to be with them.
[2]For their heart ponders plunder,
and their lips speak trouble.
[3]Through wisdom a house is built,
and through discernment it is firm-founded.
[4]And through knowledge rooms are filled
with all precious and pleasant wealth.
[5]A wise man is mightier than a strong one,
and a man of knowledge than one of great
power.
[6]For through designs you should make war,
and victory comes from abundant counsel.
[7]Wisdom is too high for the dolt,
he won't open his mouth in the gate.
[8]Who plots to do evil,
they will call him a master of cunning.
[9]The foulness of foolishness is an offense,
the scoffer is loathed by people.
[10]Should you be slack on the day of distress,

your strength will be constrained.
[11]Save those who are taken to death,
and from those stumbling to slaughter do not
hold back.
[12]Should you say, “Why, we did not know of this.”
Will not the Weigher of Hearts discern,
and the Watcher of your life not know,
and pay back a man by his deeds?
[13]Eat honey, my son, for it is good,
and honeycomb, sweet on your palate.
[14]Thus know wisdom for yourself,
if you find it, there is a future,
and your hope will not be cut off.
[15]Do not enter the home of the righteous
nor plunder the place where he beds his flock.
[16]For seven times a righteous man falls and gets up
but the wicked stumble in evil.
[17]When your enemy falls, do not rejoice,
and when he stumbles, let your heart be not
gladdened,
[18]lest the LORD see and it be evil in His eyes,
and He deflect His wrath from him.
[19]Do not be provoked by evildoers,
do not envy the wicked.
[20]For there is no future for the evil man,
the lamp of the wicked will gutter.

[21]Fear the LORD, my son, and the king,
neither one nor the other vex.
[22]For ruin from them rises suddenly;
Who can know the disaster wreaked by both?

[23]These, too, are from the wise:
showing favor in justice cannot be good.
[24]Who says to the guilty, “You are innocent,”
peoples will curse him,
nations will damn him.
[25]But for the rebukers it will be pleasant,
upon them the blessing of good will come.
[26]With lips does he kiss
who answers in forthright words.
[27]Prepare your task outside
and ready it for yourself in the field.
After, you will build your house.
[28]Do not be a witness for no cause against your neighbor,
that you should seduce with your lips.
[29]Do not say, “As he did to me I will do to him,
I will pay back the man by his deeds.”
[30]I passed by the field of the lazy man
and by the vineyard of one without sense,
[31]and, look, it had all sprouted thorns,

its surface was covered with thistles,
and its stone wall was in ruins.
[32]And I beheld and I paid mind,
I saw, I took reproof;
[33]a bit more sleep, a bit more slumber,
a bit more lying with folded arms,
[34]and your privation will come like a wayfarer,
your want like a shield-bearing man.

CHAPTER 24 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

4. *with all precious and pleasant wealth*. In this verset the poet diverges from the prevalent pattern of neat semantic parallelism between the two halves of the line, which is emphatically evident in the three preceding lines, to stipulate, in a little surprise, with what the rooms of the house are filled.

5. *mightier than the strong one, / . . . than one of great power*. The Masoretic Text reads *gever ḥakham baʿoz*, "a wise man in [the?] strength," and *meʾamets-koaḥ*, "summons up power." The second phrase is intelligible though a poor parallelism; the first phrase is not intelligible. The translation follows the Septuagint, the Syriac, and the Targum, all of which seem to have read *gavar ḥakham meiʿaz* and *meiʾamits-koaḥ*, readings that yield the translation offered here.

7. *he won't open his mouth in the gate*. As elsewhere, the gate is where judicial discussions were conducted. The dolt, lacking all wisdom, will have no idea what to say in such deliberations.

9. *loathed by people*. More literally, "people's loathing."

11. *slaughter*. Or "a killing."

12. *we did not know of this*. These words refer back to the previous line: when people are about to be slaughtered, don't pretend that you had no notion of what was happening.

the Watcher of your life not know. The "not" is unstated in the Hebrew but carried over from the previous clause.

13. *Eat honey, my son*. Though the urging to eat something that tastes sweet may sound momentarily superfluous, the equation between honey and wisdom was a familiar one, and it is promptly spelled out in the next verse, which is clearly bracketed with this one.

15. *Do not enter the home of the righteous*. The Masoretic Text reads, "Do not lie in wait, wicked man, for the home of the righteous," *ʾal teʾerov rashaʿ leneweh tsadiq*. This is odd because "lie in wait" is something done to a person, not to a place, and because vocatives addressed to the wicked are not part of the rhetorical strategy of Proverbs. This translation adapts an emendation proposed by Fox, based in part on the Septuagint: *tavoʾ*, "enter," for *teʾerov*, "lie in wait," and the deletion of *rashaʿ*, "wicked man," as a probable gloss.

21. *neither one nor the other vex*. The Masoretic Text reads, "And don't mix in [*titʿarav*] with *shonim*." The meaning of *shonim* is in doubt. Some think it means "dissidents"; the King James Version guesses, desperately, "them that are given to change." There is no evidence that this verbal root, which can mean "to repeat" or "to be different," had either of these senses in the Bible. The translation follows the Septuagint, which reads *sheneyhem*, "the two of them," for *shonim*, and *titʿabar* (or perhaps *teʿaber*), a root having to do with anger, instead of *titʿarav*, "mix in." This two-line proverb, then, follows a recurring theme of the book in warning against provoking those in power, who can have a short fuse and a heavy hand.

23. *These, too, are from the wise*. This is the brief formal introduction of a new selection of proverbs from a different source.

showing favor in justice. This second verset in fact begins the sequence on impartiality in justice that takes up the next two versets.

26. *kiss / . . . forthright words*. The line flaunts a paradox: he who speaks straightforwardly—probably words of justified criticism—is as one who kisses, however harsh the words.

27. *Prepare your task outside*. This is another piece of purely pragmatic wisdom: first, a person must shore up his substance by working in the field, and then he will be in a position to build a house. This proverb is a pointed antithesis to the satiric portrait at the end of the chapter of the lazy man letting his possessions sink into ruin.

30. *I passed by the field of the lazy man*. The miniature first-person narrative that begins here is relatively rare in this part of the book, where hortatory second-person address predominates.

32. *I took reproof*. In this context, the recurring idiom has the sense of "I learned a lesson."

33–34. These two lines duplicate 6:10–11. See the comments there for an elucidation of the language.

CHAPTER 25

[1]These, too, are proverbs of Solomon, which
the men of Hezekiah king of Judah transcribed.
[2]God's honor is to hide a matter,
the honor of kings, to probe a matter.
[3]The heavens for height and the earth for depth,
but the heart of kings is beyond probing.
[4]Remove the dross from silver,
and for the refiner the vessel comes out.
[5]Remove the wicked man from the king's presence,
and his throne is firm-founded in justice.
[6]Do not preen before a king,
and do not stand in the place of the great.
[7]For better that he say to you, "Come up here,"
than that he abase you before a noble
whom your eyes have seen.
[8]Do not go out quickly to a quarrel,
for what will you do afterward
when your neighbor puts you to shame?
[9]Take up your quarrel with your neighbor,
but another's secret do not reveal,

[10]lest he who hears revile you,
and your infamy not be withdrawn.
[11]Golden apples in silver carvings,
a word spoken in its own right way.
[12]A ring of gold and a fine-gold bangle—
the wise rebuker to an ear that heeds.
[13]Like the chill of snow on a harvest day,
a faithful messenger to his senders,
he revives his master's spirits.
[14]Clouds and wind yet there is no rain—
a man who boasts of a deceptive gift.
[15]Through patience a leader is duped,
and a gentle tongue breaks a bone.
[16]If you find honey, eat just what you need,
lest you have your fill of it and throw it up.
[17]Be sparing of your visits in your neighbor's house,
lest he have his fill of you and hate you.
[18]A mace and a sword and a sharpened arrow—
a man who bears false witness against his
neighbor.
[19]A shattered tooth and a shaky leg—
treacherous refuge on a day of trouble.
[20]Who takes off a garment on a cold day,
vinegar on natron—
thus the singer of songs to a downcast heart.
[21]If your foe is hungry, feed him bread,

and if he thirsts, give him water,
[22]for you would heap live coals on his head,
and the LORD will pay you back.
[23]A north wind brings on rain,
and an angry face—a secretive tongue.
[24]Better to dwell in the corner of a roof
than with a quarrelsome wife in a spacious house.
[25]Cool water to a famished throat—
good news from a distant land.
[26]A muddied fountain, a fouled-up spring—
a righteous man toppling before the wicked.
[27]To eat too much honey is not good,
and to be sparing of speech is honor.
[28]A breached city without a wall—
a man with no restraint to his spirit.

CHAPTER 25 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah transcribed*. The historical claim is perfectly plausible. Hezekiah reigned during the last three decades of the eighth century B.C.E., and court scribes in this period might well have collated and redacted a small collection of proverbs. The use of "too," *gam*, clearly suggests that there was at least one earlier collection, the most likely candidate being the one that begins in chapter 10.

2. *God's honor is to hide a matter*. God's purposes in history, nature, and individual lives are beyond human ken, and their hidden character enhances our sense of divine power.

the honor of kings, to probe a matter. The king, as supreme judicial and executive authority, is obliged to sift out facts for the purposes of justice and policy. The emphasis on kings and on the comportment before nobility in all likelihood reflects the concerns of the court scribes responsible for this collection of proverbs. It continues through verse 7.

3. *The heavens for height and the earth for depth*. This line initiates the puzzle pattern that is especially prominent in this particular collection: a potentially enigmatic image in the first verset followed by its human referent or antithesis in the second verset.

4. *Remove the dross from silver*. In this instance, the puzzle image takes up a whole line of poetry, and the explanation of its relevance to the affairs of men is unfolded in a second line (verse 5).

7. *whom your eyes have seen*. This clause sounds lame and may well be a mistaken scribal addition.

11. *Golden apples in silver carvings*. This image of exquisite jewelry for apt speech reflects the high value placed in Proverbs on eloquent and beautifully framed speech.

12. *A ring of gold and a fine-gold bangle*. Here the enigmatic nature of the riddle image in the first verset is flaunted: it is rather a surprise that something as harsh and immaterial as rebuke should turn out to be the referent of these images of fine jewelry. The ring, *nezem*, would be worn on either the ear or the nose, and the former placement fits nicely with the listening ear.

13. *Like the chill of snow on a harvest day*. Of course, snow would never fall on a harvest day in the land of Israel. The early harvest in late May is an especially hot period, but even during the late harvest at the beginning of October, it is relatively warm.

14. *Clouds and wind*. The combination of clouds and wind suggests that a heavy storm is brewing. The lack of rain then sets up the enigma of the riddle, to be solved in the second verset.

15. *Through patience a leader is duped*. If you take your time and calculate carefully, you can find a way to make a ruler serve your purposes. The verb

could also be rendered as "beguiled," but the violence of the second verset argues for the more negative sense.

a gentle tongue breaks a bone. This is a very vivid instance of the tendency to intensification in the second half of the line. Duping a ruler through patient strategy in the first verset is a plausibly realistic event; the second verset then deploys a strong hyperbole—gentle speech as an agency of terrific destruction, which is also an anatomical image, the soft tongue that paradoxically can break a bone.

17. *Be sparing of your visits*. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "make your foot rare."

18. *A mace and a sword and a sharpened arrow*. In this instance the riddling nature of the initial verset is compounded by this stringing together of three different weapons. For the first term, the received text shows *meifits* ("scatter"), but this is almost certainly a mistake for *mapats*, "mace" or "club," as the evidence of the Septuagint indicates.

19. *shaky*. The translation reads *moʿedet*, "stumbling" or "shaky," for the Masoretic *muʿedet*, "designated" or "warned against," the difference being only the vocalization.

20. *vinegar on natron*. The effect of vinegar on natron (sodium carbonate) is to produce an acrid sizzle.

22. *the LORD will pay you back*. Some understand this to mean that the LORD will reward you—reward for showing humanity to your enemy. But the verb also means to requite or punish, and that sense is a better match with the idea of heaping coals on the foe's head in the first verset: if you are inhumane to your enemy, the LORD will requite it of you.

23. *an angry face—a secretive tongue*. Showing anger drives people to guard their words and not say what they mean.

24. *Better to dwell in the corner of a roof*. This verse duplicates 21:9. See the comments there.

27. *to be sparing of speech is honor*. The Masoretic Text here makes little sense: *weḥeqer kevodam kavod*, "and the probing of their honor is honor." This translation follows the emendation formulated by Fox, *wehoqer daber mekhubad*.

28. *A breached city without a wall*. This riddle image would have communicated a condition of terribly exposed vulnerability to the ancient audience, which was very familiar with fortified walls as an important means of protecting cities from invaders. In the second verset, then, the man of unrestrained spirit is seen as making himself painfully vulnerable to humiliation or harm.

CHAPTER 26

[1]Like snow in the summer, like rain in the harvest,
so honor is unfit for a fool.
[2]As a bird for wandering, as a swallow for flight,
so a groundless curse won't come to pass.
[3]A whip for the horse, a bridle for the donkey,
and a rod for the back of fools.
[4]Do not answer a dolt by his folly
lest you, too, be like him.
[5]Answer the dolt by his folly,
lest he seem wise in his own eyes.
[6]He cuts off his own legs, drinking outrage,
he who send words by a fool.
[7]Thighs hang slack on the lame
and a proverb in the mouth of fools.
[8]Like one binding a stone in a sling,
so he who gives a fool honor.
[9]A thorn comes up in the hand of a drunk
and a proverb in the mouth of fools.
[10]A master brings all things about,
but who hires a fool hires vagabonds.

[11]Like a dog going back to his vomit
a dolt repeats his folly.
[12]Have you seen a man wise in his own eyes?
There is more hope for the fool than for him.
[13]The sluggard says, “A young lion is on the road,
a lion is out in the squares.”
[14]A door turns on its hinge,
and a sluggard on his bed.
[15]The sluggard buries his hand in the dish,
he cannot bring it back up to his mouth.
[16]The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes
than seven who answer with good sense.
[17]Like one who seizes the ears of a passing dog
is he who mixes in with a quarrel not his.
[18]Like a lunatic shooting deadly firebrands
[19]is a man who deceives his neighbor
and says, “Why, I was joking.”
[20]When there is no wood, a fire goes out,
and without a grumbler, strife falls silent.
[21]Coal for embers and wood for fire
and a belligerent man to stir up quarrel.
[22]A grumbler’s words are like pounding
and they go down to the belly’s chambers.
[23]Silver with dross glazed on pottery
are ardent lips and an evil heart.
[24]By his lips a foe dissembles

and within he lays out deceit.
[25]Though he makes his speech fair, do not trust him,
for seven loathsome things are in his heart.
[26]Who covers hatred in deception,
his evil will be exposed to all.
[27]Who digs a pit will fall in it,
and who rolls a stone, it will come back on him.
[28]A lying tongue hates those it crushes,
and a smooth mouth pushes one down.

CHAPTER 26 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Like snow in the summer*. This is part of a whole series here of riddle-form one-line proverbs. These are cast either as a paradoxical or a puzzling image in the first verset—in this instance: what could possibly be as anomalous as snow in a warm season?—or as an image so self-evident that the listener wonders why it should be mentioned (for example, verses 3, 7, 14, 20).

2. *a bird . . . a swallow*. Just as these winged creatures by their nature fly away, a groundless curse will not "come down on" its intended object but will dissipate, fly away.

4–5. *Do not answer a dolt . . . / Answer the dolt*. Ingenious exegetical effort has been exercised to set these two contradictory proverbs in a dialectic or complementary relationship with each other. It is more plausible to assume that they were bracketed together editorially because of the similarity of formulation while they reflect two quite different and originally independent perspectives. The first proverb counsels us to avoid contention with a fool because we are liable to get entangled in his own misguided or confused terms ("by [or according to] his folly"). The second proverb urges us to answer the fool so that he is compelled to recognize what a fool he is. In this

English version, *kesil,* generally rendered as "fool," has been translated as "dolt" because the word for "folly" here, *iwelet*, is an entirely different term.

6. *He cuts off his own legs, drinking outrage*. In this proverb, the riddle image is especially violent: like a man who terribly mutilates himself is he who entrusts a message to a fool.

8. *binding*. With the Septuagint, the translation reads *tsorer*, "binding" or "one who binds," instead of the Masoretic *tseror*, "bundle." The relation of image to referent is not entirely clear. Fox's explanation is that giving a fool honor "arms" him to do harm to others, like the loading of a slingshot with a stone.

9. *A thorn comes up in the hand of a drunk*. Presumably, he is staggering about in his drunken stupor and thus thrusts his hand unawares against thorns.

a proverb in the mouth of fools. This means that either they will pronounce a warped proverb that may hurt others or, lacking the wisdom to pronounce wise sayings, in their effort to do so they will shame or do harm to themselves. The latter option may be more likely.

10. *A master brings all things about, / but who hires a fool hires vagabonds*. The Hebrew of the received text is obscure, but the sundry attempts to emend it involve major surgical operations on the text with no more than scant support in the ancient versions. This translation follows the general outline of the construction proposed in the New Jewish Publication Society translation.

11. *Like a dog going back to his vomit*. This is another case of a violent, and arresting, riddle image in the first half of the line.

13. *The sluggard says*. This proverb is a virtual doublet of 22:13—see the comment there. The Hebrew uses two synonyms for "lion," and the translation resorts to a familiar fallback by rendering the first term, *shaḥal*, as "young lion."

14. *A door turns on its hinge*. This is a particularly witty deployment of a seemingly obvious image for the riddling part of the line. A door, of course, turns on its hinge; but then we are invited to link that to the sluggard, turning from one side to the other in bed and going nowhere, like the door. We may also imagine the door opening and shutting, with people going in and out, while the sluggard remains in bed.

15. *The sluggard buries his hand in the dish*. This proverb duplicates 19:24. See the comment there.

17. *seizes the ears of a passing dog*. The simile has a special edge because dogs were not domesticated in ancient Israel but rather wandered outside as semiferal scavengers. The vivid implication is that a person who mixes into someone else's quarrel is liable to get badly bitten.

mixes in. The translation reads *mitʿarev* for the Masoretic *mitʿaber* ("becomes angry").

18. *lunatic*. There is some question about the precise meaning of the Hebrew term.

deadly firebrands. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "sparks, arrows, and death." "Arrows and death" may be a hendiadys for "deadly arrows."

22. *A grumbler's words*. This is another doublet. See 18:8.

23. *ardent lips*. An emendation of the first consonant of the Hebrew word rendered as "ardent" (or "burning") yields "smooth lips," which is the reading of the Septuagint.

25. *speech*. Literally, "voice."

26. *to all*. Literally, "in the assembly"—that is, in public.

28. *A lying tongue hates those it crushes*. The tongue is a synecdoche for the liar, but it accords with the potent agency assigned to speech in Proverbs that the tongue should be the subject of both verbs here. What the proverb seems to have in mind is a common psychological mechanism in which the victimizer comes to hate or despise the very person to whom he does wrong, perhaps feeling contempt because the victim has so pathetically exposed himself to harm. For a vivid sexual instance in the Bible, see the story of Amnon and Tamar in 2 Samuel 13.

a smooth mouth. The reference is obviously to smooth speech, but the agency of the body part, as with the tongue in the first verset, is important for the poetic effect.

CHAPTER 27

[1]Do not boast about tomorrow,
for you know not what the day will bring forth.
[2]Let a stranger praise you and not your own mouth,
another, and not your own lips.
[3]The weight of a stone and the heft of sand—
the dolt's anger is heavier than both.
[4]The cruelty of fury and anger's rush—
but who can stand up to envy?
[5]Better open reproof
than hidden love.
[6]The wounds from a friend are faithful
but the kisses of a foe are profuse.
[7]A sated appetite disdains honeycomb
but to a hungry appetite all bitter is sweet.
[8]Like a bird wandering from its nest
is a man wandering from his place.
[9]Oil and incense gladden the heart,
and a friend's sweetness more than inward
counsel.
[10]Do not forsake your friend or your father's friend

nor enter your brother's house on the day of
your ruin.
Better a close neighbor
than a distant brother.
[11]Get wisdom, my son, and gladden my heart,
that I may give back an answer to my insulter.
[12]The shrewd man saw evil and hid.
Dupes passed on and were punished.
[13]Take his garment, for he stood bond for another,
for an alien woman, take his pledge.
[14]Who greets his neighbor in a loud voice
first thing in the morning,
it is reckoned to him a curse.
[15]A maddening drip on a cloudy day
and a nagging wife are alike.
[16]Who conceals her conceals the wind,
and her name is called "right hand."
[17]Iron together with iron,
and a man together with his friend.
[18]Who tends a fig tree will eat its fruit,
and who guards his master will be honored.
[19]Like water face to face
thus the heart of man to man.
[20]Sheol and Perdition are not sated,
and the eyes of man are not sated.
[21]Smelter for silver and kiln for gold,

and a man according to his praise.
[22]Though you grind down a dolt with a mortar,
in the pestle among the groats,
his folly will not swerve from him.
[23]You must surely know the look of your flock,
put your mind on the herds.
[24]For wealth is not forever
nor a crown for time to come.
[25]The grass is gone, new grass appears,
the mountains' grasses are gathered.
[26]There are sheep for your clothing,
he-goats, the price of a field.
[27]Enough goat's milk for your food,
for the food of your house,
and viands for your young women.

CHAPTER 27 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *The weight of a stone and the heft of sand*. After the two preceding proverbs, which are prudential exhortations, this verse reverts to the riddle form, as does the next verse.

6. *The wounds from a friend are faithful*. Both the content of the second verset and the larger context of Proverbs suggest that "wounds" here means something like "cutting words of rebuke" (in contrast to the hypocritical kisses of an enemy). They are "faithful" in the sense that they are meant to serve one's best interest, and are an expression of loyal friendship.

profuse. This is what the Hebrew term means. The implication is that the kisses are excessive, and suspect.

9. *a friend's sweetness more than inward counsel*. The Hebrew is somewhat cryptic, or perhaps merely elliptical. "Sweetness" might be an ellipsis for "sweet counsel." The phrase rendered as "inward counsel," or perhaps "one's own counsel," is *ʿatsat nafesh*, which could mean literally "the counsel of the essential self," "the counsel of the spirit," or simply "a person's counsel."

10. *Do not forsake your friend*. Fox understands the verb in context to mean "ignore," although the evidence for that sense of *ʿazav* elsewhere is scant.

nor enter your brother's house. The implication is that a true friend is a better resource in life than a brother.

Better a close neighbor / than a distant brother. Despite the verse breaks, this is obviously a separate proverb, bracketed editorially with the previous one because of the comparison of friend and brother.

12. *The shrewd man*. This proverb duplicates 22:3.

13. *Take his garment*. This is still another doublet—of 20:16—with minor changes.

14. *Who greets his neighbor in a loud voice*. This proverb is an amusing observation on social behavior: when you are barely awake in the morning, the last thing you want is a bellowed—and perhaps ostentatious—greeting from a neighbor.

15. *A maddening drip*. This proverb is a somewhat different formulation of 19:13.

16. *Who conceals her conceals the wind, / and her name is called "right hand."* The Hebrew is unintelligible, as the translation indicates, and even with emendation it is hard to make sense of this verse. The "her" may refer to the nagging wife of the previous verse, in which case the idea is that it is impossible to hide her because she is everywhere. (The verb for the initial "conceals" is plural in the Hebrew but has been emended to a singular to accord with the second "conceals.") The literal sense of the second verset in the received text is "and the oil of his right hand will call [or will be called]," *weshemen yemino yiqraʾ*. This has been emended, partly in accordance with the Septuagint, to read *weshemah yamin yiqareiʾ*. Even so, the meaning is unclear. Perhaps, by a stretch, it could mean, she is thought of as the right

hand—that is, powerful—because there is no way to conceal or repress her. Amid all this confusion, Fox interestingly detects a pun: *tsafan*, "conceal," suggests *tsafon*, "north"; and *yamin*, "right hand," is an alternate term for "south."

17. *Iron together with iron*. This is usually understood to refer to magnetized iron, which clings to iron, and so does a man to his friend. The force of the proverb is in its terrific compactness, which the translation tries to preserve.

19. *Like water face to face*. Again, the translation reproduces the strong compactness of the original. The reference is obviously to someone seeing his own reflection in water. But water is unstable and therefore an undependable or distorting mirror, unlike an actual mirror of polished bronze (there were no glass mirrors in this era). Thus one man's heart provides a tricky or deceptive image of what is in the heart of another.

21. *a man according to his praise*. A man's reputation tests him, burns out the dross, as a smelter tries silver or gold.

23. *You must surely know the look of your flock*. These words begin a multiline proverb on the virtues of responsible pastoralism that runs to the end of verse 27.

24. *wealth*. In a pastoral economy, wealth would be measured chiefly in flocks.

a crown. This term represents an intensification of the initial verset: not only is wealth transient, but even a crown (and the power and possessions that go with it) is not forever.

for time to come. Literally, "for generation after generation."

25. *The grass is gone, new grass appears*. The grass, of course, is vital for feeding the flocks, and so it is important that there is a new growth each year.

26. *he-goats, the price of a field*. Fox's explanation seems plausible: you can always sell off some of your goats to purchase more fields to pasture the rest.

27. *goat's milk*. The word for goat means "she-goat" and is entirely different from the masculine term used in the previous verse.

viands. The literal sense is "life." The usage may reflect an etymology analogous to "viands"—that which you live on.

CHAPTER 28

[1]The wicked man flees with no pursuer,
but the righteous are bold as a lion.
[2]Through the crime of a land, its princes are many,
but through a discerning man it is long-lasting.
[3]A poor man oppressing the lowly—
pounding rain without bread.
[4]Those who forsake teaching praise the wicked,
but those who keep the teaching confront them.
[5]Evil men do not understand justice,
but the LORD's seekers understand all.
[6]Better a destitute man walking blameless
than one stubborn in his ways though rich.
[7]A discerning son keeps the teaching,
but one who consorts with gluttons shames his father.
[8]Who increases his wealth through interest and usury
will amass it for one kind to the poor.
[9]Who turns his ear from heeding instruction,
his very prayer is loathsomeness.

[10]Who misleads the upright to an evil way,
in his own pit he will fall,
and the blameless will inherit good.
[11]Wise in his own eyes is the rich man,
but the discerning poor will find him out.
[12]When the righteous rejoice, grand is the splendor,
but when the wicked rise up, man dons disguise.
[13]Who covers his crimes will not prosper,
but who admits and leaves off will be granted
mercy.
[14]Happy the man who fears at all times,
but who hardens his heart will fall into harm.
[15]A growling lion and a famished bear—
a wicked ruler over a poor people,
[16a]a prince lacking discernment and great in
oppression.
[16b]Who hates ill-gotten gains
will have length of days.
[17]A man oppressing by blood-guilt
flees to a pit.
Let none hold on to him.
[18]Who walks in blamelessness will be rescued,
but the crooked of ways will fall in a ditch.
[19]Who tills his soil is sated with bread,
but who pursues empty things is sated with
poverty.

[20]A trustworthy man abounds in blessings,
but who to enrich himself rushes will not go
scot-free.
[21]Favoritism is not good,
and for a crust of bread a man may do wrong.
[22]The miserly man rushes off after wealth,
unaware that want will befall him.
[23]Who rebukes another man will find more favor
than a smooth talker.
[24]Who robs his father and mother saying “It is no
crime”
is a friend to a man who brings ruin.
[25]The greedy man stirs up strife,
but who trusts in the LORD flourishes.
[26]Who trusts in his own heart, he is a fool,
but who walks in wisdom, he will escape.
[27]Who gives to the destitute knows not want,
but who averts his eyes abounds in curses.
[28]When the wicked rise up, man hides,
and when they perish, the righteous are many.

CHAPTER 28 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The wicked man flees . . . / the righteous are bold*. The wicked, plagued by a guilty conscience, live in constant fear of divine retribution or legal

punishment, whereas the righteous live in confidence.

2. *Through the crime of a land, its princes are many*. The possible but by no means certain meaning is that when a country is lawless, it produces many different contenders for power.

but through a discerning man it is long-lasting. As the translation reflects, the Hebrew text that has come down to us makes virtually no sense. Here is a more literal rendering: and through a discerning knowing man thus he (it?) is long-lasting. In the translation, "knowing" has been dropped as an apparent scribal doublet for "discerning." Some interpreters claim that *ken*, "thus," means "honesty," which would then be the subject of "is long-lasting," but when *ken* does not mean "thus," it is an adjective, "honest," not a noun. Emendations of this line have been unavailing.

3. *A poor man oppressing the lowly*. In an unjust economic hierarchy, even a poor person can exploit other disadvantaged people, or perhaps be used as a tool by the powerful to exploit them. This is a rare proverb in which the riddle image ("pounding [more literally, sweeping] rain without bread") appears in the second verset—perhaps because there is also something of a riddle or at least a paradox in this first verset.

pounding rain without bread. Rain as a rule waters the soil, enabling the growth of grain. A torrential rain washes away the soil, making the growth of grain impossible. The poor man's oppression of the lowly is purely destructive, and, in a kind of pun, he himself is without bread.

8. *interest and usury*. Though attempts have been made to discriminate between the two Hebrew terms, the distinction remains uncertain. The first of the terms, *neshekh*, etymo-logically means "bite" and so probably suggests excessive interest.

will amass it for one kind to the poor. This notion that ill-gotten gains will end up in the hands of the charitable is clearly wishful thinking.

10. *and the blameless will inherit good*. This third verset looks suspiciously like an addition to the original line.

12. *man dons disguise*. The verb *yeḥupas* can mean either "will be sought for"—yielding the sense that under the regime of the wicked decent people are hard to find, perhaps have to hide—or "is disguised," that is, forced self-protectively to dissemble. Since the grand splendor of the first verset implies

public display, the antithetical sense of disguise may be somewhat more likely.

14. *fears*. In context, this would be fear of doing evil or fear of retribution if evil is done.

16a. *a prince lacking discernment and great in oppression*. Despite the conventional verse break, influenced by the brevity of 16b, this verset, as Michael V. Fox notes, is clearly the third element of a triadic line characterizing the unjust ruler that begins in verse 15.

16b. *Who hates ill-gotten gains / will have length of days*. This proverb is scanned here as an abbreviated line with two versets, each having two beats in the Hebrew. But it is equally possible to represent it as a one-verset truncated line of poetry.

17. *oppressing*. The translation assumes *ʿosheq*, an active verb, instead of the passive *ʿashuq*, "oppressed," of the Masoretic Text.

18. *in a ditch*. The received text reads *beʾeḥat* ("all at once"?), but the Syriac, more plausibly, reflects *beshaḥat*, "in a ditch."

21. *for a crust of bread a man may do wrong*. If the first verset suggests that in justice—that is what the term for "favoritism" generally implies—one should not show partiality to the rich and powerful, then this clause probably means that a judge should also have compassion for the poor man who may have stolen out of sheer desperate hunger.

23. *another man*. The translation emends *ʾadam aḥaray*, "a man after me," in the received text to *ʾadam ʾaḥeir*, "another man."

26. *he is a fool*. This is an instance of what Fox calls a "gapped"—that is, elliptical—proverb. The wise man will escape from trouble, but the fool will not escape.

CHAPTER 29

[1]A man often rebuked who is stiff-necked,
will be suddenly broken beyond healing.
[2]When the righteous are many, a people rejoices,
but when the wicked man rules, a people groans.
[3]A man who loves wisdom will gladden his father,
but a chaser of whores will destroy wealth.
[4]A king makes a land stand firm through justice,
but a deceitful man destroys it.
[5]A man who flatters his fellow
spreads a net at his feet.
[6]In an evil man's crime is a snare,
but the righteous is glad and rejoices.
[7]The righteous man knows the cause of the poor.
The wicked man does not grasp knowledge.
[8]Scoffing men fan the flames of a city,
but the wise will turn back wrath.
[9]When a wise man contends with a doltish man,
the dolt rages and mocks, with no calm.
[10]Bloody men hate the innocent,
but the upright look out for his life.

[11]The fool gives vent to his whole spirit,
but the wise man quells it.
[12]A ruler heeding a lying word—
all his servants are wicked.
[13]A pauper and a schemer meet—
the LORD gives light to the eyes of both.
[14]A king who judges the poor with honesty,
his throne will stand firm for all time.
[15]Rod and rebuke impart wisdom,
but a lad run loose shames his mother.
[16]When the wicked increase, crime increases,
but the righteous will witness their downfall.
[17]Reprove your son and he will give you ease,
and offer delicacies for your palate.
[18]Without vision a people turns wild,
but happy is he who follows the teaching.
[19]Through words a slave will not accept reproof,
though he understand, there will be no answer.
[20]Have you seen a man hasty in his words?
There is more hope for the dolt than for him.
[21]Who pampers his slave from youth,
in the end there will be dismay.
[22]An angry man stirs up strife,
and a hothead abounds in crime.
[23]A man's pride will bring him low,
but the lowly of spirit will hold on to honor.

[24]Who shares with a thief hates himself,
he will hear the curse and will not tell.
[25]A man's fear becomes a snare,
but he who trusts in the LORD will be safe.
[26]Many seek a ruler's presence,
but a man's judgment comes from the LORD.
[27]A wrongdoer is the loathing of the righteous,
and the wicked's loathing, the man of straight ways.

CHAPTER 29 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *A man often rebuked*. Literally, "a man of rebukes."

2. *When the righteous are many, a people rejoices*. This proverb, like the next one and several others in this chapter, is no more than a formulation in verse of a platitude.

3. *a chaser of whores will destroy wealth*. The objection to consorting with whores is pragmatic, not moral—they will drain all your financial resources.

7. *the cause of the poor*. "Cause" here is used in its legal sense: the righteous man concerns himself with the struggle of the poor to get justice.

9. *the dolt rages*. The Hebrew merely says "he," but "dolt" has been added in the translation to avoid the ambiguity of the pronoun's antecedent.

10. *look out for his life*. The received text shows *yevaqshu nafsho*, "seek his life," an idiom that everywhere else means to try to kill a person. This translation emends the verb to *yevaqru*, a difference of one consonant, producing a verb that can have the sense shown in this English version.

11. *gives vent . . . / quells*. This proverb articulates the view found elsewhere in the book that self-restraint and discretion are important attributes of wisdom.

13. *A pauper and a schemer meet*. The probable sense of "meet" here is that, for all the differences between these two categories of people, they share one point of commonality—that, whatever their intentions for evil or good and whatever the restrictions of their condition in life, they are equally dependent on God's illumination in order to achieve insight or a state of well-being (giving light to the eyes may imply both).

16. *the righteous will witness their downfall*. The literal sense of the verb is "see," reflecting a recurrent biblical idiom that implies triumph over one's enemies because one survives to watch them come to a bad end.

17. *your palate*. The literal sense of the noun *nefesh* in context is either "throat" or "appetite." The conjunction with "delicacies" argues against any other sense of this multivalent term.

19. *Through words a slave will not accept reproof*. The implication, unfortunately, is that the only way to reprove a slave effectively is to beat him. Egyptian Wisdom texts often reflect this idea.

though he understand, there will be no answer. The second verset spells out why it is that verbal reproof of a slave will be unavailing: even if he understands the criticism leveled against him, he will choose not to respond, given his refractory slave's character.

21. *dismay*. The Hebrew *manon* appears nowhere else and is not readily linked with any verbal root that would make sense in context, which makes it look very much like a scribal error. Three different ancient versions render it in ways that point to a Hebrew text that showed *manod*. That noun, literally "shaking," elliptical for "shaking of the head," is a gesture performed when witnessing some sort of disaster.

23. *low, / . . . lowly*. In both instances, the Hebrew uses the same verbal stem, *sh-p-l* (*tash-pilenu, shefal-ruah*), in a pointed antithesis.

24. *he will hear the curse*. The curse, or imprecation, is probably a solemn curse publicly pronounced that will come down on the head of whosoever has evidence of the crime to offer in court yet remains silent.

25. *A man's fear becomes a snare*. The fearful man, in contradistinction to the man who trusts in the LORD, runs the danger of being tripped up by his own anxiety, imagining dangers where they are not and acting timorously where boldness is called for.

CHAPTER 30

[1]The words of Agur, son of Yaqeh, the oracle,
utterance of the man, to Ithiel, to Ithiel and Ukhal.
[2]For I am a brute among men,
and no human discernment have I.
[3]I have not learned wisdom,
nor the knowledge of the holy ones do I know.
[4]Who has gone up to the heavens and come down,
who has scooped up the wind in his palms?
Who has wrapped up the waters in a cloak.
Who has raised up all ends of the earth?
What is his name or the name of his son,
That you should know?
[5]Every saying of God is pure,
He is a shield to all who shelter in Him.
[6]Add nothing to His words,
lest He rebuke you and you be given the lie.
[7]Two things I have asked of You,
do not withhold them from me before I die.
[8]Falsehood and lying words keep far from me.
Privation and wealth do not give me.

Provide me my allotted bread.
[9]Lest I be sated and I renounce,
and I say, “Who is the LORD?”
And lest I lose all and I steal
and profane the name of my God.

[10]Do not denounce a slave to his master,
lest he revile you and you bear guilt.
[11]A generation that reviles its father
and its mother it does not bless.
[12]A generation that is pure in its eyes
though it has not been washed of its filth.
[13]A generation, how haughty its eyes,
and its eyelids, how arrogant.
[14]A generation whose teeth are swords,
and meat cleavers its jaws,
to devour the lowly from the earth
and the impoverished from humankind.

[15a]The leech has two daughters: “Give!” “Give!”
Three things are there that are not sated,
[15b]four that do not say, “Enough!”:
[16]Sheol and a blocked womb,
the earth unsated with water
and fire, which does not say “Enough!”

[17]An eye that mocks a father
and scorns submission to a mother,
the rooks of the river will gouge it,
and the eagle's young will devour it.
[18]Three things are there too wondrous for me,
and four that I cannot know:
[19]the eagle's way in the heavens,
the way of the snake on a rock,
the ship's way in the heart of the sea,
and the way of a man in a young woman.
[20]This is the way of an adulterous woman—
she eats and wipes her mouth
and says, "I did nothing wrong."
[21]For three things does the earth shudder,
and for four, it cannot bear it:
[22]for a slave who rules
and a scoundrel who is sated with bread,
[23]for a hateful woman in the marriage bed,
and a slavegirl who dispossesses her mistress.
[24]Four things are the smallest on earth,
yet they are the very wisest:
[25]the ants, a people not strong,
who ready their bread in the summer,
[26]the badgers, a people not mighty,
who make their home in the cleft,
[27]the locusts, who have no king,

and march out all in a row,
[28]the spider, who can be caught with hands,
and yet is in the palace of kings.
[29]Three things stride handsomely
and four things handsomely walk:
[30]the lion, mightiest of beasts,
who does not turn back from anything,
[31]the rooster and the he-goat,
and the king against whom none can stand.
[32]If you have been a scoundrel in arrogance,
and if you have schemed—put a hand on your mouth!
[33]For squeezed milk produces butter,
and a squeezed nose produces blood,
and squeezed patience produces a quarrel.

CHAPTER 30 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The words of Agur*. As this heading makes clear, the unit that follows (which probably ends with verse 9) is distinct from the rest of the Book of Proverbs. The two terms that follow, "oracle," *masaʾ*, and "utterance," *neʾum*, are usually reserved for vatic or prophetic speech, a kind of discourse uncharacteristic of Proverbs. What follows is a first-person, incipiently confessional statement unlike anything that has preceded in this book. The name Agur is otherwise unattested.

to Ithiel, to Ithiel and Ukhal. These names, and the repetition, are enigmatic. Many scholars revocalize them and change the word divisions of

the consonantal text to yield three verbs. Thus Fox proposes the following: "I am weary, God, / I am weary, and have wasted away." Although it is possible that this was the original reading in the Hebrew, there is no warrant for it in the ancient versions, and it remains conjectural.

3. *I have not learned wisdom*. This proclamation is a counterpoint to the prevailing emphasis of Proverbs. Agur, humbly aware of his limitations before a transcendent God (see the next verse), says in effect that any wisdom he might have pretended to attain amounts to nothing.

the knowledge of the holy ones. While an exegetical tradition going back to the Middle Ages understands *qedoshim* as "the Holy One," the Hebrew noun is plural. It is true that the most common name for God, *ʾelohim*, is plural in form though singular in meaning, but the evidence that *qedoshim* works in the same way is not altogether convincing. The most likely reference would be to angelic beings.

4. *Who has gone up to the heavens and come down*. Only someone who could negotiate this trajectory, patently impossible for mortal man, would be capable of achieving divine wisdom.

the waters . . . / the earth. These are the two principal elements of the biblical cosmogony.

What is his name or the name of his son. This formulation has obviously invited Christological readings that would not have been within the purview of the Hebrew poet, writing several centuries before the emergence of Christian doctrine. In the patrilineal society of ancient Israel, a man's full name was his given name and the name of his father (for example, Isaiah son of Amoz), as in our society it is the given name and the family name.

6. *Add nothing to His words*. This injunction is in keeping with Deuteronomy 4:2. The burden of this verse and the preceding one is a pious counterweight (perhaps for that reason appealing to the editor) to the idea of wisdom as a kind of craft with human instructors that predominates in the book: all wisdom comes from God through His revealed words, and no mere human should tamper with them.

7. *do not withhold them from me before I die*. This existential urgency is of a piece with Agur's distinctive confessional mode.

8. *Provide me my allotted bread*. This clause does not constitute a third thing but is simply the condition to which Agur aspires after his two wishes are

granted—freedom from false-hood, neither privation nor wealth—and then he will be content with a modest material sufficiency.

9. *Lest I be sated and I renounce*. Too many worldly goods may lead a person to feel he has no need for God. Compare Deuteronomy 32:15.

And lest I lose all and I steal / and profane the name of my God. These words sketch out a miniature narrative: first the person dismisses God as he revels in his abundant possessions; then he becomes impoverished and resorts to crime, thus profaning God's name.

10. *Do not denounce a slave to his master*. This proverb, in the form of a negative injunction, is unlike the words of Agur in form and substance and also could not belong to the "generation" sequence that begins in the next verse. An editor may have inserted it here because, like both lines of verse 9, it has a "lest" clause.

11. *A generation that reviles its father*. Here begins an independent unit of four verses (five lines of poetry) that deploys "a generation" as an emphatic anaphora at the beginning of every line but the last. The content is purely denunciatory, in a style reminiscent of the Prophets, and there is nothing here but negative characterizations of the generation in a series of subordinate clauses, with no actual grammatical predicate.

12. *filth*. The Hebrew *tsoʾah* implies excremental filth, though it is not really scatological.

14. *meat cleavers*. The relatively rare term *maʾakhelet* (also used in the story of the Binding of Isaac in Genesis 22) is not an ordinary knife but the kind of knife used to butcher meat.

15a. *The leech has two daughters*. This succinct aphorism is restricted to a single verset. One should probably assume, as most commentators have, that there is an implied human referent—a greedy person, or perhaps a greedy woman, because the Hebrew for "leech" is a feminine noun. Some interpreters see the two daughters as a reference to the two suckers of the leech.

15a–15b. *Three things . . . / four*. This little numerical progression is traditional in a certain line of biblical poetry. Compare Amos 1:3: "For three trespasses of Damascus / and for four I will not turn it back."

16. *Sheol and a blocked womb*. A parallelism between Sheol (the biblical netherworld) and the womb appears elsewhere in biblical poetry. H. N. Bialik, the great modern Hebrew poet, in a poem expressing revulsion after a sexual encounter with a woman, refers to her "hidden treasures that like Sheol cannot be sated." Here, Sheol is never sated with the dead, always wanting more, and the blocked womb, in an ironic antithesis, is never satisfied with its condition of barrenness, always hungry to produce life.

19. *heavens / . . . rock / . . . sea / . . . young woman*. There is a kind of wry wit in this sequence. The speaker imagines bird, reptile, and vessel passing through the remote regions of sky, earth, and sea that are beyond his ken. Then the fourth term invokes another place inaccessible to the imagination of the male speaker—a woman's sexual mystery, known only to her lover. The preposition "in" here before "a young woman" is meant to be understood literally—that is, in a physiological sense—as many interpreters through the ages have in fact understood it.

20. *This is the way of the adulterous woman*. This worldly observation interrupts the series of three-four sayings. It may have been inserted here because of "the way" and because of the sexual reference at the end of the preceding verse.

she eats and wipes her mouth. Elsewhere in Proverbs, an analogy between mouth and vagina is implied (for example, chapter 5).

23. *for a hateful woman in the marriage bed*. In the Hebrew, "in the marriage bed" is a passive verb, which means "is married/is sexually possessed." Fox's proposal to revocalize the verb *tibaʿel* as *tivʿal* and to understand it as "gain mastery" is unconvincing because *b-ʿ-l* does not appear in this sense as an intransitive verb elsewhere (despite the noun *baʿal*, which does mean "master" as well as "husband"). The transitive verb generally has the sexual sense indicated above. The hateful woman enjoying conjugal consummation is part of a series of figures whose fate is disturbingly not what it should be, after the slave who rules and the scoundrel who prospers, and before the slavegirl who dispossesses her mistress.

24. *smallest on earth, / yet they are the very wisest*. Though diminutive in size, they evince wisdom in how they dispose themselves. This proverb thus celebrates the value of wisdom over sheer size or strength and implies that people should learn from these small creatures.

27. *march out all in a row*. While it is questionable whether locusts assemble themselves in such neat formation, the idea is suggested by the perception of the mass of locusts as an invading army that sweeps away everything in its path, despite the smallness of its individual constituents.

28. *the spider*. There is some doubt about the identity of this creature. In any case, it is something small and easily caught, probably some sort of insect, that nevertheless is able to do what no ordinary human can: penetrate the palaces of kings.

the palace of kings. The Hebrew has a plural for "palace" and a singular for "kings."

31. *the rooster*. The Hebrew *zarzir* has been identified with several different creatures. Compounding the puzzle, it is attached here to the noun *motnayim*, "loins," and nobody has come up with a satisfactory explanation of this epithet, if that is what it is.

33. *For squeezed milk*. This entire verse has the ring of a folk saying. The term *myts*, "squeezed" (literally "squeezing [of]"), has been stretched in this saying to cover the churning of milk, though that is not its usual meaning.

patience. Some understand the Hebrew *ʾapayim* to mean "wrath." The singular form *ʾaf* means precisely that, but the doublative *ʾapayim* (when it does not mean face) appears only in the idiom *ʾerekh ʾapayim*, "patience" (literally, "long [or slow] in anger"). That idiom, in fact, occurs several times in Proverbs. If you push milk hard, it turns into something else, butter; if you push a nose hard, it spurts blood, something that does not usually come out of a nose; and if you push someone's patience hard, it turns into impatience, leading to a quarrel.

CHAPTER 31

[1]The words of Lemuel, king of Massa, with which
his mother reproved him:
[2]No, my son. Oh, no, son of my womb,
oh, no, son of my vows.
[3]Do not give your vigor to women,
nor your ways to destroyers of kings.
[4]Not for kings, Lemuel, not for kings,
the drinking of wine, nor for rulers, strong
drink.
[5]Lest he drink and forget inscribed law,
and reverse the judgment of all wretched men.
[6]Give strong drink to the perishing man
and wine to those deeply embittered.
[7]Let him drink and forget his privation,
and his misery let him no more recall.
[8]Open your mouth for the dumb,
for the judgment of all fleeting folk.
[9]Open your mouth, judge righteously,
grant justice to the poor and the wretched.

10 A worthy woman who can find?א
Her price is far beyond rubies.
11 The heart of her husband trusts her,ב
and no prize does he lack.
12 She repays him good and not evilג
all the days of her life.
13 She seeks out wool and flaxד
and performs with willing hands.
14 She is like merchant ships,ה
from afar she brings her bread.
15 She gets up while it is still nightו
and provides nourishment for her house
and a portion for her young women.
16 She sets her mind on a field and buys it,ז
from the fruit of her hands she plants a
vineyard.
17 She girds her loins in strengthח
and gives power to her arms.
18 She understands that her wares are good,ט
her lamp does not go out at night.
19 Her hands she reaches out to the distaff,י
and her palms hold on to the spindle.
20 Her palm she opens to the poor,כ
and her hands she extends to the wretched.
21 She does not fear for her household because of
snow,ל

for her whole household is clothed in scarlet.
22 Covers she makes for herself,מ
linen and purple, her garments.
23 Her husband is famed in the gatesנ
when he sits with the land's elders.
24 Fine cloth she makes, and she sells it,ס
a loincloth she gives to the trader.
25 Strength and grandeur are her garment,ע
and she laughs at the day to come.
26 She opens her mouth in wisdom,פ
teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
27 She looks after the ways of her house,צ
and does not eat the bread of idleness.
28 Her sons rise and call her happy,ק
her husband, he praises her:
29 "Many daughters have done worthy things,ר
but you—you surpass them all."
30 Grace is a lie and beauty mere breath—ש
a LORD-fearing woman, it is she who is
praised.
31 Give her from the fruit of her hands,ת
and let her deeds praise her in the gates.

CHAPTER 31 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Lemuel*. The name is unusual and nothing is known about him, not even whether he is a historical figure or a literary invention. In any case, this is still another unit of Wisdom exhortation, distinctive stylistically and rhetorically, that the anthologist has culled from an unknown source and decided to include. The advice here of a queen mother to her son has no precedent elsewhere in the book.

Massa. A kingdom in north Arabia.

with which his mother reproved him. The mother rather than the father in the role of the one who gives *musar*—reproof, admonitory moral exhortation—is unusual, though in the preceding body of proverbs there are frequent pairings of father and mother as the joint source of instruction. Her warning him not to consort with loose women—or, perhaps better, with gold diggers—is especially apt coming from a mother, as is the admonition to stay away from drink.

2. *son of my vows*. This locution suggests that she may have taken vows in a prayer for pregnancy, like Hannah in 1 Samuel 1.

3. *vigor*. The Hebrew *ḥayil* is not an explicitly sexual term; it can also suggest "wealth." In verse 10, it is used in a slightly different though related sense.

destroyers. The translation, following a Hebrew fragment found in the Cairo Geniza, reads *lemoḥot* instead of *lamḥot*, "to destroy."

4. *Not for kings*. A monarch has to exercise lucid judgment in determining state policy and administering justice, so he above all men should avoid drunkenness.

strong drink. The Hebrew *sheikhar* (from a root indicating intoxication) is not beer, as some interpreters claim, but in all likelihood is grappa. Judges 13:14 makes clear that it is an alcoholic beverage other than wine that is extracted from grapes.

6. *Give strong drink to the perishing man*. While the monarch should avoid alcohol, for the poor man it can provide a way of temporarily forgetting his wretchedness.

7. *misery*. The Hebrew *ʿamal* means both "toil" (its usual sense in Qohelet) and "misery" or "wretchedness" (its usual sense in Job).

8. *Open your mouth for the dumb*. It is the obligation of a king to speak out on behalf of those lacking the power, capacity, or boldness to speak.

all fleeting folk. The Hebrew *beney ḥalof* ("those who are to pass away") might mean ephemeral or mortal human beings, as it does in modern Hebrew, or it might designate a specific disadvantaged segment of the population teetering on the brink of death, like "the perishing man" in verse 6.

10. *A worthy woman who can find?* This concluding unit of the Book of Proverbs is an alphabetic acrostic (the Hebrew letter for each line appears in the margin). Thus, "a worthy woman" is *ʾeshet ḥayil*, the first word beginning with *ʾaleph*, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. *Ḥayil* means vigor, strength, worth, substance. It is a martial term transferred to civic life. Some have proposed that the term invites us to see this exemplary wife as a heroic figure, a kind of domestic warrior. It is noteworthy that the editors chose to conclude the book, in which instruction by male mentors to young men predominates, with a portrait of the ideal wife.

11. *prize*. The usual meaning of the Hebrew *shalal* is "booty." The choice of this term might be an argument for an activation of the martial connotation of *ḥayil* in the previous line.

12. *She repays him good and not evil*. The editor may well have seen in this line a pointed antithesis to the sundry evocations of shrewish wives and adulterous wives in the body of the book.

13. *willing hands*. This apt phrase is borrowed from Fox. The literal sense of the whole Hebrew clause is "[she] performs with will/desire/delight with her palms."

15. *a portion for her young women*. These would be the female servants or slaves of the household, which is clearly a substantial one.

16. *She sets her mind on a field and buys it*. The exemplary wife is active not only domestically, acquiring wool and flax, weaving and sewing, but also as a businesswoman.

from the fruit of her hands. As Fox notes, this means that she uses her earnings to buy property.

20. *Her palm . . . / her hands*. These terms form a neat chiasm with the preceding line: hands (a), palms (b), palm (b'), hands (a').

21. *her whole household is clothed in scarlet*. This is a hyperbole: warm wool garments would suffice to keep everyone in the household comfortable

through the winter, but the clothing she provides is regally sumptuous as well as warm.

23. *Her husband is famed in the gates*. Evidently, he is able to participate in the deliberations of justice while she is busy providing for the needs of their household. But the affluence that she has made possible also enables him to hold his head up among the elders.

24. *the trader*. The Hebrew says "Canaanite," a gentilic term that is also the designation of a profession because of the prominence of Canaanites—perhaps assimilated to Phoenicians—as traders.

25. *the day to come*. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "the latter day," which is to say, the future, something she need not fear because she has provided so well for her household.

29. *Many daughters have done worthy things*. At this penultimate point in the poem, the thematic term *ḥayil*, "worthy," recurs. It is also strategically effective that the husband, who has benefited from the wife's prodigious efforts, and until now has been in the background of the poem, trusting his wife and sitting with the elders in the gates, steps forward to address her in superlative praise. The force of the direct address is underscored by the emphatic use of the second-person singular feminine pronoun *ʾat* in the second verset: "but you—you surpass them all."

31. *Give her from the fruit of her hands*. Let her enjoy the benefits of the affluence she has amassed, and at the same time let her be praised for what she has achieved.

JOB

Introduction

The Book of Job is in several ways the most mysterious book of the Hebrew Bible. Formally, as a sustained debate in poetry, it resembles no other text in the canon. Theologically, as a radical challenge to the doctrine of reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked, it dissents from a consensus view of biblical writers—a dissent compounded by its equally radical rejection of the anthropocentric conception of creation that is expressed in biblical texts from Genesis onward. Its astounding poetry eclipses all other biblical poetry, working in the same formal system but in a style that is often distinct both lexically and imagistically from its biblical counterparts. Despite all these anomalous traits, it was quickly embraced by the framers of biblical tradition: extensive fragments of an Aramaic translation found in the caves at Qumran suggest that

by the second century B.C.E. the Dead Sea sectarians (and no doubt others) already regarded Job as part of the incipient canon of sacred texts.

As is the case with so many other biblical books, we know nothing about the author of Job—not his class background and certainly not any of his biographical details and not even with any certainty the time when he wrote. Some scholars, perplexed by the many peculiarities of the book, and especially by the linguistic ones, have speculated that it is a translation from Aramaic, or Edomite, or even Arabic. There is virtually no evidence for such ascriptions, and they seem especially untenable in light of the greatness of the Hebrew poetry of Job, rich as it is in strong rhythmic effects, virtuosic wordplay and sound-play—qualities that a translation would be very unlikely to exhibit.

The Book of Job belongs to the international movement of ancient Near Eastern Wisdom literature in its universalist perspective—there are no Israelite characters in the text, though all the speakers are monotheists, and there is no reference to covenantal history or to the nation of Israel—and it is equally linked with Wisdom literature in its investigation of the problem of theodicy. The troubling phenomenon of the suffering of the just is addressed in roughly

analogous texts both in Mesopotamia and Egypt, but any direct influence of these on the Job poet is questionable. Scholars have often assumed that there were Wisdom schools in ancient Israel and elsewhere in the region where disciples guided by teachers mastered, and in all likelihood memorized, instructional texts and imbibed the general principles for leading a just and prudent life. It is hard to imagine that the Job poet could have been part of any such institutional setting, given the radical nature of his views. One should probably think of him, then, as a writer working alone—a bold dissenting thinker and a poet of genius who produced a book of such power that Hebrew readers soon came to feel they couldn't do without it, however vehement its swerve from the views of the biblical majority.

No confident agreement among scholars on the date of the book has been reached. There are still a few stubborn adherents to the view that it was composed early in the First Temple period, although, as I shall explain, the linguistic evidence argues against that notion. The frame-story (chapters 1 and 2, concluded in chapter 42) is in all likelihood a folktale that had been in circulation for centuries, probably through oral transmission. In the original form of the story, with no debate involved, the three companions

would not have appeared: instead, Job would have been tested through the wager between God and the Adversary, undergone his sufferings, and in the end would have had his fortunes splendidly restored. A passing mention in Ezekiel 14:14 and 19 of Job, together with Noah and Daniel (not the Daniel of the biblical book), as one of three righteous men saved from disaster, reflects the presence of a Job figure—perhaps featuring in the same plot as that of the frame-story—in earlier folk-tradition. The author of the Book of Job, however, has either reworked an old text or formulated his own text on the basis of oral tradition, using archaizing language. There is an obvious effort in the frame-story to evoke the patriarchal age, though in a foreign land with non-Israelites, but the neat symmetries of formulaic numbers and the use of prose refrains resemble nothing in the Patriarchal narrative in Genesis. The style of the frame-story gives the general impression of early First Commonwealth Hebrew prose, but here and there a trait of Late Biblical Hebrew shows through—for example, the use of the verb *qabel* in 2:10 for "accept," a verb that occurs in late texts such as Esther and Chronicles but not in earlier biblical writing. Other late usages, such as a couple of the prepositions

that follow verbs there, have been detected by Avi Hurvitz, a historian of biblical Hebrew.

The poetry incorporates a noticeably higher proportion of terms borrowed from the Aramaic than does other biblical poetry. In some cases, even Aramaic grammatical suffixes are used, something that a translator from Aramaic would probably have avoided but that would have come naturally to a writer who was hearing a good deal of Aramaic all around him and probably actively spoke it himself together with Hebrew. (To cite one recurrent example: the Aramaic *milin*, "words," which would replace early biblical *devarim* in later Hebrew, appears thirty-four times in Job out of a total of thirty-eight biblical occurrences, and the Aramaic plural ending *-in*, instead of the Hebrew *-im*, is used several times.) All this suggests a historical moment when Aramaic was in the process of beginning to replace Hebrew as the vernacular of the Judahite population. That would place the Job poet in the fifth century or perhaps as early as the later sixth century B.C.E., though it is impossible to be more precise, and one cannot exclude an early fourth-century setting.

The overall structure of the book is fairly clear, but it is somewhat obscured by certain disjunctures between the frame-story and the poem, and by two

major interpolations and some gaps in the received text. There is a palpable discrepancy between the simple folktale world of the frame-story and the poetic heart of the book. God's quick acquiescence in the Adversary's perverse proposal is hard to justify in terms of any serious monotheistic theology, and when the LORD speaks from the whirlwind at the end, He makes no reference whatever either to the wager with the Adversary or to any celestial meeting of "the sons of God," a notion of a council of the gods that ultimately goes back to Canaanite mythology. The old folktale, then, about the suffering of the righteous Job is merely a pretext, a narrative excuse, and a pre-text, a way of introducing the text proper, and what happens in it provides little help for thinking through the problem of theodicy. The two major interpolations are the Hymn to Wisdom (chapter 28), a fine poem in its own right but one that expresses a pious view of wisdom as fear of the LORD that could scarcely be that of the Job poet, and the Elihu speeches (chapters 32–37), which could not have been part of the original book both because Elihu is never mentioned in the frame-story, either at the beginning or at the end, and because the bombastic, repetitious, and highly stereotypical poetry he speaks is vastly inferior to anything written by the Job poet.

After the opening two chapters of the frame-story, the core of the book is introduced by Job's harrowing death-wish poem (chapter 3), to which God will offer a direct rejoinder at the beginning of the speech from the whirlwind (see the commentary on chapter 38). There are then three rounds of debate between Job and his three reprovers, each of the three speaking in turn and he replying to each. The third round of the debate was somehow damaged in scribal transmission. Bildad is given only a truncated speech, and the third contribution of Zophar to the debate seems to have disappeared entirely. In any case, after these three rounds, Job concludes the discussion with a lengthy profession of innocence in which he also recalls his glory days before he was overwhelmed by catastrophe (chapters 27 and 29–31, with his speech interrupted by the Hymn to Wisdom of chapter 28). At this point, in the original text, the LORD would have spoken out from the whirlwind, but a lapse in judgment by an ancient editor postponed that brilliant consummation for six chapters in which the tedious Elihu is allowed to hold forth.

The Book of Job is, of course, a theological argument, but it is a theological argument conducted in poetry, and careful attention to the role that poetry plays in the argument may put what is said in a

somewhat different light from the one in which it is generally viewed. The debate between Job and his three adversarial friends and then God's climactic speech to Job exhibit three purposefully deployed levels of poetry. The bottom level is manifested in the language of reproof of the three companions. In keeping with the conventional moral views that they complacently defend, the poetry they speak abounds in familiar formulations closely analogous to what one encounters in many passages in Psalms and Proverbs. What this means is that much of their poetry verges on cliché. The Job poet, however, is too subtle an artist merely to assign bad verse to them, which would have the effect of setting them up too crudely as straw men in the debate. Thus, there are moments when their poetry catches fire, conveying to us a sense that even the spokesmen for wrongheaded ideas may exercise a certain power of vision. One might also surmise that this writer was too good a poet to be able to resist the temptation of creating for the three companions some lines and even whole passages of fine poetry.

In any case, the stubborn authenticity of Job's perception of moral reality is firmly manifested in the power of the poetry he speaks, which clearly transcends the poetry of his reprovers. The death-wish poem that initiates his discourse is a brilliantly apt

prelude to all that follows. Biblical poetry in general works through a system of intensifications, heightening or focusing or concretizing the utterance of the first verset of a line in the approximate semantic parallelism of the second verset (and in triadic lines, this process of intensification often moves on from the second verset to the third). When Job takes up his complaint in poetry in chapter 3, he exploits this inherent dynamic of biblical verse to burrow progressively deeper into the aching core of his suffering. Anguish has rarely been given more powerful expression. All this begins in the very first line he speaks, a pounding rhythm in the initial verset, *yoʾvad yom ʾiwaled bo*, "Annul the day that I was born," followed by the second verset, "and the night that said, 'A man is conceived.'" In the pattern of intensification evident here, Job, longing for relief from pain through nonexistence, wants to wipe out not just the event of his birth, in the first verset, but going back nine months and moving from day to night, his very conception, evoked in the second verset. The mention of night then triggers a long chain of images of night and darkness, each deepening the effect of the ones that precede it.

It should be said that almost all biblical poetry, because it is formally based in part on semantic

parallelism, is driven to search for synonyms. No other biblical poet, however, exhibits the virtuosity in the command of rich synonymity that is displayed by the Job poet. He compounds the primary term *hoshekh*, "darkness," with *tsalmawet*, "death's shadow," *ʿananah*, "cloud-mass," the unique *kimrirey yom*, "day-gloom" (or, perhaps, "eclipse"), *ʾofel*, "murk," and a series of verbs that indicate a befouling, obscuring, or shutting down of light. The extraordinary breadth of the Job poet's vocabulary is one of the traits that has led some scholars to imagine a foreign source for the poem, but this is a rather silly inference. There are poets in many literary traditions whose imagination and relation to language lead them to stretch the lexical limits of their medium—one might think of Shakespeare, Mallarmé, and Wallace Stevens—and the writer who fashioned the poetry of Job was clearly such a poet. This is another reason for his being drawn to tap Aramaic, as a resource that enables him to extend the reach of his vocabulary (the just cited *kimrirey* is the first instance in the poem of an Aramaic root Hebraized in order to enrich the poet's lexicon).

The English reader should be warned that this dazzling lexical abundance has created problems first for the ancient scribes and then for all who have

attempted to translate this book. Scribes in general are uneasy about transcribing words with which they are unfamiliar, and as a result they tend to substitute terms they know or otherwise to introduce some graphic stutter in copying the text. This is at least one principal reason that the text of Job has come down to us at many points quite garbled, making interpretation a matter of guesswork and repeatedly inviting emendation. But when a whole line or sequence of lines of poetry has been completely mangled in transmission, efforts to recover the original formulation through emendation are bound to be highly conjectural. The present translation therefore for the most part limits itself to relatively minor emendations of the received text—changes of single letters, reversals of consonants, alterations of the vowel-points that indicate the vocalization of words—and these changes are undertaken with a somewhat greater measure of confidence when they are warranted by a variant Hebrew manuscript or by one of the ancient translations. Moreover, even when the integrity of the text appears not to have been compromised, the precise meaning of a rare term can remain in doubt, as is the case for *kimrirey* in Job's initial poem. In these instances, a struggling translator can rely only on context, common sense, an awareness

of analogous forms and usages in biblical Hebrew and sometimes in rabbinic Hebrew, and the background of other Semitic languages, with Aramaic obviously being by far the most relevant.

The other chief resource deployed in the poetry that Job speaks is its extraordinary metaphoric inventiveness. This strength is already observable in the death-wish poem in the exquisite expression of the desire for unending darkness, "let it [the night of Job's conception] not see the eyelids of dawn" (3:9). In a procedure that is by no means typical for biblical poetry, the Job poet ranges far and wide through unexpected semantic fields for the sources of his similes and metaphors, drawing on weaving, agronomy, labor practices, meteorology, the sundry crafts, the preparation of foods. Here, for example, is a representation of the formation of the embryo from shapeless plasma in the womb: "Why, You poured me out like milk / and like cheese You curdled me" (10:10). The chiastic pattern of this line, a b b' a', is one of which this poet is especially fond. The fecundity of metaphor, moreover, is allied with a keenly observant interest in the processes of nature that is also rather unusual for a biblical poet. If Job compares the way his friends have betrayed him to the drying up in summer of a wadi, a desert gulch that

may be filled with water during the rainy season (6:15), he then proceeds for five lines to follow the seasonal cycle, the melting of snow and ice, the caravans crossing the desert desperately looking for sources of water. It seems almost as if the vehicle of the metaphor—that is, the natural panorama—interested the poet as much as the sense of betrayal he has Job express through the metaphor.

Still another source of metaphor tapped by the Job poet, beyond quotidian reality and nature, is mythology. The mythological register, too, is invoked in Job's first poem, when the amplitude of the curse he brings down on the night he was conceived is extended through these words: "Let the day-cursers hex it, / those ready to rouse Leviathan" (3:8). Leviathan, who will be mentioned quite a few times in the course of the poem, sometimes under other names, before he makes his full-scale appearance at the climax of the Voice from the Whirlwind, is the fearsome sea monster of Canaanite mythology (in some versions, he has seven heads) who had to be subdued by the weather god whose realm is the dry land. The day-cursers, we may infer, about whom little is known, are also mythological figures, able to exert a magical power through language—to this Job himself in this opening poem aspires—even over the dreaded beast of

the sea, enemy of the ordered realm of creation. The poetry of Job, then, at least in its metaphors, reaches deep into the chaotic sea, up to the stars where celestial beings dwell, and down into the kingdom of death, that shadowy underworld bordered by a Current that can be crossed only in one direction. In this poem where intensification is the key to so much, mythology serves as the ultimate intensifier.

The third—and, ultimately, decisive—level of poetry in the book is manifested when the LORD addresses Job out of the whirlwind. Here, too, the Job poet's keen interest in nature is evident, but in an altogether spectacular way that, one might say, trumps Job in the game of vision. The poet, having given Job such vividly powerful language for the articulation of his outrage and his anguish, now fashions still greater poetry for God. The wide-ranging panorama of creation in the Voice from the Whirlwind shows a sublimity of expression, a plasticity of description, an ability to evoke the complex and dynamic interplay of beauty and violence in the natural world, and even an originality of metaphoric inventiveness that surpasses all the poetry, great as it is, that Job has spoken. Many readers over the centuries have felt that God's speech to Job is no real answer to the problem of undeserved suffering, and some have complained that it amounts

to a kind of cosmic bullying of puny man by an overpowering deity. One must concede that it is not exactly an answer to the problem because for those who believe that life should not be arbitrary there can be no real answer concerning the good person who loses a child (not to speak of ten children) or the blameless dear one who dies in an accident or is stricken with a terrible wasting disease. But God's thundering challenge to Job is not bullying. Rather, it rousingly introduces a comprehensive overview of the nature of reality that exposes the limits of Job's human perspective, anchored as it is in the restricted compass of human knowledge and the inevitable egoism of suffering. The vehicle of that overview is an order of poetry created to match the grandeur—or perhaps the omniscience—of God. The visionary experience that this poetry enables for Job is of a vast creation shot through with unfathomable paradoxes, such as the conjoining of the nurturing instinct with cruelty, where in place of the sufferer's longing for absolute darkness the morning stars sing together and there is a rhythmic interplay between light and darkness.

Poetry of such virtuosity and power, dependent as it must be on the expressive force of the original words and their ordering, is bound to pale in translation. The English version offered here is an attempt—which,

inescapably, can be no more than intermittently successful—to convey something of the concreteness, the rhythmic compactness, the metaphoric richness, and the lexical vividness of the Hebrew. Perhaps one can draw a degree of encouragement from the fact that the greatness of the Book of Job has somehow managed to shine through in a long line of variously imperfect translations. My hope is that the present translation might manage to let that poetic light show in the English at least a little more than it has in earlier renderings.

CHAPTER 1

[1]A man there was in the land of Uz—Job, his name. And the man was blameless and upright and feared God and shunned evil. [2], And seven sons were born to him, and three daughters. [3]And his flocks came to seven thousand sheep and three thousand camels and five hundred yokes of cattle and five hundred she-asses and a great abundance of slaves. And that man was greater than all the Easterners. [4]And his sons would go and hold a feast, in each one's house on his set day, and they would call to their sisters to eat and drink with them. [5]And it happened when the days of the feast came round, that Job would send and consecrate them and rise early in the morning and offer up burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job thought, Perhaps my sons have offended and cursed God in their hearts. Thus would Job do at all times.

[6]And one day, the sons of God came to stand in attendance before the LORD, and the Adversary, too, came among them. [7]And the LORD said to the Adversary, "From where do you come?" And the

Adversary answered the LORD and said, “From roaming the earth and walking about in it.” [8]And the LORD said to the Adversary, “Have you paid heed to My servant Job, for there is none like him on earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and shuns evil?” [9]And the Adversary answered the LORD and said, “Does Job fear God for nothing? [10]Have You not hedged him about and his household and all that he has all around? The work of his hands You have blessed, and his flocks have spread over the land. [11]And yet, reach out Your hand, pray, and strike all he has. Will he not curse You to Your face?” [12]And the LORD said to the Adversary, “Look, all that he has is in your hands. Only against him do not reach out your hand.” And the Adversary went out from before the LORD’s presence.

[13]And one day, his sons and his daughters were eating and drinking wine in the house of their brother, the firstborn. [14]And a messenger came to Job and said, “The cattle were plowing and the she-asses grazing by them, [15]and Sabeans fell upon them and took them, and the lads they struck down by the edge of the sword, and I alone escaped to tell you.” [16]This one was still speaking when another came and said, “God’s fire fell from the heavens and burned among the sheep and the lads and consumed them, and I alone escaped to

tell you.” [17]This one was still speaking when another
came and said, “Chaldaeans set out in three bands and
pounced upon the camels and took them, and the lads
they struck down by the edge of the sword.” [18]This one
was still speaking when another came and said, “Your
sons and your daughters were eating and drinking wine
in the house of their brother, the firstborn. [19]And, look,
a great wind came from beyond the wilderness and
struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the
young people, and they died. And I alone escaped to
tell you.” [20]And Job rose and tore his garment and
shaved his head and fell to the earth and bowed down.
[21]And he said,

> “Naked I came out from my mother’s womb,
> and naked shall I return there.
> The LORD has given and the LORD has taken.
> May the LORD’s name be blessed.”

[22]With all this, Job did not offend, nor did he put
blame on God.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *A man there was in the land of Uz*. These initial words signal the fable-like character of the frame-story. The opening formula, "A man there was," *ʾish haya*, resembles the first words of Nathan's parable of the poor man's ewe in 2 Samuel 12, "Two men there were in a single town," *shney ʾanashim hayu beʿir aḥat*. The more classical formula for starting a story in Hebrew narrative is "there was a man," *wayehi ʾish*, the order of verb and subject reversed and the converted imperfect form of the verb used.

Uz. Many scholars have located this land in Edom, across the Jordan from the land of Israel. But it is really a never-never land somewhere to the east, as befits the fable and the universalizing thrust of the whole book. In this regard, the fact that *ʿuts* in Hebrew means "counsel" or "advice" invites one to construe this as the Land of Counsel.

2. *seven sons . . . three daughters*. These make a sum of ten, and all the numbers that follow yield multiples of ten. If the story is meant to evoke the pastoral world of the Patriarchs, it is clearly a stylized rendering of that world, as these formulaic numbers suggest and as the studied use of refrainlike repetitions throughout the tale equally suggests.

3. *flocks*. The Hebrew *miqneh*, deriving from a root that means "to acquire," can mean either flocks or possessions. In a pastoral society, possessions would be chiefly flocks, and what follows is, except for the reference to slaves, a catalogue of livestock. The use in verse 10 of the verb "spread" (more literally, "burst forth") in conjunction with *miqneh* also argues for the sense of "flocks."

5. *offer up burnt offerings*. In the pastoral, prenational, and non-Israelite setting of the story, there is neither temple nor priesthood, and Job, the pious monotheist, performs his own sacrifices.

cursed God. The Hebrew says, euphemistically, "blessed God." Many think this is a scribal substitution to avoid a blasphemous phrase, though it is also possible that the euphemism was actually used in speech. The same usage occurs in the Adversary's words in verse 11.

6. *the sons of God*. This celestial entourage is a literary vestige of the pre-monotheistic notion of a council of the gods and is reflected in several of the canonical psalms (perhaps, most notably, in Psalm 82).

the Adversary. The Hebrew is *hasatan*, and it invariably uses the definite article because the designation indicates a function, not a proper name. The

word *satan* is a person, thing, or set of circumstances that constitutes an obstacle or frustrates one's purposes. Only toward the very end of the biblical period would the term begin to drop the definite article and refer to a demonic figure. Marvin Pope imagines *hasatan* here as a kind of intelligence agent working for God, but the dialogue suggests rather an element of jealousy (when God lavishes praise on Job) and cynical mean-spiritedness.

8. *blameless . . . upright . . . who fears God and shuns evil*. The near verbatim repetition by God of the narrator's characterization of Job confirms its perfect authority.

11. *reach out Your hand, pray, and strike all he has*. The Adversary carefully formulates this outrageous request to strip Job of possessions and offspring with the polite particle of entreaty "pray," *naʾ*.

12. *in your hands*. The Hebrew uses the singular and pointedly plays with "reach out Your hand" both before and after this phrase. It is therefore unwise to render the phrase as "in your trust" or "in your power," as English translators since 1611 have done.

14–18. The tale of disasters, hewing to the general procedure of extensive repetition deployed here, alternates between attacks by marauders (verses 15 and 17) and natural catastrophes (verses 16 and 18). It also follows a common biblical pattern of three plus one—three disasters that destroy Job's property and a fourth that kills his children.

15. *the lads*. That is, the servants.

16. *God's fire*. This is probably a reference to lightning. "God," *ʾelohim*, might be merely an intensifier—that is, "fearsome fire."

19. *the young people*. The Hebrew *neʿarim* is the same word used for "lads" or servants, but here it refers to Job's sons and daughters and hence a gender-inclusive translation is required.

And I alone escaped to tell you. This thrice-repeated refrain is aptly picked up by Melville in the haunting conclusion of *Moby-Dick*, when everything on the *Pequod* is wiped out, only Ishmael surviving.

20. *shaved his head*. This (like the rending of the garment) is a general sign of mourning, though prohibited in Israel and thus a neat way of reminding the audience that Job is not an Israelite.

21. *Naked I came out . . . / naked shall I return there*. Job's acceptance of his dire fate (which gave rise to the notion of the "patient Job") is cast as a solemn two-line poem. This first line exhibits a link of narrative development between the two versets: first birth, then death. The reference of "there" has a loose associative logic: the grave is not the womb, but it is part of mother earth from which the first man was made. There is something "existential" in this brief poetic statement: whatever a man acquires in life—even in the children he begets—is supernumerary to the fundamental condition of nakedness in which he enters and leaves life.

May the LORD's name be blessed. Here Job makes exactly the opposite declaration to the one the Adversary expected: he says "blessed" in its actual meaning, not as an antithetical euphemism.

CHAPTER 2

[1]And one day, the sons of God came to stand in attendance before the LORD, and the Adversary, too, came among them to stand in attendance before the LORD. [2]And the LORD said to the Adversary, “From whence do you come?” And the Adversary answered the LORD and said, “From roaming the earth and walking about in it.” [3]And the LORD said to the Adversary, “Have you paid heed to My servant Job, for there is none like him on earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and shuns evil and still clings to his innocence, and you incited Me against him to destroy him for nothing.” [4]And the Adversary answered the LORD and said, “Skin for skin! A man will give all he has for his own life. [5]Yet, reach out, pray, Your hand and strike his bone and his flesh. Will he not curse You to Your face?” [6]And the LORD said to the Adversary, “Here he is in your hands. Only preserve his life.” [7]And the Adversary went out from before the LORD’s presence. And he struck Job with a grievous burning rash from the soles of his feet to the

crown of his head. [8]And he took a potsherd to scrape himself with, and he was sitting among the ashes. [9]And his wife said to him, “Do you still cling to your innocence? Curse God and die.” [10]And he said to her, “You speak as one of the base women would speak. Shall we accept good from God, too, and evil we shall not accept?” With all this, Job did not offend with his lips.

[11]And Job’s three companions heard of all this harm that had come upon him, and they came, each from his place—Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, and they agreed to meet to grieve with him and to comfort him. [12]And they lifted up their eyes from afar and did not recognize him, and they lifted up their voices and wept, and each tore his garment, and they tossed dust on their heads toward the heavens. [13]And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spoke a word to him, for they saw that the pain was very great.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1–3. Still following the stylized folktale narrative procedure of elaborate verbatim repetition, the story now repeats all the language of 1:6–8, with only

a couple of insignificant variations: here the Adversary is said "to stand in attendance," which was merely implied in 1:6; and here God asks him "From whence" (*ʾey mizeh*) rather than "From where" (*meʾayin*). The first new material appears in God's accusatory words to the Adversary at the end of verse 3: "still clings to his innocence, and you incited Me against him to destroy him for nothing."

4. *Skin for skin!* In this second dialogue between God and the Adversary, the pace picks up. Instead of offering a detailed account of Job's circumstances (1:10–11), the Adversary responds brusquely and pithily. Almost all interpreters agree that "Skin for skin" is some sort of proverb, but there is no clear consensus on its meaning. In light of the second half of the verse, which is manifestly an explanation of these three words, and in light of the Adversary's next line of attack, which is to strike Job with an acutely painful skin disease, a plausible interpretation would be the following: what is most precious to a man is his own physical being; in the end, he is prepared to sacrifice everything, even the "skin" (or lives) of his own dear ones, but hurt him badly in his own flesh and bones, and he will abandon all his principles of integrity.

6. *Here he is in your hands*. God's acquiescence in this perverse experiment is a puzzle for ethical monotheism, and perhaps one must say that the origins of the folktale are from a time when there was no real ethical monotheism. In any case, this wager or test is never addressed in the rest of the book.

7. *And the Adversary went out . . . And he struck Job*. In keeping with the acceleration of narrative tempo, the Adversary immediately proceeds from his exchange with God to his mischief, with no intervening narrative material as in 1:13–14.

burning rash. The Hebrew *sheḥin* derives from a root that means "hot" and is the same term used in Exodus for the fifth plague. Attempts at a precise medical diagnosis are pointless: the essential idea is that a burning rash covering the entire body from the soles of the feet to the head would be agonizing (and also disfiguring, as the initial failure of the three friends to recognize Job suggests).

9. *Do you still cling to your innocence? Curse God and die*. Again, the euphemism of "bless" for "curse" appears. Job's wife assumes either that cursing God will immediately lead to Job's death, which might be just as well,

or that, given his ghastly state, he will soon die anyway, so that he might as well curse the deity who inflicted these horrors on him. In either case, her use of the repeated phrase "still cling to your innocence" (the Hebrew equally suggests "blamelessness" or "integrity") is sarcastic: what is the point of your innocence, she says, after all that has happened? In the body of the poem, Job will still cling to his innocence, in the very act of accusing God, as God recognizes at the end of the book.

10. *accept*. The Hebrew verb *qabel* is Late Biblical, so this may be a point where the writer's own period leaked through the archaizing style he adopted for the frame-story. A few others, including the prepositions that follow a couple of the verbs, have been identified by Avi Hurvitz, a historian of biblical Hebrew.

11. *Job's three companions*. The precise location of their respective homelands has been debated by scholars, though it is clear that their places of origin reflect a spread of a few hundred miles to the east of the Jordan. One of the companions, Eliphaz, has a name associated with the descendants of Esau, or Edom. Bildad is probably a pagan name ("son of Adad"). In any case, the geographical background suggests that Job, "greater than all the Easterners," (1:3) was a man who had international connections.

to grieve with him. The literal sense of the Hebrew verb is to nod the head, as a sign of mourning or sympathy.

12. *they lifted up their eyes . . . they lifted up their voices*. In the elegant repetition, one act leads to the other, from seeing Job's disfigurement to an immediate physical response of grief.

tossed dust on their heads toward the heavens. This, like the rending of the garments, is a gesture of mourning. The Septuagint lacks "toward the heavens," perhaps because the Greek translators considered it superfluous.

13. *none spoke a word to him, for they saw that the pain was very great*. In the frame-story, the three companions seem deeply sympathetic with Job and respectful of his suffering. This argues for a discrepancy between the frame-story and the poem, where they are accusatory and even contemptuous of him. One might imagine that after the seven days of mourning, they came to the conclusion that he must have been a scoundrel to deserve all this suffering, but that seems forced.

CHAPTER 3

[1]Afterward, Job opened his mouth and cursed his
day. [2]And Job spoke up and he said:
[3]Annul the day that I was born
and the night that said, “A man is conceived.”
[4]That day, let it be darkness.
Let God above not seek it out,
nor brightness shine upon it.
[5]Let darkness, death’s shadow, foul it,
let a cloud-mass rest upon it,
let day-gloom dismay it.
[6]That night, let murk overtake it.
Let it not join in the days of the year,
let it not enter the number of months.
[7]Oh, let that night be barren,
let it have no song of joy.
[8]Let the day-cursers hex it,
those ready to rouse Leviathan.
[9]Let its twilight stars go dark.
Let it hope for day in vain,
and let it not see the eyelids of dawn.

[10]For it did not shut the belly's doors
to hide wretchedness from my eyes.
[11]Why did I not die from the womb,
from the belly come out, breathe my last?
[12]Why did knees welcome me,
and why breasts, that I should suck?
[13]For now I would lie and be still,
would sleep and know repose
[14]with kings and the councillors of earth,
who build ruins for themselves,
[15]or with princes, possessors of gold,
who fill their houses with silver.
[16]Or like a buried stillborn I'd be,
like babes who never saw light.
[17]There the wicked cease their troubling,
and there the weary repose.
[18]All together the prisoners are tranquil,
they hear not the taskmaster's voice.
[19]The small and the great are there,
and the slave is free of his master.
[20]Why give light to the wretched
and life to the deeply embittered,
[21]who wait for death in vain,
dig for it more than for treasure,
[22]who rejoice at the tomb,
are glad when they find the grave?

[23]—To a man whose way is hidden,
and God has hedged him about.
[24]For before my bread my moaning comes,
and my roar pours out like water.
[25]For I feared a thing—it befell me,
what I dreaded came upon me.
[26]I was not quiet, I was not still,
I had no repose, and trouble came.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *Annul the day that I was born*. The Job poet displays a virtuosity that transcends all other biblical poetry. Thus, the very first words of the poem begin with a strong accent for emphasis of feeling and an emphatic alliteration: *yoʾvad yom ʾiwaled bo*. The initial verb (intransitive in the Hebrew) means to die or to be lost, and therefore "perish," used by the King James Version and several modern translations, is semantically accurate but in regard to diction is a bit fussy and lacks the directness of the Hebrew. A couple of modern translators have opted for "damn," but *yoʾvad* neither is an expletive nor does it imply damnation, which is not a biblical idea. The force of what follows is that Job would like to expunge the day of his birth from the calendar, which is a contextual justification for "annul." This choice sacrifices the initial stress but does yield an iambic cadence.

and the night that said, "A man is conceived." Day and night are a formulaic word pair in biblical poetic parallelism. But in a spectacular deployment of the pattern of intensification that generally characterizes the relationship between the first and second verset in a line of biblical poetry, Job asks not only that the day of his birth be expunged but, nine months earlier, the very act of conception that led to the birth. The phrase "the night that said" might also be construed as a third-person singular with unspecified

subject standing in for a passive: “the night when it was said.” From this point on, the poet proceeds to work over first the day, then the night, summing up language to expunge each in turn.

5. *darkness . . . / cloud-mass . . . / day-gloom*. In calling up different terms for the blocking out of light, the poet reflects a richness of lexical resources that makes him stand out among biblical poets. The most unusual term here is *kimrirey yom*, “day-gloom,” probably derived from an Aramaic root that means “darkness,” and perhaps referring to an eclipse, though that is not certain. The oddness of the English rendering here is meant to intimate the strangeness of the word in the Hebrew.

7. *let that night be barren, / let it have no song of joy*. The line moves in a metonymic slide from the wished-for barrenness of Job’s mother to the night of conception as barren and joyless.

8. *the day-cursers . . . / those ready to rouse Leviathan*. As will happen again and again in the poem, the poet switches into a mythological register. Leviathan is the fearsome primordial sea-monster subdued by the god of order in Canaanite mythology. For this reason, some scholars prefer to read “Yamm-cursers” for “day-cursers,” assuming the Hebrew *yam* instead of *yom*. In either case, the cursers are mythological or magical agents.

9. *Let its twilight stars go dark*. In this triadic line, we have a temporal sequence of (a) light fading in the evening, (b) a night of hoping for a daybreak that never comes, (c) a dawn that does not come.

the eyelids of dawn. This exquisite and surprising image—another hallmark of this poet’s originality—simultaneously indicates the first crack of light on the eastern horizon and the movement of the awakening person’s eyes taking in the first light of day. The metaphor will recur late in the poem in the most unanticipated context.

10. *the belly’s doors*. The Hebrew says “my belly,” an ellipsis for “my mother’s belly.”

wretchedness. This recurrent term in Job, *ʿamal*, is here put forth as a virtual synonym for “life” or “the world.” Job’s anguish could scarcely be expressed more compactly.

12. *knees welcome me*. The simplest explanation is a reference to the mother’s knees, parted as the newborn emerges.

14. *build ruins for themselves*. In this brilliantly compact formulation of the futility of all human endeavor, kings build great edifices for themselves that are destined to turn to ruins. One thinks of Shelley's "Ozymandias."

16. *buried stillborn*. Many render *tamun* as "hidden," which is what the word means in earlier biblical Hebrew, but the term in this Late Biblical text, as the context makes clear, has traveled toward the sense of "buried" that it has in rabbinic Hebrew.

stillborn . . . / babes who never saw light. Here the poem refers directly back to the idea of dying at birth in verse 11.

17. *There the wicked*. The catalogue of human types (wicked, weary, prisoners, slaves, taskmaster) reveals a vision of life that involves hierarchies of domination and acts of exploitation.

20. *Why give light*. The Hebrew says, "Why should he give light," but it is not clearly the case, as many assume, that the pronoun refers to God. As elsewhere, the unspecified third-person singular may function as a passive, and thus the translation keeps the ambiguity of grammatical reference.

deeply embittered. The Hebrew *nefesh* ("life-breath," "essential self ") is an intensifier, hence "deeply."

21. *treasure*. The Hebrew *matmon* ("something buried") derives from the same root as "buried" in verse 16.

22. *the tomb*. The Masoretic Text reads *gil*, "joy." This translation adopts a commonly proposed emendation, *gal*, literally, "grave mound." A scribe may have been led into the error by the proximity of a verb of rejoicing.

23. *To a man*. This phrase appears to refer back to the verb at the beginning of verse 20, "Why give . . . ?"

hedged him about. In the Adversary's words in 1:10, this very verb referred to God's protection of Job. Here, it is pointedly turned around to mean that God has blocked Job on every side.

26. *not quiet . . . not still, / . . . no repose . . . trouble came*. The poem ends climactically with a string of terms expressing constant perturbation, the very opposite of the condition of peaceful nonexistence for which Job longs.

CHAPTER 4

[1]And Eliphaz the Temanite spoke out and he said:
[2] If speech were tried against you, could you stand it?
Yet who can hold back words?
[3] Look, you reproved many,
and slack hands you strengthened.
[4]The stumbler your words lifted up,
and bended knees you bolstered.
[5]But now it comes to you and you cannot stand it,
it reaches you and you are dismayed.
[6] Is not your reverence your safety,
your hope—your blameless ways?
[7] Recall, pray: what innocent man has died,
and where were the upright demolished?
[8] As I have seen, those who plow mischief,
those who plant wretchedness, reap it.
[9]Through Godov's breath they die,
before his nostrils' breathing they vanish.
[10] The lion's roar, the maned beast's sound—
and the young lions' teeth are smashed.

[11]The king of beasts dies with no prey,
the whelps of the lion are scattered.
[12] And to me came a word in secret,
and my ear caught a tag end of it,
[13]in musings from nighttime's visions
when slumber falls upon men.
[14]Fear called to me, and trembling,
and all my limbs it gripped with fear.
[15]And a spirit passed over my face,
made the hair on my flesh stand on end.
[16] It halted, its look unfamiliar,
an image before my eyes,
stillness, and a sound did I hear:
[17] Can a mortal be cleared before God,
can a man be made pure by his Maker?
[18] Why, His servants He does not trust,
His agents He charges with blame.
[19] All the more so, the clay-house dwellers,
whose foundation is in the dust,
who are crushed more quickly than moths.
[20] From morning to eve they are shattered,
unawares they are lost forever.
[21]Should their life thread be broken within them,
they die, and without any wisdom.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *If speech were tried against you*. Eliphaz's opening words register an awareness that Job is likely to resist all reproof.

3. *Look, you reproved many.* The opening rhetorical strategy is to pay Job a kind of back-handed compliment: he was known as a man who gave encouragement to the failing and also did not hesitate to rebuke those guilty of misdeeds. He should, then, be prepared to accept justified reproof himself, but Eliphaz fears this is not the case ("But now it comes to you and you cannot stand it," verse 5).

6. *Is not your reverence your safety.* The whole line is cast in an elegant chiasm: reverence (a), safety (b), hope (b'), blameless ways (a'). Job should have nothing to fear from warranted rebuke because his God-fearing life and his integrity have always given him security and hope. If he reaffirms these virtues, in the light of his friends' reproof, he will still be all right, despite all that has befallen him.

7. *Recall.* This verb is symptomatic of Eliphaz's argument. The knowledge that the innocent are never overtaken by disaster is something we have always known, and need only recall. If Job is plunged in a sea of disasters, there must be good reason for it.

8. *plow . . . / plant . . . reap*. This conventional agricultural metaphor marks a strict line of causality in the moral realm: just as the planted seed will grow according to its kind, evil acts will produce a harvest of calamity for their perpetrators.

10. *The lion's roar.* The lexical wealth of the Job poet defies translation. There are five different biblical words for lion—*'aryeh*, *shaḥal*, *kefir*, *layish*, and *lavi'*—and all five of them are used in verses 10 and 11. The King James Version, in a strategy of desperation, associated different terms with lions of different ages, but no one really knows what the original differentiations were, or if there were any. (This translation, in a gesture to tradition, adopts just one of the 1611 inventions, "young lions" for *kefirim*.)

the young lions' teeth are smashed. The force of both lines is that even such fearsomely powerful beasts can be reduced by God to impotence, their whelps scattered with no prey to nurture them.

12. *and to me came a word in secret.* Eliphaz presents his perception of man's inevitably flawed stature before God as the revelation of a scary night-vision.

15. *a spirit.* The Hebrew *ruaḥ* can also mean "breath" or "wind," but the context of nocturnal terror surely argues for a spectral apparition.

16. *its look unfamiliar.* Literally, "I did not recognize its look."

17. *Can a mortal be cleared before God.* These are the words of the spirit speaking to Eliphaz.

18. *servants . . . / agents*. These are the courtiers of the celestial entourage and the divine messengers, the "angels" of traditional terminology.

19. *clay-house dwellers.* The clay house, as both ancient and modern commentators have noted, is the human body, a transient habitation with a foundation in dust, as the account of the creation of the first human being in Genesis 2 reminds us.

20. *From morning to eve.* This is a hyperbolic representation of the brevity of the human life span.

21. *their life thread.* The Hebrew *yeter* is a cord that can be either a tent cord (which is how some interpreters understand it here) or a bowstring. One gets the sense of some essential cord within the human body, the breaking of which immediately leads to death. The image strongly conveys the fragility of man's physical existence, which at any moment can come to an end.

they die, and without any wisdom. Eliphaz, of course, means to impart conventional wisdom to Job. But the greater part of humankind, he proposes, is cut off by sudden death before attaining true wisdom.

CHAPTER 5

[1]Call out, pray: will any answer you,
and to whom of the angels will you turn?
[2]For anger kills a fool,
and the simple, envy slays.
[3] I have seen a fool striking root—
all at once his abode I saw cursed.
[4]His children are distant from rescue
and are crushed in the gate—none will save.
[5]Whose harvest the hungry eat
and from among thorns they take it away,
and the thirsty pant for their wealth.
[6] For crime does not spring from the dust,
nor from the soil does wretchedness sprout.
[7] But man is to wretchedness born
like sparks flying upward.
[8] Yet I search for El
and to God I make my case,
[9]Who does great things without limit
wonders beyond all number,
[10]Who brings rain down on the earth

and sends water over the fields.
[11]Who raises the lowly on high—
the downcast are lifted in rescue.
[12]Thwarts the designs of the cunning,
and their hands do not perform wisely.
[13]He entraps the wise in their cunning,
and the crooked's counsel proves hasty.
[14] By day they encounter darkness,
as in night they go groping at noon.
[15] He rescues the simple from the sword,
and from the hand of the strong, the
impoverished,
[16]and the indigent then has hope,
and wickedness clamps its mouth shut.
[17]Why, happy the man whom God corrects.
Shaddai's reproof do not spurn!
[18] For He causes pain and binds the wound,
He deals blows but His hands will heal.
[19] In six straits He will save you,
and in seven harm will not touch you.
[20]In famine He redeems you from death,
and in battle from the sword.
[21] From the scourge of the tongue you are hidden,
and you shall fear not assault when it comes.
[22]At assault and starvation you laugh,
and the beast of the earth you fear not.

[23]With the stones of the field is your pact,
the beasts of the field leagued with you.
[24] And you shall know that your tent is peaceful,
probe your home and find nothing amiss.
[25]And you shall know that your seed is abundant,
your offspring like the grass of the earth.
[26]You shall come to the grave in vigor,
as grain-shocks mount in their season.
[27]Look, this we have searched, it is so.
Hear it, and you—you should know.

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *I have seen a fool striking root— / all at once his abode I saw cursed*. This line summarizes the moral calculus of mainline Wisdom literature that the three companions bring to bear against Job: the prosperity of the fool or the wrongdoer is illusory and ephemeral. The Hebrew of the second verset says literally, "all at once his abode I cursed," and this translation understands this as an ellipsis for the speaker's perception that the house has been suddenly cursed. Others emend the verb to read "is cursed," eliminating the first-person singular.

4. *crushed in the gate.* The gates of the town were the place for enacting justice. They were also where a victorious enemy entered.

5. *from among thorns.* The Hebrew is obscure, and the text looks corrupt here.

6. *For crime does not spring from the dust.* Moral mischief is perpetrated by conscious human agents; it does not just spring up spontaneously like grass or weeds.

7. *But man is to wretchedness born.* This pronouncement may have a double edge. Man's fate is misery; but, given Eliphaz's moralism, he may also be saying that wretchedness is the predictable consequence of the perversity of human nature.

like sparks flying upward. The Hebrew *beney reshef* is understood by some to be an explicitly mythological reference because Reshef is the Northwest Semitic god of pestilence and the underworld. However, with the emphasis here on man as a source of trouble, the concrete image of sparks makes better sense: just as a fire sends burning sparks swirling upward, man creates wretchedness all around him.

8. *Yet I search for El.* Eliphaz is now quick to assert his own piety, in contrast to the general rule of troublemaking humankind that he has just expressed. What follows is a celebratory catalogue of God's power and providential acts, cast, as we might expect, in rather traditional poetry—in fact, reminiscent of Psalms. The Job poet cannily devises for each of the three companions poetry that has its moments of strength but is often rather conventional, in keeping with their worldview. The startling originality of Job's poetry stands out in contrast.

14. *By day they encounter darkness, / as in night they go groping at noon.* This line is another instance of the Job poet's fondness for chiastic structures: a ("day"), b ("encounter"), c ("darkness"), c' ("night"), b' ("go groping"), a' ("noon").

15. *the simple from the sword.* The Masoretic Text appears to say "from the sword from their mouth." The only way to save this reading would be to drop the second "from" as a dittography, thus yielding "from the sword of their mouth," which is a possible biblical metaphor. This translation follows Pope, who emends *mipihem*, "from their mouth," to *peta'im*, "the simple." Perhaps "mouth" at the end of the next line influenced the copyist to make a mistake here.

18. *He causes pain and binds the wound.* This whole line is particularly addressed to Job's present predicament of terrible suffering. Job is encouraged to imagine that his agony is "reproof" from God, Who will heal him when he mends his sinful ways.

19. *In six straits He will save you.* This celebration of God's providential care for the just, which continues to the end of verse 26, is again reminiscent of

Psalms. Compare, for example, Psalm 91.

21. *From the scourge of the tongue.* It is also possible to construe this phrase, as many interpreters have done, to mean: "When the tongue [that is, of slander] goes wandering."

assault. The primary sense of the Hebrew *shod* is "plunder," but in the present context, the element of violence implied by the term is salient.

24. *find nothing amiss.* The verb *teḥetaʾ* commonly means "to offend" (King James Version, "sin"), but its original sense, derived from archery, is "to miss the mark." The likely idea here is that when the just man looks into his house, everything is in order.

26. *in vigor.* The meaning of the Hebrew *kelaḥ* has long been disputed. The only other time it appears in the Bible is later in Job (30:2), where it is matched in the poetic parallelism with "strength," and hence the inference about what it means. If that inference is correct, then Eliphaz is saying that the just man remains hale and hearty until his death, which is simply a natural process of coming to an end, like the harvest invoked in the second verset.

27. *we have searched.* This first-person plural epitomizes Eliphaz's stance: he speaks with the assurance of collective wisdom.

and you—you should know. The second-person pronoun, generally omitted before a conjugated verb, is emphatic, *weʾatah daʿ-lakh*, pointing the finger at Job: as for you, you should certainly know this home truth.

CHAPTER 6

[1]And Job spoke out and he said:
[2]Could my anguish but be weighed,
and my disaster on the scales be borne,
[3]they would be heavier now than the sand of the sea.
Thus my words are choked back.
[4]For Shaddai's arrows are in me—
their venom my spirit drinks.
The terrors of God beset me.
[5]Does the wild ass bray over his grass,
the ox bellow over his feed?
[6]Is tasteless food eaten unsalted,
does the oozing of mallows have savor?
[7] My throat refuses to touch them.
They resemble my sickening flesh.
[8]If only my wish were fulfilled,
and my hope God might grant.
[9] If God would deign to crush me,
loose His hand and tear me apart.
[10] And this still would be my comfort,
I shrink back in pangs—He spares not.

Yet I withhold not the Holy One's words.
[11]What is my strength, that I should hope,
and what my end that I should endure?
[12]Is my strength the strength of stones,
is my flesh made of bronze?
[13]Indeed, there is no help within me,
and prudence is driven from me.
[14] The blighted man's friend owes him kindness,
though the fear of Shaddai he forsake.
[15] My brothers betrayed like a wadi,
like the channel of brooks that run dry.
[16] They are dark from the ice,
snow heaped on them.
[17]When they warm, they are gone,
in the heat they melt from their place.
[18]The paths that they go on are winding,
they mount in the void and are lost.
[19]The caravans of Tema looked out,
the convoys of Sheba awaited.
[20]Disappointed in what they had trusted,
they reached it and their hopes were dashed.
[21]For now you are His.
You see panic and you fear.
[22]Did I say, Give for me,
and with your wealth pay a ransom for me,
[23]and free me from the hands of the foe,

from the oppressors' hands redeem me?
[24]Instruct me—as for me, I'll keep silent,
and let me know where I went wrong.
[25]How forceful are honest words.
Yet what rebuke is the rebuke by you?
[26]Do you mean to rebuke with words,
treat the speech of the desperate as wind?
[27]Even for the orphan you cast lots,
and haggle for your companion.
[28]And now, deign to turn toward me.
To your face I will surely not lie.
[29]Relent, pray, let there be no injustice.
Relent. I am yet in the right.
[30]Is there injustice on my tongue?
Does my palate not taste disasters?

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *are choked back*. The unusual verb *laʿu* appears to derive from *loʿa*, "gullet." Others understand it to mean "spewed out."

4. *venom.* God, violating the ancient equivalent of a Geneva convention, uses poisoned arrows.

5. *the wild ass bray . . . / the ox bellow*. The answer to these rhetorical questions is of course "no": an animal has no need to make noise when it is given food. This phenomenon of natural eating in the animal realm is then

antithetically complemented by the idea in the next line that flavorless food is inedible for humans.

7. *My throat refuses to touch them.* For Job in his suffering, all food has become nauseating.

They resemble my sickening flesh. The translation is an educated guess. The syntax of the Hebrew is crabbed, and the last word of the line, *laḥmi*, could mean either "flesh" or "bread."

9. *If God would deign to crush me.* The violence of this whole shocking line is probably an expression of the extremity of Job's suffering: given all he has undergone, he wishes that God would get done with the business and utterly destroy him.

10. *I shrink back in pangs—He spares not.* The translation reproduces the enigmatic character of the Hebrew. Many interpreters seek to save coherence by construing this as "unsparing pangs," but the word for "pangs" is feminine, *ḥilah* (singular in the Hebrew), whereas the verb "spare" is conjugated in the masculine.

Yet I withhold not the Holy One's words. Most commentators understand this as Job's words against God, but "words" and "the Holy One" are tied together in the construct state (the Hebrew equivalent of a genitive). Job may be saying that even in his acute anguish he never suppressed the words of God's ethical injunctions, knowing that he lived by them, whatever God had done to him.

11. *endure.* The literal sense is "make my life-breath long." Since elsewhere, shortness of life-breath means impatience, this is probably an antonym, "patience."

14. *The blighted man's.* The Hebrew *mas* is obscure and hence the translation conjectural, following a proposal by Pope.

15. *My brothers betrayed like a wadi.* The wadi is a desert ravine. In the rainy season it fills with water and gives the appearance of a flowing stream, but in the summer, when no rain falls in this region, it turns into a dry channel.

16. *They are dark from the ice.* The Job poet is distinctive among biblical poets in his searching interest in natural phenomena. Having introduced the striking image of the wadi that goes dry in the summer as a representation of betrayal, he goes on with it for the next five lines, keenly attending to different

manifestations of the annual cycle. The water in the wadi here—the landscape might be northern Israel bordering on the mountains of Lebanon, or perhaps the high country of Iran—is darkened by the ice on its surface.

17. *in the heat they melt.* Evidently, the melting of the ice and the heaped-up snow is telescoped with the evaporation of water that follows.

19. *Tema . . . / Sheba*. Sheba is in the southwest end of the Arabian peninsula, Tema in the north, and in fact caravans went from one to the other on a trade route. The geography is nicely appropriate for Job as an "Easterner."

looked out, / . . . awaited. Apparently, they are looking for a water source in the desert as they travel, so the wadi image is continued.

21. *you are His.* The Masoretic Text reads "you are no," which makes no sense as a biblical usage. For *lo'*, "no," this translation reads *lo*, "to Him" or "His." The idea, then, would be that Job's friends have gone over to God's side.

You see panic and you fear. You see the devastation I have suffered and, afraid that it might befall you as well, you hasten to become advocates for the punitive God.

30. *Does my palate not taste disasters?* The literal sense of the Hebrew verb is "understand."

CHAPTER 7

[1]Does not man have fixed service on earth,
and like a hired worker's his days?
[2]Like a slave he pants for shade,
like a hired worker he waits for his pay.
[3]Thus I was heir to futile moons,
and wretched nights were allotted to me.
[4]Lying down, I thought, When shall I rise?—
Each evening, I was sated with tossing till dawn.
[5]My flesh was clothed with worms and earth-clods,
my skin rippled with running sores.
[6] My days are swifter than the weaver's shuttle.
They snap off without any hope.
[7]Recall that my life is a breath.
Not again will my eyes see good.
[8]The eye of who sees me will not make me out.
Your eyes are on me—I am gone.
[9]A cloud vanishes and goes off.
Thus, who goes down to Sheol will not come up.
[10]He will not return to his home.
His place will not know him again.

[11]As for me, I will not restrain my mouth.
I would lament with my spirit in straits
I would speak when my being is bitter.
[12] Am I Yamm or the Sea Beast,
that You should put a watch upon me?
[13]When I thought my couch would console me,
that my bed would bear my lament,
[14] You panicked me in dreams
and in visions You struck me with terror.
[15]And my throat would have chosen choking,
my bones—death.
[16]I am sickened—I won't live forever.
Let me be, for my days are mere breath.
[17] What is man that You make him great
and that You pay heed to him?
[18]You single him out every morning,
every moment examine him.
[19]How long till You turn away from me?
You don't let me go while I swallow my spit.
[20]What is my offense that I have done to You,
O Watcher of man?
Why did You make me Your target,
and I became a burden to You?
[21]And why do You not pardon my crime
and let my sin pass away?
For soon I shall lie in the dust.

You will seek me, and I shall be gone.

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *fixed service*. The more common meaning of the Hebrew *tsava'* is "army." By extension, the word also refers to any set term of service.

2. *shade, / . . . pay*. These terms are coordinated. The slave or the hired hand works in the hot sun all day, longing for the relief of shade, which he is likely to get only at evening, when he completes his work in the field. At the end of the day's work, he would also receive his pay.

3. *futile moons, / . . . wretched nights*. These words anticipate the account of tormented insomnia in verse 4 and of nightmares in verse 14.

5. *flesh . . . / skin*. The language here clearly picks up the affliction with a terrible skin disease from the frame-story in chapter 2.

6. *My days are swifter than the weaver's shuttle. / They snap off without any hope*. The shuttle moves back and forth rapidly, and the image illustrates the Job poet's remarkable resourcefulness in drawing figurative language from unexpected semantic fields, including technology. His virtuosity is also evident in an untranslatable pun: the word for "hope," *tiqwah*, also means "thread." Awareness of the pun dictates the choice of the verb "snap off" in the translation. The brevity of human life and the irreversibility of death are a constant theme in Job's argument with God. Death as the inexorable end is central in verses 7–10.

12. *Am I Yamm or the Sea Beast.* Yamm is the sea god of Canaanite mythology. Figured as a sea monster, he is also called Tanin (as in the second name here), Rahab, and Leviathan. In some versions, the monster has several heads. Yamm is subdued by Baal, the weather god, and imprisoned so that he cannot rise up to overwhelm the land. Thus Job, acutely aware of the brevity of his life as mortal man, rhetorically asks the deity whether he is to be thought of as an undying monstrous god to be kept imprisoned under eternal guard. Variations of this potent myth will continue to crop up in the poem.

14. *You panicked me in dreams.* Job's troubled restless nights, entirely understandable given all he has suffered, are here attributed to God as still another form of torture. In the ancient Near East, dreams were generally thought to come from the gods.

15. *my throat would have chosen choking.* Because the multivalent *nafshi* is bracketed with "choking," and parallel to "my bones," its use as a term for throat seems likely here, though it could also mean "my being."

16. *mere breath.* Here the term *hevel*, favored by Qohelet, is used.

17. *What is man that You make him great.* This whole line looks like a sardonic citation—and reversal—of Psalm 8:5–6: "What is man that You should note him, / and the human creature, that You pay him heed, / and You make him little less than the gods, / with glory and grandeur You crown him?" Instead of the psalmist's marveling over man's preeminence in creation, Job goes on to say, bitterly, that since man is such an inconsequential creature, it makes no sense for God to single him out—for such scathing, unblinking scrutiny.

19. *while I swallow my spit.* This startling phrase is another instance of the powerful physiological concreteness of Job's poetry.

20. *I became a burden to You.* The Masoretic Text reads "to myself," but this is a famous case of a *tiqun sofrim*, a euphemistic scribal correction. That is, the scribes did not want to write the virtually blasphemous phrase that Job had become a burden to God, so they substituted the first-person pronoun for the second person.

21. *For soon I shall lie in the dust. / You will seek me, and I shall be gone*. Job invokes the previously expressed idea of the brevity of human life as grounds for asking God to relent from persecuting him: against the background of eternity, Job's life will be over in but a moment, so why should God persist in making that ephemeral moment such a miserable one?

CHAPTER 8

[1]And Bildad the Shuhite spoke out and he said,
[2]How long will you jabber such things?—
the words of your mouth, one huge wind.
[3] Would God pervert justice,
would Shaddai pervert what is right?
[4]If your children offended Him,
He dispatched them because of their crime.
[5]If you yourself sought out El,
and pleaded to Shaddai,
[6]if you were honest and pure,
by now He would rouse Himself for you,
and would make your righteous home whole.
[7]Then your beginning would seem a trifle
and your latter day very grand.
[8] For ask, pray, generations of old,
take in what their fathers found out.
[9] For we are but yesterday, unknowing,
for our days are a shadow on earth.
[10]Will they not teach you and say to you,
and from their heart bring out words?

[11] Will papyrus sprout with no marsh,
reeds grow grand without water?
[12]Still in its blossom, not yet plucked,
before any grass it will wither.
[13]Thus is the end of all who forget God,
and the hope of the tainted is lost.
[14]Whose faith is mere cobweb,
a spider's house his trust.
[15]He leans on his house and it will not stand,
he grasps it and it does not endure.
[16] —He is moist in the sun,
and his tendrils push out in his garden.
[17] Round a knoll his roots twist,
on a stone house they take hold.
[18]If his place should uproot him
and deny him—"I never saw you,"
[19]why, this is his joyous way,
from another soil he will spring.
[20]Look, God will not spurn the blameless,
nor hold the hand of evildoers.
[21]He will yet fill your mouth with laughter
and your lips with a shout of joy.
[22]Your foes will be clothed in disgrace,
and the tent of the wicked gone.

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *Would God pervert justice, / would Shaddai pervert what is right?* Bildad's complacent confidence in the traditional moral calculus is epitomized here not only in the substance of the statement but in the mechanically formulaic nature of the language. Throughout the speeches of Job's three critics, the poet performs a delicate balancing act in assigning them boilerplate poetry that reflects their conventional mindset (see the comment on verse 8) and giving them some striking lines in which his own extraordinary poetic powers are manifest. As instances of this second category, one might consider "we are but yesterday" in verse 9 or the elaboration of the image of the spiderweb in verses 14 and 15.

4. *He dispatched them because of their crime.* Eliphaz, the first of the three friends to speak, began with a diplomatic gesture toward Job. Now Bildad brutally tells a just bereaved father that his children all were killed by God because they must have committed some great offense.

8. *For ask, pray, generations of old.* The formulaic language of this entire verse is reminiscent of these lines from the Song of Moses: "Remember the days of old, / give thought to the years of times past. / Ask your father, that he may tell you, / your elders, that they may say to you." (Deuteronomy 32:7).

9. *For we are but yesterday, unknowing.* Because our lives are a fleeting moment, we can have no real knowledge, for which we must turn to the age-old wisdom of our forebears.

for our days are a shadow on earth. This lovely phrase also happens to be formulaic, occurring in Psalms and elsewhere.

11. *Will papyrus sprout with no marsh.* There is an iron law in the moral realm as in nature. Just as the plant needs water to grow, a man cannot survive unless he is rooted in virtue. Only the righteous man is "like a tree planted by streams of water" (Psalm 1:3).

grow grand. Pointedly, the poet uses the same verb, *yisgeh*, that is attached at the end of verse 7 to the prospect of Job's flourishing if he mends his ways.

13. *the end.* The Masoretic Text here reads *ʾorḥot*, "the paths," but the reading of the Septuagint *ʾaḥarit* (the same consonants, with the order of the *r* and *ḥ*

reversed) makes more sense. *ʾAḥarit* means "end" and, by extension, "destiny."

16. *—He is moist in the sun.* The subject here seems to switch from those who forget God to the virtuous man (hence the introduction of the dash in the translation). Perhaps, if one recalls the antithesis between the righteous and the wicked in Psalm 1, a phrase of transition, such as "Not so the righteous," was lost in transcription. In any case, the phrase "moist in the sun" means that he remains moist even in the blazing sun.

17. *Round a knoll his roots twist, / on a stone house they take hold.* This line, developing the pushing out of the tendrils from the previous line, is another instance of the Job poet's keen eye on the processes of nature as he elaborates his images.

19. *this is his joyous way, / from another soil he will spring.* The resilience—even in the face of disaster—of the righteous man goes beyond the laws of nature: uprooted, he will somehow find other soil from which to grow.

20. *God will not spurn the blameless, / nor hold the hand of evildoers.* At the end of his speech, Bildad again invokes stereotypical language, reminiscent of many psalms and of the Book of Proverbs.

22. *the tent of the wicked gone.* This concluding verset, formulaic in itself, picks up the image of the wicked man's flimsy habitation of cobweb from verses 14 and 15.

CHAPTER 9

[1]And Job spoke out and he said:
[2]Of course, I knew it was so:
how can man be right before God?
[3]Should a person bring grievance against Him,
He will not answer one of a thousand.
[4]Wise in mind, staunch in strength,
who can argue with Him and come out whole?
[5] He uproots mountains and they know not,
overturns them in His wrath.
[6]He makes earth shake in its setting,
and its pillars shudder.
[7]He bids the sun not to rise,
and the stars He seals up tight.
[8]He stretches the heavens alone
and tramples the crests of the sea.
[9]He makes the Bear and Orion,
the Pleiades and the South Wind's chambers.
[10]He performs great things without limit
and wonders without number.
[11]Look, He passes over me and I do not see,

slips by me and I cannot grasp Him.
12 Look, He seizes—who can resist Him?
Who can tell him, “What do You do?”
13 God will not relent His fury.
Beneath Him Rahab’s minions stoop.
14 And yet, as for me, I would answer Him,
would choose my words with Him.
15 Though in the right, I can’t make my plea.
I would have to entreat my own judge.
16 Should I call out and He answer me,
I would not trust Him to heed my voice.
17 Who for a hair would crush me
and make my wounds many for naught.
18 He does not allow me to catch my breath
as He sates me with bitterness.
19 If it’s strength—He is staunch,
and if it’s justice—who can arraign Him?
20 Though in the right, my mouth will convict me,
I am blameless, yet He makes me crooked.
21 I am blameless—I know not myself,
I loathe my life.
22 It’s all the same, and so I thought:
the blameless and the wicked He destroys.
23 If a scourge causes death in an instant,
He mocks the innocent’s plight.
24 The earth is given in the wicked man’s hand,

the face of its judges He veils.
If not He—then who else?
[25]And my days are swifter than a courier.
They have fled and have never seen good,
[26]slipped away like reed ships,
like an eagle swooping on prey.
[27]If I said, I would forget my lament.
I would leave my grim mood and be
gladdened,
[28]I was in terror of all my suffering.
I knew You would not acquit me.
[29]I will be guilty.
Why should I toil in vain?
[30]Should I bathe in snow,
make my palms pure with lye,
[31]You would yet plunge me into a pit,
and my robes would defile me.
[32]For He is not a man like me that I might answer
Him,
that we might come together in court.
[33]Would there were an arbiter between us,
who could lay his hand on us both,
[34]who could take from me His rod,
and His terror would not confound me.
[35] I would speak, and I will not fear Him,
for that is not the way I am.

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *be right before God*. "Right" (Hebrew verbal root *ts-d-q*) here and elsewhere means being vindicated in a court of law. Thus the opening line announces the metaphor of legal disputation that dominates this whole chapter and recurs later in Job's argument. His sense of justice leads him to the legal metaphor, but he bitterly recognizes that he will never have his day in court because the two parties involved are absolutely unequal. God the accuser will always overwhelm him with His superior power and hold him guilty, whatever the facts of the case. One detects a fundamental idea that will lead to Kafka's *The Trial*.

5. *He uproots mountains.* These lines, down to the end of verse 10, invoke traditional poetic language generally used to celebrate God's power, as in many of the psalms and in Eliphaz's words (5:9–16), one line of which (5:9) is actually reproduced here (verse 10). But Job turns around the meaning of the traditional celebration of God: the divine power is deployed to dismay man and to take unfair advantage of him.

7. *bids the sun.* The catalogue of God's sundry powers moves up vertically from earth to sky.

and the stars He seals up tight. If the darkening of the sun in the first verset could refer to an eclipse, a natural phenomenon, this intensification in the second verset is altogether apocalyptic.

9. *the South Wind's chambers.* After the constellations, these may be mythological.

13. *Rahab's minions.* Rahab is another name for the primordial sea monster, and so the minions (literally, "helpers") are his mythological henchmen. The subduing of Rahab's minions, like the trampling on the crests of the sea in verse 8, has its background in the conquest of the sea god by the weather god in Canaanite mythology.

17. *for a hair.* The Hebrew *biseʿarah* has a homonym and so could be construed, as many interpreters do, to mean "in a storm." (That is the word used for "whirlwind" or "storm" at the beginning of God's speech in 38:1.) But the poetic parallelism with "for naught" in the second verset argues for the sense of "for a hair"—that is, a mere trifle.

19. *If it's strength—He is staunch.* This line repeats the terms bracketed together in verse 4. As elsewhere, the Job poet has a keen eye for verbal and imagistic continuities in his poem.

22. *the blameless and the wicked he destroys.* This single verset compactly summarizes Job's argument against the mainline biblical notion of God's justice. Observing the reality of human events, including, of course, the disasters that have beset him, he sees no neat system of reward for the virtuous and punishment for the transgressor: the purported system of divine justice is essentially arbitrary.

23. *He mocks the innocent's plight.* The Hebrew uses a plural noun, which is represented as a singular here to accord with the singular "wicked man" in the next line. God's mockery of the innocent makes him not just arbitrary but sadistic.

24. *The earth is given in the wicked man's hand.* Job now steps up his argument: God is not merely arbitrary; he actually tilts the conduct of the world to favor the wicked and prevents earthly judges (second verset) from seeing wrongdoing.

25. *my days are swifter than a courier.* In the two lines that begin here, the poet adopts an alternate strategy to the one of elaborating a single image through several lines that we observed in the previous chapter. Instead, he gives us three different images for swiftness in quick succession: from earth (the courier) to water (the reed ships) to sky (the eagle), with the last metaphor expressing the most violently rapid motion, and one that is not connected with human beings as are the two preceding ones.

27. *be gladdened.* The verb *ʾavligah* appears only in Job and hence its meaning is uncertain. A different understanding, "restrain myself," has become the general sense of the verb in modern Hebrew.

30. *in snow.* The translation follows the consonantal text (*ketiv*), which reads *bemo sheleg*. The marginal correction (*qeri*) reads *bemey sheleg*, "in snow waters."

make my palms pure with lye. This is an especially violent instance of the pattern of intensification in second versets. Snow (or snow water) would be pure, but the extreme cleansing measure of lye could do terrible damage to the palms.

31. *plunge me into a pit.* The clear implication is a pit filled with foul muck.

33. *an arbiter . . . / who could lay his hand on us both*. This impossible fantasy underscores the actual maddening disparity between Job and the God who is persecuting him.

35. *I would speak, and I will not fear Him, / for that is not the way I am.* The wording of the second verset here is rather obscure, and divergent interpretations (and emendations) have been proposed. The general sense of the line, though, is clear: Job will not let the terror of God confound him or silence him. He still wishes to voice his protest, not succumbing to fear. In light of this, perhaps the force of the second verset is, as this translation understands it: I am not the kind of person to be subdued by fear of God's power, and so I will speak out.

CHAPTER 10

[1]My whole being loathes my life.
Let me give vent to my lament.
Let me speak when my being is bitter.
[2]I shall say to God: Do not convict me.
Inform me why You accuse me.
[3]Is it good for You to oppress,
to spurn Your own palms' labor,
and on the council of the wicked to shine?
[4] Do You have the eyes of mortal flesh,
do You see as man would see?
[5]Are Your days like a mortal's days,
Your years like the years of a man,
[6]that You should search out my crime
and inquire for my offense?
[7]You surely know I am not guilty,
but there is none who saves from Your hand.
[8] Your hands fashioned me and made me,
and then You turn round and destroy me!
[9]Recall, pray, that like clay You worked me,
and to the dust You will make me return.

[10]Why, You poured me out like milk
and like cheese You curdled me.
[11]With skin and flesh You clothed me,
with bones and sinews entwined me.
[12]Life and kindness you gave me,
and Your precept my spirit kept.
[13] Yet these did You hide in Your heart;
I knew that this was with You:
[14]If I offended, You kept watch upon me
and of my crime would not acquit me.
[15]If I was guilty, alas for me,
and though innocent, I could not raise my head,
sated with shame and surfeited with disgrace.
[16] Like a triumphant lion You hunt me,
over again wondrously smite me.
[17]You summon new witnesses against me
and swell up Your anger toward me—
vanishings and hard service are mine.
[18] And why from the womb did You take me?
I'd breathe my last, no eye would have seen me.
[19]As though I had not been, I would be.
From belly to grave I'd be carried.
[20]My days are but few—let me be.
Turn away that I may have some gladness
[21]before I go, never more to return,
to the land of dark and death's shadow,

[22]the land of gloom, thickest murk,
death's shadow and disorder,
where it shines thickest murk.

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Let me give vent*. The Hebrew verb *ʿazav* usually means "to for-sake," and hence the meaning here is uncertain. The translation follows a proposal of Pope, but not with great conviction.

4. *Do You have the eyes of mortal flesh.* Job's complaint against God for persecuting him has two complementary sides. On the one hand, since God enjoys the perspective of divinity, it makes no sense for Him to treat Job as though He were an ignorant and angry human being. On the other hand (verses 20–23), since Job is a mere mortal whose days are few, it is unreasonable that this brief life span should be loaded with misery.

8. *Your hands fashioned me and made me.* Picking up the word "hand" from the end of the previous verse is a bridge to a new segment of the text—such repetition of terms to mark the transition from one textual unit to another is a characteristic compositional move in the Bible in both poetry and prose. The poet launches on one of the most remarkable evocations of the sheer creatureliness of man in biblical literature.

and then You turn round. The Masoretic Text reads "together all around," *yaḥad saviv*. This translation follows the reading of the Septuagint, which has *ʾahar sabota*, a phrase that makes better sense in context.

9. *like clay You worked me.* The poet picks up the image of God's creating the first human from clay in Genesis 2 and, characteristically, gives it artisanal concreteness.

and to the dust You will make me return. This notion of man's inevitable mortality (compare 1:21) is a constant theme of Job's.

10. *poured me out like milk / and like cheese You curdled me.* In keeping with his own vivid sense of metaphor and of reality—and again in the chiastic formulation he favors—the Job poet now goes beyond the figure of God the potter taken from Genesis. The embryo begins in a conjoining of fluid and protoplasm and then begins to take on the solidity of flesh, like milk congealing into cheese.

12. *and Your precept my spirit kept.* Given the way biblical syntax functions, it is also possible to switch subject and object around here (as most interpreters do): Your precept (providence?) kept my spirit. But the formulation sounds like several lines in Psalm 119, where it is the human being, or his spirit, who keeps God's precept (*pequdah*).

13. *Yet these did You hide in Your heart.* Despite all God's seeming benefactions in giving Job physical shape and substance and afterward support, He all along hid hostile intentions toward his lovingly fashioned creature.

15. *guilty . . . / innocent*. Job bitterly complains that he is damned if he does, damned if he doesn't by this inimical God.

16. *like a triumphant lion.* The syntactically obscure Hebrew of the received text here seems to say: "He triumphs, like a lion You hunt me."

over again wondrously smite me. The translation is an interpretive guess about the enigmatic Hebrew, which literally reads: "You came back, You do wonders against [?] me."

17. *vanishings and hard service are mine.* This entire clause is one of the notable puzzles in Job. The second of the two nouns is the same word used at the beginning of chapter 7 (and rendered there, because of the immediate context, as "fixed service"). The first noun, *ḥalifot*, derives from a verb that means "to slip away," "to vanish," or "to change." What Job may be saying is that his existence has become durance vile ("hard service") in which everything he would cling to slips between his fingers ("vanishings").

18. *And why from the womb did You take me?* This verse and the next obviously pick up the theme and some of the language of the death-wish poem in chapter 3 (in particular 3:11–13).

21–22. *dark . . . death's shadow, / . . . gloom . . . murk*. These lines also recall the death-wish poem of chapter 3 in deploying a whole series of synonyms

for darkness, though with a difference: in the earlier poem, darkness was wished for; here it functions as an expression of the absolute extinction of life that awaits every human being in death's realm.

22. *thickest.* The usual function of the Hebrew *kemo* is as the preposition of comparison, "like," but that would yield here "gloom like murk," which does not make much sense. *Kemo*, however, occasionally occurs in poetic texts as an intensifier rather than as a preposition, and this translation construes it that way both here and in its recurrence in the third verset.

where it shines thickest murk. This is construed by some as a second-person singular referring to God, "and You shine," although a third-person feminine singular verb (the identical conjugated form) referring to "land" at the beginning of the verse seems more likely. In any case, this concluding image is a strong oxymoron (not a characteristic figure of biblical poetry): in the grim realm of death, shining itself is darkness.

CHAPTER 11

[1]And Zophar the Naamathite spoke out and he said:
[2] Shall a swarm of words be unanswered,
and should a smooth talker be in the right?
[3]Your lies may silence folk,
you mock and no one protests.
[4]And you say: my teaching is spotless,
and I am pure in your eyes.
[5]Yet, if only God would speak,
and would open His lips against you,
[6]would tell you wisdom's secrets,
for prudence is double-edged.
And know, God leaves some of your crime
forgotten.
[7] Can you find what God has probed,
can you find Shaddai's last end?
[8]Higher than heaven, what can you do,
deeper than Sheol, what can you know?
[9]Longer than earth is its measure,
and broader than the sea.
[10] Should He slip away or confine or assemble,

who can resist Him?
[11]For He knows the empty folk,
He sees wrongdoing and surely takes note.
[12]And a hollow man will get a wise heart
when a wild ass is born a man.
[13] If you yourself readied your heart
and spread out your palms to Him,
[14]if there is wrongdoing in your hand, remove it,
let no mischief dwell in your tents.
[15]For then you will raise your face unstained,
you will be steadfast and will not fear.
[16]For you will forget wretchedness,
like water gone off, recall it.
[17]And life will rise higher than noon,
you will soar, you will be like the morning.
[18]And you will trust, for there is hope,
will search, and lie secure.
[19]You will stretch out, and none make you tremble,
and many pay court to you.
[20]And the eyes of the wicked will pine,
escape will be lost to them,
and their hope—a last gasp of breath.

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Shall a swarm of words be unanswered*. The third of the friends immediately strikes an impatient note, beginning with a frontal attack on Job and making no diplomatic gesture toward him.

a smooth talker. Literally, "a man of lips."

5. *open His lips.* This idiom is probably chosen to jibe with the mocking reference to Job as "a man of lips" in verse 2.

6. *prudence is double-edged.* The application of "double-edged" (or perhaps simply "double"), *kiflayim*, is not entirely clear. Some would emend it to *plaʾim*, yielding "prudence is wondrous."

God leaves some of your crime forgotten. Zophar blithely assumes that Job is guilty of some crime so great that, even with all he has suffered for it, God has mercifully not exacted punishment for it to the full extent of the divine law.

7. *Can you find what God has probed.* The next three verses are boilerplate language for the poetic celebration of God's world-embracing knowledge and power contrasted to man's puny grasp. When God begins to speak from the whirlwind, He will strike a similar theme, but in an entirely different poetic register and conceptual frame.

10. *Should He slip away or confine or assemble.* Interpretive attempts to find tight logical coherence in this sequence of three verbs have not been persuasive. It is best to understand them as three different instances of how God does whatever He pleases—disappears, imprisons, brings people together—without man's being able to control or affect His actions.

12. *a hollow man will get a wise heart / when a wild ass is born a man.* This pungent remark sounds, as Marvin Pope has suggested, like the invocation of a proverb.

13. *If you yourself readied your heart.* These words introduce an exhortation, which will continue to the end of Zophar's speech, for Job to turn back from his evil ways in the expectation that God will then forgive him and restore him to well-being and tranquillity.

15. *you will raise your face unstained.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "without blemish," and Zophar may well be referring not only to the supposed moral taint in Job but to the fact that he has been hideously disfigured by his skin disease.

CHAPTER 12

[1]And Job spoke up and he said:
[2]Oh yeovs, you are the people,
and with you wisdom will die!
[3]But I, too, have a mind like you, I am no less than you,
and who does not know such things?
[4]A laughingstock to his friend I am,
who calls to his God and is answered,
a laughingstock of the blameless just man.
[5] The smug man's thought scorns disaster
readied for those who stumble.
[6] The tents of despoilers are tranquil,
provokers of El are secure,
whom God has led by the hand.
[7] Yet ask of the beasts, they will teach you,
the fowl of the heavens will tell you,
[8]or speak to the earth, it will teach you,
the fish of the sea will inform you.
[9]Who has not known in all these
that the LORD's hand has done this?

10 In Whose hand is the breath of each living thing,
and the spirit of all human flesh.
11 Does not the ear make out words,
the palate taste food?
12 In the aged is wisdom,
and in length of days understanding.
13 With Him are wisdom and strength,
He possesses counsel and understanding.
14 Why, He destroys and there is no rebuilding,
closes in on a man, leaves no opening.
15 Why, He holds back the waters and they dry up,
sends them forth and they turn the earth over.
16 With Him is power and prudence,
His the duped and the duper.
17 He leads councillors astray
and judges He drives to madness.
18 He undoes the sash of kings
and binds a loincloth round their waist.
19 He leads priests astray,
the mighty He misleads.
20 He takes away speech from the trustworthy,
and sense from the elders He takes,
21 He pours forth scorn on princes,
and the belt of the nobles He slackens,
22 lays bare depths from the darkness
and brings out to light death's shadow,

[23]raises nations high and destroys them,
flattens nations and leads them away,
[24] stuns the minds of the people's leaders,
makes them wander in trackless wastes—
[25]they grope in darkness without light,
He makes them wander like drunken men.

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *you are the people*. The sarcastic thrust of the line is evident: the friends have repeatedly claimed to be the voice of the wisdom of the generations and of society in general, and Job now bitterly turns this claim back against them.

3. *mind.* The Hebrew means "heart," but here its function as the organ of understanding in biblical physiology is clearly salient.

who does not know such things? The literal sense is "who does not have such things?"

4. *who calls to his God and is answered, / . . . the blameless just man*. All this is, of course, a sarcastic reference to Job's three reprovers.

5. *The smug man's thought scorns disaster.* This is an interpretive guess at the Hebrew, which is extremely crabbed. The translation assumes that the obscure *ʿashtut* is a shortened or defective form of *ʿeshtonot*, "thoughts." Something along the lines of the construction proposed here makes sense in context because the smug man scorning disaster and showing contempt for one who stumbles neatly applies to Job's friends.

6. *The tents of despoilers are tranquil.* Job's perception that the wicked often prosper, seemingly helped by God, is a direct rejoinder to the complacent moral calculus of the friends.

7. *Yet ask of the beasts.* It is the common knowledge of all creation, Job argues, that God's power causes everything. This sounds like a pious opening,

in keeping with the view of the three companions, but he goes on to say that God's power is exercised destructively and capriciously.

10. *In Whose hand.* This entire verse is a virtual quotation of pious tradition —quoted in order to be subverted.

12. *In the aged is wisdom.* This verse and the next are a mocking imitation of the words of the three companions, and what the lines seem to say is abruptly reversed beginning in verse 14.

15. *the waters . . . dry up, / . . . they turn the earth over*. As Job sees it, God's power over creation is exerted chiefly in acts of destruction. The Voice from the Whirlwind will provide a strong rejoinder to this view.

16. *the duped and the duper.* The literal sense of the cognate Hebrew verbs is "the one who errs and the one who leads him to err."

17. *councillors . . . / judges*. Those who should exercise wisdom are catastrophically deprived of it by God. In the following verses, other figures of authority—kings, elders, priests, the trustworthy—are also undone by God.

22. *lays bare depths from the darkness.* In the account of creation at the beginning of Genesis, God resoundingly calls forth light from the primordial darkness. Here He does exactly the opposite.

24. *stuns.* Literally, "removes."

trackless wastes. The "wastes" here, *tohu*, are the same term used for the primordial void in Genesis 1. Job continues the boldly heretical idea that God, far from being a beneficent Creator establishing order, uses His violent power perversely to mislead humankind.

25. *like drunken men.* The Hebrew uses a singular noun.

CHAPTER 13

[1] Why, my eye has seen all,
my ear has heard and understood.
[2]As you know, I, too, know.
I am no less than you.
[3]Yet I would speak to Shaddai,
and I want to dispute with God.
[4]And yet, you plaster lies,
you are all quack healers.
[5]Would that you fell silent,
and this would be your wisdom.
[6]Hear, pray, my dispute,
and to my lips' pleas listen closely.
[7]Would you speak crookedness of God,
and of Him would you speak false things?
[8] Would you be partial on His behalf,
would you plead the case of God?
[9]Would it be good that He probed you,
as one mocks a man would you mock Him?
[10]He shall surely dispute with you
if in secret you are partial.

[11]Will not His majesty strike you with terror,
and His fear fall upon you?
[12]Your pronouncements are maxims of ash,
your word piles, piles of clay.
[13]Be silent before me—I would speak,
no matter what befalls me.
[14]Why should I bear my flesh in my teeth,
and my life-breath place in my palm?
[15] Look, He slays me, I have no hope.
Yet my ways I'll dispute to His face.
[16]Even that becomes my rescue,
for no tainted man comes before Him.
[17]Hear, O hear my word
and my utterance in your ears.
[18]Look, I have laid out my case,
I know that I am in the right.
[19]Who would make a plea against me?
I would be silent then, breathe my last.
[20] Just two things do not do to me,
then would I not hide from Your presence.
[21]Take Your palm away from me,
and let Your dread not strike me with terror.
[22]Call and I will reply,
or I will speak, and answer me.
[23]How many crimes and offenses have I?
My offense and my wrong, inform me.

[24]Why do You hide Your face,
    and count me Your enemy?
[25]Would You harry a driven leaf,
    and a dry straw would You chase,
[26]that You should write bitter things against me,
    make me heir to the crimes of my youth?
[27]And You put my feet in stocks,
    watch after all my paths,
        on the soles of my feet make a mark.

CHAPTER 13 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Why, my eye has seen all*. Job repeats the rhetorical move with which he began his speech (12:3), even using one identical phrase, "I am no less than you."

3. *dispute.* The Hebrew verb, which can also mean "reprove," here has a legal connotation, and language expressing Job's desire to confront God in a court of law recurs through this chapter.

4. *plaster lies.* This idiom is also used in Psalms 119:69. It may derive from the idea of covering over the truth, as with plaster.

quack healers. The relevance of this epithet is that Job's companions seek to "heal" his grievous ills by telling him he has done wrong and that he will be restored to well-being if he renounces his evil ways.

8. *Would you be partial on His behalf?* This is the crux of Job's argument against his pious reprovers. The law commands that no partiality be shown in judgment (see Leviticus 19:15), and this includes tipping the legal scales to make God seem just. To Job, this is "crookedness," "false things," and God

Himself will not tolerate it. The rebuke to the three friends by God in the closing of the frame-story bears out Job in this regard.

10. *dispute.* The leading edge of the verb here is probably "reprove," but the translation preserves the continuity of terms in the Hebrew with verses 3 and 6.

12. *your word piles, piles of clay.* All translations of the obscure Hebrew are conjectural. The construction here links *gabey* with the rabbinic *gibuv*, "heap" or "pile," and adds "word" interpretively.

14. *my life-breath place in my palm.* Elsewhere, this is an idiom for putting oneself in great danger, but the parallelism with the first verset would seem to highlight the physical concreteness of the image.

15. *Look, He slays me, I have no hope.* The intended sense of his famous line is ambiguous. This translation follows the consonantal received text (*ketiv*). The marginal correction (*qeri*) changes *loʾ* (no) to *lo* (for him), yielding, "though He slay me, I will hope for Him." Others, without much warrant, understand the verb *yaḥel* as though it were a phonetically similar verb, *ḥul*, and translate "though He slay me, I will not quake."

16. *for no tainted man comes before Him.* Job, of course, is firm in his conviction that he himself is untainted, and so he is perfectly ready to stand before God. Thus, his very willingness to dispute with God is his "rescue."

19. *I would be silent then, breathe my last.* If anyone could really muster a case against Job, he would renounce his argument and be prepared to give up the ghost.

20. *Just two things do not do to me.* The Hebrew, moving from the second-person plural in earlier verses to the second-person singular, makes it clear that Job is now turning in direct address to God.

then would I not hide from Your presence. That is, if You stopped intimidating me with Your overwhelming power (verse 21), I would be able to face You and make a case for my own defense.

21. *let Your dread not strike me with terror.* These words are only a seeming contradiction to Job's previous assertions that he is spoiling to have his day in court with God. He is infact eager to do that, but he also feels overwhelmed by the sheer power of his divine persecutor, and so He pleads with God not to

go on terrorizing him as a necessary precondition to his laying out his legal case.

23. *My offense and my wrong.* The order of the two Hebrew nouns is reversed for the sake of the rhythm in English.

27. *stocks / . . . paths, / . . . make a mark*. These are three discrete metaphors (if the feet are in stocks, logically there is no need to watch after the paths of the supposed miscreant), though they are all related as images of imprisonment or surveillance, and all three figures of speech are associated with feet (the middle image because in biblical idiom it is always feet that go on paths). It is likely that the marking of the soles of the feet refers to some sort of branding or tattooing that would be an indelible sign that the person is a felon.

CHAPTER 14

13:28 And man wears away like rot,
like a garment eaten by moths.
1 Man born of woman,
scant of days and sated with trouble,
2 like a blossom he comes forth and withers,
and flees like a shadow—he will not stay.
3 Even on such You cast Your eye,
and me You bring in judgment with You?
4 [Who can make the impure pure?
No one.]
5 Oh, his days are decreed,
the number of his months are with You,
his limits You fixed that he cannot pass.
6 Turn away from him that he may cease,
until he serves out his day like a hired man.
7 For a tree has hope:
though cut down, it can still be removed,
and its shoots will not cease.
8 Though its root grow old in the ground
and its stock die in the dust,

9 from the scent of water it flowers,
and puts forth branches like a sapling.
10 But a strong man dies defeated,
man breathes his last, and where is he?
11 Water runs out from a lake,
and a river is parched and dries up,
12 but a man lies down and will not arise,
till the sky is no more he will not awake
and will not rouse from his sleep.
13 Would that You hid me in Sheol,
concealed me till Your anger passed,
set me a limit and recalled me.
14 If a man dies will he live?
All my hard service days I shall hope
until my vanishing comes.
15 Call out and I shall answer you,
for the work of Your hand You should yearn.
16 For then You would count my steps,
You would not keep watch over my offense.
17 My crime would be sealed in a packet,
You would plaster over my guilt.
18 And yet, a falling mountain crumbles,
a rock is ripped from its place.
19 Water wears away stones,
its surge sweeps up the dust of the earth,
and the hope of man You destroy.

[20]You overwhelm him forever, and he goes off,
You change his face and send him away.
[21]If his sons grow great, he will not know.
And should they dwindle, he will not notice them.
[22] But the flesh upon him will ache,
his own being will mourn for him.

CHAPTER 14 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

13:28. *And man wears away like rot.* This entire verse belongs here, even though it's conventionally labeled verse 28 of the preceding chapter (the chapter divisions are late medieval and not intrinsic to the original biblical texts). Some scholars place this verse after 14:2. The Hebrew reads "And he wears away like rot," with the generic term *'adam*, "man," occurring at the beginning of the next line (14:1): "Man born of woman, / scant of days and sated with trouble."

3. *Even on such You cast Your eye.* Job, having evoked traditional biblical language for the brevity of human existence ("scant of days and sated with trouble, / like a blossom he comes forth and withers, / and flees like a shadow," verses 1–2), now asks God: how could You devote such terrible scrutiny to this ephemeral creature and how could you want to bring him to judgment? The verb rendered as "cast" is literally "open."

4. This verse has been bracketed because it looks dubious, and the second verset is too short to scan as poetry. Some have seen this as a marginal gloss that crept into the text.

6. *that he may cease.* A small emendation would convert this verb into an imperative, "cease" (that is, leave him be), which would fit better with "turn away from him."

until he serves out his day like a hired man. Job picks up the image he used earlier of human life as hard labor, with the worker longing for the day to come to an end.

7. *For a tree has hope.* Here the poet begins another of his fascinating forays into nature. Though he is of course aware that all things in nature eventually perish, he finds in the arboreal realm a strong image of survival that contrasts with the human condition. The cutting down of part of the trunk of a failing tree in order to allow it to regenerate appears to have been a known procedure in ancient agriculture.

9. *from the scent of water it flowers.* This quiet lyrical statement embodies a fine hyperbole: the very scent of water is enough to make the tree blossom.

10. *But a strong man dies defeated.* The noun *gever* usually indicates man in his virile strength, and is cognate with *gibor*, warrior. The adjective "strong" has been added here because there is an intended antithesis with "defeated" at the end of the verset. That verb usually means "to be weak," but in Exodus 32:18 it indicates defeat and is contrasted with "triumph" (*gevurah*, another cognate of *gever*). Since it would make little sense for the strong man to be weak after death, the probable sense is that he dies, finally defeated by death.

11. *a lake.* The Hebrew *yam* more often means "sea," but it can also mean "lake," and it makes much better sense for a lake to run dry than the sea.

12. *till the sky is no more he will not awake.* This emphatic vision of the irrevocability of death, reiterated by Job, might conceivably be a rejoinder to a new idea of an afterlife beginning to emerge in the Late Biblical period, though the ephemerality of human life is a theme struck by many biblical writers, early and late.

13. *hid me in Sheol.* Job is surely not talking about survival after death, but rather, as else-where in biblical poetry, he invokes Sheol as a deep dark cavern below the ground where one might hide.

14. *until my vanishing comes.* Some understand *ḥalifati* as "my relief," but the primary sense of the verbal root is to be gone or slip away, with "change" as a secondary sense. Perhaps the poet is playing on both meanings of the term. See the comment on 10:17.

16. *For then You would count my steps.* Some scholars emend this clause as "For then You would not count my steps" in order to bring it into neat

parallelism with the second verset. It might, however, have a positive meaning: Amos Hakham has proposed that the image is of a solicitous parent counting the steps of a toddler.

17. *sealed in a packet, / . . . plaster over my guilt*. The most plausible reading is that in this wished-for condition in which God would finally relent, any accusations against Job would be sealed and covered up—in effect, expunged from the legal record.

19. *and the hope of man You destroy.* There is a pointed contrast between the solid elements of nature—mountain, rock, stones, earth—that are nevertheless overturned, and the fragility of human hope. At the same time, these metaphors suggest an analogy between the fearsome forces of destruction in nature and God's implacability toward man.

20. *goes off.* Here and elsewhere, this is a euphemism for death—one that highlights the irrevocable disappearance of the man who dies.

You change his face. Abraham ibn Ezra plausibly understands this as a reference to the rictus of the face distorted in death.

22. *But the flesh upon him will ache.* In order to concretize the awful bleakness of death, the poet uses what may be a poetic conceit or perhaps the trace of a folk belief: the newly dead, his flesh turned rigid and then quickly the object of decay, experiences a kind of afterimage of life that is nothing but pain. In any event, the idea is clear that the dead man knows nothing of the fate of the offspring in whom he invested so many expectations but is instead locked into the anguish of his own physical extinction.

CHAPTER 15

[1]And Eliphaz the Temanite spoke up and he said:
[2]Will a wise man speak up ideas of hot air
and with the east wind fill his belly?
[3]Who disputes through speech will not avail
and from words will get no profit.
[4]So you thwart reverence,
take away prayer to God.
[5]For your crime guides your mouth,
and you choose the tongue of the cunning.
[6] Your own mouth condemns you, not I,
and your lips bear witness against you.
[7] Are you the first man to be born,
before the hills were you spawned?
[8]Did you listen at God's high council,
take away wisdom for yourself?
[9]What do you know that we don't know,
understand, that is not with us?
[10]The gray-haired and the aged are with us,
far older than your father.
[11] Are God's consolations too little for you,

and the word that He whispered to you?
12How your heart has taken you off,
and how your eyes have prompted you,
13that you should turn your hot air against God
and let out words from your mouth!
14What is man that he should merit
and that he born of woman should be in the right?
15 Why, His holy ones He does not trust,
and the heavens are not pure in His eyes.
16All the more, one vile and foul,
man who drinks mischief like water.
17I shall declare to you, listen to me,
and what I saw I shall recount,
18what the wise men have told
and have not concealed from their fathers.
19 To them alone the land was given,
no stranger passed in their midst.
20All the wicked man's days he quakes,
and few years are set aside for the tyrant.
21The sound of fear is in his ears,
in peacetime the despoiler overtakes him.
22He trusts not to come back from darkness,
and he is targeted by the sword.
23He wanders for bread—where is it?
He knows that the dark day awaits him.

[24] Failing and foe bring him terror,
overwhelm him like a king set for siege.
[25] For he reached out his hand against God,
and Shaddai he assaulted.
[26]He rushes against him in neck-armor,
with his thickly bossed shield.
[27]His face is covered with fat,
his loins are layered with blubber.
[28] He dwells in ruined towns,
in houses where no one lives that are readied for rubble heaps.
[29]He gets no riches, his wealth will not stand,
his yield does not bend to the earth.
[30]He does not turn away from darkness,
his shoots the flame withers,
he turns away in the breath of his mouth.
[31]Let the wayward not trust in vain things,
for in vain will his recompense be.
[32]Untimely he will wilt,
and his boughs will not be green.
[33]He will shed his unripe fruit like a vine
and cast off his bloom like an olive tree.
[34]For the crowd of the tainted is barren,
and fire consumes bribery's tent.
[35]Pregnant with wretchedness, giving birth to crime,
their belly prepares deceit.

CHAPTER 15 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *hot air*. The literal sense of the Hebrew is “wind.” The parallel term in the second verset, “east wind,” is a hot, blighting wind that blows from the desert. It is noteworthy that in this second round of the debate, Eliphaz, whose first speech (chapter 4) began diplomatically, launches a frontal assault against Job, denouncing him as a juggler of empty words and then an impious sinner (verses 4–6).

4. *take away.* The somewhat odd verb, which means to remove something from a whole or to subtract, is picked up in a slightly different sense in verse 8, when Job is sarcastically asked whether he has taken away wisdom from the divine council.

6. *Your own mouth condemns you.* Job’s staunch defense of his own integrity as well as his challenge to God is taken by Eliphaz as clear evidence that he is an impious liar.

7. *Are you the first man to be born.* Again, the wisdom of the ages, and of age (compare verse 10), is invoked as an argument against what the friends construe as Job’s arrogant presumption.

11. *God’s consolations . . . / the word that He whispered to you*. No mention of such solicitous address by God to Job has been made, but the conventionally pious Eliphaz may assume that God always whispers messages of consolation, even to egregious sinners like Job.

13. *turn your hot air against God / . . . let out words*. This line is a pointed verbal echo of verses 2 and 3 and has been translated to make that clear, as it is in the Hebrew.

15. *Why, His holy ones He does not trust.* The holy ones, *qedoshim*, would be angelic beings, members of the celestial entourage. Perfection is God’s alone, and His uncompromising gaze finds defects in all other beings, celestial and terrestrial.

19. *To them alone the land was given.* The relevance of this whole verse to Eliphaz's argument is unclear. Perhaps he means to say that the sages of old, from whom he and his companions have inherited their wisdom, were free from the misleading influences of foreign presences, and hence their wisdom was irreproachable.

24. *Failing and foe.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "foe and distress," but the two Hebrew terms are locked together in alliteration, *tsar umetsukah*, an effect the translation tries to imitate.

set for siege. The noun *kidor* appears only here. Guesses at its meaning have been made through proposed Semitic cognates, but the sense remains uncertain.

25. *For he reached out his hand against God, / and Shaddai he assaulted.* If this general portrait of the wicked man is intended by Eliphaz to refer at least by implication to Job, the image of a martial assault on God is truly extravagant. Naphtali Herz Tur-Sinai has proposed that these lines hark back to the Canaanite creation myth, in which the assailant against El, the sky god (that is the term for God used here), would be a mythic warrior allied with the primordial sea monster.

26. *in neck-armor.* The Hebrew simply says "in neck." The translation, with an eye to the parallel phrase in the second verset, follows the proposal of Tur-Sinai and Pope that the word is an ellipsis for armor worn to protect the neck.

27. *fat, / . . . blubber*. The image of a fat warrior may seem incongruous, but excessive fat in Psalms is an image of wicked complacency and self-indulgence. The borderline, moreover, between being fat and robust is a little vague in the ancient Near East (one might perhaps think of the aggressive build of an NFL lineman).

28. *He dwells in ruined towns.* After the wicked man's presumption in assaulting God, he is doomed to a fate of misery, living among ruins, failing in all his endeavors (verses 29–34).

30. *he turns away in the breath of his mouth.* This translation reproduces the enigmatic character of the Hebrew, where each word is intelligible but they make little sense together. The verb "turns away," *yasur*, is identical with the verb at the beginning of the first verset, where it is used with a negative, but its meaning in this verset is unclear. The contention of many interpreters that

it refers to death ("pass away") flies in the face of its use elsewhere in the Bible, where it always refers to turning away or swerving from a set trajectory or disengaging from someone or something. Perhaps, if the received text here is authentic, it might mean that the evil man through his own empty and self-deluding talk swerves from the right path.

31. *recompense.* Or "transformation." The translation is somewhat conjectural.

32. *wilt.* The Masoretic Text has *timalei*ʾ, "you will fill," which makes little sense either grammatically or semantically. This translation assumes an emendation to *yimol*, "he will wilt" or "he will wither."

CHAPTER 16

[1]And Job spoke up and he said:
I have heard much of this sort,
wretched consolers are you all.
[2]Is there any end to words of hot air,
or what compels you to speak up?
[3]I, too, like you, would speak,
were you in my place
[4]I would din words against you,
and would wag my head over you.
[5] I would bolster you with my speech,
my lips' movement would hold back pain.
[6]Should I speak, my pain would not be held back,
should I desist, it would not go away from me.
[7]But now He has worn me out.
You devastate all my people.
[8]And You crease my face, it becomes a witness,
my gauntness deposes against me.
[9]His wrath tore me apart, seethed against me,
He gnashed His teeth against me,
my foe's eyes glare at me.

10 They gaped with their mouths against me,
in scorn they struck my cheeks,
together they close ranks round me.
11 God delivers me to a wrongdoer
lets me fall in the hands of the wicked.
12 I was tranquil—he shook me to pieces,
seized my nape and broke me apart,
set me up as a target for Him.
13 His archers gathered around me.
He pierces my kidneys, pitiless,
He spills my gall to the ground.
14 He breaches me breach upon breach,
rushes at me like a warrior.
15 Sackcloth I sewed for my scabs,
and I thrust my horn in the dust.
16 My face was reddened from weeping,
and on my eyelids—death's shadow,
17 for no outrage I had done,
and my prayer had been pure.
18 Earth, O do not cover my blood,
and let there be no place for my scream.
19 Even now, in the heavens my witness stands,
one who vouches for me up above.
20 My advocates, my companions!
Before God my eye sheds tears.
21 Let a man dispute with God

and a human with his fellow.
22For a handful of years will come,
and on the path of no return I shall go.
17:1 My spirit is wrecked,
my days flicker out.
Graves are what I have.

CHAPTER 16 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

4. *din*. The root of this verb *ḥ- b-r* looks as though it were the same as the common Hebrew verb that means "to join," but, as J. J. Finklestein has shown, it actually derives from a different root (a palatal consonant *ḥet* rather than a guttural one) that indicates "noise."

wag my head over you. Here the gesture appears to indicate mockery rather than sympathy.

5. *I would bolster you with my speech.* The Hebrew says "my mouth." The switched attitude here is a little confusing. First Job said that, were his friends in his place, he would speak just as they have done, dinning accusatory words into their ears. Now he says he would comfort them. Perhaps he wants to suggest that, unlike them, he would follow accusation with genuine consolation.

hold back pain. The Hebrew says merely "hold back," but the verb in immediate context may be an ellipsis since "pain . . . held back" appears in the next line.

6. *my pain would not be held back.* This is another slightly disorienting shift. Job, having taken up the fantasy that he and his three interlocutors would be in reversed positions, now drops it abruptly, for it has made him think again of his own unrelenting anguish. Now he returns to the familiar theme of his intolerable suffering: whether he speaks or is silent, it will not leave him.

7. *You devastate all my people.* The reference could well be to Job's dead children and servants. The switch from third person to second person between the two versets is fairly common in biblical usage.

8. *crease my face . . . / my gauntness*. Job's ravaged body, a highly visible external sign of his suffering, has been construed as incriminating evidence that he must have done something to deserve it.

9. *tore me apart.* This violent verb is used for predatory animals rending their prey.

my foe's eyes glare at me. The literal sense of the verb is "to hone" or "to sharpen."

10. *They gaped.* Although Job sees God as his real persecutor, here he imagines a crowd of enemies—in all likelihood, God's henchmen—who attack him and humiliate him. The three friends have, of course, arrogated to themselves the role of such henchmen.

12. *shook me to pieces, / . . . broke me apart*. In the Hebrew, the two verbs of violent assault resemble each other phonetically and morphologically: *wayefarpereini*, *wayefatspetseini*.

14. *breaches me . . . / rushes at me*. The two versets neatly illustrate the general pattern in biblical poetry of introducing narrative development between the first verset and the second: in the martial metaphor, first the defensive walls are breached, then the warrior rushes forward through the breach in attack.

15. *scabs.* Many interpreters, on the basis of Aramaic and Arabic cognates, understand this simply as "skin" (this is the sole occurrence of the noun *geled* in the Bible). But in rabbinic Hebrew the word means the scab over a wound, and that seems more directly relevant to Job's plight.

my horn. As repeatedly in Psalms and elsewhere, the horn is a symbol of strength.

18. *let there be no place.* Within the earth itself there should be no place to hide the scream or cry. The conjunction of the earth's not covering the blood and not muffling the scream is probably a reminiscence of God's words to Cain, "Your brother's blood cries out [the same verbal root as here] to me from the soil" (Genesis 4:10). This allusion would implicitly cast God in the role of the archetypal murderer.

19. *my witness stands.* The Hebrew simply uses the implied verb “to be.” The witness up above is surely not God but rather the impartial mediator or judge for whom Job has already expressed a longing.

20. *My advocates, my companions.* If the received text is correct here, the only way to understand these words is as a bitingly sarcastic address to the three companions.

21. *Let a man dispute with God / and a human with his fellow.* The Hebrew is somewhat obscure. The meaning may be: would that a man might have a confrontation in court with God just as he would with a human accuser or legal adversary.

17:1. *My spirit is wrecked.* This triadic line, though set at the beginning of the next chapter in the conventional division into chapters, clearly concludes this whole section of Job’s complaint.

CHAPTER 17

[2] So help me, mockery is with me,
in their galling my eye wakes through the night.
[3]Come, stand pledge for me,
who will offer his handshake for me?
[4]Since their heart You hid from reason,
and so You will not exalt them.
[5] For profit he informs on friends,
and his sons' eyes waste away.
[6]He has made me a byword of peoples,
spit in the face, I became.
[7]My eye is bleared from anguish,
and my limbs are all like shadow.
[8]The upright are outraged by this,
and the innocent roused over the tainted.
[9] The righteous will cling to his way,
and the clean of hands augment in strength.
[10]And yet, all of you, return and come,
but I won't find a wise man among you.
[11]My days have passed,
my plans pulled apart,

the desires of my heart.
12 Night they would turn into day,
"Light is near"—in the face of darkness.
13 If I hope for Sheol as my home,
that I might cushion my couch with darkness,
14to the Pit I would say, "My father you are;
my mother and sister, the worm,"
15where then is my hope,
and my good—who can glimpse it?
16 Will it go down to the bars of Sheol,
altogether in the dust will it plunge?

CHAPTER 17 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *So help me*. The Hebrew *ʾim loʾ* (ostensibly, "if not") is here the formula for beginning a solemn oath.

my eye wakes through the night. The sense of the clause is unclear. The simple meaning of the verb is "to spend the night." The phrase might suggest insomnia because of excitation.

4. *heart . . . reason*. As often elsewhere, the heart is invoked as the organ of understanding.

5. *For profit he informs on friends.* This verset is the first of several in this chapter that are not readily intelligible and probably reflect a glitch in scribal transmission. The literal sense of the three Hebrew words is "for-a-portion he-tells friends." This translation, like all others, is no more than a guess.

6. *spit in the face.* The Hebrew *tophet* is obscure. The translation, mindful of a possible Aramaic cognate, interprets it as an act of humiliation parallel to "a

byword of peoples," only more extreme.

9. *The righteous will cling to his way.* Though in the previous verse Job mentions the outrage of the upright over his unwarranted suffering, this celebration of the staunchness and the augmented strength of the righteous sounds more like the three friends than like Job, and it is possible that the entire verse doesn't belong here.

12. *Night they would turn into day.* While some critics see this verse as anomalous in context, it makes plausible sense as a withering characterization by Job of the "comfort" his three friends have been offering him. Thus, Bildad has said (8:5–7) that if Job would only seek God wholeheartedly, his latter days would be far more glorious than his beginnings. For the suffering Job, such language amounts to saying that "light is near—in the face of darkness."

13. *If I hope for Sheol as my home.* This desire for release from anguish through death is perfectly consonant with the death-wish poem (chapter 3) with which Job began his complaint.

15. *my good.* The Masoretic Text has *tiqwati*, "my hope," which is the last word of the first verset and the immediately preceding word in the Hebrew text. Repetition of this sort is not common in biblical poetry, and one suspects dittography (the inadvertent scribal duplication of a word or of letters in sequence). This translation follows the Septuagint, which appears to have used a Hebrew text that read *tovati*, "my good."

16. *Will it go down to the bars of Sheol.* The Hebrew construct plural term *badey* is obscure in context. Elsewhere, *bad* is a pole, as in the poles used to carry the sanctuary, so "bars"—perhaps the bars that shut the gates of the underworld—might be appropriate here. This is also the surmise of the Revised Standard Version. The antecedent of "it" is "my hope" in the previous verse. Since the hope Job had expressed was to go down to Sheol, he may be saying, bitterly, that his hope is nowhere to be seen because it has plunged into the realm of extinction without him.

CHAPTER 18

[1]And Bildad the Shuhite spoke up and he said:
[2]How long till you both put an end to words?
Consider, and then we may speak.
[3]Why are we reckoned as beasts,
besotted in your eyes?
[4] Who tears himself apart in his wrath—
for you shall the earth be forsaken
and the rock ripped from its place?
[5]Yes, the light of the wicked will gutter,
and the spark of his flame will not shine.
[6]Light goes dark in his tent,
and his lamp gutters before him.
[7]His vigorous strides are straitened,
his own counsel flings him down.
[8] For his feet are caught in a net
and he treads on a tangle of lines.
[9]The trap grips his heel,
the trip cord seizes him.
[10]A rope is hidden for him in the ground,
his snare upon the path.

[11]All round terrors befright him,
and they scatter at his feet.
[12] His vigor turns to hunger,
disaster ready at his side.
[13]Eating his limbs and skin,
Death's Firstborn eats his limbs,
[14]tears him from his tent, his stronghold,
and sends him off to the King of Terrors.
[15] He dwells in a tent not his,
his abode is strewn with brimstone.
[16]Below, his roots dry up,
and above, his foliage withers.
[17]His remembrance is lost from the earth,
no name has he abroad.
[18] They thrust him from light to darkness,
and from the world of men drive him out.
[19] No son nor grandson in his kinfolk,
and no remnant where he sojourned.
[20]At his fate, latecomers are dumbstruck
and old-timers are seized with dread.
[21] Surely these are the dwellings of evil,
and this the place of him who knew not God.

CHAPTER 18 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *you both*. The Hebrew verbs in this verse and the next are plural, and the translation follows Raymond Scheindlin in assuming that Bildad is addressing Eliphaz and Zophar. He would then be expressing impatience with them: how long will you go on with your ineffectual speech, behaving as though the three of us were imbeciles, when the response to Job's outrageous stance is plain and clear, as I shall now demonstrate?

an end. The Hebrew *qintsey* is anomalous, and this rendering reflects a tradition of Hebrew commentators going back to the Middle Ages that links it with *qeits*, "end."

4. *Who tears himself apart.* As the reference switches to a single person, we realize that the guilty party is Job.

for you shall the earth be forsaken. There is, Bildad angrily contends, an established order of things that Job in his egotistical presumption seeks to overturn.

8. *For his feet are caught in a net.* As elsewhere in the poetry of the three friends, Bildad resorts to the boilerplate language of Psalms that describes the disaster inevitably awaiting the wicked man. At the same time, one sees here the rich resourcefulness of synonymity of the Job poet, who in three lines of verse deploys six different terms for a trap.

11. *they scatter at his feet.* The received text reads "scatter him," but "him" is not a logical object of "scatter." The Septuagint reads "they trip him up at his feet."

12. *His vigor turns to hunger.* More literally, "his vigor becomes hungry." The term *ʾon*, "vigor," is the same word associated with the once confident strides of the wicked man in verse 7.

13. *limbs.* This is the same doubtful term, *badim*, that appears in 17:16, so the translation is conjectural, though reference to a body part attached to skin seems probable.

Death's Firstborn. This is clearly a mythological figure, as is the King of Terrors in the next verse. The Hebrew term for death, *mawet* (in the construct form *mot*), is identical with the name of the Canaanite god of death, Mot. The vivid cannibalistic image of Death gnawing away at the limbs of the transgressor is not conventional language.

15. *He dwells in a tent not his.* This could well be a continuation of the mythological imagery: the wicked man is torn from his own tent, where he thought himself secure, and dragged down to the realm of the King of Terrors, where he finds himself in an abode of chaos and dissolution strewn with brimstone (an agent of destruction).

18. *They thrust him.* These anonymous plural figures are emissaries of destruction, perhaps henchmen of the King of Terrors.

the world of men. The Hebrew *tevel* indicates the inhabited world—hence "of men" in the translation.

19. *No son nor grandson.* The cutting off of a man's hereditary line is, of course, an ultimate curse in the biblical world.

20. *his fate.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "his day."

latecomers . . . / old-timers. The terms, *ʾaḥaronim* and *qadmonim*, refer to latter-day or recent people and to people from earlier times or predecessors. Exegetical efforts to align these terms with west and east are unconvincing.

21. *Surely these.* The patness of Bildad's concluding formulation neatly reflects the confident complacency of his ethical outlook.

CHAPTER 19

[1]And Job spoke up and he said:
[2] How long will you cause me grief
and crush me with words?
[3]Ten times now you have shamed me,
you do not blush to spurn me.
[4]And if in fact I have erred,
with me shall my error lodge.
[5]If in fact you vaunt over me
and reprove me with my disgrace,
[6]know, then, that God has undone me
and encircled me with His net.
[7]Look, I scream “Outrage!” and I am not answered,
I shout and there is no justice.
[8]My path He blocked and I cannot pass,
and on my ways He set darkness.
[9]My glory He stripped from me,
and took off the crown from my head.
[10]He shattered me on all sides—I am gone.
He uprooted my hope like a tree.

11 His wrath flared up against me,
and He reckoned me one of His foes.
12 Together His troops have come,
laid siege-works up against me
and encamped around my tent.
13 My brothers He distanced from me,
and my comrades turned strangers to me.
14 My dear ones withdrew, friends forgot me.
15 Those who dwelled in my house and my slavegirls
reckoned me as a stranger,
I was an alien in their eyes.
16 To my servant I called and he did not answer,
with my mouth I pleaded to him.
17 My breath became strange to my wife,
I repelled my very own children.
18 Even little ones despised me—
when I rose, they spoke against me.
19 All my intimates reviled me,
those I loved have turned against me.
20 My bones stuck to my skin and my flesh,
and I escaped with the skin of my teeth.
21 Mercy, have mercy on me, my companions,
for God's hand has blighted me.
22 Why do you hound me like God,
and of my flesh you are not sated?
23 Would, then, that my words were written,

that they were inscribed in a book,
[24]with an iron pen and lead
to be hewn in rock forever.
[25]But I know my redeemer lives,
and in the end he will stand up on earth,
[26] and after they flay my skin,
from my flesh I shall behold God.
[27]For I myself shall behold,
my eyes will see—no stranger's,
my heart is harried within me.
[28]Should you say, "How more can we hound him?
The root of the thing rests in him."
[29]Fear the sword,
for wrath is a sword-worthy crime,
so you may know there is judgment.

CHAPTER 19 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *How long will you cause me grief*. Job's opening formulation is an explicit rejoinder to the beginning of Bildad's immediately preceding speech (18:2), "How long till you both put an end to words." The term "words," *milim*, also appears in Job's speech, at the end of this verse.

7. *I scream "Outrage!"* Screaming this word, *ḥamas*, would have been a desperate call for help when, say, a person was attacked by thugs. There is an implicit narrative momentum in the sequence of lines that begins here. First, Job is assailed and screams for help; then he tries to run away but his path is

blocked; then he is seized, stripped, and shattered on all sides. Verse 11 summarizes this whole development, and then Job moves on from the metaphor of being mugged or attacked by brigands to a military metaphor (verse 12).

13. *My brothers He distanced from me.* As elsewhere, Job's personal losses and physical affliction are painfully compounded by his becoming a social pariah, a state to which the scathing rebuke of the three companions has clearly contributed.

16. *To my servant I called and he did not answer.* Together with the estrangement from his social peers, Job has lost the authority that his wealth enabled him to enjoy: the people who had been his household staff—in all probability, "servant" implies slave status, like the feminine term in the previous verse—treat him like a stranger and ignore him. Even children (verse 18) mock him.

with my mouth I pleaded. Though this sounds a little awkward, the obtrusion of the mouth prepares the way for Job's foul breath in the next verse.

17. *My breath . . . / I repelled*. Job is probably thinking of the disgusting symptoms of his disease. It is perhaps poetic license for him to invoke his children, all of whom have been killed. "My very own children" is literally "the children of my belly."

19. *intimates.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "people of my council."

20. *I escaped with the skin of my teeth.* Because teeth don't have skin, some scholars have tried to emend the text. But poetry need not be bound by anatomical logic. The verse should be read as vivid hyperbole: I was so ravaged by disease and deprivation, turned into mere skin and bones, that all I came away with was the (essentially nonexistent) skin of my teeth.

22. *hound me like God.* The frequently used term for "God," *ʾel*, could also be understood as "a god," and this is how Scheindlin generally treats it. But the point seems to be that there is one God who is perversely persecuting Job, not that the gods in general are inimical to man.

of my flesh you are not sated. Job represents his three reprovers as ghastly cannibals.

24. *an iron pen and lead.* The lead, initially puzzling, was explained by Rashi as the material used to darken the incised letters in order to make them more visible, and archaeology now offers some confirmation of this idea.

25. *I know my redeemer lives.* This famous line, long the subject of Christological interpretation, in fact continues the imagery of a legal trial to which Job reverts so often. The redeemer is someone, usually a family member, who will come forth and bear witness on his behalf, and the use of "stand up" in the second verset has precisely that courtroom connotation.

26. *and after they flay my skin, / from my flesh I shall behold God.* Amos Hakham boldly relates this strong line to Job's wish to incise his words in stone, paraphrasing it as follows: "The scars and the bruises in my flesh are the writing God inscribes in my flesh instead of the inscription I sought to make." If Hakham is right, Job would be representing himself here somewhat like the condemned man in Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" who is meant to come to an illuminating understanding of his crime through the terrible machine that inscribes his transgression on his flesh. Job, however, does not concede that he has sinned, so the idea he expresses is that through all his suffering, through the tatters of his lacerated flesh, he will in the end behold God, come face-to-face with his divine persecutor and finally vindicate himself.

27. *my heart is harried within me.* The Hebrew says literally "my kidneys come to an end [or, long] within me." This involves a prominent alliteration, *kalu kilyotay*, that the translation tries to approximate.

29. *there is judgment.* The very last word of Job's speech is problematic. The Masoretic editors were not entirely sure whether it should be pronounced *shadun* or *sheidin* or perhaps something in between. Consequently, interpretations have varied wildly. Some see a reference to demons, *sheidim*, or to a pagan god. This translation follows a tradition that goes back to a couple of the ancient versions and to Rashi in the Middle Ages and which construes the enigmatic term as *shedin*, that there is judgment, or law.

CHAPTER 20

1 And Zophar the Naamathite spoke out and he
said:
2 So my thoughts give me a rejoinder,
by dint of my inner sense.
3 I have heard the reproof to my shame,
and a spirit from my mind lets me answer.
4 This have you known of old,
from when man was set upon earth?
5 For the wicked men's gladness is fleeting,
and the tainted man's joy but a moment.
6 Though his summit ascend to the heavens,
and his head reach up to the clouds,
7 like his turd, he is lost forever,
those who see him will say, "Where is he?"
8 Like a dream he flies off, none will find him,
he will melt like a nighttime vision.
9 The eye that observed him will do it no more,
nor again will his place behold him.
10 His sons will placate the poor,
and his hands will give back his wealth.

[11]His bones that were full of youth
with him will lie in the dust.
[12]Should evil be sweet in his mouth
and he hide it under his tongue,
[13]should he cherish it, not let it go,
and hold it back on his palate,
[14] his food will turn in his innards—
vipers' bile in his gut.
[15]Goods he swallowed he will vomit,
from his belly God will expel them.
[16]He will suck the venom of vipers,
the tongue of the asp will slay him.
[17]He will see no streams of rivers
and brooks of honey and curds.
[18]He will give back gain, not swallow it,
like the goods, their value, and take no
pleasure.
[19]For he crushed, he forsook the poor,
he stole a house that he did not build.
[20]For he will not know quiet in his belly,
with his treasure he will not escape.
[21]There is no remnant of his food,
so he cannot hope to have bounty.
[22]When his need is filled he feels distressed—
every wretched man's hand comes against him.
[23]Let him fill his belly,

He will send against him His burning wrath
to rain down upon him as he eats.
[24]Should he flee from the iron weapon,
a bow of bronze will pierce him.
[25] Unsheathed, it comes out through his back,
the blade through his gall,
casting terror upon him.
[26]Sheer darkness lurks for his treasured larks,
a fire unfanned consumes him,
the remnant of his tent is smashed.
[27]The heavens will lay bare his crime
and earth will rise up against him.
[28]A torrent will take down his house,
pouring out on the day of His wrath.
[29]This is the wicked man's share from God,
the inheritance God has willed him.

CHAPTER 20 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *by dint of my inner sense*. Beginning with this clause, the language of Zophar's entire speech is at many points unusually crabbed, and as a result some of the translation is conjectural. The term *ḥush* here has been construed by some to mean "hurry" or "agitation," though it seems more likely that it carries its other meaning of "sense"—Zophar confidently declaring that his own theologically correct intuition has clearly instructed him how to answer Job.

3. *a spirit from my mind.* Literally, “my understanding.”

7. *like his turd, he is lost forever.* The preceding lines about the ephemerality of the wicked man’s success are boilerplate Wisdom poetry. Here, however, Zophar expresses his idea with scatological pungency. “Turd” makes a vivid counterpoint to “heavens” and “clouds” in the preceding line.

14. *his food will turn in his innards— / vipers’ bile in his gut.* This constitutes a strong culminating reversal of the extended description (verses 12 and 13) of the wicked man selfishly and sensually preserving in his mouth the sweet taste of his ill-gotten bounty.

15. *from his belly God will expel them.* The literal sense of the phrase is “from his belly God will reduce him to poverty [or take away all his gain].” The belly is featured prominently throughout this tirade as the bodily image of the wicked man’s greed.

18. *like the goods, their value, and take no pleasure.* This entire verset is extremely cryptic in the Hebrew. It might possibly mean that he will have to give back (first verset) either the goods he has wrongfully seized or their full value without having had the chance to enjoy them.

20. *with his treasure.* There are widely varying constructions of this phrase, but it seems likely that the *bet* before *ḥamud*, “treasure,” is a *bet* of agency. The sense, then, is that his ill-gotten wealth will be of no help to him on the day of disaster.

21. *he cannot hope to have bounty.* Again, the translation is conjectural.

23. *as he eats.* The literal sense of *bileḥumo* is “in his meat” or “in his flesh.” There are varying interpretations of the word here (some relate it to weaponry), but it would appear to carry forward the theme of the greedy man who stuffs his belly and then comes to grief.

24. *a bow of bronze.* This is, of course, an ellipsis for the arrow shot from the bronze bow.

25. *Unsheathed.* As the verb indicates, we have now switched to a different weapon, from bow to sword.

26. *lurks for his treasured larks.* The Hebrew uses two phonetically related terms both of which have the core sense of “hide” and the second of which often means “treasured” (that is, hidden because treasured—perhaps here the

man's children). The two Hebrew words in immediate sequence are *tamun* (frequently associated with traps) and *tsefunaw* (singular *tsafun*).

CHAPTER 21

[1]And Job spoke up and he said:
[2]Hear, O hear my word,
and let this be your consolation.
[3]Bear with me while I speak,
and after I speak you may mock.
[4]Is my complaint directed to man,
and why should I not be impatient?
[5]Turn to me and be appalled,
put your hand over your mouth,
[6]when I recall and am dismayed,
and shuddering grips my flesh.
[7] Why do the wicked live,
grow rich and gather wealth?
[8]Their seed is firm-founded before them,
their offspring before their eyes.
[9]Their homes are safe from fear,
and God's rod is not against them.
[10]Their bull breeds and brings no miscarriage,
their cow calves and does not lose her young.
[11]They send out their little ones like a flock,

and their children go dancing.
12 They carry the timbrel and lyre
and rejoice at the sound of the flute.
13 They pass their days in bounty,
and in an instant they go down to Sheol.
14 And they say to God, “Turn away from us,
we have no desire to know Your ways.
15 Who is Shaddai that we should serve Him,
and what use for us to entreat Him?”
16 Look, their bounty is not in their hands—
the counsel of the wicked is far from me!
17 How often does the lamp of the wicked gutter
and their disaster come upon them—
does He portion out shares in His wrath,
18 and are they as straw in the wind
and chaff that the storm has snatched?
19 Does God set aside for His sons His affliction?
Let Him pay him back that he may know.
20 Let his own eyes see his collapse,
and let him drink from Shaddai’s seething
venom.
21 For what will he care for his home when he’s
gone,
and the number of his months broken off?
22 Will he teach knowledge to God,
and will he judge those on high?

[23]One person dies full of innocence,
completely tranquil and at peace.
[24]His udders are filled with milk,
the marrow of his bones still moist.
[25]Another dies with a bitter heart,
and he has never enjoyed good.
[26] Together in the dust they lie,
and the worm will cover them.
[27]Look, I know your plans,
and your violent schemes against me.
[28]When you say, “Where is the nobleman’s house,
and where is the tent of the wicked’s abode?”
[29] Have you not asked the wayfarers,
and their tokens you cannot mistake?
[30]For on disaster’s day harm is held back,
on the day when wrath is unleashed.
[31]Who will tell to his face his way,
and for what he did, who will pay him back?
[32]And he is borne off to a sepulcher
and on the grave-mound someone keeps watch.
[33]The clods of the brook are sweet to him,
and every man is drawn after him,
and before him—beyond all number.
[34]And how do you console me with mere breath,
when your answers are naught but betrayal?

CHAPTER 21 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *consolation*. Job's use of this word is probably sarcastic: the friends, having purportedly come to "console" or "comfort" Job, have vilified him; his rejoinder now will set them straight.

5. *put your hand over your mouth.* This is a sign of horror (the Hebrew says "put hand over mouth").

7. *Why do the wicked live.* The thriving of the wicked is the theme on which Job expands for the rest of this speech, in direct refutation of his three reprovers' pat notion that the wicked always get their just deserts.

13. *They pass their days in bounty, / and in an instant they go down to Sheol.* After the elaborate picture of the wicked enjoying all the delights of worldly existence, rejoicing in their offspring (the greatest blessing in the biblical scale of values) and surrounded by material abundance, they are granted a quick and painless death.

15. *Who is Shaddai that we should serve him.* The formulation of this arrogant question may echo Pharaoh's words to Moses and Aaron, "Who is the LORD that I should heed his voice?" (Exodus 5:2).

16. *their bounty is not in their hands.* This whole verse looks like a parenthetical interjection by Job: the riches of the wicked are not their own doing, and Job himself is far from sharing their arrogant dismissal of God. Nevertheless, they prosper.

17. *portion out shares in His wrath.* The Hebrew *ḥavalim* means both "pangs" and "shares," but the verb "portion out" suggests that "shares" is the leading edge of the pun.

18. *straw in the wind / . . . chaff that the storm has snatched*. This image is a stock figure in Wisdom literature to represent the fate of destruction awaiting the wicked. Compare, for example, Psalm 1:4: "Not so the wicked, / but like chaff that the wind drives away." Job's argument, here and elsewhere, is that such language may sound good, but it does not jibe with the facts of experience.

19. *Let Him pay him back.* The second "him" refers to the wicked man, who, alas, is not paid back by God for his evil and hence never knows that there are consequences for wrongdoing.

20. *his collapse.* The Hebrew *kido* is anomalous, and the translation here follows an interpretive consensus that has been argued for on various grounds. One might emend the word to *beʾeido*, *ʾeid* meaning "disaster" (it occurs in verse 30) with the initial *be* used idiomatically before the object of the verb "to see."

seething venom. The Hebrew means both "venom" and "smoldering wrath," and so the translation adds "seething" to convey the double sense of the Hebrew pun.

21. *when he's gone.* Literally, "after him."

23. *full of innocence.* Many translations render the noun *tom* as something like "vigor" on the basis of the context here, but elsewhere it always means "innocence" or "blamelessness" (as in the frame-story of Job).

24. *udders.* The Hebrew *ʿatinim* occurs only here in the biblical corpus. The parallelism with the second verset requires a body part, and the Targum first understood it as udders (the established meaning of the word in modern Hebrew). It may seem incongruous to attach udders to a man, but the poet is probably thinking metaphorically of the fecundity of milch cows, and may also want to suggest a satirical image of the prospering wicked man fat from all he has eaten, with breastlike protuberances on his chest.

26. *Together in the dust they lie.* This idea is akin to a notion reiterated by Qohelet—that life portions out prosperity and misery arbitrarily, while in the end all share the fate of rotting in the grave.

28. *the nobleman's house, / . . . the wicked's abode*. Job was once a prospering nobleman. The fact that his house has been brought to ruin is adduced by the three reprovers as evidence that all along he has been wicked and now has gotten what he deserves.

29. *Have you not asked the wayfarers.* People who have traveled about and observed what actually happens in human affairs would be able to tell the three companions that, contrary to their complacent view, it is typically the wicked who thrive.

30. *harm is held back.* That is, the wicked are unscathed, even as disaster—storm, fire, marauders—sweeps away the innocent.

32. *a sepulcher.* The Hebrew plural *qevurot*, instead of the simple singular *qever*, "grave," suggests something grand: even in death the grandeur of the wicked is not diminished.

33. *after him, / . . . before him*. The image is of numberless throngs of admirers of the wicked man gathered round his burial rite.

34. *how do you console me with mere breath.* The verb "console," in an envelope structure, loops back to "your consolation" at the beginning of this poem. *Hevel*, "mere breath," is the term repeatedly insisted on by Qohelet, meaning something utterly devoid of substance.

betrayal. This is the last, bitter word of Job's speech: what is especially galling to him is that the three figures he thought were his friends have become his harsh denouncers.

CHAPTER 22

[1]And Eliphaz the Temanite spoke up and he said:
[2]Will a man avail with God,
will the discerning avail with Him?
[3]Does Shaddai desire that you be in the right,
or profit if your ways are blameless?
[4]Is it for your reverence that He reproves you,
comes to judgment against you?
[5] Why, your evil is great,
and there is no end to your crimes.
[6]For you take pawn from your brother for naught,
and strip the naked of their clothes.
[7]No water do you give to the famished,
and from the hungry you hold back bread.
[8]And the strong-armed possesses the land,
the privileged dwells upon it.
[9]Widows you send off empty-handed,
and the arms of the orphans are crushed.
[10] And so there are traps all around you,
sudden fear will strike you with terror,
[11]or darkness, where you cannot see,

and a spate of water will cover you.
12 Is not God in the height of the heavens?
See the topmost stars that are lofty.
13 And you say, “What does God know?
Through thick cloud can He judge?
14 Clouds are His shelter—He does not see,
on the rim of the heavens He walks.”
15 Would you keep the age-old path
on which wrongdoers trod,
16 who are shriveled before their time,
their foundation pours out like a river?
17 Who say to God, “Turn away from us,”
and what can Shaddai do to them?
18 When He has filled their homes with bounty—
the counsel of the wicked be far from me!
19 The righteous shall see and rejoice,
and the innocent shall mock them.
20 Their substance is surely destroyed,
and their remnant the fire consumes.
21 Be accustomed to Him, be at peace,
and through this will your comings be blessed.
22 Take, pray, from His mouth instruction,
and set His utterances in your heart.
23 If you come back to Shaddai, you’re restored,
if you banish evil from your tent,
24 and lay your gold down in the dust,

on a brook-bordered rock your Ophir treasure,
25and Shaddai will be your gold,
heaped up silver for you.
26For then you'll take pleasure in Shaddai,
and lift up your face to God.
27You will entreat Him and He will hear you,
and your vows you will pay.
28You will decree and it will come to be,
and light will gleam on your ways.
29 When they sink low and you say "Pride,"
who casts his eyes down He rescues.
30He lets the guilty escape,
he escapes through your spotless palms.

CHAPTER 22 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

5. *Why, your evil is great, / and there is no end to your crimes.* Eliphaz's entire speech is suffused with a sense of unreflective moral certitude. Since God gets no benefit from a man's righteousness (verses 2–4), it follows "logically" that a man afflicted by God, as Job has been, is guilty of unspeakable crimes.

6. *take pawn from your brother for naught.* Eliphaz now launches on a catalogue of crimes that, like his poetry, is heavily formulaic: taking away clothes from the indigent (presumably, the clothes are the pawn—see Exodus 22:25), withholding bread and water from the hungry and thirsty, allowing the manipulation of the legal and economic system by the powerful, oppressing the widow and the orphan.

strip the naked of their clothes. This translation, like the King James Version, mirrors the wording of the Hebrew, which is, of course, a prolepsis: these victims become naked when they are stripped of their clothes.

10. *And so.* It follows as an inevitable consequence of all these unspeakable crimes that Job is condemned to terrible torment.

12. *Is not God in the height of the heavens?* These words begin an impious speech that Eliphaz puts in Job's mouth: because God is high above, far removed from man and surrounded by thick cloud in His celestial abode, He surely cannot see what man does down below, and so a sinner like Job imagines he can act with impunity.

17. *and what can Shaddai do to them.* The first verset is the quoted speech of the wrongdoer; this second verset is essentially free indirect discourse—that is, someone's speech conveyed in the third person.

18. *the counsel of the wicked be far from me.* This clause is virtually identical with 21:16. It makes more sense in context here than in Job's speech, so one may suspect that it was inadvertently introduced into chapter 21 in scribal transcription.

21. *Be accustomed to Him.* This is the usual meaning of the verb *hasken.* The sense may be to enter into a habitual relationship of closeness with God.

blessed. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "be good."

23. *restored.* Literally, "be built" (or "rebuilt").

24. *lay your gold down in the dust.* Many interpreters understand this to mean, consider your gold as dust, but the preposition *ʿal* ("on," or more idiomatically here in English, "in") argues for the literal sense: Job is exhorted to strip himself of all his worldly possessions and to make God alone (verse 25) his treasure. Of course, disaster has already stripped him of his wealth; so either there is a disconnect with the frame-story, or Eliphaz is assuming that such a vicious exploiter as Job would have somehow continued to hide ill-gotten gains.

Ophir treasure. Ophir, to the south of the land of Israel, was celebrated for its fine gold. The Hebrew says simply "Ophir."

26. *lift up your face.* Here this is a gesture of prayer.

28. *gleam.* Almost all the English versions say "shine," but the Hebrew *nagah* is a specialized poetic word for giving off light.

29. *When they sink low and you say "Pride."* Both this verse and the next are rather crabbed in the Hebrew and so the translation is conjectural. (To begin with, it is far from certain that the cryptic *gewah* means "pride" here.) The translation tentatively reconstructs the meaning as follows: the repentant Job encounters people fallen on bad times and condemns them for having been proud (as in "Pride before a breakdown," Proverbs 16:18). When these unfortunates then embrace humility ("who casts his eyes down"), God rescues them. Though they were guilty (the meaning of *ʾi-naqi* in the next verse has been much contested), God enables them to escape from their disaster, granting them that favor because He takes into consideration the intervention on their behalf of the now blameless Job ("he escapes through your spotless palms"). All this is no more than an educated guess about the meaning of these two stubbornly obscure lines.

CHAPTER 23

[1]And Job spoke up and he said:
[2]Even now my complaint is defiant,
His hand lies heavy as I groan.
[3]Would that I knew how to find Him,
that I might come to where He dwells.
[4]I would lay out my case before Him
and would fill my mouth with contentions.
[5]I would know the words that He answered me,
and would grasp what He said to me.
[6]With great power would He debate me?
No! He alone would pay heed to me.
[7]There the upright can contend with Him,
I would get away for all time from my Judge.
[8]Look, to the east I go, and He is not there,
to the west, and I do not discern Him,
[9]To the north where He acts, and behold Him not,
He veils the south, and I do not see Him.
[10]For He knows the way with me,
tests me—I come out as gold.
[11] To His steps my foot held fast,

His way I kept, and I did not swerve.
12From His lips' command I did not turn,
in my bosom I stored His mouth's dictates.
13Yet He wants but one thing—and who can divert Him?
What he desires He will do.
14For He will finish out my fixed tally,
and much more of the same is with Him.
15So I am dismayed before Him,
I look, am afraid of Him.
16And God has made my heart quail,
Shaddai has dismayed me.
17For I am not severed from darkness,
and my face the gloom has covered.

CHAPTER 23 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *His hand lies heavy as I groan*. This is the first of a series of obscure clauses in this speech. The literal sense is "my hand was heavy on my groan." The translation emends "my hand," *yadi*, to "His hand," *yado*, a very small difference in Hebrew script. The preposition "on" before "groan" is understood to mean something like "in the midst of"—hence, "as I groan."

4. *lay out my case.* Job again resorts to his fantasy of meeting God for a fair legal argument in court.

6. *He alone would pay heed to me.* The Hebrew says literally "pay [or put] in [against?] me." An ellipsis or omission is assumed here: pay heed (*sim lev*).

The idea seems to be that if only Job could have his day in court with God, his divine persecutor would put aside His advantage of overwhelming power and pay attention to Job's argument in his own defense.

8. *east . . . / west*. These directional terms, like the ones in the next verse, can also refer to forward, backward, left, and right, and interpreters are divided as to which set of references is intended here. Since Job has spoken about searching out the place where God dwells (verse 3), the points of the compass seem more likely, and it makes more sense for God to "veil" (verse 9) the south than the right hand.

11. *To His steps my foot held fast.* It must be said that the language of this verse and the next sounds more like a conventionally pious Wisdom psalm (compare Psalm 119) than like Job. Given the relatively undistinguished poetry of this chapter and its textual difficulties, one might suspect that at least some of this text has been smuggled in from another source.

12. *in my bosom.* The translation reads *beḥeiqi* instead of the Masoretic *meiḥuqi*, "from my statute [tally?]." This reading is reflected in the Septuagint and the Vulgate. A scribal error might have been triggered by the occurrence of *ḥuqi* in verse 14.

13. *He wants but one thing.* The literal sense is "He is in one."

14. *He will finish out my fixed tally.* The probable reference is to the tally of Job's afflictions. The same verb and object, *hishlim ḥoq*, occur in Exodus 5:14 in reference to the tally of bricks of the Hebrew slaves.

and much more of the same is with Him. God has an abundance of further nasty things that he can inflict on human beings.

17. *my face.* The received text reads "from my face" (or "from my presence"), *mipanay*, but the suspect initial *mem* ("from") before the word for "face" is probably a dittography induced by the occurrence of *mipney* ("from" or "from before") in the first verset.

CHAPTER 24

[1] Why are dire times not stored by Shaddai
and those who know Him behold not his days?
[2] They set aside boundary stones,
a flock they steal and pasture it.
[3]The orphans' donkey they drive off, they take in
pawn the widow's ox.
[9][They steal the orphan from the breast,
and the poor man's suckling they take in pawn.]
[4]They push the paupers from the road,
together the earth's poor go in hiding.
[5]Why, like wild asses in the wilderness
they go forth on their task
searching for food,
the steppe offers bread to the lads.
[6]In the field they harvest their fodder,
glean leavings from the wicked's vineyard,
[7]naked, pass the night with no garment
and no clothing in the cold.
[8]By the mountain stream they are soaked
and unsheltered they hug a rock.

[10]Naked, they go round with no garment,
and hungry, they carry the sheaf.
[11]In the groves they make olive oil,
they trample the winepresses and they thirst.
[12]From the town the folk groan,
the dying breath of the fallen cries out,
and God finds no cause for blame.
[13]They joined the rebels against the light,
they did not know its ways,
and they did not dwell in its paths.
[14] By light the murderer rises,
he slays the poor and the indigent,
and at night he is like a thief.
[15]The adulterer's eye watches for twilight,
saying, "No eye will make me out."
He puts a mask on his face.
[16]They tunnel by dark into houses.
By day they seal themselves up.
They do not know light.
[17] For morning to all them is death's shadow
when they know the terrors of death's shadow.
[18] Let him be swiftly swept off on the waters,
cursed be his field in the land.
Let him not turn on the vineyard path.
[19]Parched land and heat steal away the snow;
Sheol, those who offend.

[20]Let the womb forget him.
    He is sweet to the worm.
Let him no more be recalled,
    and let wickedness break like wood.
[21]Let his mate be barren and not give birth,
    left a widow denied of good.
[22] He who hauled bulls with his strength
    will stand up and not trust in his life.
[23] Though God grant him safety on which he relies,
    His eyes are on their ways:
[24]They are on top a moment and are gone.
    Laid low, like the weeds they shrivel,
        and like heads of grain they wither.
[25]If it be not so, who will give me the lie,
    and render my word as naught?

CHAPTER 24 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Why are dire times not stored by Shaddai*. In this verse, the individual words and their syntactical connection are perfectly clear, but the meaning remains obscure. “Dire” has been added interpretively to “times,” following one prevalent construction of the verse. The sense then would be, why does God fail to reserve a time of punishment for the wicked, and why does He not allow His faithful to see His days of judgment?

2. *They.* The reference switches to the wicked, the ones Shaddai should punish.

9. *They steal the orphan from the breast.* This verse, bracketed to indicate it is probably out of place, does not seem to belong between verses 8 and 10, which are part of a description of the destitute who have been forced to flee to the wilderness, but it does fit here in the report of victimizing widows and orphans.

5. *like wild asses.* The "like" is merely implied in the Hebrew. Those who are now like these untamed beasts are the destitute who have run off to the badlands in order to escape persecution.

the steppe offers bread to the lads. The impoverished young are driven to forage in the wilderness for whatever sustenance they can find.

6. *fodder.* The term, generally indicating animal feed, reflects the bleak circumstances to which these destitute refugees have been reduced.

10. *hungry, they carry the sheaf.* They labor for landowners, carrying sheaves of grain from which they cannot partake. The same idea is expressed in the next verse in the image of trampling grapes while going thirsty.

12. *God finds no cause for blame.* This summarizing clause succinctly states Job's indictment of divine justice: the poor go hungry and thirsty, brutally exploited by the ruthless rich; multitudes of murdered people cry out in their death throes; yet God sees nothing awry.

By light the murderer rises. Some interpreters, through a rather forced invocation of a rabbinic idiom, claim that *ʾor* means "evening," not "light." But the plain meaning of the line, in complementary parallelism, is that the murderer gets up in broad daylight to commit his crime impudently, and then at night, in a different criminal style, sneaks around to do more of the same.

16. *By day they seal themselves up.* The reference is not entirely clear. Perhaps the clause suggests that after tunneling into the house, the thieves shut and shutter it in daylight so they can ransack its contents with impunity. This would provide a practical explanation for "They do not know light"—both night and day they work in darkness. At the same time, these words obviously catch up the larger symbolic significance of the criminals' status as "rebels against the light (verse 13)."

17. *For morning to all them is death's shadow.* In the perverted world of the criminals, they fear the light that would expose them as others fear the darkness of death.

18. *Let him be swiftly swept off on the waters.* The passage that runs from here to the end of verse 24 is one of the most notoriously obscure in the Book of Job. Some scholars think it belongs in its entirety either to chapter 25 (where a sizable section of Bildad's speech has obviously been lost) or to chapter 26. Such radical transporting of chunks of text is based on risky conjecture, and so it seems best to leave the passage where it is, construing the verbs as curse-forms (their form in the Hebrew gives no clear indication of their mode): may all these dire things befall the wicked whose offenses have just been enumerated.

swiftly swept off. The Hebrew says only "swift."

Let him not turn on the vineyard path. The wicked man, his own field cursed, is condemned to wander in wasteland, not to enjoy a pleasant stroll through any fruitful vineyard.

19. *steal away the snow.* The Hebrew says "snow waters," telescoping the snow and its melting and evaporation, but that phrase sounds cumbersome in English.

Sheol, those who offend. That is, just as the desert heat melts the snow, the underworld takes away those who offend. But this entire line has probably been damaged because there are five accented syllables in the first verset and just two in the second verset, an extreme imbalance that is not admissible in biblical versification.

20. *womb . . . / worm*. In a neat encompassing maneuver, the line moves from womb to tomb in cursing the life of the wicked man.

22. *He who hauled bulls with his strength.* This rendering is an educated guess at the meaning of the Hebrew.

in his life. The Masoretic Text reads "in life," *baḥayin* (with an unusual Aramaic ending), but some manuscripts more plausibly have *beḥayaw*, "in his life."

23. *Though God grant him safety.* The Hebrew reads merely "he," but the antecedent that makes the best sense of this sentence is God. The idea, then, would be that God may accord the wicked temporary security, but He continues to scrutinize their acts (the Hebrew swings from singular to plural as it does elsewhere in the passage), and retribution will come. It must be said that this view sounds more like one of the three friends than like anything we would expect from Job. Perhaps we can justify verses 22–24 as integral to

Job's speech by seeing them as statements impelled by the momentum of the preceding series of curses against the wicked: having wished them to be swept away and driven into the grave, Job now indulges in a kind of fantasy that his wishes will really be fulfilled, that the triumphant wicked will actually get their just deserts from God.

24. *like the weeds.* The received text reads "like all," *kakol*. But the Qumran text of the Aramaic Targum shows *kayabla'*, "like the weed," which might reflect *kayablit* in the Hebrew, and that reading is followed here.

CHAPTER 25

[1]And Bildad the Shuhite spoke up and he said:
[2]Dominion and fear are with Him,
Who makes peace in His heights.
[3]Is there a number to His brigades,
and on whom does His light not rise?
[4]And how can man be right with God,
how can he born of woman be clear?
[5]Why, the moon itself does not give light,
and the stars are not clear in His sight.
[6]How much more, man the maggot,
and humankind the worm.

26:[5]The shades shudder down below,
the waters and their denizens.
[6] Sheol is naked before Him,
and Perdition is without garb.
[7]He stretches Zaphon over the void,
hangs earth over emptiness,
[8]bundles water in His clouds,

the scud does not burst below,
[9]covers the face of the throne,
spreads His cloud upon it,
[10] draws a circle over the water
to the border of light and darkness.
[11]The heavens' pillars quaver,
are dumbfounded by His roar.
[12]Through His power He subdued Yamm,
and in His cunning He smashed Rahab.
[13] With His wind He bagged the Waters.
His hand cut down the elusive Serpent.
[14]Why, these are but the least of His ways,
the tag end of the word that is heard of Him.
And His might's thunder who can grasp?

CHAPTER 25 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

Bildad's speech as we have it in the received text—only six verses—is inordinately brief, less than a third the length of the other speeches in the debate, and a section or sections of it almost certainly have been displaced or lost in the process of scribal copying. This translation follows a common proposal in transposing 26:5–14 to Bildad's discourse here. Those verses, which are wholly devoted to a rhapsodic celebration of God's cosmic powers, are altogether implausible as part of Job's speech, though that is how they are assigned in the received text.

2. *Who makes peace in His heights.* This clause, which was later adopted in the Jewish liturgy for the conclusion of the *kaddish*, may well refer, as Pope

has suggested, to God's victory in a primordial battle of gods. The reference to "brigades" in the next line suggests that idea, and if in fact 26:5–14 is a direct continuation of this speech, the invocation of a triumphant warrior god there would be a further development of this mythological plot.

3. *on whom does His light not rise.* As the next two lines make clear, these words suggest that God's searching scrutiny holds all beings, terrestrial and celestial, to account.

5. *the moon itself does not give light.* In God's stern judgment, even the bright moon is considered to be dim.

the stars are not clear. The Hebrew uses a strategic pun because the verb *zaku* can mean both "to be pure" (or "innocent") and "to be bright."

26:5. *down below.* This adverb is moved here from the beginning of the second verset, where the Masoretic cantillation marks place it, to the end of the first verset, where it makes better sense and rhythm.

6. *Sheol is naked before him.* Even the depths of the underworld are exposed to God's searching gaze. (Compare 25:3.)

7. *Zaphon.* Zaphon is the mountain dwelling of Baal, the Syro-Canaanite weather god. This mythological reference sets the stage for the invocation of the battle with the primordial sea monster in verses 11–13.

8. *below.* The Hebrew says "below them," the third-person plural suffix referring back to "clouds" in the first verset.

10. *draws a circle over the water / to the border of light and darkness.* The essential idea is that God circumscribes the roiling sea, preventing it from surging over the dry land. The border of light and darkness would have to be the horizon, which may not be logically correct but is poetically evocative as an image of fixing a vast boundary on the sea, from the horizon to—implicitly—the edge of the land.

12. *Yamm / . . . Rahab*. These, as we have seen earlier, are different names for the menacing sea god who is subdued by YHWH (or, in the Canaanite version, Baal), Who pushes back the forces of chaos and establishes the created order.

13. *With His wind He bagged the Waters.* The Hebrew here is somewhat obscure, but a construction that continues the picture of a primordial battle

against the sea monster seems plausible. Thus, following Tur-Sinai, the translation understands the anomalous *shifrah* to be a cognate of the Akkadian term that means "net," and instead of the Masoretic *shamayim*, "heavens," *sam mayim*, "He put the Waters [in a net, *shifrah*]," is assumed. The Water is given an uppercase *W* here because it appears to be a poetic epithet for Yamm.

CHAPTER 26

[1]And Job spoke up and he said:
[2]How have you helped without power,
rescued by an arm without strength?
[3]How have you counseled without wisdom,
and abundantly proffered advice?
[4]To whom have you told words,
and whose breath has come out of you?

CHAPTER 26 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

Chapters 26 and 27 sharply reflect the damaged state of the text of the whole sequence of chapters leading to Job's last confession of innocence. As noted in the initial comment on chapter 25, only the first four verses of chapter 26 can plausibly be attributed to Job. The formula that begins chapter 27, "And Job again took up his theme," would seem to signal the end of the debate proper and the introduction of Job's long confession of innocence that runs to the end of chapter 31. But verses 8–23 of chapter 27 are an emphatic declaration in the style of the three reprovers that God invariably punishes the guilty. Attempts to save these verses as Job's discourse by reading them as irony are forced and quite unconvincing. One of the three friends must be the speaker, and the most likely suspect, as many scholars have inferred, is Zophar, whose contribution to the third round of debate is missing from the

received text. A bracketed formulaic sentence introducing these lines as Zophar's speech has been added in the translation before verse 8. Verses 8–23, however, could not be the entirety of Zophar's speech because the passage breaks off abruptly and is about half the length of the other speeches in the debate.

2. *helped without power.* Some understand this to mean: help someone who has no power. Given the parallelism, however, with offering counsel without wisdom in the next line, it is far more likely to refer to pretending to help when the one offering help is powerless to do so. What remains puzzling is that the second person is singular where one would expect Job to address all three friends.

2–4. These verses break off, to be followed by a new formula for introducing Job's speech. Either a long section has been lost, or these lines belong somewhere in a previous speech of Job's.

CHAPTER 27

[1]And Job again took up his theme and he said:
[2] By God, Who denied me justice
and by Shaddai Who embittered my life,
[3]as long as my breath is within me,
and God's spirit in my nostrils,
[4]my lips will never speak evil,
nor my tongue ever utter deceit.
[5]Far be it from me to declare you right,
till I breathe my last I will not renounce my virtue.
[6]To my rightness I cling, I will not let go,
my heart has not caused reproach all my days.
[7]Let my enemy be deemed a wicked man
and my adversary a wrongdoer.

[And Zophar the Naamathite spoke up and he said:]
[8] For what hope has the tainted to profit,
when God takes away his life?
[9]Will God hear his scream

when disaster befalls him?
10 Will he delight in Shaddai,
will he call upon God at all times?
11 Let me teach you with God's own force,
what is with Shaddai I will not conceal.
12 Look, all of you have beheld it,
and why do you spew empty breath?
13 This is the wicked man's share with God,
the portion that oppressors take from Shaddai.
14 If his sons be many, it is for the sword,
and his offspring will go without bread.
15 His survivors will be buried in the death-plague,
and his widows will not keen.
16 Should he heap up silver like dust
and like mud lay up apparel,
17 he'll lay up, and the just man will wear it,
and the silver the blameless share out.
18 He will build his house like the moth,
like a shack that a watchman puts up.
19 Rich he lies down— it's not taken away.
He opens up his eyes and it's gone.
20 Terror will take him like water;
by night the storm snatches him up.
21 The east wind bears him off and he's gone,
it sweeps him away from his place.
22 It flings itself on him unsparing,

from its power he strives to flee.
23 It claps its hands against him,
and hisses at him from its place.

CHAPTER 27 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *By God . . . / by Shaddai*. Job begins his confession of innocence by pronouncing a solemn oath in the name of the very deity who has been persecuting him.

8. . *For what hope has the tainted to profit.* This speech begins with a recurrent central theme of the friends' verbal assault on Job: the man who has polluted himself through evil acts will never really profit from them because God's stern retribution will overtake him (as it has overtaken Job).

11. *Let me teach you with God's own force.* This smug assumption that the speaker knows what God knows about good and evil, reward and punishment, is characteristic of the friends.

12. *Look, all of you have beheld it, / and why do you spew empty breath?* These impatient words make sense coming from Zophar as the last of the three reprovers to speak in the debate. He turns to his two friends and berates them for not making their case against Job more forcefully clear to him.

15. *his widows will not keen.* The plural, of course, presupposes polygamy. Presumably, the widows will not mourn because they have no use for their good-for-nothing husband.

19. *it's not taken away.* The referent of the Hebrew verb is ambiguous, but it seems likely that it refers to the rich man's wealth.

20. *like water.* Although some emend this word, thinking it an odd simile, it may simply refer to the way a flood overwhelms a person or sweeps him away —a very common image for death or disaster in Psalms. "Water" and "storm" would then be parallel terms for destruction in the two versets.

21. *the east wind.* As elsewhere (including the frame-story), the east wind, blowing from the desert, parches and blights.

23. . *claps its hands . . . / hisses*. Both are conventional gestures of scorn, but at the same time the sounds of clapping and hissing or whistling neatly evoke the violent motion of the storm wind.

CHAPTER 28

[1]Yes, there's a mine for silver
and a place where gold is refined.
[2]Iron from the dust is taken
and from stone the copper to smelt.
[3] An end has man set to darkness,
and each limit he has probed,
the stone of deep gloom and death's shadow.
[4]He breaks under a stream without dwellers,
forgotten by any foot,
remote and devoid of men.
[5]The earth from which bread comes forth,
and beneath it a churning like fire.
[6]The source of the sapphire, its stones,
and gold dust is there.
[7]A path that the vulture knows not
nor the eye of the falcon beholds.
[8]The proud beasts have never trod on it,
nor the lion passed over it.
[9]To the flintstone he set his hand,
upended mountains from their roots.

10 Through the rocks he hacked out channels,
and all precious things his eye has seen.
11 The wellsprings of rivers he blocked.
What was hidden he brought out to light.
12 But wisdom, where is it found,
and where is the place of discernment?
13 Man does not know its worth,
and it is not found in the land of the living.
14 The Deep has said, “It is not in me,”
and the Sea has said, “It is not with me.”
15 It cannot be got for fine gold,
nor can silver be paid as its price.
16 It cannot be weighed in the gold of Ophir,
in precious onyx and sapphire.
17 Gold and glass cannot equal it,
nor its worth in golden vessels.
18 Coral and crystal—not to be mentioned,
wisdom’s value surpasses rubies.
19 Ethiopian topaz can’t equal it,
in pure gold it cannot be weighed.
20 And wisdom, from where does it come,
and where is the place of discernment?
21 It is hidden from the eye of all living,
from the fowl of the heavens, concealed.
22 Perdition and Death have said,
“With our own ears we heard its rumor.”

[23]God grasps its way,
and He knows its place.
[24]For He looks to the ends of the earth,
beneath all the heavens He sees,
[25] to gauge the heft of the wind,
and to weigh water with a measure,
[26]when He fixes a limit for rain
and a way for the thunderhead.
[27]Then He saw and recounted it,
set it firm and probed it, too.
[28]And He said to man:
Look, fear of the Master, that is wisdom,
and the shunning of evil is insight.

CHAPTER 28 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Yes, there's a mine for silver*. This rhapsodic celebration of divine wisdom is clearly not part of the debate between Job and his three reprovers, and the strong scholarly consensus is that it is an editorial interpolation, perhaps with the aim of introducing a pious view of wisdom in this book that is such a radical challenge to the guiding assumptions of Wisdom literature. Robert Gordis, noting some affinities with the general poetic language of Job, imagines that this is an earlier composition by the Job poet, which he decided to insert here as a kind of interlude before Job's final confession of innocence. That proposal, though beguiling, is fanciful: this looks like the work of another poet with a very different worldview. As a hymn to divine wisdom, however, it does exhibit considerable poetic force.

silver / . . . gold. These precious substances appear later in the poem in the list of objects of value that cannot equal the worth of wisdom. The mining of silver and gold and then the smelting of copper also introduce the notion of man's technological resourcefulness. As the lines that follow vividly declare, man searches out all the remote places of the earth, sinking mine shafts into the depths of the ground, damming rivers, everywhere in ardent pursuit of treasure. Yet all this brilliant technology is nothing in comparison to the value of real wisdom.

a place where gold is refined. The movement from the source of silver in the first verset to the place of refining gold in the second verset participates in the general pattern of narrative development between the two halves of lines in biblical poetry.

3. *An end has man set to darkness.* The Hebrew says merely "he has set"; the implied antecedent, "man," has been added for the sake of clarity. Given the image in the third verset of stone as the abode of darkness, what is probably suggested here is that man, tunneling into stone for precious minerals, opens it to the light, or, perhaps, brings torchlight down into the mines.

4. *breaks under a stream.* This is a poetic image of digging tunnels under rivers.

5. *beneath it a churning like fire.* Although it is unlikely that the poet had any notion of the earth's molten core, he seems to have had a sense of what is beneath the surface of the earth as a realm of fluid unstable forces, while the surface above provides humankind its daily bread.

8. *The proud beasts have never trod on it.* The places that man the restless miner reaches in his quest for precious minerals are so remote that even wild animals do not live there. The existence of copper mines in the rocky desert region near the Gulf of Aqaba might have encouraged this image.

12. *But wisdom, where is it found.* All this human searching into the dark and remote places of the earth may discover treasure but not what is far more precious, wisdom.

15. *fine gold.* This is the first of four different Hebrew terms for gold that the poet deploys in the next five lines.

20.*And wisdom, from where does it come.* The use of this entire line as a refrain is in keeping with the celebratory purpose of the poem.

22. *Perdition and Death.* This mythological pair answers to the pair, Deep and Sea, in verse 14. The effect of both is to give a cosmic sweep to the celebration of divine wisdom: it is not to be found in the sea or the great abyss or the underworld realm of death but only with God.

25.*to gauge the heft of the wind.* The wind, of course, cannot be weighed—except by God.

to weigh water with a measure. Several English versions render this as "mete out water with a measure." The point, however, is not that God doles out measures of water but rather that He alone, as Creator, can weigh the huge mass of the primordial waters.

27.*Then He saw and recounted it.* The past tense of the verbs indicates that this act of divine reflection comes at the end of the process of creation, a process intimated in verses 24–26. The poet may have in mind the reiterated "And He saw that it was good" in the first account of creation. The recounting, then, might be the authoritative narrative of creation in Genesis.

set it firm. This is the verb regularly used for establishing things on a firm foundation—houses, dynasties, the world.

and probed it, too. God not only set creation on a firm foundation but also, through His unique wisdom, searched out and understood every one of its components.

28. *And He said to man.* This clause (two words in the Hebrew) is an extra-metrical introduction to the concluding line of the poem. Extrametrical elements, especially for the introduction of direct speech, are fairly common in prophetic poetry.

fear of the Master . . . / the shunning of evil. The reiterated question in the refrain of where is wisdom is now given a resonant answer at the very end of the poem. But such neat confidence is alien to the Job poet, even where he evokes God's speech at the end of the book.

the Master. The Hebrew uses *ʾadonai* here, and only here, in the Book of Job, which has led some scholars to think it is textually suspect. Many manuscripts read YHWH, but that divine name is also not used in Job until the Voice from the Whirlwind. Since by the Late Biblical period YHWH was pronounced as though it were *ʾadonai*, that may have led to the switch here, though it is hard to know which term was the original one.

CHAPTER 29

1 And Job again took up his theme and he said:
2 Would that I were as in moons of yore,
as the days when God watched over me,
3 when He shone his lamp over my head,
by its light I walked in darkness,
4 as I was in the days of my prime—
God an intimate of my tent,
5 when Shaddai still was with me,
all around me my lads;
6 when my feet bathed in curds
and the rock poured out streams of oil,
7 when I went out to the city's gate,
in the square I secured my seat.
8 Lads saw me and took cover,
the aged arose, stood up.
9 Noblemen held back their words,
their palm they put to their mouth.
10 The voice of the princes was muffled,
their tongue to their palate stuck.
11 When the ear heard, it affirmed me,

and the eye saw and acclaimed me.
12 For I would free the poor who cried out,
and the orphan with no one to help him.
13 The perishing man's blessing would reach me,
and the widow's heart I made sing.
14 Righteousness I donned and it clothed me,
like a cloak and a headdress, my justice.
15 Eyes I became for the blind,
and legs for the lame I was.
16 A father I was for the impoverished,
a stranger's cause I took up.
17 And I cracked the wrongdoer's jaws,
from his teeth I would wrench the prey.
18 And I thought: In my nest I shall breathe my last,
and my days will abound like the sand.
19 My root will be open to water,
and dew in my branches abide,
20 my glory renewed within me,
and my bow ever fresh in my hand.
21 To me they would listen awaiting
and fall silent at my advice.
22 At my speech they would say nothing further,
and upon them my word would drop.
23 They waited for me as for rain,
and gaped open their mouths as for showers.
24 I laughed to them—they scarcely trusted—

but my face's light they did not dim.
[25]I chose their way and sat as chief,
I dwelled like a king in his brigade when he
comforts the mourning.

CHAPTER 29 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Job again took up his theme*. With the repetition of this formula from 27:1, we are back on track with Job's concluding confession of innocence.

3. *when He shone his lamp over my head.* The concrete image is of God "watching over" Job solicitously, holding a lit oil lamp (which would have been a wick in oil in a shallow concave ceramic dish) above him so that he can walk safely through the dark.

4. *God an intimate of my tent.* Literally, "When God's council [that is, His exclusive intimate company] was at my tent."

5. *my lads.* Though the Hebrew *neʿarim* could refer either to Job's seven dead sons or to his retainers, the latter meaning is more likely because the context here is Job's recollection of the imposing standing in society he enjoyed before all the disasters befell him.

6. *curds / . . . oil*. These are, of course, hyperbolic expressions of affluence. Compare Deuteronomy 32:13: "He suckled him honey from the crag / and oil from the flinty stone."

7. *the city's gate, / . . . the square*. The square before the city's gate was the place where justice was deliberated, and Job, as the leading notable of the community—compare verses 8–11—would have had a regular place there.

11. *affirmed me.* The verb *ʾasher* literally means to say *ʾashrey*, "happy is he."

12. *I would free the poor.* Exercising his role in administering justice, Job acted on behalf of the helpless—the poor, the orphan, the widow, the man about to perish, the handicapped, the victim of wrongdoing (verses 12–17).

18. *In my nest I shall breathe my last.* As a consequence of a life dedicated to virtuous acts, Job thought he had every reason to expect he would die a tranquil death in the bosom of his family.

my days will abound like the sand. The Hebrew word for "sand," *ḥol*, has a homonym that means "phoenix," and many interpreters have been attracted to that meaning because the phoenix is eternal, reborn out of its own ashes. However, Job is not imagining eternal life, only a very long life, and the equation between (grains of) sand and things so abounding, or so many (the verbal stem *r-b-h*, as here) that they are innumerable, is a common biblical idiom.

20. *within me.* The literal sense of the Hebrew preposition is "with me" or "alongside me."

my bow ever fresh in my hand. The poet probably has in mind that after very extended usage, the bowstring begins to go slack and the wood of the bow loses its spring, but this bow—a metaphor for Job's strength—is constantly renewed.

22. *At my speech they would say nothing further.* This verse and the previous one pick up the theme of verses 9 and 10. Some critics have proposed moving these lines to earlier in the poem for the sake of seamless continuity, but such wholesale rearrangement of the text seems neither necessary nor warranted.

my word would drop. The "dropping" is of a liquid, and is close to "drip," an image of blessed fructification in a semiarid region that was reflected in verse 19 and is vividly developed in verse 23.

24. *I laughed to them—they scarcely trusted.* This whole verse is the one obscure juncture in an otherwise transparent chapter. The interpretation assumed in this translation is that Job, expatiating to his listeners, expresses a joyfulness that they in their plight can hardly trust, yet they do not presume to object to his buoyant mood. The verb understood here as "dim" has given rise to widely divergent constructions and hence to very different readings of the line.

25. *when he comforts the mourning.* Some critics, puzzled by this clause, have drastically emended the Hebrew, but it seems reasonably intelligible as it stands in the received text: Job, like a king in the midst of his royal brigade, offers comfort to those of his men who have suffered losses—metaphorically,

the loss of comrades fallen in battle—as in general he has rescued victims, fought on behalf of orphans and widows, and so forth.

CHAPTER 30

[1]And now mere striplings laugh at me
whose fathers I spurned
to put with the dogs of my flock.
[2] The strength of their hands—what use to me?
From them the vigor has gone:
[3] In want and starvation bereft
they flee to desert land,
the darkness of desolate dunes,
[4]plucking saltwort from the bush,
the roots of broom wood their bread.
[5] From within they are banished—
people shout over them as at thieves.
[6]In river ravines they encamp,
holes in the dust and crags.
[7]Among bushes they bray,
beneath thorn plants they huddle.
[8]Vile creatures and nameless, too,
they are struck from the land.
[9]And now I become their taunt,
I become their mocking word.

[10]They despised me, were distant to me,
and from my face they did not spare their spit.
[11]For my bowstring they loosed and abused me,
cast off restraint toward me.
[12]On the right, raw youths stand up,
they make me run off
and pave against me their roadways of ruin.
[13]They shatter my path,
my disaster devise,
and none helps me against them.
[14]Like a wide water-burst they come,
in the shape of a tempest they
[15]Terror rolls over me,
pursues my path like the wind,
and my rescue like a cloud passes on.
[16] And now my life spills out,
days of affliction seize me.
[17] At night my limbs are pierced,
and my sinews know no rest.
[18] With great power He seizes my garment,
grabs hold of me at the collar.
[19]He hurls me into the muck,
and I become like dust and ashes.
[20] I scream to You and You do not answer,
I stand still and You do not observe me.
[21]You become a cruel one toward me,

with the might of Your hand You hound me.
22 You bear me up, on the wind make me straddle,
break me apart in a storm.
23For I know You'll return me to death,
the meetinghouse of all living things.
24 But one would not reach out against the afflicted
if in his disaster he screamed.
25 Have I not wept for the bleak-fated man,
sorrowed for the impoverished?
26For I hoped for good and evil ca[1]me.
I expected light and darkness fell.
27My innards seethed and would not be still,
days of affliction greeted me.
28In gloom did I walk, with no sun,
I rose in assembly and I screamed.
29Brother I was to the jackals,
companion to ostriches.
30My skin turned black upon me,
my limbs were scorched by drought.
31And my lyre has turned into mourning,
my flute, a keening sound.

CHAPTER 30 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *mere striplings*. The Hebrew says “ones younger than I” or, more literally, “lesser than I in days.”

whose fathers I spurned. The society in which Job was once one of the greatest of those who dwell in the East is hierarchical in regard both to social-economic standing and to age. Even the fathers of Job’s mockers would have been beneath his notice, unfit to run with his sheep dogs, and how much more so their half-baked sons.

2. *the strength of their hands—what use to me?* Job’s mockers assail him in the ostensible vigor of their youth, but he imagines that it will vanish in a moment, and he proceeds to elaborate a fantasy of the striplings turned into miserable pariahs banished to the wilderness (verses 3–8).

3. *the darkness of desolate dunes.* The Hebrew shows prominent alliteration and wordplay: *ʾemesh shoʾah umeshoʾah*. The last two words would literally mean something like “desolation and desolateness.”

5. *from within.* The Hebrew *min-gew* is the first of a whole series of obscure places in this chapter. Some interpreters, arguing from a proposed Northwest Semitic cognate, understand it to mean “from the community.” In rabbinic Hebrew, *gew* or *go* can mean “inside,” and that linguistic connection seems less of a stretch than the purported Semitic cognate. “Within” then would refer to home, companionship, the boundaries of civilized habitation.

7. *they bray.* The Hebrew verb *yinhaqu*, generally used for donkeys, nicely conveys the reduction of the banished men to brutishness.

9. *And now I become their taunt.* Job, having vividly conjured up the wretched fate deserved by, or about to overtake, his young mockers, now bitterly turns to the unrestrained derision to which they are subjecting him.

11. *my bowstring they loosed.* The slackening of the bowspring is an image of deprivation of power, of unmanning.

12. *they make me run off.* Literally, “they send off my feet.”

15. *my path.* The translation reads *netivati*, “my path,” with several manuscripts and the Syriac version, instead of the Masoretic *nedivati* (“my nobility”?).

my rescue like a cloud passes on. There is no need to see, as many interpreters have done, an exotic meaning in *yeshuʿati*, which everywhere else

means “rescue.” Job, cast into deepest desperation, sees a fleeting vision of his hoped-for rescue sailing off from him like a cloud.

17. *my limbs are pierced.* One might also understand this as “He pierces my limbs,” the antecedent being God.

18. *With great power He seizes my garment.* The wording of this entire verse is obscure, and hence any translation is conjectural.

20. *You do not observe me.* The received text reads “You observe me,” but various manuscripts as well as the Vulgate show the negative.

22. *storm.* The marginal gloss (*qeri*) instructs us to read the word in the Hebrew consonantal text, *tushiwah*, as *tushiah*, “wisdom” or “prudence,” but it is more likely a variant spelling of *teshuʿah*, “uproar” or “storm.”

24. *the afflicted / . . . he screamed*. The verse as it stands in the received text is opaque. The translation reads *ʿani*, “the afflicted,” for the Masoretic *ʿi*, “heap of ruins,” and *shiweaʿ*, “he screamed,” for *shuaʿ*, “nobleman.” If all this is correct, the idea would be that no one would abuse a helpless suffering person —so why does God persecute me in this way?

25. *bleak-fated.* Literally, “hard of day.”

29. *Brother I was to the jackals.* In a painful reversal, the fate of brutalization and banishment from society that Job conjured up for his mockers has befallen him instead.

CHAPTER 31

[1]A pact I sealed with my eyes—
I will not gaze on a virgin.
[2]And what is the share from God above,
the portion from Shaddai in the heights?
[3]Is there not ruin for the wrongdoer,
and estrangement for those who do evil?
[4]Does He not see my way,
and all my steps count?
[5]Have I walked in a lie,
has my foot hurried to deceit?
[6]Let Him weigh me on fair scales,
that God know my blamelessness.
[7]If my stride has strayed from the way,
and my heart gone after my eyes,
or the least thing stuck to my palms,
[8] let me sow and another shall eat,
my offspring torn up by the roots.
[9]If my heart was seduced by a woman,
and at the door of my friend I lurked,
[10]let my wife grind for another

and upon her let others crouch.
[11]For that is lewdness,
and that is a grave crime.
[12]For it is fire that consumes to Perdition,
and in all my yield eats the roots.
[13]If I spurned the case of my slave
or my slavegirl in their brief against me,
[14]what would I do when God stands up,
and when He assays it, what would I answer?
[15] Why, my Maker made him in the belly,
and formed him in the selfsame womb.
[16]Did I hold back the poor from their desire
or make the eyes of the widow pine?
[17]Did I eat my bread alone,
and an orphan not eat from it?
[18] For from my youth like a father I raised him,
and from my mother's womb I led him.
[19]If I saw a man failing, ungarbed,
and no garment for the impoverished,
[20]did his loins not then bless me,
and from my sheep's shearing was he not warmed?
[21]If I raised my hand against an orphan,
when I saw my advantage in the gate,
[22]let my shoulder fall out of its socket
and my arm break off from its shaft.

[23]For ruin from God is my fear,
and His presence I cannot withstand.
[24]If I made gold my bulwark,
and fine gold I called my trust,
[25]if I rejoiced that my wealth was great
and that abundance my hand had found,
[26]if I saw light when it gleamed
and the moon gliding grand,
[27]and my heart was seduced in secret,
and my hand caressed my mouth,
[28]this, too, would be a grave crime,
for I would have denied God above.
[29]If I rejoiced at my foe's disaster,
and exulted when harm found him out—
[30]yet I did not let my mouth offend
to seek out his life in an oath.
[31] Did the men of my tent ever say,
"Would that we were never sated of his flesh."
[32]The sojourner did not sleep outside.
My doors to the wayfarer I opened.
[33] Did I hide like Adam my wrongdoings,
to bury within me my crime,
[34]that I should fear the teeming crowd,
and the scorn of clans terrify me,
fall silent and keep within doors?
[35] Would that I had someone to hear me out.

Here's my mark—let Shaddai answer me,
and let my accuser indict his writ.
36 I would bear it upon my shoulder,
bind it as a crown upon me.
37 The number of my steps I would tell Him,
like a prince I would approach him.
38If my soil has cried out against me,
and together its furrows wept,
39if I ate its yield without payment,
and drove its owners to despair,
40instead of wheat let nettles grow,
and instead of barley, stinkweed.

Here end the words of Job.

CHAPTER 31 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *A pact I sealed with my eyes*. After the catalogue of woes in the previous section of this final speech, Job begins a series of affirmations of the scrupulously virtuous life he led. Not only did he avoid promiscuity (verse 9), but he even strictly refrained from gazing with lust at nubile women. This profession of innocence is interrupted in verses 2–4 by a declaration—not exactly in keeping with what Job says elsewhere—that God watches wrongdoers from above and punishes them. Some scholars have proposed moving around various verses in this chapter in order to produce better continuities, but all such surgical procedures on the text are necessarily conjectural.

5. *Have I walked.* This line initiates a whole series that employs the Hebrew form that indicates swearing an oath.

8. *sow . . . eat, / . . . torn up by the roots*. In an agricultural society, these images are standard metaphors for all forms of endeavor.

10. *let my wife grind for another.* The verb here is a kind of violent pun. Grinding in a small stone hand mill is a domestic activity regularly performed by the woman in preparing food for her husband and family. But the crouching of other men over her in the second verset turns the grinding into a representation of the sexual act.

13. *If I spurned the case of my slave.* Job moves on from sexual morality to social justice. Even a slave has legal rights and may bring a suit against his master, and Job says that in the days of his prosperity he always honored those rights.

15. *the selfsame womb.* Job, of course, does not mean that he and the slave had the same mother but rather that they share the same human condition, each having been formed in the womb. Hence, despite the economic disparity, an existential parity obtains between them.

18. *from my mother's womb I led him.* The received text says "led her," a difference of one syllable in a suffix, which some then understand to refer to the slavegirl in the second half of verse 13. Such a distant antecedent seems unlikely, and it is more plausible to emend the suffix. The "mother's womb" is obviously a hyperbole, Job declaring that from his earliest days he looked after the poor.

20. *did his loins not then bless me.* The loins, now comfortably wrapped in the garment Job provides, are the poetic enunciator of the blessing.

21. *my advantage in the gate.* The gate is where courts of justice were conducted. The term rendered here as "advantage" is in most other contexts "rescue," the idea being that you come out on top.

22. *let my shoulder fall out of its socket.* This would be measure-for-measure justice, a retaliation for raising one's hand against the orphan.

26. *light when it gleamed / . . . the moon gliding grand.* As the erotic language of the next line makes clear, this would be an ecstatic response to the moon, perhaps as manifestation of a deity.

27. *my hand caressed my mouth.* The gesture is both sensual and cultic. We should keep in mind that Job, for all his quarrel with God, remains a staunch monotheist.

28. *this, too, would be a grave crime.* It is fitting that the same term of condemnation used for adultery in verse 11 is presented here in connection with succumbing to the pagan-erotic seduction of the moon.

29. *If I rejoiced at my foe's disaster.* Job's profession of innocence here goes beyond the norm of biblical morality, which often (as in Psalms) is happy to express exultation when disaster overtakes an enemy.

31. *Would that we were never sated of his flesh.* The victim of this metaphoric cannibalism would have to be the helpless and the unhoused—perhaps explicitly the sojourner and the wayfarer of the next line.

33. *Did I hide like Adam my wrongdoings.* This would be the first human after eating the forbidden fruit and trying to hide from God.

35. *Would that I had someone to hear me out.* Job reverts to the idea of having his day in court with God that he repeatedly favored earlier.

Here's my mark. The mark is probably the mark with a personal seal by which a person would authenticate a legal document.

36. *I would bear it upon my shoulder.* So confident is Job that the accusations against him are baseless that he would proudly wear the writ of indictment as an ornament.

37. *The number of my steps I would tell Him.* Job would readily report everything he has done because he is confident, as he said in verses 5 and 6, that he never walked in a lie or allowed his stride to stray.

like a prince. The Hebrew *nagid* puns on *agidenu*, "I would tell him," the two words sharing the same root.

39. *drove its owners to despair.* Some would like to understand this as "its tenants" because Job has just referred to the soil as his, but the Hebrew *beʿalim* means "owners." Perhaps the possessive attached to "soil" refers to renting soil (note the reference to payment). It is conceivable that a wealthy man like Job, besides the plots he owned outright, might have rented additional fields in order to grow crops for profit.

40. *stinkweed.* It is notable that the last angry word of Job's argument in his own defense is "stinkweed," *boʾshah*.

Here end the words of Job. This is a formal marker of closure and may well be original in the text. At this point, one might expect God's response to Job. Instead, as we shall now see, someone else intervenes.

CHAPTER 32

[1]And these three men left off answering Job because
he was right in his own eyes. [2]And Elihu the son of
Barachel the Buzite from the clan of Ram flared up in
anger, against Job his anger flared, for his claiming to
be in the right more than God. [3]And against his three
com panions his anger flared because they had not
found an answer that showed Job guilty. [4]And Elihu
waited out Job's words, for they were his elders. [5]And
Elihu saw that the three men could utter no answer,
and his anger flared.

[6]And Elihu the son of Barachel spoke up and he
said:

I am young in years,
and you are aged.
Therefore was I awed and feared
to speak my mind with you.
[7]I thought, Let years speak,
and let great age make wisdom known.

[8]Yet it is a spirit in man,
and Shaddai's breath that grants discernment.
[9]It is not the elders who are wise
nor the aged who understand judgment.
[10]Therefore do I say, O listen to me,
I, too, will speak my mind.
[11]Look, I have waited for your speech,
hearkened to your understandings,
while you tested words.
[12]And I attended to you,
and, look, Job has no refuter,
none to answer his talk among you.
[13]Should you say, "We have found wisdom—
God will confound him, not man,"
[14]he has not made his brief to me,
and with your words I would not answer him.
[15]—they take fright, they no longer respond,
words leave them in the lurch—
[16]I waited, for they did not speak,
for they stood and no longer
[17]I, too, will speak out my part,
I will speak my mind, I, too.
[18]For I am full up with words,
the wind in my belly constrains me.
[19]Look, my belly is like unopened wine,
like new wineskins it bursts.

[20]Let me speak that I may be eased,
    let me open my lips and speak out.
[21]I will show favor to no man,
    nor flatter any person.
[22]For if I knew how to flatter,
    my Maker would soon take me away.

CHAPTER 32 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Elihu*. Although some scholars have tried to save the Elihu speeches as an integral part of the book, the plausible consensus is that it is an interpolation, the work of another poet. No hint of Elihu's presence is made in the frame-story at the beginning, and he is equally absent from the closing of the frame in chapter 42. The poetry he speaks is by and large not up to the level of the poetry in the debate between Job and his three reprovers, and there is a whole series of Hebrew terms that appear only in the Elihu speeches. His name, though feasible in biblical usage, appears to be satirically devised as an intimation of his impatiently presumptuous character. The literal meaning of Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite from the clan of Ram is "He-is-my-God the son of God-has-blessed the Scornful One from the High Clan."

4. *waited out Job's words*. The implication is that he waited out both Job's words and those of the three companions, but it is Job's argument that he wants to refute.

5. *could utter no answer*. Literally, "there was no answer in the mouth."

6. *I am young in years, / and you are aged*. This invocation of relative ages lines up with the traditional notion, repeatedly mentioned by the three companions, that wisdom lies with the elders.

8. *Yet it is a spirit in man*. Elihu, having listened impatiently to the ineffectual arguments of his three elders, now rejects the idea that wisdom resides with

the aged and instead contends that it derives from God's gift of the spirit in a person, without regard to age.

13. *God will confound him, not man.* The literal sense of the verb represented as "confound" is "push back," "drive away." In attributing this statement to the three reprovers, Elihu shows them admitting the failure of their own arguments.

14. *he has not made his brief to me.* If he had done so, Elihu contends, I would have answered him in words quite different from yours. A small emendation of the initial Hebrew word here, "not," yields a subjunctive statement: "had he made his brief to me."

15. *they take fright.* This entire verse is set out here between dashes because it is a narrative statement about the three friends and not part of Elihu's direct address to them. Whether it is a glossing interpolation or part of the poet's expository strategy is unclear. If the latter, we might read it as a kind of aside to the audience by Elihu.

17. *I, too, will speak out my part, / I will speak my mind, I, too.* Such repetitiousness is characteristic of Elihu's speeches and of a piece with his bombastic character.

18. *the wind in my belly constrains me.* This metaphoric representation of the impatient urge to speak as an explosive condition of flatulence is surely satiric, at least in effect and perhaps in intent. It is extended in the image of bursting wineskins in the next line.

19. *new wineskins.* The wine, still fermenting in the new skins, which are not yet supple with use, threatens to burst them.

20. *Let me speak that I may be eased.* This verset continues the idea of speech as release from painful flatulence.

21. *I will show favor to no man.* As Elihu, concluding his rebuke to the three friends, prepares to launch his frontal assault on Job, he intimates that they have been too kind to this reprobate, something that he, representing himself as a perfectly objective person, will not do.

22. *my Maker would soon take me away.* The Hebrew verb at the end puns on "show favor," *lasei't panim* (very literally, "to bear a face"), because "take away" (or "bear off") is also *lasei't.*

CHAPTER 33

[1]But hear, Job, my speech,
and hearken to all my words.
[2]Look, I've opened my mouth,
my tongue speaks on my palate.
[3]My heart's truth—what I say,
and my lips utter lucid knowledge.
[4]God's spirit has made me,
and Shaddai's breath has quickened me.
[5]If you can answer me,
lay it out before me, take your stance.
[6]Why, I am like you to God,
from clay I, too, was pinched.
[7]Look, fear of me does not dismay you,
my urging does not weigh upon you.
[8]Why, you said in my ears,
and the sound of words I heard:
[9]"Pure I am with no wrong,
guiltless, I am free of crime.
[10]Look, He finds pretexts against me,
He counts me His enemy.

[11]He puts my feet in stocks,
He watches all my ways.”
[12]Look, where you fail to be right I will answer you,
for God is greater than man.
[13]Why do you contend with Him,
if He answers not all of man’s words?
[14]For God speaks in one way
or in two, and no one perceives Him:
[15]In a dream, a night’s vision,
when slumber falls upon men,
in sleep upon their couch.
[16]Then He lays bare the ear of men,
and terrifies them with reproof,
[17]to make humankind swerve from its acts
to put down pride in a man,
[18]that he save himself from the Pit
and his life from the Current.
[19]And he is reproved with pain on his couch—
shuddering in his bones unrelenting.
[20]His life-breath despises bread,
his gullet, desirable food.
[21]His flesh wastes away before one’s eyes,
and his bones, once unseen, are laid bare.
[22]And his being draws near to the Pit,
his life-breath to the Killers.
[23]If he had an advocate,

one spokesman out of a thousand,
to declare for man his uprightness,
[24]he could pity him and say, “Redeem him
from going down to the Pit. I found ransom.”
[25]His flesh would become sleeker than in youth,
he’d return to the days of his prime.
[26]He entreats God, Who grants him favor,
and he sees His face with a joyous cry
and He restores to man his right standing.
[27]He sings out to men and says,
“I offended, perverted what’s straight,
and it was not worth it for me.”
[28]He redeemed his being from crossing to the Pit,
and his life-breath enjoys the light.
[29]Look, all this God performs
twice or thrice with a man,
[30]to bring back his being from the Pit,
to glow in the light of life.
[31]Attend, Job, listen to me,
be still and I will speak.
[32]If there are words, answer me.
Speak, for I would find you in the right.
[33]If not—you, listen to me,
be still, and I will teach you wisdom.

CHAPTER 33 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *But hear, Job, my speech.* Elihu now turns from the three friends to the man he considers to be the malefactor. Much of this speech is formulaic, and rather repetitious, and the poetry is undistinguished, lending plausibility to the surmise that this is not the work of the Job poet.

4. *God's spirit.* Elihu appears to refer not merely to his own creaturely condition but to the fact (see 32:8) that God has inspired him with discernment.

7. *Look.* It is almost a verbal tic that Elihu begins so many sentences with the ostensive particle (*hineh* or *hen*), which in his case expresses an impatient sense that he knows it all.

fear of me does not dismay you. The self-assured Elihu is indignant that Job shows no signs of quailing before the reproof that Elihu administers, certain of its rightness.

9. *Pure I am with no wrong.* The speech attributed to Job, which continues to the end of verse 11, is in fact a paraphrase of several declarations of innocence and complaints about God's relentlessness that Job made in the course of the debate with the three friends.

13. *all of man's words.* The Hebrew says merely "all of his words," but the likely antecedent of "his" is "man" at the end of verse 12, so that word has been added for clarity.

14. *For God speaks in one way.* The fact of the matter, Elihu argues, is that God really answers man in more than one way, but unwitting humans don't realize they are being addressed. The particular mode of divine communication then stipulated is dream-visions.

16. *terrifies them with reproof*. The Hebrew here is obscure. Instead of the Masoretic *yaḥtom* ("He seals"?), this translation reads, with the Septuagint, *yeḥitem*, "terrifies them."

17. *its acts.* The Hebrew uses a singular noun. A long exegetical tradition, beginning in Late Antiquity, assumes that what is implied is evil acts.

18. *the Current.* The translation concurs with one line of interpreters who conclude that the Hebrew *shelaḥ*, which can mean "weapon" as well as

"stream," is a parallel to the Pit and refers to a mythological river, such as the one known in Mesopotamian mythology that marks the boundary of the realm of death.

21. *before one's eyes.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "from sight."

22. *the Killers.* If the received text is accurate, this would refer to angels of destruction in Sheol.

24. *Redeem him / from going down to the Pit.* This whole line is also awkward in the Hebrew and doesn't scan as poetry. This is the least of the textual difficulties in this chapter.

25. *become sleeker.* The Hebrew verb is anomalous and may reflect a corrupted text, so the translation is conjectural.

27. *sings out.* The form of the verb is peculiar and its meaning somewhat uncertain.

31. *Attend, Job, listen to me.* Characteristically, this speech of Elihu's ends not with poetic imagery or genuine argumentation but with emphatic exhortation, in a repetitious series of declarations that Job should be silent and listen to the wisdom that Elihu is about to impart to him.

CHAPTER 34

[1]And Elihu spoke up and he said:
[2]Listen, you sages, to my words,
and you who know, O hearken to me.
[3]For the ear probes words
as the palate tastes in eating.
[4]Let us take us a case to
let us know what is good between us.
[5]For Job has said, “I’m in the right,
and God has diverted my case.
[6]He lies about my case,
I’m sore-wounded from His shaft for no crime.”
[7]Who is a man like Job,
lapping up scorn like water?
[8]He consorts with wrongdoers
and walks with wicked men.
[9]For he has said, “What use to a man
to find favor with God?”
[10]Therefore, discerning men, hear me:
far be from God any wickedness,
from Shaddai any wrong.

[11]For a man's acts He pays him back,
and by a person's path He provides him.
[12]Surely God does not act wickedly,
and Shaddai does not pervert justice.
[13]Who assigned the earth to Him,
and placed the whole world with Him?
[14]Should He set His mind on man,
his living breath He would gather to Him.
[15]All flesh would expire together,
man to the dust would return.
[16]If you understand, then listen to this,
hearken to the sound of my words.
[17]Would one who hates justice hold sway,
would you call the great Righteous One wicked?
[18]Does one say of a king "scoundrel,"
"wicked" of the nobles?
[19]Who did not show favor to princes
nor was partial to rich over poor,
for they all are the work of His hands.
[20]In a moment they die, at midnight,
a people is upturned, passes on,
the mighty swept off, by no hand.
[21]For His eyes are on a man's ways,
and all his steps He does see.
[22]There is no dark and no death's shadow
where wrongdoers can hide.

[23]For He sets no fixed time for man
to come in judgment with God.
[24]He smashes the limitless mighty
and puts others in their place.
[25]Therefore He knows their deeds,
overturns them, in a night they are crushed.
[26]For their wickedness He strikes them
in a place where all can see,
[27]because they turned away from Him,
and all His ways they did not grasp,
[28]bringing the poor man's scream before Him,
and the scream of the lowly He heard.
[29]Should He be silent, who could condemn Him?
Should He hide His face, who could glimpse
Him,
whether a nation or a man?
[30]—rather than a tainted man ruling,
than snares for the people.
[31]Did he ever say to God,
"I shall bear my punishment and not sin,
[32]I did not see—You must instruct me,
if I have done wrong, I won't do it again"?
[33]Should He by your dictates mete out justice,
for it is you who reject or choose, not I?
And what do you know?—speak.
[34]Discerning men will say to me

and a wise man listening to me:
35“Job speaks without knowledge,
and his words are without any sense.”
36Would that Job might be tested forever
for responding like villainous men.
37For he adds to his offense,
makes crime abound among us,
and compounds his talk against God.

CHAPTER 34 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Listen, you sages*. True to character, Elihu lines himself up with the sages but also suggests that he knows even better than they.

4. *Let us take us a case to court.* Elihu's desire to argue his case against Job in quasilegal terms borrows from the metaphor of legal disputation that Job has frequently used and anticipates the polemic quotation of Job's legal imagery in verses 5 and 6.

6. *He lies about my case.* The Masoretic Text reads "I lie," but the *yod* signaling the third person may have been dropped by a scribe because the previous word ends with a *yod* (haplography).

sore-wounded from His shaft. The Hebrew is syntactically cramped and cryptic, literally reading "sore-wounded my shaft." Presumably the shaft, shot by God, is "mine" because it has pierced Job's body.

9. *What use to a man / to find favor with God?* These words are in fact a succinct summary of Job's argument about the arbitrariness of God's justice.

13. *Who assigned the earth to Him*. That is, God alone, having no superiors, is responsible for ruling the earth, and thus one can expect that He will do so justly.

17. *the great Righteous One.* The translation follows the lead of most interpreters, who understand this as a designation of God, though the Hebrew phrase *tsadiq kabir* sounds a little odd in biblical usage as a divine epithet.

18. *Does one say of a king "scoundrel."* Elihu's theological conservatism is reinforced by his social and political conservatism: whoever rules is right.

20. *In a moment they die, at midnight.* God as the world's impartial judge works in unanticipated ways. The wicked may prosper, but then they are swept off to destruction in the blink of an eye, in the middle of the night. This assertion jibes with a view often reiterated in Psalms.

23. *He sets no fixed time.* The received text appears to say "He does not set still" (or "yet"). But the puzzling "still," *ʿod*, is probably a haplography obscuring *moʿed*, "fixed time," since the preceding word, "sets," *yasim*, ends with a *mem*. The *ayin* and the *waw* of *moʿed* would then have been scribally reversed to produce an erroneous *ʿod*.

26. *For their wickedness.* Textual difficulties proliferate from here through verse 31. Instead of the Masoretic *reshaʿim*, "the wicked," this translation reads *rishʿam*, "their wickedness."

in a place where all can see. The literal sense is "in a place of seers."

29. *Should He be silent.* If the translation mirrors the meaning of the Hebrew, which is not entirely certain, the sense is: even if God chooses to be silent and hide His presence, His justice is never in question.

30. *—rather than a tainted man ruling.* This entire verse remains obscure.

31. *bear my punishment.* "Punishment," perhaps the most likely object of the verb, is merely implied.

33. *who reject or choose, not I.* Again, the Hebrew wording is rather crabbed and the meaning far from certain. The evident sense is a sarcastic challenge to Job: is it you who makes the decisions about the implementation of justice in the world and not God? The sudden switch from third-person reference to God to the first person ("not I") is a little disorienting but an allowable procedure in biblical usage.

34. *Discerning men.* Elihu concludes this speech as he began it, by invoking the support of the wise for his argument.

36. *like villainous men.* The received text reads “in [or against] villainous men,” but the Septuagint and some Hebrew manuscripts show “like.”

CHAPTER 35

[1]And Elihu spoke up and he said:
[2]Is this what you count as justice,
you say, “I am more right than God”?
[3]That you should say, What use is it to you,
what shall I gain from my offense?
[4]I will answer you in words,
and your companions with you.
[5]Look to the heavens and see,
and the sky that is high above you.
[6]If you offended, how do you affect Him,
if your crimes be many, what do you do to Him?
[7]If you’re in the right, what do you give Him,
or what could He take from your hand?
[8]On a man like yourself your wickedness acts,
and on a human being your righteousness.
[9]From much oppression they cry out,
call for help from the arm of the powerful.
[10]And none says, “Where is God my Maker,
Who gives us melodies in the night,

[11]instructs us more than the beasts of the earth,
    makes us wiser than the birds of the heavens?”
[12]Then they cried out—and He did not answer—
    from evil men’s haughtiness.
[13]But to falseness God will not listen,
    and Shaddai will not behold it.
[14]How much more, when you say, you don’t behold Him,
    the case is before Him and you await it,
[15]and now, His wrath requites nothing,
    and He knows nothing of any crime.
[16]And Job—with mere breath he opens his mouth.
    Devoid of knowledge, he heaps up words.

CHAPTER 35 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *What use is it to you, / what shall I gain from my offense?* The line shifts from second-person reference to Job in the first verset to first-person citation of Job in the second verset, a switch permissible in biblical usage though disconcerting to the English reader. Job’s gaining from his offense is a little cryptic, but the evident sense is that he feels it makes no difference whether he is virtuous or sinning, and he has no special motive to offend because he gets nothing from it.

5. *Look to the heavens and see.* The invocation of the vastness of the heavens prepares the ground for the contention (verses 6–8) that man’s actions have no effect on God high above.

8. *acts.* A verb to this effect is merely implied in the Hebrew.

9. *From much oppression they cry out.* This sudden switch to the suffering multitudes is intended to make the argument that many undergo terrible affliction but only Job accuses God for his suffering.

10. *Who gives us melodies in the night.* Many modern interpreters prefer to understand the noun *zemirot* as deriving from a (rare) homonymous root *z-m-r* that means "strength." There is nothing, however, in the immediate context to indicate that "strength" is the more likely meaning. By opting for the meaning "melodies," one accords the poet of the Elihu passages his first line of haunting poetry in an otherwise lackluster performance.

13. *But to falseness God will not listen.* Job has been objecting that God refuses to listen to his complaint. Elihu's rejoinder is that when a complaint is entirely baseless, God will of course refuse to listen.

15. *and now, His wrath requites nothing.* This entire line is completely opaque in the Hebrew. A very literal translation of this first verset is "And now that there is nothing, His wrath requites [or singles out]."

and He knows nothing of any crime. The word represented as "crime," *pash*, is unintelligible, and the translation assumes, with many critics, that it was originally *pesha*ʿ, "crime," the last consonant having been somehow dropped in scribal transcription. Even so, the clause sounds garbled and scarcely in keeping with biblical idiomatic usage. A literal rendering: "And he knows nothing in [of?] crime very much." In any case, this line is meant to be a summary of Job's impious words.

16. *And Job.* The switch from second person to third person at the end of this speech has a certain rhetorical logic: Elihu, having rebuked Job in direct address, now refers to him, contemptuously, in these summarizing words in the third person.

CHAPTER 36

[1]And Elihu went on to say:
[2]Wait for me a bit while I tell you
that there are still words on God's behalf.
[3]I shall speak my mind far and wide,
and show that the right's with my Maker.
[4]For, indeed, my words are no lie,
one perfect in knowledge is with you.
[5]Look, God is great, He does not despise us,
great in power and understanding.
[6]He will not let the wicked live,
and He grants justice to the afflicted.
[7]He does not take His eye off the righteous
nor off kings for the throne,
whom He seats on high forever.
[8]And if captives are in fetters
ensnared in the bonds of affliction,
[9]He tells them their acts,
and their crimes, which grow great.
[10]And He lays bare their ear to reproof,
and says they must turn from wrongdoing.

[11]If they obey and serve,
they will finish their days in bounty
and their years in pleasantness.
[12]And if they obey not, they will cross the Current,
and expire unawares.
[13]And the tainted in heart keep up anger,
they do not cry out when He binds them.
[14]They die in youth,
perish among catamites.
[15]He frees the afflicted through their affliction
and through oppression He lays bare their ear.
[16]He even drew you away from the straits,
a broad place unconfined beneath you,
your table heaped with rich fare.
[17]And you were filled with the case of the wicked,
the case and the ruling on which they depend.
[18]For look out, lest he lure you with riches,
lest great bribery lead you astray.
[19]Will your wealth matter to Him in straits
and all the efforts of power?
[20]Do not pant for the night,
for peoples to vanish from where they are.
[21]Watch out, do not turn to wrongdoing,
which you chose instead of affliction.
[22]Why, God looms on high in His power.
Who is like Him as a teacher?

[23]Who has assigned Him His way,
and who has said, “You have done wrong”?
[24]Recall that you exalt His deeds
which men have espied.
[25]All humankind has beheld Him,
man looks from afar.
[26]Why, exalted is God, and we know not,
the number of His years is unfathomed.
[27]For He draws down drops of water,
they are distilled in the rain of His wetness,
[28]as the skies drip moisture,
shower on abounding humankind.
[29]Can one grasp the spread of cloud,
the roars from His shelter?
[30]Why, He spreads over it His lightning,
and the roots of the sea it covers.
[31]For with them He exacts justice from peoples,
gives food in great abundance.
[32]Lightning covers His palms,
and He commands it to hit the mark.
[33]His roaring tells about Him,
His zealous wrath over evil acts.

CHAPTER 36 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

4. *one perfect in knowledge is with you*. Elihu is referring to himself, with characteristic lack of modesty. Ever bombastic, he begins this fourth discourse with a three-line windup (verses 2–4) entirely devoted to announcing his own wisdom.

5. *despise us.* The object of the verb is merely implied in the Hebrew.
power and understanding. The Hebrew says literally "power of heart," but the heart is clearly referred to here as the organ of understanding.

9. *their crimes.* It is Elihu's complacent assumption that if someone is subjected to captivity or some other terrible misfortune (verse 8), it must be because he is being punished for some crime that he has committed.

12. *the Current.* As in 33:18, the probable reference of the Hebrew *shelaḥ* is to a mythological river marking the border of the realm of death.

14. *catamites.* The Hebrew *qedeishim* is in dispute. Though it has often been understood as a term for homosexual cult-prostitutes, some scholars deny there was any practice of cultic prostitution, male or female, in the ancient Near East. The parallelism with "youth" here is obscure. If the term does refer to male prostitutes, perhaps Elihu assumes that they would have been cut off at an early age because of their promiscuity.

15. *frees the afflicted through their affliction.* The evident idea is that the experience of suffering leads to a new and liberating insight in the sufferers—into what they have done and how they must change.

17. *you were filled with the case of the wicked.* The Hebrew wording, reflected in this translation, is somewhat obscure. Textual difficulties become more and more dense as the chapter goes on.

18. *For look out.* With many scholars, this translation reads *hameh* (an Aramaicism for "look") instead of the Masoretic *ḥeimah*, "anger."
lest he lure you. The "he" would be one of the wicked.

19. *Will your wealth matter to Him in straits.* The translation supposes *lo* ("to Him") instead of the Masoretic *lo'* ("not"). In any case, the meaning of the whole is uncertain.

20. *for peoples to vanish.* Literally, "for peoples to go up." The possible sense of all this is: don't count on a sudden upheaval in the middle of the night, when whole peoples are suddenly destroyed, and your own fortune changed.

21. *instead of affliction.* Affliction, one recalls, is, in Elihu's view (verse 15), an agency of moral correction.

27. *For He draws down drops of water.* A prime instance of God's greatness, beheld by humankind (verse 25), is His bringing the rains to sustain life.

wetness. The term *ʾeid* occurs only here and in the second creation story, Genesis 2:6, where it refers to the moisture rising from the primeval earth.

29. *the roars from His shelter.* The shelter, *sukah*, is the heavenly abode of the deity in Canaanite mythology, and the roars from it are the sound of thunder.

30. *His lightning.* The usual sense of the Hebrew *ʾor* is "light," but the Elihu poet, both here and in verse 32, uses this instead of the common word *baraq*.

the roots of the sea it covers. The verb here is a little odd, but the idea seems to be that God's lightning penetrates even to the roots of the sea.

31. *For with them He exacts justice from peoples.* "Them" refers to the just mentioned thunder and lightning, which are the traditional weapons of the sky god in pre-Israelite mythology.

gives food in great abundance. The two versets of this line express respectively the acts of the God of judgment and of the God of mercy. He brings down a thundering assault of punishment on wayward nations but provides sustenance to humankind at large. The opposing acts are associated because the lightning occurs in rainstorms, and the gentler rains (see verses 27 and 28) water the earth to make it fruitful.

32. *Lightning covers His palms.* The lightning bolts rest on God's palms before He hurls them at their target.

33. *His roaring tells about Him.* The translation of this cryptic verset is an educated guess, based on the surmise that this line is a continuation of the thunder imagery and that the rumbling of the thunder is heard as a manifestation of God's awesome power. The second verset in the original sounds altogether like gibberish, an effect mirrored—inadvertently?—in the King James Version for the entire line: "The noise thereof showeth concerning it, the cattle also concerning the vapour." This translation tries to rescue the verset from pure gibberish by emending *miqneh*, "cattle," to *meqanei*ʾ, "to be zealous," and revocalizing *ʿoleh* ("going up"?) as *ʿawlah*, "wrongdoing" or "evil act."

CHAPTER 37

[1]For this, too, my heart trembles,
and it leaps from its place.
[2]Hear, O hear His voice raging
and the murmur that comes from His mouth.
[3]Beneath all the heavens He lets it loose—
His lightning to the corners of earth.
[4]After it roars a voice,
He thunders in the voice of His grandeur,
and He does not hold them back as His voice
is
[5]God thunders wondrously with His voice,
doing great things that we cannot know.
[6]For to the snow He says: “Be on earth,”
and rain in torrents, the rain of His mighty
torrents.
[7]Every man He shuts in,
that all men know His deeds.
[8]And the beast comes into its lair,
and in its den it dwells.
[9]From the sky-chamber comes the tempest,

and from the winds' dispersal the cold.
10 From God's breath the ice is made,
and wide waters turn solid.
11 With heavy moisture He loads the cloud,
the thunderhead scatters His lightning,
12 and round about it spins in its designs
to perform all that He charges them
on the face of inhabited earth,
13 whether for a scourge to His earth,
whether for mercy, He makes it happen.
14 Hearken to this, O Job,
stand, and take in the wonders of God.
15 Do you know when God directs them,
and His thunderhead's lightning shines?
16 Do you know of the spread of cloud,
the wonders of the Perfect in Knowledge,
17 when your garments feel warm
as the earth is becalmed from the south?
18 Will you pound out the skies with Him,
which are strong as a metal mirror?
19 Let us know what to say to Him!
We can lay out no case in our darkness.
20 Will it be told Him if I speak,
will a man say if he is devoured?
21 And now, they have not seen the light,
bright though it be in the skies,

as a wind passes, making them clear.
[22]From the north gold comes;
over God—awesome
[23]Shaddai, whom we find not, is lofty in power,
in judgment and great justice—He will not
oppress.
[24]Therefore men do fear Him.
He does not regard all the wise of heart.

CHAPTER 37 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *For this, too, my heart trembles*. This chapter is the completion of Elihu's fourth speech. The prominence of thunder and lightning as manifestations of God's awesome power is a direct continuation of the lightning theme that is at the center of 36:29–32. In evoking God's power in the natural world, the Elihu section moves beyond hectoring exhortation and almost rises to the level of poetry, though the language in biblical terms is still relatively routine for this subject, with many parallels to Psalms. The editor of the book may have been drawn to insert the Elihu passages precisely here because this concluding section of the fourth speech is a kind of prelude to the Voice from the Whirl-wind, resembling it thematically but scarcely its equal in poetic power.

2. *His voice raging*. As in Canaanite poetry, often mirrored in Psalms, the rumbling of thunder is understood as the voice of the deity.

4. *hold them back*. This translation understands the unusual verb *ʿaqev* as the equivalent of the rabbinic *ʿakev*, "to hold back" or "restrain." The pronoun "them" then refers to the bolts of lightning.

7. *Every man He shuts in*. The torrential rains compel every man to take shelter.

10. *From God's breath.* In the vivid anthropomorphism of the imagery, God's cooling breath, passing over the water, turns it to ice.

15. *Do you know.* This repeated question anticipates the challenge to Job's limited human knowledge in the Voice from the Whirlwind.

18. *Will you pound out the skies with Him.* The prevalent notion in the ancient Near East was that the sky was a great slab (*raqiʿa*, the "vault" of Genesis 1, a noun derived from the Hebrew verb that means "to pound out"). Since that verb appears only here in this particular conjugation, some interpreters understand it as "soar to the skies" (the sense that this conjugation of the root has in modern Hebrew). However, the reference to the solidity of the skies in the second verset makes the sense of pounding out a metallic slab more likely.

a metal mirror. Mirrors were made not from glass but from polished bronze.

19. *in our darkness.* The Hebrew says, somewhat cryptically, "from darkness," and "our" has been added interpretively. The sense seems to be that we humans in our ignorance are unable to articulate a legal argument against God, and you, Job, will surely not be able to tell us how to do it.

20. *will a man say if he is devoured.* Paltry man, standing before the all-powerful deity, has nothing to say in the face of the prospect of being overwhelmed and destroyed by God.

21. *they have not seen the light.* "They" refers to people in general. Even under clear skies, their limited human perception prevents them from seeing the bright light of the sun.

22. *From the north gold comes.* The claim of many interpreters that this refers to "the golden rays of the sun," as in the New Jewish Publication Society translation, is unconvincing both because the Hebrew sounds very much like a literal reference to gold and because the north is definitely not the direction from which the sun comes. Pope has proposed that behind this verset is the image of Baal's palace on Mount Zaphon (that is, North Mountain), a structure made out of gold, silver, and lapis lazuli. The verset would then be an apt parallel to the invocation of the glorious nimbus around God in the second verset.

23. *He will not oppress.* Some interpreters revocalize the Hebrew verb to yield "He will not answer." That is, although God is just, we cannot expect Him to address mere mortals. This reading would be in keeping with man's inability to gain access ("find out") to the lofty deity. But the emphasis on divine justice in this verset argues for the sense of "will not oppress."

24. *Therefore men do fear Him.* They fear Him (the Hebrew verb means both "to fear" and "to revere") because He is at once lofty in power and just.

He does not regard all the wise of heart. As the Hymn to Wisdom concluded in Job 28:28, "fear of the Master, that is wisdom," and God has no special regard for those who imagine they have attained understanding independently through the exercise of intellect. This final line would be a last rebuke to Job, who has had the presumption to think he knows how the system of divine justice should work and hence has dared to challenge God.

CHAPTER 38

[1]And the LORD answered Job from the whirlwind
and He said:
[2]Who is this who darkens counsel
in words without knowledge?
[3]Gird your loins like a man,
that I may ask you, and you can inform Me.
[4]Where were you when I founded earth?
Tell, if you know understanding.
[5]Who fixed its measures, do you know,
or who stretched a line upon it?
[6]In what were its sockets sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone,
[7]when the morning stars sang together,
and all the sons of God shouted for joy?
[8]Who hedged the sea with double doors,
when it gushed forth from the womb.
[9]when I made cloud its clothing,
and thick mist its swaddling bands?
[10]I made breakers upon it My limit,
and set a bolt with double doors.

[11]And I said, “Thus far come, no farther,
here halt the surge of your waves.”
[12]Have you ever commanded the morning,
appointed the dawn to its place,
[13]to seize the earth’s corners,
that the wicked be shaken from it?
[14]It turns like sealing clay,
takes color like a garment,
[15]and their light is withdrawn from the wicked,
and the upraised arm is broken.
[16]Have you come into the springs of the sea,
in the bottommost deep walked about?
[17]Have the gates of death been laid bare to you,
and the gates of death’s shadow have you seen?
[18]Did you take in the breadth of the earth?
Tell, if you know it all.
[19]Where is the way that light dwells,
and darkness, where is its place,
[20]that you might take it to its home
and understand the paths to its house?
[21]You know, for you were born then,
and the number of your days is great!
[22]Have you come into the storehouse of snow,
the storehouse of hail have you seen,
[23]which I keep for a time of strife,
for a day of battle and war?

[24]By what way does the west wind fan out,
the east wind whip over the earth?
[25]Who split a channel for the torrent,
and a way for the thunderstorm,
[26]to rain on a land without man,
wilderness bare of humankind,
[27]to sate the desolate dunes
and make the grass sprout there?
[28]Does the rain have a father,
or who begot the drops of dew?
[29]From whose belly did the ice come forth,
to the frost of the heavens who gave birth?
[30]Water congeals like stone,
and the face of the deep locks hard.
[31]Can you tie the bands of the Pleiades,
or loose Orion's reins?
[32]Can you bring constellations out in their season,
lead the Great Bear and her cubs?
[33]Do you know the laws of the heavens,
can you fix their rule on earth?
[34]Can you lift your voice to the cloud,
that the water-spate cover you?
[35]Can you send lightning bolts on their way,
and they will say to you, "Here we are!"?
[36]Who placed in the hidden parts wisdom,
or who gave the mind understanding?

[37]Who counted the skies in wisdom,
    and the jars of the heavens who tilted,
[38]when the dust melts to a mass,
    and the clods cling fast together?
[39]Can you hunt prey for the lion,
    fill the king of beast's appetite,
[40]when it crouches in its den,
    lies in ambush in the covert?
[41]Who readies the raven's prey
    when its young cry out to God
        and stray deprived of food?

CHAPTER 38 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the whirlwind*. Though the Hebrew *seʿarah* probably means simply "storm," this translation choice—and the consequent phrase the Voice from the Whirlwind—have been so deeply embedded in the imagination of speakers of English after the King James Version that it seems wise not to tamper with it.

2. *Who is this who darkens counsel.* With God's speech as the climax of the book, the Job poet takes a risk that only a supreme artist confident in his genius could do. He had already created for Job the most extraordinarily powerful poetry to express Job's intolerable anguish and his anger against God. Now, when God finally speaks, the poet fashions for Him still greater poetry, which thus becomes a poetic manifestation of God's transcendent power and also an image-for-image response to the death-wish poem that frames Job's entire argument. The unusual phrase "darkens counsel" is not merely an indication of speaking ignorantly (as the parallel in the second verset spells out) but a rejoinder to the spate of images of darkness blotting

out light in the death-wish poem of chapter 3. In pointed contrast to that poem, the opening section of the Voice from the Whirlwind introduces images of light and then traces a dynamic interplay between light and darkness.

4. *Where were you when I founded earth?* God's speech moves in a narrative progression from cosmogony (verses 4–21) to meteorology (verses 22–38)—which is to say, the play of natural forces across the created world invoked in the cosmogonic section—to zoology (38:39–39:40)—which is to say, the panorama of living creatures thriving in the play of the natural forces of creation—to zoology with a mythic heightening (40:15–41:26).

5. *a line.* This is the builder's line, used to construct straight angles.

7. *when the morning stars sang together.* The verb for singing, *ron*, is from the same root as *renanah* "glad song," which Job (3:7) wished to expunge from the night he was conceived. The morning stars are also a counterpoint to the stars of dawn on the night of conception that Job wished never to appear. This splendid vision of the celestial beings joining in joyous song in celebration of creation is not intimated in other biblical accounts of how God created the world.

8. *hedged the sea.* The idea of blocking, or imprisoning, the fiercely raging sea, which continues in some of the subsequent lines, shows the trace of the Canaanite creation myth. But the verb chosen here is the same one Job used (3:23) in his complaint that God had closed off all routes to him.

the womb. This metaphor for the sea as the matrix of creation is the first of a whole series of birth images that answer to the language of the death-wish poem, in which Job expresses the desire never to have been born, for the womb to have been his tomb. Here, by contrast, an awesome surge of energy comes forth from the womb of creation.

9. *swaddling bands.* This utterly original metaphor depicts the sheets or strips of white mist hovering over the primordial sea, and because swaddling bands are used for infants, it extends the imagery of birth.

12. *morning, / . . . dawn*. Looking beyond the primordial sea to the earth, the poet begins, strategically, with images of light—again, precisely what Job wanted to extinguish forever.

13. *to seize the earth's corners.* Evidently, it is light that takes hold of the far corners of the earth, "shaking" out, or exposing, the wicked who hide in night's darkness.

14. *It turns like sealing clay.* The antecedent of "it" is the earth: just as the unshaped matter of sealing clay becomes a distinct form when the seal is stamped on it, the earth, shapeless in darkness, assumes distinct form as the light of day spreads over it.

takes color. The Masoretic *yityatsvu*, "take a stand," makes no sense, and it is emended here to *titstabaʿ*.

19. *Where is the way that light dwells, / and darkness, where is its place.* The poet naturally begins with light, but in the complementary parallelism of the line, darkness also has its place. Creation, like the diurnal cycle, is a pulsing rhythm of light and darkness, whereas Job, in the egoism of his suffering, exercised an imagination only of darkness.

21. *You know, for you were born then.* This whole line is of course a sarcastic address to Job, whose minuscule life span could not measure up to the vastness of timeless creation. It also echoes back ironically against Job's wish never to have been born.

23. *which I keep for a time of strife.* The storehouses of snow and hail are manifestly mythological locations where God stockpiles these elements as weapons for future combat against some unspecified cosmic foe.

24. *the west wind fan out.* The noun *ʾor* usually means "light," but that sense is hard to reconcile with the verb, which may have a military connotation, as in Genesis 14:15, where it means to "fan out" or "deploy." Some construe it as "lightning," although that use of the term is restricted to the Elihu speeches and accords neither with the verb nor with the poetic parallelism. This translation deems likely the scholarly proposal that in this instance *ʾor* reflects the Aramaic *ʾoriya*, "west wind."

26. *to rain on a land without man.* It is one of the many enigmas of God's creation that rain pours down on places utterly devoid of human habitation. This idea is in keeping with the radical rejection of anthropocentrism, elsewhere assumed in biblical thought, that informs God's poem.

27. *desolate dunes.* See the comment on the identical phrase in 30:3.

28. *a father, / . . . begot*. Again, the poet invokes imagery of conception and birth in answer to Job's expressed desire to expunge them.

29. *whose belly . . . / who gave birth*. The birth imagery now moves from father to mother. In keeping with the boldness of the poet, it is a daring move because it evokes a virtually oxymoronic picture of hard cold ice coming out of a womb.

32. *constellations*. Many interpreters, going back to the King James Version and before it, construe the Hebrew *mazarot* as the name of an unidentified constellation, but it seems more likely that it is a dialectic variant of *mazalot*, which simply means "constellations."

33. *their rule*. The Hebrew suffix indicates "his" or "its," which has led some to identify God as the antecedent. But the plausible antecedent is the stars, thought to govern or predict the affairs of men. This could be a small scribal error, though fluid switching between singular and plural is rather common in biblical usage.

36. *the hidden parts . . . / the mind*. The meaning of the two nouns here, *tuhot* and *sekhwi*, have long been disputed. Some think they refer to birds, the ibis and the rooster, or even to mythological figures.

37. *Who counted the skies*. What is probably assumed is a multiplicity of heavens (in the Apocrypha and in some rabbinic legends they are seven in number).

the jars of the heavens who tilted. This is an original image of the source of rain. Else-where, as in the Flood story, there are casements in the vault of the heavens that are opened to let down the rain.

38. *the clods cling fast together*. This image of rain-soaked clods of earth turned into an amalgam of mud completes the meteorological section of the poem. After rain, snow, hail, ice, wind, and the patterns of the stars, the poet is ready to turn to the animal kingdom.

39. *the lion, / . . . the king of beast's appetite*. The Hebrew actually switches from the singular in the first verset to a plural in the second verset (see the comment on verse 33) and then continues in the plural in the next line. The translation keeps all these references in the singular in order to avoid confusion for the English reader. Many modern translations show "lioness,"

presumably because it is the lioness who does the hunting, but the Hebrew nouns in both halves of the verse are masculine.

CHAPTER 39

[1]Do you know the mountain goats' birth time,
do you mark the calving of the gazelles?
[2]Do you number the months till they come to term
and know their birthing time?
[3]They crouch, burst forth with their babes,
their young they push out to the world.
[4]Their offspring batten, grow big in the wild,
they go out and do not return.
[5]Who set the wild ass free,
and the onager's reins who loosed,
[6]whose home I made in the steppes,
his dwelling place flats of salt?
[7]He scoffs at the bustling city,
the driver's shouts he does not hear.
[8]He roams mountains for his forage,
and every green thing he seeks.
[9]Will the wild ox want to serve you,
pass the night at your feeding trough?
[10]Bind the wild ox with cord for the furrow,
will he harrow the valleys behind you?

[11]Can you rely on him with his great power
and leave your labor to him?
[12]Can you trust him to bring back your seed,
gather grain on your threshing floor?
[13]The ostrich's wing joyously beats.
Is the pinion, the plume, like the stork's?
[14]For she leaves her eggs on the ground,
and in the dust she lets them warm.
[15]And she forgets that a foot can crush them,
and a beast of the field stomp on them—
[16]harsh, abandons her young to a stranger,
in vain her labor, without fear.
[17]For God made her forgetful of wisdom,
and He did not allot her insight.
[18]Now on the height she races,
she scoffs at the horse and its rider.
[19]Do you give might to the horse,
do you clothe his neck with a mane?
[20]Do you make his roar like locusts—
his splendid snort is terror.
[21]He churns up the valley exulting,
in power goes out to the clash of arms.
[22]He scoffs at fear and is undaunted,
turns not back before the sword.
[23]Over him rattles the quiver,
the blade, the javelin, and the spear.

[24]With clamor and clatter he swallows the ground,
and ignores the trumpet's sound.
[25]At the trumpet he says, "Aha,"
and from afar he scents the fray,
the thunder of captains, the shouts.
[26]Does the hawk soar by your wisdom,
spread his wings to fly away south?
[27]By your word does the eagle mount
and set his nest on high?
[28]On the crag he dwells and beds down,
on the crest of the crag his stronghold.
[29]From there he seeks out food,
from afar his eyes look down.
[30]His chicks lap up blood,
where the slain are, there he is.

CHAPTER 39 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the mountain goats' birth time*. Continuing the images of a creation teeming with births that is a thematic rejoinder to Job's language longing for death, the poet offers a vivid vignette of the birthing of mountain goat and gazelle.

3. *burst forth*. The literal meaning of the Hebrew verb is "split open," a word choice that strikingly conveys the poet's sense that the procreative drive in nature (and the nurturing one as well) cannot be separated from violence.

4. *they go out and do not return*. The separation of the young from their mothers, a biological imperative, prepares the way for the subsequent images

of feral freedom in the wild, beyond the realm of human control.

13. *the ostrich's wing joyously beats.* This entire verse is notoriously obscure. Modern scholars are generally agreed that the bird in question is an ostrich, though the term used here is not the usual *bat-yaʿanah* but rather a kind of poetic epithet, "wing of song," or perhaps, better, "screech-wing," a designation alluding to the loud sounds the ostrich makes. The somewhat enigmatic verb *neʿelasah* appears to derive from a root associated with joy, or perhaps joyful movement (in Proverbs 7:18 it appears in a verb for sex).

Is the pinion, the plume, like the stork's? Although each Hebrew word of this verset is understandable, they make little sense together and hence any translation is no more than a guess. A very literal rendering of the Hebrew would be: "is a pinion a stork and plume."

14. *For she leaves her eggs on the ground.* This notion that the ostrich abandons all the eggs she lays and does not stay to hatch them is no more than ancient folk zoology.

16. *harsh, abandons her young to a stranger.* The translation is an interpretive surmise. The literal, cryptic sense of the Hebrew is "She hardened [the verb is in the wrong grammatical gender] her young to [someone?] not hers."

in vain her labor, without fear. This reproduces the Hebrew literally. The labor in vain would refer to her going to the trouble of laying these neglected eggs. Perhaps the cryptic "without fear" might mean that she exhibits no fear, though she should, about what might happen to her offspring.

17. *God made her forgetful of wisdom.* The ostrich, abandoning her young, is one of the enigmas of nature, suggesting that there is no readily discernible moral pattern in the order of creation. Other creatures, as the poem has already shown and will show again, lavish care on their offspring.

18. *she races.* The verb *hamriʾ* occurs only here. The Aramaic translations understood it to mean "soar" (and in modern Hebrew it is used for a plane's taking off from the ground), but ostriches don't fly. The translation is a guess based on context.

20. *roar like locusts.* The poet seems to be thinking of the great clamorous sound—a frightening sound—made by a vast swarm of locusts.

24. *With clamor and clatter.* The translation emulates the strong alliteration of the Hebrew, *beráʿash werógez*, although the second Hebrew term is closer to

"rage" or a state of disturbance.

26. *soar*. The unusual Hebrew verb is cognate with *ʾevrah*, "pinion," a poetic term for "wing," so it is conceivable that it refers not to the act of flight but, like the second verset, to spreading wings.

28. *the crag*. This remote, inaccessible habitat of the bird of prey complements the uninhabited steppes where the wild ass lives.

30. *His chicks lap up blood*. One of the remarkable aspects of the Job poet's vision of nature is that it so completely unsentimental. The creatures of the wild (with the exception of the peculiar ostrich) are endowed with an instinct to nurture their young. For carnivores, however, that nurture involves violence —destroying living creatures in order to sustain life in the offspring. The concluding image, then, of God's first speech is of the fledgling eagles in the nest, their little beaks open to gulp down the bloody scraps of flesh that their parent has brought them. The moral calculus of nature clearly does not jibe with the simple set of equations and consequences laid out in Proverbs and in Psalms.

CHAPTER 40

[1]And the LORD answered Job and He said:
[2]Will he who disputes with Shaddai be reproved?
Who argues with God, let him answer!
[3]And Job answered the LORD and he said:
[4]Look, I am worthless. What can I say back to You?
My hand I put over my mouth.
[5]Once have I spoken and I will not answer,
twice, and will not go on.
[6]And the LORD answered Job from the
whirlwind and He said:
[7]Gird your loins like a man.
Let me ask you, and you will inform Me.
[8]Will you indeed thwart My case,
hold Me guilty, so you can be right?
[9]If you have an arm like God's,
and with a voice like His you can thunder,
[10]put on pride and preeminence,
and grandeur and glory don.
[11]Let loose your utmost wrath,
see every proud man, bring him low.

[12]See every proud man, make him kneel,
tramp on the wicked where they are.
[13]Bury them in the dust together,
shut them up in the grave.
[14]And I on my part shall acclaim you,
for your right hand triumphs for you.

[15]Look, pray: Behemoth, whom I made with you,
grass like cattle he eats.
[16]Look, pray: the power in his loins,
the virile strength in his belly's muscles.
[17]He makes his tail stand like a cedar,
his balls' sinews twine together.
[18]His bones are bars of bronze,
his limbs like iron rods.
[19]He is the first of the ways of God.
Let his Maker draw near him with His sword!
[20]For the mountains offer their yield to him,
every beast of the field plays there.
[21]Underneath the lotus he lies,
in the covert of reeds and marsh.
[22]The lotus hedges him, shades him,
the brook willows stand around him.
[23]Look, he swallows a river at his ease,
untroubled while Jordan pours into his mouth.

[24]Could one take him with one's eyes,
with barbs pierce his nose?

[25]Could you draw Leviathan with a hook,
and with a cord press down his
[26]Could you put a lead line in his nose,
and with a fishhook pierce his cheek?
[27]Would he urgently entreat you,
would he speak to you gentle words?
[28]Would he seal a pact with you,
that you take him as lifelong slave?
[29]Could you play with him like a bird,
and leash him for your young women?
[30]Could hucksters haggle over him,
divide him among the traders?
[31]Could you fill his skin with darts,
and a fisherman's net with his head?
[32]Just put your hand upon him—
you will no more recall how to battle.

CHAPTER 40 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And the LORD answered Job and He said*. After completing the poetic sweep of the great panorama of creation from the beginning of things to the

world of living creatures, God turns in direct confrontation to Job, who now (verses 4 and 5) is abashed and renounces his challenge to God.

7. *Gird your loins like a man.* As the LORD launches on His second speech, He repeats verbatim the opening formula of the first speech (38:3). He then proceeds to turn around Job's language of a legal dispute (verse 8) and to ask Job sarcastically whether he is capable of exercising God's power (verses 9–14).

10. *pride and preeminence, / . . . grandeur and glory*. The translation follows the double alliteration of the Hebrew: *gaʾon wegovah . . . wehod wehadar.*

11. *your utmost wrath.* The Hebrew says literally "the wraths of your fury," but, as elsewhere, the locking together of synonymous nouns in the construct state is an intensifier.

13. *the grave.* The Hebrew *tamun* means literally "the hidden [place?]," but this is evidently an epithet for the grave (or, perhaps, the underworld), especially since the verbal stem *t-m-n*, also used at the beginning of the line, means both "to hide" and "to bury."

15. *Behemoth.* The Hebrew word means "beast." It is in plural form, possibly a plural of intensification or majesty, but the noun is treated as singular and masculine (indeed, spectacularly masculine) throughout. Behemoth clearly takes off from the Egyptian hippopotamus, but in his daunting proportions, his fierce virility, and his absolute impregnability, he represents a mythological heightening of the actual beast, just as Leviathan is even more patently a mythological heightening of the Egyptian crocodile. The fact that the poet probably never laid eyes on these fabled beasts but knew of them through travelers' yarns no doubt facilitated this transition from zoology to myth. Whether there is some counterpart to Behemoth in Canaanite or Sumerian myth, as some have claimed, is a matter of dispute.

16. *loins, / . . . virile strength*. Both terms point to sexuality—the loins by metonymy and "virile strength" because the Hebrew term *ʾon* is characteristically used for sexual potency.

17. *makes his tail stand like a cedar.* The exiguous tale of the hippopotamus scarcely fills this bill, but in all likelihood "tail" is a euphemism for a different part of the male animal's anatomy.

balls. The rare *peḥadim* has long been understood—and was so understood by the King James translators, who rendered it as "stones"—as an Aramaicism reflecting *paḥdaʾ*, "testicle."

19. *Let his Maker draw near him with His sword.* More literally, "bring His sword near to him." The verset is a little enigmatic, but it is usually understood to mean that only Behemoth's Maker would dare to approach him with a sword.

21. *the lotus . . . / the covert of reeds and marsh*. This native habitat of the hippopotamus is distinctly Egyptian.

23. *swallows.* The verb usually means "to oppress." The hyperbolic sense here may be that Behemoth demolishes a whole river in one long, easy gulp.

untroubled. Literally, "he is secure."

Jordan. In biblical poetry, which constantly needs synonyms because of its dependence on semantic parallelism, both Jordan and the Nile (*yeʾor*) are used as terms for "river."

25. *Leviathan.* Although associated with the crocodile of the Nile, Leviathan (Ugaritic *lotan*, Hebrew *liwyatan*) is a prime actor in Canaanite mythology as a sea monster, and in keeping with his role here in the climactic passage of the poem, he is more prominently mythological than Behemoth. There is no formal introduction or indication of transition for the Leviathan section, but the "barbs" of the last Behemoth line and the "hook" of the first Leviathan line create a linkage.

26. *lead line.* The Hebrew *ʿagmon* usually means "reed," so this rendering is a guess based on context.

31. *Could you fill his skin with darts.* This notion of the absolute invulnerability of Leviathan to all human weapons—which caught Melville's attention in *Moby-Dick*—is elaborated in 41:19–21.

and a fisherman's net with his head. The translation follows the Hebrew, which in the first verset has Leviathan's skin as the object of the verb "fill" and here has, as the object of the same verb, a fisherman's net, into which Leviathan's head would be put.

32. *you will no more recall how to battle.* The Hebrew syntax is somewhat cryptic, though the general sense seems clear. Very literally, it reads, "Recall battle, you will do no more."

CHAPTER 41

[1]Look, all hope of him is dashed,
at his mere sight one is cast down.
[2]No fierce one could arouse him,
and who before Me could stand up?
[3]Who could go before Me in this I'd reward,
under all the heavens he would be mine.
[4]I would not keep silent about him,
about his heroic acts and surpassing grace.
[5]Who can uncover his outer garb,
come into his double mail?
[6]Who can pry open the doors of his face?
All around his teeth is terror.
[7]His back is rows of shields,
closed with the tightest seal.
[8]Each touches against the next,
no breath can come between them.
[9]Each sticks fast to the next,
locked together, they will not part.
[10]His sneezes shoot out light,
and his eyes are like the eyelids of dawn.

[11]Firebrands leap from his mouth,
sparks of fire fly into the air.
[12]From his nostrils smoke comes out,
like a boiling vat on brushwood.
[13]His breath kindles coals,
and flame comes out of his mouth.
[14]Strength abides in his neck,
and before him power dances.
[15]The folds of his flesh cling together;
hard-cast, he will not totter.
[16]His heart is cast hard as stone,
cast hard as a nether millstone.
[17]When he rears up, the gods are frightened,
when he crashes down, they cringe.
[18]Who overtakes him with sword, it will not avail,
nor spear nor dart nor lance.
[19]Iron he deems as straw,
and bronze as rotten wood.
[20]No arrow can make him flee,
slingstones for him turn to straw.
[21]Missiles are deemed as straw,
and he mocks the javelin's clatter.
[22]Beneath him, jagged shards,
he draws a harrow over the mud.
[23]He makes the deep boil like a pot,
turns sea to an ointment pan.

[24]Behind him glistens a wake,
he makes the deep seem hoary.
[25]He has no match on earth,
made as he is without fear.
[26]All that is lofty he can see.
He is king over all proud beasts.

CHAPTER 41 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *all hope of him is dashed*. That is, any hope to vanquish Leviathan will be frustrated.

one is cast down. The translation is an interpretive inference from a single word in the Hebrew, *yutal*, "will be cast."

2. *arouse him.* The same verb is used with Leviathan as its object in 3:8, "ready to rouse Leviathan." One suspects it was part of the mythological scenario.

3. *Who could go before Me in this I'd reward.* The Hebrew is cryptic. The possible meaning is that God alone has the power to subdue Leviathan, but if a mortal man could really do it, God would abundantly reward him.

4. *I would not keep silent about him.* These words would seem to refer to the hypothetical hero who would vanquish Leviathan, though they are ambiguous enough that they might refer to Leviathan himself. In that case, instead of the conditional "I would not keep silent," the translation would require a simple indicative, "I will not keep silent." "Heroic acts," however, sounds more appropriate for a human.

5. *outer garb, / . . . double mail*. The description of the fabled beast begins with physical features of the crocodile—here, its plated armor. The second noun in the received text is *risno*, "his reins," but the Septuagint reading, *siryono*, "his armor," is more plausible.

6. *the doors of his face.* These are, of course, his powerful jaws.

7. *back.* The received text reads *gaʿawah*, which means "pride," but both the Septuagint and the Vulgate used a Hebrew text that must have read, more plausibly, *gewah*, "back."

10. *His sneezes shoot out light.* At this point, the poet clearly moves from the Egyptian crocodile to a mythological fire-breathing dragon.

and his eyes are like the eyelids of dawn. This verset is one of the most arresting—and daring—moves of the Job poet. He had used this altogether striking image at the beginning of the book, in Job's death-wish poem (3:9, and see the second comment on that verse). Now he brings it back, not hesitating to locate an image of exquisite beauty at the heart of terror. It is precisely this paradox that epitomizes his vision of Leviathan—a frightening and alien creature—yet, in God's creation, also a thing of beauty.

11. *fly into the air.* More literally, "escape."

14. *power dances.* The precise meaning of the noun *deʾavah* is a little in doubt. Some construe it as "violence" or "terror." The verb *taduts* usually means "to exult." Some ancient versions show *taruts* (a small orthographic difference), "runs."

16. *nether millstone.* In the biblical-poetic pattern of intensification from first verset to second, the beast's heart is at first hard as stone, then hard as a nether millstone, which would have to be especially hard and heavy in order to bear the pressure of grinding.

17. *rears up . . . / crashes down*. Both words in the Hebrew are semantically ambiguous, and so this interpretation is conjectural.

18. *sword.* This paradigmatic weapon then triggers a whole catalogue of weapons that would be useless against Leviathan.

20. *arrow*. The Hebrew uses a poetic epithet, "son of the bow."

21. *Missiles.* The mysterious *totaḥ* appears only here, and all that is known about it is that it must be some sort of weapon. Modern Hebrew has adopted it for "cannon."

24. *Behind him glistens a wake.* The last visual sighting of Leviathan is of his wake as he churns through the water and out of the field of human vision. It is notable that this whole poem, which began with the light of the morning stars

and a question about where light dwells, concludes with a wake shining on the surface of the abyss.

26. *He is king over all proud beasts.* The same phrase, *beney shaḥats*, "proud beasts," occurs in 28:8, in the Hymn to Wisdom. Since there it refers to beasts, it is reasonable to assume that the meaning here is the same. What is remarkable about this whole powerfully vivid evocation of Leviathan is that the monotheistic poet has taken a figure from mythology, traditionally seen as the cosmic enemy of the god of order, and transformed it into this daunting creature that is preeminent in, but also very much a part of, God's teeming creation.

CHAPTER 42

[1]And Job answered the LORD and he said:
[2]I know You can do anything,
and no devising is beyond You.
[3]“Who is this obscuring counsel without
knowledge?”
Therefore I told but did not understand,
wonders beyond me that I did not know.
[4]“Hear, pray, and I will speak.
Let me ask you, that you may inform me.”
[5]By the ear’s rumor I heard of You,
and now my eye has seen You.
[6]Therefore do I recant,
And I repent in dust and ashes.

[7]And it happened after the LORD had spoken these words to Job, that the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: “My wrath has flared against you and your two companions because you have not spoken rightly of Me as did My servant Job. [8]And now, take for

yourselves seven bulls and seven rams and go to My servant Job, and offer a burnt offering for yourselves, and Job My servant will pray on your behalf. To him only I shall show favor, not to do a vile thing to you, for you have not spoken rightly of Me as did my servant Job." [9]And Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went out and did according to all that the LORD had spoken to them, and the LORD showed favor to Job. [10]And the LORD restored Job's fortunes when he prayed for his companions, and the LORD increased twofold all that Job had. [11]And all his male and female kinfolk and all who had known him before came and broke bread with him in his house and grieved with him and comforted him for all the harm that the LORD had brought on him. And each of them gave him one kesitah and one golden ring. [12]And the LORD blessed Job's latter days more than his former days, and he had fourteen thousand sheep and six thousand camels and a thousand yokes of oxen and a thousand she-asses. [13]And he had seven sons and three daughters. [14]And he called the name of the first one Dove and the name of the second Cinnamon and the name of the third Horn of Eyeshade. [15]And there were no women in the land so beautiful as Job's daughters. And their father gave them an estate among their brothers. [16]And Job lived a

hundred and forty years after this, and he saw his children and his children's children, four generations.
[17]And Job died, aged and sated in years.

CHAPTER 42 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *I know You can do anything*. Job's final recantation begins by a recognition of God's omnipotence, though it might be noted that he had conceded this attribute all along in his complaint against God, raising doubts not about divine power but about divine justice.

3. *Who is this obscuring counsel without knowledge?* Job is directly quoting God's first words to him in 38:2 (only substituting a synonymous verb). He does this in order to grant the validity of God's challenge to him.

wonders beyond me that I did not know. The wonders are the spectacular vision of God's complex creation, from cosmogony to Leviathan, that has been vouchsafed to Job through the Voice from the Whirlwind.

4. *Let me ask you, that you may inform me.* Job again quotes from the beginning of God's speech to him, 38:3, in order to concede the justice of God's position.

5. *By the ear's rumor I heard of You, / and now my eye has seen you.* "The ear's rumor" is literally "the hearing of the ear," and picks up the imperative "hear" of the previous line. The seeing of the eye is a testimony to the persuasive power of the poetry that God has spoken to Job out of the whirlwind. Through that long chain of vividly arresting images, from the swaddling bands of mist drifting over the primordial sea at creation to the fearsomely armored Leviathan, whose eyes are like the eyelids of dawn, Job has been led to see the multifarious character of God's vast creation, its unfathomable fusion of beauty and cruelty, and through this he has come to understand the incommensurability between his human notions of right and wrong and the structure of reality. But he may not see God Himself because God addresses him from a storm cloud.

7. *you have not spoken rightly of Me as did My servant Job.* The three companions had repeatedly proffered lies—about Job and about the divine system of justice—in order to preserve their pat notion of reward and punishment. They were, in effect, corrupted witnesses on God's behalf. Though the LORD from the whirlwind roundly rebuked Job for his presumption, Job in the debate, unlike his three companions, had remained honest to his own observation of reality and his awareness of his own acts; so, even in his presumption, he had spoken "rightly" about God, had clung to his integrity. Thus God pointedly continues here to call Job His "servant," as He did in His exchanges with the Adversary.

9. *the LORD showed favor to Job.* That is, God accepted Job's intercession on behalf of the three companions because of Job's integrity.

10. *the LORD increased twofold all that Job had.* As countless readers have objected, this doubling of property is scarcely adequate compensation for all Job's sufferings, and even more so, the ten new children scarcely heal the wound of the loss of the first ten lives. But the book ends in the folktale world of the frame-story, where everything is reduced to schematic patterns and formulaic numbers, and perhaps in this world such a question cannot properly be asked.

11. *all his male and female kinfolk.* The Hebrew says "all his brothers and his sisters," but the narrative context suggests that the broader biblical meaning of this kinship term is likely here.

broke bread. Literally, "ate bread [that is, food]."

grieved with him and comforted him. These are precisely the actions performed by the three companions in 2:12, but here they are actually restorative, and breaking bread together marks the return of the pariah Job to the human community.

kesitah. An evidently valuable coin mentioned in several other biblical texts, though nothing more is known about it.

one golden ring. The *nezem* is a large ring, worn on the ear or nose, not on a finger.

14. *Dove . . . Cinnamon . . . Horn of Eyeshade*. These strange and lovely names (the sons remain anonymous and no names were assigned to Job's children in the opening frame-story) are mystifying. The Hebrew names Yemimah, Qetsiʿah, Qeren Hapukh have no currency elsewhere in the Bible.

The writer may have wanted to intimate that after all Job's suffering, which included hideous disfigurement as well as violent loss, a principle of grace and beauty enters his life in the restoration of his fortunes. Thus, the three daughters have names associated with feminine delicacy and the arts of attraction, and they are said to be the most beautiful women in the land.

15. *gave them an estate among their brothers.* This was not the standard biblical practice of inheritance.

16. *children. Banim* can mean either "sons" or "children," but the prominent attention just given to Job's three daughters suggests that the more inclusive sense is intended. It may be especially fitting that Job, having begun his complaint by wishing that his own birth could be eradicated, at the end is witness to a chain of births of his offspring.

THE SONG OF SONGS

Introduction

The extraordinary variegation of the books of the Hebrew Bible in style, genre, and outlook is one of the most exciting aspects of this anthology that spans nearly a millen nium. But even against that background, the Song of Songs stands out in its striking distinctiveness—a distinctiveness that deserves to be called wondrous. The delicate yet frank sensuality of this celebration of young love, without reference to God or covenant or Torah, has lost nothing of its immediate freshness over the centuries: these are among the most beautiful love poems that have come down to us from the whole ancient world. Famously, the erotic nature of the Song constituted a challenge for the framers of the canon, both Jewish and Christian, and their response was to read the poems allegorically—in the case of the early rabbis, as the love between the Holy One and Israel, and in the

case of the Church fathers, as the love between Christ and the Church. “If all the writings are holy,” Rabbi Akiva proclaimed in a discussion of the Song’s canonicity, “the Song of Songs is holy of holies.” Both religious traditions, however fervently they clung to this allegorical vision, never succeeded in entirely blocking the erotic power of the text. There are, for example, medieval Hebrew liturgical poems that earnestly follow the theological plot of the allegory yet knowingly or sometimes unwittingly let the young lovers’ delight in the carnal consummation of love make its presence felt.

Little is known about the origins of these poems. Different elaborate theories have been proposed about them: that they are wedding poems, that they should be read as drama, that they originated in poems to a pagan love goddess, that they constitute a single architectonic poetic structure, that they are direct adaptations of Egyptian or Mesopotamian love poetry. All such theories should prudently be rejected. The book as a whole has an anthological look, though a case might be made for certain recurrent configurations constituting a kind of unity. It is conceivable that embryonic versions of some of these poems were in oral or perhaps written circulation for centuries, but there is no way of proving that

hypothesis. The evidence of the language of the poems —some of the vocabulary and certain grammatical forms—clearly indicates a relatively late date of composition; the fourth century B.C.E. seems a reasonable guess, though some would put it a little later. It may be that one or two of the poems were in fact written as wedding poems, but the content of most of them leads one to conclude that the free enjoyment of the pleasures of love and not marriage is what the poets had in view. Several of the poems have an urban setting, with the young woman addressing "the daughters of Jerusalem" or confronted by the town watchmen, but the predominant background of the poems is bucolic or sylvan—luscious gardens, verdant forests, vineyards, rolling hills, and mountains. Solomon is mentioned more than once, but the intention seems to be to draw a contrast between the two young lovers delighting in each other in the vernal lushness of nature and the luxuries of the royal court.

These poets are finely aware of the long tradition of Hebrew poetry, but notably there is little in the way of allusion to earlier Hebrew texts. This is hardly evidence that the poets were unfamiliar with those texts, only that the antecedent biblical literature did not much suit their own purposes.

The formal system of parallelism between versets —that is, parts of the line—that governs Hebrew poetry from its earliest extant texts going back to around 1100 B.C.E. is still very much in evidence, although in quite a few lines the parallelism is looser than in earlier eras. The first line of the book, for example, like a good many after it, is not constructed on semantic parallelism: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, / for your loving is better than wine.” In this instance, the second verset does not parallel the first but instead explains it. Other lines that appear to diverge from the convention of poetic parallelism actually follow a precedent well attested in earlier Hebrew poetry. Thus the first poetic line of 1:4 reads: “Draw me after you, let us run. / The king has brought me to his chamber.” Here, as in many lines in the Prophets, Psalms, and elsewhere, the second verset traces a narrative development of what is introduced in the first: the young woman first declares her eagerness to run off after her lover; in the second verset, they have completed their running and come to his bedchamber, reported in a verb that indicates a completed action. More generally, however, these poets deploy the millennium-old convention of poetic parallelism inventively and vividly. When the beloved describes her dark complexion (1:5) as “like the tents

of Kedar, / like Solomon's curtains," she uses the parallelism to make an argument against those who would mock her for her peasant's suntan. Yes, I am dark, she says, like nomads' tents woven from black goat's hair (the name Kedar puns on a Hebrew root that means "dark"), but if I seem to belong to a rough Bedouin setting, my darkness is also something lovely, like Solomon's tent hangings, which might well be dyed, in royal fashion, in deep blue or purple.

The predominant use of semantic parallelism in the poetic corpus of the Bible is to concretize, focus, or intensify material from the first verset in the second. This strategy is vividly evident in line after line here. Chapter 8, for example, begins with the following line: "Would that you were a brother to me, / suckling my mother's breasts." It is possible to construe the second verset as a participial phrase, which is done in this translation in part for the sake of readability in English. But it is equally possible that it is a noun phrase, "a suckling of my mother's breasts," which would be in keeping with the procedure of parallelistic verse to substitute in the second verset a paraphrase or epithet for the plain noun (here, "brother") of the first. We should note what is effected through the substitution. The general fraternal relationship marked by "brother" becomes something biological and

intimately physical: the beloved fantasizes her lover sucking the same breasts that she has sucked. This fantasy of shared physical closeness in infancy then becomes a vivid anticipation of another kind of physical closeness in adulthood. One can see that the poet had a subtle sense of how the inherited poetic system worked as he put the system to a rather different use from what one finds in the earlier poems that have been preserved in the canon.

Much of the enchantment and the sensual richness of the celebration of love in the Song inhere in its metaphoric language. Some of the metaphors drawn from the animal kingdom and from architecture—teeth as newly bathed ewes, a neck as a tower—may seem a little strange to modern readers, though that probably was not true for the ancient audience. Other figurative comparisons—eyes like doves, breasts like twin gazelles, kisses sweeter than wine—retain all their lovely expressiveness after more than twenty-two centuries. What is remarkable is how consistently the figurative language of these poems evokes the experience of physical love with a delicacy of expression that manifests the poet's constant delight in likening one thing to another. (The Hebrew verb *damah*, "to be like," is repeatedly flaunted.) There is a recurrent shuttling between the metaphor and its

referent, in some instances creating a sense of virtual interchangeability between the two that enables the poet to speak candidly of sexual gratification without seeming to do so. In a related kind of poised ambiguity, we often don't know, because of the figurative language, whether we are inside or outside. Here is an exquisite metaphor from the first chapter: "A sachet of myrrh is my lover to me, / all night between my breasts. / A cluster of henna, my lover to me, / in the vineyards of Ein-Gedi" (1:13–14). A young woman making herself desirable might possibly wear a sachet of fragrance between her breasts. Reading the lines, we of course realize what the lover, playfully miniaturized as a sachet, is doing in that place, but the realization is nuanced in feeling by the charming metaphor. And the concluding verset, "in the vineyards of Ein-Gedi," leaves us pleasantly hovering between possibilities: has the henna of the metaphor been grown at the Ein-Gedi oasis overlooking the Dead Sea, or rather, in a slide through the metaphoric to the literal, are the lovers actually enjoying their love in the vineyards of Ein-Gedi, as elsewhere vineyards or gardens become their bower?

These ambiguities, always evocative, never arch, between figure and referent are most brilliantly deployed in the relatively long poem that starts at 4:8

and runs to 5:1. The flourishing natural landscape, beginning with the wild and distant mountains of Lebanon, is the apt background for the young lovers, who are themselves vernal, like the world though which they move. But there is a fine transition inaugurated at 4:12 from the literal realm of green things to a figurative one. Now the beloved's body is a "locked garden" filled with luscious fruit and fragrant plants, and she invites her lover to enter the garden and enjoy its fruits. The audience of these lines is of course expected to know exactly what she is talking about, but the delicacy of expression is sustained by the harmonious continuity between outside and inside. This distinctive use of metaphor does not explain everything, but it is surely one of the features of the Song of Songs that makes it among the most beautiful collections of love poetry in the Western tradition.

CHAPTER 1

[1]The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.

[2]Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth,
for your loving is better than wine.
[3]For fragrance your oils are goodly,
poured oil is your name.
And so the young women love you.
[4]Draw me after you, let us run.
The king has brought me to his chamber.
Let us be glad and rejoice in you.
Let us extol your loving beyond wine.
Rightly do they love you.

[5]I am dark but desirable,
O daughters of Jerusalem,
like the tents of Kedar,
like Solomon's curtains.
[6]Do not look on me for being dark,
for the sun has glared on me.

My mother's sons were incensed with me,
they made me a keeper of the vineyards.
My own vineyard I have not kept.
7 Tell me, whom I love so,
where you pasture your flock at noon,
lest I go straying
after the flocks of your companions.
8 —If you do not know, O fairest of women,
go out in the tracks of the sheep
and graze your goats
by the shepherd's shelters.

9 To my mare among Pharaoh's chariots
I likened you, my friend.
10 Your cheeks are lovely with looped earrings,
your neck with beads.
11 Earrings of gold we will make for you
with silver filigree.

12 While the king was on his couch
my nard gave off its scent.
13 A sachet of myrrh is my lover to me,
all night between my breasts.
14 A cluster of henna, my lover to me,
in the vineyards of Ein-Gedi.

15 O you are fair, my friend,
O you are fair, your eyes are doves.
16 —O you are fair, my lover, you are sweet,
our bed is verdant, too.
17 Our house's beams are cedar,
our rafters evergreens.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The Song of Songs.* In biblical idiom this formation indicates a superlative —the best of songs. The exquisite poetry that follows surely justifies the title.

which is Solomon's. The attribution is strictly editorial, following a practice of attributing Late Biblical books to famous figures from earlier Israelite history. The identification is encouraged by the appearance of Solomon's name in verse 5 (see the last comment there) and by the reference to "the king" in verse 4 (again, see the first comment there) and elsewhere.

2. *Let him kiss me.* The Hebrew *yeshaqeini* puns on *yashqeini*, "let him give me drink," since the kisses are likened to wine.

loving. The Hebrew *dodim* suggests lovemaking, a sense already understood in the Middle Ages. The medieval Hebrew poet Yehudah HaLevi concludes an allegorical poem clearly based on that Song of Songs with this explicitly sexual line, spoken by the beloved (Israel) to God: "Put your strength in me, for I will give you my loving [*dodai*]." One should note that the young woman begins by imagining her desirable lover from a certain distance, in the third person, and then in the second half of the line closes the gap by addressing him more intimately in the second person.

3. *For fragrance.* The Song of Songs revels in the pleasures of all five senses. This initial poem begins with taste and here moves on to smell. Touch is implied in verse 13, sight in verse 15, and later sound will enter as well.

poured oil. The Hebrew modifier *turaq* is problematic because grammar requires a masculine verb, but the form here is feminine. Some interpreters want to see the word as the name of a kind of oil, but it probably makes more sense to understand it as an image of poured oil emitting a pleasing scent, as the lover's good name projects in public an attractive sense of him. The Hebrew shows wordplay, which also appears in Proverbs, between *shemen*, "oil," and *shem,* "name."

4. *The king*. Here and elsewhere this is a designation for the lover. The beloved is never called queen, perhaps because of the asymmetry between the sexes in the biblical world: he is her glorious king, and she is the one in whom he continually delights, but she is not his queen.

has brought me to his chamber. In a palace, there would be inner chambers, but the chamber of which he speaks is clearly a secluded place in which to make love. Marriage is not mentioned. The Hebrew shows a plural, probably reflecting poetic usage.

Let us. It is noteworthy that she switches back and forth from direct address to third-person reference to her lover. Verse 2 begins with a third-person wish, then moves into intimate address. The "us" here may be the daughters of Jerusalem, introduced explicitly in the next verse, which however begins a new poem.

5. *desirable*. While the adjective *naʾwah* comes to mean something like "lovely" in standard Hebrew usage, it derives from the verbal stem *ʾ-w-h*, "to desire," and given the erotically fraught world of the Song, that meaning is probably activated here.

the tents of Kedar. Kedar is an Arab tribe, and Bedouins to this day make their tents out of black goat hair. The name also puns on the Hebrew root *q-d-r*, "to be dark."

like Solomon's curtains. The curtains are tent hangings. Some scholars revocalize the Hebrew for "Solomon" in order to make it the name of a desert tribe, thus yielding a neater parallelism. But the point of the line is precisely its paradox: I am as dark as a nomad's tent but as desirable as the lovely curtains of a king. This would be an especially effective rejoinder to the elegant urbanite daughters of Jerusalem who might mock her for her suntanned skin, the sign of a peasant.

6. *dark*. Instead of the primary term with which she began, *sheḥorah*, she now uses the same word with a diminutive suffix, *sheḥarḥoret,* "darkish," "dusky."

My mother's sons. She does not call them "my brothers" but uses a designation that suggests a certain distancing from them. Later, she will invoke a woman's attachment to her mother.

were incensed with me. The Hebrew verb suggests heat, thus linking with the glaring sun of the previous line. The brothers are incensed with her because she has not kept her vineyard, that is, she has not preserved her virginity. She on her part expresses no misgivings—quite the contrary—at having exercised sexual freedom.

they made me a keeper of the vineyards. Her brothers have exiled her from the comforts of home (perhaps an urban home) and made her perform this rough peasant task in order to punish her.

My own vineyard I have not kept. The reference is double—metaphorically, to her virginity, and physically to her complexion, which she has been unable to preserve in its desired fairness while working in the vineyard.

7. *whom I love so.* Many translations, following the King James Version, render this as "whom my soul loves," but the Hebrew *nafshi* does not mean "my soul." Rather, it is an intensive alternative to the first-person pronoun. Since English does not have intensive personal pronouns, this translation here and elsewhere compensates by adverbial intensification, "so."

go straying. The Hebrew *ʿotiyah* appears to mean "cover up, wrap," a meaning that is problematic both because of the context and because the transitive verb would normally require a grammatical object. It is best construed as a reversal of consonants (whether by usage or scribal error) for *toʾah,* to wander or go astray.

8. *If you do not know.* This is the first of a series of dialogic exchanges between the lovers. (The switch from her speech to his is indicated in our text by the dash.) In this poem, they are both shepherds, and she has asked him exactly where she may find him lest she wander into the company of his male friends, who might well be tempted to take advantage of her beauty. His response looks like a lover's tease: if you really don't know where to find me, use some ingenuity and follow the tracks of my flock until you come to where I am.

shelters. Although most translations represent *mishkenot* as "tents," the term is not restricted to tents and could also refer to a lean-to or some similar kind of temporary dwelling.

9. *To my mare among Pharaoh's chariots.* Some scholars think the suffix added to the word for "mare" is not a possessive but an archaic form occasionally used in construct combinations. Ariel and Chana Bloch argue against this on philological grounds, accepted here, and it makes more sense for the lover to claim possession of the metaphorical mare. Marvin Pope has proposed that the reference of this image is to the strategy of Thutmosis III, at the battle of Qadesh, of sending mares in heat among the enemy cavalry in order to drive them into disarray. Alternatively, since Egypt was known as an exporter of horses, this could simply mean that the beloved, compared to a fine mare, would stand out among the best of horses. Egyptian horses, one should note, were sometimes decked with ornaments around their necks.

10. *looped earrings.* This translation adopts the solution to *torim* proposed by the Blochs, as it does with "silver filigree" at the end of the next verse.

12. *While the king was on his couch / my nard gave off its scent.* This is an appropriately sexy beginning to this richly sensual poem: the lover is lying in bed waiting for her, and as she approaches, she is aware of the fragrance with which she has scented her body. In the next line, it is the lover who metaphorically becomes the fragrance. Nard, or spikenard, was imported to the ancient Near East all the way from the Himalayas, where the plant was grown, so it is clearly a luxury item.

13. *A sachet of myrrh is my lover to me.* The combination of delightfulness and sensuality in this metaphor is one of the hallmarks of the Song of Songs. The lover is playfully miniaturized as a sachet of perfume strung around the neck of the beloved on a cord and resting between her breasts even as their night of sweet physical intimacy is beautifully evoked.

14. *in the vineyards of Ein-Gedi.* There is an ambiguity here between the metaphorical and the literal that is another characteristic of the poetry of this book. The lover is figuratively a cluster of henna, pressed to the beloved's body, henna being an aromatic plant grown at the oasis of Ein-Gedi near the Dead Sea. At the same time, the wording leaves open the possibility that the two lovers are actually together at the oasis.

15. *O you are fair, my friend.* The male lover is speaking, something altogether clear in the Hebrew because "my friend," *raʿyati,* is feminine. In the next line, she answers in kind.

16. *our bed is verdant, too.* Another pleasing ambiguity of the Song is between inside and outside. She probably means to say that the bed on which they will enjoy love's pleasures is a forest floor, but she could be saying that an actual bed inside on which they lie partakes of the verdancy of the flourishing realm of nature outside. The ambiguity continues with the cedar beams and evergreen rafters of the next line, which are either literal, because they are making love in the forest, or metaphorical, because their house is redolent of the green world outside.

17. *Our house's beams.* The Hebrew shows a plural, "houses," but as Yair Zakovitch notes, there are other instances in biblical usage where when two nouns are joined in a construct form, a plural second term converts the first term to a plural, even though the sense is actually singular.

CHAPTER 2

[1]I am the rose of Sharon,
the lily of the valley.
[2]—Like a lily among the thorns
so is my friend among the young women.
[3]—Like a quince tree among the trees of the forest
so is my lover among the young men.
In its shade I delighted to sit
and its fruit was sweet to my taste
[4]He has brought me to the house of wine
and his banner over me is love.
[5]Stay me up with raisin cakes,
cushion me with quinces,
for I am in a swoon of love.
[6]His left hand beneath my head,
his right hand embracing me.
[7]I make you swear, O daughters of Jerusalem
by the deer or the gazelles of the field,
that you shall not rouse not stir love
until it pleases.
[8]Hark! Oh, my lover is coming,

bounding over the mountains,
leaping over the hills.
[9]My lover is like a deer
or like a stag.
Oh, he stands behind our wall
peering through the windows,
peeping through the crannies.
[10]My lover spoke out and said to me:
"Arise my friend, my fair one, go.
[11]For, look, the winter has passed
the rain has gone away.
[12]Buds can be seen in the land,
the nightingale's season has come
and the turtledove's voice is heard in our land.
[13]The fig tree has put forth its green fruit
and the vines in blossom waft fragrance.
Arise and go, my friend,
my fair one, go forth."
[14]My dove in the rock's crevices,
in the hollow of the cliff,
show me how you look,
let me hear your voice,
for your voice is sweet
and your look desirable.

[15]Seize us the foxes,
the little foxes,
despoiling the vineyards,
but our vineyards are in bloom.
[16]My lover is mine and I am his,
who grazes among the lilies.
[17]Until morning's breeze blows
and the shadows flee,
turn round, be like a deer, my love,
or like a gazelle
on the cloven mountains.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *rose . . . / lily*. Like a good many items of biblical flora, the identification of these two flowers remains uncertain, so it seems sensible to follow the traditional English equivalents here, which may be as good a guess as any others.

2. *Like a lily among the thorns*. This particular poem unfolds through statement and response in a lovers' dialogue. She announces herself as a flower; he goes her one better by answering that she is like a flower among the thorns in comparison to other young women. She then responds by likening him to a fruit-bearing tree, with the contrast between tree and flower neatly corresponding to the anatomical difference between the two sexes.

3. *quince tree*. The traditional rendering of "apple tree" cannot be right because apple trees were not cultivated in the ancient Near East. (The term used here would nevertheless become the standard word for "apple" in later Hebrew.) The Blochs opt for "apricot," which does make sense in regard to its

succulence, but it remains conjectural. Quince, a harder fruit, has at least a metrical advantage. Quinces have been used in Greece and perhaps elsewhere in the Mediterranean for many centuries to perfume bedsheets, and that association might be in play in the Song of Songs.

its shade . . . / its fruit. Because the Hebrew possessive suffix is masculine, "it" could equally refer to the tree or to its metaphorical referent, the young man. In the apt image, he offers her two things—protection (a standard meaning of "shade" in biblical usage) and sensual pleasure. Fruit, wine, and honey throughout the Song are associated with sexual gratification.

4. *He has brought me to the house of wine.* Egyptian love poetry, which many scholars think is an antecedent to the Song of Songs, often makes a banquet house a place for the lovers' tryst. But since wine is metaphorically identified with sexual pleasure (see 1:2, 4), the house of wine might be entirely metaphorical—that is, the chamber or bower to which the lover has brought his beloved in order to make love to her.

his banner over me is love. Several scholars have argued that the noun here, *degel*, reflects an Akkadian cognate that means "to see," but there is scant evidence in the Hebrew Bible of the use of this word with the sense of sight. Everywhere else, *degel* indicates a "banner" or "flag." The image would be consonant with a heroic representation of the lover as a strong, even triumphant figure, here leading her to his bower under a flag that signals not tribal or military identity but, quite eloquently, love.

5. *Stay me up with raisin-cakes.* She is faint with desire and so asks for these delicacies to revive her.

I am in a swoon of love. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "lovesick," but that sounds too pathetic, or adolescent, in English. The King James Version "sick of love" sounds like a blunder, or at least has become that for twenty-first-century usage.

6. *His left hand beneath my head, / his right hand embracing me.* The chronological steps of this poem need to be sorted out. First, in verse 4, she recalls a moment when her lover led her off to "the house of wine." Now, however, she is away from him, weak with desire for him (verse 5), and as we learn from verse 7, she is speaking to a group of young women in Jerusalem. This verse, then, is either a flashback to the moment when he embraced her or a wish-fulfillment fantasy of what she now desires.

7. *I make you swear, O daughters of Jerusalem.* The implication seems to be that they have somehow been pestering her with questions about her absent lover: Where is he? If he is as wonderful as you say, why aren't you together with him now? Her rejoinder to such implied challenges is that love will attain its fulfillment in its own good time, and you must not urge its consummation until that time has come.

by the deer or the gazelles of the field. This is a beautiful reflection of the worldview of the Song. Typically, it is God who is invoked in such oaths in the Bible, but God is never mentioned in the book. Instead the young woman invokes beautiful creatures of wild nature, creatures she repeatedly uses as metaphors for her lover.

until it pleases. The Hebrew verb here usually means "to desire" or "to like." The Blochs render this as "until it is ripe," which stretches the sense of the Hebrew term a bit but is quite apt.

8. *Hark!* The Hebrew *qol* usually means "voice" or "sound," but it is also sometimes an interjection corresponding to "hark" in English. That sense may be more likely here because she would scarcely hear the voice of her lover (unless he were shouting her name or yodeling), and the sound of his footsteps would scarcely be audible as he bounds over the mountains.

9. *Oh, he stands behind our wall / peering through the windows, / peeping through the crannies.* This entire line exemplifies the delicate and witty interplay between tenor and vehicle in the use of metaphor in the Song. The scene can be read two ways. As metaphor, it invites us to imagine a deer that has come leaping down the hills and now stands outside the house, peering in through the window (an occurrence quite familiar to many who live in American suburbs near wooded areas). As the referent of the metaphor, it is the vigorous young lover who has come running in his eagerness to be with the beautiful woman he loves, pausing for a moment outside before he crosses the threshold.

11. *the winter has passed.* The love poetry of the Song of Songs is preeminently poetry of the verdant world of spring. Jewish tradition fixed it to be read on the Sabbath of springtime Passover because of the allegorical interpretation in which the two lovers are identified with God and Israel celebrating their nuptials after the exodus from Egypt, which occured in early spring. But the framers of the tradition were also aware of the vernal

efflorescence affirmed in the Song, with a good many liturgical poems composed for this Passover Sabbath invoking the flourishing world of spring.

12. *the nightingale's season.* Some interpreters choose to take the Hebrew noun *zamir* as a homonym that means "pruning," but birdsong sounds more appropriate to the mood of the poem.

14. *My dove in the rock's crevices.* In this particular poem, the young woman appears to be playfully hiding from her lover, an act registered in the image of a dove nesting in the rock's crevices.

the cliff. While the Hebrew *madregah* comes to have the general meaning of "stair," in the context of this line, evoking a scene in nature, it probably refers to a cliff or similar rock formation in which there would be small concavities or cracks in which a dove could hide.

15. *Seize us the foxes.* This verse, like a few others in the Song, is no more than a fragment, and consequently its meaning is uncertain. Since vineyards tend to be metaphorical in the Song (see 1:6) and are figuratively associated with the body of the beloved, one may propose the following reading: there are in the world pesky agents of interference that seek to obstruct love's fulfillment, as foxes despoil a vineyard, but our own special vineyard remains flourishing and intact, our love unimpeded.

16. *who grazes among the lilies.* The implicit metaphor, made explicit in the next verse, is a deer, but the lilies are associated elsewhere with the delights offered by the body of the beloved.

17. *turn round, be like a deer, my love.* This line pivots on still another of the ambiguities in which the poetry of the Song revels. Momentarily, the young woman appears to be sending her lover away to go running across the mountainous landscape. But in the preceding line ("until morning's breeze blows . . .") she clearly invites him to spend the night. The equation between the woman's body and the landscape that appears elsewhere (compare the extended poem in chapter 4) is manifested here, and "the cloven mountains" are in all likelihood a figurative reference to her breasts.

CHAPTER 3

[1]On my couch at night
I sought him I love so.
I sought him but did not find him.
[2]Let me rise and go round the town,
in the streets and in the square.
Let me seek him I love so.
I sought him but did not find him.
[3]The watchmen who go round the town found me.
“Have you seen him I love so?”
[4]I had barely passed on from them
when I found him I love so.
I held him and did not let go
till I brought him to my mother’s house,
and to the chamber of her who conceived me.

[5]I make you swear, O daughters of Jerusalem,
by the deer or by the gazelles of the field,
that you shall not stir nor rouse
love until it pleases.

[6]Who is this coming up from the desert
like a pillar of smoke
perfumed with myrrh and frankincense
from all the merchant's powders?

[7]Look, Solomon's bed—
sixty warriors round it
of the warriors of Israel.
[8]All of them wielding the sword
trained in battle,
each with his sword on his thigh
out of terror in the nights.
[9]A palanquin did King Solomon make
from Lebanon wood.
Its posts he made of silver,
its padding gold,
its curtains crimson,
its inside paved with love
by the daughters of Jerusalem.
[10]Go out and behold, O daughters of Zion,
King Solomon in the diadem
with which his mother crowned him
on his wedding day,
on the day of his heart's rejoicing.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *On my couch at night*. Many interpreters understand this entire sequence as a dream. That reading is plausible but not inevitable since it is perfectly possible that she is tossing in her bed because her lover is not lying by her side and that she then rises to go out and look for him.

2. *Let me rise and go round the town.* This act, whether dreamed or real, is an expression of great daring on the part of the beloved because it would be dangerous for a young woman to go wandering through the streets of the town in the dark of the night. Compare Ruth 3:13, where Boaz keeps Ruth from walking home at night.

3. *The watchmen who go round the town found me.* As yet, she does not find her lover but is found by the watchmen. In the parallel poem in chapter 5, they attack her. Here they are merely the audience for her plaintive question about her lover's whereabouts.

4. *I held him and did not let go.* The lover's response is not registered, nor is there any dialogue between them. All that is reported is her passionate clinging to him and her bringing him to her mother's house. This is, we should note, a young woman who takes the initiative, first daring to go out into the dark streets in search of her lover, then grasping him and leading him to her mother's house.

to my mother's house, / . . . to the chamber of her who conceived me. This translation preserves the literal sense of the Hebrew in poetic parallelism, the standard term ("mother") is generally used in the first verset, and a substitution—often it is a metaphor or an unusual synonym—is used in the second. The reference to conception here may intimate the sexual act that the young woman has in mind. The figure of the mother often appears in Sumerian love poetry, which could be in the distant background of this poem. In many cultures, it is the mother's role to instruct her daughter about what to do in the act of love, and that may also be a reason for introducing the mother here. Notably, the biblical corpus is dotted with references to the father's house, which is a fixed social unit, but in the Song only the mother's house

appears. Another feature of poetic parallelism in the Bible can be observed in the other pair of nouns in this line: quite often, when a spatial term appears in the first verset, the parallel term in the second is a smaller space or an object contained within the space demarcated by the first term. She leads him, then, to the house and then, entering the house, to a chamber within it. This standard procedure of poetic parallelism here indicates a move into secluded intimacy.

5. *I make you swear.* See the first comment on 2:7. There the vow she imposes on the daughters of Jerusalem addresses the plight of separation from him, her longing to join him. Here it is a kind of coda to her nocturnal search for her lover, in the end crowned with success—you must not rouse love, she tells the young women, until it is ripe and ready, but now, as I bring my lover to the inner chamber of my mother's house, the moment of ripeness has come.

6. *Who is this coming up from the desert.* There is some debate as to whether this verse belongs with the lines that follow. The use of "who," as the Blochs argue, makes it unlikely that it refers to Solomon's bed or to his palanquin, and so the entire verse, two lines of poetry, should probably be seen as an independent fragment. What is clear, however, is that the editor, by placing these two lines here, meant to encourage readers to see a connection with what follows. The image of someone—the Hebrew uses a feminine form—coming up from the desert perfumed, in a grand procession, looks like a reminiscence of the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon, offering an associative link with the figure of Solomon in the poem that runs from verse 7 to the end of the chapter.

7. *Solomon's bed.* The subject of this poem appears to be quite different from the poetry about two pastoral lovers in a sylvan setting that constitutes the bulk of the Song of Songs.

sixty warriors round it / of the warriors of Israel. This line, together with the next two, looks like a grand epic flourish, describing the formidable array of guards around Solomon in his palace bedchamber. But Yair Zakovitch proposes that the whole sequence is satiric, representing King Solomon quaking in his bed "out of terror in the nights," in striking contrast to the young woman in the preceding poem, who does not hesitate to go out in the night, with no armed guard, in search of her lover.

9. *A palanquin.* The Hebrew term *ʾapiryon* appears only here and is borrowed from either the Greek or the Persian. Some construe it as a fixed royal structure ("pavilion"), but in rabbinic literature, which is only a few centuries removed from our text, it is understood as "palanquin" or, perhaps less grandly, "sedan chair." A palanquin as well as a pavilion would be grandly furnished, and the fact that it has *ʿamudim*, in some contexts "pillars," is not proof of architectural identity because that word could also mean "posts," as in this translation.

Lebanon wood. This would be expensive cedarwood.

its padding gold. Gold would not make a very comfortable padding, so the reference is probably to padding covered with cloth woven from gold thread.

its inside paved with love. There is no need to emend the noun here. As Zakovitch notes, the sequence here exhibits a familiar biblical pattern of three similar terms and then a switch: silver, gold, crimson, love. The effect of surprise at the end is exquisite.

10. *the diadem.* Though the Hebrew *ʿatarah* might simply mean "crown," it is not the standard term for a royal crown, and on the evidence of the Talmud, there was a practice to adorn the bridegroom with some sort of special diadem. This might well have been put on by the bridegroom's mother, whereas there are no historical grounds for a procedure in which the mother places the crown of the kingdom on her son.

with which his mother crowned him. As in the previous poem, it is the mother who presides over the nuptials.

on his wedding day. Although no explicit citations occur, it looks as though this poem, evoking the pomp and circumstance of Solomon's wedding day, has in mind Psalm 45, which is an epithalamium for a royal wedding.

CHAPTER 4

[1]O you are fair, my friend,
O you are fair.
Your eyes are doves
through the screen of your tresses.
Your hair is like a herd of goats
that have swept down from Mount Gilead.
[2]Your teeth like a flock of matched ewes
that have come up from the washing,
all of them alike,
and none has lost its young.
[3]Like a scarlet thread, your lips,
and your tongue—desire.
Like cut pomegranate your cheekbones
through the screen of your tresses.
[4]Like the tower of David your neck
built gloriously.
A thousand shields are hung on it,
all the warriors' bucklers.
[5]Your two breasts are like two fawns,
twins of a gazelle,

that graze among the lilies.
[6]Till morning's breeze blows
and the shadows flee,
I will go to the mountain of myrrh
and to the hill of frankincense
[7]You are wholly fair, my friend,
there is no blemish in you.
[8]With me from Lebanon, bride,
with me from Lebanon come.
Gaze from the peak of Amanah,
from the peak of Senir and Hermon,
from the lions' dens,
from the leopards' mountains.
[9]You have captured my heart, my sister, bride.
You have captured my heart with one glance of your eyes,
with one bead of your necklace.
[10]How beautiful your loving, my sister, bride,
how much better your loving than wine,
and the scent of your unguents than all perfumes.
[11]Nectar your lips drip, bride,
honey and milk are under your tongue,
and the scent of your robes
like Lebanon's scent.
[12]A locked garden, my sister, bride,

a locked well, a sealed spring.
13 Your branches, an orchard of pomegranates
with luscious fruit,
henna and spikenard,
14 spikenard and saffron,
cane and cinnamon
with every tree of frankincense,
myrrh and aloes
with every choice perfume.
15 A garden spring,
a garden of fresh water
and streams from Lebanon.
16 —Arise, O north, and come, O south,
blow on my garden, let its perfumes flow,
Let my lover come to his garden
and eat its luscious fruit.
5:1 —I have come to my garden, my sister, bride,
I have gathered my myrrh with my perfume,
I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey,
I have drunk my wine with my milk.
—Eat, friends, and drink,
be drunk with loving.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *through the screen of your tresses.* The Hebrew says merely "through your tresses," but "the screen of," essentially implied, has been added for poetic legibility. A long interpretive tradition, going back to the Septuagint and embraced by some modern scholars, understands the noun *tsamah* to mean "veil." The Blochs make a compelling philological argument against this construction on three grounds: the form of the noun is one used for body parts; in Isaiah 47:2, this same noun is the object of the verb "to lay bare," which is consistently used for exposing parts of the body, not for the removal of garments; introduction of a veil would interrupt the sequence of references to the beloved's face and body out of which the whole poem is composed. The Blochs also note that covering the beautiful young woman with a veil gives her an aura of modesty, or reflects an inclination to prudery, that is not in keeping with the frank eroticism of the poem. In modern Hebrew, *tsamah*, in accord with the biblical sense of the word, means "braid [of hair]." "Tresses," then, the last word of this line, neatly overlaps with "hair," the first Hebrew word of the very next line.

a herd of goats / that have swept down from Mount Gilead. The hair of the goats would be black, like the hair of the beloved cascading over her shoulders.

2. *Your teeth like a flock of matched ewes.* This image, which may look incongruous to the modern eye, would probably have seemed natural to the ancient Hebrew pastoralists. The white plays against the black of the hair, to which a third color, the scarlet of the lips, will be added. In an era millennia before dentistry, most people's teeth would be yellowed and gapped by early middle age, if not sooner. This, then, is an impressive feature of the beloved's beauty: her teeth are perfectly white, like sheep coming out of the water, and every tooth is perfectly matched, with none missing, like the flock of ewes in which "none has lost its young."

3. *and your tongue—desire.* Literally, "your tongue [is] desirable [or lovely]." The metaphoric location later of milk and honey under the tongue, verse 11, suggests that the lover is thinking of openmouthed kisses.

cheekbones. Though this same word clearly means "temple" (that is, forehead) in the Song of Deborah, Judges 5:26, there is a long and plausible exegetical tradition, going back at least to Rashi, that understands it as "cheekbones." (Rashi, citing an Old French word, calls it the "apple" of the cheek). The temple would probably be too high on the head because the

description is making its way downward, according to the convention of the *wazf*, the vertical celebration of the loved one's beautiful body.

4. *Like the tower of David your neck.* This simile, like a good many others in the poem, is "Oriental," reflecting an aesthetic in which the poet pursues the momentum of the object of comparison, half forgetting the thing to which it is compared. Long necks—think of Nefertiti—were obviously thought of as beautiful.

built gloriously. The adverbial *letalpiyot* has defied decipherment or convincing etymological explanation. All that is clear is that it constitutes a superlative.

A thousand shields are hung on it. At this point, the image of the woman disappears in the image of the tower. Nevertheless, the shields hung on the tower allude to links of shining jewelry that the woman wears around her neck.

5. *Your two breasts are like two fawns.* The description continues its vertical descent, though in this particular poem, this is as far down as it will go. After the architectural and military images of the neck, the breasts are represented through soft and gentle animal imagery.

that graze among the lilies. While the reference is to the fawns, not to the breasts, there is a suggestion that the breasts are surrounded by floral fragrance.

6. *I will go to the mountain of myrrh / and to the hill of frankincense.* In biblical poetry, "mountain" and "hill" are a formulaic pair, with "mountain" (usually in the plural) almost always appearing in the first half of the line and "hill" (again, generally in the plural) in the second half. But the poet here takes advantage of the familiar pair in a subtly erotic metaphor. We have already noted a metaphoric equivalence between mountains and breasts (2:17) in the recurrent evocation of the beloved's body as landscape. (There is one mountain, not two, here in order to match "hill," which in the anatomical hint has to be singular.) If that is intimated here, then the hill would be a smaller anatomical convexity, the *mons veneris.* As elsewhere, the poet manages to be perfectly decorous in his figurative language and yet hint at sexual actualities.

7. *You are wholly fair, my friend.* The poem concludes in an envelope structure that invokes the opening line and adds something to it in what amounts to an incremental repetition.

8. *with me from Lebanon come.* Why Lebanon? It is, of course, a place of deep forests and natural fragrances. It is also far away to the north and wild, a locus of adventure and perhaps danger, as the introduction of lions and leopards at the end of this verse may suggest. This wild setting for the lovers makes a piquant contrast to the enclosed garden in the second part of the poem.

9. *You have captured my heart.* The verb *libavtini* might be an ad hoc invention, derived from *levav*, "heart." The King James Version renders this a bit more strenuously as "ravished my heart."

one glance of your eyes. The translation adopts the solution of the Blochs. The literal sense is "one of your eyes," which sounds peculiar in English.

11. *Nectar your lips drip.* The Hebrew is a lovely blur of alliteration: *nofet titofna siftotayikh.* The internal rhyme of "lips drip" seeks to provide a small equivalent of this effect. The same sequence of words occurs in Proverbs 5:3, though there the context is negative because the reference is to the lips of a seductress.

honey and milk are under your tongue. Milk and honey, most readers will recall, are repeatedly associated with the bounty of the promised land. Here the order of the two terms is reversed, perhaps because the poet wanted to stress sweetness; and the beloved's open mouth, eager for kisses, becomes the lover's promised land.

and the scent of your robes / like Lebanon's scent. The landscape of Lebanon, where he invited her to roam with him at the beginning of the poem, now clings through simile to the fragrance of her robes.

12. *A locked garden.* This interpretation has triggered, perhaps understandably, reams of mystical-allegorical interpretation. In the first instance, however, the locked garden is the body of the beloved and the sealed spring her intimate part. For the metaphoric equation between spring or well and female sexuality, see Proverbs 5:15–18.

a locked well. The somewhat unusual Hebrew for "well," *gal*, is close to the word for "garden," *gan*, and may be a scribal error. Many manuscripts as well as the Septuagint show *gan* here.

14. *frankincense.* The Hebrew for this fragrance, *levonah,* puns on *levanon,* "Lebanon."

15. *a garden of fresh water.* The first noun here in the Masoretic Text is *gal*, which everywhere else means either "pile of stones" or "wave" and which only by a considerable stretch do various translators render as "spring" or "well." (*Gulah*, a word that has this latter meaning, appears in Joshua 15:19 but is far from phonetically the same as *gal.*) Many Hebrew manuscripts as well as three ancient versions show *gan*, "garden," and the inadvertent substitution of *lamed* for *gimmel* is one a scribe could easily have made.

and streams from Lebanon. This presumably means fresh-flowing streams like the ones in the mountains of Lebanon. But it is almost as though there were an underground channel leading from the landscape of Lebanon at the beginning of the poem to this enclosed garden far to the south.

16. *blow on my garden, let its perfumes flow.* The delicate dance between outer and inner, between metaphor and its referent, is beautifully performed here. We are invited to envisage a real garden, blooming with luscious fruit and redolent of natural fragrances, in which the beloved awaits her lover. But because the garden is also a metaphor for her body, her invitation to him to enter the garden is a sexual invitation, and the flowing of perfumes a hint of her physical readiness for him.

5:1. Despite the chapter break, the first verse of chapter 5 is clearly the conclusion of this poem.

I have gathered my myrrh. The verb *ʾarah* is a specialized term for "collecting honey." The lover's declaration in these two lines is a clear statement that he has heeded her beck oning and entered her garden.

Eat, friends, and drink, / be drunk with loving. This concluding line of the poem is formally anomalous because a third person is now speaking, urging the two lovers to revel in the consummation of their love. If we keep in mind the anthological character of the Song of Songs, we may infer that this particular poem was originally an epithalamium, and in accordance with the conventions of this genre of wedding poem, the bride and groom are exhorted by a wedding guest or by a kind of chorus to enjoy the pleasures of love.

CHAPTER 5

[2]I was asleep but my heart was awake:
Hark! my lover knocks.
—Open for me, my sister, my friend,
my dove, my perfect one.
For my head is drenched with dew,
my locks with the drops of the night.
[3]—I have put off my gown,
how can I don it?
I have bathed my feet,
how can I besmirch them?
[4]My lover pulled back his hand from the latch,
and my heart raced within me.
[5]I rose to open for my lover.
My hands dripped myrrh
and my fingers liquid myrrh,
over the handles of the bolt.
[6]I opened for my lover,
but my lover had slipped off, was gone.
my breath left me when he spoke.
I sought him but did not find him.

I called him but he did not answer.
[7]The watchmen who go round the town found me.
They struck me, they wounded me.
They pulled my veil from me,
the watchmen of the walls.
[8]I make you swear, O daughters of Jerusalem,
should you find my lover, what shall you tell him?
that I am in a swoon of love.
[9]—How is your lover more than another,
O fairest among women?
How is your lover more than another,
that thus you make us vow?
[10]—My lover is shining white and ruddy,
standing out among ten thousand.
[11]His head is purest gold,
his locks are curls
black as a raven.
[12]His eyes are like
by streams of water
bathing in milk,
dwelling by a pool.
[13]His cheeks are like beds of spices
sprouting aromatic scents.
His lips are lilies,
dripping liquid myrrh.
[14]His arms are coils of gold

inset with ruby.
His loins are fine-wrought ivory,
with sapphire inlaid.
15 His thighs are ivory pillars
set on pedestals of gold.
Like Lebanon his look,
he is choice as the cedars.
16 His mouth is sweetest drink,
all of him, delight.
This is my lover and this is my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem.

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *I was asleep but my heart was awake*. Those who read this poem as a dream take this double indication as a signal of sleeping consciousness. But as with the poem in 3:1–5, it is equally plausible to understand this as an actual state: she sleeps lightly, restlessly, anxiously awaiting the arrival of her lover, who comes in the middle of the night.

Open for me. The clear reference is to the door, but the sexual hint is also palpable.

For my head is drenched with dew. He mentions this as the reason that she must let him in at once, so that he need not linger anymore in the heavy damp of the night. Of course, there is quite a different reason that he so urgently wants her to open the door for him.

3. *I have put off my gown, / how can I don it?* Obviously, she is eager to open for him but momentarily plays this coy game of teasing her lover, which, to her dismay, has the effect of driving him away.

4. *the latch.* This translation adopts an English equivalent for the Hebrew used by several previous translators. The literal meaning of the original is "hole," a relatively large aperture into which a wooden key was introduced to loosen the bolt locking the door.

my heart raced within me. The Hebrew noun means literally "innards," thought to be the seat of strong feelings. The received text reads *ʿalaw*, "for him," but the Septuagint and many Hebrew manuscripts show *ʿalay,* literally "for, or upon me," and that is the reading reflected in this translation.

My hands dripped myrrh / and my fingers liquid myrrh, / over the handles of the bolt. The close focus of her hand on the door vividly dramatizes her eagerness to open for her lover. Perhaps those hands are even fumbling in excitement, adding another moment to her delay. The fact that she has perfumed herself suggests that she has been waiting for her lover to join her. The dripping of fragrant unguent over a lock about to be undone subtly hints at the prospect of female arousal, though no metaphorical equation is put forth.

6. *had slipped off, was gone.* The doubling of the verbs expresses the dire finality of his absence as she looks into the night from the open door.

I sought him but did not find him. These words, which also occur in the poem in chapter 3, point to the fact that she has gone out into the darkened town to look for him, but that narrative fact is made explicit only in the next verse.

7. *They struck me, they wounded me.* We now realize how dangerous it is for a woman to go out in the streets at night. The watchmen evidently take her for a prostitute, wandering alone at night. (The story of Tamar, in Genesis 38, who disguises herself as a roadside whore, suggests that prostitutes in the ancient Near East sometimes covered their faces because Tamar's father-in-law, Judah, does not recognize her. In a moment, we will learn that the young woman is wearing a veil.) The watchmen decide to punish her for her brazenness by beating her and humiliating her through the stripping away of her veil.

8. *I make you swear, O daughters of Jerusalem.* One should probably assume narrative continuity with the immediately preceding encounter with the night watchmen. If all this is a dream, then she simply escapes the watchmen and then encounters the daughters of Jerusalem. If it is not a dream, there would have to be a narrative ellipsis: since these young women would not be out in

the town in the middle of the night, one would have to infer that, breaking free of the watchmen, she continues to seek her lover through the night and then, still searching, meets the daughters of Jerusalem on the morrow.

9. *How is your lover more than another.* After she has announced that she is positively faint or ill with longing for her lover, as she did in a previous poem (2:5), the daughters of Jerusalem want to know what is so extraordinary about her lover that should drive her to impose this vow and that should trigger such extreme emotions. This question then becomes the pretext for a *wasf*, a celebration of the beauty of the body of the one beloved that moves down from head to legs.

10. *shining white and ruddy.* This is a little enigmatic: "ruddy" must refer to his complexion because it cannot refer to his hair, which is black (verse 11). Perhaps the word for "shining white," *tsaḥ*, is meant to convey a general sense of dazzling purity in his appearance. That would accord with the image of the lover as a kind of statue that is developed later in the poem.

12. *bathing in milk.* As elsewhere, the realization of the metaphoric image develops its own momentum. Presumably, the milk bath would be the whites of the eyes and the doves the irises.

dwelling by a pool. The word for "pool" occurs only here. This seems the most plausible construction, though some interpreters relate it to a word that involves the inlaying of jewels.

13. *sprouting aromatic scents.* The Masoretic Text has *migdelot*, "towers of," which could be the right reading, even though it is hard to imagine flower beds as towers or a beard (if that is what is on his cheeks) as a tower. The Septuagint and the Vulgate read *megadlot*, "growing" or "sprouting," which this translation follows.

14. *His arms are coils of gold / . . . His loins are fine-wrought ivory.* In contrast to his celebration of her beauty (4:1–7), in which animal imagery and landscape imagery predominate, with one architectural metaphor, the second half of this poem is a cluster of images of jewels and precious substances, appropriately male in their hardness. The lover becomes a kind of statue so resplendent that it seems virtually the statue of a god. As Ron Hendel has suggested to me, this is one of the poetic features of the Song that encourages allegorical readings in which the lover is in fact God.

15. *Like Lebanon his look.* Since Lebanon was so intimately associated with the cedars grown there and exported to surrounding lands, the clear reference of this verset is to the lover's lofty stature.

he is choice as the cedars. There is a pun in the Hebrew because the word for "choice," *baḥur,* also means "young man."

16. *His mouth is sweetest drink.* The reversion to the mouth does not really violate the vertical movement of the poem downward because it is a kind of summary at the end: the beloved, having canvassed her lover's beauty from head to foot, returns to the physical site of those kisses that epitomize physical intimacy with him and give her such gratification. *Mamtaqim*, "sweetest drink" (which in modern Hebrew means "candy"), is in biblical usage something sweet that is drunk, as its appearance in Nehemiah 8:10 makes clear. This links the phrase with the beginning of the first poem of the Song, in which the lover's kisses are better than wine: the first thing she says about her lover in the whole sequence of poems is also what she says about him, summarizing what she feels, at the end of this poem.

all of him, delight. "All of him" points to the summarizing gesture here: everything I have said of him, from his golden head to the pedestals of gold on which he stands. The word for "delight" is, more literally, "desirable things," "precious things."

This is my lover and this is my friend. This concluding flourish is a direct rejoinder, triumphant after her enthralled description of him, to the question of the daughters of Jerusalem: "How is your lover more than another?"

CHAPTER 6

[1]Where has your lover gone,
O fairest among women.
Where has your lover turned
that we might seek him with you?
[2]—My lover has gone down to his garden,
to the spice beds,
to graze in the garden
and to gather lilies.
[3]I am my lover's and my lover is mine,
who grazes among the lilies.

[4]—You are fair, my friend, as Tirzah,
lovely as Jerusalem,
daunting as what looms on high.
[5]Turn away your eyes from me,
for they have overwhelmed me.
Your hair is like a herd of goats
that have swept down from Mount Gilead.
[6]Your teeth are like a flock of ewes
that have come up from the washing,

all of them alike
    and none has lost its young.
[7]Like cut pomegranate your cheekbones
    through the screen of your tresses.
[8]Sixty are there queens
    and eighty concubines
        and young women beyond number.
[9]Just one is my dove, my pure one,
just one to her mother,
    dazzling to her who bore her.
The girls saw her and called her happy,
    queens and concubines, and they praised her.
[10]Who is this espied like the dawn,
    fair as the moon,
dazzling as the sun,
    daunting as what looms on high?

[11]To the walnut garden I went down
    to see the buds of the brook,
to see if the vine had blossomed,
    if the pomegranate trees were in flower.
[12]I scarcely knew myself,
    she set me in the noblest chariot.

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Where has your lover gone.* Despite the chapter division (a late medieval intervention in the text), the first three verses of this chapter are in all probability the conclusion of the poem that began at the beginning of chapter 5. The young woman has roamed through the streets of the town in search of her lover. When she encounters the daughters of Jerusalem (5:8–9), they ask her what it is about her lover that should have made her so overwrought. She responds by praising her lover's beauty (5:10–16). Hearing this, they now ask her: Well, if he is so extraordinary, where is he? We are ready to go out in search with you, so we can see for ourselves if he is really as you say.

2. *My lover has gone down to his garden.* This is an oblique reference to sexual fulfillment. Her body has been vividly equated with a garden of luscious fruit (4:12–5:1). What she is telling them is that there is no need for them to join her in seeking her lover—she has already found him, and he has been with her in rapturous consummation. If this is a true report and not a boast or fantasy, one can reconstruct the following sequence of events, filling in the narrative hiatus between 5:7 and 5:8: after the assault by the watchmen, she continues her search, finds her lover, and spends the night with him; now on the next day, she meets the daughters of Jerusalem, who may know something about her wandering on the previous night; momentarily, she goes along with their assumption that she is distraught because she is looking for her lover; now, at the conclusion of her speech to them, she joyfully announces that she has in fact found him.

4. *You are fair, my friend.* These words begin a new poem, spoken by the lover. In the understanding on which this translation is based, the poem continues through verse 10.

fair . . . as Tirzah, / lovely as Jerusalem. Tirzah was for a brief time the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel as Jerusalem was capital of the southern kingdom of Judah. By the time this poem was composed, Tirzah and the northern kingdom had long vanished, so this city as a byword for beauty either was a distant memory or reflects an old line of poetry (or perhaps a proverbial saying) in this poem that was written centuries later.

daunting as what looms on high. The adjective *ʾayumah* suggests something like "inspiring awe or trepidation," an emotion that a man might well feel in beholding the ravishing beauty of the woman he desires. The

happy solution of "daunting" is borrowed from the Blochs. The simile (a single word in the Hebrew, *kanigdalot*) has perplexed interpreters. It is derived from the same root as *dagul*, "standing out," in 5:10. The Blochs make an elaborate argument that this is a poetic epithet for the stars and hence render the term in their translation as "the stars in their courses." That is a lovely flourish but makes the word more explicitly stellar than the Hebrew warrants because there is no set equation between the root *d-g-l* and stars in biblical usage. It may be preferable to preserve the resonant ambiguity of the Hebrew: she is daunting as something grand and lofty, which might indeed be the stars or might be the two cities just mentioned, both set on promontories.

5. *Turn away your eyes from me, / for they have overwhelmed me.* This line transforms the daunting beauty of the previous line into a vividly concrete response to her.

Your hair is like a herd of goats. This line, together with everything in verses 6 and 7, is a reprise of 4:1–3, though here 4:3a does not appear. This sort of near verbatim recurrence of lines may reflect the anthological nature of the Song of Songs, in which two or more lines of poetry might have migrated from one poem to another. For elucidation of this line and of verses 6 and 7, see the comments on 4:1–3.

8. *Sixty are there queens.* The Hebrew style here reflects a kind of epic flourish, and the syntactic inversion of the translation seeks to emulate that effect. (One may note that the Hebrew for "they," *heimah,* shows an extra syllable at the end, a form of the word usually reserved for poetry; "are there" in the translation is meant as a stylistic equivalent.) The ascent from sixty to eighty to "beyond number" follows a structural procedure in biblical poetry, in which when a number is introduced in the first verset, it is somehow increased in the second (and here, in the third as well).

concubines. Following "queens," these are probably the king's concubines. The poet could have Solomon in mind.

young women. The Hebrew is *ʿalamot,* which others translate as "maidens." That choice is in keeping with the quasi-epic style of the line, but the English term could imply virginity, which is not true of the Hebrew. The first two versets invoke a large number of royal consorts; this third adds the whole vast set of nubile young women—all of whom cannot compare to the one and only beloved.

9. *her mother / . . . her who bore her.* The parallelism in these two versets follows the standard procedure of biblical poetry in which the normal term is used in first verset, and in the following verset a metaphoric or paraphrastic substitution or an unusual synonym is employed. Again in keeping with biblical poetics, the second term here concretizes the general designation "mother" by focusing on the act of birth, as if the mother were saying: This dazzling beauty has come out of my womb!

dazzling. The Hebrew *barah* means both "pure" and "bright," but the sense of brightness may be more salient here because of the imagery of brilliance in the next verse, where *barah* again appears.

The girls. Literally, "daughters."

queens and concubines. The sequence reverses the order of verse 8: it begins with the general category of "girls" (*banot*) and then proceeds to queens and concubines.

10. *dawn, / . . . moon, / . . . sun.* Zakovitch proposes that at dawn both sun and moon can be visible. In any case, the progression moves, as one would expect in biblical poetry, from pale light (the moon) to intense light (the sun). The words for both "sun" and "moon" are feminine, in contrast to their more common synonyms in earlier biblical Hebrew, and the grammatical gender makes them more apt as similes for the beautiful young woman.

11. *To the walnut garden I went down.* This verse and the next, no longer a celebration of the beauty of the beloved, appear to be a new poem or, given their brevity, the fragment of a poem. As elsewhere, there is a studied ambiguity between literal and figurative, outside and inside. At first, the lover's declaration looks like a straightforward report of having gone down into a garden to enjoy the spring landscape, and in light of the vernal ambience of the Song, this is a perfectly plausible reading. The next verse, however, invites us to see the garden as a metaphor.

12. *I scarcely knew myself.* The idiom suggests ecstatic confusion. Shalom Paul has likened it to an Akkadian expression that refers to a condition of mental confoundment.

she set me in the noblest chariot. The Hebrew collocation *ʿami-nadiv* is a famous crux. Literally, it would seem to mean "my people-noble." The combination *nedivey-ʿam*, "the people's nobles," appears a number of times in biblical poetry, especially archaic poetry (for example, in the Song of the Well, Numbers 21:18, and in the Song of Deborah, Judges 5). The Blochs

propose emending the text by reversing the order of the two words; Zakovitch reads it as having the same meaning as *nediv-ʿam* even though the order is reversed. The word for "chariot" is in the plural, but plural for singular, perhaps as an epic gesture, is not uncommon in biblical poetry. But what is this chariot? Especially given the statement of ecstasy in the first half of the line, the contention of the Blochs that the noble chariot in which she places him is her body seems convincing. Retrospectively, then, we conclude that the garden of the previous verse is, like the garden in chapter 4 and above in 6:2, also a metaphor for the beloved's body.

CHAPTER 7

[1]Turn back, turn back, O Shulamite,
turn back, that we may behold you.
—Why should you behold the Shulamite
in the dance of the double rows?
[2]—How fair your feet in sandals,
O daughter of a nobleman.
The curves of your thighs like wrought rings,
the handiwork of a master.
[3]Your navel a crescent bowl,
let mixed wine never lack!
Your belly a mound of wheat
hedged about with lilies.
[4]Your two breasts like two fawns,
twins of a gazelle.
[5]Your neck like an ivory tower,
your eyes like pools in Heshbon
by the gate of the town of grandees.
Your nose like the tower of Lebanon
looking out toward Damascus.
[6]Your head upon you like Mount Carmel,

and the locks of your head are purple.
A king is caught in the tangle.
7How fair you are, how sweet,
O Love, among delights!

8Your stature was like a palm tree
and your breasts were like the clusters.
9I thought: I will climb the palm,
I will grasp its stalks,
and let your breasts be like grape clusters,
and the scent of your breath like quince,
10and your mouth like goodly wine.
—It flows to my lover smoothly,
stirring sleepers' lips to speak.
11I am my lover's
and for me his desire.

12Come my lover,
Let us go out to the field,
spend the night in the henna.
There will I give my love to you.
13Let us rise early in the vineyards.
We shall see if the vine is in flower,
if the blossoms have opened,
if the pomegranate trees have budded.

There I will give my loving to you.
[14]The mandrakes give off fragrance
and at our door all luscious fruit,
fresh picked and stored as well,
I have laid up for you, my love.

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Turn back, turn back.* The imperative verb *shuvi* does not mean "turn around," as it is understood in some translations. The Shulamite has been dancing and evidently has begun to move away from the group of other dancers, so now these plural speakers—a kind of chorus—invite her to dance again.

Shulamite. The meaning of her name has been disputed. The most probable derivation is from *Shalem*, a shortened form of "Jerusalem," though one should not exclude a punning association with Solomon (*Shelomoh* in Hebrew) and with the verbal root that suggests wholeness.

Why should you behold. This seems to be the speech of a second group. The poem, then, would be composed of an antiphonal exchange between two (presumably male) choruses.

the dance of the double rows. Or "the dance of the double camps." Its choreography is beyond retrieval, but one may imagine two rows of dancers with the Shulamite as the star performer moving between them. The two rows may even be the two choruses.

2. *How fair your feet in sandals.* Although the first Hebrew noun can also mean "steps," the poem is focused on her body parts, not on her movements. As has often been observed, this particular poem in praise of the beauty of the beloved moves from feet to head rather than the other way around because the chorus is watching her dancing; and their eyes are first caught by her moving feet. The antiphonal voice has just challenged this group with a

question—why should we gaze on the Shulamite?—and now an answer is provided in the celebration of her beauty.

The curves of your thighs like wrought rings. In this instance, the beauty of the lovely woman is first likened to exquisite artifacts, as in her celebration earlier of her lover's beauty, and only afterward to growing things, animals, and architectural elements. It is worth noting that her thighs, navel, and breasts appear to be visible as she dances, so she may be wearing some sort of diaphanous dress or skimpy tunic. That would give special point to the entreaty, "Turn back, turn back, . . . that we may behold you (verse 1)."

3. *Your navel a crescent bowl.* Sometimes, as Freud famously said of cigars, a navel is just a navel, despite the inclination of some interpreters to see it as an image of a different body part. Nevertheless, the filling of a receptacle with liquid has a certain erotic resonance. But the intention of the line is more general: just as the crescent concavity of her navel should always be filled, she is never to be arid and empty.

mixed wine. The ancient Hebrews, like the Greeks, often mixed strong wine with water.

a mound of wheat. One should note that this poetics has no particular commitment to metaphoric consistency. In the previous line, the navel was likened to a finely crafted bowl; now the belly around it is compared to a mound of wheat. Visually, the two lines trace a counterpoint between the navel's concavity and the gentle convex curve of the belly.

5. *your eyes like pools in Heshbon.* Heshbon is a Moabite city. Perhaps it was proverbial for its beauty, though if that is the case, the tradition has been lost to us. The simple exoticism of a distant place may have appealed to the poet, as with Lebanon and Damascus.

the town of grandees. The Hebrew *bat-rabim* is literally "daughter of the great ones" or, equally possible, "daughter of the many." These two words are often construed as a place-name, but this translation follows the argument of the Blochs that "daughter" is an epithet for the town (cities are often imagined as women in biblical language) and that *rabim* has the meaning it sometimes shows elsewhere of "important persons," "masters." It would be in accordance with the use of parallelism in biblical poetry for the poet to introduce a poetic epithet for a place-name that appears in the preceding verset.

Your nose like the tower of Lebanon. Even more than the image of the neck as a tower, this simile is likely to seem incongruous to modern readers,

but it reflects both the value set on a long, architecturally elegant nose as a sign of beauty and the tendency of this poetry to follow the momentum of the term of comparison in the simile.

6. *like Mount Carmel.* Mount Carmel, overlooking the site of present-day downtown Haifa, is lofty and wooded and thus is an appropriate image for the grandeur of the Shulamite's head. Because the word "mount" does not appear in front of "Carmel" in the Hebrew, some interpreters have taken *karmel* as a homonym that means "farmland," but surely a luxuriant high place is a more apt image for the head. The word is also close to *karmil*, "purple," and so may punningly point toward the color that appears in the next verset, even though a different term is used for the color.

the locks of your head are purple. What is probably meant is a black sheen that has purple highlights, but the color is also chosen because *ʾargaman* is associated with royal raiments, which would be an appropriate link for this "daughter of a nobleman."

A king is caught in the tangle. The king is probably an epithet for the lover, as in 1:4. The other noun in this clause, *rehatim*, is obscure. It might refer to the beams of a loom. The translation choice of "tangle" is dictated by context.

7. *O Love.* The word for "love," *ʾahavah*, is capitalized in the translation because it cannot be a designation for the human object of love. Love itself is said to be the sweetest of delights.

8. *Your stature.* These words signal the beginning of a new poem, in which the lover recalls contemplating the fine stature of his beloved and longing to embrace her.

9. *let your breasts be like grape clusters.* As he evokes physical intimacy, the comparison moves from date palm to grapes, perhaps because of the general association of wine with kisses and lovemaking.

the scent of your breath like quince. This second verset exhibits the general tendency of poetic parallelism in the Bible to move from a large object or space to something smaller. The word for "breath" is literally "nose," but by metonymy that becomes in biblical usage a term for "breath."

10. *your mouth.* Literally, "your palate."

It flows to my lover smoothly. She now responds to him in midsentence (her response is indicated here typographically by the initial dash). Though

the verb used usually means simply "go," in conjunction with this adverb it has the sense of "flow." The "it" appears to refer to the goodly wine of the mouth that he has just mentioned: yes, she says, it is delectable wine that flows straight to my lover, exciting those who sleep to speech where actual wine might be a soporific.

11. *I am my lover's / and for me his desire.* This line is plausibly read as her summarizing affirmation of their love after she has evoked in the previous line the potent effect of her kisses. Some interpreters, however, prefer to see it as the initial line of the next poem.

12. *the henna.* The Hebrew *kefarim* has a homonym that means "villages," which is also possible here, but it seems more likely, as the next verse indicates, that she is inviting him to spend a night in the open air, and *kefarim* in the sense of "henna" is associated earlier with love's pleasures.

14. *mandrakes.* This plant was thought to be an aphrodisiac, as is evident in the story of the mandrakes found by Reuben (Genesis 30:14–16). It is also quite obvious in the Hebrew that *duda'im*, "mandrakes," plays on *dodai,* "my love" (in the sense of "lovemaking") that she has just used. Either the phonetic closeness of the two words led to the belief that mandrakes were aphrodisiac, or the belief in their power to stimulate desire generated the name for the plant.

give off. The use of this verb pointedly picks up "give" at the end of the previous line.

our door. The Hebrew shows a plural, again a poetic usage.

all luscious fruit, / . . . I have laid up for you, my love. This is still another instance of the delightfully teasing play between outside and inside, literal and figurative, in which the Song abounds. She has invited him to look at the blossoming world with her. Now they come back to her house, where she announces that she has set aside delicious fruit for him, which could be taken literally. But the concluding verset strongly intimates that the fruit is the delectable pleasures of love that she has scrupulously kept for him alone —"stored" (literally, "old") because she has carefully held these for him, "fresh picked" (literally, "new") because these fruits will have the freshness of the spontaneous gifts of her body.

CHAPTER 8

[1]Would that you were a brother to me,
suckling my mother's breasts.
I would find you in the street, would kiss you,
and they would show no scorn for me.
[2]I would lead you, I would bring you
to my mother's house, she would teach me.
I would give you spiced wine to drink,
from my pomegranate wine.
[3]His left hand beneath my head,
his right hand embracing me.
[4]I make you swear, O daughters of Jerusalem,
that you shall not rouse nor stir love
until it pleases.

[5]Who is this coming up from the desert
leaning on her lover?

Under the quince tree I roused you.
There your mother conceived you,

there she who bore you conceived you.

[6]Set me as a seal on your heart,
as a seal on your arm.
For strong as death is love,
fierce as Sheol is
Its sparks are fiery sparks,
a fearsome flame.

[7]Many waters cannot
put out love
nor rivers sweep it away.
Should a man give
all the wealth of his house for love,
they would surely scorn him.

[8]We have a little sister
and she has no breasts.
What shall we do for our sister
on the day she is spoken for?
[9]If she is a wall,
we will build on her a silver turret.
If she is a door,
we will besiege her with cedar boards.
[10]—I am a wall

and my breasts are like
Then I was in his eyes
like a town that finds peace.

[11]A vineyard Solomon had
in the Vale of Wealth.
He gave the vineyard to the keepers:
each would get from its fruit
a thousand silver shekels.
[12]My vineyard is my own.
You can have the thousand, Solomon,
and two hundred for the keepers of its fruit.

[13]You who dwell in the garden,
friends listen for your voice.
Let me hear it.
[14]—Flee my lover and be like a deer
or like a gazelle
on the spice mountains.

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *suckling my mother's breasts.* This could also be read as a noun phrase: "a suckling of my mother's breasts." That construction would be in keeping with

the logic of the biblical parallelism, where the general term in the first verset (here "brother") is followed by some sort of epithet or paraphrase as the equivalent in the second. Second-verset equivalents usually concretize the term that appears in the first. In this instance, we are given the sensual concreteness of the lover sucking the breasts of the beloved's mother, which then is a kind of prolepsis of kissing or sucking the breasts of his beloved.

I would find you in the street. There may be an echo of her desperate search through the streets to find her lover in 3:1–4. In the fantasy of a fraternal bond here, of course, since they are brother and sister, they are free to embrace in full public view, without censure. Her desire for him is so imperative that she wishes she could have unimpeded access to his embraces even when they are out in the streets.

2. *I would lead you, I would bring you.* As elsewhere, it is she who plays an unabashedly active role. The implied narrative sequence is that after having encountered him in the street and having kissed him, she takes him by the hand and leads him back to her mother's house, where they can make love.

she would teach me. Though emendations have often been proposed for this verb in the received text, it makes sense as it stands. In many cultures, as several commentators have argued, it is the traditional duty of the mother to instruct her daughter in the art of love, and it looks as if that is what the young woman has in mind here. That role resonates with the initial image of the fantasy, in which the mother's breasts suckle the lover.

spiced wine . . . / my pomegranate wine. In biblical Israel and elsewhere in the ancient Mediterranean, spices were sometimes added to wine. As in previous poems in the Song, the wine is a metaphor for the pleasures of love that she now offers him.

3. *His left hand beneath my head, / his right hand embracing me.* This line, which repeats 2:6, is a discreet expression of the sexual consummation that she has promised in the previous line or might even refer to their embrace after the consummation. This poem becomes a nice companion piece to the poem in 2:4–7. There it was the lover who brought the beloved to the bedchamber; here it is she who brings him. The parallelism strongly suggests that "the house of wine" in 2:4 is an epithet for the private place where they make love, as here; in her mother's house, she offers him her "spiced wine."

4. *I make you swear, O daughters of Jerusalem.* This recurring line, in the present context, concluding this particular poem, suggests something like the

following: I make you swear not to interfere and not to urge love's fulfillment before the time is ripe; now I have enjoyed that ripeness in the intimate privacy that is only for me and my lover.

5. *Who is this coming up from the desert / leaning on her lover?* This line, the first verset replicating 3:6a, sounds like the beginning of a poem that has been lost. The next, triadic line is also a fragment lacking context. Although there are occasional brief fragments earlier in the book, two fragments in immediate sequence here may reflect a quandary of the editor as he came to the end of his collection of poems: in the material at his disposal, he had a couple of snippets of poems, perhaps on torn pieces of parchment, that he did not want to discard because he either felt that they had authoritative status or saw them as good lines of poetry.

Under the quince tree I roused you. The quince, if that is what the Hebrew *tapuaḥ* is, was earlier associated (2:5) with reviving the young woman faint with passion. Here it is she who addresses him, as the grammatical forms of the Hebrew makes clear. The verb "rouse"—again the woman takes sexual initiative—is probably intended in an erotic sense. Thus Rashi: "she says this seeking her lover's affection . . . and it is the language of the wife of one's youth rousing her lover at night as he slumbers, embracing him and kissing him."

There your mother conceived you. This verset and the one that follows are enigmatic. Elaborate explanations have been proposed, from mythological to zoological. The simplest possibility is that an act of love was once consummated under this tree, and the young woman now proposes a new consummation—in a way, a reenactment. The editorial placement of this line here was probably encouraged by the role of the mother in verses 1 and 2 above.

she who bore you. The vocalization of the Masoretic Text indicates a verb, "she bore you" (*yeladetkha*), but the conventions of parallelism would lead us to expect a poetic substitution for the noun "mother" in the preceding verset (thus the translation supposes *yoladetkha*), and this is in fact the vocalization reflected in the Septuagint and in one version of the Syriac.

6. *Set me as a seal on your heart, / as a seal on your arm.* Some commentators see this line as still another fragment, but it works perfectly well as the initial line of the poem that follows.

fierce as Sheol is jealousy. Many modern interpreters prefer to understand the noun *qin'ah* as "passion," but most of its biblical usages indicate jealousy, which makes perfectly good sense here.

a fearsome flame. The word for "flame" has the theophoric suffix *yah*, but this translation follows the scholarly consensus that it is used here as an intensifier, with no theological implication. This would be consistent with the rest of the Song of Songs, where God is neither mentioned nor at issue in the poems.

7. *Many waters cannot / put out love.* The "many waters" may have some mythological resonance as the primordial waters of creation and (as in Psalms) of the great cosmic sea. This poem differs somewhat from the others in the collection because it is less a direct address by one of the lovers to the other than a celebration of the power of love, though this does not preclude the possibility, if verse 6a is the beginning of the poem, that it is spoken by the beloved to her lover.

8. *We have a little sister.* This poem, too, differs from the others: here a group of brothers, acting as a kind of chorus, contemplates, perhaps apprehensively, the conjugal future of their prepubescent sister. We may be invited to recall the spiteful brothers who punished their sexually active sister by making her a keeper of vineyards (1:6). It is quite possible that this verse and the one that follows amount to a flashback: the decidedly nubile sister (verse 10) thinks back to the moment when her brothers were nervous about her approaching puberty.

and she has no breasts. The supple, beautiful breasts of the young woman are a recurrent feature of the love poems.

9. *If she is a wall.* The reference is probably to being closed off from the dangers of the potential suitors or seducers. (The locked garden of chapter 4 is a partial analogy.)

we will build on her a silver turret. Though the precise meaning of the Hebrew noun is in dispute, it is most plausibly understood in this context as some sort of ornament, perhaps to be given as a reward for her protecting her virginity. Zakovitch cites the Talmudic "city of gold," an ornament worn by brides, as a possible analogue.

we will besiege her with cedar boards. This verset is obscure. The most likely sense is an expression of hostility by the brothers toward their sister, as in 1:6. That is, if she is a door, which unlike a wall opens up to let people in,

instead of bedecking her with silver ornaments, we will lay siege against her with siege engines made of cedarwood. Despite the efforts of some interpreters to understand the verb here as indicating something less hostile, the plain meaning of *tsur ʿal* is "to lay siege against." The brothers, then, cast themselves as guardians of the family honor, prepared to punish their sister if she betrays it.

10. *I am a wall / and my breasts are like towers.* She now offers a vigorous rejoinder to the remembered speech of her brothers. She is a wall, she knows perfectly well how to protect herself from unwanted suitors; and contrary to the moment years earlier when she was a physically undeveloped little sister, she is a sexually mature woman with palpably prominent breasts of which she is proud.

in his eyes. The implied antecedent to "his" must be her one true lover.

like a town that finds peace. The Hebrew merely has "like one [feminine] who finds peace." Towns are invariably feminine in biblical Hebrew and are sometimes referred to as mother or daughter or personified as a woman. In the context of "wall" (the term for the wall of a city, not of a house) in the previous line, it seems plausible that she who finds peace is the city. To complete the walled-city metaphor of her rejoinder to her brothers: for her lover the town opens its gates, allowing him to enter peacefully—there is neither siege nor conflict, only a happy welcoming.

11. *the Vale of Wealth.* The Hebrew *ba'al hamon* definitely looks like a place-name, but it is probably meant to be thematically significant. For this reason, the name is translated rather than transliterated. *Ba'al* does not actually mean "vale" but is a component of many biblical place-names, probably because the Canaanite god Baal was once worshipped at these places. The word for "wealth," *hamon,* is phonetically akin to *hon*, "wealth" in verse 7.

a thousand silver shekels. The Hebrew says only "a thousand silver."

12. *My vineyard is my own.* Given the way "vineyard" is used in 1:6 and "garden" elsewhere, she is almost certainly referring to the precious treasures of her body. Vineyards, of course, were economically important in ancient Israel. The idea that her private vineyard is worth far more than King Solomon's large revenue-producing vineyard is clearly in keeping with "Should a man give / all the wealth of his house for love, / they would surely scorn him (verse 7)."

13. *You who dwell in the garden.* The conjugated verb is feminine, so we know it is the lover addressing the young woman. As with a few other nouns in the Song, the Hebrew for "garden" shows a poetic plural. The beloved, as in chapters 4 and 5, is in a garden and is also herself a garden.

friends listen for your voice. This is a little obscure. The probable meaning is that friends—his, hers, anyone amicably disposed—are eager to hear her sweet voice, as is the lover himself in 2:14.

Let me hear it. But he seems to want her to speak for him alone. The single Hebrew word represented by these four English words is really not metrically sufficient to constitute a verset in a line of poetry, and the syntax is somewhat problematic. All of this makes the whole line look textually suspect.

14. *Flee my lover and be like a deer.* It is appropriate that the book ends with a lovers' dialogue. He speaks one line of poetry (verse 13), and she answers with an antithetical line of poetry (verse 14). Both lines are triadic, a kind of line often used in biblical poetry to mark some sort of closure.

on the spice mountains. Like so much in the Song, this phrase and the imperative verb that precedes it point in two directions. Again, the purposeful ambiguity between outside and inside, literal and figurative, is invoked. Ostensibly, she is saying that he must run away to the distant mountains (perhaps after a night of love, though that is by no means clear). But her breasts have been represented figuratively as mountains, and "spice mountains" (or more literally, "mountains of fragrances") would be an apt designation for them. This entire line recalls 2:17 (see the comment on that verse), with *harey besamim*, "spice mountains," similar in form to *harey bater*, "cloven mountains," in 2:17. In what might be understood as a lover's teasing invitation, she urges him to run away—to the amorous haven of her waiting body.

RUTH

Introduction

Is Ruth in fact a Late Biblical book? Although this is the consensus of biblical scholars, there are some vocal dissenters. These tend to take at face value the assertion of the opening verse that we are reading a story that goes back to the period of the Judges—an assertion that led, as perhaps the author of Ruth intended, to the placement of the book between Judges and Samuel in the Septuagint and consequently in the Christian canonical order of the Bible. Some of the dissenters evoke the pure classical style of Ruth that in many ways sounds like the Hebrew of the early first millennium B.C.E.

But style is actually the clearest evidence of the lateness of Ruth. The writer took pains to create a narrative prose redolent of the early centuries of Israelite history, but it is very difficult to execute such a project of archaizing without occasional telltale slips,

as one can see in the Hebrew of the frame-story of Job. Here, there are at least a dozen terms that reflect distinctive Late Biblical usage—as, for example, the verbs used for taking a wife (1:4), for wait or hope (1:13), and for removing a sandal (4:7), and another ten idiomatic collocations occur that never appear in earlier biblical texts.

The other strong sign of Ruth's composition in the period after the return from Babylonian exile in the fifth century B.C.E. is its genre. The book is still another manifestation of the veritable explosion of new narrative genres that characterizes the Late Biblical period. For all the polemic thrust of this text (to which we will turn momentarily), it is basically an idyll, quite unlike any of the narratives written during the First Temple period. The setting is bucolic—Bethlehem is a small town, scarcely a city, and the action of the two central chapters takes place outside the town, in the fields and on the threshing floor. Harvesting and agriculture are a palpable presence in the story. Unlike the narratives from Genesis to Kings, where even pastoral settings are riven with tensions and often punctuated by violence, the world of Ruth is a placid bucolic world, where landowner and workers greet each other decorously with blessings in the name of the LORD, and where traditional practices such as

the levirate marriage and leaving unpicked ears of grain for the poor are punctiliously observed. The idyllic nature of the book is especially evident in its characters. In the earlier biblical narratives, character is repeatedly seen to be fraught with inner conflict and moral ambiguity. Even such presumably exemplary figures in the national history as Jacob, Joseph, David, and Solomon exhibit serious weaknesses, sometimes behaving in the most morally questionable ways. In Ruth, by contrast, there are no bad people. Orpah, who turns back to Moab, leaving Naomi, is devoted to her mother-in-law and is merely following Naomi's exhortation. She is a good person, only less good than Ruth. The unnamed kinsman of the last chapter is also not a bad person, merely less exemplary than Boaz in his unwillingness to take on a Moabite wife with all that might entail. In sum, this idyllic narrative is one of the few truly successful stories in any literature that concentrates almost exclusively on good people.

Ruth's Moabite origins have led many interpreters —convincingly, in my view—to see this story as a quiet polemic against the opposition of Ezra and Nehemiah to intermarriage with the surrounding peoples when the Judahites returned to their land in the fifth century B.C.E. The author may have picked up a hint from 1 Samuel 22:3–4, where David, said

here to be Ruth's great-grandson, is reputed to have placed his parents under the protection of the king of Moab to keep them safe from Saul. Readers should note that for biblical Israel, Moab is an extreme negative case of a foreign people. A perennial enemy, its origins, according to the story of Lot's daughter in Genesis 19, are in an act of incest. The Torah actually bans any sort of intercourse, social, cultic, or sexual, with the Moabites. Against this background of hostility, Moab in this book provides refuge for the family of Elimelech fleeing from famine (like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), and the two Moabite daughters-in-law are faithful, loving women, with Ruth's moral nobility altogether exemplary. It is this that Boaz is aware of from the outset, and he is in no way put off by Ruth's identity as a Moabite, unlike the kinsman who declines to perform the levirate obligation. Ruth is a perfectly virtuous Moabite—*ʾeshet hayil*, a "worthy woman"—who becomes the progenitrix of the royal line of the Judahite kingdom. It is hard not to see in the boldly iconoclastic invention of this plot an argument against the exclusionary policy on foreign wives propagated by Ezra and Nehemiah. This would also make the fifth century B.C.E., at the moment when intermarriage was an urgent issue, a plausible time for the composition of the book.

It is remarkable that a story in all likelihood framed for a polemic purpose should be so beguiling. Charm is not a characteristic that one normally associates with biblical narrative, but this idyll is charming from beginning to end, understandably making it one of the most perennially popular biblical books. If the writer set out to make Ruth the Moabite a thoroughly good person in order to implement his argument for openness to exogamy, he also had a rare gift for making good characters convincing, manifested from the very beginning in Naomi's solicitous speech to her daughters-in-law and then in Ruth's unforgettable pledge of devotion to her. This author was finely aware of the conventions of earlier biblical narrative as he was sensitive to the prose style of his predecessors, but he subtly adapted those conventions to his own artistic and thematic ends. He clearly is familiar with the betrothal type-scene that plays an important role in Genesis and early Exodus, but in his canny version, it is a young woman, not a young man, who encounters her future spouse near a well in a foreign land, and the foreign land, paradoxically, is Judah, which she will then make her homeland, "coming back" with Naomi to a place where she has never been.

Another recurrent device of classical biblical narratives is the use of the first piece of dialogue assigned to a character to define the distinctive nature of the character. That procedure is splendidly realized in Ruth's first speech, addressed to Naomi, in chapter 1. The lyric suasive force of her speech should be noticed, for it is the first signal instance of one of the appealing features of the prose of the Book of Ruth. Earlier biblical narrative often introduces brief poetic insets into the prose—formal poems, sometimes just a line or two in length, that mark a portentous juncture of the story, a blessing or a prayer or an elegy (the valedictory words of Rebekah's family to her as she leaves to become Isaac's bride, Jacob's cadenced cry of dismay when he believes Joseph has been torn apart by a wild beast). In Ruth, on the other hand, the dialogue repeatedly glides into parallel structures that have a strong rhythmic quality and sound rather like verse but do not entirely scan as formal poetry. Naomi's relatively long speech to her daughters-in-law abounds in loose parallel structures and emphatic repetitions, culminating in one parallelism that actually scans as verse in the Hebrew: "would you wait for them till they grew up? / For them would you be deprived of husbands?" Ruth's beautifully cadenced response is still closer to poetry: "For wherever you go,

I will go. / And wherever you lodge, I will lodge. / Your people is my people, / and your god is my god."

These gestures toward poetry continue to mark the speech of the characters down to the words of blessing of the townswomen near the end of the last chapter. The balance, the rhythmic poise, the stately symmetries of the language are an apt manifestation of the harmonious world of the Book of Ruth: the characters express a kind of moral confidence ultimately stemming from a sense of the rightness of the traditional values of loyalty, love, and charity and of the sustaining force of providence even in the face of adversity. All this taken together, consummated with the most finely managed artistry, makes the Book of Ruth one of literature's most touching stories with a happy ending.

CHAPTER 1

[1]And it happened in the days when the judges ruled
that there was a famine in the land, and a man went
from Bethlehem to sojourn in the plains of Moab, he
and his wife and his two sons. [2]And the man's name
was Elimelech, and his wife's name was Naomi, and
the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion,
Ephrathites from Bethlehem of Judah. And they came
to the plains of Moab and they were there. [3]And
Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she, together
with her two sons, was left. [4]And they took for
themselves Moabite wives. The name of one was
Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they
dwelled there some ten years. [5]And the two of them,
Mahlon and Chilion, died as well, and the woman was
left of her two children and of her husband. [6]And she
rose, she and her daughters-in-law, and turned back
from the plains of Moab, for she had heard in the
plains of Moab that the LORD had singled out His
people to give them bread. [7]And she went out from the
place where she had been, with her two daughters-in-

law, and they went on the way to go back to the land of Judah. [8]And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law: “Go back, each of you to her mother’s house. May the LORD do kindness with you as you have done with the dead and with me. [9]May the LORD grant that you find a settled place, each of you in the house of her husband.” And she kissed them, and they raised their voice and wept. [10]And they said to her, “But with you we will go back to your people.” [11]And Naomi said, “Go back, my daughters, why should you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb who could be husbands to you? [12]Go back, my daughters, go, for I am too old to have a husband. Even had I thought ‘I have hope. This very night I shall have a husband and bear sons,’ [13]would you wait for them till they grew up? For them would you be deprived of husbands? No, my daughters, for it is far more bitter for me than for you because the LORD’s hand has come out against me.” [14]And they raised their voice and wept once more, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. [15]And she said, “Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people. Go back after your sister-in-law.” [16]And Ruth said, “Do not entreat me to forsake you, to turn back from you. For wherever you go, I will go. And wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people is my people, and your god is

my god. [17]Wherever you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. So may the LORD do to me or even more, for only death will part you and me." [18]And she saw that she was insisting on going with her, and she ceased speaking to her. [19]And the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem, and it happened as they came to Bethlehem that the whole town was astir over them, and the women said, "Is this Naomi?" [20]And she said, "Do not call me Naomi. Call me Mara, for Shaddai has dealt great bitterness to me. [21]I went out full, and empty did the LORD bring me back. Why should you call me Naomi when the LORD has borne witness against me and Shaddai has done me harm?" [22]And Naomi came back, and her daughter-in-law with her who was coming back from the plains of Moab. And they had come to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *when the judges ruled*. The "judges" (*shoftim*) are tribal chieftains, as in the Book of Judges. This initial notice led the Septuagint, and the Christian canon afterward, to place the Book of Ruth in the Former Prophets, after Judges.

2. *And the man's name*. All the names appear to have symbolic meaning, though perhaps that is not entirely certain. Elimelech means "my God is

king." Naomi, as she herself points out in verse 20, suggests "sweet" or "pleasant." Unlike these two names, which have some sort of general currency, the two sons' names, Mahlon and Chilion, mean "sickness" and "destruction" and so are manifestly schematic names pointing to the fate of their bearers and would not have been used in reality.

Bethlehem of Judah. "Bethlehem" signifies "house of bread," a meaning that will be fully activated in the grain harvest during which the main action takes place. Because it is a generic name for any town in a region where grain is cultivated, the writer stipulates "of Judah" to distinguish it from at least one other Bethlehem.

4. *Orpah*. Orpah points to the word for "nape," *ʿoref*, another name dictated by plot function, because in the end she necessarily turns her back on Naomi to head back to Moab. Elsewhere, turning the nape is a sign of flight; here it merely focuses on Naomi's vision of Orpah as she turns around, after all a devoted daughter-in-law only following her mother-in-law's exhortation.

Ruth. There is some uncertainty about the meaning of this name. It might be a defective spelling of *reʿut*, "friendship," or it might derive from the verbal stem *r-w-h*, which suggests "well-watered" or "fertile." It is also possible that the name has no thematic meaning.

dwelled. First they came merely to "sojourn" (verse 1). Now they "dwell" in Moab for a decade, threatening to become expatriates.

6. *turned back*. The whole story turns on four thematic key words—three are verbs, *lashuv*, "to go back or return," *lalekhet*, "to go," and *lidboq*, "to cling." These verbs, as we shall see, will acquire complicated and even paradoxical meanings. The fourth term is a noun, *ḥesed*, "kindness" (but also implying something like "faithfulness" or "loyalty"). The word first appears in verse 8.

bread. This Hebrew term, *leḥem,* is probably a synecdoche for "food" as it often is elsewhere, though there is special emphasis on bread because of the barley harvest in the fields around Bethlehem.

9. *a settled place*. The literal meaning of the Hebrew word *manoaḥ* is "rest." In combination with *naḥalah*, "inheritance," the word *menuhah* implies "settling down somewhere in comfort and security."

11. *Do I still have sons in my womb who could be husbands to you?* Naomi here refers explicitly to the practice of *yibum*, levirate marriage: when a husband dies, leaving no male offspring, one of his brothers is obliged to

marry the widow and beget children with her, serving as a kind of proxy for his deceased brother. The obligation of levirate marriage is at issue in the story of Tamar in Genesis 38. It is worth noting that she becomes the progenitrix of the line that will lead to David, like Ruth, who is only three generations removed from David. In chapter 4 here the practice of *yibum* is extended beyond brothers-in-law to kinsmen, which differs from Genesis.

13. *would you wait for them till they grew up? For them would you be deprived of husbands?* These clauses are the first manifestation of a pronounced tendency in Ruth to cast dialogue in cadenced parallel statements that are loose approximations of parallelistic poetry. This approximation will become tighter in Ruth's first speech.

bitter. In verse 20, Naomi will explicitly say this is the antonym to her name.

the LORD's hand has come out against me. The wording suggests something close to an attack.

14. *Orpah kissed her mother-in-law*. In context, the obvious implication is that this is a farewell kiss as she turns her "nape," *ʿoref,* to Naomi and heads home. She is a good woman but less resolute than Ruth.

15. *Go back*. This is the plain meaning of this verb, for Moab is Ruth's place of origin; then, paradoxically, she will be said to "go back" to Judah, a land where she has never been.

16. *lodge*. The verb *lun* means "to spend the night while traveling or wandering," so Ruth scarcely envisages a comfortable and stable lot in following Naomi.

Your people is my people, and your god is my god. There was no real process of conversion in the ancient Near East. If a person considered residence in a different country, he or she would in the natural course of things embrace the worship of the local god or gods. One should therefore not imagine that Ruth has become a theological monotheist, only that she is recognizing that if she follows Naomi to her people in Judah, she will also adopt the god of the country.

17. *Wherever you die, I will die, and there will I be buried*. Ruth's moving speech, with its fine resonance of parallel clauses, appropriately ends on the note of death: she will always remain with Naomi in the trajectory of a whole life until death. The procedure of biblical narrative of defining a character by

his or her initial speech is vividly deployed here, showing Ruth as the perfect embodiment of loyalty and love for her mother-in-law.

19. *the whole town*. This is a perfect illustration of the fact that biblical *ʿir* usually means "town," not "city." Bethlehem, far from being a walled city, is a modest agricultural town with small cultivated fields on its outskirts.

was astir. It would have been a notable event in this small town that Naomi, having entirely disappeared for ten years, should suddenly reappear, with a young woman in tow. This would have triggered gossip and speculation among the townswomen. The women focus on Naomi, not paying attention to the young woman with her.

the women. The Hebrew merely says "they," but the plural verb is conjugated in the feminine. It is noteworthy that throughout the first chapter women alone have been active characters, the men briefly introduced only to die. This is surely a point of departure from the patriarchal norm of classical Hebrew narrative, where there are some strong female characters but the men predominate.

20. *Mara*. This name would mean "bitter," the antithesis of the sweetness suggested by the name Naomi.

21. *the LORD has borne witness against me and Shaddai has done me harm*. These two parallel clauses are entirely scannable as poetry, with three accented syllables in each half of the line in Hebrew. Because of the poetic requirement of synonymous substitution, Naomi, after invoking the standard term, "the LORD" (YHWH) in the first verse, uses a poetic or archaic alternative in the second verse, "Shaddai" (in traditional translations, "the Almighty"). In fact, elsewhere "Shaddai" unattached to *ʾel,* "God," appears only in poetry.

22. *Naomi came back, and her daughter-in-law with her who was coming back*. The paradox here is thematically pointed. Naomi is of course coming back to her homeland. Ruth is "coming back from the plains of Moab," which is her homeland, because she is united in purpose with Naomi and has in a sense already made the land of Judah, to which she comes for the first time, her new homeland. This paradox will be further enriched by the allusion in the next chapter to Abraham's migration from a land in the east to Canaan.

And they had come to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. This notation clearly sets the agricultural scene where all the subsequent

action will unfold. The harvesting bears out the word Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had remembered his people to give them bread, and the fertility of the land also adumbrates Ruth's destined fertility.

CHAPTER 2

[1]And Naomi had a kinsman through her husband, a
man of worth from the clan of Elimelech, and his
name was Boaz. [2]And Ruth the Moabite said to
Naomi, “Let me go, pray, to the field, and glean from
among the ears of grain after I find favor in his eyes.”
And she said to her, “Go, my daughter.” [3]And she
went and came and gleaned in the field behind the
reapers, and it chanced that she came upon the plot of
Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech. [4]And look,
Boaz was coming from Bethlehem, and he said to the
reapers, “May the LORD be with you!” and they said,
“May the LORD bless you!” [5]And Boaz said to his lad
who was stationed over the reapers, “Whose is this
young woman?” [6]And the lad stationed over the
reapers answered and said, “She is a young Moabite
woman who has come back with Naomi from the plain
of Moab. [7]And she said, ‘Let me glean, pray, and
gather from among the sheaves behind the reapers.’
And she has come and stood since the morning till
now. She has barely stayed in the house.” [8]And Boaz

said to Ruth, “Have you not heard, my daughter—do
not go to glean in another field, and also do not pass on
from here, and so shall you cling to my young women.
9Your eyes be on the field in which they reap and go
after them. Have I not charged the lads not to touch
you? Should you be thirsty, you shall go to the pitchers
and drink from what the lads draw from the well.”
10And she fell on her face and bowed to the ground and
said to him, “Why should I find favor in your eyes to
recognize me when I am a foreigner?” 11And Boaz
answered and said, “It was indeed told me, all that you
did for your mother-in-law after your husband’s death,
and that you left your mother and your father and the
land of your birth to come to a people that you did not
know in time past. 12May the LORD requite your
actions and may your reward be complete from the
LORD God of Israel under Whose wings you have
come to shelter.” 13And she said, “May I find favor in
the eyes of my lord, for you have comforted me and
have spoken to the heart of your servant when I could
scarcely be like one of your slavegirls.” 14And Boaz
said to her at mealtime, “Come here and eat of the
bread and dip your crust in vinegar.” And she sat
alongside the reapers, and he bundled together roasted
grain for her, and she ate and was sated and left some
over. 15And she rose to glean, and Boaz charged his

lads, saying, “Among the sheaves, too, she may glean,
and you shall not harass her. [16]And also she may
certainly take her share from the loose ears of grain
and glean, and you shall not chide her.” [17]And she
gleaned in the field till evening and beat out what she
had gleaned, and it came to almost an *ephah* of barley.
[18]And she carried it and came to the town, and her
mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. And she
took out and gave to her what she had left over after
being sated. [19]And her mother-in-law said to her,
“Where did you glean today and where did you work?
May he who recognized you be blessed!” And she told
her mother-in-law how she had worked with him, and
she said, “The name of the man with whom I worked
today is Boaz.” [20]And Naomi said to her daughter-in-
law, “Blessed is he to the LORD, Who has not
forsaken His kindness with the living and with the
dead!” And Naomi said to her, “The man is related to
us, he is of our redeeming kin.” [21]And Ruth the
Moabite said, “Moreover, he said to me, ‘To the lads
who are mine shall you cling until they finish all the
harvest that is mine.’” [22]And Naomi said to Ruth her
daughter-in-law, “It is good, my daughter, that you
shall go out with his young women, and that they not
trouble you in another field.” [23]And she clung to Boaz’s
young women to glean till the barley harvest and the

wheat harvest were finished. And she stayed with her mother-in-law.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *a man of worth*. The original meaning of *gibor ḥayil* is "valiant warrior," but in the idyllic setting of the Book of Ruth, its meaning is extended to an entirely pacific sense—a landholder of substantial means. It is the same designation that is applied to the "worthy woman" of Proverbs 31:10, and later this feminine form of the epithet will be attached to Ruth.

his name was Boaz. Though the meaning of the name is not altogether transparent, and though it may not be meant to be symbolic, a tradition going back to Late Antiquity associates it with a Hebrew root signifying "strength."

2. *Ruth the Moabite*. She is explicitly identified as a Moabite to underscore the seeming contradiction of a foreign woman going out to take advantage of the Israelite law (Leviticus 19:9) enjoining agriculturalists to leave what the reapers failed to garner for the poor to pick up.

after I find favor in his eyes. Ruth exercises a kind of nervous reticence in regard to Naomi's prosperous relative, who has no doubt been pointed out to her by her mother-in-law, in not mentioning him by name. She realizes that she will be dependent on Boaz's goodwill and so says she will not glean until he has shown himself favorable toward her. In the event, she begins gleaning before that happens.

3. *it chanced that she came upon the plot of Boaz*. This is hardly an accident because that is precisely where she intended to go. The peculiar formulation may be meant to suggest that there is a concordance between human initiative and God's providence.

4. *And look, Boaz was coming from Bethlehem*. His home would be in town and the cultivated fields he owns outside the town.

*May the LORD be with you!*The exchange of greetings here perfectly expresses the harmonious and traditional world of the Book of Ruth: master

and workmen bless each other cordially in the name of the LORD.

5. *lad*. Though the Hebrew noun *naʿar* does designate a young man, it is very often extended, as here, to refer to anyone in a position of subservience. Boaz's overseer of the reapers is surely not a stripling and may well be a man of mature years.

Whose is this young woman? We now learn that the widow Ruth is young, appearing to Boaz as a *naʿarah*, a nubile young woman. He of course does not know until his overseer tells him that she is a Moabite. The use of "whose" reflects his assumption that she must be under the authority of her father's house.

6. *has come back*. In the words of the overseer, Ruth's emigration from Moab is again assimilated to Naomi's coming back to Judah.

7. *gather from among the sheaves*. She would not be picking up sheaves but rather ears of grain that had fallen from the sheaves.

she has come and stood since the morning till now. This is obviously testimony to Ruth's assiduousness at her task of gleaning.

She has barely stayed in the house. The Hebrew text, which reads literally, "This is her staying in the house a bit," seems garbled, and so the translation is no more than a guess.

8. *Have you not heard, my daughter*. This form of address appears to imply that Boaz is a mature man, perhaps a decade or two older than Ruth, who may be in her early twenties.

and so shall you cling to my young women. First Ruth clings to Naomi. Now, in this thematically fraught word, which will be repeated, she is enjoined to cling to Boaz's servant girls.

9. *Your eyes be on the field*. "Be" is merely implied in the Hebrew.

Have I not charged the lads not to touch you? A nubile young woman (and, probably, an attractive one) might well be subjected to sexual advances from these farmhands.

drink from what the lads draw from the well. "The well" is merely implied by the verb, which is used only for drawing water from a well. What we have here is a piquant reversal of the traditional betrothal type-scene: instead of a future bridegroom encountering a young woman, *naʿarah*, at a well in a foreign land, there is a young woman, *naʿarah*, in a land foreign to her but homeland to the others, for whom *neʿarim* will draw water.

10. *when I am a foreigner*. These words are fraught with poignancy and thematic point. As a foreigner, Ruth feels she has no right to expect favors from the Judahites. In fact, the plot will manifest how she "clings" to this new community and becomes an integral part of it.

11. *you left your mother and your father and the land of your birth*. These words are the most significant literary allusion in the book. They explicitly echo God's first words to Abraham in Genesis 12:1, "Go forth from your land and your birthplace and your father's house." Now it is a woman, and a Moabite, who reenacts Abraham's long trek from the east to Canaan. She will become a founding mother of the nation as he was the founding father. Ruth's paradoxical journey outward from home that proves to be a "going back" to home has been aptly summarized by Herbert Marks: these "brief chapters outline the two principal archetypes of Western narrative, the Abrahamic myth of definitive rupture and the Odysseian myth of ultimate return, the journey home."

14. *mealtime*. The meal after the arrival of a stranger at a well in a foreign land is still another motif of the betrothal type-scene.

dip your crust in vinegar. This homey detail neatly catches the pastoral quality of the idyll.

15. *Among the sheaves, too, she may glean*. Boaz makes a point of offering Ruth the opportunity to collect a generous abundance of grain, not just solitary ears left by the reapers in the standing barley.

16. *take her share*. The use of the verb *sh-l-l* here is unusual because it usually means "to take booty." The evident idea is that she will have a windfall of good takings, like someone who reaps booty after a victory.

17. *beat out what she had gleaned*. This would be to get rid of the chaff.

18. *what she had left over after being sated*. This refers to what she had left over from the midday meal, as reported in verse 14. What she gives to Naomi here is not the garnered grain but prepared food. This story that began in hunger now manifests an abundance of food.

19. *recognized*. The sense of the verb is obviously to single out or show special attention, as in verse 10 above. But it is a key verb in the Joseph story, and there is an underlying sense in which Boaz "recognizes" Ruth as a true daughter of Naomi and a fit mate for himself.

20. *Who has not forsaken His kindness with the living and with the dead*. All this echoes, with perfect thematic appropriateness, Orpah's and Ruth's exemplary behavior observed by Naomi in 1:8.

he is of our redeeming kin. "Redeemer" throughout the story signifies a legal, familial function. If a childless woman is widowed, a male kin can "redeem" her through marriage, assuring that through him her inheritance will not be lost and providing her offspring. Naomi is careful to say "of our redeeming kin," properly implying that there may be other candidates in the family, as proves the case in Chapter 4.

22. *trouble you*. The verb here has almost a sense of "interfere with," but that British usage is a little too explicitly sexual to adopt in the translation.

CHAPTER 3

[1]And Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, shall I not seek for you a settled place for you, that it be well for you? [2]And now, is not Boaz our kinsman with whose young women you were winnowing barley at the threshing floor tonight? [3]And you must bathe and anoint yourself and put on your garments and go down to the threshing floor. Do not let yourself be known to the man till he has finished eating and drinking. [4]And it will be, when he lies down, that you will know the place where he lies down, and you shall come and uncover his feet and lie down, and as for him, he shall tell you what you should do.” [5]And she said to her, “Whatever you say to me I will do.” [6]And she went down to the threshing floor and did all that her mother-in-law charged her. [7]And Boaz ate and drank, and he was of good cheer, and he came and lay down at the edge of the stack of barley. And she came stealthily and uncovered his feet and lay down. [8]And it happened at midnight that the man trembled and twisted round, and, look, a woman was

lying at his feet. [9]And he said, “Who are you?” And she said, “I am Ruth your servant. May you spread your wing over your servant, for you are a redeeming kinsman.” [10]And he said, “Blessed are you to the LORD, my daughter. You have done better in your latest kindness than in the first, not going after the young men, whether poor or rich. [11]And now, my daughter, do not be afraid. Whatever you say I will do for you, for all my people’s town knows that you are a worthy woman. [12]And now, though in fact I am redeeming kin, there is also a redeeming kin closer than I. [13]Spend the night here, and it shall be in the morning, should he redeem you, he will do well to redeem, and if he does not want to redeem you, I myself will redeem you, as the LORD lives. Lie here till morning.” [14]And she lay at his feet till morning and arose before a man could recognize his fellow man. And he said, “Let it not be known that a woman came to the threshing floor.” [15]And he said, “Give me the shawl that you have and hold it out.” And she held it out, and he measured out six shares of barley and he set it on her, and she came into the town. [16]And she came to her mother-in-law, and her mother-in-law said, “How is it with you, my daughter?” And she told her all that the man had done for her. [17]And she said, “These six shares of barley he gave me, for he said,

‘You should not come empty-handed to your mother-in-law.’” [18]And she said, “Stay, my daughter, till you know how the matter will fall out, for the man will not rest if he does not settle the matter today.”

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *a settled place*. See the note on 1:9. In both instances, Naomi associates the Hebrew term *manoaḥ* with the security and tranquillity of married life.

3. *you must bathe and anoint yourself and put on your garments*. These instructions initiate a chain of details in the nocturnal encounter between Ruth and Boaz that almost teasingly hint at an erotic experience, but such an experience is pointedly not consummated. Here Ruth is enjoined to wash her body and anoint it (perhaps with fragrant oils) and dress herself (perhaps finely).

Do not let yourself be known to the man. The verb “to know” is reiterated in the episode. In its active form, it can have a sexual meaning in biblical usage, so it plays a role in the erotic tease of the narrative.

till he has finished eating and drinking. In this, Naomi is calculating that Boaz will be in a good mood after eating and drinking, a calculation confirmed in verse 7, when these two verbs are followed by “he was of good cheer.”

4. *uncover his feet*. Alternately, the Hebrew noun could mean “the place of his feet.” In any case, it is an odd detail. Since the verb of uncovering is the one used in biblical prohibitions of uncovering the nakedness of someone—that is, engaging in sexual intercourse—the erotic tease of the narrative is again manifested. (But the proposal of some interpreters that “feet” is a euphemism for the penis is highly dubious.) Ruth lies down not alongside Boaz but at his feet, an expression of her lower social status and of the subservient role of wives in relation to their husbands in biblical society. The uncovering may simply be an act to show that someone is present, and so when Boaz awakens

in the middle of the night, perhaps what first startles him—though it is unreported—is his exposed feet, after which he realizes that a woman is present.

he shall tell you what you should do. Naomi certainly appears to leave open the possibility that Boaz will ask Ruth to have sex with him, but she is counting on the likelihood that he will instead virtuously devise a plan to do social and matrimonial justice to his kinswoman by marriage.

7. *she came stealthily*. The implication of the adverb is not a surreptitious act but an entrance on tiptoe, so as not to wake Boaz.

8. *trembled and twisted round*. Since only after this does he see that a woman is there on the threshing floor with him, one may infer that the momentary physical contortion is from suddenly awaking in the night, perhaps even from a nightmare.

9. *Who are you?* The question is brusque, unadorned by any polite form of address, as if to say: Woman, what are you doing here on my threshing floor in the middle of the night? He of course has met Ruth during the day, but in the dark of the night he does not immediately recognize her, especially after just having awakened.

spread your wing. The Hebrew *kanaf* means both "wing" and "corner of a garment," and most translations render it in the latter sense because the reference is to a man. But Ruth is echoing Boaz's words in 2:12, "the LORD God of Israel under Whose wings you have come to shelter," and as a metaphor, a man can certainly extend a sheltering wing. Zakovitch observes, citing both Rashi and Ezekiel 16:8, that sheltering wings can be a symbol of marriage. In that case, Ruth delicately avoids explicit reference to marriage, instead using an image that also has the more general connotation of shelter.

a redeeming kinsman. Not "the" redeemer, because she knows there may be another candidate for the role.

10. *your latest kindness*. The immediate context suggests that the more salient meaning of *ḥe sed* here is "act of loyalty."

the first. While this might mean Ruth's loyalty to Naomi in Moab, the mention that follows of her not going after the young men makes it more likely that he is referring to her discretion during the day in keeping a distance from the young men.

whether poor or rich. Ruth stayed away from everyone in the group of gleaners, regardless of social standing.

11. *Whatever you say I will do for you*. These words pointedly echo Ruth's to Naomi in verse 5. Though she has placed herself in a posture of subservience to him, he now affirms that he is prepared to do whatever she bids him.

all my people's town. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "all my people's gate," but "gate" is a synecdoche for the town, because it is both the entrance to the town and the area where courts of justice are held when the town's elders convene.

a worthy woman. This feminine equivalent of the epithet earlier used for Boaz, "a man of worth," intimates that the two are perfectly suitable mates.

13. *Spend the night here*. There is both a practical and a symbolic reason for Boaz's urging Ruth to spend the night with him on the threshing floor. He is concerned that it might be dangerous for her to make her way back through the town in the dark of night—in the event, she will leave at the first crack of dawn, when just a bit of light shows but not enough to distinguish one face from another (verse 14). But the night spent together is also an adumbration of marital union, though here, in the most likely reading, still unconsummated. The verb used for "spend the night" is the same in Ruth's "wherever you lodge, I will lodge," but this "lodging" is one that cannot be together with Naomi.

he will do well to redeem. The redemption of the widowed kinswoman is his prerogative and his obligation, so if the relative chooses to do it, Boaz can only lend his assent and approval.

I myself. In the Hebrew, the otherwise unrequired first-person pronoun is added as a strong emphasis on the part of the speaker.

14. *Let it not be known that a woman came*. Boaz is, of course, concerned for Ruth's reputation.

15. *six shares of barley*. The Hebrew simply says "six barley," not specifying the unit of measure, but it would have to be relatively small for Ruth to carry it.

and he set it on her. Boaz evidently wraps up the measure of barley in the shawl and then places it either on Ruth's shoulder or on her head.

16. *How is it with you*. The Hebrew appears to say "who are you," but *mi,* usually "who," as in Boaz's words in verse 8, also sometimes means "what" or

"how."

17. *You should not come empty-handed*. The Book of Ruth is all about the transition from emptiness to fullness—from famine to abundance, from bereavement and childlessness to marriage and children. Naomi has told the women of the town "I went out full, and empty did the LORD bring me back" (1:21), and now the same Hebrew word, *reiqah*, appears in Ruth's report of Boaz's speech to her. The fullness of the shawl bearing the barley is a hint of the fullness of offspring that Ruth will enjoy and bring to Naomi.

18. *Stay, my daughter*. This reiterated form of address is a token of Naomi's constant affection for Ruth.

the man will not rest. Now that the two women have taken this initiative, the responsibility for action lies with Boaz, and Naomi trusts his dependability, and his good faith.

CHAPTER 4

[1]And Boaz had gone up to the gate, and he sat down
there, and look, the redeeming kin of whom Boaz
spoke was passing by, and he said, “Turn aside, sit
down here, So-and-so.” And he turned aside and sat
down. [2]And he took ten men of the town elders and
said, “Sit down here,” and they sat down. [3]And he said
to the redeeming kin, “Naomi, who came back from
the plain of Moab, sold the parcel of the field that was
our brother Elimelech’s. [4]And as for me, I thought, I
shall alert you, saying, ‘Acquire it in the presence of
those seated here and in the presence of my people’s
elders.’ If you would redeem, redeem, and if you will
not redeem, tell me, that I may know that there is none
except you to redeem and I am after you.” And he
said, “I will redeem.” [5]And Boaz said, “On the day you
acquire the field from Naomi, you will also acquire
Ruth the Moabite to raise up the name of the dead
man on his estate.” [6]And the redeeming kin said, “I
cannot redeem, lest I spoil my estate. You—redeem
my obligation of redemption, for I cannot redeem.”

[7]And thus it was in former times in Israel concerning
redemption and concerning exchange to fulfill every
condition: a man would remove his sandal and give it
to his fellow man. And this was the practice in Israel.
[8]And the redeemer said, “You—acquire it,” and he
removed his sandal. [9]And Boaz said to the elders and
to all the people, “You are witnesses today that I have
acquired all that was Elimelech’s and all that was
Chilion’s and Mahlon’s from the hand of Naomi. [10]And
also Ruth the Moabite, wife of Mahlon, I have
acquired for myself as wife, to raise up the name of
the dead on his estate, that the name of the dead be
not cut off from his brothers and from the gate of his
place. You are witnesses today.” [11]And all the people
who were in the gate and the elders said, “We are
witnesses. May the LORD make the woman coming
into your house like Rachel and like Leah, both of
whom built the house of Israel. And do worthy things
in Ephrathah and proclaim a name in Bethlehem.
[12]And may your house be like the house of Perez to
whom Tamar gave birth by Judah, from the seed that
this young woman will give you.” [13]And Boaz took
Ruth the Moabite, and she became his wife, and he
came to bed with her and the LORD granted her
conception and she bore a son. [14]And the women said
to Naomi, “Blessed is the LORD, Who has not

deprived you of a redeemer today, and let his name be proclaimed in Israel. [15]And may he be a restorer of life for you and a support for your old age, as your daughter-in-law, whom you love, has born him, who has been better to you than seven sons." [16]And Naomi took the child and placed him in her lap and became a nurse for him. [17]And the neighbor women called a name for him, saying, "A son is born to Naomi," and they called his name Obed—he was the father of Jesse father of David. [18]And this is the lineage of Perez. Perez begat Hezron. [19]And Hezron begat Ram and Ram begat [20]Aminadab. And Aminadab begat Nahshon, and Nahshon begat Salmah. [21]And Salmah begat Boaz, and Boaz begat Obed. [22]And Obed begat Jesse, and Jesse begat David.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the gate*. The town gate, with some sort of square or plaza in front of it, is both the principal public place of the town and the site where courts of justice are held. Boaz exploits both these aspects of the gate, first taking a seat there in the expectation, which proves correct, that the redeeming kin is likely to pass through this frequented space; then convening a quorum of the elders to serve as witnesses to the legal act that will be executed.

sit down here, So-and-so. The Hebrew *peloni ʾalmoni*, which appears twice elsewhere in the Bible, seems to derive from *pele'*, "mystery" (so Rashi proposes), and the root *ʾ-l-m*, suggesting "mute." The point of refusing this

character a name is that by declining to exercise his obligation of redemption, he essentially withdraws from playing any role in the plot except to stand aside for Boaz. One notes that he immediately assents to Boaz's command to take a seat, as do the elders in the next verse—both testifying to Boaz's authority in the community.

3. *Naomi . . . sold the parcel of the field that was our brother Elimelech's*. Presumably, she was compelled to do this in her destitution. Zakovitch observes that since a widow does not inherit from her husband, this would have to be after the deaths of Mahlon and Chilion, for a mother can inherit from her sons.

4. *if you will not redeem*. The received text shows "if he will not redeem," but many Hebrew manuscripts as well as the Septuagint, the Vulgate, and the Peshitta have the more coherent second-person singular.

there is none except you to redeem. Mr. So-and-so is the only known kin of Naomi besides Boaz, so his refusing to redeem will clear the way for Boaz.

I will redeem. At this point the kinsman imagines that the redemption solely involves acquiring the parcel of land so that it can be restored to the possession of Naomi's clan, to which he belongs. Since Naomi has been left without offspring, he thinks that by providing the purchase price, he will retain permanent possession of the parcel of land.

5. *On the day you acquire*. As Zakovitch notes, this idiom puts temporal pressure on the kinsman because it refers to this very day when they are sitting before the gate in the presence of the elders and the townspeople.

you will also acquire Ruth the Moabite to raise up the name of the dead man. This is the more challenging aspect of the obligation of redemption that until now Boaz has held in reserve—the duty of *yibum* or levirate marriage (see Deuteronomy 25:5–6). When a man dies without male offspring, his brother is obliged to marry the widow ("levirate" derives from the Latin *levir*, "brother-in-law") and, acting as a kind of proxy for the deceased, beget a child with the widow, who will thus continue the name of the dead brother. In this case, the kinsman is not actually the brother of Ruth's dead husband but his relative (perhaps, a first cousin), and the Hebrew word *ʾaḥ* means both "brother" and "kinsman." The received text here reads "from [*meʾet*] Ruth," but this is almost surely a scribal error for *ʾet*, the sign of a direct object in Hebrew. One should note that Boaz makes a point of identifying Ruth as a Moabite, calculating that this will trouble the kinsman, for the Moabites are

not merely foreigners but traditional enemies with whom contact has been proscribed. The introduction of the levirate obligation also pointedly recalls the story of Tamar and the sons of Judah in Genesis 38. One son marries her and dies, leaving Tamar childless. The same fate befalls his brother after marrying her, leading Judah to withhold his third son from carrying out the levirate duty. Tamar, like Ruth, is a foreigner (in her case, a Canaanite), and when she contrives through deception to conceive twins by Judah, Perez and Zerah, she becomes the progenitrix of the line that will lead to Boaz, as we are reminded in the genealogical notice at the end of the book (verses 18–22).

6. *I cannot redeem, lest I spoil my estate*. He leaves unstated why this should be the case. Many commentators conclude that he does not want to contaminate his family by introducing a Moabite woman. The Midrash Ruth Rabba proposes that he fears he will suffer the fate of Mahlon and Chilion, who died after marrying Ruth and Orpah. In any case, if he begets a son with Ruth, the estate will stand in the name of her dead husband, not of the kinsman, as is indeed the aim of the levirate law.

7. *And thus it was in former times in Israel*. This formula (compare 1 Samuel 9:9) clearly indicates that the writer and his audience are removed in time from the era when the levirate obligation was practiced, and it is thus another reflection of the lateness of the book.

to fulfill every condition. The language here is explicitly legal.

a man would remove his sandal and give it to his fellow man. There is no certainty as to who gives the sandal to whom or what exactly it signifies. In the enunciation of the levirate law in Deuteronomy 25:9, it is the widow who removes the sandal from the brother-in-law who has refused to marry her, and she then spits in his face, so the removal of the sandal in Deuteronomy is clearly a sign of disgrace. (There the verb is *ḥalats*; here, in the Late Biblical usage, it is *shalaf*, a term that in earlier Hebrew refers only to "the unsheathing of a sword.") In our text, there is no indication of disgrace. The removal of the sandal seems to be a legal ritual for the transfer of an obligation, or of property—perhaps from the kinsmen to Boaz. The seeming confusion here about the details of the *yibum* ritual may reflect the writer's distance from the time when it was practiced.

8. *You—acquire*. By emphatically designating Boaz with the second-person pronoun before the verb in the imperative, the kinsman relinquishes all rights

of redemption to Boaz.

9. *I have acquired all that was Elimelech's*. Since Naomi has sold her late husband's land, Boaz is declaring that he is about to pay whatever sum is required for buying back the property.

Chilion's and Mahlon's. Zakovitch shrewdly observes the way the difference in the meaning of the two names plays out in the story. "Chilion" implies utter destruction, and with no offspring, this son's name will be lost. "Mahlon" suggests a lesser condition of illness, and his name will be revived through Ruth.

10. *Ruth the Moabite*. If this national epithet put off the kinsman, Boaz on his part unambiguously affirms his readiness to marry the foreign woman.

from the gate of his place. This combination of terms is unusual but is dictated by the fact that they are assembled in the square in front of the gate.

11. *like Rachel and like Leah*. Their blessing transforms Ruth into a kind of adopted matriarch.

do worthy things in Ephrathah and proclaim a name in Bethlehem. In a benedictory flourish, their speech glides into formal verse, though it is unusual that the standard designation, "Bethlehem," appears in the second half of the line, and the less common synonym, "Ephrathah," in the first half. The phrase "do worthy things" incorporates the same term, *ḥayil*, that occurs in the designation of Ruth as a "worthy woman."

12. *Perez to whom Tamar gave birth by Judah*. The underlying allusion to the story of Judah and Tamar is now made explicit.

13. *The LORD granted her conception*. The phrase does not ordinarily occur in reports of conjugal union and conception. It is probably dictated by the fact that Ruth had remained childless in her years of marriage to Mahlon.

14. *And the women said*. The story began with three women (and three dead men), then with the unflagging loyalty and love between two women. When Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem, they were greeted by a bevy of astonished, and gossiping, women. Now the women become a chorus to celebrate the birth of Naomi's grandchild.

16. *And Naomi took the child and placed him in her lap and became a nurse for him*. To cuddle the child and become a caregiver for him is, of course, a natural expression of a grandmother's love, but it also strongly suggests how

the child has become a vivid replacement for the two sons Naomi has lost. It is by no means necessary to see this act, as some interpreters have done, as a formal ceremony of adoption, and it would be both odd and unnerving for a grandmother to adopt her grandchild while his mother was alive.

17. *the neighbor women*. This designation, as Zakovitch, with his characteristic sensitivity to nuances of word choice, observes, points to a closeness to Naomi in this group that does not characterize the more general chorus of townswomen.

and they called his name Obed. Only here is the name given to a child by neither father nor mother but by neighbor women. It is probably a reflection of the importance of the community of women in the story. The name Obed, which occurs elsewhere, means "worshipper" and is probably a shortened form of Obadiah, "worshipper, or servant, of the LORD."

18. *And this is the lineage of Perez*. In careful emulation of the Book of Genesis, the writer weaves together narration with genealogy to pointed thematic purpose. Here he aligns the son Ruth bears both back to Judah's son, Perez, and forward to the founder of the divinely authorized dynasty, David. As with some other genealogical lists, there are exactly ten generations from Perez to David. Ruth the Moabite, who "comes back" to the region of Judah and, in the words of her vow to her mother-in-law, takes Naomi's God as her own, at the end becomes the great-grandmother of David king of Israel.

LAMENTATIONS

Introduction

The only reasonably safe conclusion one can draw about the origins of the Book of Lamentations is the likelihood that it was composed in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the kingdom of Judah in 586 B.C.E. A tradition that goes back to Late Antiquity attributes the book to the prophet Jeremiah. The obvious grounds for this attribution, embraced by both Jews and Christians, are that Jeremiah repeatedly and grimly prophesied the demise of the kingdom and the exile and that he himself lived through the Babylonian conquest with all its depredations. Jeremiah's authorship has not been accepted by modern scholars, and the poetry of these laments over the fate of Zion is altogether different stylistically and formally from the poetry one finds in Jeremiah.

Lamentations is unique among books of the Bible in that four of its five chapters are composed as

alphabetic acrostics, with the third chapter being a triple acrostic, showing three lines that begin with each of the letters in the Hebrew alphabet in their conventional sequence. Even the fifth chapter, which is not an acrostic, comprises twenty-two lines of poetry, the number of letters in the alphabet. The formal differences among the five chapters have led some analysts to conclude that this is a collection of poems by five different poets, but that is not an absolutely necessary inference because the same elegist might have easily been impelled to try his hand at somewhat different forms. Another possible hypothesis is that the editor of the work of a single acrostic poet concluded the book with a poem of his own in which, perhaps not feeling up to the formal challenge of the acrostic, he made do with a poem that had the same number of lines as there were letters in the alphabet. In any case, it is unclear why the alphabetic acrostic form was felt appropriate for these laments. Could it be that the progress from *aleph* to *taw* was felt to imply a comprehensive listing of all the disasters that had befallen the people? Might it reflect the presence of a single elegist who simply was drawn to alphabetic acrostics? Might it be a mnemonic to facilitate public recitation?

If we look across at the psalms that are composed as alphabetic acrostics, we may conclude that the acrostic form encouraged the deployment of a great deal of formulaic language, giving us boilerplate where we might hope for poetry. The most egregious instance is Psalm 119, a sevenfold alphabetic acrostic that is little more than conventional formulas from beginning to end. Interestingly, the acrostic form for the most part does not have this consequence in Lamentations. Some of the language definitely echoes phraseology and imagery of the poetry of doom in the Prophets—the ways of Zion mourning and desolate, the implacable enemy gloating in his triumph, virgins ravished, babes wasting away in the famine. Yet, as the poems drive inexorably from the first letter of the alphabet to the last, they accumulate many powerful images of devastation. Representing God as an implacable enemy drawing His bow against Israel sounds more like an anticipation of Job than a reminiscence of the Prophets. The notion of the surrounding peoples called to Jerusalem like festival pilgrims to destroy rather than to celebrate, to raise in the sacred precincts a fierce cry instead of the festive songs, is a bitter expression of the pain of the loss of the Temple, even without images of crashing roofs and flaming walls. Cannibalism under the duress of

starvation in time of siege is a recurrent theme in prophecies of doom, but here that ghastly act is twice given a horrifying immediacy: “Should women eat their fruit, / the dandled babes?” The speaker in these laments, who is sometimes a horror-stricken observer and sometimes the collective voice of the people, conveys his sense of distress through an anguished physicality: “He wasted my flesh and my skin, / He shattered my bones.” Or again, “He made my teeth crunch down on gravel, / crushed me in the dust.” Repeatedly, the poet conveys arresting images of a once glorious nation reduced to utter wretchedness, scarcely alive: “Their mien was darker than black, / they are not recognized in the streets. / Their skin is shriveled on their bones, / become as dry as wood.” If sometimes the poems look like the deployment of the familiar formulas of the Hebrew poetry of disaster, lines such as the ones just quoted express a sense of a poet who has seen with his own eyes all the horrors of the siege and the consequent destruction of Jerusalem. The figures of the blind in the streets of the city, smeared with blood from the corpses they stumble over at every step, whether based in actual observation or, more probably, poetic invention, are another kind of vivid vehicle for representing the terrible extent of

the slaughter as the city is overrun by murderous invaders.

Against this panorama of horror, the elegist, not limiting himself to keening over the destruction, repeatedly affirms his faith in a just God Who has punished Israel for its transgressions but Who in the end will redeem it and exact retribution from its enemies for their cruel excesses. Lamentations, like most good literature, is a strong response to the historical circumstances for which it was framed while at the same time speaking to analogous situations in other times and places. Its catalogue of horrors is something that, alas, we continue to see reenacted in various guises across the globe. Its faith in the prospect of a restored order of justice is a sustaining belief that humankind may always need in the face of massive devastation and the traumatic displacement of exile. One readily understands why it is that Jewish tradition fixed the recitation of these five laments as an annual ritual, not merely in commemoration of the destruction of the First Temple or the Second but also as a way of fathoming the ghastly recurrent violence that has darkened two millennia of history.

CHAPTER 1

[1]How she sits alone, א
the city once great with people.
She has become like a widow.
Great among nations,
mistress among provinces,
reduced to forced labor.
[2]She weeps on through the night, ב
and her tears are on her cheek.
She has no consoler
from all her lovers.
All her friends have betrayed her,
have become enemies to her.
[3]Judah is exiled in affliction ג
and in hard labor.
She dwells among the nations,
she finds no rest.
All her pursuers overtake her
in straits.
[4]The roads of Zion mourn ד
without festival pilgrims.

All her gates are desolate,
her priests are groaning,
her virgins are sorrow-stricken
and she—it is bitter for her.
[5]Her foes are at the head, ה
her enemies are tranquil,
for the LORD has stricken her with sorrow
because of all her trespasses.
Her babes have fallen captive
before the foe.
[6]And from Zion's Daughter is departed ו
all her glory.
Her nobles have become like stags
that find no pasture,
and they go without strength
before the pursuer.
[7]Jerusalem recalls ז
in the days of her affliction and her wandering
all her treasures
that were in days of yore,
as when her people fell to the foe's hand
with none to help her.
The foes saw her and they laughed
over her disasters.
[8]An offense did Jerusalem commit, ח
therefore she became despised.

All who honored her degrade her,
for they have seen her nakedness.
She on her part groans
and has fallen back.
[9]Her uncleanness is in her skirts, ט
she has no mind of her future,
and she plunges wondrously,
there is none to console her.
See, O LORD, my affliction,
for the enemy is boasting.
[10]The foe has laid his hand י
on all her treasures,
for she has seen nations
come into her sanctuary
of whom I charged they must not come
into assembly with you.
[11]All her people groan כ
seeking bread.
They gave their treasures for food
to revive their failing lives.
See, O LORD, and look,
for she has become cheapened.
[12]Not upon you, all passersby! ל
Look and see,
is there pain like my pain
that He inflicted upon me,

that the LORD struck me with sorrow
on the day His wrath flared?
13 From on high He sent out fire, מ
into my bones He brought it down,
Spread a net for my feet,
made me fall back.
14 The yoke of my trespasses is tight, נ
twisted by His hand,
climbing round my neck—
He made my strength stumble.
The LORD has given me into the hand
of one I cannot stand against.
15 The Master has spurned ס
all my champions in my midst,
has proclaimed an appointed time against me
to break my young men.
A winepress the Master has trampled
for the Virgin Zion's Daughter.
16 For these do I weep. ע
My eyes, my eyes are flooded,
for the consoler is far from me,
the reviver of my failing life.
My children have become desolate,
for the enemy has prevailed.
17 Zion spread her hands.פ
There is none to console her.

The LORD has summoned for Jacob
round about him his foes.
Jerusalem has become
despised among them.
[18]Righteous is the LORD, צ
for I have rebelled against Him.
Hear, pray, all you peoples,
and see my pain.
My virgins and my young men
have gone off captive.
[19]I called out to my lovers— ק
they deceived me.
My priests and my elders perished in the city
when they sought food
that would revive their failing lives.
[20]See, O LORD, for I am distressed, ר
my innards are roiled,
my heart churns within me.
For I have surely rebelled.
Outside, the sword slays sons,
inside, very death.
[21]They have heard that I groan, ש
I have none to console me.
All my enemies heard of my harm, were gladdened.
But it was You who did it.
You brought the day You summoned.

May they be like me!
[22]Let all their evil come before You ת
and do to them as You did to me
for all my trespasses.
For my groans are many
and my heart aches.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

1. *How she sits alone, / the city once great with people*. The translation follows the Hebrew syntax, which inscribes a process of revelation: first we see a woman sitting solitary, then the woman is identified as a metaphor for the city.

She has become like a widow. The simile of the widow of course builds on the metaphoric equivalence of city and woman. The widow is a grieving woman alone, without her husband and, as many biblical texts make clear, legally and socially vulnerable.

2. *and her tears are on her cheek*. This is a vivid instance of focusing in the second verset of the poetic line: first we have the general acts of prolonged weeping, then the close-up of tears running down the cheeks.

all her lovers. These are the purported allies to whom the kingdom of Judah looked for help when the Babylonians invaded. Calling them "lovers," in keeping with a usage in Prophetic poetry, suggests that Judah's turning to them was a kind of promiscuity.

3. *All her pursuers overtake her / in straits*. The image is of fleeing Judah trapped in a narrow passageway or in a cul-de-sac.

4. *without festival pilgrims*. This phrase is an oblique reference to the destruction of the Temple.

All her gates are desolate. It is through these gates that the pilgrims would have entered the city to go to the Temple.

5. *Her babes have fallen captive*. Though it is conventional in prophecies of doom to invoke the suffering of babes (sometimes bracketed with elders),

their mention here has a special bite because now we see that the widowed woman has small children who, to compound her plight, have been taken into captivity.

7. *all her treasures*. The treasures (etymologically, "desired things") probably refers particularly to the precious vessels of the Temple looted by the invaders.

8. *she became despised*. The Hebrew word *nidah*, a root that suggests banishment, is associated with a menstruant woman, considered unclean and not to be touched.

for they have seen her nakedness. This phrase extends the sexual metaphor because it is generally used to refer to taboo sexual relations and their shamefulness. The image is of Zion as a woman flung down, her skirts pulled up, her nakedness exposed.

9. *Her uncleanness is in her skirts*. This palpably focuses the metaphor of the menstruant: the uncleanness is menstrual blood.

for the enemy is boasting. The Hebrew appears to say "for the enemy makes big," but this is an ellipsis for "makes his mouth big," an idiom for boasting.

10. *on all her treasures*. Again, this refers to the Temple vessels, as a reference to "her sanctuary" in the next line makes clear. But the foe laying his hand on her treasures also continues the sexual metaphor, suggesting violation of her body.

they must not come / into assembly with you. The prohibited peoples, using this very phrase, are spelled out in Deuteronomy 23:4–5.

11. *They gave their treasures for food*. These are now private possessions that the starving people barter for food.

to revive their failing lives. "Failing" is merely implied in the Hebrew.

14. *is tight*. The Hebrew verb *nisqad* occurs only here, and its meaning, necessarily conjectural, can only be inferred from context. Some emend it to a recognizable verb, *nishqad,* "is carefully watched," but that meaning scarcely fits this context.

He made my strength stumble. With the yoke twisted round her neck, Zion is unable to walk properly and, in the next verset, cannot stand before her enemies.

16. *My eyes, my eyes are flooded*. As in verse 2, first we have the general report of weeping, then the concrete focus on the eyes. The literal sense of this clause is: "My eye, my eye comes down with water."

17. *Zion spread her hands*. This is a conventional gesture of supplication.
despised. The poet again uses the term *nidah* that refers to a menstruant.

18. *Righteous is the* LORD. In the midst of the anguished complaint over the bitter fate of the devastated nation, the poet justifies the catastrophe as the necessary consequence of Judah's rebellion against God.

19. *I called out to my lovers— / they deceived me*. Here the implied sexual metaphor of verse 2 is clearer. The woman who has consorted with sundry lovers cries out for help from them in her hour of distress, but they turn their backs on her. Once again, the reference is political: Judah's allies, Egypt in particular, failed to provide any assistance during the Babylonian attack.
perished in the city. What the poet has in view is starvation during the siege of Jerusalem.

20. *the sword slays sons*. The literal sense is "the sword bereaves."
inside, very death. Though the Hebrew seems to say "like death," the particle *ka,* which usually means "like," also sometimes has a reinforcing or intensifying sense, and that seems likely here. Some interpreters claim that the noun *mawet* shows its occasional meaning of "plague," but it is by no means necessary to introduce that sense here.

21. *May they be like me*. This line and the preceding one incorporate an implied causal sequence: first the enemies gloat over the destruction of Judah; then the speaker registers the fact that the catastrophe was God's doing and that the foe was only His instrument; finally, the speaker hopes that the same dire fate will overtake Zion's conquerors. This is in fact a recurrent idea in Prophetic literature: that Judah's enemies may be God's "rod" of punishment but will in turn suffer for the terrible harm they have inflicted on Judah. This theme is continued in the next verse.

22. *do to them as You did to me / for all my trespasses*. The poet is constrained to perform a balancing act. It is God Who has inflicted all the suffering on Judah as just punishment for all its offenses. Yet the enemy, killing and raping and burning, has acted viciously and should have to pay the price for his cruelty.

CHAPTER 2

[1]How has the Master beclouded in His wrath א
the daughter of Zion,
has flung from the heavens to the ground
the splendor of Israel,
nor did He recall His footstool
on the day of His wrath.
[2]The Master obliterated, had no mercy, ב
all of Jacob's dwellings,
brought to the ground, profaned,
a kingdom and its nobles.
[3]He hacked down in smoldering wrath ג
the whole horn of Israel,
pulled back His right hand
from before the enemy,
and burned in Jacob like a white-hot fire
consuming all around.
[4]Like an enemy He bent His bow, ד
poised with right hand like a foe
and slayed all precious to the eye
in the tent of Zion's Daughter,

poured forth like fire His fury.
[5]The Master became like an enemy, ה
obliterated Israel,
obliterated all her citadels,
laid in ruins her fortresses,
and made abundant in Judah's Daughter
wailing and woe.
[6]And He stripped bare His shelter like a garden, ו
laid in ruins His appointed place.
The LORD wiped out the memory in Zion
of festival and sabbath,
and spurned in His raging wrath
king and priest.
[7]The Master abandoned His altar, ז
cast aside His sanctuary,
handed over to enemies
the wall of her citadels.
They raised a sound in the house of the LORD
as on a festival day.
[8]The LORD contrived to lay in ruins ח
the wall of Zion's Daughter.
He stretched out the measuring line,
did not pull His hand back from obliteration,
and rampart and wall did mourn,
together they were bleak.
[9]Her gates sunk into the ground, ט

He destroyed and shattered her bolts.
Her king and her nobles were among the nations,
there was no teaching.
Her prophets, too, were not vouchsafed
vision from the LORD.
[10]They sat on the ground, were silent, י
the elders of Zion's Daughter.
They covered their heads with dust,
they girded sackcloth.
They lowered their heads to the ground,
Jerusalem's virgins.
[11]My eyes were worn out with tears, כ
my innards were roiled.
My bile spilled out on the ground
for the breaking of my People's Daughter
when the babe and the suckling grew faint
in the squares of the city.
[12]To their mothers they say, ל
"Where is grain and wine?"
as they faint like the slain
in the squares of the city.
[13]How can I bear witness for you, what can I liken to you, מ
O Daughter of Jerusalem?
What can I compare to you and console you,
O Virgin, Zion's Daughter?

For great as the sea is your breaking.
Who can heal you?
14 Your prophets saw visions for you— נ
empty and insipid,
and did not lay bare your crime
to restore your fortunes
and saw visions for you
of emptiness and delusion.
15 They clapped their hands over you, ס
all passersby.
They hissed and wagged their heads
over Jerusalem's Daughter:
"Is this the city of which was said
'The perfection of beauty,
the joy of all the earth'?"
16 They opened wide their mouths to mock you, פ
all your enemies.
They hissed, they gnashed their teeth,
they said, "We obliterated her.
Why, this day for which we hoped
we have attained it, we have seen it."
17 The LORD has done what He had planned, ע
He carried out His utterance
that He charged in days of old.
He destroyed and had no mercy,
and the enemy rejoiced over you—

He raised the horn of your foes.
[18]Their heart cried out to the Master. צ
O wall of Zion's Daughter,
shed like a brook your tears
day and night.
Give yourself no respite,
let your pupils be not still.
[19]Arise, sing out in the night ק
at the beginning of the watches.
Pour out your heart like water
before the presence of the LORD.
Raise your palms to Him
over the life of your babes
faint with famine
at the corner of every street.
[20]See, O LORD, and look: ר
To whom have you acted thus?
Should women eat their fruit,
the dandled babes?
Should priest and prophet be slain
in the sanctuary of the Master?
[21]They lay on the ground in the streets, ש
lad and elder.
My virgins and my young men
fell by the sword.
You slew on the day of Your wrath,

You slaughtered, had no mercy.
[22]You called in as on festival days ח
my neighbors from all around,
and on the day of the LORD's wrath
there was neither refuge nor survivor.
Those whom I dandled and raised up
my enemy destroyed.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *beclouded*. The unusual Hebrew verb *yaʿiv* is evidently derived from *ʿav,* "cloud."

footstool. Ancient Near Eastern kings are often depicted sitting on their thrones with their feet on footstools. In this case, God's throne would be on high and the footstool would be the Jerusalem Temple.

2. *obliterated*. The verbal stem means "to swallow," here rendered in the intensive conjugation, suggesting total destruction.

3. *the whole horn of Israel*. As elsewhere in biblical poetry, a horn is a symbol of strength. *pulled back His right hand*. That is, God did not exert His power to battle Israel's enemies. *a white-hot fire*. The two nouns joined here in the construct form, *ʾesh* and *lehavah,* are synonyms, a form that indicates intensification, hence "white-hot" in the translation.

4. *Like an enemy He bent His bow*. In the previous verse, God is represented refusing to confront the enemy. Now He becomes an active enemy, attacking Israel.

all precious to the eye. This epithet may refer in particular to the children. In the next verset, "the tent of Zion's daughter" is Jerusalem.

5. *wailing and woe*. The wordplay in the Hebrew is *taʾaniyah waʾaniyah*.

6. *His shelter*. The Hebrew term often refers to a temporary shelter set up in a vineyard or field, but here it is an epithet for the Temple, parallel to "His appointed place." The choice of the term emphasizes its fragility. The destruction of the Temple is elaborated in the next verse.

7. *They raised a sound in the house of the* LORD */ as on a festival day*. The statement is bitterly ironic. On a festival day, the Temple would be filled with the singing and the hubbub of the celebrants. Now it rings with the battle cries of the troops who have come to destroy it.

8. *He stretched out the measuring line*. Ordinarily, the measuring line would be used in construction. Here, the structures of Jerusalem are measured out for unsparing destruction.

9. *there was no teaching*. The first verset indicates the fate of the nobility and the royal line. Since "teaching" is generally the prerogative of the priests, that group is now added by implication.

10. *They sat on the ground, were silent*. In the first and third lines of this verse, we get the act of abjection in the initial verset, then, in a small revelation, the subject of that act in the second verset. Thus we see elders and virgins bracketed in despair, two opposite categories that imply the entire people.

11. *My eyes were worn out with tears*. Here, at the exact midpoint of the poem, the speaker introduces his own anguished reaction to the catastrophe.
My bile spilled out on the ground. The literal sense is "my liver."

12. *To their mothers they say*. Babes and sucklings of course can't speak, so one must assume that both terms refer hyperbolically to vulnerable small children. Though it may also seem odd that little children would ask about wine, they are made to invoke two principal staples, grain and wine.

14. *did not lay bare your crime*. The false prophets promised only good things for the people ("empty and insipid") and failed to castigate them so that they might turn away from their evil actions and avert the destruction.

15. *They clapped their hands over you*. This is not, obviously, applause but a gesture of derision.

16. *They opened wide their mouths to mock you*. Throughout biblical poetry, the pain of defeat is imagined to be made more acute by the gloating of the

triumphant enemies.

17. *He carried out His utterance / that He charged in days of old*. Presumably, what the poet has in mind is the stipulation, especially reiterated in Deuteronomy, that if Israel fails to keep its covenantal obligations, terrible disasters will overtake it.

18. *your pupils*. The Hebrew *bat-ʿeyneikh*—seemingly, "the daughter of your eye"—is almost certainly a shortened form of *bavat-ʿeyneikh,* "your pupil."

19. *sing out*. Although this Hebrew verb is generally used for joyful song, here it is obviously close to "wail."

20. *Should women eat their fruit, / the dandled babes?* This horrific specter of cannibalism under the duress of starvation in the time of siege repeatedly haunts biblical literature, and there are grounds to infer that it sometimes actually happened.

22. *You called in as on festival days / my neighbors from all around*. This line repeats the bitter irony of verse 7, using different language: the neighboring peoples were summoned by God to Jerusalem, as the Israelites had been summoned on festival days, not to celebrate but to kill and to destroy.

Those whom I dandled and raised up. The two verbs used make this a pointed reference to the children.

CHAPTER 3

[1]I am the man who has seen affliction א
by the rod of His wrath.
[2]Me He drove off, led away—
darkness and no light!
[3]Just to me He comes back,
turns His hand against me all day.
[4]He wasted my flesh and my skin. ב
He shattered my bones.
[5]He built up against me, encompassed me
with misery and suffering.
[6]He made me dwell in darkness
like those long dead.
[7]He walled me in, I could not go out, ג
piled heavy bronze fetters upon me.
[8]Even though I cried out and shouted,
he blocked my prayer.
[9]He walled in my way with hewn stone,
He twisted my paths.
[10]A lurking bear He was to me, ד
a lion in hiding.

[11]My ways He led astray and He ripped me apart,
He made me desolate.
[12]He bent His bow
and stood me up as a target for the arrow.
[13]He drove into my innards ה
the shafts of His quiver.
[14]I became a laughingstock to all my people,
the theme of their taunts all day.
[15]He fed me full with bitterness,
gave me wormwood's draught.
[16]He made my teeth crunch down on gravel, ו
crushed me in the dust.
[17]My life abandoned peace,
I forgot what was good.
[18]And I thought, "My strength
and my hope are lost before the LORD."
[19]Recall my affliction and my wandering— ז
wormwood and poison.
[20]My very life does recall
and bends down upon me.
[21]Thus I answer to my heart,
therefore I yet hope:
[22]The LORD's kindness has not ended, ח
for His mercies are not exhausted.
[23]They are renewed every morning.
Great is Your faithfulness.

24 “My portion is the LORD,” I said.
therefore I yet hope for Him.
25 Good is the LORD for those who look to Him, מ
for the person who seeks Him out.
26 Good that he hopes in silence
for rescue from the LORD.
27 Good is it for a man that he bear
a yoke in his youth.
28 Let him sit alone and be silent נ
when He has set it upon him.
29 Let him put his mouth into the dust—
perhaps there still is hope.
30 Let him offer his cheek to him who strikes him,
let him take his fill of disgrace.
31 For the LORD will not abandon forever. ב
32 Though He strikes with sorrow,
He will show mercy in His great kindness.
33 For He does not afflict on purpose
and aggrieve the sons of men
34 to crush beneath His feet ל
all the prisoners of the earth,
35 to sidetrack the case of a man
before the presence of the Most High,
36 to deflect a person in his plea—
the Master would not brook this.
37 Who can speak and it comes about מ

if the Master has not decreed it?
[38]From the Most High's mouth shall not issue
the evil and the good?
[39]Of what shall a living person complain,
a man for his offenses?
[40]Let us seek out and plumb our ways נ
that we come back to the LORD.
[41]Let us lift up our heart on our palms
to God in the heavens.
[42]We trespassed and rebelled—
You did not forgive.
[43]You enveloped us in anger and pursued us, ס
You slew and showed no pity.
[44]You enveloped Yourself in a cloud,
that prayer could not pass through.
[45]Filth and disgust You made us
in the midst of the peoples.
[46]They gaped with their mouths upon us, פ
all our enemies.
[47]Terror and trap they were for us,
shearing and shattering.
[48]Rivers of tears my eye does shed
for the shattering of my people.
[49]My eye streams and is not still, ע
without respite
[50]till the LORD look out

and see from the heavens.
51My eyes have dealt ill to me
for all the daughters of my city.
52They have ensnared me like a bird, צ
my enemies for no cause.
53They have cut off my life in a pit
and cast stones at me.
54Waters whelmed over my head,
I thought, “I am gone.”
55I called Your name, O LORD ק
from the bottommost pit.
56My voice You have heard—
do not shut Your ear to my sigh, to my cry.
57You drew close on the day I called You,
You said, “Do not fear.”
58You pleaded, O Master, my cause, ר
You redeemed my life.
59You have seen, O LORD, the wrong done me.
Grant me justice!
60You have seen all their vindictiveness,
all their schemes against me.
61You have heard their insults, O LORD, ש
all their schemes against me,
62the slurs of my foes and their prattle
against me all day.
63Look on their sitting and their rising—

I am the theme of their taunts.
64Pay them back their deserts, O LORD, ת
according to their own acts.
65Give them anguish of the heart,
Your curse upon them.
66Pursue in wrath and destroy them
from beneath the heavens of the LORD.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *I am the man who has seen affliction*. Unlike the three other acrostic chapters, this alphabetic acrostic has three lines for each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Thus, for the letter *aleph,* it begins with *ʾani,* "I," then has *ʾoti,* "me," and *ʾakh,* "just" (or "only"). This form leads to even more syntactic inversions than is common in biblical Hebrew, with the object of the verb "fronted" at the beginning of many lines, but the poet exploits this pattern for expressive emphasis.

5. *He built up against me*. No object of the verb is supplied in the Hebrew, but by implication what is suggested is the building up of siege-works. In this case, the building material of the siege-works is misery and suffering.

7. *He walled me in*. The imagery here manifestly complements the image of siege-works in verse 5. The speaker (Israel) cannot move both because his way is blocked by large stones (verse 9) and because he is weighed down with heavy fetters.

11. *He ripped me apart*. The unusual Hebrew verb for violent rending picks up the image of bear and lion.

14. *a laughingstock . . . / the theme of their taunts*. The language used to characterize a condition of abjection is formulaic, and it will be repeated with

minor variations later in the poem, but it generates a certain power through the force of reiteration.

16. *He made my teeth crunch down on gravel*. Being fed bitterness and drinking worm-wood are conventional terms for suffering. The crunching down on gravel is a shockingly concrete image (chewing what cannot be chewed after drinking poison) for unspeakable distress.

21. *Thus I answer to my heart*. This indication of inward debate marks a turning point: the speaker's suffering is intolerable, but, in introspection, he recovers his long-standing belief in God's kindness and so is led to hope that the suffering will come to an end.

25. *Good is the* LORD. After the profession of faith in the previous line ("My portion is the LORD"), the speaker goes on as he reaches the letter *tet,* to proclaim God's goodness in three lines that begin with *tov,* "good."

27. *Good is it for a man that he bear / a yoke in his youth*. "Yoke" is a standard epithet for burden or suffering. A person who is forced to undergo suffering in his youth will come out the better for it. By analogy, the speaker, who is not necessarily in his youth, will gain inner strength or depth through the anguish he is now undergoing.

28. *when He has set it upon him*. The Hebrew formulation is somewhat cryptic, but it is best construed as a reference to God in the subject-pronoun and to the yoke in "it," the object of the verb.

29. *Let him put his mouth into the dust*. Abraham ibn Ezra plausibly construes this as a bending down to fill the mouth with dust so that he cannot speak.

31. *For the* LORD *will not abandon forever*. Given the absence of any sort of parallelism, it is difficult to scan this sentence as a poetic line.

33. *He does not afflict on purpose*. The literal sense is "He does not afflict from His heart." This line and the surrounding ones continue the affirmation of God's goodness, despite the catastrophe that He has brought on His people.

35. *to sidetrack the case of a man / before the presence of the Most High*. The phrase that constitutes the second verset here clearly suggests a celestial court. Legal proceedings are thus used as a metaphor to represent the issue of divine justice in history: if one believes that the God of Israel is a just God, one

must cling to the faith that despite the present dire moment, He will render justice to Israel.

36. *would not brook this*. The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "would not [or did not] see this," but this is the most likely meaning.

40. *Let us seek out and plumb our ways*. The assertion continues the concern with divine justice: although our acute suffering seems unreasonable, we need to examine our acts to see if we have done things to bring such a catastrophe upon ourselves. Only then can we be reconciled with God.

41. *Let us lift up our heart on our palms*. Lifting the palms is a gesture of prayer, but this prayer must be heartfelt. The lines that follow are a confession of guilt, justifying God's cruelty to His people.

47. *Terror and trap*. The Hebrew has a more pronounced sound-play, *paḥad wafaḥat*.

shearing and shattering. The Hebrew alliteration is *hashʾeit wehashever*.

51. *dealt ill to me*. The verb *ʿoleleh* means "dealt," but the sense is often negative, hence "ill" in the translation.

53. *They have cut off my life in a pit / and cast stones at me*. What may be represented here is flinging someone into a pit and then stoning him to death.

54. *Waters whelmed over my head*. The image of drowning is common in Psalms for death or near death. It may be triggered associatively by the metaphor of the pit in the preceding line.

56. *My voice You have heard*. The conjugation of the Hebrew verb indicates some sort of past action. Either the speaker is remembering that in the past God heeded his supplications or, in the urgency of the present moment, he imagines God's hearing as an accomplished fact.

61. *all their schemes against me*. It is unclear whether this verbatim repetition of the last half of the previous line is meant for expressive effect (anaphora) or whether a scribe has inadvertently duplicated the phrase where different words stood in the original text.

63. *their sitting and their rising*. The translation follows the Hebrew idiom, which has the general sense of "all their sundry activities."

66. *Pursue in wrath and destroy them*. After the focus on the suffering of the people and the question of divine justice, the poem concludes with an expression of rage against the enemy: a just God will not only restore the fortunes of Israel but also will wreak vengeance upon those who have perpetrated such horrors on His people.

CHAPTER 4

[1]How has gold turned dull, א
    how tarnished finest gold!
The sacred gems spilled out
    at the corner of each street.
[2]Zion's precious children, ב
    worth their weight in gold,
how are they reckoned as earthenware jars,
    the work of the potter's hands!
[3]Even jackals offer the breast, ג
    suckle their own cubs.
My People's Daughter is now ruthless
    as ostriches in the desert.
[4]The suckling's tongue has cleaved ד
    to his palate out of thirst.
Babes ask for bread—
    none offers it to them.
[5]They who ate delicacies ה
    are desolate in the streets.
They who were reared on purple,
    embrace the refuse heaps.

[6]And the crime of my People's Daughter ו
is greater than the offense of Sodom
that was overturned in a moment
and no hands were laid on her.
[7]Her elite were purer than snow, ז
they were whiter than milk.
Their limbs were ruddier than coral,
sapphire was their body.
[8]Their mien is darker than black, ח
they are not recognized in the streets.
Their skin is shriveled on their bones,
become as dry as wood.
[9]Better the slain of the sword ט
than the slain by famine.
For those run through ooze blood
more than the crop of the field.
[10]The hands of compassionate women י
cooked their own children—
they became nourishment for them
in the shattering of my People's Daughter.
[11]The LORD has spent His fury, כ
poured out His smoldering wrath,
and lit a fire in Zion,
and her foundations it consumed.
[12]The kings of the earth did not believe, ל
nor all the world's dwellers,

that a foe and enemy would enter
the gates of Jerusalem
13because of her prophets' offenses, מ
the crimes of her priests,
who shed in her midst
the blood of the just.
14The blind wandered through the streets, נ
became so foul with blood
that none could touch their garb.
15"Turn away, you unclean," they called to them, ס
"Turn away, turn away, do not touch!"
So they flew off, they wandered.
It was said in the nations, "They shall dwell no more."
16The LORD's presence has set them apart, פ
no more shall one look on them.
They showed no favor to the priests,
no mercy to the elders.
17Our eyes still pine ע
for our vain hope
in our hope that we harbored
from a nation that cannot rescue.
18They stalked our steps צ
to block walking through the streets.
Our end drew near, our days played out,
for our end had come.

[19]Swifter were our pursuers ק
    than the eagles of the heavens.
On the mountains they raced after us,
    in the desert ambushed us.
[20]Our very life-breath, the LORD's anointed, ר
    was captured in their traps,
of whom we had said,
    "In his shade we shall live among the nations."
[21]Exult and rejoice, Edom's Daughter, ש
    you who dwell in the land of Uz.
To you as well shall the cup pass on,
    you shall be drunk and naked be.
[22]Your guilt is done with, Zion's Daughter, ת
    He no more shall exile you.
He makes a reckoning of your guilt, Edom's
  Daughter,
    your offenses He exposed.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *How has gold turned dull*. The first two verses of this lament are an interesting instance of literal statement that is then revealed to be a metaphor. Verse 1 appears to present a concrete image of precious materials debased—gold tarnished, gems spilled on the ground. Then, in verse 2, with the representation of Zion's children "worth their weight in gold" (literally, "weighed in gold"), it becomes evident that they are the treasures now

counted as worthless, their lives without value as they are slaughtered in the streets.

3. *My People's Daughter is now ruthless / as ostriches in the desert*. There appears to have been a folk tradition about the cruelty or indifference of ostriches to their young (compare Job 39:13–17). Zion is ruthless toward her young because she can do nothing to save them from starving to death.

5. *They who ate delicacies / are desolate in the streets*. This amounts to an explanation of the metaphor of gems spilled out in verse 1.

6. *no hands were laid on her*. Sodom was devastated by fire and brimstone rained down by God, not by an enemy.

7. *their body*. The Hebrew *gizrah* appears only here, and its precise meaning is not certain. In modern Hebrew, it came to mean "shape" or "form," based on one understanding of this text.

8. *Their skin is shriveled on their bones*. This is a case in which the general pattern of concretization from the first verset to the second takes place instead between two successive lines: first the general blackening of mien or appearance, then the horrific image of shriveled skin (from starvation) dry as wood.

9. *more than the crop of the field*. This phrase has puzzled interpreters. The understanding reflected in this translation is that "those" must refer to the slain by the sword. Run through by the sword, their bodies ooze blood more abundantly than the crop of the field runs with sap (alternately, more than the crop of the field flourishes). The blood flooding from their bodies reflects the swiftness of their death, a fate preferable to the fate of those who die slowly from famine.

10. *The hands of compassionate women / cooked their own children*. This horrifying act of cannibalism provides amplification for the "ruthlessness" of Zion toward her children in verse 3.

12. *The kings of the earth did not believe*. This assertion is based on the fiction that Zion in her glory was universally regarded as secure and impregnable.

13. *her prophets' offenses*. These are obviously the false prophets who failed to correct the people but instead flattered it with illusory predictions.

14. *The blind wandered through the streets*. Because they cannot see where they are going, they repeatedly touch or stumble on the many bleeding corpses that are scattered everywhere.

became so foul with blood / that none could touch their garb. The blind smeared with the blood of the slain become a kind of metonymic displacement of the general catastrophe. In the destruction, spilled blood is hideously ubiquitous. The blind, smeared with it, become an object of disgust, pariahs for all who encounter them.

15. *they flew off*. The meaning of the Hebrew verb is not entirely certain, but the general sense is clearly that the blood-fouled blind become universally rejected fugitives.

16. *The LORD's presence has set them apart*. It is God's decree that these blind should become pariahs.

They showed no favor to the priests, / no mercy to the elders. This is a puzzling statement because it is far from clear how or why the blind should have performed these iniquitous functions. Perhaps the poet simply needed some rationale for the dire fate of the blood-smeared blind and so attributes to them these moral failings.

17. *our vain hope*. This would be the hope of military assistance from supposed allies, such as Egypt, which in the event never materialized.

18. *They*. The reference is to the enemy, not to the just mentioned "nations."

to block walking. The Hebrew infinitive for "walking" is prefixed by a *mem* which here is the so-called *mem* of privation, represented for intelligibility in the translation by "to block."

20. *Our very life-breath*. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "the breath of our nostrils." This is an idealizing epithet for the Davidic king, as though the life, the living and breathing of the nation, were dependent on this leader.

was captured in their traps. In fact, King Zedekiah, attempting to flee the city, was caught by the Babylonians, blinded after being forced to witness the execution of his sons, and afterward taken in exile to Babylonia.

In his shade. As often in biblical usage, "shade" means "protection."

21. *the land of Uz*. Where this region, in which Job is said to live, is located remains uncertain, but here it seems to be part of, or an alternative name for, Edom.

To you as well shall the cup pass on. This is the cup of wrath. The anger against Edom reflects the eager collaboration of the Edomites in the destruction of Jerusalem, as Psalm 137 attests.

CHAPTER 5

[1]Recall, O LORD, what befell us,
look and see our disgrace—
[2]our estate turned over to strangers,
our homes to foreigners.
[3]Orphans we were without fathers,
our mothers like widows.
[4]Our water we drank for silver,
our wood came at a price.
[5]Up to our necks we were pursued,
we wearied, we got no rest.
[6]To Egypt we put out our hand,
to Assyria, to be sated with bread.
[7]Our fathers offended and are no more,
it was we bore the weight of their crimes.
[8]Slaves ruled over us,
none broke us free from their hand.
[9]At the cost of our lives we got bread
because of the desert sword.
[10]Our skin burned hot as a kiln
from the raging fever of famine.

[11]Women they ravaged in Zion,
virgins in Judah's towns.
[12]Nobles were impaled by them,
elders they did not honor.
[13]Young men carried millstones,
and lads stumbled with loads of wood.
[14]Elders were no more in the gates,
nor young men at their songs.
[15]Our heart's joy is no more,
our dance has turned to mourning.
[16]The crown of our head has fallen.
Woe to us, for we have offended.
[17]For this our heart is anguished,
for these our eyes go dark.
[18]On Mount Zion that is desolate
foxes go about.
[19]But You, O LORD, for all time are enthroned,
Your throne for all generations!
[20]Why should You forget us forever,
forsake us for endless years?
[21]Bring us back to You, LORD, that we come back,
renew our days as of old.
[22]For indeed You have rejected us,
You have been grievously furious with us.

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Recall, O LORD*. This last of the five poems of Lamentations differs from the others both because it is not an acrostic and because it has only a single line of poetry, not two, for each of its twenty-two verses. (It does, however, retain the length of twenty-two lines, which is the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet.) Many scholars have taken these differences as evidence for a different poet, but that conclusion, possibly plausible, is not altogether inevitable.

4. *Our water . . . / our wood*. These bare necessities of life, water to drink and firewood for warmth during the winter months, had to be paid for by the distressed Judahites.

5. *Up to our necks we were pursued*. This idiom, which does not occur elsewhere, probably means "sorely pursued," though it might have the implication of being pursued to put the neck in a yoke.

6. *to Assyria*. By the era of destruction in 586 B.C.E., Assyria was no longer in the historical picture, but the poet harks back to a long-standing Israelite history of turning to the adjacent imperial powers for assistance.

7. *the weight of their crimes*. "Weight" is merely implied by the verb.

9. *the desert sword*. The probable reference is to the sundry peoples to the east of the Jordan who preyed on the fleeing refugees from Judah as they struggled to survive.

12. *impaled*. While the Hebrew verb means "hanged," the evidence suggests that the ancient Near Eastern peoples executed their victims and then impaled their bodies on poles rather than using a noose.

13. *loads of wood*. "Loads," implied by the verb "stumbled," is added in the translation for clarification.

14. *Elders were no more in the gates*. The gates were where elders sat to conduct courts of justice.

19. *But You, O LORD, for all time are enthroned*. The poet, having scanned the bleak landscape of destruction, comes to a turning point: God, after all, is still

the eternal king of the world, and so there may be hope that He will restore the people's fortunes.

21. *Bring us back to You, LORD*. This entire verse was later adopted for the traditional Jewish liturgy.

22. *For indeed You have rejected us, / You have been grievously furious with us*. Logically, this verse is connected with the preceding one: we now desperately need You to bring us back to You, for in the present terrible moment we are clearly the object of Your fury. Jewish tradition, however, reflects a sense that this is too grim a note on which to end the book, so when Lamentations is publicly chanted on the fast of the Ninth of Av, verse 21, "Bring us back to You . . .," is repeated to conclude the reading.

QOHELET (Ecclesiastes)

Introduction

Qohelet is in some ways the most peculiar book of the Hebrew Bible. The peculiarity starts with its name. The long tradition of translation into many languages, beginning with the ancient Greek version, uses some form of "Ecclesiastes" for the title. The Septuagint translators chose that title because it means "the one who assembles," and the Hebrew root *q-h-l* does mean "to assemble." Some have claimed that what it refers to is the assembling of sayings, but this Hebrew verb always takes people, not words or things, as its object, so it may reflect the assembling of audiences or disciples for these discourses. The grammatical form of the word is also odd because one would expect *maqhil* (causative), not *qohelet*, and, in any case, *qohel* (masculine), not *qohelet* (ostensibly feminine). There are at least two instances in Late Biblical Hebrew of the *-et* ending to indicate—apparently—the term for a

vocation, and that may be the use of the form here, though some doubt still remains. So, we are not entirely sure what Qohelet means, and whether it is a title (at one point in our text, it is preceded by the definite article) or perhaps a proper name. All this uncertainty, and possibly also the ponderousness of "Ecclesiastes," has led most modern scholars to use the untranslated Hebrew name, a practice I follow here.

In the opening verse, Qohelet is called "son of David," but that might mean only that he comes from the Davidic line. Jewish and Christian tradition famously identified him as Solomon because of this epithet, because of the repeated stress on his search for wisdom, and because of the autobiographical narrative in chapter 2 in which he speaks of having built many houses and created elaborate gardens and amassed wealth and items of luxury. It is best to think of Qohelet as the literary persona of a radical philosopher articulating, in an evocative rhythmic prose that occasionally scans as poetry, a powerful dissent from the mainline Wisdom outlook that is the background of his thought. It has long been recognized that this is one of the later books of the Hebrew Bible. Some scholars have been tempted to see in it an influence of Greek philosophy, but C. L. Seow argues convincingly on linguistic grounds that the text was

probably written a few decades before the conquest of Palestine by Alexander the Great in 333 B.C.E. There are two Persian loanwords and certain turns of language that belong to the late Persian period but no Greek loanwords. (In the Hellenistic period, a flood of Greek words would enter the Hebrew language.) In light of the fact that Aramaic had begun to take over as the vernacular as early as the later sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E., there are also, not surprisingly, turns of speech and terms that show an influence of Aramaic, and there are also some lexical and syntactic features that anticipate rabbinic Hebrew. As to any conceivable Greek background, we should keep in mind that even before Alexander's conquest, there were commercial and cultural connections between Greece and the Levant, so the possibility cannot be excluded that Qohelet indirectly picked up some motifs of Greek thought. On the whole, however, his unblinking, provocative reflections on the ephemerality of life, the flimsiness of human value, and the ineluctable fate of death read like the work of a stubborn and prickly original—one who in all likelihood wrote in the early or middle decades of the fourth century B.C.E. His frequent invocation of terms drawn from bookkeeping reflect the mercantile

economy of the period. His class identity is uncertain, though his politics are conservative.

The way he wrote in some respects resembles traditional Wisdom literature but in others sharply departs from it. The stringing together of moral maxims in concise symmetrical or antithetical formulations, sometimes with rather tenuous connections between one maxim and the next, is clearly reminiscent of the Book of Proverbs. Often, however, Qohelet's maxims are subversive in content, or seem to be citations of traditional maxims that are challenged or undermined by the new context in which they are set. In a few passages, Qohelet offers entirely pragmatic counsel of a sort one might expect to find in Proverbs. For the most part, however, his observations are properly philosophic, inviting us to contemplate the cyclical nature of reality and of human experience, the fleeting duration of all that we cherish, the brevity of life, and the inexorability of death, which levels all things. Of the propositions he insists on most urgently, only the notions of life's brevity and of mortality accord with the consensus of biblical belief that had developed by the fourth century B.C.E. The central enigma, then, of the Book of Qohelet is how this text of radical dissent, in which time, history, politics, and human nature are seen in such a bleak light, became

part of the canon. Perhaps the ostensible ascription to Solomon shoehorned the book into the canon, but that is hard to judge.

The peculiarity of Qohelet's philosophic stance is compounded by the peculiarity of his literary vehicle: he is a writer who works out philosophic thought through poetic prose. He has a finely developed sense of expressive rhythm; he makes central use of refrains and other devices of repetition, the stylistic repetition serving as a correlative for the cycle of repetition that in his view characterizes the underlying structure of reality. He often seems to think in metaphors, or, at least, metaphors are used where writers in a different tradition would use abstractions, and the range of overlapping meanings suggested by the concrete image is repeatedly brought into play. By and large, the various modern translations have not done much justice to Qohelet's literary style, which is inextricably linked with the force and conceptual subtlety of his thought. The King James Version is still the most adequate English rendering of Qohelet's style—in many respects, it is one of the best performances of the 1611 translators—though it does not always provide an apt equivalent for his verbal concision and rhythmic compactness, and it is not very reliable in the

many places where the Hebrew wording is obscure or perhaps defective.

Qohelet's famous first words, which he will make a much repeated refrain and with which he will conclude the book proper, before the epilogue, are a prime instance of a metaphor serving the function of an abstraction. The King James Version rendered the initial words and all their recurrences as "vanity," "vanity of vanities." The seventeenth-century translators obviously had the Latin version in mind, with "vanity" suggesting a lack of value, not self-admiration. This choice has actually been preserved, a little surprisingly, in one recent scholarly translation, C. L. Seow's Anchor Bible Ecclesiastes. At least a couple of other modern translations have opted for "futility," and Michael V. Fox, in his admirable analysis accompanied by a translation of the text, insists on "absurdity." The problem is that all of these English equivalents are more or less right, and abstractions being what they are, each one has the effect of excluding the others and thus limiting the scope of the Hebrew metaphor. The Hebrew *hevel* probably indicates the flimsy vapor that is exhaled in breathing, invisible except on a cold winter day and in any case immediately dissipating in the air. It is the opposite of *ruaḥ*, "life-breath," which is the animating

force in a living creature, because it is the waste product of breathing. If, then, one wanted to line up the abstractions implied by *hevel*, it would include not only futility, absurdity, and vanity but at least insubstantiality, ephemerality, and elusiveness as well. Because of these considerations, this translation has chosen to reproduce the concrete image of the Hebrew, rendering *hevel* as "mere breath" ("breath" alone doesn't quite work in English) and representing the Hebrew superlative form *havel havalim* as "merest breath." Altogether, Qohelet is preoccupied with entities that exhibit movement but can't be seen or grasped. Ruaḥ in its other sense of "wind" plays a prominent role in the opening lines of the book, and the metaphor for futility and pointless effort that is often paired with "mere breath" is "herding the wind," *reʿut ruaḥ*. (The King James Version seriously misrepresents this, introducing still another abstraction, as "vexation of spirit.") Even Qohelet's philosophic quest is repeatedly represented in the Hebrew in concrete, virtually physical terms: he turns around, turns back, like a man in restless pursuit of some maddeningly elusive quarry, trying to find true wisdom. Such wisdom would be the discovery of whether there is any point in human life. If there is not, as Qohelet seems inclined to conclude, he enjoins

us to make the most of what we have while we have it —to enjoy in measured fashion good food and wine and a woman one loves, if only the unpredictable course of circumstances makes a person lucky enough to possess these things.

The rather slippery phrase I have just used, "seems inclined to conclude," is in fact in keeping with the to-and-fro movement of Qohelet's philosophic discourse. He is a serious thinker who is constantly in motion—another way in which the language of turning and turning back is appropriate to his enterprise. He has an interest in weighing antithetical propositions and moving dialectally among them. Absolute consistency is not his purpose, and so Michael Fox's title, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, is perfectly apt. God appears with some frequency in his reflections on life, and while it is the same term, *ʾelohim*, used by the Elohist as well as by the Priestly writer at the beginning of Genesis (Qohelet never uses YHWH), this is clearly not the same deity as the one imagined in the dominant currents of biblical theology. The cosmic vista of the prose-poem with which the book begins (1:2–10) makes no mention of God. When the term *ʾelohim* is finally introduced in 1:13, the context is odd and unsettling: "all that is done under the sun—it is an evil business that God gave to the sons of man to busy

themselves with." This is surely a far cry from the God of Genesis 1 Who commands humankind, as the climactic product of the process of creation, to be fruitful and multiply and to hold sway over all things. The God of the earlier books of the Bible can sometimes be irascible or perhaps even capricious, but He means humanity to fulfill a grand destiny, and it is human dereliction that triggers His wrath and brings down His punishment. Qohelet, who does not altogether reject antecedent tradition, occasionally thinks that God will bring men to judgment, though it is unclear how or when. (Surely not in any afterlife, which is polemically excluded again and again by Qohelet.) Yet here God seems almost perverse in keeping the sons of man busy with an evil business—evil, as the larger context makes clear, not in a moral sense but because it is miserable and pointless, herding the wind. Qohelet has enough of a connection with tradition that he never absolutely denies the idea of a personal god, but his *'elohim* often seems to be a stand-in for the cosmic powers-that-be, for fate or the overarching dynamic of reality that is beyond human control. (It is worth noting that even in earlier texts *'elohim* sometimes has this sense, as in Abraham's words to Abimelech in Genesis 20:13, "when the gods [*'elohim*, here exceptionally treated grammatically as a

plural] made me a wanderer," or when Joseph's brothers, scarcely inclined to pious locutions, discover the silver in their packs and say "What is this that God has done to us?" [Genesis 42:28].) On this issue as on others, Qohelet's position may fluctuate. He is not at all impelled to reject theism, but his sense of life is often readily translatable into posttheistic terms: the world is a theater of continuing frustration and illusion; that is the way that God/fate/the intrinsic constitution of reality has determined that it should be.

Do Qohelet's discourses have a formal structure? Much interpretive ingenuity has been exerted to show that they do. The more elaborate the proposed structure, the less plausible it appears. The movement of Qohelet's thought is freewheeling and associative. It includes segments of maxims and perceptions that clearly belong together thematically and sometimes in terms of literary formulation (such as the sequences of "better *x* than *y*" sayings). Beyond that, it is hard to find architectonic design in the book; on the contrary, the relative looseness of form admirably suits the mobility of Qohelet's thought. There are, however, strongly articulated framing units at the beginning and the end. The book begins with the great prose-poem about the cyclical futility of all things. This unit is immediately followed by the quasinarrative

autobiographical section that runs through to the end of chapter 2, in which Qohelet, in his persona as king of Jerusalem and hence a man endowed with the power and resources to explore all the possibilities of the human condition, steps forward and speaks about his quest from center stage. The autobiographical narrative establishes the context for much that follows, since Qohelet the philosophic searcher and the explorer of experience makes repeated appearances in the pronouncements on life that he proposes. Then the book proper ends with the haunting poem on mortality that is a kind of matching end piece to the prose-poem at the beginning. The vision of futility begins his book, and the vision of decay and death ends it. All along, Qohelet has thought much about the inescapability of death because it is the prime instance of how everything is mere breath: we dream and hope and lust and love, grasp for power and prestige, but the end that awaits everyone is the ineluctable condition of moldering in the grave. Thus the same words that initiated the prose-poem at the beginning aptly conclude the poem at the end: “Merest breath, said Qohelet. All is mere breath.”

How, then, did such a book come to be included in the canon? The process of inclusion, it should be said, was not long in coming, for fragments of Qohelet

found at Qumran indicate that it was already part of the library of Scripture there only a century or two after its composition. Some interpreters attribute its embrace by the shapers of the canon to the pious tilt it is given in the epilogue (12:9–14). It has long been the scholarly consensus that the epilogue is the addition of an editor seeking to domesticate Qohelet's doctrinal wildness, though a couple of recent commentators have tried to argue—unpersuasively, in my view—that the epilogue is consistent with the body of the book and may be the work of the same writer. In any case, it is surely attributing far too much naïveté to the ancient readers to imagine that a few dozen words of piety at the end would deflect them from seeing the subversive skepticism emphatically reiterated throughout the text. We are unlikely ever to have a confident explanation of why Qohelet—or, for that matter, Job or Esther or the Song of Songs—entered the canon, but its inclusion suggests that the canon may not have been determined solely on the grounds of ideological and theological conformity. In regard to its literary power and the uncompromising rigor of its observation of the human condition, this was clearly one of the most original texts produced in the biblical period, early or late. There must have been many Hebrew readers in the last two and a half centuries before the Common Era and

on into the Common Era who were not willing to let go of Qohelet, who felt that it somehow belonged in the anthology of texts—not quite yet a canon—that constituted the literary legacy of the nation. They may well have felt this attachment to Qohelet despite the fact that it challenged long-cherished notions about human destiny and the nature of reality. It is even possible that they embraced the book precisely because of the challenges it posed, for there was not a great deal of doctrinal consistency in the whole body of incipiently canonical texts, and the so-called biblical worldview, which is really a construct of later interpreters, was at this early moment far from a settled issue. The pious epilogue should probably be seen not as a way of transforming the audience's understanding of the text but rather as a no more than hopeful rhetorical gesture, an effort to conclude the book with a seal of official approval unlikely to fool anyone about its actual contents. What continues to engage the moral and philosophic imagination, as it surely must have done in Late Antiquity, is the writer who unblinkingly saw all human enterprise as herding the wind, who envisaged the same grim fate for rich and poor, for the righteous and the wicked, and who was led to question whether wisdom itself in the end had any advantage over foolishness.

CHAPTER 1

[1]The words of Qohelet son of David, king in Jerusalem.

[2]Merest breath, said Qohelet, merest breath. All is mere breath.
[3]What gain is there for man in all his toil that he toils under the sun.
[4]A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth endures forever.
[5]The sun rises and the sun sets, and to its place it glides, there it rises.
[6]It goes to the south and swings round to the north, round and round goes the wind, and on its rounds the wind returns.

[7]All the rivers go to the sea, and the sea is not full.
To the place that the rivers go, there they return to go.
[8]All things are weary. A man cannot speak. The eye is not sated with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

[9]That which was is that which will be, and that which
was done is that which will be done, and there is
nothing new under the sun.
[10]There is a thing of which one would say, “See this, it
is new.” It already has been in the eons that were
before us. [11]There is no remembrance of the first
things nor of the last things that will be. They will
have no remembrance with those who will be in the
latter time.

[12]I, Qohelet, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.
[13]And I set my heart to inquire and seek through
wisdom of all that is done under the sun—it is an evil
business that God gave to the sons of man to busy
themselves with.

[14]I have seen all the deeds that are done under the sun,
and, look, all is mere breath, and herding the wind.
[15]The crooked cannot turn straight nor can the lack be
made good. [16]I spoke to my heart, saying: As for me,
look, I increased and added wisdom beyond all who
were before me over Jerusalem, and my heart has seen
much wisdom and knowledge. [17]And I set my heart to
know wisdom and to know revelry and folly, for this,

too, is herding the wind. [18]For in much wisdom is much worry, and he who adds wisdom adds pain.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The words of Qohelet son of David*. This editorial superscription, together with the account in the second half of the chapter of Qohelet's amassing wisdom, is the basis for the traditional ascribing of authorship to Solomon, though Solomon's name is never mentioned in the book. Virtually all scholarly assessments date the text nearly six centuries after Solomon.

Qohelet. There are two puzzles in this name. While it appears to derive from the Hebrew root *q-h-l*, which means "to assemble," one would expect it to be in the *hiphʿil* conjugation, which usually has a causative and transitive sense, rather than in the *qal* conjugation (that is, *maqhil* rather than *qohel*). Second, the name has a feminine verbal ending (Qohelet rather than Qohel), although this is generally explained, on the basis of two such occurrences elsewhere in the biblical corpus, as a suffix indicating vocation. It could be a title rather than a name, and in 7:27 it actually appears with a definite article (although not in this translation). If one follows the semantics of the Hebrew conjugations—where, for example, *shokhev* in the *qal* conjugation means "he who lies down," whereas *mashkiv* in the *hiphʿil* means "he causes to lie down"—*qohelet* could even mean "he who is part of the assembly" rather than "the assembler." In either case, the idea of a group of people listening to philosophic discourse seems to be implied. Given the uncertainty about the name, and whether it is a name or a title, it seems wise to preserve the term in the Hebrew, as scholars generally now do.

2. *merest breath*. The form of the Hebrew, *havel havalim*, is a way of indicating a superlative or an extreme case. Rendering this phrase as an abstraction (King James Version, "vanity of vanities," or Michael Fox's more philosophically subtle "absurdity of absurdities") is inadvisable, for the writer uses concrete metaphors to indicate general concepts, constantly exploiting the emotional impact of the concrete image and its potential to suggest

several related ideas. *Hevel*, "breath" or "vapor," is something utterly insubstantial and transient, and in this book suggests futility, ephemerality, and also, as Fox argues, the absurdity of existence.

All is mere breath. The constant use of repetition, from this initial verse onward, gives the rhythmic prose of Qohelet an incantatory power and at the same time registers one of its principal themes: that it is the very nature of reality for all things constantly to repeat themselves.

5. *The sun rises and the sun sets*. The cyclical movement of day and night is taken as prime evidence in nature of the repetitive cyclical character of reality. This notion is a radical challenge to the conception of time and sequence inscribed in Genesis and elsewhere in the Bible, where things are imagined to progress meaningfully (as in the seven days of creation) toward a fulfillment. The next two verses, invoking the cyclical motion of the wind and the rivers, continue this vision of pointless movement round and round.

glides. The Hebrew *shoʾef* usually means "pants," but this translation follows the Targum, Rashi, and many modern commentators in relating it to *shuf*, "to pass through," "to move," "to glide."

7. *there they return to go*. The final "to go," which has been omitted in most translations from 1611 onward, of course sounds a little odd (as does the Hebrew), but it is part of the essential stylistic pattern of verbal repetition that mirrors the concept of repetition in nature.

11. *There is no remembrance*. This is a radical and deeply disturbing idea for the Hebrew imagination, which, on the evidence of many earlier texts, sets such great store in leaving a remembrance, and envisages the wiping out of remembrance as an ultimate curse.

12. *I, Qohelet*. The Hebrew syntax equally allows one to construe this sentence as: "I am Qohelet. I was king over Jerusalem." These words, after the thematic-metaphoric prologue of verses 2–11, inaugurate a first-person account of Qohelet's frustrating quest for knowledge that continues until 2:20.

13. *I set my heart*. In biblical physiology, the heart is the organ of understanding, though sometimes it is also associated with feeling.

14. *herding the wind*. The verbal root of the first Hebrew word here generally means to tend a flock (and in the Song of Songs, to graze), so the common modern translation, "pursuit of the wind," is an interpretive liberty. Herding

the wind, which of course cannot be herded (it goes round and round), is an effective enough image of futile activity, coordinated with "mere breath."

15. *nor can the lack be made good*. The verb *lehimanot* appears to mean "be counted." Many emend it to *lehimalot*, "be filled." In any case, this verse adds to the concept of repetition the notion that events are irreversible and mishaps irreparable.

16. *all who were before me over Jerusalem*. It is not strictly necessary to make this, as some commentators have done, a reference to the pre-Israelite kings of Jerusalem because Qohelet is not explicitly identified as Solomon, and even the designation "son of David" could easily indicate a member of the Davidic line rather than David's actual son.

17. *to know wisdom and to know revelry and folly*. Qohelet's project is a comprehensive exploration of experience, which would include reflection on the sayings of the wise, observation of the broad variety of events, and also experimentation in the realm of the senses, with intoxicants and perhaps even orgies. The common rendering of *holelut* as "madness" (for which in biblical Hebrew, as in the modern language, the primary term would be *shigaʿon*) confuses this idea; *holelut* suggests a wild and unruly indulgence of the senses in which lucidity is lost—hence "revelry."

18. *For in much wisdom is much worry*. Here this radical Wisdom text challenges the basic premise of Wisdom literature—that devotion to wisdom is the one true road to the good, fulfilled life.

CHAPTER 2

[1]I said in my heart, “Come, now, let me pour out wine
in merriment and enjoy good things.” And, look, this,
too, is mere breath. [2]To mirth I said, “Wild reveling,”
and to merriment, “What does it do?” [3]I sought in my
heart to ply my body with wine, while my heart acted
with wisdom, not grasping folly, until I might see what
is good for the sons of man that they should do under
the heavens in the number of the days of their lives. [4]I
made me great works. I built myself houses, I planted
for myself vineyards. [5]I made for myself gardens and
orchards and planted in them every kind of fruit tree.
[6]I made for myself pools of water from which to water
a wood growing trees. [7]I bought male slaves and
slavegirls, and had home-born slaves, too. Also many
herds of cattle and sheep did I have, more than all who
were before me in Jerusalem. [8]I gathered for myself
both silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and
provinces. I got myself men and women singers and
the pleasures of humankind, and many a concubine.
[9]And I grew great and added more than all who were

before me in Jerusalem. Still my wisdom stayed with
me. [10]And all that my eyes sought I did not withhold
from them, nor did I deny my heart any merriment—
for my heart was merry—from all my toil, and this
was my share from all my toil. [11]And I turned about in
all my deeds that my hands had done and in the toil
that I had toiled to do, and, look, all was mere breath
and herding the wind, and there was no gain under the
sun. [12]And I turned to see wisdom and revelry and
folly, for what is the man [13]who comes after the king,
that which he has already done? And I saw that
wisdom surpasses folly as light surpasses darkness.
[14]The wise man has eyes in his head, and the fool goes
in darkness. Yet I, too, knew that a single fate befalls
them all. [15]And I said in my heart, “Like the fate of the
fool, it will befall me, too, and so why have I become
so wise?” And I said in my heart that this, too, is mere
breath. [16]For there is no remembrance of the wise, as
with the fool, forever. Since in the days to come, all
will be forgotten. Yes, the wise dies like the fool!
[17]And I hated life, for all that was done under the sun
was evil to me, for all is mere breath and herding the
wind. [18]And I hated all things got from my toil that I
had toiled under the sun, that I should leave it to the
man who will come after me. [19]And who knows
whether he will be wise or a fool, and he will have

power over all that was got from my toil for which I toiled and grew wise under the sun. This, too, is mere breath. [20]And I turned round to make my heart despair over all the toil that I had toiled under the sun. [21]For there is a man whose toil is in wisdom and knowledge and skill, and to a man who did not toil for it he will give away his share. This, too, is mere breath and a grievous evil. [22]For what does a man have from all his toil and from his heart's care that he toils under the sun? [23]For all his days are pain, and worry is his business. At night, as well, his heart does not rest. This, too, is mere breath. [24]There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and sate himself with good things through his toil. This, too, have I seen, for it is from God's hand. [25]For who will eat and who will feel, save me? [26]For to the man who seems good before Him He has given wisdom and knowledge and merriment, but to the offender He has given the business of amassing and taking in to give to him who seems good before God. This, too, is mere breath and herding the wind.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *To mirth I said*. The purely hedonistic probe of Qohelet's experiment with experience fails because the wildness of orgiastic release proves to be no more than a transient excitation, leading to nothing and providing no lasting satisfaction.

3. *not grasping folly*. The Masoretic Text reads "grasping folly" (*leʾehoz besikhlut*), but this translation adopts a frequently proposed emendation, assuming that a scribe inadvertently dropped "not" (*loʾ*) in copying because it had the same two letters, *lamed* and *aleph*, that begin the next word, *leʾehoz*. The idea is that Qohelet gave himself over to drinking and revelry yet clung to his perspective of wisdom because his purpose in indulging the senses was to see if, indeed, that was part of "what is good for the sons of man that they should do under the heavens."

4. *I made me great works*. The fiction of Qohelet as king over Jerusalem is important for the philosophic argument because, as this passage makes clear, he is thus endowed with the means to explore everything that wealth can give a man—grand houses, splendid gardens, slaves, resident entertainers, a harem of lovely women. This fiction, of course, strongly invokes the story of Solomon.

9. *added*. The literal translation of this verb underscores the vocabulary of accumulation and bookkeeping that Qohelet repeatedly employs—"add" (*hosif*) and "gain" (*yitron*, the surplus that shows on the bottom line of the account).

Still my wisdom stayed with me. This declaration is of a piece with "while my heart acted with wisdom, not grasping folly" in verse 3

11. *And I turned*. The repeated use of this verb points up Qohelet's project of restless experimentation: he turns in one direction and then another, but of course all proves to be mere breath and herding the wind.

12. *for what is the man who comes after the king, that which he has already done*. This clause is somewhat obscure. The received text reads "they have already done," but many different manuscript versions show the singular, which makes more sense. The most likely meaning is: in the cyclical futility of the generations (an idea spelled out in chapter 1), the man who comes after me, King Qohelet, can do no more than replicate what I have already done.

13. *wisdom surpasses folly as light surpasses darkness*. Qohelet's view of wisdom is paradoxical, or dialectic. He recognizes that wisdom offers no way out of life's futility and no escape from the inexorable fate of death that awaits the wise like the fool, but wisdom nevertheless provides what one might describe as a privilege of clarified consciousness: it is far better to live disabused of all illusion, like Qohelet himself, than to live a deluded life, like the fool.

14. *The wise man has eyes in his head, and the fool goes in darkness*. This statement is clearly cast in the form of a proverb, akin to what one finds in the Book of Proverbs. It cuts two ways: on the one hand, it continues the idea expressed in "wisdom surpasses folly . . ." (verse 13); on the other hand, it may well be a traditional proverb that, as Robert Gordis has argued, Qohelet means to subject to critique. What follows in the second half of this verse and in the next two verses certainly looks like a challenge to this bit of proverbial wisdom.

16. *Since in the days to come, all will be forgotten*. A double-edged sword undercuts the efficacy of wisdom—the fact that the wise man will be swallowed up by death like the most benighted fool, and that after he is gone, all remembrance of him will vanish.

18. *all things got from my toil*. Although the Hebrew says only "all my toil" (*ʿamali*), the term *ʿamal* in this book alternately means the activity of toiling and that which is gained through toil.

22. *his heart's care*. The term *raʿyon,* attached here to "heart," does not occur in earlier biblical Hebrew. It is probably cognate with *reʿut*, the word used in "herding the wind," and hence is rendered in this translation as "care" because it may also derive from the activity in which a shepherd looks after or cares for his flock. Extrapolating from the use in Qohelet, later Hebrew adopts the term to mean "idea."

24. *There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and sate himself with good things*. Though this affirmation may look like a contradiction (for example, of verse 1), it is another expression of Qohelet's dialectic thinking. Immersion in sensual pleasure, especially in its extreme forms, may bring no lasting good, but in the futility of our ephemeral lives, the simple pleasures of the senses here and now are all we have, and we might as well take advantage of them.

sate himself. At first blush, the Hebrew verb *herʾah* might seem to mean "to show," deriving from the root *r-ʾ-h*, which indicates sight, but in Qohelet it is not infrequently a variant form of the root *r-w-h*, meaning "to slake" or "to sate oneself." Similarly, the verb *reʾeh* near the end of verse 1 probably does not mean "see" but "sate oneself," or "enjoy."

for it is from God's hand. The introduction of God may be a little surprising, but Qohelet, though a skeptical empiricist, is no atheist. God—always the general term *ʾelohim* and never YHWH—is a given for him, but this God makes decisions about whom to favor and whom to reject in inscrutable ways, and He cannot be counted on to neatly reward the wise and the righteous, as other biblical writers assume.

25. *For who will eat and who will feel, save me?* This is the bedrock of Qohelet's existential realism. All I know is the immediacy of my own bodily experience. God has given this to me to enjoy, if I can; others, as the next verse makes clear, may not be so lucky.

26. *the offender*. As elsewhere in biblical literature, *ḥoteʾ* does not mean "sinner," as it is conventionally translated, but rather one who gives offense, who misses the mark. How and why he offends is left unstated, and it may in fact be a mystery to Qohelet.

This, too, is mere breath and herding the wind. The appearance of this melancholy refrain at the end of this verse and of this whole sequence may be dictated in context by the following logic: in this transient life, he who pleases God may enjoy the worldly goods passed on to him from the unlucky man who offends God, but under the aspect of eternity, even that difference amounts to little, for in the end death serves as the great equalizer.

CHAPTER 3

[1]Everything has a season, and a time for every matter
under the heavens.

[2]A time to be born and a time to die.
A time to plant and a time to uproot what is
planted.
[3]A time to kill and a time to heal.
A time to rip down and a time to build.
[4]A time to weep and a time to laugh.
A time to mourn and a time to dance.
[5]A time to fling stones and a time to gather stones
in.
A time to embrace and a time to pull back from
embracing.
[6]A time to seek and a time to lose.
A time to keep and a time to fling away.
[7]A time to tear and a time to sew.
A time to keep silent and a time to speak.
[8]A time to love and a time to hate.

A time for war and a time for peace.
[9]What gain is there for him who does in what he toils?

[10]I have seen the business that God has given to the sons of man with which to busy themselves.
[11]Everything He has done aptly in its time. Eternity, too, He has put in their heart, without man's grasping at all what it is God has done from beginning to end.
[12]I know that there is nothing good in it but to be merry and to partake of good things in his life. [13]And also every man who eats and drinks and enjoys good things in all his toil—this is a gift from God. [14]I know that whatever God does will be forever. One cannot add to it and one cannot take away from it. And God has acted also that they should fear Him. [15]That which was already has been, and what is to be already has been, and God seeks out the pursued. [16]And further did I see under the sun: the place of judgment—wickedness there, and the place of justice—the wicked there. [17]I said in my heart: The just man and the wicked God will judge, for there is a time for every matter, and every deed He assesses. [18]I said in my heart in regard to the sons of man, God has sifted them out to show them they are but beasts. [19]For the

fate of the sons of man and the fate of the beast is a single fate. As one dies so dies the other, and all have a single spirit, and man's advantage over the beast is naught, for everything is mere breath. [20]Everything goes to a single place. Everything was from the dust, and everything goes back to the dust. [21]Who knows whether man's spirit goes upward and the beast's spirit goes down to the earth? [22]And I saw that nothing is better than that man should rejoice in his works, for that is his share, for who can bring him to see what will be after him?

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *A time to be born and a time to die*. The seven verses that begin here are the first instance of formal poetry in Qohelet. There are seven paired lines, with the number seven pointedly chosen because of its traditional association with the sacred. Each half line is very short, containing only two accented syllables (with the exception of the end of verse 2, where *natuaʿ*, "what is planted," is not strictly necessary and might be an explanatory gloss added by a scribe). Any English version would do well to emulate the King James Version in reproducing as much as feasible the compactness of the Hebrew. The parallelism between the halflines is of course antithetical.

born . . . die / . . . plant . . . uproot. There is a semantic pairing in each pair of lines: here, life and death for humans; planting and uprooting in the vegetable kingdom; then killing and healing, wrecking and building; weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing; and so forth.

5. *A time to fling stones*. In this instance, at least on the surface, there does not seem to be any semantic pairing between this first line and the second line, which speaks of embracing and avoiding embraces. This ostensible divergence from the overall pattern gives some credence to the proposal by Gordis that the flinging and gathering of stones are a metaphor for ejaculation and refraining from ejaculation. Gordis cites the Midrash Qohelet Rabba on this verse, which reads it in this sexual sense.

6. *to lose*. The context suggests that the sense of the verb here, as an antithesis to "seek," is "to give up for lost."

7. *to tear . . . to sew*. These may refer to acts of mourning and emergence from mourning, which would then be matched by the silence and speech of the next half line.

9. *What gain is there*. This verse, taken together with what follows, may spell out the philosophic point of the catalogue of times. The contradictory events of human life, both good and bad, are beyond man's control. At one moment he will be called upon to laugh, at another, to weep, but he can scarcely hope to derive any gain from this alternating pattern not determined by him

11. *Eternity, too, He has put in their heart*. The Hebrew *ʿolam* means "eternity" in the biblical language, though some interpreters argue that here it has the sense of "world" that it carries in rabbinic Hebrew—that is, God has planted in the human heart the love of the world. It seems more likely that the intended meaning is: man is conscious of the idea of eternity (Qohelet as philosopher surely is), but that is the source of further frustration, for he is incapable of grasping "what it is God has done from beginning to end." Other interpreters reverse the second and third consonants of *ʿolam* to yield *ʿamal*, "toil."

12. *in it*. The Hebrew says "in them." The unclear antecedent might be "life" (which is a plural in Hebrew).

13. *this is a gift from God*. Qohelet repeatedly urges us to enjoy the pleasures of life here and now, but he is perfectly aware that it is a matter of luck, or God's unfathomable determination, whether we are given the time and means to enjoy the good things of life, or whether we are condemned to die, to uproot, to rip down, to mourn.

14. *that they should fear Him*. The absolute determination of events, beyond all human control, is understood as a reason for man to fear the deity that controls all things.

15. *God seeks out the pursued*. This is what the Hebrew literally says, but no one has been able to make good sense of it. If "the pursued" is equivalent in meaning to "him who is sought," the meaning of the clause might be coordinate with "what is to be already has been," but the verse remains doubtful.

17. *and every deed He assesses*. The translation understands *sham* not as the adverb "there" but as a verb (infinitive *shum*) common in rabbinic Hebrew.

18. *God has sifted them out to show them*. This string of words is not intelligible in the Hebrew and continues the patch of scribal scrambling that spreads over verses 15–18. The translation derives "to show" (*lar'ot*) by revocalizing the Masoretic *liro't* ("to see"), but the meaning of the clause is still uncertain.

19. *man's advantage over the beast is naught*. This is another instance in which Qohelet's unblinking view rejects a fundamental premise of the biblical consensus. In the Creation story, the human creature is brought into the world after the beasts and is enjoined to hold sway over all other living creatures. Here, man and beast are seen to share the same fate of mortality, and there is no qualitative difference between them.

21. *Who knows whether man's spirit goes upward*. Qohelet may be referring to a new doctrine that was beginning to circulate in the Late Biblical period that imagines the ascent of the soul after death. If so, he is entirely skeptical about the idea, suspecting that the spirit of man and beast alike descends into the earth (the Hebrew can also mean "underworld").

22. *for who can bring him to see what will be after him?* The "after" of the question, following the logic of the previous verse, could refer to the fate of the departed spirit after death. Perhaps more simply, and in keeping with such previous reflections as the one in 1:11, the reference could be to the course of events after one's death—that is, one can never know what will happen after one is gone, so the only sensible thing to do is to take advantage of the pleasures that present themselves in life while one possesses it.

CHAPTER 4

[1]And I went back and saw all the oppression that is
done under the sun: the tears of the oppressed who
have none to console them, and from the hand of their
violent oppressors there is none to console them. [2]And
I praised the dead, who have already died, more than
the living, who are still alive. [3]And better than both is
he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil
deeds that are done under the sun. [4]And I saw all the
toil and all the skilled deeds—that it is a man's envy of
his fellow. This, too, is mere breath and herding the
wind. [5]The fool hugs his hands and eats his own flesh.
[6]Better a palmful of ease than two handfuls of toil and
herding the wind. [7]And I went back and saw mere
breath under the sun. [8]There is one without a second,
neither son nor brother he has. And there is no end to
his toil, nor is his eye sated with wealth: "And for
whom do I toil and deprive myself of good things?"
This, too, is mere breath and an evil business. [9]Two
are better than one, for they get good reward for their
toil. [10]For if one should fall, the other will lift up his

friend. But if the one alone should fall, there is no other to lift him up. [11]If two lie together, they are warm, but as for one, how will he be warm? [12]And if one should attack him, the two will stand against him. And the triple cord will not quickly be snapped.
[13]Better a poor but wise boy than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to be wary. [14]For from the prison-house he came out to be king, for in his kingship, too, the impoverished man was born. [15]I have seen all the living who go about under the sun alongside the next boy who will stand in his place.
[16]There is no end to all the people, to all before whom he stood, nor would the ones who came later be happy with him. For this, too, is mere breath and herding the wind.

[17]Watch your step when you go to the house of God, for understanding is more favored than the offering of sacrifice by fools, for they do not know even how to do evil.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *oppression*. The Hebrew noun is plural, probably meaning “acts of oppression,” but English usage prefers “oppression” as a collective term.

the tears of the oppressed who have none to console them. It is notable that Qohelet registers the suffering of the oppressed as a given fact without the slightest indication, as in Psalms or elsewhere, that God will rescue them from their suffering, and without any exhortation, as in the Prophets, that we must act to rescue them.

2. *the dead, who have already died . . . the living, who are still alive*. The seeming redundancy of this wording is of a piece with Qohelet's pointed stylistic use of emphatic repetition.

3. *And better than both is he who has not yet been*. Though there is a point of similarity to Job's wish in Job 3 never to have been born, that refusal of existence is an expression of Job's own unbearable suffering, whereas Qohelet puts forth the idea as a general philosophic reflection on the human condition.

deeds. The Hebrew *maʿaseh* is singular but stands as a collective noun. The same is true for "deeds" in the next verse.

5. *The fool hugs his hands and eats his own flesh*. This is a traditional-sounding proverb, of the sort that one finds in the Book of Proverbs, enjoining against indolence. The eating of one's own flesh is, of course, a metaphor for causing devastating harm to oneself.

6. *Better a palmful of ease than two handfuls of toil*. This declaration, cast in the formula of a traditional proverb ("better *x* than *y*"), at least partly contradicts the previous proverb. Gordis's proposal that Qohelet first quotes a conventional saying and then offers a critique of it is plausible, though it has not been embraced by all scholars.

8. *And for whom do I toil*. These words are evidently a quotation of the single, childless man. It is at least possible that Qohelet identifies with him and is speaking autobiographically as well.

9. *for they get good reward for their toil*. Throughout these lines, the argument for friendship is pragmatic, invoking neither companionship nor love.

10. *if one should fall*. The Hebrew uses a plural, but the sense is partitive.

the other. Literally, "the one."

the one alone. "Alone" is added in the translation for clarification.

11. *If two lie together*. It is not necessary to conclude that either marriage or sex is implied, especially since what has been envisaged to this point is the advantage gained through a man's having a companion. The warmth of a

shared bed could easily be that of two companions, without sexual intent (like Ishmael and Queequeg at the beginning of *Moby-Dick*).

12. *And the triple cord will not quickly be snapped*. The whole sequence on the advantages of having a friend takes the proverb form of a succession of numbers (one-two-three). The triple cord, as many scholars have observed, is a citation from the *Gilgamesh* epic, or of a saying in general circulation that is quoted in *Gilgamesh*. In the epic, Gilgamesh, urging his friend Enkiddu to stick with him in the endeavor to slay the monster Humbaba, declares, as evidence of the advantage of joining forces, that a towed ship will not sink because "no man can snap the triple cord" by which it is fastened.

13. *Better a poor but wise boy than an old and foolish king*. Many futile attempts have been made to anchor this exemplary tale in the succession of two or more particular historical monarchs, but it seems more sensible to understand it as another illustrative instance of the pattern of futility from one generation to the next—in this case, in regard to the exercise of power. Some of the details remain obscure, but the following narrative outline is likely: a clever boy (a young man) is preferable to a doddering old king, perhaps senile, and not able to look out for his own interests. The boy, once imprisoned (perhaps for debt) and powerless, somehow manages to get out and assume the throne. He in turn is succeeded by a third figure like himself. In this chain of succession, no one gets lasting benefit from the exercise of power.

14. *for in his kingship, too, the impoverished man was born*. This is obscure but might refer to still another "poor boy" who will be poised to seize power. This would be "the next boy" of the following verse.

16. *before whom he stood*. The Hebrew says literally "before whom he was." The translation follows Fox in understanding this as a reference to the second boy's leadership of the people.

nor would the ones who come later be happy with him. In the succession of generations, the leader's power is always precarious because those led are fickle ("him" refers to the third of the three kings). All this constitutes an application to the political realm of Qohelet's idea that it is pointless to amass wealth through toil because there is no way of knowing who will inherit it.

17. *understanding is more favored than the offering of sacrifice by fools*. Some interpreters construe *lishmoaʿ* to mean "obedience" or "heeding" because that

is the sense it has in 1 Samuel 15:22, where it is also contrasted with "sacrifice." The antithesis with "fools," however, argues for the other meaning, "understanding."

for they do not know even how to do evil. The Hebrew sounds enigmatic, and "even" has been added interpretively. The sense would then be that they are so stupid that they don't even have the consciousness of doing evil, let alone the mental clarity to do good.

CHAPTER 5

[1]Be not rash with your mouth, and let your heart not
hurry to utter a word before God. For God is in the
heavens and you are on earth. Therefore let your words
be few. [2]For a dream comes with much business and
the fool's voice with much talk. [3]When you make a
vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it, for there is no
pleasure in fools. What you vow, fulfill. [4]Better that
you do not vow than that you vow and do not fulfill.
[5]Do not let your mouth make your body offend, nor
say before God that it was a mistake. Why should God
rage over your voice and ruin your handiwork? [6]For in
many dreams are mere breath and much talk. Instead,
fear God. [7]If you see the oppression of the poor and
the perversion of justice and right in the province, be
not amazed at the matter, for he who is high has a
higher one watching him, and still higher ones over
them. [8]And the gain of the land is in everything—a
king is subject to the field. [9]He who loves money will
not be sated with money, and he who loves wealth will
have no crop. This, too, is mere breath. [10]As bounty

multiplies, those who consume it multiply, and what is the benefit for its owner except what his eyes see?
[11]Sweet is the worker's sleep, whether he eats little or much. And the rich man's surfeit does not let him sleep. [12]There is a blighting evil I have seen under the sun: wealth kept for its owner for his harm. [13]And that wealth is lost in a bad business, and he begets a son with nothing in his hand. [14]As he came out from his mother's womb, naked will he return to go as he came, and nothing will he bear off from his toil that he brings in his hand. [15]And this, too, is a blighting evil: as he came, so he goes, and what gain does he have that he should toil for the wind? [16]All his days, too, he goes in darkness, with much worry and illness and rage.
[17]Look, I have seen what is good: it is fit to eat and to drink and enjoy good things in all his toil that he toils under the sun in the number of the days of his life that God gave him, for that is his share. [18]Also the man whom God has given wealth and possessions and whom He has empowered to enjoy it and bear off his share and delight in his toil—this is God's gift. [19]For not much will he recall the days of his life, for God makes him busy with his heart's delight.

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Be not rash with your mouth*. As the next five verses make clear, the reference is to the pronouncement of vows. Thus "God is in the heavens and you are on earth" is a reminder of man's exposure, as a mere terrestrial creature, to the all-seeing scrutiny of God on high. Verses 1–6 here, to which the last verse of chapter 4 must be attached, are a somewhat surprising, and conventional, stress by Qohelet on appropriate behavior in the sanctuary and an injunction to act in a way that will deter divine punishment. The second-person singular imperatives are also stylistically different from what precedes. Either this section was editorially patched into the text from a different source, or one must assume that Qohelet, for all his radical views, does not doubt the presence of an omniscient God who punishes man for vows left unfulfilled.

2. *much business*. In this context the phrase seems to refer to the confusion of ideas and images characteristic of dreams, which are said to resemble a fool's chatter. The "talk" of the fool would include rash vows that the fool has no intention to fulfill.

3. *for there is no pleasure in fools*. Only a fool would make a vow and not fulfill it, and such behavior will give no pleasure to God.

5. *Do not let your mouth make your body offend*. This reference is still to vows.

6. *For in many dreams are mere breath and much talk*. The Hebrew of this clause looks defective, at least in its prepositions. As the Hebrew text stands, the literal sense is "For in many dreams and mere breath and much talk." This translation deletes the "and" before "mere breath" (*havalim*) and thus construes the relation between "dreams" and "mere breath" as subject and predicate.

7. *for he who is high has a higher one watching him*. This whole clause is obscurely worded in the Hebrew, as it is in this translation, but the preceding clause about the perversion of justice suggests a reference to bureaucratic hierarchy—not an exclusively modern phenomenon—in which rights are easily made wrong. Others interpret the Hebrew to mean "arrogant" rather than "high."

8. *a king is subject to the field*. The Hebrew is ambiguous, and some construe it as "a king belongs to the tilled field." The evident sense of the whole verse is that both the economy and political power depend on agriculture.

9. *This, too, is mere breath*. The invocation of this refrain of futility after a proverb with which Qohelet might well agree may express a general skepticism on his part about all such formulations of wisdom: we don't really know how to control consequences in our lives.

10. *what is the benefit*. The noun *kishron* elsewhere means skill, but, as Abraham ibn Ezra and sundry modern commentators have argued, the meaning in context is something like "benefit."

what his eyes see. The one benefit he can absolutely count on is beholding his possessions. Given the uncertain fluctuations of human circumstances, he may not be given the opportunity to enjoy them.

11. *the worker's sleep . . . the rich man's surfeit*. The worker's hard labor, however little he may get by it, gives him the gift of sound sleep, but the rich man's full belly—or his worries about his possessions—keeps him awake.

12. *a blighting evil*. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "a sick evil."

13. *that wealth is lost in a bad business*. The rich man has "kept" his wealth, then invests it foolishly, leaving both himself and his heir without resource. As elsewhere, Qohelet reflects the preoccupations of a mercantile society.

14. *As he came out from his mother's womb*. As many interpreters have recognized, these words are close to the ones Job pronounces (Job 1:21) when he has been stripped by disaster of all that he has.

16. *illness*. The Hebrew has a possessive suffix ("his illness"), which scrambles the syntax, but the Septuagint plausibly reads here simply "illness."

18. *this is God's gift*. The exhortation of the preceding verse to enjoy life's pleasures, which Qohelet has pronounced before, here undergoes a dialectic correction: we should enjoy the good things given us—if, that is, we are fortunate enough to have the opportunity to enjoy them, if economic vicissitude or illness or political disaster does not intervene. Thus, the opportunity to follow a course of simple hedonism is a gift of God—or perhaps fate, for the two exhibit some interchangeability in Qohelet.

19. *not much will he recall the days of his life*. Fox suggests that this means he will not be very conscious of life's brevity. It could also mean that he will pay little attention to the uncertainty and the sheer potential for misery of a human life.

God makes him busy. The received text shows merely "makes busy" (*maʿaneh*), but the Septuagint and the Syriac have "makes him busy" (*maʿanehu*, an addition of a single letter as accusative suffix).

CHAPTER 6

[1]There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it
is heavy on humankind: [2]a man whom God gives
wealth and possessions and honor, and he lacks
nothing for himself of all he desires, and God does not
grant him to enjoy it, for a stranger will enjoy it. This
is mere breath and an evil sickness. [3]If a man begot a
hundred children and lived many years, and many
were the days of his life, he might yet not be sated
with good things, and even a burial he might not have.
I said: better than he is the stillborn. [4]For in mere
breath did it come, and into darkness it goes, and in
darkness its name is covered. [5]The very sun it did not
see or know—more ease for it than for him. [6]And
were he to live a thousand years twice over, yet good
things he did not enjoy—does not everything go to a
single place? [7]All a man's toil is for his own mouth, yet
his appetite will not be filled. [8]For what advantage has
the wise over the fool? What good is it for the poor
man to know how to get round among the living?
[9]Better what the eyes see than desire going round.

This, too, is mere breath and herding the wind. [10]What was has already been called by name and is known, as he is man and cannot deal with one more powerful than he. [11]For there are many words that increase mere breath; what is the advantage for man? [12]For who knows what is good for man in life, in his days of mere breath, for he spends them like a shadow? Who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *heavy*. The literal sense of the adjective is "great." Derivatives of that word —*rav*, *rabbah*, *rabot*, *harbeh*—punctuate this entire section.

2. *enjoy*. The Hebrew is literally "eat" (and so the King James Version). The usage is an anticipation of a common idiom in rabbinic Hebrew, in which the verb "eat" (*'akhal*) means to enjoy the fruits of something.

3. *he might yet not be sated with good things*. The logical connection with the two preceding clauses is not entirely clear, and "yet" has been added interpretively.

and even a burial he might not have. Some interpreters prefer to attach this clause to the stillborn at the end of the verse and in the two following verses, but the Hebrew text clearly ties it in with the man who lives many years. The idea expressed jibes with Qohelet's general pessimism about life: a man may beget many children and live a very long time, but this does not mean he won't come to a bad end, not having enjoyed his own material benefits and finally being subjected to the ignominy of lying unburied.

6. *yet good things he did not enjoy*. Again, "yet" is added in the translation for clarity. In fact, the whole verse would make better sense if it read "and good

things enjoyed"—that is, even if a man had an unbelievably long life filled with enjoyment, in the end everything is swallowed up by death.

8. *to get round among the living*. The Hebrew *lahalokh neged haḥayim* is not altogether clear—the preposition *neged* could mean "before" or "against," and *haḥayim* could be either "the living" or "life." The translation follows a consensus of interpreters that the phrase indicates an ability to manage with people. If that is the intended meaning, Qohelet suggests that the poor man's competence in dealing with others does him no more good than wisdom does the wise man.

9. *Better what the eyes see than desire going round*. The evident sense is that one is better off simply enjoying what one sees—let us say, a beautiful woman—than embarking on the dangerous and potentially frustrating path of trying to fulfill desire. Although the King James Version's "the wandering of the desire" has a nice ring and has been adopted by many modern translators, the Hebrew *halokh* means "to go" or "to go about," not really "to wander," and it is surely intended to echo the *halokh* in the phrase "get [or go] around among the living" (verse 8). Because Qohelet also uses "to go" as a euphemism for dying, and because *nefesh* means "life-breath" as well as "appetite" or desire, C. L. Seow construes this phrase to mean "the passing of life."

10. *What was has already been called by name*. To call something by name in biblical Hebrew and other ancient Near Eastern languages is to designate its nature and define its being, so the entire clause expresses Qohelet's sense of determinism.

he is man and cannot deal with one more powerful than he. Because of the context of determinism, many see "one" as a reference to God, though it could just as well refer to a human being who exercises power, given Qohelet's sense of political hierarchies and the social limitations of freedom.

12. *For who knows what is good for man*. This question follows on "there are many words that increase mere breath" (verse 11). Qohelet is a Wisdom writer who constantly questions the value of wisdom. He knows that a human life is likely to be bleak, that it is intrinsically unpredictable, may end badly, and will surely be blotted out by death. His "wisdom" is to register this perception, but, apart from his occasional exhortations to enjoy, he does not

presume to know what is good for man, unlike the purveyors of mainline wisdom.

CHAPTER 7

[1]Better a good name than good oil, and the day of
death than the day one is born. [2]Better to go to the
house of mourning than to go to the house of
carousing. For that is the end of all men—let the living
take it to heart. [3]Better worry than merriment, for by a
scowl the heart is gladdened. [4]The wise men's heart is
in the house of mourning, and the heart of fools in the
house of mirth. [5]Better to hear the rebuke of the wise
than a man hearing the song of fools. [6]For like the
sound of thorns beneath the pot, so is the laughter of
the fool. And this, too, is mere breath. [7]For
oppression's profit drives the wise man wild, and a
bribe destroys the mind. [8]Better a thing's end than its
beginning; better patience than haughtiness. [9]Do not be
rash in your mood to be angry, for anger rests in the
lap of fools. [10]Say not: What has happened, that the
days gone by were better than these? For you asked
not about this in wisdom. [11]Better wisdom with a
legacy, it is an advan tage to those who see the sun.
[12]For in wisdom's shade is money's shade, and the gain

of wisdom's knowledge keeps its possessors alive.
[13]See God's work, for who can straighten what He has
made crooked? [14]On the day of good luck, enjoy the
good, and on the day of evil, see: one against the other
God has set, so that man find nothing after him.
[15]Everything have I seen in my days of mere breath:
the righteous perishing in his righteousness, and the
wicked living a long life in his evil. [16]Do not be
overrighteous and do not be overwise. Why should you
be dumbfounded? [17]Don't be overwicked and don't be
a fool. Why should you die before your time? [18]It is
good that you seize this, and from the other as well do
not take back your hand, for he who fears God will get
out of them all. [19]Wisdom is stronger for the wise than
ten rulers who are in the town. [20]For there is no man
righteous on earth who does good and will not offend.
[21]To all the words, too, that they speak, do not pay
heed, that you hear not your servant reviling you. [22]For
many times, too, your heart has known, that you, too,
have reviled others. [23]All this I tried out through
wisdom. I said, Let me grow wise, and it was far away
from me. [24]Far away that which was and deep, deep—
who can find it? [25]I turned round in my heart to know
and to inquire and seek wisdom and reckoning and to
know foolish wickedness and mad folly. [26]And I find
woman more bitter than death. For she is all snares,

and nets her heart, and fetters her arms. He who is good before God will escape her, and an offender will be trapped by her. [27]See, this have I found, said Qohelet: one by one to find a reckoning. [28]Further I sought and did not find—one man in a thousand I found, and a woman among all these I did not find. [29]Except, see this I found: that God made men upright, but they sought many reckonings.

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Better a good name*. This verse inaugurates a sequence of maxims cast in the traditional proverb form of "better *x* than *y*" (*tov*). The "good" before "name" is merely implied in the Hebrew.

and the day of death than the day one is born. Many commentators understand this to mean that one can never be sure of one's good name until the end of life, but this makes Qohelet blander than he actually is. He begins with a rather anodyne proverbial saying, that a good name (*shem*) is better than precious oil (*shemen*), but then he goes on to say that departing life is better than entering it, for life itself, whatever one's reputation, is a miserable affair from one end to the other.

2. *carousing*. The Hebrew *mishteh* literally means "drinking," and feasting is also implied.

For that is the end of all men. This sentence essentially explains the preceding one: since our common fate is mortality, it is better to confront this bleak existential fact by going to the house of mourning rather than to try to evade it through revelry.

3. *by a scowl the heart is gladdened*. Some understand the expression *yitav lev* to mean "the heart is improved," but *tuv* (as a verb) linked with *lev*, "heart,"

means in biblical idiom to be in a happy mood. The paradox of gladness through grimness would have appealed to Qohelet's sensibility.

5. *than a man hearing*. An emendation eliminates the slightly odd "a man."

6. *the sound of thorns*. Most translations since the King James Version read "crackle," which is more vivid but unfortunately is translation through embellishment. The Hebrew *qol* means simply "sound." The idea is that the laughter of fools is grating, like the noisy sound of a quick-burning fire of thorns. The Hebrew uses a pun, *sirim*, "thorns," and *sir*, "pot."

7. *oppression's profit*. Though the Hebrew merely says "oppression," what is implied is the consequences of oppression, as "toil" may be either the activity or what is gained from it.

a bribe. While *matanah* usually means "gift," in context it is an illicit gift.

10. *Say not*. This verse appears to record, as Seow has suggested, an exchange between Qohelet and his students. He would of course view this as a foolish (and nostalgic) question because in his philosophy things were never better—the same cycle of futility has always occurred.

11. *Better wisdom with a legacy*. Most interpreters construe this—again, blandly—to mean "better wisdom than a legacy," but the Hebrew *ʿim* clearly means "with" and is not a term of comparison. The saying is another expression of Qohelet's hardheaded practicality: wisdom is nice to have, but still better is wisdom with a good annual income.

12. *For in wisdom's shade is money's shade*. This follows from the previous verse. "Shade" probably means "shelter," as it often does in biblical Hebrew: the security provided by wisdom will help one attain (or help one manage) the security provided by wealth.

14. *one against the other*. Life is an imponderable mixture of good fortune and misfortune, making it impossible for man to discern any pattern of meaning or purpose in it.

15. *the righteous perishing*. This declaration, of course, deliberately denies a fundamental assumption of Psalms, Proverbs, and other biblical books.

16. *Do not be overrighteous*. Any kind of excess, whether in righteousness or in evil, is a provocation of men and fate.

dumbfounded. The Hebrew *tishomem* could also mean something stronger, "devastated."

18. *this . . . the other*. This cryptic formulation appears to refer to foolishness (though perhaps not to wickedness) and righteousness. This would be in keeping with Qohelet's declaration that he has explored all realms of experience, foolishness and revelry as well as sober wisdom.

will get out of them all. This phrase is obscure. The attempt of many interpreters to align it with the rabbinic idiom that means to fulfill an obligation (*yatsa' yedey*) is unpersuasive because the component *yedey* is absent here. Perhaps the meaning is that the God-fearer will manage to escape the dire consequences of being either too righteous or too foolish.

19. *is stronger*. The Qumran fragment of Qohelet reads "will help," a difference of one additional consonant in the Hebrew.

22. *you, too, have reviled others*. By introspection, we all recognize the ubiquitous impulse to be malicious, hence one is well advised not to eavesdrop on one's servant's conversation, for one is all too likely to hear distressing things.

23. *it was far away from me*. The reference is to wisdom.

25. *reckoning*. As several commentators have observed, this, like other elements in Qohelet's lexicon, is a bookkeeping term.

26. *I find woman more bitter than death*. This misogynistic declaration is notorious, but the language of the rest of this verse and the next one makes clear that the kind of woman Qohelet has in mind is the seductress or "stranger-woman" who often appears in Wisdom literature (as, memorably, in Proverbs 5 and 7).

He who is good before God. That is, who finds favor before God.

27. *one by one to find a reckoning*. The formulation here makes clear the bookkeeping aspect of the idiom: Qohelet has sifted through experience, counted the sums of all the numbers, and this is what he has found.

28. *and a woman among all these I did not find*. Perhaps extrapolating from the case of the seductress, Qohelet extends the scope of misogyny: if only one honest man in a thousand can be found, there is no honest woman at all.

29. *God made men upright, but they sought many reckonings*. Human nature begins with the potential for honesty ("upright" is literally "straight"), but people pervert this potential by devising devious calculations, like wily accountants juggling figures in their books.

CHAPTER 8

[1]Who is like the wise man, and who knows a word's
solution? A man's wisdom lights up his face, and the
impudence of his face transforms it. [2]Keep a king's
utterance as though it concerned a vow to God. [3]Do
not be hasty. From his presence you should go. Do not
persist in a bad business. [4]For whatever he desires, he
may do, since a king's word is power, and who can say
to him, "What are you doing?" [5]He who keeps a
command will know no evil thing, and the time of
judgment a wise heart knows. [6]For every happening
has a time of judgment, for man's evil is heavy upon
him. [7]For one knows not what will be, for what will be
—who can tell of it? [8]No man has power over the
wind, to shut in the wind, and there is no power over
the day of death, and there is no sending away from
war, and wickedness will not make those who do it
escape. [9]All this have I seen and set my heart to all that
is done under the sun, a time when man holds power
over man to his harm. [10]And so have I seen the wicked
brought to the grave, and from a holy place they went

forth, while those who did right were forgotten in the town. This, too, is mere breath. [11]The sentence for an evil act is not carried out swiftly. Therefore the heart of the sons of men brims over within them to do evil. [12]For the offender does evil a hundredfold and lives a long life, though I know, too, that it will be well with those who fear God, who fear His presence. [13]And it will not be well with the wicked, and like a shadow, he will not live long, as he does not fear God's presence. [14]There is a thing of mere breath that is done on the earth—there are righteous to whom it befalls as though they did wickedly, and there are wicked to whom it befalls as though they did righteously. I said that this, too, is mere breath. [15]And I praised merriment, for there is nothing better for man under the sun than to eat and to drink and to make merry, and that will attend him in all his toil in the days of his life that God gives him under the sun. [16]When I set my heart to know wisdom and to see the business that is done on earth, day and night my eyes saw no sleep. [17]And I have seen every deed of God, that man cannot grasp the deed which is done under the sun, inasmuch as man toils to seek and cannot grasp it. And even if the wise means to know, he will not be able to grasp it.

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *a word's solution*. "Word," *davar*, could also mean "thing." *Pesher*, "solution," occurs only here in the Bible, though it is common in later Hebrew. It is cognate with *patar*, the verb used for Joseph's solving the enigma of dreams, and would seem to suggest laying open a hidden meaning.

2. *Keep a king's utterance*. This verse begins a series of purely pragmatic admonitions involving the dangers lurking in the corridors of power. The literal meaning of "king's utterance" is "king's mouth." The Hebrew here is prefaced by the word "I," which has no plausible syntactic linkage with anything that follows or precedes it. Since the two final letters of the last word of the previous verse are *nun* and *aleph*, and the first two letters of *ʾani*, "I," are *aleph* and *nun*, this looks suspiciously like dittography and hence the word is omitted from the translation.

4. *since a king's word is power*. The abstract noun *shilton*, recurrent in Qohelet, is linked to *shalit* of earlier biblical Hebrew, which means "ruler." In Qohelet, it suggests the exercise of authority or power (the claim of some scholars that it means "proprietorship" dilutes its actual force).

5. *command*. The likely meaning in this passage is a royal command, not a divine commandment.

the time of judgment. The Hebrew is literally "time and judgment," but some manuscripts delete the "and," and even if one leaves it in the text, the expression could simply be a hendiadys. What is less certain is whether the time of judgment refers to the king's judgment or to God's. The context of this verse argues for the former—if you are so imprudent as to get yourself in trouble, the king's judgment will catch up with you. The phrase in the next sentence might point to divine judgment, but it is perhaps best to construe both verses as addressing royal judicial power.

8. *No man has power over the wind*. Fox, Seow, and others construe *ruaḥ* in its other sense as "life-breath," chief ly because of the reference to death in the next clause. That construction is unlikely because of the verb "to shut in" (or "imprison"), which is far more appropriate to the wind. The idea is that just as a man has no power to shut in the wind—which, as we recall, goes round perpetually to the four corners of the earth—no one has power over death.

sending away. The Hebrew *mishlaḥat* elsewhere means "delegation." It may refer to sending a substitute or delegate (*shaliaḥ*) for military service or, alternately, being released (one meaning of this verbal root) from service.

10. *so have I seen the wicked brought to the grave*. The received text reads, enigmatically, "I have seen the wicked buried and they came" (*qevurim uvaʾu*). This translation follows the Septuagint, which appears to have had a Hebrew text that read *qevarim muvʾaim*, a difference of two consonants in the second word.

holy place. At this late moment in the biblical era, the reference is probably to a synagogue, where the funeral was held.

This, too, is mere breath. In this particular instance, Fox's contention that the idiom refers to absurdity in its existential sense is persuasive. The wicked are given a proper burial while the righteous are forgotten—nothing stands to reason in this world.

11. *The sentence for an evil act is not carried out swiftly*. This is another of Qohelet's arguments with the moral calculus of Psalms. In many psalms, the speaker, confronted with the worldly success of the wicked, says that they flourish only for a moment and will soon suffer judgment. The empirical Qohelet, observing social and political realities, sees that the wicked often endure long in their success and in this way they actually encourage others to emulate their evil acts.

brims over. Literally, "is filled." The idiom suggests presumptuous eagerness to do something.

12. *a hundredfold*. The form of the Hebrew *meʾat* is anomalous. This translation follows a long tradition in deriving the term from *meʾah*, "a hundred," but others variously emend the word.

though I know, too, that it will be well with those who fear God. This seeming contradiction is perhaps best understood as a swing of feeling in an ambivalent Qohelet. He knows as a matter of observation that the wicked flourish with no sign of retribution, but he wants, desperately, to cling to the idea that there is nevertheless a divine moral order in which the righteous are rewarded and the wicked punished.

14. *there are righteous to whom it befalls as though they did wickedly*. Now Qohelet swings back to the other pole of his ambivalence—one might say, from moral hopefulness to unblinking observation.

15. *I praised merriment*. This particular affirmation of the pleasures of the senses is probably a response to the articulation of life's moral absurdity in the preceding verses: because in this insubstantial fleeting existence of mere breath, we cannot make head or tail of any system of reward and punishment, now or later, we can do nothing better than to enjoy what is given to us.

16. *day and night my eyes saw no sleep*. The Hebrew says, incongruously, "his eyes saw no sleep" (literally, "with his eyes he saw no sleep"). This translation follows the proposal of several interpreters to emend the suffix of the Hebrew words for "eyes" and for "no" from the third person to the first person. The idea of sleepless pursuit of wisdom is surely appropriate to Qohelet's repeated affirmation of his dedication to philosophical investigation.

17. *grasp*. The Hebrew verb means literally "to find."

CHAPTER 9

[1]For on all this I set my heart to sort out all this—that
the righteous and the wise and their acts are in God's
hand. Neither hatred nor love does man know. All
before them is mere breath. [2]As all have a single fate,
the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad,
and the clean and the unclean, and he who offers
sacrifice and he who does not sacrifice, the good and
the offender, he who vows and he who fears the vow.
[3]This is the evil in all that is done under the sun, for all
have a single fate, and also the heart of the sons of
man is full of evil, and mad revelry in their heart while
they live, and afterward—off to the dead. [4]For he who
is joined to the living knows one sure thing: that a live
dog is better than a dead lion. [5]For the living know that
they will die, and the dead know nothing, and they no
longer have recompense, for their memory is
forgotten. [6]Their love and their hatred as well, their
jealousy, too, are already lost, and they no longer have
any share forever in all that is done under the sun. [7]Go,
eat your bread with rejoicing and drink your wine with

a merry heart, for God has already been pleased by
your deeds. [8]At every season let your garments be
white, and let oil on your head not be lacking. [9]Enjoy
life with a woman whom you love all your days of
mere breath that have been given to you under the sun,
all your days of mere breath, for that is your share in
life and in your toil that you toil under the sun. [10]All
that your hand manages to do with your strength, do,
for there is no doing nor reckoning nor knowledge nor
wisdom in Sheol where you are going. [11]I returned to
see under the sun that not to the swift is the race and
not to the mighty, the battle, nor to the wise, bread,
nor to the discerning, wealth, nor to those who know,
favor, for a time of mishap will befall them all. [12]Nor
does man know his time, like fish caught in an evil net
and like birds held in a trap, like them the sons of man
are ensnared by an evil time when it suddenly falls
upon them. [13]Wisdom, too, have I seen under the sun,
and it is great in my eyes. [14]There was a little town, and
few people within it, and a great king came against it
and went round it and built against it great siege-
works. [15]And there was found within it a poor wise
man, and that person saved the town through his
wisdom, but no one recalled that poor man. [16]I said:
Better wisdom than might, but the poor man's wisdom
is scorned and his words are unheard. [17]The words of

the wise gently said are heard more than the shout of the ruler among fools. [18]Better wisdom than weapons, yet a single offender destroys much good.

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *are in God's hand*. Though the formulation may sound unexceptionally pious, what is expressed is a sense of fatalism: even the wise and the righteous do not control their own destinies.

Neither hatred nor love does man know. The key term here is "know," with the emphasis on understanding rather than on experiencing. Every person is of course acquainted with hatred and love but is not able to fathom the meaning or the sources of these powerful emotions.

All before them is mere breath. The Masoretic Text reads "All before them," followed by a full stop, and then begins the next verse with "all." Neither "all before them" standing alone nor the second "all" makes much sense. This translation follows the Septuagint and two other ancient versions in reading instead of the second "all," *hakol*, "mere breath," *hevel,* a difference of one consonant. The sentence then is coherent.

2. *the bad*. This word is absent in the Masoretic Text but appears in two ancient versions, and all the other positive terms in this verse have a matching negative term.

he who fears the vow. He is afraid to make a vow lest he be unable to fulfill it and suffer dire consequences. In this whole catalogue, Qohelet again stands in opposition to the biblical majority view: it makes no difference what a person does morally or ritually—the same fate of death awaits all. That idea is then vividly stressed in the next three verses.

4. *joined*. The translation follows the marginal *qeri*, which reads *yeḥubar*, instead of the text proper, which has *yebuḥar*, "chosen."

knows. Literally, "has."

a live dog. Dogs in ancient Israel were scavengers, not pets, and hence were despised.

7. *Go, eat your bread with rejoicing*. This exhortation to enjoy follows logically from the somber meditation on death's inexorability that has preceded. If the same grim fate awaits us all, we are well advised to take advantage of the pleasures of this life while we have them.

God has already been pleased by your deeds. If you have been granted the good things of this life to enjoy—a loaf of bread, a jug of wine, white garments, a head of hair moistened with oil—that in itself is a sign that you have found favor in God's eyes.

9. *all your days of mere breath*. Although some scholars regard the second occurrence of this phrase as an inadvertent scribal duplication, Qohelet throughout exhibits a stylistic fondness for this kind of incantatory repetition.

10. *for there is no doing nor reckoning . . . in Sheol where you are going*. It is possible that Qohelet's uncompromising insistence on death as a realm of utter extinction is a polemic response to the new doctrine of an afterlife that was beginning to emerge toward the end of the biblical period.

11. *for a time of mishap*. The Hebrew *ʿet upegaʿ*, literally "time and mishap," is in all likelihood a hendiadys, hence the translation. The phrase is probably an oblique reference to death. Qohelet is not saying that the fastest runner will lose the race or the mighty warrior will be defeated in battle but rather that all human triumphs are temporary and therefore illusory, for death obliterates everything.

12. *Nor does man know his time*. In consonance with the use of "time" in the previous verse, this means the time of death, as "evil time" later in the verse makes clear. The imagery that follows of trapped fish and birds then concretizes the sense of humankind caught in the grip of its fate of mortality.

13. *great in my eyes*. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "great to me."

14. *There was a little town*. The features of this miniature narrative suggest that it is a hypothetical case rather than a historical anecdote. The whole story is a dialectic challenge to the celebration of wisdom in the preceding verse because it illustrates that if wisdom does not come from a prestigious source, it is liable to be ignored or forgotten.

15. *there was found within it*. The Hebrew appears to say "he found within it," but as often is the case in biblical Hebrew, the third-person masculine singular is used in place of a passive verb.

and that person saved the town. Some interpreters understand the verb as a conditional, "that person might have saved the town," linking this clause with "the poor man's wisdom is scorned" in the next verse. However, the end of this sentence, "but no one recalled that poor man," suggests that in fact he saved the town, but afterward his act was forgotten by the townspeople, who preferred not to think that their welfare had depended on the wisdom of a man of lowly status.

16. *Better wisdom than might, but the poor man's wisdom is scorned*. Qohelet takes us through still another dialectic turn. Wisdom is a supreme value, but given society's concern with status, if wisdom is not accompanied by prestige, it will have no audience.

18. *yet a single offender destroys much good*. This is another observation about the precariousness of the efficacy of wisdom. Wisdom may be more powerful than even the best of weapons, but a single reckless or irresponsible person can do great damage over which the calculations of wisdom have no control.

CHAPTER 10

[1]A dead fly makes the perfumer's oil chalice stink.
Heavier than weighty wisdom is a bit of folly. [2]A wise
man's mind is at his right, and the fool's mind at his
left. [3]Even when the fool walks on the road, his mind
is absent, and it says to all, he is a fool. [4]If the ruler's
mood goes against you, do not leave your place, for
calmness puts great offenses to rest. [5]There is an evil I
have seen under the sun, a true error that comes forth
from the person in power. [6]Folly is set on great heights,
and the rich dwell down below. [7]I have seen slaves on
horses and noblemen walking like slaves on the
ground. [8]He who digs a pit will fall in it, and he who
breaches a wall, a snake will bite him. [9]He who moves
stones will be hurt by them, and he who splits wood is
endangered by it. [10]If the iron is dull and he has not
honed its edge, he will exert great effort. And the
advantage of skill is wisdom. [11]If a snake bites with no
snake-charm, there is no advantage for the expert of
incantations. [12]The words of a wise man's mouth bring
favor, and the lips of a fool bring him ruin. [13]The first

of the words of his mouth are folly, and the last of them evil revelry. [14]And the fool speaks many words. Man knows not what will be, and what will be after him, who can tell him? [15]The toil of a fool wears him out, so that he knows not how to go to town. [16]Woe to you, land, whose king is a lackey, and your princes dine in the morning. [17]Happy are you, land, whose king is a noble, and your princes dine in fit time, in manliness, not in drunkenness. [18]Through sloth the roof-beam sags, and through slack hands the house leaks. [19]For food is set out for merriment and wine that gladdens the living. And money keeps everyone busy. [20]Even on your couch revile not a king, and in your sleeping chambers revile not a rich man, for the fowl of the heavens will carry the sound and the wingèd thing will tell the word.

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *A dead fly*. The Hebrew, *zevuvey mawet*, seems to say "flies of death," but if one moves the final *yod* at the end of the first word to the beginning of the second word, the consonantal text reads *zevuv yamut* (literally, "a fly that dies")—the single fly that spoils the ointment.

chalice. With many analysts, this translation reads *gaviʿa*, "chalice," for the puzzling *yabiʿa* ("bubbles"? or "ferments"?). A dead fly would not make oil ferment.

weighty. The form of the Hebrew *mikavod* is peculiar and syntactically awry, but the context argues for the sense of "weight," one of the meanings of this root.

2. *mind.* The Hebrew is literally "heart," thought to be the seat of understanding, but the context puts an emphasis on cognition, not feeling, and one must avoid the comic error of Molière's physician despite himself, who places the heart on the right side.

4. *mood.* The basic meaning of the Hebrew *ruaḥ* is "spirit."

5. *a true error.* "True" is added because the particle *kaf* before the noun is an indication of emphasis, not, as it is more commonly, of comparison.

6. *Folly . . . the rich*. This opposition, especially because of the second term, reflects Qohelet's social conservatism. He accepts established hierarchies and thinks something is out of joint if the foolish (or the lowly) are on top and the wise (or the rich) on the bottom. A similar sentiment is expressed in the next verse in his dismay over slaves mounted on horseback.

8. *He who digs a pit . . . he who breaches a wall*. This maxim is purely prudential, much like what one finds in the Book of Proverbs: you have to be careful of the consequences of your actions. The walls were built of piled-up stones without mortar, so it was easy to make a small breach in which a snake could hide.

10. *If the iron is dull.* This is again prudential advice: if you don't prepare your tools properly for the task to be performed, you will have a harder job.

the advantage of skill is wisdom. The Hebrew is equally cryptic. Some scholars revocalize *hakhsher*, "skill," to yield *hakasher*, "the skilled man," which mitigates the difficulty but does not remove it.

11. *If a snake bites.* This is a little obscure. The likely meaning is that if the snake charmer does not bother to practice his art before the snake bites, what good is his skill?

14. *Man knows not what will be.* The relevance in context of this reiterated idea is that since no one knows what will be, the chattering of the fool is all the more pointless.

15. *so that he knows not how to go to town.* The fool is so exhausted by his witless efforts that he ends up having no idea where he is headed. Fox cites an

Egyptian saying, “does not reach the city,” that has the sense of “does not know where he is going,” and the expression here sounds like such a proverbial idiom.

16. *lackey.* The Hebrew *naʿar* means “lad” or “youth” but also by extension a servant or anyone in a subordinate position. The opposition to “a noble” in the next verse suggests that the sense of an underling is intended. Once again, Qohelet’s attachment to established social hierarchies is evident.

dine in the morning. They give themselves over to a life of irresponsible carousing at all times, again in contrast to the princes in the next verse. The implication is that a country ruled by a lackey will lose all sense of appropriate restraint and fall into a round of hedonistic merrymaking.

18. *Through sloth.* This is more prudential counsel in the spirit of the Book of Proverbs.

19. *money keeps everyone busy.* The verb here, *yaʿaneh*, most commonly means “answer” in biblical Hebrew, but as several recent commentators have argued, this verbal stem in Qohe-let’s distinctive vocabulary is associated with business, as in the reiterated noun *ʿinyan*, which means “business.” The evident idea here is that people may fling themselves into feasting and drinking, but their overriding preoccupation is money—which, among other uses, pays the bills for the carousing.

20. *Even on your couch.* The Hebrew noun *madaʿ* generally means “knowledge” (in modern Hebrew it is the term for “science”). Many modern interpreters construe it as “thought” or “mind”—an understanding already registered in the King James Version. But if a person is merely thinking nasty thoughts about the king without speaking them, how could the fowl of the heavens carry the sound? The parallelism between the two clauses here invites the emendation of *madaʿakha*, “your thought,” to *matsaʿakha*, “your couch.” Perhaps an emendation is not even necessary: Seow proposes that the “knowing” reflected in the root of the word is knowing in the sexual sense, which could make this an otherwise unattested term for the place where sexual intimacy is consummated.

CHAPTER 11

[1]Send out your bread upon the waters, for in the long
course of time you will find it. [2]Give a share to seven
and even to eight, for you know not what evil will be
on earth. [3]If the clouds fill, they will empty out rain on
the earth. And if a tree falls in the south or the north,
the place where the tree falls, there it will be. [4]He who
watches the wind will not plant, and who gazes on
clouds will not harvest. [5]As you know not the path of
the life-breath into the limbs within the full womb, so
you know not the deeds of God, Who does everything.
[6]In the morning plant your seed and at evening let your
hand not rest, for you know not which will be fit, this
one or that, or whether both be equally good. [7]And
light is sweet, and it is good for the eyes to see the sun.
[8]Should a man live many years, let him rejoice in all of
them, and let him recall the days of darkness, for they
will be many. Whatever comes is mere breath.
[9]Rejoice, young man, in your youth, and let your heart
be merry in the days of your prime, and go about in
the ways of your heart and what your eyes see. But

know that for all these God will bring you to judgment. [10]And remove worry from your heart, and take evil away from your flesh, for youth and the time of vigor are mere breath.

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Send out your bread upon the waters*. These words initiate a series of prudential maxims on how to conduct one's life in the face of the unpredictability of events and their deterministic character that is beyond human control. The sending out of bread on the waters is surely not advice about overseas investments, as some commentators have imagined, but rather a didactic metaphor. The proposal of Rashi, Abraham ibn Ezra, and other medieval commentators that the reference is to acts of charity is perfectly plausible: perform acts of beneficence, for you never know when you yourself may benefit from having done them. The idea is then continued in the next verse: be generous to any number of people, for in the course of events you yourself may end up in need and enjoy a reciprocation of support from one of those you have helped.

3. *If the clouds fill.* The sense of this entire verse is that there is a system of strict causation in the structure of things, even though the second sentence puts this in terms that verge on tautology.

if a tree falls. This image conveys a sense of events occurring with an inevitability that, like trees in the forest, is not controlled by man.

4. *He who watches the wind . . . who gazes on clouds*. The good agriculturalist does not waste his time looking for signs of changing weather before he acts but plants at the fixed season ("a time to plant") in the expectation of an eventual harvest.

5. *into the limbs within the full womb.* The "limbs," *ʿatsamim*, are the body of the fetus. The Masoretic Text reads "like the limbs," *kaʿatsamim*, but many

Hebrew manuscripts as well as the Targum have, more plausibly, *baʿatsamim*, "into the limbs." The received text also reads "the womb of the full one [that is, the pregnant woman]," which could be correct, but a change of the initial vowel from *bᵉ* to *ba* yields "the full womb" and enables the translation to reproduce the play on "fill" in verse 3. This may be the more likely reading because there are no other biblical instances of "the full one" as a synonym for a pregnant woman.

6. *for you know not which will be fit.* This is more prudential advice. Qohelet recommends that, given the uncertainty of future events, one would do well to diversify one's investments, figuratively and perhaps literally.

7–8. *light is sweet . . . recall the days of darkness*. These moving words are another exhortation by Qohelet to enjoy the good things of this fleeting life while we still have it. As Nabokov movingly puts it in the opening sentence of *Speak, Memory*, "common sense tells us that our existence is but a crack between two eternities of darkness."

8. *Whatever comes is mere breath*. It is unlikely that this refers to death, as some have claimed, because in Qohelet it is darkness that is associated with death, whereas "mere breath" is rather the futile substance of worldly experience. Whatever happens, then, in our lives is mere breath—fleeting, insubstantial, without meaning—and all we can do is to take pleasure in what seems pleasurable.

9. *for all these God will bring you to judgment.* It is tempting to follow the suggestion of many commentators who see this whole sentence as an editorial intrusion, perhaps from the same hand that was responsible for the epilogue of the book. It must be said, though, that Qohelet does sometimes entertain the idea of a God who judges every human creature, even if at other points "God" in his usage is close to "fate."

10. *take evil away from your flesh.* "Evil" here does not carry a moral sense but means something like "harm," "unpleasantness."

the time of vigor. As a long exegetical condition assumes, the term *shaḥarut* probably derives from *shaḥor*, "black"—that is, the time of life when the hair is still black. (Others connect the word with *shaḥar*, "dawn," though the dawn of life would be infancy, not youth.) This moment is evanescent, mere breath, for the gray hair and its attendant infirmities will soon come.

CHAPTER 12

[1]And recall your Creator in the days of your prime,
until the days of evil come, and the years arrive, when
you will say, “I have no delight in them.” [2]Until the sun
goes dark, and the light and the moon and the stars,
and the clouds come back after the rain.

[3]On the day that the guards of the house will quake
and the stalwart men be twisted,
and the maids who grind grow idle, for they are now
few,
and those who look from the casements go dark.
[4]And the double doors close in the market
as the sound of the mill sinks down,
and the sound of the bird arises,
and all the songstresses are bowed.
[5]Of the very height they are afraid,
and terror is in the road.
And the almond blossoms,
and the locust tree is laden,

and the caper fruit falls apart.
For man is going to his everlasting house,
and the mourners turn round in the market.
6Until the silver cord is snapped,
and the golden bowl is smashed,
and the pitcher is broken against the well,
and the jug smashed at the pit.
7And dust returns to the earth as it was,
and the life-breath returns to God Who gave it.
8Merest breath, said Qohelet. All is mere breath.

9And more than being wise, Qohelet further taught knowledge to the people and weighed and searched out and framed many maxims. 10Qohelet sought to find apt words and wrote honestly words of truth. 11The words of the wise are like goads and like nails driven in—from the composers of collections, given from a certain shepherd. 12And more than these, my son, beware: of making many books there is no end, and much chatter is a weariness of the flesh. 13The last word, all being heard: fear God and keep His commands, for that is all humankind. 14Since every deed will God bring to judgment, for every hidden act, be it good or evil.

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *in the days of your prime*. The stress on the evanescence of the years of vigor before decrepitude and death continues the theme of the last four verses of the previous chapter.

the days of evil. Again, the sense of "evil" is not moral but physical—when the body begins to fall apart.

2. *the clouds come back after the rain.* This seeming reversal of the order of nature is an indication of the personal catastrophe of aging: everything goes dark, and in this ultimate storm, the clouds continue to blanket the sky even after the rain—perhaps because (verse 3) the sense of sight is dimmed. As many commentators have noted, there is an affinity between the imagery here and some of the apocalyptic imagery of the Prophets.

3. *On the day that the guards of the house will quake.* The book of Qohelet proper aptly concludes with this haunting—and also mystifying—poem on the waning of human life and on impending death. The poem abounds in textual difficulties, and some of the references are ambiguous or simply unclear. A tradition of interpretation that goes back to Late Antiquity reads the poem as an allegory of the deterioration of the body, but as Fox and others have argued, the allegory, plausible for some of the images, breaks down elsewhere. The literal picture of a house, or an estate, in decay is eloquent in itself, and rituals of mourning are clearly enacted outside the house. At best, one may say that certain lines, but not others, also invite comparisons with parts of the aging body.

the maids who grind grow idle. Grinding grain with a hand mill would have been the work of female servants in an affluent ancient Near Eastern household. But the Hebrew feminine plural *toḥanot* could also suggest teeth (mostly fallen out here), and in later Hebrew it is in fact the word for molars.

those who look from the casements. The corresponding body part would be the eyes, feminine plural in Hebrew like this verb.

4. *the sound of the bird arises.* The Hebrew phrasing is obscure and has generated highly divergent interpretations. One possible understanding is that

in the silence that falls as the maids cease their labor of grinding, the sound of a solitary bird—no cheerful songbird—stands out, and the songstresses on their part fall silent and are bowed low. The literal sense of "songstresses" is "daughters of song," which has led some to construe the phrase as a reference to birds, but that would create a contradiction with the singular "sound of the bird."

5. *Of the very height they are afraid.* The meaning of the Hebrew has been much debated. It is unclear whether "they" refers to old people or to the songstresses, but the idea seems to be that they are afraid in all directions, above and below.

almond . . . / locust . . . / caper-fruit. The allegorizers have exercised strenuous ingenuity on these lines (the almond blossom corresponding to white hair, the sagging locust to an impotent penis, and so forth). It is less strained to read these lines simply as images of the cycle of growth and decay in nature as man is about to depart from that cycle. The most puzzling reference is to the laden locust. Some see this as indicating a plant, not an insect (in fact a meaning carried by the English word as well); others detect a reference to the female locust heavy with eggs, after laying which she dies. Perhaps the least strained construction is a locust tree heavy with ripe fruit.

the mourners turn round. Here at the end of the book, Qohelet invokes the same verb he used repeatedly at the beginning for the futile cycle of the natural world and then for his own turning about in quest of wisdom.

6. *the silver cord . . . / the golden bowl*. Again, without allegory, precious things fall apart, like human life.

the pitcher is broken . . . / the jug smashed. Seow points to archaeological evidence that pottery was actually broken at burial sites as a sign of mourning. *Galgal*, "jug," elsewhere usually means "wheel," but here it is evidently related to *gulah*, the word used for "bowl." The sense of "wheel" remains a possibility.

pit. The Hebrew *bor* is a pit, sometimes a well, but also a term for the grave or the underworld.

8. *Merest breath, said Qohelet.* In a gesture of tight closure, Qohelet repeats precisely the refrain with which he began the book.

9. *And more than being wise.* The strong consensus of scholarship is that the verses from here to the end of the text are an epilogue added by an editor,

with the aim of bringing Qohelet's radical vision in line with more conventional piety. Many interpreters construe the initial word, *yoter,* as "furthermore," but that strains Hebrew usage, which clearly attaches *yoter* to *shehayah Qohelet*, literally, "than Qohelet was." The stated idea as it is understood in this translation is plausible: Qohelet was not merely a sage but, one might say, a lecturing and publishing sage, one who gave public instruction and edited and formulated maxims.

further. Others construe this as "constantly."

weighed. This verb derives from the word for "ear," *ʾozen*, but only here does it appear in the *piʿel* conjugation. Many understand it as "listen," but listening seems too passive for the other activities of compiling and formulating listed here. The verb could easily be connected with the word for "scales," *mʾoznayim*, as it is in later Hebrew, where it means "balance" or "weigh."

11. *goads . . . nails*. The images suggest that the words of the wise may sting or hurt, which seems especially apt for Qohelet.

from the composers of collections. The meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain, but a reference to anthologists or collectors of sayings is plausible in context. Syntactically, there is an ellipsis here, the sense being "[the words of the wise] from the composers of collections."

given from a certain shepherd. Traditionally, this highly obscure phrase is understood as a reference to God ("from one Shepherd"). Fox and Seow both argue convincingly that the simile of the goad leads to a reference to an actual goad-wielding shepherd, and that *ʾeḥad*, "one," is used here as it is sometimes used elsewhere as what amounts to an indefinite article. Nevertheless, this phrase is oddly detached in the syntax from the goads and nails.

12. *chatter.* The Hebrew *lahag* refers either to speech or to study, and the parallelism with making many books has encouraged many interpreters to opt for "study." But the author of the epilogue, at once praising Qohelet and interposing a certain distance from him, wants to warn readers that all this writing, including Qohelet's, may simply exhaust one and perhaps distract one from the simple duties of piety, so the sense of "chatter" has some plausibility. This is the regular meaning of *lahag* in later Hebrew.

13. *The last word.* The author of the epilogue is at pains to have the last word, which will neutralize the many subversive words Qohelet has uttered.

for that is all humankind. Though the King James Version's interpretive "this is the whole duty of man" may catch the intention of the original, that rendering makes the clause sound more strictly didactic than it is, and it seems better to preserve the slightly ambiguous inclusiveness of the Hebrew.

14. *every deed will God bring to judgment.* Qohelet, too, at a couple of points expresses the idea that we are subject to God's judgment, but this monitory flourish at the very end is an affirmation of the staunch piety with which the epilogist seeks to contain the more disruptive ideas of Qohelet.

ESTHER

Introduction

OF THE SEVERAL BIBLICAL BOOKS that test the limits of the canon, Esther may well be the most anomalous. It is the only scriptural text of which no scrap has been uncovered at Qumran. The pious Dead Sea sectarians might well have looked askance at it not merely because it never mentions the name of God but also because its narrative world is fundamentally secular. The Jews of the Persian empire are said here to have different "rules" from their neighbors, but these rules—the Persian loanword *dat* is used, which means "regulation" or "governing decree"—are in no way identified as divine commandments, and issues of faith or covenant are not at all part of this story. Nor, quite notably, is the Land of Israel. The likely date of the book's composition would be sometime late in the fifth century B.C.E. or perhaps slightly later: any date after the demise of the Persian empire in the fourth

century is highly improbable because by then the fictional activities of a Persian court would have been of little interest to Hebrew audiences, and the abundant borrowings of Persian words would have been unintelligible. In all likelihood, then, the book was written not long after the return to Zion authorized by the Persian emperor Artaxerxes and led by Ezra and Nehemiah in the middle of the fifth century, but this momentous event does not exist for the author of Esther, who envisages life in the diaspora as a normal and even permanent condition.

The most unusual aspect of Esther, for a book that made it into the biblical canon, is that it offers strong evidence of having been written primarily for entertainment. It has variously been described as a farce, a burlesque, a satire, a fairy tale, and a carnivalesque narrative, and it is often quite funny, with sly sexual comedy playing a significant role. The portrait of King Ahasuerus and the Persian court makes no pretense of serious correspondence to historical reality, as the original audience surely must have known. The Persian emperors were famous for their tolerance toward ethnic minorities—a policy clearly enunciated in the Cyrus Cylinder—and so Ahasuerus's accepting Haman's plan to massacre all the Jews of the realm is a manifest fantasy. And

though the repeated attention in the book to imperial bureaucratic procedure and the written document (*ketav*) as its principal instrument does reflect something about the Persian system of governance, and the emphasis on luxury and banquets also corresponds to what we know of the Persian court, there could have been no actual legal stipulation like the one mentioned here that all royal decrees were absolutely irrevocable.

Ahasuerus, although he consents to a genocidal scheme, is basically a well-meaning, often obtuse, figure of fun. He repeatedly has a dim sense of what is going on around him. In the early chapters, he barely speaks, instead following the counsel of his courtiers like a marionette, and to the end he is an easy mark for manipulation. The writer even introduces a couple of arch hints that may lead us to wonder about his virility as well as about his intelligence.

What could have motivated this sort of narrative invention? Political grounds for the satiric representation of a Persian emperor seem unlikely. Ahasuerus is assigned the role he plays because of the necessities of the gratifying national fantasy contrived by the writer. The reigning queen Vashti, unwilling to expose her female charms to the eyes of her husband's drunken companions, must be removed, at the urging

of one of those very companions, in order to make way for Esther, the beautiful Jewish commoner who becomes queen and saves her people. Her meteoric rise to royal grandeur, which then enables the ascent of her adoptive father Mordecai to the position of vice-regent, leans on the literary precedent of the Joseph story, as has often been observed. Here, however, the rags-to-riches story of Joseph is compounded by the threat to the lives of Mordecai, Esther, and all their people, and they must foil the plot of a nefarious enemy—said, altogether unrealistically, to be a descendant of Israel's arch-enemies, the Amalekites—whom Mordecai at the end will replace as the king's first minister.

Reversal is the key to the plot of Esther. In the first verse of chapter 9, this pattern is actually spelled out in two Hebrew words, *wenahafokh huʾ*, "on the contrary" or "it was the opposite." Instead of Haman's minions killing the Jews, it is the Jews who kill them. Instead of Mordecai's being impaled on the stake that Haman has erected for him, it is Haman and then his sons who are executed and impaled. Instead of Haman parading in regal grandeur on the king's own horse, it is Mordecai who is accorded that signal honor. And at the end, it is Mordecai, not Haman, who exercises power of the realm as vice-regent, adorned in regal

finery. The carnivalesque character of the story is evident in all this. In the carnival, hierarchies are (temporarily) reversed; the lowly get to play the roles of those above them, typically through masks and costumes, as Mordecai, having donned sackcloth in the hour of impending disaster, appears at the end in indigo and white, a golden diadem, and a wrap of crimson linen. The penultimate chapter of the book is largely devoted to fixing the date and practice of the carnivalesque holiday of Purim (which generally falls in March, around the same time as Mardi Gras). While this chapter is often seen as an epilogue, it is quite possible that the entire story was invented in order to provide an as-if historical justification for a day of feasting and drinking and merrymaking, already embraced by the Jews, that has no warrant among the festivals stipulated in the Torah.

The peculiarities of the Book of Esther's narrative world are matched by the peculiarities of its Hebrew style. As one would expect, it shows a number of the characteristics of Late Biblical Hebrew, with certain terms, as in other Late Biblical books, anticipating usages of the rabbinic Hebrew that would begin to emerge toward the end of the biblical period. But it should also be said that in contrast to other Late Biblical books, Esther exhibits a noticeable degree of

stylistic looseness. Infinitives are often used where conjugated forms of the verb seem to be required, a procedure not evidenced elsewhere in Late Biblical Hebrew. Agreement between subject and verb is often ignored. The careful tense distinction of classical Hebrew between perfect and imperfect forms of the verb is entirely relaxed, and at some points the writer appears to be a little uncertain as to how to handle Hebrew verb tenses. And from time to time there are run-on sentences that sprawl over several verses without a great deal of syntactic coherence.

Yet, as novelists such as Balzac and Dreiser demonstrate, it is possible to tell a very effective story with a sometimes ragged style. The author of Esther, unlike his Hebrew predecessors in the First Commonwealth period, revels in catalogues of descriptive details and delights in invoking the pomp and luxury of the imperial court where Esther's and Mordecai's destiny of greatness will in the end be splendidly realized. Here, for example, at the very beginning, is the setting for the king's "seven-day banquet in the garden court of the king's pavilion—white linen, indigo cotton fastened with cords of fine crimson cloth on silver cylinders and marble columns, gold and silver couches on a paving of alabaster and marble, and mother-of-pearl and black pearl." And

beyond the descriptions, the writer deploys lively wit and an apt sense of comic timing in the dialogues that reveal a subtle Esther, a resolute Mordecai, a fumbling Ahasuerus, and a menacing but finally sputtering Haman. It is not hard to understand how this delightful story, devoid though it is of spiritual concerns and covenantal gravity, became canonical. It of course provided the warrant for a festive early spring celebration that few wanted to give up. But even apart from the holiday, as a story it was for its early audiences, as it would continue to be, both highly amusing and gratifying, at once a vivid satire and a tale of national triumph that offered to diaspora Jews a pleasing vision of safety from imagined enemies and a grand entrée to the corridors of power.

CHAPTER 1

[1]And it happened in the days of Ahasuerus, the
Ahasuerus who was king from India to Cush, one
hundred and twenty-seven provinces. [2]In those days,
when Ahasuerus was seated on his royal throne which
was in Shushan the capital, [3]in the third year of his
reign, he made a great banquet in his presence for all
his ministers and his servants, the freeholders of Persia
and Media, the noblemen and the ministers of the
provinces, [4]when he showed the wealth of his
kingdom's glory and the worth of the splendor of his
greatness many days—a hundred and eighty days.
[5]And when these days had gone by, the king made a
banquet for all the people who were in Shushan the
capital, from the greatest to the least, a seven-day
banquet in the garden court of the king's pavilion—
[6]white linen, indigo cotton fastened with cords of fine
crimson cloth on silver cylinders and marble columns,
gold and silver couches on a paving of alabaster and
marble, and mother-of-pearl and black pearl. [7]And
drink was proffered in golden vessels and vessels of

various kinds, an abundant royal wine in kingly fashion. [8]And the drinking was according to royal rule, there was no compulsion, for thus had the king decreed to all the officials in his house, to let every man act according to his will. [9]Vashti, too, made a banquet in the royal house that was Ahasuerus's. [10]On the seventh day, when the king was of good cheer through the wine, he said to Mehuman, Bizzetha, Hashbona, Bigetha, Agabtha, Zethan, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of king Ahasuerus, [11]to bring Queen Vashti before the king with the royal crown, to show her beauty to the peoples and the ministers, for she was comely to look at. [12]And Queen Vashti refused to come according to the word of the king by the eunuchs, and the king was very furious, and his rage flared up within him. [13]And the king said to the sages, experts in protocol, for thus was the king's practice before all the experts in rule and law, [14]and those closest to him were Carchena, Shethar, Admantha, Tashish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven ministers of Persia and Media— [15]according to the rule, what to do with Queen Vashti because she had not obeyed the king's dictate by the eunuchs. [16]And Memucan said before the king and the ministers: "Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong but against all the ministers and all the

peoples that are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. [17]For the queen's act will go out to all the women to hold their husbands in contempt in their eyes, when they will say, 'King Ahasuerus said to bring Vashti before him and she did not come.' [18]And this very day, the noblewomen of Persia and Media will say to all the king's nobles that they heard of the queen's act, and there will be a full measure of contempt and fury. [19]If it please the king, let the royal decree go out from before him and be written in the rules of Persia and Media, not to the transgressed, that Vashti not come into the presence of King Ahasuerus, and her queenship be given to another better than she. [20]And let the king's edict that he will issue be heard throughout his kingdom, large though it is, and let all wives accord worth to their husbands, from the greatest to the least." [21]And the thing was good in the eyes of the king and the ministers, and the king did according to Memucan's word. [22]And he sent out ministers to all the provinces of the king, to every single province in its own writing and to every single people in its own language, that every man should rule in his home and speak his people's language.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Ahasuerus.* The name is derived from that of the Persian emperor called Xerxes by Herodotus. He reigned from 486 to 465 B.C.E. Beyond the name, there is scarcely any historical connection between the actual emperor and the king of this fantasy world of our text.

Cush. In all likelihood, this is Nubia, so the empire stretches from the southwest to the far northeast.

one hundred and twenty-seven provinces. This is the first in a series of flamboyant numerical exaggerations in the story.

3. *freeholders.* The Hebrew term *ḥayil* means "military force" but also refers to wealth, as in Ruth, and the latter meaning is more likely here.

4. *a hundred and eighty days.* The lavish banquet, then, for the royal bureaucracy goes on for approximately half a solar year. This does not seem to be an empire in which much business gets done.

5. *for all the pseople.* After the six months of royal feasting, the king prepares a second banquet just one week long for the general populace.

in the garden court of the king's pavilion. Either the king did not want to give the throngs access to the palace proper, or there were so many of them that an open space was required. In any case, the garden with its pavilion accords well with all the imperial luxury.

6. *white linen, indigo cotton fastened with cords of fine crimson cloth.* This lengthy catalogue of sumptuous items is one of the markers of Esther's distinctive style. There is nothing like it in the spareness of earlier biblical narrative. (The furnishings of Solomon's temple and palace in 1 Kings are hardly the same thing because they constitute an inventory and are not an integral part of the narrative.)

indigo cotton . . . fine crimson cloth. The Hebrew appears to say "cotton and indigo," "fine cloth and scarlet," but it makes no sense to put two colors in a list of sumptuous fabrics, so both terms should be instances of hendiadys, two words joined by "and" that refer to a single concept.

black pearl. This is no more than an interpretive guess for the precious stone indicated by the Hebrew *sohẹ ret*.

8. *And the drinking was according to royal rule.* "Royal rule" incorporates the recurrent word *dat*, one of many Persian loanwords.

there was no compulsion. What this may mean is that according to royal practice, the guests were free to drink as little or as much as they chose, as the last phrase of the sentence indicates.

9. *Vashti, too, made a banquet.* The context suggests that this was a banquet for women alone.

10. *the king was of good cheer.* The Hebrew expression (literally, "when his heart was good") regularly occurs in the Bible to express the elevated state caused by drinking.

Mehuman, Bizzetha. These seven Persian names—rather mangled in Hebrew transliteration—matched by the names of the seven ministers in verse 14, are part of the writer's effort to endow his story with vivid Persian local color. There may also be an intended comic effect in the string of foreign names.

11. *to show her beauty.* The Midrash imagines this is an order for her to parade naked before the male revelers. This could conceivably be what actually is hinted, but even if it is not, the midrashic interpretation nevertheless enters into the carnivalesque spirit of sensuality and dissipation that characterizes the story.

13. *experts in protocol.* The literal meaning is "knowers of the times," but the end of the verse argues for this sense. One notes that the sentence beginning here sprawls over three relatively long verses, another departure from the stylistic norms of First Commonwealth Hebrew narrative.

16. *Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong.* This long speech of a courtier's counsel stands in instructive contrast to the lack of any dialogue assigned to Ahasuerus up to this point. He is a man who likes to show off his riches and his wife's beauty, and who likes to party, and who becomes furious when his wishes are thwarted. Beyond this, he exhibits scant sense of how to act and appears to be readily manipulable. Manipulation is precisely what Memucan proceeds to do through his shrewd rhetoric, playing on male solidarity and a male sense of vulnerability in the face of the rebellious wives. Thus Vashti is cast as a perverse woman who will subvert male authority throughout the empire.

18. *And this very day.* This choice of phrase makes it sound imperative for the emperor to take action against Vashti immediately.

contempt and fury. The contempt is that of the wives shown to their husbands. The fury may be the response of the husbands. In any case, Memucan conjures up a state of moral anarchy if uppity women are not put in their place.

19. *go out.* As with Vashti's act of rebellion, things "go out," radiate from the center in Shushan to the far reaches of the empire.

and be written in the rules of Persia and Media. Again, the key word *dat* appears. This satiric narrative is all about an elaborately rule-bound imperial bureaucracy, where as it will later emerge—against all historical plausibility—a royal decree once issued cannot be revoked.

20. *edict.* This is another Persian loanword intended to invoke the procedures and official channels of the Persian empire. The Hebrew form of the word, *pitgam*, would later come to mean "aphorism."

be heard throughout his kingdom, large though it is. This is another instance of projecting power from the center at Shushan to the far ends of a vast empire. In fact, the difficulty of exercising royal power will be an important issue in the story.

accord worth. The Hebrew *yeqar*, one of numerous Aramaic usages in the story, means "worth," "honor," "respect."

21. *in the eyes of the king and the ministers.* Evidently, Ahasuerus needs the express support of his courtiers before he can confidently embrace Memucan's counsel or anybody's.

22. *in its own writing.* This vast multiethnic empire would have incorporated groups with different systems of writing and, as the next phrase makes clear, different languages, and the emperor wants to make sure that his decree will be clearly understood wherever it is proclaimed, from India to Cush.

and speak his people's language. This final phrase may be out of place, and, in fact, the sundry versions of the Septuagint simply omit it. However, it may mean that the husband, having heard the royal decree in his own language, proceeds to convey its contents to his wife in that language, which is presumably also her language, so that there should be no mistake about what has been decreed.

CHAPTER 2

[1]After these things, when King Ahasuerus's wrath subsided, he recalled Vashti and what she had done and what was decreed about her. [2]And the king's lads, his servants, said, "Let virgins comely to look at be sought out for the king. [3]And let the king appoint officials in all provinces of his kingdom, and every young virgin woman comely to look at be gathered in Shushan at the women's house by Hegai the king's eunuch, keeper of the women, and let them be given unguents. [4]And the 4 young woman who will be pleasing in the eyes of the king shall rule in Vashti's stead." And the thing was pleasing in the eyes of the king, and so did he do. [5]There was a Jew in Shushan the capital, and his name was Mordecai son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite man, [6]who had been exiled from Jerusalem with the group of exiles that was exiled with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had exiled. [7]And he became guardian to Hadassah, which is to say, Esther, his uncle's daughter, for she had no father or mother.

And the young woman was comely in features and
comely to look at, and when her father and her mother
died, Mordecai had taken her as his daughter. [8]And it
happened when the king's word and his rule were
heard, and many young women were gathered in
Shushan the capital by Hegai, that Esther was taken
into the king's house by Hegai, keeper of the women.
[9]And the young woman was pleasing in his eyes, and
she won favor before him, and he hastened to bring
her unguents and her share of food to give to her and
the seven young women who were fit to give her from
the king's house, and he singled her out and her young
women for good treatment in the women's house.
[10]Esther did not tell who were her people and her kin,
for Mordecai had charged her not to tell. [11]And every
single day Mordecai would go walking in front of the
women's court to know how Esther fared and what
would be done for her. [12]And when each young
woman's turn came to come to the king, at the
conclusion of her having twelve months, according to
the women's rule, for thus would the days of their
unguents be completed—six months in oil of myrrh
and six months in perfumes and women's unguents—
[13]and in this fashion would the young woman come to
the king, whatever she would say would be granted her
to take with her from the women's house to the house

of the king. [14]In the evening she would come, and in
the morning she would go back to the women's house
again in the hands of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch,
keeper of the concubines. She would not come again
to the king unless the king desired her and she was
called by name. [15]And when the turn came of Esther
daughter of Abihail, Mordecai's uncle, whom he had
taken as his daughter, to come to the king, she asked
nothing but what Hegai the king's eunuch would say.
And Esther found favor in the eyes of all who saw her.
[16]And Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, to his royal
house, in the tenth month, which is the month of
Teveth, in the seventh year of his reign. [17]And the king
loved Esther more than all the women, and she won
grace and favor before him more than all the virgins,
and he put the royal crown on her head and made her
queen in Vashti's stead. [18]And the king made a great
banquet for all his ministers and his servants, Esther's
banquet, and he granted relief of taxes for the
provinces, and he gave gifts in kingly fashion. [19]And
when the virgins gathered a second time, with
Mordecai sitting in the king's gate, [20]Esther was not
telling who were her kin and her people, as Mordecai
had charged her, and Esther did what Mordecai said,
for she was under his guardianship. [21]In those days,
when Mordecai was sitting in the king's gate, Bigetha

and Theresh, two of the king's eunuchs, of the guardians of the threshold, became furious and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. [22]And the matter became known to Mordecai and he told Esther, and Esther spoke to the king in Mordecai's name. [23]And the matter was searched out and found to be so, and the two of them were impaled on stakes, and it was written down in the Book of Acts before the king.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *when King Ahasuerus's wrath subsided, he recalled Vashti and what she had done.* These words may indicate ambivalence on the part of the king. His wrath has subsided, and he remembers Vashti, perhaps conscious of the fact that he remains without a queen, but he also remembers her disobedience. He may well be hesitant about what to do, which would then invite the detailed advice of his courtiers that begins in the next verse.

2. *Let virgins comely to look at be sought out for the king.* The pattern introduced in the first chapter is repeated here: others speak at considerable length while there is no reported speech for the king. This contrast creates the impression that Ahasuerus is a passive ruler, led around by his advisors.

3. *and every young virgin woman comely to look at be gathered in Shushan.* The fairy-tale character of the story becomes especially clear here. Every beautiful virgin from all the provinces of the vast empire is to be sought out and brought to the capital.

the women's house. This is, of course, the royal harem, but the translation follows the Hebrew, which does not use a specialized term.

the king's eunuch. Though the term *saris* often refers to a high-ranking official who has not been castrated, as in Genesis 39:1, putting actual eunuchs

in charge of a harem was a general practice, for obvious reasons.

unguents The frequent choice by translators of "cosmetics" for this term is misconceived. Even in this fairy-tale world, putting on cosmetics for six months running (see verse 12) would be extremely odd. The idea is rather that the young virgins are steeped at length in substances that will make their bodies supple and fragrant.

4. *the thing was pleasing in the eyes of the king.* It is no accident that a phrase from the end of the courtier's counsel to the king is repeated in the report of his response to the counsel: he is seen to be perfectly malleable to the words and advice of those around him in the court.

5. *Mordecai son of Jair.* His father has a good Hebrew name, but his own name is derived from that of the Babylonian god Marduk, a reflection of the degree to which the Judahites exiled to Babylonia had adapted themselves to the new culture. Similarly, Esther (who also is given a Hebrew name, Hadassah) has a name deriving from that of the Babylonian goddess Ishtar.

7. *his uncle's daughter.* They are, then, first cousins. Although Mordecai assumes a paternal role, actually adopting the orphaned Esther, they are in fact, respectively, a younger and older member of the same generation—Esther perhaps in her late teens, Mordecai conceivably in his thirties.

comely in features and comely to look at. This doubling of the epithet for beauty may suggest that she is lovelier than all the other assembled virgins. The same double epithet is applied to Joseph (Genesis 39:6), and its use here probably signals the general allusion to the Joseph story: in both cases, we have an extraordinarily beautiful Hebrew who ends up in a position of grandeur and power in the royal court.

9. *And the young woman was pleasing in his eyes.* This is again like Joseph, who finds favor in the eyes of everyone he encounters (see Genesis 39:4 and 23).

10. *for Mordecai had charged her not to tell.* Mordecai does not hesitate to send his adoptive daughter to the king's bed—that is clearly the culmination of the selection process for the new queen—and he calculates that her potential proximity to the throne might prove useful to their people.

11. *Mordecai would go walking in front of the women's court.* He was of course prohibited from entering the harem.

12. *six months in oil of myrrh and six months in perfumes and women's unguents.* This is another fantastic detail of the fairy-tale plot: each of these beautiful virgins spends a full year steeping herself in fragrant oil, perfumes, and unguents, so that when she comes to the bed of the king, her body will in every one of its cells be in a state of perfect erotic attractiveness.

14. *In the evening she would come, and in the morning she would go back.* The selection process, then, comes down to trial by sexual intercourse: with which of these virgins will the king be truly satisfied? The image of the king as an indefatigable sexual athlete bedding virgins night after night is intrinsically comic, but it is also undercut by a sly hint that points in the opposite direction.

again. The Hebrew *sheni*—seemingly "second"—looks odd. If it really modifies "house," it should have a definite article in front of it, which it does not, and it would be strange for there to be two different harems. This translation emends the word to *shenit,* "again," or "a second time."

16. *the month of Teveth.* These names of the months, which became standard in later Hebrew usage, entered the language in the Babylonian period from the language of the surrounding culture.

17. *And the king loved Esther more than all the women.* The reason for his love is not spelled out. Perhaps it was just her winning ways, as indicated at the end of verse 15. But if sexual performance is the crucial test, how would one inexperienced virgin distinguish herself from the others? We are left wondering about this, but the arch double meaning of one detail at the beginning of chapter 5 raises the suspicion that this passive and not very competent king may have a problem with virility. If that is the case, the beautiful and understanding Esther might possibly be the one virgin who helps him overcome his difficulties.

21. *became furious.* This is the general meaning of the Hebrew verb *qatsaf,* and there is no evidence that it has a technical political sense, such as "became disaffected." Something, then, that Ahasuerus has done or some general policy of the king infuriates the two eunuchs. In light of the figure Ahasuerus has cut, this would not be entirely surprising.

23. *impaled on stakes.* The Hebrew appears to say "were hanged on a tree," but the historical evidence points to impalement, not hanging, as the customary form of execution in the ancient Near East. In many instances, the

condemned person was put to death in some other fashion and his impaled body was then displayed as a form of humiliation.

it was written down in the Book of Acts. The Book of Acts, on the model of the designation repeatedly used in the Book of Kings, would be royal annals. The mention of the recording of the event prepares the background for the reading out loud of this episode to the insomniac king in chapter 6.

CHAPTER 3

[1]After these things King Ahasuerus elevated Haman
son of Hammedatha the Agagite and raised him up
and seated him higher than all the ministers who were
with him. [2]And all the king's servants who were in the
king's gate would kneel and bow down to Haman, for
thus had the king charged concerning him, but
Mordecai would not kneel and would not bow down.
[3]And the king's servants who were in the king's gate
said to Mordecai, "Why do you flout the king's
command?" [4]And it happened as they said this to him
day after day and he did not heed them, they told it to
Haman to see whether Mordecai's words would stand,
for he had told them that he was a Jew. [5]And Haman
saw that Mordecai was not kneeling and not bowing
down to him, and Haman brimmed with wrath. [6]And
he scorned to lay hands on Mordecai alone, for they
had told him who Mordecai's people were, and Haman
sought to destroy all the Jews, Mordecai's people, who
were in all Ahasu-erus's kingdom. [7]In the first month,
which is the month of Nissan, in the twelfth year of

King Ahasuerus's reign, he cast a *pur*, which is a lot, for every day in the month and every month of the twelve, and it fell on the month of Adar. [8]And Haman said to King Ahasuerus: "There is a certain people, scattered and separate from the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom, and their rules are different from every people's and they do not observe the king's rules, and it does not pay for the king to leave them in peace. [9]If it please the king, let it be written to wipe them out, and ten thousand talents of silver will I measure out to the court overseers to bring into the king's treasury." [10]And the king removed his ring from his hand and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, foe of the Jews. [11]And the king said to Haman, "The silver is yours and the people's, to do with it as is good in your eyes." [12]And the king's scribes were called together in the first month on its thirteenth day, and it was written as all that Haman had charged to the king's satraps and the governors in every single province according to their mode of writing and to the ministers of every single people and every single province according to their language. In the name of King Ahasuerus was it written, and it was sealed with the king's ring. [13]And missives were sent out by the hand of couriers to all the king's provinces—to destroy, to kill, and to wipe

out all the Jews, from young lad to old man, babes and women, on a single day, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to take their spoils. [14]A copy of the writing to be given as rule in every single province, manifested to all the peoples, to be ready for this day. [15]The couriers went out rushed by the king's word, and the rule was given out in Shushan the capital. And the king and Haman sat down to drink, and the city of Shushan was confounded.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *King Ahasuerus elevated Haman.* No reason is given for this act. In light of the very bad character that Haman goes on to exhibit, the king's decision to grant him special power suggests extremely poor judgment on the part of Ahasuerus.

the Agagite. Agag is the Amalekite king whom Saul is supposed to kill in 1 Samuel 15. Obviously, no one in the actual Persian court could have been related to the Amalekites, but the ethnic identification is introduced in order to align Haman with the traditional archenemies of the people of Israel.

2. *all the king's servants who were in the king's gate.* These are all members of the court, probably high-ranking imperial officials.

but Mordecai would not kneel. The reason given for his refusal beginning in Late Antiquity is religious: as a Jew, he would not prostrate himself before flesh and blood. But that is not self-evident in the text, and Mordecai might well have personal or political motives, refusing to bow down to someone he despises and who he thinks is not entitled to be vice-regent.

4. *to see whether Mordecai's words would stand.* The meaning of this clause is ambiguous. If the reason for Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman is religious —Jews don't bow to people—then "for he had told him that he was a Jew" explains his action. Alternately, Mordecai may have categorically refused to bow without offering any religious justification. In that case, his stubborn refusal is compounded by the fact that he has announced his belonging to an ethnic group perceived as different.

6. *Haman sought to destroy all the Jews.* This resolution of genocide reflects the fairy-tale vehicle of the narrative and could scarcely represent an actual option of policy in the Persian empire, known for its toleration of minorities.

7. *in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus's reign.* Esther, then, would have been queen for five years at this point.

a pur. This is a Persian loanword, and thus it is immediately glossed by the Hebrew word for "lot," *goral*. The Hebrew plural form of the word, Purim, becomes the name of the carnivalesque holiday for which the Book of Esther serves as rationale.

it fell on the month of Adar. Adar corresponds approximately to March, placing Purim around the same time as Mardi Gras and other carnivalesque festivals marking the end of winter. No day is given in this verse, though one version of the Septuagint shows "on the thirteenth day of the month," and that phrase may have dropped out through an error in scribal transcription.

8. *their rules are different.* The Book of Esther reflects a repeated preoccupation with rules, appropriately using the Persian loanword *dat*. The royal court constantly issues rules that have to be strictly observed. The Jews have different rules, and they are called that, not "commandments," and may well be ethnic practices rather than an absolutely religious regimen.

9. *ten thousand talents of silver will I measure out.* This is an extravagant amount, hundreds of tons of silver. Haman's evident intent is to persuade the king to authorize the massacre by this huge gift to the royal treasuries, which is virtually a bribe. Haman would have had to be fabulously rich, which might be the reason Ahasuerus elevated him to the position of viceroy.

10. *And the king removed his ring from his hand and gave it to Haman.* In this, he confers full royal authority upon Haman to carry out his murderous plan.

11. *The silver is yours.* The king refuses the extravagant gift. Keep the silver, he says, and do with it whatever you want—perhaps large expenses will be incurred in carrying out the massacre throughout the vast empire.

12. *according to their mode of writing.* Just as different ethnic groups in the empire have different languages, they also use different scripts.

sealed with the king's ring. This is the ring Ahasuerus gave to Haman.

13. *to destroy, to kill, and to wipe out.* The multiplication of synonyms for killing clearly emphasizes the total annihilation that Haman aims for.

and to take their spoils. This would be an additional motivation for the killers.

14. *A copy of the writing to be given as rule.* The term for "copy," *patshegen*, is still another Persian loanword. The narrative bristles with language representing the punctilious observance of imperial bureaucratic procedure. The writer may well have been struck by the elaborate bureaucracy of the Persian empire, though needless to say, no such decree for the massacre of an entire population within the empire was ever issued.

15. *And the king and Haman sat down to drink.* While the couriers sent out by Haman are feverishly racing across the empire with the orders for the massacre, the king and Haman sit at their ease in the capital, drinking. Indeed, drinking is the chief activity in which we see the king engaged, both at the beginning of the story and afterward.

and the city of Shushan was confounded. The murderous decree, of course, would have been public knowledge, and the Jews of Shushan were to be massacred, just like the Jews elsewhere in the empire. The inhabitants of Shushan may not necessarily be sympathetic toward the Jews—after all, they have been enjoined by Haman's decree to carry out the massacre and stand to gain from it the property of the victims—but it is nevertheless an act so extreme that it leaves them in a state of confusion. We have, then, three very different postures as the disaster looms: Haman and the king complacently drinking, the populace of Shushan confounded, and (implicitly) the Jews in a state of trepidation in the face of imminent destruction.

CHAPTER 4

[1]And Mordecai knew all that had been done, and Mordecai rent his garments and donned sackcloth and ashes and went out into the city and cried out loudly and bitterly. [2]And he came as far as in front of the king's gate, for one could not enter the king's gate in clothing of sackcloth. [3]And in every single province, where the king's word and his rule 3 reached, the Jews were in great mourning—and fasting and weeping and dirges, sackcloth and ashes were laid out for the multitudes. [4]And Esther's young women and her eunuchs came and told her, and the queen was badly shaken. And she sent garments to clothe Mordecai and to remove his sack-cloth from him, but he did not accept them. [5]And Esther called to Hatach, of the king's eunuchs whom he had stationed before her, and she charged him concerning Mordecai to find out what was this and for what was this. [6]And Hatach went out to Mordecai in the city square that was in front of the king's gate. [7]And Mordecai told him all that had befallen him and the matter of the silver that Haman

had meant to weigh out to the king's treasuries for the Jews, to wipe them out. [8]And the copy of the writing of the rule that was given out in Shushan to destroy them he gave him to show to Esther, to tell her, and to charge her to come to the king to plead with him and to entreat him for her people. [9]And Hatach came and told Mordecai's words to Esther. [10]And Esther said to Hatach and charged him to convey to Mordecai: [11]"All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that every man and woman who comes into the inner court without having been called, the single rule is to put to death unless the king reach out to him the golden scepter. And as for me, I have not been called to come to the king thirty days now." [12]And they told Esther's words to Mordecai. [13]And Mordecai said in response to Esther: "Do not imagine to escape of all the Jews in the house of the king. [14]For if you indeed remain silent, relief and rescue will come to the Jews from elsewhere, and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether for just a time like this you have attained royalty?" [15]And Esther said in response to Mordecai, [16]"Go, assemble all the Jews who are in Shushan, and fast on my behalf, and do not eat nor drink three days, night and day. And I, too, with my young women, shall fast in this fashion. And so, I shall come to the king not

according to rule, and if I perish, I perish.” [17]And Mordecai moved on and did all that Esther had charged him.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *And he came as far as in front of the king’s gate.* Though some of the Hebrew usage in Esther is a little slack, here the writer’s choice of phrase is quite precise: Mordecai makes his way toward Esther as far as he can come, which is the square in front of the palace, but he can go no farther because of his unseemly garments.

3. *fasting and weeping and dirges.* Facing destruction, they undertake a fast, a customary procedure to entreat God in a moment of collective distress, but in this thoroughly secular tale no turning to God is mentioned. Mordecai on his part is not yet reported to be fasting, only crying out bitterly.

sackcloth and ashes were laid out. The verb used here usually refers to making up a bed. Perhaps in this case it applies to clothing, or the meaning might be that the people slept in bedding of sackcloth and ashes.

4. *she sent garments to clothe Mordecai.* She would like to speak to him face-to-face, but he can enter the palace only if he removes his sackcloth and puts on proper clothing.

5. *to find out what was this and for what was this.* Her inquiry is puzzling, for having been informed of Haman’s decree, she surely knows why Mordecai has put on the garb of mourning. Perhaps she simply wonders why he needs to adopt this particular outward expression of grief and, evidently, to persist in it.

6. *And Hatach went out to Mordecai.* The introduction of an intermediary suggests a potential distance or division between the adoptive father and his adoptive daughter, and, in fact, a certain tension will emerge in the exchange between them.

7. *the matter of the silver that Haman had meant to weigh out.* Although the king had refused this offer and so it might seem moot, Mordecai cites Haman's readiness to pay a vast fortune as a reflection of his utter determination to wipe out the Jews—literally at any price.

8. *the copy of the writing of the rule.* This is not only another expression of the story's preoccupation with imperial bureaucratic procedures but is also a piece of "documentary evidence" of the dire decree with which Mordecai wants to confront Esther.

10. *charged him to convey to Mordecai.* The Hebrew uses an elliptical expression, "charged him to Mordecai."

11. *All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know.* The knowledge of this court practice is universal in the empire, so Mordecai must surely be quite aware of it. His urging Esther, then, to go before the king, she suggests, might well lead to her instant death.

the single rule is to put to death. Josephus vividly imagines court officials armed with axes standing by the king, ready to chop off the head of anyone who presumes to enter the royal presence uninvited.

unless the king reach out to him the golden scepter. This is obviously a gesture symbolizing the conferral of royal favor. But in light of the sexualized atmosphere of the tale, and the oblique hint of a question about royal sexual performance in the nightly testing of the beautiful virgins, it seems legitimate to suggest that a sexual double meaning is lurking here: if the phallic royal scepter is extended when the queen appears, she will know that she is in the king's good graces.

And as for me, I have not been called to come to the king thirty days now. Her very wording emphasizes the length of this period. It is surely a long time to leave a beautiful young wife neglected in the women's quarters. From what we know about Ahasuerus, he is unlikely to have been preoccupied with affairs of state. Could the flagging of interest in Esther be the result of uncertainty about his sexual capability?

13. *Do not imagine to escape of all the Jews in the house of the king.* This response, through the mediation of Hatach, is close to a rebuke: don't think an exception will be made for you and that you will be able to save your own skin. In fact, Esther's Jewish identity is not known in the court, but Mordecai seems to imply that somehow Haman's ruthless henchmen will ferret it out.

14. *relief and rescue will come to the Jews from elsewhere.* The early rabbis understood this to be God, but the expression is quite vague, and as throughout the book, God is not mentioned.

16. *fast on my behalf.* This is slightly odd because they are already fasting. The difference may be that the fast is now to be especially on behalf of Esther, who is about to endanger her life for her people, and it is also a very long fast—three whole days and nights.

and if I perish, I perish. These words express a kind of stoic resolution: I know I have to do this, however dangerous; if I succeed, it will be a great triumph, but otherwise, I am prepared to accept my grim fate.

CHAPTER 5

[1]And it happened on the third day that Esther donned
royal garb and stood in the inner court of the king's
house opposite the king's house, with the king sitting
on his royal throne in the royal house opposite the
entrance to the house. [2]And it happened when the king
saw Queen Esther standing in the court, that she found
favor in his eyes, and he reached out to Esther the
golden scepter that was in his hand, and Esther
approached and touched the top of the scepter. [3]And
the king said to her, "What troubles you, Queen
Esther, and what is your request? Up to half the
kingdom, and it will be granted to you!" [4]And Esther
said, "If it please the king, let the king and Haman
come today to the banquet that I have prepared for
him." [5]And the king said, "Hurry to Haman to do
Esther's bidding." And the king and Haman came to
the banquet that Esther had prepared. [6]And the king
said to Esther at the wine banquet, "What is your
petition, and it will be granted to you, and what is your
request? Up to half the kingdom, and it will be done!"

[7]And Queen Esther answered and said, “My petition
and my request, [8]if I have found favor in the eyes of
the king and if it please the king to grant my petition
and to fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come
to the banquet that I shall prepare for them, and
tomorrow I shall do according to the king’s bidding.”
[9]And Haman went out that day happy and of good
cheer, and when Haman saw Mordecai in the king’s
gate, and he had not arisen and had not stirred for him,
Haman brimmed with wrath against Mordecai. [10]And
Haman held himself in check and came to his house,
and sent and brought his friends and Zeresh his wife.
[11]And Haman recounted to them the glory of his
wealth and his many sons and all in which the king had
elevated him, and how he had raised him up over the
noblemen and the servants of the king. [12]And Haman
said, “Queen Esther brought with the king to the
banquet that she prepared only me, and tomorrow, too,
I am invited by her with the king. [13]But all this is not
worth my while so long as I see Mordecai the Jew
sitting in the king’s gate.” [14]And Zeresh his wife
together with all his friends said to him, “Let them set
up a stake fifty cubits high, and in the morning say to
the king that Mordecai be impaled on it, and come
with the king to the banquet happy.” And the thing
pleased Haman, and he set up the stake.

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the third day.* This is obviously at the end of three days of fasting decreed by Esther. The narrative will now swiftly move from fasting to feasting.

donned royal garb. As a counterpoint to Mordecai's sackcloth, which prevents him from entering the palace, Esther is careful to put on her queenly robes, and perhaps a crown as well, when she enters the throne room unbidden. The word "royal," *malkhut*, is repeated as a designation (not strictly necessary) of the throne, highlighting this meeting as an encounter between king and queen.

opposite the entrance to the house. Thus, as Esther approaches the inner court, she can see the king and vice versa.

2. *she found favor in his eyes.* However much he has neglected her during the past thirtythree days, the sight of beautiful Esther in her splendid royal robes stirs feelings of affection in him.

he reached out to Esther the golden scepter. This is the crucial gesture signaling his favorable acceptance of her uninvited appearance.

Esther approached and touched the top of the scepter. The literal sense is "head of the scepter." A sexual undermeaning here is not to be excluded.

3. *What troubles you.* The king sees that his royal consort is agitated about something. Shrewdly, she does not reveal the source of her agitation yet but instead extends a social invitation.

Up to half the kingdom. Ahasuerus, feared by Esther as a distant royal husband who might sentence her to die, is suddenly, as he beholds his beautiful wife, extravagantly uxorious in what he is prepared to give her. Once again he is easily manipulated. But all she asks is that he agree to be her dinner guest.

4. *to the banquet that I have prepared.* Counting on a favorable response, she has actually prepared the feast before coming to the king. Time, of course, is an urgent consideration because the date of the scheduled massacre is approaching. Lavish banquets are the very language of this Persian court. The

story began with banquets, and now a pivotal moment will take place through one banquet leading to a second one.

5. *Hurry to Haman to do Esther's bidding.* An invitation to a private feast with the queen and king would of course be very attractive to Haman. Nevertheless, he is seen "to do Esther's bidding," manipulated in a scheme she has devised.

6. *the wine banquet.* This designation, which is new in the story, suggests that drinking is even more important than eating at these regal banquets. The wine will put the king in "good cheer."

8. *let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I shall prepare for them.* Esther lulls Haman into a false sense of security and also leads the king for the moment to imagine she may have nothing to ask of him but attendance at another lavish "wine banquet." She also wants to make sure that the king will be in a receptive mood by plying him with drink and food on two successive days.

and tomorrow I shall do according to the king's bidding. She saves this for the end of her response: Yes, I do have a further request, which the king has bidden me to state, and I shall announce it at the feast on the morrow.

9. *happy and of good cheer.* He is obviously happy to think himself the special object of the queen's favor, and "of good cheer," here as elsewhere, indicates the euphoric mood induced by drinking. But a moment later, the sight of Mordecai not deigning to arise in deference to his presence (not to speak of his refusal to bow down to the king's ministers) will change his good mood to wrath.

10. *Haman held himself in check.* He does not want to rant and rage in public but waits until he returns home, when he can consult his intimates about a plan of revenge.

11. *Haman recounted to them the glory of his wealth.* Haman's wealth is surely a familiar story (one recalls the immense treasure he was prepared to offer the king), but he cannot resist bragging about it to his household and his friends.

and his many sons. Throughout the Bible, and in ancient Near Eastern culture in general, producing many sons is a sign, like wealth, of having achieved successful standing in the world. The sons, each given a name, will appear at the end of the story in their humiliating public execution.

and all in which the king had elevated him. Here he reverts to what was reported in 3:1. Again, Haman is bragging about something everyone knows.

12. *only me.* On top of all the grand things Haman has just enumerated, he has just now been the object of the queen's unique favor.

with the king. This phrase, occurring twice here in Haman's boast, expresses his self-gratifying illusion that he has been placed virtually on par with the king.

13. *sitting.* That is, Mordecai's refusal to rise in defiance.

14. *And Zeresh his wife together with all his friends said to him.* It is unclear whether Haman expected to elicit this vengeful proposal from them or whether he was turning to them for a suggestion about how he should practically implement his anger against the defiant Mordecai. In any case, the murderous counsel they offer him indicates that he is a man who keeps very bad company.

a stake fifty cubits high. This would be roughly sixty feet high—higher, in fact, than the palace itself. The height, like much else in the story (the hundreds of beautiful virgins, the vast sum Haman is prepared to give Ahasuerus) is altogether hyperbolic, an expression of Haman's rage against Mordecai rather than a practical stipulation of how a corpse should be publicly displayed.

in the morning. This would be the morning of the very day on which Haman has been invited to a second banquet by Esther, who, unbeknownst to him, is Mordecai's kinswoman and adopted daughter.

impaled. As before, the term probably indicates that the person is to be executed first and then the body exposed for humiliation on the high pole.

come with the king. Zeresh aptly picks up on the phrase her husband has used twice, recognizing that it expresses his gratified sense of uniquely privileged closeness to the throne.

happy. Just as he came out of the first banquet happy at having been accorded such special social honor in the court, he will enter the second banquet happy that he has just destroyed his hated enemy.

CHAPTER 6

[1]That night the king could not sleep, and he ordered to
bring the annals, the Book of Acts, and that they be
read to the king. [2]And he found it written that
Mordecai had told about Bigetha and Theresh, the two
eunuchs of the king, the guardians of the threshold,
who had sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. [3]And
the king said, “What honor and grandeur were done
for Mordecai on account of this?” And the king’s lads,
his attendants, said, “Nothing was done for him.” [4]And
the king said, “Who is in the court?” And Haman had
come into the outer court in the king’s house to say to
the king to impale Mordecai on the stake that he had
readied for him. [5]And the king’s lads said to him,
“Look, Haman is standing in the court.” And the king
said, “Let him come in.” [6]And Haman came, and the
king said to him, “What should be done for the man
whom the king desires to honor?” And Haman said in
his heart, “To whom would the king desire to do honor
more than to me?” [7]And Haman said to the king, “The
man whom the king desires to honor, [8]let them bring

royal raiment that the king has worn and a horse on which the king has ridden, and set a royal crown on his head, [9]and give the raiment and the horse into the hands of a man of the king's nobles, the courtiers, and let them dress the man whom the king desires to honor and ride him on the horse through the city square and call out before him, 'Thus shall be done to the man whom the king desires to honor.'" [10]And the king said to Haman, "Hurry, take the raiment and the horse as you have spoken, and do this for Mordecai the Jew, who is sitting in the king's gate. Omit nothing from all you have spoken." [11]And Haman took the raiment and the horse and dressed Mordecai and rode him on the horse through the city square and called out before him, "Thus shall be done to the man whom the king desires to honor." [12]And Mordecai returned to the king's gate, and Haman was thrust back to his house, mournful and distraught. [13]And Haman recounted to Zeresh his wife and to all his friends what had befallen him. And his wise men and Zeresh his wife said to him, "If Mordecai is of the seed of the Jews, before whom you have begun to fall, you shall not prevail over him but you shall surely fall before him." [14]While they were still speaking, the king's eunuchs arrived and hastened to bring Haman to the banquet that Esther had prepared.

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *could not sleep.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "his sleep wandered." This vivid expression became the standard idiom for insomnia in later Hebrew. The king's sleeplessness at this juncture in the plot is a narrative convenience, so that he can discover Mordecai's act of loyalty when the annals are read to him, but the insomnia might be "motivated" by his excited curiosity about what Esther will reveal to him at the banquet the next day.

4. *Haman had come into the outer court . . . to say to the king to impale Mordecai.* It is now early in the morning, and Haman has arrived bright and early so that he can proceed promptly to the execution of Mordecai before the banquet later in the day. Everything that follows is the unfolding of a series of comic reversals: the man whom Haman thinks he is about to kill proves to be the man whom the king honors; Haman himself, the comic villain, instead of being the object of royal honor, as he imagines, is forced into the humiliating role of honoring the very man he hates.

6. *What should be done.* As before, Ahasuerus is at a loss to know what to do —surely an appropriate means of honoring Mordecai should not have been beyond him—and again turns for counsel to someone in his court. The advice Haman gives him will prove to be Haman's own comeuppance.

To whom would the king desire to do honor more than to me? This delusion is entirely in keeping with the self-congratulatory frame of mind in which he reported to his wife and intimates his grand social success in being invited to a private banquet by the queen.

8. *royal raiment that the king has worn and a horse on which the king has ridden.* Haman's delusions of grandeur bring him dangerously close to claiming the throne for himself, as the Midrash properly recognizes: he wants raiment, horse, and crown that are not merely regal but that the king has actually used, thus putting himself in metonymic contact with the body of the king—in a way, becoming the king. All this royal grandeur, of course, will be accorded instead to his enemy Mordecai.

9. *courtiers.* The Hebrew uses still another Persian loanword, *partemim.* Such linguistic "local color" is appropriate since Haman would have made fluent use of all the set designations for the sundry officials in the Persian court.

Thus shall be done. The repetition of this entire clause in verse 11, without variation, makes it a kind of refrain in this episode. The implementation of the king's desire to honor a particular man will be carried out, item after item, but the object of the honor will not be the one whom the grandiose deviser of the honor imagines.

10. *Hurry.* The element of hastening is prominent throughout this swiftly paced tale. Haman hurries to the palace first thing in the morning in order to get royal authorization to impale his enemy as soon as possible. Ahasuerus hurries to carry out Haman's plan for according honor, perhaps mindful of the fact that he has a banquet to attend later in the day. At the end of this episode, the king's eunuchs hurry to bring Haman, fresh from his public humiliation in honoring Mordecai, to the banquet.

who is sitting in the king's gate. This neutral observation on the part of the king touches on what galls Haman, that the seated Mordecai has refused to stand in deference to him.

Omit nothing from all you have spoken. This stipulation provides a rationale, in the king's own command, for the exact repetition in the language of the narrative report, of everything Haman has proposed. The one item that is in fact omitted is placing the crown on his head—perhaps, one may surmise, because the king himself does not mention it, thinking that this would be going too far.

12. *Mordecai returned to the king's gate.* Mordecai's sitting in front of the palace is a kind of vigil. He continues to wait and see how things will fall out for his threatened people, and all the regal honor just accorded him has not turned his head or deflected him from this task.

13. *If Mordecai is of the seed of the Jews . . . you shall not prevail over him.* This response is scarcely in keeping with their counsel on the previous day to impale Mordecai, but it reflects the nationalist comic fantasy that is the vehicle of this story. Haman has already identified Mordecai to them as "the Jew." Now they appear not entirely certain whether he is of Jewish stock, but if he is, they are convinced that he is destined to defeat Haman because they recognize some special indomitable power in "the seed of the Jews." That

recognition was not in evidence when they advised Haman to have Mordecai executed.

14. *hastened to bring Haman to the banquet that Esther had prepared.* The banquet is also a trap for Haman. He is, then, rushing from humiliating frustration to fatal defeat, on the verge of "falling" before the seed of the Jews, as his wife and councillors have just predicted.

CHAPTER 7

[1]And the king and Haman came to drink with Esther.
[2]And the king said to Esther again on the second day
of the wine banquet, “What is your petition, Queen
Esther, and it will be granted you? Up to half the
kingdom and it will be done!” [3]And Queen Esther
answered and said, “If I have found favor in the eyes
of the king, and if it please the king, let my life be
granted me in my petition and my people’s in my
request. [4]For we have been sold, I and my people, to
be destroyed, to be killed, and to be wiped out. And
had we been sold to be male slaves and slavegirls, I
would have remained silent, for the foe is not worth
bothering the king.” [5]And King Ahasuerus said, and he
said to Queen Esther, “Who is it and where is he,
whose heart has prompted him to do this?” [6]And
Esther said, “A man foe and enemy, this evil Haman.”
And Haman was terrified before the king and the
queen. [7]And the king arose in his wrath from the wine
banquet to the pavilion garden, and Haman stood to
plead for his life to Queen Esther, for he saw that the

evil was fixed against him by the king. [8]And the king came back from the pavilion garden to the house of the wine banquet, and Haman was fallen on the couch where Esther was, and the king said, “Is it also to force the queen with me in the house?” The word had scarcely issued from the king’s mouth, and Haman’s face turned pale. [9]And Harbona, one of the eunuchs, said before the king, “Look, there is actually a stake that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, who spoke good on behalf of the king, standing in Haman’s house, fifty cubits high.” And the king said, “Impale him on it.” [10]And they impaled Haman on the stake that he had readied for Mordecai, and the king’s wrath subsided.

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *came to drink.* At this second feast, the primacy of drinking is made clear at the outset, and in the next verse the social occasion will be immediately designated as “the wine banquet.” It may be a calculation of Esther’s to ply Ahasuerus with drink in order to be sure that he is especially favorably disposed toward her when she makes her shocking revelation.

2. *What is your petition.* In contrast to the general technique of earlier biblical narrative, which is to introduce small but significant changes in what looks like verbatim repetition, the Book of Esther uses exact repetition as a kind of narrative refrain, much like the framestory of Job, another Late Biblical composition.

3. *let my life be granted me.* When she finally states the content of her petition, she does it with strategic effort, pointedly startling the king by saying that her own life is in imminent danger, something he had no reason to suspect. In the immediately following sentence, she adds "my people," now revealing to him for the first time that she is a Jew. On the evidence of the subsequent narrative events, that revelation does not trouble him.

4. *we have been sold.* The sense of the idiom is "given over," but she may also be alluding to the extravagant price in silver that Haman offered in order to secure permission to kill the Jews, and actual sale will be at issue when she mentions the hypothetical alternative of slavery.

to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be wiped out. These verbs pick up the language of the genocidal decree devised by Haman. They also reflect the rather loose Hebrew grammar of this text, for classical Hebrew would require passive infinitive forms, but active infinitives ("to destroy," "to kill," "to wipe out") are used here.

for the foe is not worth bothering the king. Some understand *tsar,* "foe," to mean *tsarah,* "trouble," but this same word is picked up in verse 6 to designate Haman.

5. *And King Ahasuerus said, and he said to Queen Esther.* Adele Berlin has proposed that the repetition of the verb "said" is meant to indicate hesitation on the king's part. Such usage, however, would be unique in biblical narrative; there may be a scribal error here, perhaps a simple inadvertent duplication (dittography). Some scholars emend the first "he said" to "hurried," a verb that in Hebrew shares two of three consonants with the verb for "said."

where is he. The Hebrew could also be construed as "who is he" (a mere repetition), but there is probably an ironic effect in the king's asking (clueless, as usual) where the scoundrel is when he is standing before him.

6. *A man foe and enemy, this evil Haman.* Esther continues to weigh her utterances shrewdly, saving the revelation of the would-be murderer and his stigmatizing label for the end of her speech.

7. *And the king arose in his wrath from the wine banquet to the pavilion garden.* He is so furious after discovering that his most trusted minister has plotted to kill his queen that he scarcely knows what to do—at many instances he scarcely knows what to do—and so he walks out into the garden

to pace back and forth. This is, of course, also a narrative convenience, so that Haman can be alone with Esther.

8. *Haman was fallen on the couch where Esther was.* The guests at the wine banquet would have been reclining on couches. Haman has prostrated himself on Esther's couch in pleading for his life. But the verb "fall" makes this a literal realization of Zeresh's dire prophecy, "You shall surely fall before him" (in this case, not before Mordecai but before his adoptive daughter).

Is it also to force the queen with me in the house? The sexual comedy of the Book of Esther becomes particularly acute at this moment. Ahasuerus, seeing Haman sprawled out on Esther's couch, briefly imagines that his first minister is attempting to rape the queen, in the king's very presence. The misapprehension may be sharpened by his own uneasy awareness that he has failed to invite the beautiful queen to his bedchamber for a month. One should also keep in mind that to sexually possess the king's consort is to lay claim to the throne, as Absalom does in cohabiting with David's concubines on the palace roof in full view of the people. Such presumption to kingship accords with Haman's frustrated plan to wear the king's raiment and crown and ride the king's horse.

turned pale. The precise meaning of the Hebrew term is in dispute, but it clearly indicates that he is distraught.

9. *Look, there is actually a stake that Haman has prepared for Mordecai.* Again, it is someone in the court, in this case one of the palace eunuchs, who needs to propose to the king an appropriate course of action. In the fairy-tale logic of this narrative, that action is a neat reversal: the very instrument of the would-be executioner is used to execute him.

10. *And they impaled Haman on the stake.* In the rapid pace of this narrative, justice is immediately carried out, perhaps on the same day.

and the king's wrath subsided. Haman's murderous project, which would have involved the death of the queen, would have to be seen by Ahasuerus as an act of base betrayal on the part of his most trusted minister, so the king's anger abates only when Haman is put to death.

CHAPTER 8

[1]On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther
the house of Haman, foe of the Jews, and Mordecai
came before the king, for Esther had told what he was
to her. [2]And the king removed his ring that he had
taken away from Haman and gave it to Mordecai, and
Esther placed Mordecai over the house of Haman.
[3]And Esther spoke once again before the king and fell
at his feet and wept and pleaded with him to take away
the evil of Haman the Agagite and his scheme that he
had hatched against the Jews. [4]And the king reached
out the golden scepter to Esther, and Esther arose and
stood before the king. [5]And she said, “If it please the
king and if I have found favor before him and if the
thing be fit before the king and I be pleasing in his
eyes, let it be written to turn back the missives, the
scheme of Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite,
which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the
king’s provinces. [6]For how could I behold the evil that
would befall my people and how could I behold the
destruction of my birth-kin?” [7]And King Ahasuerus

said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, “Look,
I have given the house of Haman to Esther, and him
they have impaled on a stake for his having laid hands
on the Jews. 8And as for you, write concerning the
Jews what is good in your eyes in the king’s name, and
seal it with the king’s ring, for a writ that has been
written in the king’s name and sealed with the king’s
ring one cannot turn back.” 9And the king’s scribes
were called together at that time, in the third month,
which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day
therein, and it was written as all that Mordecai had
charged to the Jews and to the satraps and the
governors and the ministers of the provinces from
India to Cush, one hundred and twenty-seven
provinces, every province according to its own mode
of writing and every people according to its language,
and to the Jews, according to their system of writing
and according to their language. 10And he wrote in the
name of King Ahasuerus and sealed it with the king’s
ring and sent missives by the hand of couriers on
horseback riding mail-horses bred of swift steeds:
11That the king has granted to the Jews who were in
every single city to assemble and defend their lives, to
destroy, and to kill and to wipe out the whole force of
every people and province that was assaulting them,
even children and women, and to take their booty, 12on

a single day, in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, [13]the copy of the writ to be given as a rule in every single province, manifest to all the peoples, and for the Jews to be ready for this day to take vengeance of their enemies. [14]The couriers riding the mail-horses went out rushing urgently by the king's command, and the rule was given out in Shushan the capital. [15]And Mordecai came out before the king in royal garb, indigo and white, and a great golden diadem and a wrap of crimson linen. And the city of Shushan was merry and rejoicing. [16]For the Jews there was light and joy and gladness and honor. [17]In every single province and in every single city, where the king's command and his rule reached, there was joy and gladness for the Jews, banquet and holiday, and many of the peoples of the land were passing as Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them.

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *and Mordecai came before the king.* Repeatedly, the writer is careful to use the preposition "before," rather than "to," in relation to the king because a person comes before—that is, into the presence of—the august personage of a monarch. This is the first moment in the story when Mordecai and Ahasuerus actually meet.

for Esther had told what he was to her. This crucial revelation on her part was not previously reported in the narrative but is introduced now in order to explain Mordecai's appearance before the king.

2. *And the king removed his ring.* The passing of the signet ring, token of conferral of the king's power on its bearer, marks the neatly antithetical reversal of positions—Haman is now dead, and Mordecai assumes the position he had enjoyed.

3. *And Esther spoke once again.* The king would assume that he has granted her all she could want, but now she has still another urgent petition. If Ahasuerus were more alert, he might have understood on his own that there remains a grave problem because of the irreversibility of the royal decree.

4. *And the king reached out the golden scepter to Esther.* Since she has already been granted the privilege to present her petition to the king, she fears that this new request will seem presumptuous and be rebuffed, so again she needs the extending of the golden scepter as the sign that the king has granted her permission to speak.

Esther arose and stood before the king. Since she has prostrated herself in supplication, she needs to rise in order to speak.

5. *let it be written.* As previously in the story, scrupulous attention is paid to empirical bureaucratic procedure enacted through written documents. The verbal stem *k-t-b* and its cognate noun *ketav* (in its two senses of "script" or "mode of writing" and "writ") are emphatically repeated.

7. *Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew.* She, too, is a Jew, as she has now made perfectly clear, but in the eyes of Ahasuerus her royal status remains primary, and the identifying title "Queen" is repeated in the story again and again.

Look, I have given the house of Haman to Esther, and him they have impaled. Ahasuerus, perhaps with a small hint of impatience, notes that he has already done a great deal for Esther and her kinsman, but in the next verse he goes on to say that he will leave it to them to deal with what remains a sticky situation.

8. *for a writ that has been written in the king's name and sealed with the king's ring one cannot turn back.* This crucial point is distinctly part of the fantasy world reflected in the plot of this book. The Persian empire—and indeed any

empire—could scarcely have been governed on the basis of absolutely irrevocable decrees. That supposition, however, enables another of the story's symmetrical antitheses: just as Haman sent out written decrees to the far reaches of the empire to destroy all the Jews, Mordecai now will send out written decrees authorizing the Jews to attack and kill their would-be destroyers.

9. *from India to Cush.* As at the beginning of the book, we are reminded of the vastness of the empire.

10. *And he wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus.* The king has enjoined both Esther and Mordecai to implement the writing of messages bearing the full authority of the throne, but in the event, it is Mordecai, quickly assuming the powers of vice-regent and equipped with the king's signet ring, who does the writing, or rather, instructs the scribes to write the documents in all the different languages of the realm.

riding mail-horses bred of swift steeds. The exact meaning of the three unusual terms for horses (at least one of them a Persian loanword) is unclear, but there is an evident implication that they are fast horses. Herodotus noted the speed and efficiency of the Persian imperial mail system.

11. *to assemble.* Perhaps previously they had been denied the right to assemble, which would mean to group forces in self-defense.

to destroy, and to kill and to wipe out. These are precisely the terms used in Haman's plan to extirpate the Jews.

even children and women. "Even" has been added in the translation to clarify the meaning. The annihilation of the entire population—again what Haman had envisaged for the Jews—is, needless to say, horrendous, though it accords with the practice of *ḥerem*, the total "ban," that was not uncommon in ancient Near Eastern warfare and that figures prominently in Joshua, a text our writer may have in mind here.

14. *rushing urgently by the king's command.* The king's command in itself imparts urgency to their mission, but they need to hurry in order to bring the royal message to distant parts of the empire before the day appointed for the destruction of the Jews. The hurrying also reinforces the overall breakneck speed of the narrative.

and the rule was given out in Shushan the capital. This clause needs to be added so that we will be sure to know that the decree was also promulgated in

Shushan, where there was no necessity to send out mounted couriers.

15. *And Mordecai came out before the king in royal garb.* This is an obvious realization of Haman's fantasy that *he* should be dressed in royal garb, and now, in Mordecai's case, it is going to be his habitual attire as vice-regent, not merely the finery worn for a ceremony to honor him. In chapter 6, the king quietly deleted Haman's inclusion of the crown in his list of royal accoutrements. Here Mordecai is said to wear an *ʿatarah,* "diadem," which is nearly a crown but perhaps a bit less than *keter*, the word Haman used. Behind Mordecai's being clothed in regal garments (earlier he was in sackcloth) lies the Joseph story, in which the former Hebrew prisoner is dressed by Pharaoh in regal clothing after he is invested with power as vice-regent.

the city of Shushan was merry and rejoicing. This reiterated theme at the end of the story accords with its carnivalesque character and with its aptness as the founding narrative of a carnivalesque holiday, Purim.

17. *banquet and holiday.* The story that began with banqueting ends with banqueting. In all its recurrent cases, the term used is *mishteh*, which emphasizes drinking (and intoxication will become a theme of the holiday of Purim). The Hebrew for "holiday," *yom tov*, occurs only here in the Bible in this sense, thought it will become the standard term for "holiday" in rabbinic Hebrew.

were passing as Jews. The verb here is the reflexive form of the root *y-h-d, yehudi*, "Jew." It is unlikely that it means conversion to Judaism, as it would in later Hebrew, because there was no procedure of religious conversion in the fifth century B.C.E. and also because the Book of Esther shows not the least concern with religion. What the verb seems to imply in context is that the sundry peoples pretended to be Jews, or perhaps aligned themselves with the Jews, in order to avoid attack.

for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them. This sweeping military triumph of the Jews is not presented in any way as a miracle, but it is clearly another element of fantasy in this fantastic tale, as Adele Berlin notes, underlining its carnivalesque genre. The Jews, after all, were a small minority in the Persian empire, and the authorization by the emperor for them to take up arms against their assailants does not plausibly mean that they could overwhelm their enemies and strike terror among them. This turnabout, then, is a resolution of the fairy-tale plot: the beautiful queen has successfully

interceded to save her people; the tables are turned on those who meant to wipe out the Jews; and as the great victory is celebrated, a Jew in royal finery becomes first minister to the king.

CHAPTER 9

[1]On the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar,
on the thirteenth day therein, when the king's
command and his rule came to be enacted, on the day
when the enemies of the Jews hoped to dominate them
and, on the contrary, it was the Jews who dominated
their foes, [2]the Jews assembled in their cities in all the
provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those
who sought to do them harm, and no man could stand
before them, for the fear of them had fallen on all the
peoples. [3]And all the ministers of all the provinces and
the satraps and the governors and those who carried
out the king's tasks were raising up the Jews, for the
fear of Mordecai had fallen upon them. [4]For great was
Mordecai in the house of the king, and his fame was
going about through all the provinces, for the man
Mordecai was becoming ever greater. [5]And the Jews
struck down all their enemies with a blow of the sword
and with killing and destruction, and they did to their
enemies what they willed. [6]And in Shushan the capital
the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men. [7]And

Parshandatha and Dalphon and Aspatha [8]and Poratha
and Adalia and Aridatha, [9]and Parmashta and Arisai
and Aridai and Vaizatha [10]the ten sons of Haman son
of Hammadatha foe of the Jews did they kill, but they
did not lay hands on the spoil. [11]On that day, the
number of the slain in Shushan the capital came before
the king, [12]and the king said to Queen Esther, “In
Shushan the capital the Jews killed and destroyed five
hundred men and the ten sons of Haman, and in the
rest of the king’s provinces, what have they done? And
what is your petition, and it will be granted to you, and
what more is your request and it will be done!” [13]And
Esther said, “If it please the king, let it be granted to
the Jews who are in Shushan tomorrow as well to do
according to today’s rule, and let Haman’s ten sons be
impaled on stakes.” [14]And the king spoke to have it
done thus and to have a rule given out in Shushan and
to impale Haman’s ten sons. [15]And the Jews who were
in Shushan assembled as well on the fourteenth day of
the month of Adar and killed three hundred men in
Shushan, but they did not lay hands on the spoils.
[16]And the rest of the Jews who were in the king’s
provinces assembled and defended their lives and had
respite from their enemies and killed their foes,
seventy-five thousand, but they did not lay hands on
the spoils, [17]on the thirteenth day of the month of

Adar, with respite on the fourteenth day therein, and
they made it a day of banqueting and rejoicing. [18]And
the Jews who were in Shushan assembled on the
thirteenth day therein and on the fourteenth day
therein, with respite on the fifteenth day therein, and
they made it a day of banqueting and rejoicing.
[19]Therefore do the village Jews, who dwell in unwalled
towns, make the fourteenth day of the month of Adar
rejoicing and banqueting and holiday and the sending
of portions of food to each other. [20]And Mordecai
wrote down these things and sent missives to all the
Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus,
near and far, [21]to fix for them that they should make
the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and the
fifteenth day therein every single year [22]like the days
when the Jews had respite from their enemies, and the
month that was turned for them from sorrow to joy
and from mourning to holiday, to make them days of
banqueting and rejoicing and sending of portions of
food to each other and gifts to the poor, [23]and for the
Jews to accept all that they had begun to do and that
Mordecai had written to them. [24]For Haman son of
Hammedatha the Agagite foe of the Jews had schemed
against the Jews to destroy them and had cast a *pur*,
which is a lot, to panic them and to destroy them.
[25]And when she came before the king, he said, with the

missive, “Let the evil schemes that he hatched against the Jews turn back on his own head.” And they impaled him and his sons on stakes. [26]Therefore have they called these days Purim, by the name of the *pur*. Therefore by all the words of this epistle and what the king had seen concerning this and what had come upon them, [27]the Jews fixed and accepted for themselves and for their seed and for all who joined with them, never to be violated, to make these two days, as they were written and according to their time, in every single year, [28]and that these days should be remembered and done in every generation, clan by clan, province by province, city by city, and that these days of Purim should not pass away from the midst of the Jews, and their remembrance should not come to an end from among their seed. [29]And Queen Esther daughter of Abihail with Mordecai the Jew wrote with full authority to confirm this Purim epistle once more. [30]And missives were sent to all the Jews, to the hundred twenty-seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, words of peace and truth, [31]to fix these days of Purim in their times as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther had fixed for them, and as they had fixed for themselves and for their seed just as they had fixed for themselves matters of fasts and their supplication.

[32]And Esther's dictum fixed these matters of Purim and was written out in a missive.

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *on the contrary*. This expression—in the Hebrew, *wenahafokh hu'*, "and it was the opposite"—makes verbally explicit the entire series of neatly antithetical reversals with which the story concludes.

2. *the Jews assembled.* As before, the verb suggests a drawing together of forces for effective military action against the assailants.

3. *for the fear of Mordecai had fallen upon them.* As Berlin aptly notes, while the populace fears the armed weight of the Jews, the high-ranking officials of the imperial bureaucracy fear Mordecai because they see that he has been given extraordinary power in the court. This point is underlined in the next words of the text, "For great was Mordecai in the house of the king."

4. *his fame was going about.* The writer makes abundant use of what amounts to a progressive tense, relatively rare in earlier biblical Hebrew, to indicate an unfolding process.

the man Mordecai. This epithet is unusual, and the writer may have in mind the char-acterization in Exodus of Israel's great lawgiver as "the man Moses."

6. *five hundred men.* Though biblical narrative typically uses highly inf lated casualty figures, this one sounds plausible: the fighting in Shushan appears to have involved only a few thousand, with five hundred slain. Perhaps the proximity to the palace discouraged large numbers from attempting to implement the murderous decree of the disgraced and executed Haman.

7. *And Parshandatha and Dalphon.* The writer seems to revel in this sheer Persian foreignness of all these names, as elsewhere he delights in studding his Hebrew with Persian loanwords.

10. *but they did not lay hands on the spoil.* The decree promulgated by Mordecai in fact allowed them to take the booty, but they choose to limit themselves to killing their enemies in self-defense. Berlin proposes that this gesture is a reversal of King Saul's taking spoils from the Amalekites ruled by Agag, Haman's putative ancestor (1 Samuel 15).

12. *in the rest of the king's provinces, what have they done?* Fox and Bernard Levinson see in this question a satiric jab at the king, who is more concerned as he speaks to Esther with body counts than with whether her people has been saved. But the question may also reflect Ahasuerus's habitual ignorance about what is going on around him: Do those fallen number only a few hundred here and there, as in Shushan, or many thousands? Why he thinks Esther should have a command of the casualty figures is a puzzle.

And what is your petition. The king mechanically repeats the formula he has used twice before in speaking to Esther, though it is unclear why he should think she has still another petition. Has the feared monarch become an uxorious husband, constantly asking his wife what he can do for her?

13. *let it be granted to the Jews who are in Shushan tomorrow as well.* The narrative logic of this request is not altogether evident because after the five hundred killed and the killing of Haman's ten sons, it is not terribly likely that there would be further attacks on the Jews in the capital. Some scholars have proposed that the rationale for the request is etiological—to provide an explanation for the fact that this new carnivalesque holiday was in some places celebrated for two days.

let Haman's ten sons be impaled on stakes. They have already been killed, so this is a clear indication that impalement often followed execution, as a means of humiliating the dead by exposing their bodies.

16. *had respite from their enemies.* This expression evokes an older Hebrew idiom that indicates the state of calm and relief after the consummation of a military victory.

seventy-five thousand. Now the number of fallen enemies moves to the kind of hyperbolic scale one would expect in ancient narrative.

17. *and they made it a day of banqueting and rejoicing.* The grounding of the new holiday in this story is now pointedly emphasized, with a careful stipulation of the day in Adar when it is to be observed. As before, the word for "banquet" or "banqueting" highlights drinking.

19. *Therefore.* The Hebrew *ʿal-ken* is a standard locution for introducing etiologies. Virtually everything that follows is a kind of epilogue that explains how the festival of Purim came to be celebrated on this date.

the village Jews, who dwell in unwalled towns. In practical terms, this would eventually apply to almost all Jews, who therefore celebrate the holiday one day only. The sole clear candidate for a currently inhabited city that was walled in ancient times is Jerusalem, where a second day of Purim, called "Shushan Purim," is observed.

20. *And Mordecai wrote down these things and sent missives.* The preoccupation of this narrative with the sending of written documents as the instrument for carrying out policy continues to the end of the story. One should note that this verse initiates a sprawling run-on sentence that goes all the way to the end of verse 23. This is an especially egregious example of the syntactic looseness of the book's Hebrew style.

25. *And when she came before the king.* The referent of "she" would be Esther. Some interpreters read this as "it" (Hebrew has no neuter pronoun), referring to Haman's plot or news of his plot, but that construction is problematic because there is no noun in the preceding sentence, feminine or otherwise, that could serve as antecedent to the proposed "it."

with the missive. This phrase *ʿim hasefer* is rather obscure and may reflect a scribal error. The word *sefer*, "missive," "document," or "scroll," occurs so frequently that it would not be surprising if a scribe inadvertently repeated it here out of place.

27. *the Jews fixed and accepted.* The language in these closing verses is pointedly legalistic: the Jews enter into a binding agreement that they will scrupulously observe the terms of their new holiday for all time. The writer is treading on dangerous ground because he is arguing for the legitimacy of a holiday that has no warrant among the sundry festivals listed in the Torah. Consequently, he wants to make it clear that there is national consent for all the conditions of this newly minted holiday. One might note that no religious justification is given for the holiday: it is not commanded by God but instituted to commemorate the people's victory over those who sought to destroy it.

for all who joined with them. Though some see these as the Persians who "passed as Jews," it is more likely that the expression refers to fellow travelers of the Jews, Judaizing foreigners who are probably not quite formal converts.

The anonymous prophet of the return to Zion (Isaiah 56:3 and 6) uses this same verb in this sense.

28. *that these days of Purim should not pass away from the midst of the Jews.* The phrasing here continues the terminology of binding legal agreement for the establishment of the holiday.

29. *Queen Esther daughter of Abihail.* She is so identified here near the end of the book to underscore her Jewish lineage—she is both queen of Persia and daughter of Abihail.

30. *And missives were sent.* The Hebrew appears to say "and he sent missives," but the third-person singular verb is often used as the equivalent of a passive (somewhat like the *on* construction in French).

words of peace and truth. This is the literal sense of the Hebrew, a collocation that occurs a few times elsewhere. It may well be a hendiadys, meaning something like "true peace." After all the violence, real peace would indeed be welcome.

31. *matters of fasts and their supplication.* The literal sense of the word rendered as "supplication" is "cry," as the King James Version shows. The mention of fasts and supplication at the end of this festive narrative may seem at least momentarily puzzling. The point is that just as the Jews have been punctilious in observing their sundry fast days, they are now to be equally punctilious in celebrating this holiday of merrymaking. The introduction of this comparison between somber and joyous holidays accords nicely with the previously mentioned transition "from sorrow to joy, from mourning to holiday."

32. *Esther's dictum . . . was written out in a missive.* The first noun, *maʾamar,* suggests speech, something said, but as throughout the book, it takes on the full weight of authority only when it is written out in a scroll or missive, *sefer.* The fact that here it is Esther, not Mordecai, who has the decree written reinforces the understanding that in verse 29 it is Esther who does the writing (the Hebrew grammar indicates "she wrote"), with Mordecai merely reinforcing her effort.

CHAPTER 10

[1]And King Ahasuerus imposed forced labor on all the land and on the coastlands. [2]And all the acts of his authority and his might and the account of Mordecai's greatness to which the king raised him, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Media and Persia? [3]For Mordecai the Jew was second to King Ahasuerus and great over the Jews, in favor with his many brothers, seeking the good of his people and speaking peace for all its seed.

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *forced labor.* In the ancient Near East, conscripting subjects for service in corveés was a common form of taxation. The notation of the king's taxation at the end looks a little odd, but it is perhaps introduced to indicate that after the violent upheavals caused by Haman's nefarious plot, Ahasuerus imposed order on his realm and took steps to ensure its economic stability.

the coastlands. In later Hebrew, *ʾiyey hayam* means "islands of the sea," but in biblical usage it refers to far-flung places that may be either along the shore of the Mediterranean or actual islands. Here the idiom stands instead of phrases used earlier for the vast extent of the empire.

2. *are they not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Media and Persia?* The wording of this entire verse pointedly imitates a recurrent formula in the Book of Kings, where it refers to one of two actual sets of annals, those of the kings of Judah and Israel, respectively. This is an effort to impart an effect of authentic history to a narrative that is actually woven of fantastic invention.

3. *its seed.* Many interpreters understand this as "his seed." But a declaration at the very end of Mordecai's status and virtues would surely not conclude by saying that he looked after his own offspring. Rather, he seeks the good of his people and creates conditions of harmonious existence for all its posterity.

DANIEL

Introduction

Daniel is surely the most peculiar book in the Hebrew Bible. It is also clearly the latest. Whereas the dating of most biblical books is no more than a series of rough approximations, often hotly debated by scholars, it is almost certain that the second half of Daniel was written between 167 and 165 B.C.E. because it refers in detail to the persecutions initiated by Antiochus IV Epiphanes and his suppression of the Temple cult in those years and to no subsequent events. Given this late date, it is not surprising that Daniel more closely resembles the apocalyptic texts of the Apocrypha and of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were written around the same time or a little afterward, and the Book of Revelation in the New Testament, which draws on Daniel, than any similarity to earlier biblical books.

The apocalyptic vision of history has abundant anticipations in the Hebrew Prophets, but it is a

similarity with crucial differences. The Prophets, whose usual vehicle of expression was biblical poetry with its system of intensifications from one part of the line to the next and, often, from one line to the next, sometimes conjured up a landscape of catastrophe in which the world would revert to the state of chaos that obtained before creation or, alternatively, imagined a landscape of redemption in which all peoples would come to Mount Zion to imbibe the LORD's teaching. But these prophecies, however extravagant, were ultimately dystopian or utopian visions of some actual historical future, cast in vivid poetic hyperbole. The writer of Daniel, on the other hand, seems to be pushing toward a notion of an era that will come at the end of familiar historical process, something he thought to be imminent after the intolerable violations by Antiochus IV that his people were then suffering. The prospect of the resurrection of the dead, certainly new to biblical writing in such a literal form, is an intrinsic element in this end-time, when all things would radically change.

In regard to literary form as well, Daniel is quite different from previous biblical literature. There are narrative segments in the first seven chapters but no real characters of the sort we encounter in the earlier biblical books. Daniel and his three friends are little

more than exemplary figures of piety, without nuance or psychology, who are moved by the writer through miracle stories that make manifest to all the supreme power of their God. Daniel himself, beyond being the object of miraculous intervention, operates as the interpreter of visionary dreams and, in the last half of the book, as the one to whom vision is vouchsafed. As a high-ranking courtier interpreting the dreams of a king, he is of course modeled on Joseph in Pharaoh's court, but again this is a similarity with a difference. Pharaoh's dreams, like Nebuchadnezzar's here, are a communication from God about what will befall his kingdom, and Joseph then proposes that certain measures can be taken to avert the disastrous consequence of what is about to unfold. In Daniel, no such human intervention is possible because the dreams and the visions are part of an inexorable deterministic system—a hallmark of the apocalyptic view. Daniel seems less an interpreter than a decipherer of divine codes, which sometimes have a numeric aspect, in which the details of God's plans for humankind are encrypted. It is no wonder that both Christians and Jews used the Book of Daniel as their point of departure for intricate calculations about the end of days. In the Christian canon, Daniel is placed with the Prophets because, from his purported location

in the Babylonian Persian period, he prophesies what will happen in future times. The Hebrew Prophets, however, although they evoke future possibilities, are for the most part not strictly predictive, and certainly not in the minutely circumstantial way we find in Daniel. The placement of Daniel in the Jewish canon in Ketuvim, or Miscellaneous Writings, is more in keeping with the anomalous nature of this text.

The other unusual feature of the book is that it is written in two languages. The opening is in Hebrew—the first chapter and the four initial verses of chapter 2. At this point, the text switches to Aramaic, the language in which it continues uninterrupted until the end of chapter 7. The rest of the book is in Hebrew. By this late date, Aramaic had for the most part replaced Hebrew as the Jewish vernacular. It was by then the established language of international diplomacy in the Near East, and the Aramaic used here is the so-called imperial Aramaic, somewhat more formal and different in certain usages from the rabbinic Aramaic that was emerging, in which the Talmud and much of the Midrash would be written over the next few centuries. Aramaic is a Semitic language closely cognate with Hebrew, the distance between the two languages being something like the distance between French and Italian. Grammatical

structures are analogous, and many primary terms in the two languages are the same, only slightly different in form. Thus, Hebrew *melekh*, "king," is matched by Aramaic *malkaʾ*; Hebrew *leḥem*, "bread," by Aramaic *laḥmaʾ*. Many other terms are distinctively Aramaic, though, for understandable reasons, hundreds upon hundreds of these words would be absorbed into the evolving rabbinic Hebrew, and some Aramaic loanwords already appear in the poetry of Job and in Esther, though, for a reason I shall explain, hardly at all in the Hebrew of Daniel.

The Hebrew of this book is in fact even stranger than its quasi-narrative form and its apocalyptic character. This Hebrew writer (there might have been more than one) was clearly quite familiar with the Pentateuch and the Prophets, but it is hard to say what else he might have known of earlier Hebrew Scripture. He manifestly sought to make his own Hebrew sound Prophetic (though perhaps "vatic" might be a more appropriate term), and that is probably why, for the most part, he resisted Aramaic usages and other conspicuous features of Late Biblical Hebrew. The impulse to sound Prophetic led to some deliberate obscurity in expression. This obscurity was probably compounded by scrambled scribal transmission at a good many points. But I would like to propose that this

author, though he knew earlier Hebrew writings, was fully comfortable in Aramaic and not in Hebrew. Much of what he produced can be fairly characterized as bad Hebrew prose. The syntax is often slack, at points unintelligible; parts of speech are sometimes inappropriate; the idioms not infrequently sound odd or perhaps are simply wrong. The writer overworks certain Hebrew terms, as if he did not have other more apt ones available: the verbs, for example, *ʿamad*, "stand," and *heḥeziq*, "hold" or "make strong," are awkwardly used over and over, in quick sequence, in a number of different senses, some of them unwarranted by earlier Hebrew.

The Book of Daniel, then, is an imperfect composition. In style, its Hebrew sections are seriously flawed. Its narrative is primarily a vehicle for laying out tales of miraculous aid that demonstrate God's power, or for setting the circumstances for elaborately coded revelations of the future course of history that require deciphering. In strictly literary terms, it is a book that falls far below what earlier biblical texts, both narrative and Prophetic, would lead us to expect. And yet Daniel is also a book fraught with religious importance for its age and beyond. As the latest text of the Hebrew canon, it is a hinge work between the Hebrew Bible proper and the intertestamental period

as well as the New Testament. Earlier Hebrew writers had assumed an essential element of contingency in historical process: human action, for better or for worse, would determine the future course of events. Daniel sees things differently: some people are written in the Book of Life and some are not; a plan dictated from on high is unfolding step by step, replete with precise numerical indications and mystifying symbolic prefigurations. Daniel points the way forward to many aspects of the New Testament, to a series of Jewish false messiahs from the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century, to the Christian chiliastic sects of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as well as earlier, and to much else. Daniel imposes a heavy burden on both Jewish and Christian history that in some ways we may still be carrying. Its strange and enigmatic visions are something with which we continue to grapple.

CHAPTER 1

[1]In the third year of the kingship of Jehoiakim king of
Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylonia came to
Jerusalem and lay siege against it. [2]And the LORD
gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand and the
best of the vessels of the house of God, and he brought
them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god,
and the vessels he brought to his god's treasure house.
[3]And the king said to the majordomo head of his
eunuchs, to bring from the Israelites and from the
royal seed and from the nobles [4]young men who were
without blemish and goodly in appearance and
discerning in all wisdom and possessing knowledge
and understanding matters, and who had the strength
to serve in the king's palace, to teach them book
learning and the language of the Chaldeans. [5]And the
king apportioned for them for each day from the king's
royal provisions and from his drinking wine, to rear
them for three years, that the best of them should
serve in the king's presence. [6]And among them from
the Judahites were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and

Azariah. [7]And the chief of the eunuchs gave them
names, and he made Daniel Belteshazzar, and
Hananiah Shadrach, and Mishael Meshach, and
Azariah Abednego. [8]And Daniel resolved that he
would not defile himself with the king's provisions and
with his drinking wine, and he asked of the chief of
the eunuchs that he not have to defile himself. [9]And
God made Daniel find grace and mercy in the presence
of the chief of the eunuchs. [10]And the chief of the
eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my master the king,
who has apportioned your food and your drink, for
why should he see you downcast among the young
men of your age? And you would make me guilty to
the king." [11]And Daniel said to the overseer whom the
chief of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah,
Mishael, and Azariah, [12]"Test your servants ten days,
and let them give us from the grains that we may eat,
and water that we may drink. [13]And let our appearance
be seen before you together with the appearance of the
young men who eat the king's provisions, and as you
see, so do with your servants." [14]And he heeded them
in this matter and tested them ten days. [15]And at the
end of the ten days their appearance was seen to be
better and plumper in flesh than all the young men
who had eaten the king's provisions. [16]And the
overseer kept bearing away their provisions and their

drinking wine and giving them grains. [17]And to these young men, the four of them, did God give knowledge and discernment in all books and wisdom, and Daniel understood all visions and dreams. [18]And at the end of the time that the king had said to bring them, the chief of the eunuchs brought them before Nebuchadnezzar. [19]And the king spoke with them, and none of all of them was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, and they entered the service of the king. [20]And in every matter of discerning wisdom that the king asked of them, he found them ten times better than all the soothsayers and wizards who were in all his kingdom. [21]And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *In the third year of the kingship of Jehoiakim.* This historical-sounding notation at the beginning of the book in fact betrays its pseudohistorical character. The third year of Jehoiakim was 606 B.C.E., and there is no evidence that Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem then. On the contrary, extrabiblical documents show that he and his army were occupied elsewhere at that time. He did make an incursion into Jerusalem and took Jehoiakim captive nine years later.

2. *the best of the vessels.* The Hebrew *miqtsat* can mean either "some of" or "the best of," but it seems more likely that the conquering king would plunder the choicest vessels.

the land of Shinar. This is an old name for Babylonia.

3. *eunuchs.* The Hebrew term, a loanword from the Akkadian, can mean either "eunuch" or "high official" (as in the case of Potiphar, who is married, in Genesis 39). Some have inferred from this eunuch's being placed over Daniel and his friends that they were castrated, but this is surely contradicted by the stipulation that they must be "without blemish," as Abraham ibn Ezra and many others have noted. In any case, eunuchs often served in the Persian court, and our story evinces some intermingling of Babylonian and Persian elements.

to bring from the Israelites and from the royal seed and from the nobles. Some have detected here a general Babylonian practice of conscripting young exiled noblemen for court service, perhaps to demonstrate the universal command of the empire, but the whole idea of educating the adolescent Israelites for the court may more likely be a storytelling contrivance to set up a situation in which Daniel's superior wisdom can be exhibited.

4. *young men who were without blemish and goodly in appearance.* The sprawling sentence, which begins in the previous verse, shows a certain stylistic slackness in the Hebrew, with loose syntactic links and some inert synonymity. The looseness of the prose may reflect a tendency in Late Biblical Hebrew (as in Esther), or could be the consequence of the translation from Aramaic that many scholars have detected in this chapter.

to serve. The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "to stand." The same idiom occurs in verse 19.

the language of the Chaldeans. The young men would have been speakers of Aramaic (and perhaps Hebrew as well). The language of the Chaldeans is Akkadian, written in cuneiform. The mastery of both the written and the spoken form of the language would have been necessary for the young men to serve in the Babylonian court.

5. *drinking wine.* This phrase, repeated in what follows, looks like a redundancy. Either it is an idiomatic flourish, or it is meant to distinguish wine meant to be drunk from libation wine.

for three years. Persian documents actually stipulate three years as the period for educating young men coming of age.

the best of them. See the comment for "the best of the vessels" in verse 2.

7. *the chief of the eunuchs gave them names.* This is the first step in the process of acculturation—substituting Babylonian names for their given Hebrew names. Mordecai and Esther, too, have names reflecting the host culture of the exiles.

8. *he would not defile himself with the king's provisions.* These presumably would have included prohibited meats such as pork and rabbit. One might note that the exiled King Jehoiakim (2 Kings 25:29–30) is not reported to have any compunction about eating the Babylonian king's provisions; nor does this appear to be a concern in Esther. It has been suggested that the concern about consuming prohibited foods was a special issue in the Hellenistic period.

9. *And God made Daniel find grace and mercy in the presence of the chief of the eunuchs.* Although the idioms used here are different, the general formulation is reminiscent of Joseph's finding favor in the eyes of Potiphar, then of the prison warden, in Genesis 39. Other allusions to the Joseph story will follow.

12. *the grains.* The Hebrew noun is related to the word for "seed." Some construe this as "legumes" or "vegetables." In any case, it is obviously a spartan vegetarian diet.

15. *their appearance was seen to be better and plumper in flesh.* This is a minor miracle, that they should flourish on a diet of grains and water, and greater miracles will follow. The Hebrew phrase for "plumper in flesh" is the same one used in Pharaoh's dream of the seven fat cows in Genesis 41, making this another allusion to the Joseph story.

17. *and Daniel understood all visions and dreams.* This faculty sets him apart from his three friends, whose wisdom is limited to books and bodies of knowledge. Joseph, too, is an expert interpreter of dreams, though visions are not part of his story.

18. *at the end of the time.* This is the three-year period stipulated by the king for the education of the young men.

19. *none of all of them.* There is a sizable group of noble young Judahites who have undergone the course of education, but Daniel and his three friends stand out among them.

20. *all the soothsayers and wizards.* The first term, *ḥartumim*, is an Egyptian loanword that appears several times both in the Joseph story and in the story of Moses's confrontation with Pharaoh in Exodus. The second term, *ʾashafim*, is an Akkadian loanword. Thus, the wisdom of the young Hebrew noblemen far exceeds that of the professional sages of these two empires, renowned for their expertise in astrology, soothsaying, and related arts conceived as instruments of knowledge in the ancient world.

21. *the first year of King Cyrus.* Cyrus was the Persian emperor who overthrew the Babylonians. Emperors come and go, but Daniel remains.

CHAPTER 2

[1]And in the second year of Nebuchadnezzar's
kingship, Nebuchadnezzar dreamed dreams, and his
heart pounded and his sleep was ruined. [2]And the king
said to all the soothsayers and the wizards and the
magicians and the Chaldeans to explain the king's
dreams to him, and they came and stood before the
king. [3]And the king said to them, "I have dreamed a
dream, and my heart pounded, wanting to know the
dream." [4]And the Chaldeans spoke to the king in
Aramaic, "May the king live forever! Say the dream to
your servants and we shall tell its meaning." [5]The king
answered and said, "The matter has been determined
by me: if you do not explain to me the dream and its
meaning, you will be cut to pieces and your houses
will be turned into dung-heaps. [6]But if you tell the
dream and its meaning, gifts and presents and great
honor you shall receive from me. Therefore tell me the
dream and its meaning." [7]They answered a second
time and said, "Let the king say the dream to his
servants and we shall tell its meaning." [8]The king

answered and said, “Indeed, I know that you are buying time because you have seen that the matter was determined by me. [9]For if you do not explain the dream to me, there is but one decree for you, and you have prepared a false and lying word to say to me until time passes. Therefore say to me the dream and I shall know that you have told me its meaning.” [10]The Chaldeans answered before the king and said, “There is no man on earth who can tell the word of the king because no great and powerful king has asked a thing like this of any soothsayer or wizard or Chaldean. [11]And the matter that the king has asked is grave, and there are no others that can tell it before the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh.” [12]Because of this the king raged and was very angry and thought to put to death all the sages of Babylonia. [13]And a decree was issued that the sages were to be killed, and Daniel and his friends were to be killed. [14]Then did Daniel respond with counsel and insight to Arioch, chief of the king’s executioners, who had gone out to call the sages of Babylonia. [15]He spoke out and said to Arioch, the king’s regent, “For what is this severe decree from the king?” Then Arioch informed Daniel of the matter. [16]And Daniel went and asked of the king that time be given him to tell the meaning to the king. [17]Then Daniel went to his house and

informed Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah his friends
of the matter [18]to ask mercy of the God of the heavens
about this mystery, that Daniel and his friends not
perish with the rest of the sages of Babylonia. [19]Then
was the mystery revealed to Daniel in a night-vision.
Then Daniel blessed the God of the heavens. [20]Daniel
spoke out and said, “May the name of God be blessed
forever and forever, for wisdom and strength are His.
[21]And He changes the times and the seasons, takes
kings away and raises up kings, gives wisdom to the
wise and knowledge to those who know discernment.
[22]He lays bare the deep and hidden things, knows what
is in darkness, and light dwells with Him. [23]To You,
God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise that You
have granted me wisdom and strength, and now You
have made known to me that which we asked of You,
for the matter of the king You have made known to
us.” [24]Because of this Daniel came to Arioch, whom
the king had appointed to put to death all the sages of
Babylonia. He went and thus he said to him, “Do not
put to death the sages of Babylonia. Bring me before
the king and I will tell the meaning to the king.”
[25]Then did Arioch rush to bring Daniel before the
king, and thus he said to him, “There is a man of the
exiles from Judah who will explain the meaning to the
king.” [26]The king answered and said to Daniel, whose

name was Belteshazzar, “Can you explain to me the dream that I saw and its meaning?” [27]Daniel answered before the king, “The mystery of which the king has asked, sages, wizards, soothsayers, and diviners cannot tell the king. [28]But there is a God in the heavens Who reveals mysteries and has made known to the king what will be in the latter days, your dream and the visions in your head as you lay asleep, this is it. [29]You, king, your thought has risen as you lay asleep of what will be in the time to come, and the Revealer of Mysteries has made known to you what will be. [30]As for me, not through wisdom that is in me more than all living men has the mystery been revealed to me but in order to make known to the king the meaning, that you may know your heart’s thoughts. [31]You, king, were seeing, and look, a huge statue. This statue was great and its brilliance was abundant. It was standing before you and its appearance was fearsome. [32]That statue, its head was goodly gold, its chest and arms were silver, its loins and its thighs were, bronze. [33]Its legs were iron and its feet part iron and part clay. [34]You were watching till a stone hewed not by hands struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and shattered them. [35]Then altogether the iron, clay, bronze, silver, and gold were shattered and became like chaff from the summer threshing floor, and no place was found for them. And the stone that struck

the statue became a great mountain and filled all the earth. [36]This is the dream, and its meaning we shall say before the king. [37]You are king, even king of kings, to whom the God of the heavens has given power and might and honor. [38]And wherever human beings, beasts of the field, and fowl of the heavens live, He has given them in your hand and caused you to rule over them all. You are the head of gold. [39]And after you shall arise another kingdom, inferior to yours, and a third kingdom, of bronze, that shall rule over all the earth. [40]And a fourth kingdom shall be strong as iron because iron shatters and splinters all things, and like smashing iron, all these shall it shatter and smash. [41]And as to the feet and the toes you saw, part potter's clay and part iron, the kingdom shall be split, and it shall have of the strength of iron because you saw iron mixed with clay from the soil. [42]And as to the toes, part iron and part clay, some of the kingdom shall be strong and some of it fragile. [43]And as to your seeing iron mixed with clay from the soil, they shall be mixed with human seed and shall not hold together just as iron does not mix with clay. [44]And in the days of these kings the God of the heavens shall establish a kingdom that shall never be destroyed. To another people it shall not be abandoned. It shall shatter and put an end to all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever. [45]Because you

have seen that from a mountain a stone was hewed not by hands and smashed the iron, bronze, clay, silver, and gold, the great God has made known to the king what will be after this, and the dream is true, its meaning certain." [46]Then did King Nebuchadnezzar fall on his face, and he bowed down to Daniel, and he said to offer to him grain offering and incense. [47]The king answered Daniel and said, "In truth, your god is the God of gods and master of kings and revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery." [48]Then did the king make Daniel great, and he gave him many great gifts and caused him to rule over all the province of Babylonia and made him chief governor over all the sages of Babylonia. [49]And Daniel asked of the king, and he appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over the work of the province of Babylonia. And Daniel served in the king's gate.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *in the second year of Nebuchadnezzar's kingship.* This notation is a much discussed contradiction because in chapter 1, it is in the third year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign that Daniel and his three friends are sent off for three years of education, after which they are brought back to the court. None of the proposals for resolving this difficulty is entirely convincing.

his heart pounded. Literally, "his spirit pounded." This is the same phrase used for Pharaoh's response to his two dreams and constitutes a clear allusion.

his sleep was ruined. This translation links the verb *nihyatah* with the noun *howah*, "disaster." Others emend it to read more smoothly *nadedah*, the verb for "wandering" sleep—that is, insomnia.

2. *the Chaldeans.* Because the Chaldeans were famous for their skills in soothsaying and divination, the ethnic name came to indicate those who practice these arts.

3. *wanting to know the dream.* The simplest reading is that he wanted to know the meaning of the dream, though some interpreters understand this, with a mind to his subsequent dialogue with the sages and Daniel, that he cannot remember the dream.

4. *And the Chaldeans spoke to the king in Aramaic.* This looks like an editorial contrivance to mark the transition from Hebrew to Aramaic. Afterward, everything is in Aramaic until the end of chapter 7. Aramaic, which by the sixth century B.C.E. was the lingua franca of the region, would have been the native tongue of the Chaldeans. It is unclear what language we are supposed to imagine was being spoken in the dialogues before this point—perhaps Akkadian but surely not Hebrew.

8. *I know that you are buying time.* Though this idiom may sound excessively contemporary in English, it is the precise literal sense of the Aramaic.

10. *There is no man on earth who can tell the word of the king.* They have asked that he report his dream to them so that they can interpret it, but he has confronted them with an absolutely unheard-of challenge: he expects them to know the contents of his dream without the slightest prompt from him and then to provide an interpretation. This is why they go on to say that only the gods who are not flesh and blood could answer such a challenge. In the event, it is Daniel's God who will reveal to him both the contents of the dream and its meaning.

13. *the sages were to be killed, and Daniel and his friends were to be killed.* Although the forms of the two verbs are different (the latter employs an auxiliary verb joined to "killed" in the reflexive infinitive), both must be construed, in light of what ensues, as actions about to happen but not yet

performed. Daniel and his friends are on the list of those to be executed because they have joined the group of the country's sages.

16. *that time be given him.* Though the sages have been accused by the king of buying time, Daniel now needs a brief span of time to pray to God that he be granted knowledge of the dream.

19. *the mystery revealed.* The two words, *razaʾ gali*, recur with variations throughout the story. They constitute an Aramaic equivalent of the etymological sense of "apocalypse" in Greek, and the dream itself proves to be incipiently apocalyptic.

21. *He changes the times and the seasons.* Just as God's power is manifested cosmically in the changing cycles of time and seasons, it is manifested politically as he "takes kings away and raises up kings." The dream will be about the displacement of one kingdom by another.

24. *Bring me before the king.* Here Daniel observes court protocol. In verse 16, he appears to have come into the royal presence uninvited, unless one infers an ellipsis there.

25. *There is a man . . . who will explain the meaning.* One of several indications that this is not a story that adheres to any realistic logic is that this high court official should be certain that a young Judahite exile can interpret the dream solely because he says he can.

26. *whose name was Belteshazzar.* This notation is introduced because Daniel would be called by his Babylonian name when brought before the king.

28. *there is a God in the heavens.* This designation, *ʾita ʾelah bishemaya* or, simply, *ʾelah shemaya*, is Daniel's way of referring for the benefit of the polytheist king to the one God of heaven and earth.

in the latter days. The phrase *ʾaḥarit yomaya* draws directly from the Hebrew *ʾaḥarit hayamim.* Although later this phrase comes to mean the eschatological "end of time," its biblical sense is something like "in time to come."

30. *that you may know your heart's thoughts.* There is an odd congruence here with the Freudian notion of dreams. The dreaming mind is a theater of vital revelation, but the dreamer himself cannot understand the meaning of the dream. For that he needs an expert interpreter.

31. *and look, a huge statue.* Going beyond Joseph, his prototype in Genesis, Daniel is able to envisage exactly what the king saw in his dream, just as the king had demanded of his sages.

32–33. *gold . . . silver . . . bronze . . . iron.* As we go down the body of the statue, the metals progressively decrease in value. The four metals linked with four ages obviously correspond to the progressive decline in Hesiod's *Works and Days.* Though it is possible that our late author actually read Hesiod (elsewhere in Daniel, Greek loanwords appear), the myth of the four ages and four kingdoms is equally attested in old Iranian literature, and it seems likely that it had some currency throughout the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East. In its Iranian version, the first kingdom is Assyria, but Daniel substitutes Babylon because it is the empire that subdued the kingdom of Judah. The other three, then, would be Media, Persia, and Greece. (Rashi and ibn Ezra see Rome as the fourth kingdom, in keeping with rabbinic historical typology, but Rome would be too late for inclusion in Daniel.)

33. *part iron and part clay.* The clay, of course, is the origin of the English idiom "feet of clay." The odd mixture of iron and clay suggests both that the fourth kingdom is powerfully destructive and easily broken.

34. *a stone hewed not by hands.* This is clearly a supernatural stone, one that in verse 35 will become a great mountain and fill all the earth.

37. *You are king, even king of kings, to whom the God of the heavens has given power and might and honor.* The opening words make Nebuchadnezzar sound virtually divine, but the words that follow put him in his place in the theological scheme of things—it is God alone who has granted this greatness to the king.

40. *iron shatters and splinters all things.* The terrific destructive force of the fourth kingdom reflects Alexander the Great's establishment through military might of a world empire and perhaps also the armed power of his warring heirs.

43. *they shall be mixed with human seed.* This clause is enigmatic. Some understand it to mean "they shall be mixed in marriage," referring to a matrimonial alliance between the Seleucids and the Ptolemys, but *zeraʿ* plainly means "seed," not marriage.

and shall not hold together. This definitely looks like a reference to the splitting of Alexander's empire, wrought in fierce iron, into three competing kingdoms, hence frangible as potter's clay.

44. *a kingdom that shall never be destroyed.* The establishment by God of an eternal kingdom on earth is a strongly messianic idea.

46. *he bowed down to Daniel.* This prostration before a human being, followed by offering to him grain and incense, may be understandable after Daniel has demonstrated such astounding visionary wisdom, but it looks suspect from a monotheistic point of view. The text, however, does not intimate any negative judgment of the act.

47. *In truth, your god is the God of gods.* The king appears to be a virtual convert to monotheism, though his phrasing may rather suggest that he acknowledges Daniel's god as superior to all others—the God of gods, just as he himself has been said to be the king of kings.

48. *all the province of Babylonia.* As in Esther, *medinah* (a Persian loanword) does not mean "kingdom" or "state" but "province." Babylonia is the principal province of the empire, but there are others.

49. *over the work of the province of Babylonia.* They appear to have responsibility over public projects, corvée labor, and the like, whereas Daniel is supervisor of the sages and operates in the court.

And Daniel served in the king's gate. "In the king's gate," *bitraʿ malkaʾ*, essentially means in the palace. The verb used here in the Aramaic is literally "was," for which "served" has been substituted in the translation to indicate that he is performing a function. Serving in the palace, Daniel is an intimate councillor of the king.

CHAPTER 3

[1]Nebuchadnezzar made a statue of gold, sixty cubits
high and six cubits wide. He set it up in the Dura
Valley in the province of Babylonia. [2]And
Nebuchadnezzar sent out to assemble the satraps, the
governors and officials, the councillors, the treasurers,
the judges, the commanders of the camps, and all the
administrators of the provinces to come for the
dedication of the statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had
set up. [3]Then did the satraps, the governors and
officials, the councillors, the judges, the commanders
of the camps, and all the administrators of the
provinces assemble for the dedication of the statue that
Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they were standing
before the statue that Nebuchadnezzar had set up.
[4]And the herald called out loudly: “To you, is it said,
peoples, nations, and tongues! [5]When you hear the
sound of the horn, the pipe, the lute, the zither, the
lyre, the flute, and all kinds of music, you shall fall
down and worship the gold statue that King
Nebuchadnezzar has set up. [6]And whoever does not

fall down at once shall be cast into the furnace of blazing fire.” [7]Therefore, when they would hear the sound of the horn, the pipe, the lute, the zither, the lyre, the flute, and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations, and tongues would at once worship the gold statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. [8]Because of this, at that time Chaldean men came forward and denounced the Jews. [9]They spoke out and said to King Nebuchadnezzar, “O king, may you live forever! [10]You, O king, put out a decree that any man who heard the sound of the horn, the pipe, the lute, the zither, the lyre, the flute, and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the gold statue. [11]And whoever did not fall down and worship would be cast into the furnace of blazing fire. [12]There are certain Jewish men whom you have appointed over the work of the province of Babylonia, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These have paid no heed to you, O king. They do not serve your god, and they do not worship the gold statue that you set up.” [13]Then did Nebuchadnezzar say in anger and fury to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Then were these men brought before the king. [14]Nebuchadnezzar spoke out and said to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you are not serving my god, and are not worshipping the gold statue that I put up?

[15]Now, if you are ready, when you hear the sound of the horn, the pipe, the lute, the zither, the lyre, the flute, and all kinds of music, and you worship the statue that I have made, [all will be well]. And if you do not worship, you will at once be thrown into the furnace of blazing fire, and who is the god who can save you from my hands?" [16]Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "We do not need to answer you about this matter. [17]If our God, Whom we serve, is able to save us from the furnace of blazing fire and from your hand, O king, He shall save us. [18]And if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we will not serve your god, and we will not worship the gold statue that you have set up." [19]Then was Nebuchadnezzar filled with wrath, and the look of his face changed because of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He spoke out and said to stoke the furnace seven times hotter than it was wont to be stoked. [20]And to the valiant warriors of his army, he said to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in order to throw them into the furnace of blazing fire. [21]Then were these men bound in their trousers, their tunics, their headgear, and their garments and were thrown into the furnace of blazing fire. [22]Therefore because the king's word was severe, and the furnace was intensely stoked, those men who had brought up Shadrach, Meshach,

and Abednego did the fire's flame kill. [23]And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the furnace of blazing fire. [24]Then was King Nebuchadnezzar astounded and arose in haste. He spoke out and said to his councillors, "Did we not throw three men bound into the fire?" They answered and said to the king, "Indeed, O king." [25]He answered and said, "Why, I see four men walking unbound within the fire, and there is no hurt in them, and the appearance of the fourth is like a divine being!" [26]Then did Nebuchadnezzar approach the gate of the furnace of blazing fire. He spoke out and said, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the most high God, come out!" Then did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego come out from within the fire. [27]And the satraps, governors, officials, and the king's councillors were assembled and saw these men, that the fire had no power over their bodies, and the hair on their heads was not singed, and their trousers were in no way different and the smell of fire had not touched them. [28]Nebuchadnezzar spoke out and said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, Who has sent His messenger and saved His servants who trusted in Him and defied the king's word and submitted their bodies, for they would not serve nor worship any god except their God. [29]And let a decree be set out by me

that any people, nation, or tongue that speaks ill of the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be cut to pieces and their house shall be turned into a dung-heap, for there is no other god that can rescue like this." [30]Then did the king exalt Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylonia: [31]"King Nebuchadnezzar, to all his people, nations, and tongues that dwell in all the earth, may your well-being abound. [32]The signs and wonders that the most high God has performed with me, it pleases me to tell.

[33]His signs, how great they are,
and His wonders, how powerful!
His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and his dominion for all generations."

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *a statue of gold, sixty cubits high.* Herodotus and other ancient sources in fact report monarchs erecting monumental statues to Zeus and other gods. In this case, the deity is not specified. Sixty cubits would make the statue in

question about eighty feet high. The width is too narrow to be proportionate, but the writer probably did not trouble himself about such details. It is often assumed that "gold" means gold-plated, but given the folktale quality of the whole story, perhaps we are intended to imagine that this fabulously extravagant statue was solid gold. The editorial placement of this story here may have been dictated by the statue with the gold head in the previous episode.

2. *the satraps, the governors and officials, the councillors.* The author of this story clearly revels in lists, first this one indicating the elaborate network of the royal bureaucracy and then the pomp and circumstance of the list of the musical instruments to be played at the dedication ceremony. Unlike classical biblical narrative, where with very few exceptions repetitions appear with significant and subtle swerves from the verbatim, here the lists are repeated exactly (one might say, mechanically). One should note that most of the bureaucratic titles here are Persian loanwords, and there are no borrowings from the Greek. Since Jews in the Hellenistic period were quite familiar with the titles of imperial functionaries and many of these terms are then reflected in the Talmud and the Midrash, it seems likely that the core of this particular story was formulated in the Persian period.

5. *the horn, the pipe, the lute, the zither.* The first two items in this list of instruments are indigenous Aramaic, but the next three are borrowings from the Greek. If the basic narrative of assembling all the officials for the dedication of the statue antedates Alexander's conquest of the Near East, the elaboration concerning the musical performance at the ceremony must have been composed in the Hellenistic period. These are wind and string instruments with no percussion instruments, but it is unclear whether that reflects the actual composition of orchestras in this period. The exact identification of all the instruments is not entirely clear. The fifth term in the list, *pesantrin*, was adopted in modern Hebrew as the word for "piano." The sixth term, *sumponia*, originally meant "musical harmony" in Greek, though it obviously names a musical instrument in this list, and "flute" in the translation is one guess among many that have been made.

fall down and worship the gold statue. There is no evidence here of Nebuchadnezzar's conversion to monotheism after Daniel's interpretation of his dream. This is one indication that this is an originally independent story.

6. *whoever does not fall down at once shall be cast into the furnace of blazing fire.* Such lethal cultic coercion was not generally practiced by pagan kings. Some commentators have detected here a reflection of the religious coercion of the Jews by Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the 160s B.C.E., but as John J. Collins has argued, that is not a necessary inference, especially since the edict is not directed specifically at the Jews. Instead, this may be a parable of the dangers of cultic assimilation in the situation of diaspora.

12. *There are certain Jewish men.* Since Daniel and his three friends have been presented as a tight group and all four have been given administrative posts in the imperial bureaucracy, the absence of Daniel's name here and throughout the chapter is another reflection that this story was not originally connected with the Daniel narrative.

15. *all will be well.* These words are supplied in the translation because there is a conditional clause in the Aramaic that appears to break off at this point.

17. *If our God . . . is able to save us . . . He shall save us.* The three young men are not entirely sure that they will be saved, but their devotion to God is so absolute that they are prepared to suffer the pangs of fiery death if divine rescue is not forthcoming. In all this, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are scarcely "characters," with an individual psychology, a personal history, and an intimated inner life like the characters in classical Hebrew narrative, but are rather exemplary figures on a didactic tale, perfect embodiments of unswerving allegiance to the one God. The willingness to accept martyrdom is also a new emphasis.

20. *to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.* This gratuitous command will compound the miracle. The death of prisoners flung into a fiery furnace would have been in any case certain, but these three are bound so that they can scarcely move about as they are—presumably—burned to a crisp.

21. *their trousers, their tunics, their headgear.* There is some ambiguity about the identification of these items of apparel. In any case, they are probably their wardrobe as court officials, now to be consigned to the fire together with their bodies.

22. *those men who had brought up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did the fire's flame kill.* This is not only a stroke of retribution against the henchmen of the pagan king, but also another compounding of the miracle that is about

to occur: the excessively stoked furnace sends flames shooting out its aperture that burn to death the royal agents, whereas the three Judahite exiles will prove to be unhurt in the very heart of the flames.

25. *I see four men walking unbound within the fire.* Although there are from time to time miraculous events in earlier biblical narrative, this late text drastically steps up the supernatural nature of the miracle. The prophet Elijah does ascend to heaven in a fiery chariot, but that is, after all, a translation from earthly existence to something beyond. In this story, on the other hand, human figures living in the here-and-now walk about in the intense flames, accompanied by a divine being, as though they were going for an evening stroll. Their bonds as well have miraculously disappeared, and even their garments, itemized above, have not been singed.

a divine being. The literal sense of the Aramaic is "son of God," but as with its Hebrew equivalent, which appears frequently in earlier biblical texts, the idiom does not suggest filial connection with God but rather belonging to the general category of celestial figures.

26. *the gate of the furnace.* Though most translations render this as "the door of the furnace," the Aramaic *tera'* clearly means "gate." What the writer may have envisaged is something like an iron grillwork gate over the front of the furnace. Apertures in the gate would have allowed the king and his entourage to enjoy the spectacle of the victims writhing as they are burned. Verse 25 indicates that the king can see what is going on inside the furnace, which would argue for a gate, not a solid door. It is perhaps through the apertures of the gate that flames shoot out to kill the men who have brought Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to the furnace.

the most high God. The Aramaic *ʾelaha ʿiliʾa* is a translation of the Hebrew *ʾel ʿelyon*. *ʿElyon* was originally the name of the Canaanite sky-god, but by this late period that origin was entirely obscured and the simple meaning of *ʿelyon* as "high" or "lofty" was firmly in place.

27. *and the smell of fire had not touched them.* This last detail reflects what might be characterized as the hyperbolic representation of the miraculous: not only were their bodies and their garments completely undamaged by the fire, but even the acrid smell of the fire had not attached itself to them.

28. *Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.* Perhaps one should not infer that the king had become a monotheist, owing fealty only to

the God of the heavens Who is the God of Israel. His language seems to suggest that this particular deity has manifested extraordinary power and therefore should be the object of reverence. (Compare the wording of the edict in the next verse.)

Who has sent His messenger. The king concludes that the mysterious fourth figure in the fiery furnace is a divine emissary who has saved the three young men.

29. *for there is no other god that can rescue like this.* The king's words seem to say that he recognizes the unique power of the God of Israel to effect miraculous salvation; but he does not necessarily renounce the belief in other gods, only concedes that they would not be as powerful as the God of the three exiled Judahites.

31. *King Nebuchadnezzar, to all his people, nations, and tongues that dwell in all the earth.* This is the formal heading of the decree that the king promulgates. The phrase "that dwell in all the earth" is a hyperbolic flourish: Nebuchadnezzar of course knows that there are other kingdoms, but the extent of his empire is so vast that it is as if it embraced all the earth.

may your well-being abound. These words of well-wishing conclude the formal heading of the edict.

32. *it pleases me to tell.* This phrase constitutes an appropriate introduction to the poem praising God that concludes the royal decree.

33. *His signs, how great they are.* The poetic flourish at the end is also a pointing of the moral in this theologically didactic tale: the most high God is to be praised because He manifests signs and wonders that are tokens of His everlasting dominion.

His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom / and his dominion for all generations. This line is an Aramaic translation of Psalm 145:13.

CHAPTER 4

[1]“I, Nebuchadnezzar, was tranquil in my house and
flourishing in my palace. [2]I saw a dream and it
frightened me, and thoughts upon my couch and
visions in my head panicked me. [3]By me has an edict
been issued for all the sages of Babylonia to come
before me, that they may make known to me the
meaning of the dream. [4]Then did the soothsayers,
wizards, Chaldeans, and diviners come, and I said the
dream to them, but its meaning they did not make
known to me. [5]And latterly, Daniel came before me,
whose name is [6]Belteshazzar, like the name of my god,
and in whom the spirit of the holy gods resides, and I
said the dream to him: ‘Belteshazzar, master
soothsayer, of whom I know that the spirit of the holy
gods resides in you and no mystery is withheld from
you, these are the visions of my dream that I saw, and
say its meaning. [7]And the visions in my head upon my
couch I saw, and, look, there was a tree in the earth
and its height was great. [8]The tree grew and became
mighty, and its top reached the heavens and its

branches to the end of all the earth. [9]Its foliage was
lovely and its fruit great, and there was food for all in
it. Beneath it the beasts of the field were shaded, and
in its branches the birds of the heavens dwelled, and all
flesh was nourished from it. [10]I saw among the visions
in my head, and, look, a holy emissary came down
from the heavens, [11]calling out loudly and thus saying,
“Cut down the tree, hack off its branches. Shake loose
its foliage and scatter its fruit. Let the beasts go off
from underneath it and the birds from its branches.
[12]But leave one of its roots in the ground and with a
chain of iron and bronze be it set in the grass of the
field, and by the dew of the heavens be it moistened
and with the beasts its portion in the grass of the earth.
[13]Its heart shall be changed from humankind, and a
beast’s heart shall be given to it, and seven seasons
shall pass over it. [14]By the decree of the divine
emissaries is the word, and the utterance of the holy
ones is the pronouncement, so that the living may
know that the Most High rules over the kingdom of
man, to whom He wills he gives it, and the lowliest of
men He shall raise up over it.” [15]This is the dream that
I, King Nebuchadnezzar, saw, and you, Belteshazzar,
say its meaning, for all the sages of my kingdom have
not been able to make its meaning known to me, but
you can, for the spirit of the holy gods resides within

you.’” [16]Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was astounded for about an hour, and his thoughts panicked him. The king spoke out and said, “Belteshazzar, let not the dream and its meaning panic you.” Belteshazzar answered and said, “My lord, may the dream be for your enemies and its meaning for your foes. [17]The tree that you saw, which was great and mighty and its height reached the heavens and its branches in all the earth, [18]and its foliage was lovely and its fruit great, and food for all in it, beneath it dwelled the beasts of the field and in its branches rested the birds of the heavens, [19]you are the king, who has become great and mighty, and your greatness has grown and reached to the heavens and its branches to all the earth. [20]And as to your seeing, O king, a holy emissary coming down from the heavens and saying, ‘Cut down the tree and destroy it but leave one of its roots in the ground, and with a chain of iron and bronze [set it] in the grass of the field and by the dew of the heavens let it be moistened and with the beasts of the field its portion, until seven seasons pass over it,’ [21]this is its meaning, O king, and the decree of the Most High that is to come upon my lord the king. [22]And you shall they banish from men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field, and grass like the ox shall they feed you, and from the dew of

the heavens shall they give you drink. And seven seasons shall pass over you until you know that the Most High rules over the kingdom of man and to whom He chooses He gives it. [23]And as to their saying to leave one of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall endure for you once you know that the heavens rule. [24]And yet, O king, let my counsel be pleasing to you, and redeem your offenses through righteousness, in showing kindness to the poor, let your tranquillity be prolonged. [25]All this is to come upon King Nebuchadnezzar." [26]At the end of the twelve months he was walking up on [the roof of] the royal palace of Babylon. [27]The king spoke out and said, "Is not this the great Babylon that I have built as the house of the kingdom in the might of my power and for the honor of my glory?" [28]The word was still in the mouth of the king when a voice fell from the heavens: "To you they say, King Nebuchadnezzar, the kingship has turned away from you. [29]And from man they shall banish you, and with the beasts of the field your dwelling, grass like the ox they shall feed you, and seven seasons shall pass over you until you know that the Most High rules over the kingdom of man and to whom He chooses He gives it." [30]At that very moment the word was fulfilled upon Nebuchadnezzar, and from man he was banished and he ate grass like the ox, and from the dew of the

heavens his body was moistened until his hair grew like eagles and his nails like birds. [31]And at the end of many days: “I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes to the heavens and my mind returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and extolled the Eternal One, whose dominion is an eternal dominion and His kingdom for all generations. [32]And all earth’s dwellers are counted as naught, and as He chooses He does with the array of the heavens and earth’s dwellers, and there is none who can protest against Him and say to Him, ‘What have You done?’ [33]At that very moment my mind returned to me, and the glory of my kingdom, my grandeur and my splendor, returned to me, and me did my councillors and my nobles seek out, and I was set up over my kingdom, and exceeding greatness was added to me. [34]Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of the Heavens, all of Whose acts are truth and Whose paths are justice, and Who can bring low those who go about in pride.”

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *I, Nebuchadnezzar.* Despite the late medieval chapter divisions, most modern scholars plausibly conclude that the epistolary formulation of 3:31–

33 is actually the beginning of the royal message to the people of the realm that continues here. The first-person narrative that follows is a form that would have been unusual in earlier biblical literature.

3. *for all the sages of Babylonia to come before me.* The setup of this story is patently devised as a parallel to the story of the interpretation of the king's dream in chapter 2, where after all the sages of the realm are summoned and prove unable to interpret the dream, Daniel is brought in and provides an authoritative interpretation.

5. *whose name is Belteshazzar, like the name of my god.* The king of course refers to and addresses Daniel with his Babylonian name. Underscoring Daniel's Babylonian acculturation, the king asserts, in what is actually a false etymology, that the beginning of the name is derived from Bel, the Babylonian god.

7. *the visions in my head upon my couch I saw.* Though the formulation sounds a little odd to modern ears, the fixed assumption in the Bible is that dreaming is above all a visual experience, so that a person is said to "see a dream."

8. *The tree grew and became mighty, and its top reached the heavens.* Behind this vision are ancient Near Eastern traditions of a cosmic tree. In this instance, however, the tree represents Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom, which in fact was characterized hyperbolically by the sundry Babylonian emperors as reaching the heavens and extending to the ends of the earth. "Mighty" may seem to be a strange adjective for a tree but is influenced by the reference to empire.

its branches. The Aramaic *hazoteih* seems to mean "appearance," which does not make the best sense in context, but there is a homonym with the same root, also attested in Hebrew, that means something like "tangle of branches."

10. *a holy emissary.* Many modern interpreters read the noun here, *ʿir*, as "watcher," deriving it from *ʿer*, "awake." The grounds for this understanding are not conclusive. It is at least as likely that *ʿir* is an Aramaic cognate of the Hebrew *tsir*, "emissary." (Phonetically the Hebrew consonant *tsadeh* converts to the Aramaic *ayin*.)

12. *with a chain of iron and bronze be it set in the grass.* It is altogether unclear what a metal chain is doing tied to the root of a tree, and attempts to rescue the meaning of the received text are unconvincing. One suspects that a small fragment from a different vision extrudes in the text here.

13. *Its heart shall be changed from humankind.* One should keep in mind that in the biblical view the heart is primarily the seat of understanding, so what is indicated is a loss of reason.

seven seasons. The time span marked by the Aramaic *ʿidanin* is not altogether clear, but though it is not the ordinary word for "years," it probably refers here to a period of seven years during which the king is to be reduced to a condition of bestial irrationality.

14. *so that the living may know that the Most High rules over the kingdom of man.* This is the great recurring theme of Daniel, an idea nurtured when the Jews were under the dominion of overpowering empires—Babylonian, Persian, Greek. Human dominion is transient and contingent, a mere mirage in comparison with the dominion of God.

15. *the spirit of the holy gods.* As above, the king uses appropriate polytheistic language, though he will ultimately be compelled to recognize the undisputed supremacy of "the Most High."

16. *Daniel . . . was astounded for about an hour.* Unlike his earlier act of dream interpretation, at first he is daunted by the enigmatic character of the dream, and only after taking some time to collect his exegetical powers and after being encouraged by the king does he propose the interpretation.

the dream be for your enemies and its meaning for your foes. This is a diplomatic way of saying that the portent of the dream is a disaster, and one wishes it had been for Nebuchadnezzar's enemies and not for him.

17. *which was great and mighty and its height reached the heavens.* The narrative here again follows the procedure we have observed before in the verbatim repetition of details.

22. *you shall they banish from men.* This is the heart of the prophetic meaning of the dream. It is also the point at which it becomes clear that this whole story was not originally about Nebuchadnezzar. There are no ancient reports of Nebuchadnezzar's leaving his throne for an extended period. There are, on the other hand, such reports about his successor several decades later

in the sixth century B.C.E., Nabonides. He seems to have been incapacitated from exercising kingship for a period of about ten years, which here, in accordance with the general use of formulaic numbers in the Bible, is rounded down to seven ("seasons" or "times," but very likely in the sense of "years"). Further confirmation is offered by a fragmentary text found at Qumran that scholars call the Prayer of Nabonides. In this text, Nabonides prays to be healed from an evil disease with which he has been stricken. If the details of Daniel reflect something of the historical facts, Nabonides would have been suffering from some psychological illness, a kind of long psychotic break that took away his reason. The author of our story interprets this episode of mental disturbance as a powerful demonstration of God's ability to bring the mighty low, to reduce to bestiality or raise up again the most imposing of monarchs. An editor probably substituted the name of Nebuchadnezzar for Nabonides in order to align this story with the previous episodes. The moral is spelled out at the end of verse 22 and in the king's confession of faith in the power of the Most High in verses 31–32.

24. *through righteousness.* Many scholars contend that *tsidqah* (Hebrew *tsedaqah*) here shows the rabbinic use of the word to mean "charity," as the parallel phrase, "showing kindness to the poor," may indicate. It is worth noting that many of the formulations in this episode are framed in semantically parallel statements that are close to poetry, and some scholars in fact set out much of the king's epistle as formal verse.

26. *he was walking up on [the roof of] the royal palace.* The preposition in the original is clearly "on," so the implication is that he was walking on the roof. The roof would have given him a vantage point to look out upon the splendors of his royal city, as in fact he does in the next verse.

27. *the great Babylon.* The Aramaic is *Bavel rabta'*. The Hebrew cognate of this adjective is several times attached to great cities elsewhere in the Bible. Nebuchadnezzar was in fact famous for his grand building projects, which here he contemplates.

28. *The word was still in the mouth of the king.* The king's pride in the imposing edifices he has put up is a manifestation of hubris, and so this is the propitious moment for him to be stricken in the fashion that has been prophesied in his dream.

30. *from man he was banished and he ate grass like the ox.* The writer hews to his commitment to repeat verbatim what has been said before (said twice): his is a world of oracular predictions and perfect fulfillments, and the exact repetition expresses this absolute correspondence between the two. In Daniel's world, there is really no wiggle room for human freedom; everything plays out according to God's predestined plan that is an essential aspect of the apocalyptic worldview. The only textual detail here that goes beyond repetition is the wild growth of the king's hair and nails, which simply elaborates the idea that there is no distance between him and the beasts.

31. *at the end of many days.* This would be at the end of the seven seasons or years, when the king through his purgatorial experience comes to recognize his subservience to God.

32. *with the array of the heavens and earth's dwellers.* God's unchallenged dominion, he now sees, extends not only over all the earth but even over the heavens, where He commands the heavenly armies, which are both the stars and the angels.

34. *Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of the Heavens.* This whole concluding speech is often characterized as a doxology. The term is apt, for this story, like the others in Daniel, turns on creating circumstances that drive the character to a formal affirmation of a theological principle. There is very little that resembles this in earlier biblical narrative, where complexities and ambiguities of character preclude this sort of flat confession of faith.

CHAPTER 5

[1]King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of
his nobles, and before the thousand he drank wine.
[2]With the wine on his tongue, Belshazzar said to bring
the vessels of gold and silver that Nebuchadnezzar his
father had taken away from the Temple in Jerusalem
so that the king and his nobles, his wives, and his
concubines might drink from them. [3]Then did they
bring the vessels of gold that had been taken away
from the temple of the house of God in Jerusalem, and
the king and his nobles, his wives, and his concubines,
drank from them. [4]They drank the wine and praised
the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and
stone. [5]At that very moment, the fingers of a man's
hand came out and wrote before the lampstand on the
plaster of the wall of the king's palace, and the king
saw the palm of the hand that was writing. [6]Then did
the king's countenance change and his thoughts
panicked him, and the cords of his loins went slack
and his knees knocked together. [7]The king called out
loudly to bring in his magicians, Chaldeans, and

diviners. The king spoke out and said to the sages of Babylonia, “Whichever man reads this writing and tells me its meaning shall wear royal purple and have a golden collar round his neck and rule over a third of the kingdom.” [8]Then did the king’s sages come in, but they could not read the writing nor make its meaning known to the king. [9]Then did King Belshazzar greatly panic and his countenance changed, and his nobles were confounded. [10]Because of the words of the king and his nobles, the queen came into the banquet hall. The queen spoke out and said, “May the king live forever! Let not your thoughts panic you, nor your countenance change. [11]There is a man in your kingdom in whom the spirit of the holy gods resides, and in your father’s days enlightenment and understanding and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him. And King Nebuchadnezzar your father raised him up as master of the soothsayers, the magicians, the Chaldeans, the diviners, [12]because exceeding spirit and knowledge and understanding to interpret dreams and explain enigmas and untie knotty matters were found in Daniel, to whom the king gave the name of Belteshazzar. Now, let Daniel be called and he will tell its meaning.” [13]Then was Daniel brought in before the king. The king spoke out and said, “You are Daniel, who is of the exiles from Judah whom my father

brought from Judah. [14]And I have heard of you that the spirit of the gods resides within you and that enlightenment and understanding and exceeding wisdom are found within you. [15]And now, the sages and the magicians were brought in before me, that they should read this writing and make its meaning known to me, but they could not tell the thing's meaning. >[16]And I have heard of you that you can interpret meanings and untie knotty matters. Now, if you can read the writing and make its meaning known to me, you shall wear royal purple and a golden collar shall be round your neck, and over a third of the kingdom you shall rule." [17]Then did Daniel speak out and say before the king, "Let your gift be yours, and your presents give to another. I shall read the writing and the meaning I shall make known to the king. [18]You, O king, the Most High God gave kingship and greatness and honor and glory to Nebuchadnezzar your father. [19]And because of the greatness that He gave him, all people, nations, and tongues were trembling and fearful before him. Whom he would will he would slay and whom he would will he would let live, and whom he would will he would raise up and whom he would will he would bring low. [20]And when his heart was overweening and his spirit grew mighty in defiance, he was taken down from his royal throne and his glory

was removed from him. [21]And he was driven from humankind, and his heart was leveled with the beasts and his dwelling was with the wild asses. Grass like the oxen they fed him, and from the dew of the heavens his body was moistened, until he knew that the Most High God rules over the kingdom of man, and whom He will He raises over it. [22]And you, his son Belshazzar, your heart has not been humbled though you have known all this. [23]And against the LORD of the heavens you have exalted yourself, and you brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your nobles, your wives, and your concubines drank wine in them, and you praised gods of silver and gold, bronze, wood, and stone, who do not see and do not hear and do not know. And the God in Whose hand is your life-breath and all your ways are His, you did not glorify. [24]Then before Him was sent the palm of a hand and this writing was inscribed. [25]And this is the writing that was inscribed: *mene mene teqal ufarsin.* [26]This is the meaning of the word: *mene*, God has numbered your kingship and brought it to an end. [27]*Teqal*, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. [28]*Peras*, your kingdom has been broken apart and given to Media and Persia." [29]Then Belshazzar spoke, and they clothed Daniel in royal purple and put a golden collar round his neck and

proclaimed of him that he should rule over a third of the kingdom. [30]On that very night Belshazzar king of the Chaldeans was slain. [6:1]And Darius the Mede received the kingdom when he was sixty-two years old.

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *King Belshazzar made a great feast.* As with other details of court life in the early chapters of Daniel, this feasting with extravagant consumption of wine sounds more Persian than Babylonian.

2. *With the wine on his tongue.* The literal sense of the Aramaic is "in the taste of the wine."

the vessels of gold and silver. To use the sacred vessels from the Jerusalem temple for drunken carousing is, of course, an act of sacrilege, and it will spell the king's doom.

Nebuchadnezzar his father. This is another instance of the scrambling, or perhaps schematization, of the royal line in Daniel. Belshazzar was the son of Nabonides, and he actually was never king, only regent during his father's ten-year absence from the court. Nabonides, not Belshazzar, was the last Babylonian king. In fact, the two were not descendants of Nebuchadnezzar: after the death of Nebuchadnezzar's son-in-law, who had succeeded him, Nabonides assumed the throne in a palace coup.

4. *praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.* There is a small irony in their worshipping gods of gold and silver as they drink from the sacred vessels fashioned from gold and silver. The catalogue of materials from which idols are made then proceeds in descending order of value to bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

5. *the fingers of a man's hand.* Though the "finger of God" appears in the Exodus story, it is essentially metaphorical. This sort of spooky, quasimagical

apparition is not characteristic of earlier biblical narrative.

before the lampstand. The likely reason for this detail is that the writing on the wall is thus fully illuminated, so the visual legibility of the letters is not the issue.

6. *countenance.* The literal sense is "radiance," and the term is probably related to the rabbinic *ziw panim*, "radiance of the face."

the cords of his loins went slack and his knees knocked together. The loins are imagined in biblical usage as the seat of strength. This physical realization of the king's dismay is unusual and virtually satiric.

7. *reads this writing and tells me its meaning.* Throughout the story, there are two challenges—reading the writing and saying what it means. Since the sages would surely have been able to read the alphabet shared by Aramaic and Hebrew, it may be that this super-natural inscription used a cryptic script.

a golden collar. This probably alludes to the regal ornament placed around Joseph's neck in Genesis 41:42. To judge by Egyptian paintings and archaeological finds, that was a kind of collar, coming down over the upper chest, and not a chain.

10. *the queen.* Since it seems improbable that the queen would know about Daniel while the king would not, this is in all likelihood the queen mother. (In the false genealogy of the story, she is Nebuchadnezzar's wife and Belshazzar's mother, who would have known firsthand of Daniel's wisdom through the previous episodes.)

May the king live forever. This is the same blessing Bathsheba pronounces to the aged and decrepit David. It turns into an irony here because he dies that night.

12. *untie knotty matters.* The same idiom, *meshareʾ qitrin*, that was used for the slackening of the cords of the king's loins (verse 6) is now used antithetically to express not weakness but strength in unraveling mysteries.

14. *And I have heard of you.* Once again, our writer exhibits his proclivity for verbatim repetition by deploying virtually the same string of epithets for Daniel's wisdom that the queen mother used.

17. *Let your gift be yours.* That is, keep all your gifts; my sole interest in deciphering the writing on the wall is to act as a mouthpiece for the Most High and to display the special wisdom He has implanted in me.

19. *Whom he would will he would slay and whom he would will he would let live.* Since these phrases and the ones that follow are typically attached to God in Psalms and elsewhere, it sounds as though the king were exercising godlike power. In the event, his successor to the throne will prove powerless before God.

20. *he was taken down from his royal throne and his glory was removed from him.* This and what follows in the next verse correspond to the story told in chapter 4, which applies historically not to Nebuchadnezzar but to Nabonides.

23. *who do not see and do not hear and do not know.* This mocking characterization of the inert idols is a near quotation of Psalm 115:5–6.

24. *Then before Him was sent the palm of a hand.* This formulation of indirect agency with the passive mode of the verb reflects a growing tendency in the Late Biblical period to avoid attributing anthropomorphic acts directly to God: it is God's initiative, but the disembodied hand is somehow "sent" from before the divine presence.

25. *this is the writing that was inscribed.* Daniel's wording suggests that the script itself was not intelligible to others, so he begins by reading out the four words. Since *mene* is repeated, there are actually only three words, but in all likelihood the writer wanted four in order to make the prophecy correspond to the paradigm of the four kingdoms.

26. mene. This is a recognizable Aramaic verb that means "to count" or "to number." But it has been widely recognized since the nineteenth century that the three words point to a prophecy that is not mainly focused on Belshazzar's personal fate. The three words are the names of three ancient coins: the *mina*, a valuable coin worth sixty shekels; the shekel (*teqal* is the Aramaic equivalent to that Hebrew term, *sh* in Hebrew converting to *t* in Aramaic); and the *peras*, which is a half-shekel (the verbal root, as is evident in Daniel's interpretation, means "to break apart"). In rabbinic Hebrew, this verbal stem is used for breaking bread.

28. *your kingdom has been broken apart.* In the paradigm of the four kingdoms, forced though it may be here, Nebuchadnezzar is the high-value *mina*, Belshazzar is the shekel, and when Babylonia is conquered, the kingdom breaks into two parts, Persia and Media (which does not entirely fit the historical facts). The form of the fourth term (dropping the prefix *u* for

"and") as Daniel reads it was *parsin*; now it is modified to *peras* to bring it close in form to the Hebrew and Aramaic name for Persia. (The form in verse 25, *ufarsin*, shows an *f*, dictated by the fact that this consonant is preceded by a vowel there, but it is the same Hebrew letter, *peh*.).

29. *they clothed Daniel in royal purple.* It may seem odd that he should be rewarded rather than beheaded for bringing so dire a message to the king. Of course, our story needs a happy ending from the Jewish point of view, but perhaps we are to infer that Belshazzar is exercising an honorable sense of fairness: he promised all this grandeur to the person who succeeded in telling him the meaning of the writing on the wall, and this Daniel has managed to do, however ominous the writing.

30. *On that very night Belshazzar king of the Chaldeans was slain.* As Collins notes, this instant fulfillment of Belshazzar's punishment has a folkloric look. The ancient Greek historians do report that Babylonia was overwhelmed by a surprise attack. In any case, the defeated king was Nabonides

6:1. *And Darius the Mede received the kingdom.* This notation of the transfer of power clearly marks the end of this story, despite its later editorial placement at the beginning of a new chapter. The attribution of the conquest of the Babylonian empire to Darius is still another confusion. Cyrus was the conqueror, and in any case Darius was a Persian, not a Mede. The writer needs to insert a Mede in order to arrive at four kingdoms, and he has in mind biblical prophecies (e.g., Jeremiah 51:11) that the Medes destroyed Babylonia.

sixty-two years old. The historical Darius was considerably younger when he began his reign.

CHAPTER 6

[2]It pleased Darius to raise up one hundred twenty satraps to be throughout his kingdom, [3]and above them three overseers, of whom Daniel was one, to whom these satraps would report, that the king should not be troubled. [4]Then was this Daniel preeminent among the overseers and the satraps, for there was exceptional spirit in him, and the king thought to raise him up over the whole kingdom. [5]Then the overlords and the satraps were seeking to find some pretext against Daniel in regard to the kingdom, but no pretext nor corruption could they find, for he was faithful, and no fault nor corruption was found in him. [6]Then these men said that “no pretext was found against this Daniel, but we have found one against him in the law of his god.” [7]Then did these overseers and satraps come in a crowd to the king and thus said to him, “King Darius, live forever! [8]All the overseers of the kingdom, the governors and the satraps and councillors, have resolved to issue a royal vow and to enforce a binding edict that for thirty days whoever

asks a petition of any god or man other than you, O king, shall be thrown into the lions' den. [9]Now, O king, you should issue the binding edict and put it down in writing that is not to be changed, according to the law of Media and Persia that shall not be transgressed." [10]Because of this, King Darius indited the writ of the binding decree. [11]And when Daniel knew that the writ was indited, he went into his house, and it had windows in its upper chamber open toward Jerusalem, and three times daily he would fall to his knees and pray and give thanks before his God just as he had done in time past. [12]Then did these men come in a crowd and find Daniel petitioning and imploring his God. [13]Then they approached and said before the king, "About the binding edict, O king, did you not indite a binding edict that any man who petitioned any god or man for thirty days other than you, O king, should be thrown into the lions' den?" The king answered and said, "The word is right according to the law of Media and Persia, which cannot be transgressed." [14]Then did they answer and say before the king that "Daniel, who is of the exiles of Judah, has paid no heed to you, O king, nor to the binding edict that you indited, and three times daily he makes his petition." [15]Then when the king heard the word, it was very dire for him and he set his mind on Daniel to save him, and till sunset

he was striving to rescue him. [16]Then these men came in a crowd to the king and said to the king, “Know, O king, that it is a rule of Media and Persia that any binding edict or vow that the king issues cannot be changed.” [17]Then the king said, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions’ den. The king spoke out and said to Daniel, “Your god whom you always worship will save you.” [18]And a stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his signet and with the signet of his nobles, that nothing should be changed regarding Daniel. [19]Then did the king go to his palace and fast through the night, and no banquet table was set before him, and his sleep went wandering from him. [20]Then did the king rise with the light at dawn and in a rush went to the lions’ den. [21]And as he approached the den, he shouted to Daniel with a sad voice, the king spoke out and said to Daniel, “Daniel, servant of the living god! Your god whom you worship always, can He have saved you from the lions?” [22]Then did Daniel speak with the king: “O king, live forever! [23]My God sent His messenger and he shut the lions’ mouths and they did not harm me because I was found innocent before Him, and also before you, O king, no harm have I done.” [24]Then was the king very content, and he said to bring up Daniel from the den. And Daniel was brought

up from the den, and no harm was found in him, for he had trusted in his God. [25]And then the king said, and they brought those men who had slandered Daniel and they threw them into the lions' den, them and their children and their wives. They had barely touched the bottom of the den when the lions overwhelmed them and crunched all their bones. [26]Then King Darius wrote to all the peoples, nations, and tongues that dwelled in all the land: "Great peace to you! [27]By me an edict has been issued that in all the realm of my kingdom people shall fear and tremble before the God of Daniel,

for He is the living God
and endures forever,
and His kingdom shall not be
destroyed,
and His dominion until the
end.

[28]He saves and rescues and does signs and wonders in the heavens and on earth, Who has saved Daniel from the lions." [29]And this Daniel prospered in the reign of Darius and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian.

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *one hundred twenty satraps.* Herodotus reported that there were twenty satraps. The inflated number recalls the formulaic 120 years that is the ideally long life span, that of Moses.

4. *Then was this Daniel preeminent among the overseers.* The ascendancy in the royal administration of a man perceived to be a foreigner clearly kindles the jealousy of the overseers and the satraps and gives them a motive to do away with Daniel.

5. *was found in him.* One might note the rather flaccid repeated use of the serve-all verb "was found." The author of this story is not a great Aramaic stylist.

6. *the law of his god.* The word for "law" or "rule" is a Persian loanword, *dat*, that is also used frequently in Esther. Collins renders it here as "religious practice," and the present context does in fact seem to edge the term in the direction of its meaning in later Hebrew, "religion."

8. *All the overseers of the kingdom, the governors and the satraps and councillors, have resolved.* The notion that irrevocable royal edicts could be initiated by government bureaucrats in the Persian empire is historically quite unlikely.

for thirty days whoever asks a petition of any god or man other than you. This is another historical improbability. Darius never claimed divine status for himself and so was unlikely to have denied his subjects the right to petition their gods, not to speak of petitioning a person who held power over them. And if in fact Darius was to be treated as the godlike monarch of all he surveyed, why limit the ban to thirty days?

the lions' den. The Aramaic *guba'* (cognate to the Hebrew *geiv*) is actually a pit, but the translation respects the proverbial force of "Daniel in the lions' den."

9. *that is not to be changed.* As with the authorization to massacre the Jews in Esther, this story turns on the fiction that no royal decree in the Persian

empire could be revoked. Such a practice is extremely unlikely, and the writer may have picked up the idea from Esther.

11. *windows in its upper chamber open toward Jerusalem.* This is the only moment when anything other than diaspora existence is envisaged. Jews to this day face toward Jerusalem when they pray, and the present text suggests the practice may go back to the Late Biblical period. Facing Jerusalem, of course, does not necessarily mean going back there.

three times daily he would fall to his knees. Three daily prayers became the standard practice in later Judaism, but it is unclear whether the notation here reflects the beginning of that practice or is merely meant to indicate Daniel's persistent piety.

14. *Daniel, who is of the exiles of Judah.* As Collins observes, they do not mention his office but only the fact that he is a foreigner.

15. *it was very dire for him.* Literally, "it was very evil for him." The king likes and admires Daniel, but he has been trapped by his councillors because the royal decree is irrevocable, as his officials emphatically point out to him in the next verse.

till sunset he was striving to rescue him. What this must mean is that he was trying to think of some way out of the terrible quandary.

18. *the king sealed it with his signet.* Presumably, the king's seal on the stone is a sign that no man may dare to roll the stone away.

19. *banquet table.* The Aramaic *daḥawan* is obscure. The idea that it refers to a table goes back to Rashi and is supported by some modern scholars; others think it may mean "diversions" or even "dancing girls."

his sleep went wandering from him. This is the vivid literal sense of the Aramaic (and Hebrew) idiom for insomnia.

20. *rise with the light at dawn.* This early rising of the sleepless king is clearly an expression of his acute anxiety about Daniel's fate.

21. *as he approached the den, he shouted to Daniel.* The king is sorely afraid that Daniel has been torn to shreds, and so he shouts to Daniel as he comes near, hoping against hope that he will get a response. If not, he may choose not to have the stone rolled back.

23. *My God sent His messenger and he shut the lions' mouths.* Efforts to explain this naturalistically—for example, the king may have had the lions fed

before Daniel was thrown into their den—are dubious. As with the Ten Plagues in Exodus, the writer manifestly wants to present this event as a miracle, enabled by an emissary sent by God.

24. *Then was the king very content.* Literally, "then was it very good for the king."

bring up Daniel from the den. The verb used is a clear indication that the den is conceived as a pit.

25. *them and their children and their wives.* The retribution, as in the story of Achan's violation of the ban in Joshua 7, is swift and savage: not only are the scheming councillors fed to the lions but so are their entire families.

27. *in all the realm of my kingdom people shall fear and tremble before the God of Daniel.* The monotheistic wish-fulfillment fantasy is especially prominent at this point. Unlike the previous stories, the king in this instance does not merely recognize the supreme power of Daniel's God but enjoins the worship of this God on all his subjects. There is, of course, no way in which such an act could have a historical basis.

for He is the living God / and endures forever. In the ceremonial flourish of the royal edict, the language moves into formal verse, using in the Aramaic epithets for God that appear frequently in the Hebrew poetry of the Bible. The rhythms of the next verse, which concludes the edict, are looser, and so that sentence has not been set out as poetry in this translation.

29. *in the reign of Darius and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian.* The order of the two emperors suggests that Cyrus came after Darius, though in point of historical fact, Cyrus preceded him. The reason for this reversal is that the writer wants to preserve the paradigm of the four kingdoms: Darius is supposed (falsely) to be a Mede, which is why Cyrus is then identified as "the Persian."

CHAPTER 7

[1]In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylonia
Daniel saw a dream and the visions in his head on his
couch. Thus he wrote down the dream, the beginning
of the words he said. [2]Daniel spoke out and said: “I
was seeing in my vision by night, and, look, the four
winds of the heavens were rippling the Great Sea.
[3]And four great beasts were coming out of the sea,
each different from the others. [4]The first was like a
lion, and it had eagle’s wings. I was watching till its
wings pulled apart and it was lifted from the earth and
made to stand on its legs like a man, and a man’s heart
was given to it. [5]And, look, a second beast resembling
a bear, and on one side it was made to stand, and three
ribs were in its mouth between its teeth, and thus were
they saying to it: ‘Arise, consume much flesh.’ [6]After
this I was watching, and, look, another like a leopard,
and it had four bird’s wings on its back, and the beast
had four heads, and dominion was given to it. [7]After
this I was seeing among the visions of the night, and,
look, a fourth beast, fearsome and terrifying and

exceedingly powerful, and it had great iron teeth. It
was devouring and mangling, and the remains at its
feet it trampled, and it was different from all the beasts
before it, and it had ten horns. [8]I was watching the
horns, and, look, another small horn came up among
them, and three of the previous horns were torn out
before it, and, look, eyes like a man's eyes were in this
horn and a mouth uttering overweening things. [9]I was
looking, until thrones were cast down and the Ancient
of Days took His seat. His garment was like white
snow and the hair of His head like pure wool, His
throne tongues of flame, its wheels burning fire. [10]A
river of fire was flowing and went out before Him.
Thousands upon thousands ministered to Him, and
myriad upon myriad stood before Him. The court was
seated and the books were opened. [11]I was looking—
then from the sound of the overweening words that the
horn was uttering I looked till the beast was slain and
its body destroyed and consigned to the burning fire.
[12]As to the remaining beasts, their dominion was taken
over, and an extension of life was given to them for a
time and season. [13]I was seeing in the visions of the
night and, look, with the clouds of the heavens one like
a human being was coming, and he reached the
Ancient of Days, and they had him approach before
Him. [14]And to him were given dominion and honor

and kingship, and all the people, nations, and tongues
did serve him. His dominion is an everlasting
dominion that will not pass away and his kingdom will
not be destroyed. [15]I, Daniel, my spirit was downcast
within me and the visions within my head panicked
me. [16]I approached one of those standing there and
asked of him the truth about all this, and he spoke to
me and made known to me the meaning of the things.
[17]‘These great beasts, which are four—four kings shall
rise up from the earth, [18]and the holy ones of the Most
High shall receive the kingdom and take possession of
the kingdom forever and forever.’ [19]Then I wanted the
truth about the fourth beast that was different from all
of them, exceedingly fearsome—its teeth of iron and
its claws of bronze, consuming and mangling and
trampling what remained with its feet. [20]And
concerning the ten horns that were on its head and
another that came up and three fell before it, and that
horn had eyes and a mouth uttering overweening
things, and its appearance was greater than its fellows.
[21]I was watching, and that horn did battle with the holy
ones and prevailed over them. [22]Until the Ancient of
Days came and meted out justice for the holy ones of
the Most High, and the time came when the holy ones
took possession of the kingdom. [23]Thus did he say:
‘The fourth beast is the fourth kingdom that shall be

on the earth, which shall be different from all the kingdoms and shall consume all the earth and shall harrow it and grind it to dust. [24]And the ten horns from that kingdom, ten kings shall arise, and another shall arise after them, and he shall be different from those before him, and three kings shall he bring low, [25]and he shall utter words against the Most High and afflict the holy ones, and he shall think to change the times and the law. And they shall be given in his hand for a season, a season, and a half-season. [26]And the court shall be seated, and they shall take away his dominion, destroying and expunging to the end. [27]And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of all kingdoms under the heavens shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High. Its kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve it and obey it. [28]This marks the end of the matter.' I, Daniel, my thoughts sorely panicked me and my countenance changed, and I kept the matter in my heart."

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Daniel saw a dream.* This marks a new stage in the book. Though the present chapter shares with previous ones enigmatic dream-symbols and the

paradigm of the four kingdoms, here Daniel is the recipient of the dream-vision and not the interpreter of the king's dream. In the next verse, Daniel will become the first-person narrator of his dream, another feature that sets this apart from what has preceded. As we shall see, the nature of this dream also differs from the previous dreams.

the beginning of the words he said. This is a literal rendering of the Aramaic. The sense appears to be: he began to speak.

2. *the four winds of the heavens.* The phrase also indicates the four directions of the compass. It sets the scene in cosmic terms.

3. *four great beasts were coming out of the sea.* The ultimate background of this moment is Canaanite cosmogonic myth, which our author would have known only through intermediaries, whether cultic or literary. This is precisely the case for the Job poet, who makes abundant use of Canaanite mythology. In the Canaanite myth, a fearsome sea-monster (Lotan or Leviathan or Yamm) rises to do battle with the weather god of the land. Here the beast is multiplied to four in order to correspond to the four kingdoms. The strong scholarly consensus is that the four beasts represent, in chronological order: Babylonia, Media, Persia, and Greece.

4. *a lion.* The first three beasts are all beasts of prey, suggesting the power and destructive force of these empires. But the lion and the leopard are also regal heraldic animals, emblems of the glory of empire.

6. *four bird's wings on its back.* Like the lion with eagle's wings, this image of a sphinxlike winged beast is a common element in ancient Near Eastern iconography from Egypt to Mesopotamia.

four heads. The imagery of the beasts becomes progressively phantasmagoric (by comparison, the image of the bear with ribs between its teeth is relatively realistic). This movement will culminate in the utterly fantastic fourth beast.

7. *fearsome and terrifying and exceedingly powerful.* This most menacing of the beasts represents Greece, with the persecutions of the Jewish population around 167 B.C.E. particularly in mind, according to the view of most scholars. Hence the iron teeth and the devouring and mangling and trampling.

ten horns. At least some interpreters conclude that these are ten successive Seleucid kings.

8. *another small horn came up among them.* The last horn probably represents Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the perpetrator of the persecutions and the suppressor of the Jewish cult. Collins proposes that the adjective "small" is a gesture of contempt.

three of the previous horns were torn out before it. These are three claimants to the throne eliminated and supplanted by Antiochus Epiphanes.

9. *the Ancient of Days took His seat.* At this point, in contrast to the earlier dream-visions, the scene becomes explicitly apocalyptic. God Himself enters the picture, seated on a throne, clothed in glorious white raiment, to mete out judgment. History is to take a decisive and irreversible turn through spectacular divine intervention. The apocalyptic note aligns this chapter with the second half of Daniel, while its being written in Aramaic—all that follows will be in Hebrew—serves as a bridge between the first half of the book and the second.

10. *Thousands upon thousands ministered to Him.* All this celestial glory constitutes an implicit rejoinder to the power of earthly empires that has just been symbolically evoked: the court of even the greatest emperor is a mean and minuscule thing in comparison with the court of the Ancient of Days, with its untold thousands of celestial ministrants, its throne with wheels of fire, the river of fire that flows out from it.

11. *the beast was slain.* The last and most vicious of earthly kingdoms is annihilated by God.

13. *one like a human being.* The translation avoids "like the son of man" because of its strong, and debatable, tilt toward a messianic interpretation. If traditional Christian interpreters have understood this is a reference to Christ, some Jewish interpreters have seen it as a collective representation of the Jewish people, which is equally unlikely. Collins, after a thorough and scrupulous survey of all the possible readings, plausibly concludes that the term refers to an angelic being, most likely Michael, descending onto the scene "with the clouds." This would explain the force of "like"—this figure looks like a human being but is more than that.

14. *His dominion is an everlasting dominion.* This is an apocalyptic motif par excellence: history as we know it, with its cycles of empires, comes to an end, and the divinely effected kingdom, championing God's people, is instated instead.

16. *and made known to me the meaning of the things.* Here we see clearly how Daniel as an apocalyptic text differs in its use of symbolism from biblical prophecy. Though the vision of the four beasts has a certain affinity with Ezekiel's vision of the celestial chariot, it is more phantasmagoric and bewildering—the beast with ten horns, the little horn that emerges, and so forth—and in its very enigmatic character cries out for decoding, which one of the ministering angels now proceeds to do, at least in part.

18. *the holy ones of the Most High.* The most likely reference is to angels. The "Most High" here has a plural ending, but that is probably a plural of majesty.

19. *different from all of them, exceedingly fearsome.* This horrendous iron-toothed beast, mangling and trampling, reflects the frightening oppressive power of the Seleucid kingdom under Antiochus Epiphanes.

21. *that horn did battle with the holy ones.* This is an apocalyptic war, essentially between the forces of darkness and light (even if those terms, which appear in the Qumran scrolls, are not mentioned). The armies of evil at first prevail, as the Greeks did in 167 B.C.E., but then God intervenes (verse 22) to bring about a decisive victory.

24. *another shall arise after them, and he shall be different from those before him.* The author of this vision writes in the conviction that Antiochus Epiphanes, arising out of a line of ten kings and displacing three contenders to the throne before him, is different in his pernicious nature from all who preceded him.

25. *he shall utter words against the Most High.* This might refer, as Collins notes, to Antio-chus's practice of stamping on some of his coins "God manifest" with his image.

he shall think to change the times and the law. This sibylline formulation in all likelihood refers to the decree of Antiochus Epiphanes suppressing the traditional Jewish cult and imposing pagan worship in the Jerusalem Temple.

a season, a season, and a half-season. The writer continues to hew to the murky style of oracular pronouncement, but this probably means two and a half years.

26. *And the court shall be seated.* Heavenly judgment of the forces of evil is indicated by this.

27. *all dominions shall serve it and obey it.* The downtrodden people of Israel will now exercise unending dominion. This theme may owe something to the poetic hyperboles in Second Isaiah, where the kings and queens of the nations are said to serve Israel, but that idea is recast here as a ringing apocalyptic declaration of the radical transformation of history.

28. *my thoughts sorely panicked me.* Though the vision ends with a grand pronouncement of the ultimate triumph of the forces of light, the bewildering vision bristles with terrifying elements, so at the end Daniel feels overwhelmed by it all.

CHAPTER 8

[1]In the third year of Belshazzar's reign a vision
appeared to me, Daniel, after what had appeared to me
before. [2]And I saw in the vision, and it happened when
I saw, that I was in Shushan the capital, which is in the
province of Elam by the brook of Ulai. [3]And I raised
my eyes and saw, and, look, a ram was standing before
the brook, and it had two horns, and the horns were
high and one was higher than the other, and the higher
one sprouted last. [4]I saw the ram, and, look, it was
butting to the west and to the north and to the south,
and all the beasts could not stand up before it, and
none could save from its power, and it did as it pleased
and grew great. [5]And I was pondering, and, look, a he-
goat came from the west over all the earth and was not
touching the ground, and the goat had a jutting horn
between its eyes. [6]And it came up to the ram with the
two horns that I had seen standing before the brook
and ran toward it in the fury of its strength. [7]And I saw
it reaching the ram, and it attacked it and struck down
the ram and shattered its two horns. And the ram did

not have the strength to stand up before it, and it flung the ram to the ground and trampled it, and there was none to save the ram from its power. [8]And the he-goat became very great, and as it grew mighty, the large horn was broken and four jutting ones sprouted in its stead to the four corners of the heavens. [9]And from one of them came out a puny horn, and it grew exceedingly toward the south and toward the east and toward the Splendid Land. [10]And it grew up to the host of the heavens and brought down some of the stars from the host and trampled them. [11]And up to the Commander of the Host it grew, and from it the daily offering was taken away, and the firm place of His sanctuary was flung away. [12]And a host was criminally set against the daily offering, and it flung truth to the ground and prospered in what it did. [13]And I heard a certain holy one speaking, and the certain holy one said to whoever was speaking, ‘Till when is the vision —the daily offering and the desolating crime giving the sanctum and the host to be trampled?’ [14]And he said to me, ‘Two thousand three hundred evenings and mornings, and the sanctum will be made right.’ [15]And it happened when I Daniel saw the vision that I sought understanding, and, look, standing before me was as the likeness of a man. [16]And I heard a human voice in the midst of the Ulai, and it called out and said,

‘Gabriel, make that one understand what is seen.’
17 And he came to where I stood, and when he came, I
was terrified and fell on my face. And he said to me,
‘Understand, O human, that the vision is for the end-
time.’ 18 And as he spoke to me I fell into a trance, my
face on the ground, and he touched me and made me
stand up. 19 And he said, ‘I am about to make known to
you what will be in the latter time of the wrath, for it
is the appointed time for the end. 20 The ram that you
saw with the horns is the king of Media and Persia.
21 And the he-goat is the king of Greece, and the great
horn that is between its eyes is the first king. 22 And the
one broken and four stood in its stead are the four
kingdoms that rose up from a nation and not through
its power. 23 And in the latter time of his kingdom,
when the crimes are fulfilled, an impudent king will
rise up, who understands enigmas. 24 And his power
will grow mighty but not through his own power, and
he will lay waste wondrously and prosper in what he
does and lay waste to mighty ones and to the people of
the holy ones. 25 And with his shrewdness he will
prosper in the deceit he possesses, and in his mind he
will grow great and lay waste to many unawares, and
he will stand against the prince of princes, but he will
be broken effortlessly. 26 And the portent of evening
and morning that was said is truth. As for you, keep

the vision a secret, for it is for a long time off.' [27]And I, Daniel, I was devastated and stricken for a long time, and I arose and did the king's tasks and was dumbfounded over the vision, and none understood."

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *In the third year.* The language now switches from Aramaic to Hebrew and will continue in Hebrew until the end of the book. But, as noted above, the form and content of this chapter are closely related to those of the previous chapter.

2. *Shushan the capital.* This is the royal city of the Persian empire and the theater in which most of the action takes place in the Book of Esther. Daniel's fictional location, we should recall, is in the Babylonian, then Persian, empire. Many modern interpreters understand the noun rendered here as "capital" to signify "fortress city."

3. *two horns.* These are the kingdoms of Media and Persia, with Persia being the "higher" horn that sprouts after the other horn.

4. *to the west and to the north and to the south.* Though one ancient version supplies the fourth direction, these are in fact the directions in which the Persian empire chiefly expanded.

5. *a he-goat came from the west.* This is the Greek empire, which invaded the Near East from the west.

and was not touching the ground. It is unnecessary to assume that this makes the he-goat a winged beast. The obvious indication is of the breathtaking swiftness of Alexander's conquest.

a jutting horn. The Hebrew collocation *qeren ḥazut* is peculiar, and Hebrew usage will become still stranger as the vision proceeds. Most interpreters understand the second term to reflect a verbal root that means "to

see," thus indicating something like "highly visible." It is on that assumption that the present translation uses "jutting," but this is somewhat conjectural.

7. *it attacked it and struck down the ram.* This is an image of Alexander's devastating frontal assault on the Persian empire.

8. *the large horn was broken and four jutting ones sprouted in its stead.* This is a symbolic representation of the death of Alexander in 323 B.C.E. and the breakup of the vast empire he had established into four smaller empires.

9. *a puny horn.* This repeats the derogatory Aramaic reference in 7:8 to Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

10. *And it grew up to the host of the heavens and brought down some of the stars.* The host (or "array") of the heavens is both God's celestial army and the stars. Although the imagery sounds apocalyptic, the reference is probably to the violation of the Temple cult by Antiochus, which is understood as an assault on God.

11. *the daily offering was taken away.* This formulation directly invokes the suppression of the temple cult in late 167 B.C.E. The "Commander of the Host" would have to be God, so the profanation of the Temple is seen as affecting God Himself.

12. *And a host was criminally set against the daily offering.* The Hebrew of this entire verse is crabbed and opaque, whether through mangling in scribal transmission or because the writer, perhaps more comfortable in Aramaic than in Hebrew, had an imperfect sense of the language. As a result, any translation at this point is somewhat conjectural.

prospered in what it did. The Hebrew is again problematic: both "prospered" and "did" are conjugated as feminine verbs, but the word for "host" is masculine. "Truth" is a feminine noun, but it makes no sense for that to be the subject of the verbs.

13. *a certain holy one.* This is clearly an angel.

the daily offering and the desolating crime giving the sanctum and the host to be trampled. Although the reference has to be again to the desecration of the Temple by Antiochus, this whole clause reads like word salad in the Hebrew—literally: the daily offering and the desolating crime give and holiness and host trampling.

14. *Two thousand three hundred evenings and mornings.* The daily offering was made each evening and morning. Thus the time envisaged during which the Temple cult is suppressed comes to slightly more than three years.

will be made right. Alternately, "will be justified." It is an anomalous use of the verb *ts-d-q*.

15. *as the likeness of a man.* This is another way of referring to an anthropomorphic celestial being.

16. *a human voice in the midst of the Ulai.* The voice, that is, comes as human speech, but the speaker is more than human, addressing Daniel from the midst of a watercourse, where no ordinary human would be.

Gabriel. It is only in this late period that angels are given names.

17. *O human.* The Hebrew *ben-ʾadam*, which some render, misleadingly, as "son of man," is a term of address used by the divine for the human that is borrowed from Ezekiel.

18. *I fell into a trance.* As Abraham does in his face-to-face covenant with God in Genesis 15:12.

19. *the latter time of the wrath.* The most probable reference of this murky formulation is to the end of the period of persecution initiated by Antiochus.

21. *the first king.* This, of course, is Alexander the Great.

23. *when the crimes are fulfilled.* The meaning is obscure. Some have compared it to Genesis 15:16, when it is said "for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full"—that is, once the balance sheet of all their crimes is full, they will be destroyed.

an impudent king . . . who understands enigmas. Antiochus is impudent but also exercises a certain cunning or shrewdness.

24. *lay waste to mighty ones.* Collins understands these to be the three pretendants to the throne whom Antiochus eliminated.

25. *shrewdness.* The Hebrew *sekhel* also has a more positive sense ("insight," "intelligence"), but the present context surely calls for a negative term for acumen.

unawares. Antiochus took Jerusalem in a surprise attack.

effortlessly. More literally, "without a hand" (others, "not by human hands"). Collins suggests that in this the author of the vision dissociates

himself from the Maccabean rebellion against Antiochus.

26. *keep the vision a secret, for it is for a long time off.* It is doubtful that this text, or any other in Daniel, was hidden as esoteric doctrine in its own time, but one must remember that this prophecy is purportedly revealed to Daniel back in the Persian period, in the third year of the reign of Belshazzar.

27. *devastated.* The translation follows Rashi in deriving the verb *nihyeiti* from the noun *howah*, "disaster."

did the king's tasks. Daniel returns to his responsibilities as a high-ranking royal bureaucrat.

and none understood. The meaning of the portent has been revealed to Daniel but to no other person.

CHAPTER 9

[1]In the first year of Darius son of Ahasuerus from the
seed of Media, who was made king over the kingdom
of the Chaldeans, [2]in the first year of his reign, I,
Daniel, came to understand in the books the number
of years that according to the word of the LORD to
Jeremiah the prophet were to fulfill the devastation of
Jerusalem—seventy years. [3]And I turned to the Master
God to petition in prayer and supplication, in fasting
and sackcloth and ashes. [4]And I prayed to the LORD
my God and confessed and said, “O Master, great and
fearsome God, Who keeps the covenant and
faithfulness for those who love Him and keep His
commands! [5]We have offended and done wrong and
acted wickedly and rebelled and swerved from Your
commands and from Your statutes. [6]And we have not
heeded Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your
name to our kings, our nobles, our fathers, and to all
the people of the land. [7]Yours, O Master, is
righteousness and ours the disgrace, the men of Judah
and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, far and

near in all the lands to which You have driven them for their betrayal that they committed against You. [8]Ours is the shame, O LORD, our kings', our nobles', and our fathers', for we have offended You. [9]To the Master our God are compassion and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against Him. [10]And we have not heeded the voice of the LORD our God to walk in His teachings that He set before us through His servants the prophets. [11]And all Israel have violated Your teaching and swerved away, not heeding Your voice. And the curse and the imprecation written in the Teaching of Moses servant of God poured down on us, for we have offended Him. [12]And he fulfilled His word that He had spoken concerning us and concerning our judges who judged us to bring upon us great evil, which has never been done under all the heavens as was done against Jerusalem. [13]As it is written in the Teaching of Moses, all this evil came upon us, yet we did not entreat the LORD our God to turn from our wrongdoing and to find wisdom in Your truth. [14]And the LORD was exacting about the evil and brought it upon us, for the LORD our God is righteous in all His acts that He has done, but we did not heed His voice. [15]And now, O Master our God, Who brought Your people out from the land of Egypt with a strong hand and made a name for Yourself as on this day, we have offended, we have

acted wickedly. [16]O Master, by all Your righteousness
let Your wrath, pray, and Your fury turn back from
Your city Jerusalem, Your holy mountain, for through
our offenses and through the wrongdoing of our
fathers, Jerusalem and Your people are a disgrace to
all around us. [17]And now, listen, God, to the prayer of
Your servant and to his supplications, and let Your
face shine on Your desolate sanctuary for the sake of
the Master. [18]Bend Your ear, my God, and listen. Open
Your eyes and see our desolation and the city on which
Your name is called, for not because of our
righteousness do we pour out our supplication before
You but because of Your great compassion. [19]O
Master, listen. O Master forgive. O Master hearken,
and do it, do not delay, for Your sake, my God, for
Your name is called on Your city and on Your people."
[20]I was still speaking and praying and confessing my
offense and the offense of my people Israel and
pouring out my supplication before the LORD my
God for the holy mountain of my God, [21]and I was still
speaking in prayer, when the man Gabriel, whom I had
seen in the vision before, glided down in flight,
reaching me at the hour of the evening offering. [22]And
he imparted understanding and spoke with me and
said, "Daniel, now have I come out to convey wisdom
to you. [23]At the beginning of your supplication the

word was issued and I have come to tell that you are beloved. And discern the word and understand the vision. [24]Seven weeks of years are decreed for your people to work out the crime and to finish offenses and to atone for wrongdoing and to bring everlasting justice and to seal vision and prophecy and to anoint the holy of holies. [25]And you shall know and understand: seven weeks of years from the issuing of the word to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the anointed prince, and in sixty-two weeks of years it will once more be built, square and moat, but in a time of distress. [26]And after the sixty-two weeks of years the anointed one shall be cut off with none to cut off with none to save him. [27]And the troops of a prince who comes shall destroy the city and the sanctuary, but his end shall come in a sudden rush, and till the end of the decreed war, desolation. [28]And he shall make a strong pact with the many for one week of years, and for half a week of years he shall put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering. And in its place there shall be a desolating abomination until the decreed destruction is poured down on the desolating thing."

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Darius son of Ahasuerus.* This is still another confusion of Persian dynastic names. Ahasuerus was not the father of Darius, but he appears to be plugged in here as a familiar Persian royal name.

2. *the books.* Daniel actually has in mind one book, Jeremiah, who prophesied (Jeremiah 25:11) that "these nations shall serve the king of Babylonia seventy years." The text from Jeremiah will surface in the exchange with the angel Gabriel, verses 22–27, where it will be given a novel interpretation.

3. *the Master.* This chapter makes repeated use of *ʾadonay*, "Master." That may be a pious scribal substitution for YHWH, but YHWH is used in the next verse and afterward in Daniel's prayer (and nowhere else in the book).
in fasting and sackcloth and ashes. This paraphernalia of mourning is also traditionally used for penitential prayers.

4. *I prayed to the LORD.* The form of the penitential prayer is unique to this chapter. The language of the prayer is traditional (and somewhat different from the Hebrew used elsewhere in Daniel), so this may have been an older prayer adapted and inserted by the writer. This sort of literary collage is common in biblical composition from its early stages.

5. *We have offended and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled.* The language of confession was adopted liturgically for the shorter confession of sins in the Yom Kippur service.

6. *we have not heeded Your servants the prophets.* Heeding the prophets is of paramount concern for Daniel because he is basing his vision of history on Jeremiah.

7. *in all the lands to which You have driven them.* This formulation is in keeping with the repeated declaration in Deuteronomy that exile comes as punishment for violation of the covenant.

12. *great evil, which has never been done under all the heavens.* This hyperbolic characterization of the national catastrophe that befell Judah (which of course did not differ from the conquest of other peoples) echoes, perhaps consciously, a repeated theme from Lamentations.

16. *let Your wrath, pray, and Your fury turn back from Your city Jerusalem.*This formulation leads one to wonder whether this prayer may have originated before the return to Zion in the middle of the fifth century B.C.E. At the time of the composition of Daniel, the Temple had long been rebuilt, and

there was a substantial Jewish population in Jerusalem. But as we shall see, the catastrophe of the destruction of Jerusalem and the razing of the Temple is conflated with a later and different disaster.

17. *Your desolate sanctuary.* The term *shamem*, "desolate," which originally would have referred to the destroyed Temple, will now be used to indicate a different kind of desolation.

19. *O Master, listen. O Master forgive. O Master hearken.* These words constitute a formal coda to Daniel's supplication.

20. *my offense and the offense of my people.* Although the confession of sin has been in the first-person plural, Daniel, as spokesman for the people, must include himself.

21. *the man Gabriel.* Although Gabriel is a divine being, he is designated "man" because his form is human.

glided down in flight. The term *biyʿaf*, rendered here as "in flight," is disputed, but it could easily derive from the verbal stem that indicates flying by a reversal of consonants. If so, this would be the first unambiguous instance of an airborne angel.

23. *the word was issued.* The likely reference is to the word of revelation or explanation that is here given to Daniel.

you are beloved. Hence, you are the privileged recipient of this revelation.

vision. Literally, "what is seen," that is, the vision. Elsewhere in Daniel another term is used for "vision."

24. *Seven weeks of years.* The Hebrew appears to say merely "weeks," but it becomes apparent in Daniel's calculations that these are weeks of years. That might be indicated by the otherwise odd masculine plural ending, whereas "weeks" in earlier Hebrew always has a feminine plural ending, though the word is masculine. It is also possible that a masculine plural ending is simply used as part of a general tendency of later Hebrew to regularize irregular forms. In any case, through this terminology, Jeremiah's "seventy years," which would approximately mark the time span from the moment of his prophecy to the beginning of the return to Zion, is transformed into 490 years —still not an exact number but bringing the elapsed time to just a few decades after the date of 167, when this vision is enumerated. Biblical

Hebrew, with its attachment to formulaic numbers, often uses numerical indications only approximately.

to finish offenses. The received text reads "to seal," *leḥatem*, but that is probably an inadvertent scribal duplication of that same verb which occurs later in the verse, and many manuscripts read *lehatem*, "to finish," "bring to an end."

25. *from the issuing of the word.* This has to be Jeremiah's word.

the anointed prince. This is probably Antiochus IV Epiphanes. One should remember that "anointed" in biblical Hebrew is the equivalent of "crowned" and does not necessarily imply divinely sanctioned status.

in a time of distress. This is almost certainly a reference to the persecutions ordered by Antiochus.

26. *the anointed one shall be cut off.* Though the reference, after the previous "anointed prince," is confusing, most commentators think this alludes to Onias III, the high priest who was murdered around 171 B.C.E. Priests as well as princes were anointed. After Onias III, there were no more legitimate Zadokite priests.

with none to save him. "To save him" does not appear in the Hebrew but may have been dropped in scribal transmission.

28. *he shall make a strong pact with the many for one week of years.* What is envisaged is the collaboration of the large population of Hellenized Jews in Jerusalem with Antiochus in setting up a pagan cult in the Temple. This alliance is said to last seven years, and for three and a half years the traditional cult of YHWH in the Temple was violated.

in its place. The Masoretic Text reads, incomprehensibly, "on the wing" (or "corner"). The translation follows a commonly proposed emendation: instead of *ʿal kenaf* we read *ʿal kano*.

a desolating abomination. Pointedly, Daniel cannot bring himself to mention the vile, disgusting thing that has been placed in the Temple. Some think it may be the statue of a pagan god; others conclude that it is a special altar for pagan sacrifice set up within the Temple. On that altar (or perhaps, before that statue), the animal sacrifices offered, as we know from other ancient sources, included pigs—an animal toward which Jewish loyalists had a kind of visceral revulsion, thus adding an associative coloration to the generalized language of disgust that Daniel uses here.

CHAPTER 10

[1]In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia a word was
revealed to Daniel, whose name had been called
Belteshazzar, and the word was true and the service
great, and he understood the word and had
understanding of the vision. [2]“At that time, I, Daniel,
was mourning for three weeks. [3]No fine bread did I
eat, nor did meat and wine come into my mouth, and I
was careful not to rub myself with oil until the three
weeks were over. [4]And on the twenty-fourth day of the
first month, I was by the great river, which is the
Tigris. [5]And I raised my eyes and saw, and, look, there
was a certain man dressed in linen and his loins were
girt with pure gold, [6]and his body was like chrysolite,
and his face like the look of lightning, and his eyes like
fiery torches, and his arms and his legs like the color
of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like
the sound of a great crowd. [7]And I, Daniel, alone saw
the vision, but the people who were with me did not
see the vision, yet a great trembling fell upon them and
they fled to hide. [8]As for me, I remained alone, and I

saw this great vision, and no strength remained in me, and my bearing was shattered, and I retained no strength. [9]And I heard the sound of his words, and as I heard the sound of his words, I was in a trance on my face, and my face to the ground. [10]And, look, a hand touched me and he pulled me to my knees and to the palms of my hands. [11]And he said to me, ‘Daniel, beloved man, understand the words that I speak to you and stand up where you are, for now have I been sent to you.’ And as he spoke this thing to me, I stood up, shaking. [12]And he said to me, ‘Fear not, Daniel. For from the first day that you set your mind to understand and to afflict yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come through your words. [13]And the prince of the kingdom of Persia was standing against me twenty-one days, and, look, Michael, one of the leading princes, was coming to help me, and I remained there by the king of Persia. [14]And I have come to let you understand what will befall your people in the latter time, for there is yet a vision for the time.’ [15]And as he spoke to me words of this sort, I put my face to the ground and I fell silent. [16]And, look, one in the likeness of a human being was touching my lips, and I opened my mouth and spoke and said to him who stood before me, ‘My lord, in the vision my pangs overcame me and I retained no

strength. [17]And how can this slave of my lord speak
with my lord, and I, strength will not stand in me and
no breath is left me?' [18]And again one like the
semblance of a human being touched me and made me
strong. [19]And he said, 'Fear not, beloved man, it is well
with you. Be very strong.' And as he spoke with me, I
grew strong and said, 'Let my lord speak, for you have
made me strong.' [20]And he said, 'Do you know why I
have come to you? And now, I shall go back to do
battle with the prince of Persia, and as I go out, look,
the prince of Greece is coming. [21]But I shall tell you
what is inscribed in the writ of truth, and there is no
one sustaining me against all those save Michael your
prince.' **11**:[1]And I in the first year of Darius the Mede, I
took my stand to strengthen and to be a bastion for
him. [2a]And now the truth shall I tell you."

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *In the third year of Cyrus.* In 1:21, we are told that Daniel's mission continued only until the first year of Cyrus's reign. The discrepancy is unresolved.

the service. The more common meaning of *tsava'* is "army," but that is because one owes a term of service in the army. Presumably, the sense here is the great and arduous service as a recipient of vision.

3. *No fine bread did I eat.* Fasting, or partial fasting, as is evidently the case here, had become common in this period as a procedure for creating readiness for visionary experience.

not to rub myself with oil. The Hebrew uses a different verb from the one for anointing, and "anoint," adopted in almost all English versions, should be avoided because of its sacral or political associations. What is referred to here is the pleasurable and cosmetic rubbing of the body with soothing oil, a practice well attested in the ancient Mediterranean from Greece to the Fertile Crescent.

5. *dressed in linen.* Linen as angelic garb is a cue picked up from Ezekiel.

6. *and his body was like chrysolite, and his face like the look of lightning.* While this figure, who must be Gabriel, has been described as "a certain man" because his form is anthropomorphic, he is dazzling and monumental (like the lover in Song of Songs 5:10–16) from his jewel-like body and his refulgent face and eyes to his roaring voice.

7. *yet a great trembling fell upon them.* Unlike Daniel, they are not privileged to see the vision, but they sense some sort of numinous fearsome presence, which strikes them with terror.

8. *my bearing.* The literal sense of the Hebrew noun is "glory." The word selection and, even more, the phrase that immediately follows, *nehpakh lemashḥit*, sound odd.

9. *a trance.* As before, the trance is a precondition to receiving the vision.

10. *a hand touched me.* Daniel, in a trance, with his face pressed to the ground, is not in a position to see the angel, but now he feels a hand touching him and raising him up with a shaking motion.

12. *to afflict yourself.* This reflexive verb often has the sense of "to fast" and in Late Biblical and rabbinic Hebrew generates a cognate noun for fasting, *taʿanit.*

13. *the prince of the kingdom of Persia.* The probable reference is not to the Persian emperor but to a celestial *sar* who serves as an angelic patron of Persia. Though there are a couple of episodic hints of such a notion in earlier biblical literature, it basically reflects a new concept of history: celestial agents do battle with one another on behalf of the nations they patronize, and human agency is thus drastically reduced.

twenty-one days. These evidently correspond to the twenty-one days of Daniel's fast.

15. *I put my face to the ground.* Daniel's head had been raised when Gabriel lifted him from his prostrate position, but as he is about to be told what will befall his people in the time to come, he flings himself back down in fear.

16. *touching my lips.* Unlike the more general touch of verse 10, Daniel here is specifically touched on the lips, an indication that he is to speak the prophecy he will receive. In order to touch him on the lips, the angel would have had to raise his head from the ground.

18. *made me strong.* Although some have linked Daniel's weakness with his twenty-one days of partial fasting, what is much clearer is that the power of the epiphany itself devastates or evacuates him, and so he needs to be strengthened.

19. *it is well with you.* Some render *shalom lakh* as a greeting, "peace be with you," but given the context of Daniel's overwhelming weakness followed by his regaining strength, the inevitable sense is "it is well with you"—don't worry, you are all right now.

20. *I shall go back to do battle with the prince of Persia.* As in verse 13, this is a battle between angelic patrons of the nations.

the prince of Greece is coming. In this theocentric vision of history, it is not Alexander the Great but the celestial prince of Greece who approaches to defeat the Persian empire.

21. *the writ of truth.* Though most translations render this as "the book of truth," the Hebrew noun *ketav* means anything that is written down, and it is worth preserving the mysterious indeterminacy of the locution, which seems apt for a prophetic revelation.

sustaining me. The reflexive Hebrew verb is the same one used in verse 19 for Daniel's "growing strong."

Michael your prince. Gabriel is speaking, but his celestial ally Michael is the prince of the people of Israel.

11:1. *And I in the first year of Darius the Mede.* This translation follows the proposal of many scholars that the first verse and a half of chapter 11 are actually the conclusion of the textual unit that begins with 10:1.

I took my stand. This is still another instance in which the Hebrew of Daniel seems a little peculiar. The literal sense of the Hebrew is “my stance is to strengthen and to be a bastion for him,” but the context appears to require a verb, not a noun, and that has been supplied in the translation.

CHAPTER 11

[2b]Look, another three kings are to stand forth for
Persia, and the fourth shall grow rich with greater
wealth than all, and with his wealth he shall stir up all,
even the kingdom of Greece. [3]And a warrior king shall
stand forth and rule very dominantly and do as he
pleases. [4]And when he stands forth, his kingdom shall
be broken and divided to the four winds of the heavens
and not to his offspring and not to the dominion that
he had ruled, for his kingdom shall be uprooted and be
for others besides these. [5]And the king of the south
shall be strong, but one of his commanders shall
prevail over him and shall rule, very dominant his
dominion. [6]And at the end of some years they shall
join together, and the daughter of the king of the south
shall come to the king of the north to make a treaty,
but she shall not retain strength, nor shall he retain
strength, and she shall be given over—she and those
who brought her and her begetter and her supporter in
those times. [7]And a shoot shall stand forth from her
roots in his place, and he shall come to the army and

enter the stronghold of the king of the north and
prevail. [8]And their gods as well with their molten
images with their precious vessels of silver and gold he
shall bring in captivity to Egypt, and for years he shall
stand away from the king of the north. [9]And he, he
shall come into the kingdom of the king of the south
and then return to his land. [10]And his sons shall be
stirred up and gather a crowd of many forces and
surely come and sweep along and pass through. And
again he shall be stirred up, as far as his stronghold.
[11]And the king of the south shall be enraged and come
out and do battle with him, with the king of the north,
and he shall set out a great crowd, and the crowd shall
be given into his hand. [12]When the crowd is borne off,
his heart shall be haughty, and he shall bring down tens
of thousands, but he shall not be strong. [13]And again
shall the king of the north set out a crowd greater than
the first, and at the end of some years he shall surely
come with a great force and much paraphernalia.
[14]And in those times many shall stand against the king
of the south, and the lawless sons of your people shall
be raised up to fulfill the vision, but they shall stumble.
[15]And the king of the north shall come and build a
siege-work and capture the fortified city, and the
powers of the south shall not be able to withstand, not
even his elite troops, and there shall be no strength to

withstand. [16]And the one who comes against him shall do as he pleases with none withstanding him, and he shall stand in the Splendid Land, with all of it in his hands. [17]And he shall set his face to come in them ight of all his kingdom, and make a treaty with him, and give him a daughter in marriage to destroy him, but it shall not stand and shall not be. [18]And he shall turn his face back to the coastlands, and capture many, and a consul shall put an end to his insults, even without his insult, he shall requite him. [19]And he shall turn his face back to the strongholds of his land and stumble and fall and not be found. [20]And there shall stand in his place one who makes a tribute collector pass through the glory of the kingdom, but in a few days he shall be broken, neither in wrath nor in battle. [21]And there shall stand in his place a contemptible man to whom the glory of the kingdom has not been given, and he shall come stealthily and grasp the kingdom through smooth talk. [22]And the sweeping powers shall be swept away before him and be broken, and also the prince of the covenant. [23]And after the joining with him he shall practice deceit, and he shall come up and grow mighty with a small force. [24]Stealthily shall he come into the richest provinces. He shall come and do what neither his father nor the fathers of his father had done, he shall despoil and take booty and distribute wealth to

them, and against fortresses he shall lay his plans, but for a time. [25]And he shall rouse his strength and his heart against the king of the south, and the king of the south shall be stirred up for battle with a very great and mighty force, but he shall not withstand, for they shall lay plans against him. [26]And those who eat at his table shall break him and sweep away his army, and many shall fall slain. [27]And the two kings, their heart shall be for harm, and on a single table, deceit; for there is still an end for the appointed time. [28]And he shall go back to his land with great wealth, and his heart against the holy covenant. And he shall do his deeds and go back to his land. [29]At the appointed time, he shall again go into the south, but the second time shall not be like the first. [30]And ships from Kittim shall come against him, and he shall be daunted and once again rage against the holy covenant, and do his acts and look to those who abandon the holy covenant. [31]And forces shall stand forth from him and profane the sanctuary, the stronghold, and take away the daily offering and set up the desolating abomination. [32]And those who deal wickedly with the covenant he shall flatter with smooth talk, but the people who know their God shall stand strong and act. [33]And the discerning among the people shall make the many understand, but they shall stumble for a time by the sword and by

flame, by captivity, and by despoiling. [34]And when they stumble they shall find little support, and many shall join them with smooth talk. [35]And from among the discerning shall people fall, to purge them and to refine and to purify until the end, for it is still for the appointed time. [36]And the king shall do as he pleases, and he shall exalt himself and make himself great over every god, and against the God of gods he shall speak wondrous things, and he shall prosper till the wrath comes to an end, for what has been decreed shall be done. [37]And he shall not consider the gods of his fathers nor the one beloved by women, nor shall any god be considered, for over everything he shall make himself great. [38]But he shall honor the god of strongholds in his place, he shall honor a god that his fathers did not know, with gold and with silver and with precious stones and costly things. [39]And he shall act for those who fortify the strongholds, the people of an alien god whom he comes to know. He shall greatly honor them and make them rule over many and share out land at a price. [40]At the end-time the king of the south shall join battle with him and the king of the north shall storm against him with chariots and horsemen and many ships, and he shall come into the lands and sweep through and pass on. [41]And he shall come into the Splendid Land, and myriads shall

stumble, but these shall escape from his hand—Edom and Moab and the leadership of the Ammonites. [42]And he shall reach out his hand against the lands, and the land of Egypt itself shall not escape. [43]And he shall rule over the treasures of gold and silver and all the costly things of Egypt, and the Libyans and the Nubians shall trail after him. [44]But rumors from the east and from the north shall alarm him, and he shall sally forth in great rage to destroy and to slaughter many. [45]And he shall pitch the tents of his pavilion between the sea and the splendid holy mountain, and he shall come to his end, with none to help him.

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2b. *another three kings are to stand forth for Persia.* As in all that follows in this chapter, the three Persian kings plus one are cloaked in deliberately mystifying anonymity, in keeping with the intended prophetic effect. Scholarship generally gives this the neutral label of *ex eventu* prophecy, though it may be more to the point to call this pseudo-prophecy. That is, Daniel, fictionally located in the Persian empire, is represented as foreseeing the political events of the next century and a half—events that the author of the book, around 167 B.C.E., knew in minute detail. In contrast, however, to the treatment of the wars and campaigns in the Seleucid and Ptolemaic empires, the four Persian kings are schematic, and the extraordinary wealth of the fourth is probably a literary invention.

he shall stir up all, even the kingdom of Greece. The notion that the wealth of the Persian emperor—probably Darius III—motivated Alexander to invade

is not strictly historical.

3. *a warrior king.* The dominant warrior king is of course Alexander the Great.

4. *And when he stands forth.* The verb here, repeated from verse 2, is obscure in context and symptomatic of the use of awkward and unclear repetitions in Daniel's Hebrew. In fact, the empire broke up not while Alexander was "standing" but after his premature death.

divided to the four winds of the heavens. Alexander's vast empire broke into four parts, only two of which, warring over the Land of Israel, will be the object of attention in what follows.

not to his offspring. Alexander had no biological heirs to the throne.

5. *the king of the south.* This is Ptolemy I Soter, who seized Egypt after Alexander's death.

one of his commanders shall prevail over him. This is Seleucus I Nicator, who assisted Ptolemy around 312 B.C.E., then returned to Babylonia, where he created an empire greater than Ptolemy's.

6. *the daughter of the king of the south.* Berenice, daughter of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, was married to Antiochus II Theos, the Seleucid emperor.

she shall not retain strength, nor shall he retain strength. Antiochus died suddenly, perhaps poisoned by his first wife, Laodice. Berenice and her child were then murdered.

she shall be given over. The Hebrew is vague and obscure, like much of the language in this chapter.

7. *a shoot shall stand forth from her roots.* This is Ptolemy III, Berenice's brother, who was victorious in a campaign against Laodice's son, Seleucus II, in 246 B.C.E.

8. *he shall stand away from the king of the north.* This is still another instance of an odd and unidiomatic use of the verb "stand."

9. *he shall come into the kingdom of the king of the south.* Seleucus II then counterattacked and regained the territory he had lost.

10. *his sons shall be stirred up.* These are Seleucus III (227–223 B.C.E.) and Antiochus III (223–187 B.C.E.). The latter dominated the region for three decades, exploiting the weakness of Ptolemy III.

as far as his stronghold. The reference is obscure.

11. *the crowd shall be given into his hand.* Ptolemy IV defeated Antiochus in the battle of Rafia in 217 B.C.E. But he failed to take advantage of his victory and had to contend with uprisings of native Egyptians in his home territory.

13. *And again shall the king of the north set out a crowd greater than the first.* Antiochus recaptured eastern portions of his empire (212–205 B.C.E.) and then attacked Egypt after the deaths of Ptolemy IV and his queen. By 200 B.C.E., the Seleucids had gained control of Judah.

14. *the lawless sons of your people.* The reference is disputed, but this may be a designation of the Jewish Hellenizers who allied themselves with the Seleucids.

15. *shall come and build a siege-work.* This is the siege of Sidon, in which Antiochus assaulted the Ptolemaic forces.

16. *he shall stand in the Splendid Land.* This is the notation, in pseudo-prophetic language, of Antiochus's conquest of Judah.

17. *give him a daughter in marriage.* Antiochus, in the interest of halting hostilities, betrothed his daughter Cleopatra to Ptolemy V in 197 B.C.E.

to destroy him. The Masoretic Text reads "destroy her," but the Qumran Daniel, more plausibly, shows a masculine suffix. Once again, the wording is odd, but it probably refers to the idea that Cleopatra would pursue Seleucid interests in the Ptolemaic court.

it shall not stand and shall not be. Cleopatra failed to deliver, instead showing loyalty to the Ptolemaic empire.

18. *he shall turn his face back to the coastlands.* Antiochus led his forces through Asia Minor in the first years of the second century B.C.E.

a consul shall put an end to his insults. The consul is the Roman officer Lucius Cornelius Scipio, who defeated Antiochus at the battle of Magnesia in 190 B.C.E. But much of the wording is obscure.

19. *stumble and fall and not be found.* Antiochus perished at Elymaus in 187 B.C.E. while attempting to sack the temple of Bel.

20. *one who makes a tribute collector pass through the glory of the kingdom.* Antiochus was succeeded by Seleucus IV. In financial straits, he dispatched one Heliodorus to collect taxes. Eventually Seluecus was killed in a plot hatched by Heliodorus. Though this took place after twelve years, it is referred to dismissively here as "a few days."

21. *a contemptible man.* This is Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the perpetrator of the desecration of the Jerusalem Temple and hence Daniel's bête noire.

to whom the glory of the kingdom has not been given. Antiochus IV usurped the throne from the Seleucid line after 175 B.C.E.

22. *the prince of the covenant.* The high priest, Onias III, was murdered at this point.

23. *after the joining with him.* This is still another vague locution, which must refer to political alliances made by Antiochus to strengthen his position.

25. *And he shall rouse his strength and his heart against the king of the south.* Antiochus invaded Egypt in 170 B.C.E.

26. *those who eat at his table shall break him.* Daniel attributes the defeat of Ptolemy VI Philometor by Antiochus to bad counsel or a conspiracy by his close advisors.

27. *on a single table, deceit.* Antiochus and Ptolemy VI negotiated, but in the view of this author, Antiochus deceived the southern king through a pretense of friendship and then seized control of Egypt.

29. *he shall again go into the south.* Antiochus, after having withdrawn from Egypt, invaded it again in 167 B.C.E.

30. *ships from Kittim.* Kittim, an opaque geographic reference in Balaam's oracle (Numbers 24:24), at this late period was often used to designate Rome, as is clear in several Qumran documents. Antiochus, confronted by a Roman ultimatum, had been forced to pull back from Egypt.

31. *the sanctuary, the stronghold.* Fortifications had been introduced into the temple structure.

the desolating abomination. This recurrent phrase, *hashiquts meshomem,* which expresses Daniel's loathing of the object of idolatrous veneration set up in the Temple, may pun, as many scholars conclude, on *baʿal shamin,* the Baal of the heavens, widely worshipped in the region. This could be a statue of Zeus Olympius.

33. *the discerning among the people.* These are Daniel's own circle. Some commentators think they may be a kind of sect. In any case, it is clearly pious right thinking rather than armed resistance that for Daniel constitutes the most legitimate opposition to Antiochus.

they shall stumble for a time by the sword and by f lame. These words probably refer to the martyrdom suffered by the "discerning" who kept the faith, as is attested in Maccabees.

34. *they shall find little support.* The discerning ones remain an embattled minority in the Jewish population, and even those who pretend to support them (which might include the Maccabees) offer no more than lip service.

35. *to purge them and to refine and to purify.* The martyrdom of the discerning may manifest a necessity to winnow out all those who are not sufficiently pure of heart.

36. *he shall speak wondrous things.* The obvious sense is to speak arrogantly, but the use of a root that means "wonder" is symptomatic of a certain imprecision in the Hebrew vocabulary of Daniel.

the wrath. The mostly likely reference is to the wrath of Antiochus.

37. *he shall not consider the gods of his fathers.* This statement might reflect Antiochus's elevation of the cult of Zeus Olympius at the expense of the other gods, but it is probably hyperbolic, intended to represent Antiochus as impious even within his own polytheistic domain.

the one beloved by women. Scholars generally understand this as the conflated figure of Tammuz-Adonis.

38. *the god of strongholds.* Collins plausibly suggests that this epithet is based on "the hated Akra, the garrison established by Antiochus in the City of David."

39. *the people of.* The translation follows the widely accepted emendation of Masoretic *ʿim*, "with," to *ʿam*, "the people of." These would be Seleucid soldiers stationed by Antiochus in Jerusalem (and *ʿam* can also mean "troops").

40. *At the end-time.* These words indicate a move from pseudo-prophecy to actual prophecy. Daniel envisages an apocalyptic clash between the kingdom of the north and the kingdom of the south, which in fact never occurred. After his actions in Jerusalem, Antiochus turned his attention to the Persians in the east.

45. *he shall come to his end, with none to help him.* The concluding verses of this chapter show many of the ingredients of apocalyptic vision. There is a cataclysmic war (as in the battle of Gog from the land of Magog). The

representative of the forces of evil triumphs for a time (what later rabbinic tradition would call “the birth pangs of the messiah”), and then he is suddenly rendered helpless and perishes. This account, written around 167 B.C.E., has nothing to do with Antiochus’s death in Persia in 165, and word of his demise would not have reached Jerusalem until 164.

CHAPTER 12

[1]And in that time Michael shall stand up, the great
prince who stands over the sons of your people, and it
shall be a time of distress the like of which has not
been since the nation came to be until that time. And
in that time your people shall escape, all who are
found in the book. [2]And many of the sleepers in the
deep dust shall awake—some for everlasting life and
some for disgrace and everlasting shame. [3]And the
discerning shall shine like the splendor of the sky, and
those who guide the many to be righteous, like the
stars, forever and ever. [4]As for you, Daniel, conceal the
words and seal the book till the end-time. Many shall
roam about and knowledge shall abound. [5]And I,
Daniel, saw, and, look, two others were standing, one
on this bank of the river and one on that bank of the
river. [6]And one said to the man dressed in linen, who
was over the water of the river, “Until when is the
wondrous end?” [7]And I heard the man dressed in
linen, who was over the water of the river, and he
raised his right hand, and his left hand was toward the

heavens, and he swore by the One who lives forever that at the appointed time of times and a half and at the end of the shattering of the power of the holy people, all these things shall be finished. [8]And I heard and did not understand, and I said, “My lord, what is the aftermath of these things?” [9]And he said, “Go, Daniel, for the words are concealed and sealed till the end-time. [10]Many shall be sifted and purified and purged, and the wicked shall act wickedly, and none of the wicked shall understand, but the discerning shall understand. [11]And from the time the daily offering was taken away and the desolating abomination was set up is a thousand two hundred and ninety days. [12]Happy who waits and reaches a thousand three hundred and thirty-five days. [13]As for you, go to the end and you shall rest, and stand up for your destiny at the end of days.”

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *shall stand up . . . stands over.* The Hebrew of Daniel again exhibits a propensity to use the same word over and over again in different senses—not to some subtle punning purpose, as in earlier Hebrew prose, but rather through a certain stylistic slackness. The sense of “stand over” is to protect, Michael being the guardian angel of the people of Israel.

all who are found in the book. The strong scholarly consensus is that this is the book of life. There are some brief hints in earlier biblical literature of such a book kept on high, but here it is made dramatically explicit.

2. *the sleepers . . . shall awake—some for everlasting life and some for disgrace and everlasting shame.* This is, famously, the first and only clear reference to the resurrection of the dead in the Hebrew Bible. There are a few possible anticipations in the Prophets, but those may be either hyperbolic or metaphors of national restoration. By the last biblical centuries, notions of an afterlife had some currency in the Near East. Bodily resurrection after burial here is accompanied by the idea of reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked, though "disgrace" for the latter rather than the tortures of hell is what is expressed.

the deep dust. The literal sense of the Hebrew is "the soil of the dust," but when two synonyms are joined this way in the construct state (*semikhut*), the effect is an intensification. (Compare, among many instances, Exodus 10:22, *ḥosekh-ʾafeilah*, "pitch-dark.") The point is that the dead who are to rise are buried deep in the ground.

3. *the discerning.* Once again, this is the term Daniel uses for the privileged spiritual elite to which he belongs.

shine like the splendor of the sky. This phrase was later incorporated into the Jewish prayer for the dead.

like the stars. Collins notes that the idea of astral immortality was current in the Hellenistic world and may well have influenced this formulation.

4. *conceal the words and seal the book till the end-time.* In the first instance, this command is dictated by Daniel's fictitious location in the Persian period—the prophecy of the end must remain a secret until its time comes. But given the apocalyptic freight of the prophecy, it needs to be a strictly esoteric revelation even when its fulfillment is only three and a half years away.

Many shall roam about and knowledge shall abound. It is not necessary to emend this sentence, as many scholars have done. The idea is that in the end-time, many will go about in search of knowledge, which will then become accessible.

5. *two others.* Two other angels, besides Michael.

the river. Though the Hebrew *yeʾor* was initially an Egyptian loanword referring to the Nile, it became (usually in the plural) a poetic synonym for

"river," and here it probably refers to the Euphrates.

6. *the man dressed in linen.* This is how the angel was described in 10:5.

the wondrous end. Many interpreters understand this as a reference to Antiochus's persecutions and so construe "wondrous," *niflaʾot*, against the grain of its usual meaning, in a negative sense. (See the New Jewish Publication Society translation, "awful things.") But it may be more plausible to understand this to mean the end-time, when wondrous things will take place.

7. *he raised his right hand, and his left hand was toward the heavens.* The raising of the hand, or here both hands, is the gesture of making a solemn vow.

the appointed time of times and a half. The Hebrew here is a translation of the Aramaic phrase that appears in 7:25.

8. *aftermath.* Daniel pointedly uses the term *aḥarit*, "what comes after." That is, if all these things—perhaps in particular, the persecutions by Antiochus—are to come to an end, what will come afterward?

10. *Many shall be sifted and purified and purged, and the wicked shall act wickedly.* This is clearly a landscape of apocalypse: the righteous will be winnowed out from the chaff of evildoers, while the wicked will continue in their wicked ways until they are overtaken by perdition.

11. *a thousand two hundred and ninety days.* This makes three and a half years from the time Antiochus suppressed the temple cult in 167 B.C.E. But given the sweep of the language in this concluding section, beginning with the awakening of the sleepers in the dust, the writer seems to have in mind not merely the restoration of the daily sacrifices in a temple that has been cleansed but a radical transformation of existence.

12. *a thousand three hundred and thirty-five days.* There is, of course, a discrepancy of forty-five days between this figure and the one given in the previous verse. The simplest explanation may be that this verse was written just after the 1,290 days had passed and so another six and a half weeks were added in hopeful expectation. In any event, subsequent Jewish and Christian interpreters used these verses to make intricate calculations for the coming of the end of days, which manifestly had not taken place in the fourth decade of the second century B.C.E., as Daniel had envisaged. An illuminating exposition

of this activity of calculating and recalculating the end-time is found in Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending.*

13. *go to the end.* This slightly odd expression must mean, as the rest of the verse indicates, "go to await the end."

you shall rest. The evident sense is: rest in the grave. The notion of Daniel's death prior to his resurrection is probably another reflection of the fact that he is supposed to be living in the Persian era, perhaps two centuries before the prophesied end-time.

stand up for your destiny. The translation preserves the literal sense of this much used Hebrew verb, though the meaning in context is "rise up." Given that Daniel is preeminently one of the righteous, his destiny at the end-time will surely be everlasting life.

EZRA–NEHEMIAH

Introduction

There is a tradition going back to Late Antiquity that sees Ezra and Nehemiah as a single book, often simply referred to as "Ezra." The two books, however, differ in form and are certainly not the work of a single writer. Ezra is a third-person narrative reporting historical—at least possibly historical—events affecting the returned exiles in the fifth century B.C.E. It includes the only extended passage (chapters 4–6) in the Bible outside of Daniel written in Aramaic, the language that by this time was in the process of becoming the vernacular of the people of Israel. In all likelihood, it was composed at the very end of the fifth century or perhaps during the early decades of the fourth century B.C.E. Nehemiah was probably written a little earlier, in the last quarter of the fifth century. A good portion of it consists of Nehemiah's memoirs, written in the first person, and there is no equivalent to

this form elsewhere in the Bible. It also incorporates Persian imperial documents, and these are probably authentic, even if they may have undergone a certain amount of reworking in the process of being translated into Hebrew. In any event, both Ezra and Nehemiah reflect a strong impulse to leave a record of historical events of their time, and they also manifest the new openness to formal diversity that characterizes Late Biblical literature. In the writing produced during the First Temple period, there was basically one kind of narrative, variously inflected from Genesis to Judges to Samuel to Kings, showing a good deal of stylistic uniformity and adhering by and large to the same literary conventions. In the prose produced in the period after the destruction of the kingdom of Judah in 586 B.C.E., one encounters diversity and what may be thought of from a modern point of view as formal experimentation, as the generically and stylistically different Esther, Ruth, and Jonah vividly illustrate. In Ezra and Nehemiah, we have historical narrative, memoir, collages of historical documents, and a few passages that may well be drawn from folktales.

All this writing, moreover, is driven by a powerful political motive, which is not exactly the case in earlier Hebrew narrative. As happens several times in this period, political power is divided between two figures

working in complementary fashion—Ezra the scribe and priest, who is concerned with the all-important project of the restoration of the cult and the canonization of the newly redacted Torah through the institution of its public reading, and Nehemiah, coming to Jerusalem from a high position in the Persian court, the political leader who addresses security issues of rebuilding the walls of the city and confronting armed enemies. Their joint concerns—reestablishing the Temple and the cult within it, authorizing a legal and historical national text, and creating a security apparatus—are conceived as the essential activities for the renewal of the life of the nation in its homeland after the long decades of exile.

The community of returned exiles found itself in sharp conflict with other groups in the country, and the ideology promoted by both Ezra and Nehemiah was stringently separatist. Those who had remained in the land and claimed to be part of the people of Israel—in particular, the Samaritans—were regarded as inauthentic claimants to membership in the nation and were to have no role in the project of rebuilding. This rejection led to resentment, armed attacks, and denunciations to the Persian court of the group led by Ezra and Nehemiah. The machinations of their

adversaries and Nehemiah's countermeasures are recorded in detail here.

Another policy dictated by Ezra and Nehemiah's separatist view was the sweeping resistance to intermarriage. In the case of Ezra, this entailed draconian measures whereby not only were new intergroup unions to be absolutely avoided but also men who had long-standing foreign wives were to expel them with their children.

It should be noted that there was a strong antithetical view on this issue within the community of returned exiles that is reflected in the Book of Ruth, which in the end was included in the canon and surely must have embodied the outlook of more than a solitary writer. In Ruth, we recall, a young Moabite woman, widow of an Israelite man, evinces love and devotion in following her mother-in-law back to Bethlehem in Judah, where she marries a prosperous landowner and becomes the progenitrix of the line of David. It is hard to imagine a more vigorous riposte to the separatism promulgated by Ezra and Nehemiah. Ruth firmly rejects any notion of an ethnic test for belonging to the community of Israel, and, as in the literature of the earlier biblical period, there is an ease of movement into the community: a woman from across the border settles in Judah, quite naturally

accepts the God of her new home, and becomes in every respect a daughter of the people. The Book of Ruth is a luminous testimony to the tolerance and universalism that were a part of the biblical heritage. But the separatist view embodied in Ezra and Nehemiah is the one that seems to have prevailed in its time: no foreign wives, no Samaritans or others of uncertain ethnic and religious background, were tolerated in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and the renewal of the Temple. For better or for worse, this is the approach that gained momentum and would predominate in the many centuries that followed.

Ezra

CHAPTER 1

[1]In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia as the word
of the LORD by Jeremiah had come to fulfillment, the
LORD roused the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, and
he sent forth a proclamation through all his kingdom,
and in a writ as well, saying, [2]"Thus said Cyrus, king
of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth has the
LORD, God of Israel, given me, and He has ordered
me to build Him a house in Jerusalem which is in
Judah. [3]And whoever among you of all His people,
may his God be with him, let him go up to Jerusalem
which is in Judah and build the house of the LORD,
God of Israel—He is the God Who is in Jerusalem.
[4]And whoever remains in all the places where they
sojourn, let the people of his place support him with
silver and with gold and with goods and with beasts
together with the freewill offerings for the house of the
God who is in Jerusalem." [5]And the patriarchal chiefs
of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites
arose, all whose spirit God had roused to go up to
build the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem.
[6]And all those around them strengthened their hands

with silver vessels and with gold and with goods and with beasts and with delicacies besides all the freewill offerings. [7]And King Cyrus had taken out the vessels of the house of the LORD that Nebuchadnezzar had taken out from Jerusalem and put in the house of his god. [8]And Cyrus king of Persia took them out through Mithreath the treasurer, and he counted them out to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah. [9]And this is their count: thirty golden bowls, a thousand silver bowls, twenty-nine knives, [10]thirty golden chalices, four hundred ten different silver chalices, and a thousand other vessels. [11]All the vessels of gold and of silver, five thousand four hundred. All did Sheshbazzar bring up when the exiles went up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the first year of Cyrus king of Persia.* This would be 538 B.C.E., the first year of his conquest of Babylonia and his consequent consolidation of Persian hegemony over a vast region from Cappadocia in the far northwest to Arabia in the southeast and to Egypt and the Levant in the west.

the word of the LORD by Jeremiah. Jeremiah had prophesied a period of seventy years before the return from the impending exile. This "fulfillment" actually falls two decades short of the prediction, but the number seventy is formulaic.

he sent forth a proclamation. Since the Hebrew uses the word that means "voice," this would be a proclamation delivered orally by heralds. It is complemented, as the next phrases indicates, by a written version.

2. *All the kingdoms of the earth has the* LORD, *God of Israel, given me.* The Hebrew writer, piously and tendentiously, represents Cyrus as recognizing the supreme sovereignty of the God of Israel.

He has ordered me to build Him a house in Jerusalem. This statement accords with the general content of the Cyrus Cylinder, issued in 538 B.C.E. and on view in the British Museum. In it, Cyrus authorizes the rebuilding of local sanctuaries throughout his empire. Here this is presented as a special dictate from God for the Jerusalem Temple, but the cylinder clearly indicates that the authorization was part of a general imperial policy, perhaps devised to win the loyalty of the many different subjects of the empire.

3. *He is the God Who is in Jerusalem.* Here Cyrus sounds more like a polytheist, assuming there are different local gods.

4. *support him.* The Hebrew switch from singular to plural to singular is a little confusing, but "him" has to refer to the "he" who "goes up."

8. *the treasurer.* The term *gizbar* is one of several Persian loanwords used in the narrative.

Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah. In all probability, his office is that of prefect over the Persian province of Yehud. The counting out of the sacred vessels of the treasurer to the prefect is in effect the provision of an inventory, to ensure that none of the items carted off by Nebuchadnezzar is missing.

9. *knives.* Some understand the Hebrew term to mean "substitute items."

10. *different silver chalices.* In the Masoretic Text, the first term here is *mishnim,* which would mean "secondary" or "double." This translation reads instead, with several versions of the Septuagint, *meshunim,* a difference only in vocalization.

CHAPTER 2

[1]And these are the people of the province who came
up from the captivity of the exiles whom
Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylonia had exiled to
Babylonia, and they returned to Jerusalem and to
Judah, each to his town, [2]who came with Zerubbabel,
Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai,
Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehun, Baanah. The tally of
the men of the people of Israel: [3]the sons of Parosh,
two thousand one hundred seventy-two; [4]the sons of
Shephatiah, three hundred seventy-two; [5]the sons of
Arah, seven hundred seventy-five; [6]the sons of Pahath-
Moab, the sons of Jeshua, Joab, two thousand eight
hundred twelve; [7]the sons of Elam, one thousand two
hundred fifty-four; [8]the sons of Zattu, nine hundred
forty-five; [9]the sons of Zaccai, seven hundred sixty;
[10]the sons of Bani, six hundred forty-two; [11]the sons of
Bebai, six hundred twenty-three; [12]the sons of Azgad,
one thousand two hundred twenty-two; [13]the sons of
Adonikam, six hundred sixty-six; [14]the sons of Bigvai,
two-thousand fifty-six; [15]the sons of Adin, four

hundred fifty-four; [16]the sons of Ater of Hezekiah,
ninety-eight; [17]the sons of Bezai, three hundred
twenty-three; [18]the sons of Jorah, one hundred twelve;
[19]the sons of Hashun, two hundred twenty-three; [20]the
sons of Gibbar, ninety-five; [21]the sons of Bethlehem,
one hundred twenty-three; [22]the men of Netophah,
fifty-six; [23]the men of Anathoth, one hundred twenty-
eight; [24]the sons of Azmaveth, forty-two; [25]the sons of
Kiriath-Jearim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, seven
hundred forty-three; [26]the sons of Ramah and Geba,
six hundred twenty-one; [27]the men of Michmas, one
hundred twenty-two; [28]the men of Bethel and Ai, two
hundred twenty-three; [29]the sons of Nebo, fifty-two;
[30]the sons of Magbish, one hundred fifty-six; [31]the sons
of the other Elam, one thousand two hundred fifty-
four; [32]the sons of Harim, three hundred twenty, [33]the
sons of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, seven hundred twenty-
five; [34]the sons of Jericho, three hundred forty-five;
[35]the sons of Senaah, three thousand six hundred
thirty; [36]the priests, sons of Jedaiah of the house of
Jeshua, nine hundred seventy-three; [37]the sons of
Omer, one thousand fifty-two; [38]the sons of Pashhur,
one thousand two hundred forty-seven; [39]the sons of
Harim, one thousand seventeen; [40]the Levites, sons of
Jeshua and Kadmiel, the sons of Hodaviah, seventy-
four; [41]the choristers, sons of Asaph, one hundred

twenty-eight; [42]the sons of the gatekeepers, sons of Shallum, sons of Ater, sons of Talmon, sons of Akkub, sons of Hatita, sons of Shobai, all were one hundred thirty-nine; [43]the Temple laborers, sons of Ziha, sons of Hasupha, sons of Tabbaoth, [44]sons of Keros, sons of Siaha, sons of Padon, [45]sons of Lebanah, sons of Hagabah, sons of Akkub, [46]sons of Hagab, sons of Shamlai, sons of Hanan; [47]sons of Giddel, sons of Gahar, sons of Reaiah; [48]sons of Rezin sons of Nekoda, sons of Gazzam; [49]sons of Uzza, sons of Paseah, sons of Besai; [50]sons of Asnah, sons of Meunim, sons of Nephusim; [51]sons of Bakbuk, sons of Hakupha, sons of Harhur; [52]sons of Bazluth, sons of Mehida, sons of Harsha; [53]sons of Barkos, sons of Sisera, sons of Tamah; [54]sons of Neziah, sons of Hatipha; [55]sons of Solomon's servants, sons of Sotai, sons of Hasophereth, sons of Peruda; [56]sons of Jaalah, sons of Darkon, sons of Giddel; [57]sons of Shephatiah, sons of Hattil, sons of Pochereth Hazzebaim, sons of Ami; [58]all of the temple servants and sons of Solomon's servants, three hundred ninety-two. [59]And these were the ones who came up from Tel Melah, Tel Harsha—Cherub, Addan Imner. And they could not tell their patriarchal house and their seed, whether they were of Israel. [60]The sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, the sons of Nekoda, six hundred fifty-two.

[61]And of the sons of the priests, the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, the sons of Barzillai who had taken a wife of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite and was called by his name. [62]These searched for their writs of lineage and they were not found, and they were excluded from the priesthood. [63]And the satrap said to them that they could not eat from the holiest things till a priest should stand forth with the Urim and Thummim. [64]The whole assembly together was forty-two thousand three hundred sixty, [65]besides their male slaves and slavegirls—these were seven thousand three hundred thirty-seven, and they had two hundred male and female choristers. [66]Their horses, seven hundred thirty-six, their mules, two hundred forty-five; [67]their camels, four hundred thirty-five, their donkeys, six thousand seven hundred twenty. [68]And of the patriarchal chiefs when they came to the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, some gave a freewill offering for the house of God to set it up on its foundation. [69]According to their capacity, they gave for the treasury of the task sixty-one thousand drachmas of gold, and five thousand minnas of silver, and one hundred priestly robes. [70]And the priests and the Levites and some of the people and the choristers and the gatekeepers and the temple laborers settled in their towns and all Israel in their towns.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the people of the province.* The "province" would be Yehud, or Judah, now having the status of a province in the Persian empire.

2. *The tally of the men of the people of Israel.* It is important for the writer, in order to confirm the solidarity of the return to Zion and to mark for merit those who chose to return, to present this exhaustive census of the returners. The list, however, shows some anomalies. The enumeration of the sundry groups returning does not add up to the total sum cited at the end of the list. At first, the listing is according to patriarchal lineage; then it switches to identifying groups by place of origin; then it switches back to lineage. Many of the names in the list appear only here and sound very strange to the Hebrew ear, perhaps because they are of foreign (Babylonian? Persian?) origin. A few of the names are ordinary Hebrew words that would be rather odd to use as personal names—e.g., Mispar, "number"; Bakbuk, "bottle"; Lebanah, "moon"; Tabbaoth, "rings." The compilation of this list is something of a mystery. Some have conjectured that it is a composite, blending together groups that returned to Judah soon after Cyrus's decree in 538 B.C.E. with groups that came later, as both Ezra and Nehemiah did.

21. *the sons of Bethlehem.* This marks the switch from listing by lineage to listing by place of origin.

31. *the other Elam.* There is an Elam far to the northeast of Israel; this would be a different place, probably within the borders of Judah, that shared the name.

36. *Jedaiah of the house of Jeshua.* The report now returns to listing by lineage.

40–42. *the Levites . . . the choristers . . . the gatekeepers.* Since the writer's central agenda involves the rebuilding of the Temple and the renewal of the cult within it, he takes care to enumerate the sundry temple functionaries, now returning to assume their hereditary service.

43. *the Temple laborers.* These *netinim* presumably performed more menial functions in the Temple than the Levites, choristers, and gatekeepers. It is possible that they were of foreign origin (compare the Gibeonites, who became hewers of wood and drawers of water for the Israelites).

53. *Sisera.* This is an especially odd name, for it is also the name of the Canaanite general defeated by Deborah and Barak in Judges 4–5.

59. *who came up from Tel Melah, Tel Harsha.* A third principle of listing is now introduced—towns of origin in Babylonia.

61. *Barzillai the Gileadite.* He is the loyal old man who gives provisions to David and his troops in their flight across the Jordan at the time of Absalom's rebellion.

63. *the satrap.* The Hebrew *tirshata* is clearly a loanword, probably Persian, designating a high official. One may infer that the official in question was Nehemiah, appointed to govern the province of Judah.

till a priest should stand forth with the Urim and Thummim. This divinatory device was used in the First Temple period but not in the Second, so the satrap may be saying: "never."

68. *the house of the* LORD *which is in Jerusalem.* The phrase is proleptic, for the house of the LORD had not yet been rebuilt, as the second half of this verse makes clear.

69. *the task.* The Hebrew *mela'khah* is regularly used for the work of building or renovating the Temple.

drachmas . . . minnas. These are Persian terms for currency or weights of precious metal, the former adopted by the Greeks.

CHAPTER 3

[1]And the seventh month arrived, and the Israelites
were in the towns. And the people gathered as one
man in Jerusalem. [2]And Jeshua son of Jozadak with
his brothers the priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel
and his brothers rose up, and they built the altar of the
God of Israel to offer up burnt offerings upon it as was
written in the Teaching of Moses, man of God. [3]And
they set the altar firm on its foundation, for they were
in fear of the peoples of the lands, and they offered up
upon it burnt offerings to the LORD from morning to
evening. [4]And they performed the Festival of Huts as it
was written with the burnt offerings of each day in the
number according to the rule each on its day, [5]and
afterward, perpetual burnt offerings for the new moons
and for all the hallowed festivals of the LORD and for
all who offered a freewill offering to the LORD. [6]From
the first day of the seventh month they began offering
up burnt offerings to the LORD, but the temple of the
LORD was not yet founded. [7]And they gave silver to
the hewers and to the craftsmen and food and drink

and oil to the Sidonians and to the Tyrians to bring cedarwood from Lebanon by sea to Jaffa according to the authorization they had from Cyrus king of Persia.
[8]And in the second year of their arrival at the house of God in Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak and the rest of their brothers, the priests, and the Levites, and all who had come from the captivity to Jerusalem began by setting up the Levites from age twenty to oversee those doing the task of the house of the LORD. [9]And Jeshua stood with his sons and his brothers, Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, to oversee those doing the task in the house of the LORD, the sons of Henadad, their sons, and their brothers the Levites.
[10]And the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, and they set up the priests in their vestments with trumpets and the Levites, sons of Asaph, with cymbals to praise the LORD, as David king of Israel had prescribed. [11]And they called out in praise and in acclamation to the LORD, that He was good, that His kindness to Israel was forever, and all the people raised a great shout in praise to the LORD for the laying of the foundation of the house of the LORD. [12]And many of the priests and the Levites and the elderly patriarchal chiefs who had seen the first house on its foundation, this house, with their own

eyes, were weeping loudly, and many raised their voices with shouts and rejoicing. [13]And the people could not distinguish between the sound of the joyous shouting and the sound of the people's weeping, for the people were raising a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Jeshua . . . Zerubbabel.* Texts from the period of the Return to Zion repeatedly cite, as this one does, two leaders, one of priestly lineage and the other a secular figure. It is generally concluded that Zerubbabel was a descendent of the Davidic line. One should note, however, as a reflection of the extensive acculturation of the exiles in Babylonia that he bears an eminently Babylonian name, which means "seed of Babylonia."

they built the altar. The construction of the Temple itself has not yet begun, but the altar is the first priority so that the offering of sacrifices can be resumed.

3. *for they were in fear of the peoples of the lands.* The fear is that some of the sundry non-Israelites in and around Jerusalem might vandalize or actually destroy the altar, so it is built with a solid foundation, making it more difficult to damage.

7. *silver to the hewers and to the craftsmen and food and drink and oil to the Sidonians and to the Tyrians.* The skilled workers get paid in silver. The Phoenicians, who have transported the cedarwood (as in the building of Solomon's temple), are bringing materials that have already been paid for, so they merely receive provisions.

by sea to Jaffa. In all likelihood, the cedar trunks were bound into rafts and floated down the coast.

10. *as David . . . had prescribed.* More literally, "by David."

11. *that He was good, that His kindness to Israel was forever.* Since these words are a citation from Psalms, one may infer that they were singing a psalm as they played their musical instruments.

12. *who had seen the first house.* This ceremony of rededication, sometime after 534 B.C.E., takes place more than half a century after the destruction of the First Temple.

13. *the people could not distinguish between the sound of the joyous shouting and the sound of the people's weeping.* This report sounds historically plausible and dramatizes the mixture of exultation and memory of past calamity in this celebration.

CHAPTER 4

[1]And the foes of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple to the LORD God of Israel. [2]And they approached Zerubbabel and the patriarchal chiefs and said to them, “Let us build with you, for like you we would seek out your God, and to Him we have been sacrificing from the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here.” [3]And Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and the rest of the patriarchal chiefs with him, said to them, “It is not for you and for us to build a house for our God, for we ourselves shall build for the LORD God of Israel as Cyrus king of Persia has charged us.” [4]And the people of the land were slackening the hands of the people of Judah and frightening them from building [5]and hiring against them councillors to thwart their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia and through to the reign of Darius king of Persia. [6]And in the reign of Ahasuerus, at the beginning of his reign, they wrote a denunciation against the dwellers of Judah and Jerusalem. [7]And in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam,

Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of their associates
wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia, and the epistle was
written in Aramaic and read out in Aramaic. [8]Rehum
the chancellor and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter
about Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes as follows: [9]Then
Rehum the chancellor and Shimshai the scribe and the
rest of their associates, the judges and the inspectors,
the advisors, the administrators, the Archivites, the
Babylonians, the Shushbanites who were Elamites,
[10]and the rest of the peoples whom the great and
glorious Asnappar had exiled and settled in the city of
Samaria and in the rest of the region Beyond the
River. And now, [11]this is the copy of the epistle that
they sent to him: “To King Artaxerxes, your servants,
men from Beyond the River. [12]And now let it be
known to the king that the Jews who came up from
before you to us in Jerusalem, the rebellious and
offending city, they are rebuilding, and the walls they
are finishing and its foundations they are reinforcing.
[13]Now let it be known to the king that if this city is
rebuilt and the walls finished, the levy, the tribute, and
the land tax they will not pay, and in the end the
kingdom will be harmed. [14]Now, since we have tasted
the salt of the palace, and it is not proper for us to see
the king’s shame, for this we have sent out and made it
known to the king, [15]that it be searched in the

chronicles of your fathers, and you will find in the chronicles that this city is a rebellious city and is harmful to kings and provinces, and has provoked war within it from days of yore. Therefore was this city destroyed. [16]We inform the king that if this city is rebuilt and the walls finished, because of this you will have no share in the region Beyond the River." [17]The king sent back this word to Rehum the chancellor and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their associates who were dwelling in Samaria and in the rest of the region Beyond the River: "Greetings. And now [18]the missive that you sent me has been read out and expounded before me. [19]And a decree was put forth by me, and they searched and found that this city from days of yore has risen against kings and rebelled, and war has been provoked in it. [20]And powerful kings were over Jerusalem and dominated the entire region Beyond the River, and the levy, the tribute, and the land tax were paid to them. [21]Now, put out a decree to stop these men from their work, and this city shall not be rebuilt until a decree is put forth by me. [22]And be careful to make no mistake about this lest there be great damage that would do harm to kings." [23]Then when the copy of this letter of King Artaxerxes was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they went in great haste to Jerusalem to the

Jews and stopped them by main force. [24]Then was the work on the house of God in Jerusalem stopped, and it remained stopped until the second year of Darius king of Persia.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the foes of Judah and Benjamin.* Judah and Benjamin being the two tribes of the southern kingdom of Judah, the designation here is of the returning exiles, represented as the autochthonous inhabitants of the land. The "foes" would be the Samaritans—perhaps in part a remnant of Israelites, but here represented as foreigners who had adopted the local cult—living in the region to the north, where the vanished kingdom of Israel once was located. Their declaration is that they "would seek out your God" (verse 2), and that they had been sacrificing to him reflects their embrace of the worship of YHWH because it was the local cult.

2. *who brought us up here.* This is a clear indication of their primarily foreign origin. It was Assyrian imperial policy to exile local populations and bring in others from elsewhere in the empire. Zerubbabel's declaration in the next verse that he will not countenance this collaboration in the rebuilding of the Temple expresses his separatist policy—these are not true Israelites and they do not belong with us.

7. *the epistle was written in Aramaic and read out in Aramaic.* The text seems to say "and translated into Aramaic," which makes no sense (the Septuagint lacks the second verb here). This could be a scribal error, but there are some grounds for concluding that the verb *targem* (a loanword related to "turkemen") meant not only "to translate" but also "to read out in public," which is precisely what the *turgeman* in the early synagogues did as he rendered the Hebrew of the Torah into Aramaic. At this point, the language of Ezra switches from Hebrew to Aramaic. Aramaic, in fact, was the common official language of the Persian empire, so a letter to the emperor

such as this would have been written in Aramaic. It is unclear whether the actual original Aramaic document has been inserted in the text or whether—perhaps more likely—the author has composed an Aramaic letter conveying the substance of the original document.

9. *the inspectors, the advisors, the administrators.* The exact nature of these bureaucratic titles is unknown.

the Archivites, the Babylonians. The text now switches from imperial functionaries to terms of national identity.

10. *Beyond the River.* This is from the Persian point of view, so it probably means the River Jordan, which is to say, all who live in the land of Israel, designated by the Persians as the province of Yehud.

13. *if this city is rebuilt and the walls finished.* If Jerusalem again becomes a walled city, ready to resist attack, it will exercise autonomy and cease to pay its sundry taxes (the precise nature of the tax terms is unclear) to the empire.

14. *tasted the salt of the palace.* This is a synecdoche for enjoying imperial provisions.

19. *this city from days of yore has risen against kings.* The emperor accepts the accusation of the Samaritan instigators.

21. *until a decree is put forth by me.* Nevertheless, his acceptance is conditional because he reserves for himself the right to revoke his ban on the rebuilding of the city. He is clearly acting like an emperor, not wanting foreign commoners to dictate policy to him.

23. *they went in great haste to Jerusalem to the Jews and stopped them by main force.* Artaxerxes has assented to their argument against the rebuilders, however provisionally. Before he can change his mind, they rush off to Jerusalem with his authorization and immediately bring the rebuilding to a halt, using some sort of violence, or at least the threat of violence, to do so.

CHAPTER 5

[1]And Haggai the prophet and Zechariah son of Iddo
the prophet prophesied concerning the Jews of Judah
and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, to
them. [2]Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua
son of Jozadak and the officers rose up to rebuild the
house of God that was in Jerusalem, and with them the
prophets of God aiding them. [3]At that time Tattenai
the satrap of Beyond the River and Shethar-Bozenai
and their associates came down upon them, and thus
did they say to them, “Who gave you authorization to
rebuild this house and to finish these walls? [4]Then thus
we said to them, ‘What are the names of the men who
are rebuilding this structure?’” [5]But the eye of their
God was upon the elders of the Jews, and they did not
stop them until a report could go forth to Darius, and
then they would respond to this in a missive. [6]The copy
of the letter that Tattenai the satrap of Beyond the
River and Shethar-Bozenai and their associates the
inspectors of Beyond the River sent to King Darius. [7]A
word did they send to him, and thus it was written: “To

King Darius abundant greetings. [8]Let it be known to
the king that we went to the province of Yehud to the
house of the great god, and it is being rebuilt with
hewn stone, and timber is being set in the walls, and
this work of which we report is being done and is
prospering through them. [9]Then did we ask of these
elders, as follows did we say to them: ‘Who gave you
authorization to build this house and to finish these
walls?’ [10]And their names as well we asked of them to
inform you that the names of the men who are at their
head have been written down. [11]And this is the word
they answered us, saying, ‘We are the servants of the
God of the heavens and the earth, and we are
rebuilding the house that was built many years long
ago, and a great king of Israel built it and finished it.
[12]But because our fathers angered the God of the
heavens, He gave them into the hand of
Nebuchadnezzar the Chaldean, king of Babylonia, and
he destroyed this house, and he exiled the people to
Babylonia. [13]But in the first year of Cyrus king of
Babylonia, King Cyrus put out a decree to rebuild this
house of God. [14]And also the vessels of the house of
God, of gold and silver that Nebuchadnezzar had taken
out from the Temple in Jerusalem and brought to the
temple in Babylonia, Cyrus took out from the temple
in Babylonia, and they were given to one named

Sheshbazzar, whom he had made satrap. [15]And he said to him: “These vessels, carry, go, set them in the Temple in Jerusalem, and the house of God shall be rebuilt on its site.” [16]Then this Sheshbazzar came, laid the foundations of the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and from then to now it has been rebuilt, but it is not complete.’ [17]And now, if it please the king, let it be searched in the archives of the king there in Babylonia whether it be that King Cyrus put forth a decree to rebuild this house of God in Jerusalem, and let the king’s pleasure concerning this be sent to us.”

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Haggai . . . Zechariah.* Both these prophets were deeply involved in exhorting Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the people to move forward in the task of rebuilding the Temple.

3. *finish these walls.* The fact that the verb which means “to finish” or “to complete” is repeatedly used for the walls may suggest that in the conquest the walls were only partially destroyed. Whereas the invaders would have been impelled to raze the Temple and the palace, breaches in the walls would have sufficed for their purposes.

8. *the house of the great god.* The Persian officials acknowledge, or at least are made to acknowledge in the formulation of this text, that the god of this people is great and powerful.

hewn stone. The exact meaning of *ʾeven-gelal* (a Hebrew term in the Aramaic text, perhaps because it is a technical builder’s term) is uncertain.

Some think that it refers to the color of the stone—possibly veined Jerusalem stone—but an indication of the shaping of the stone fits the context better.

11. *a great king of Israel.* This of course would be Solomon, but the Persians would scarcely have been familiar with his name, so this descriptive epithet is entirely appropriate to their address to Tattenai and his associates.

12. *because our fathers angered the God of the heavens.* They hew to the explanation of Deuteronomy and the Prophets that the offenses of the people are what brought about the destruction of the Temple.

13. *Cyrus king of Babylonia.* He actually used this title for a brief time after conquering the Babylonians.

16. *from then to now it has been rebuilt, but it is not complete.* The previous chapter gives the impression that the obstruction of the building was through the violent interference of the Samaritans, but the evidence in the writings of Haggai and Zechariah rather more plausibly points to a failure of initiative on the part of the returning exiles.

CHAPTER 6

[1]Then King Darius put forth a decree, and they
searched in the library in which the archives rested in
Babylonia. [2]And in Ahemeta, in the capital city, which
is in the province of Media, a certain scroll was found,
and thus was written in it—a memorandum. [3]In the
first year of King Cyrus, King Cyrus put forth a
decree: “The house of God in Jerusalem, the house
shall be rebuilt, the site on which sacrifices are offered,
its foundations raised up, its height sixty cubits, its
width sixty cubits, [4]three rows of hewn stone and one
row of timber, and the expenses shall be granted by
the house of the king. [5]And the vessels as well of the
house of God, of gold and silver, that Nebuchadnezzar
took out from the Temple in Jerusalem and brought to
Babylonia, they shall bring back and place in the
Temple that is in Jerusalem, to its site, and they shall
set them in the house of God.” [6]Now Tattenai the
satrap of Beyond the River, Shethar-Bozenai, and their
associates the inspectors of Beyond the River were far
away from there: “[7]Leave the work of the house of

God to the satrap of the Jews and to the Jewish elders.
This house of God they shall rebuild on its site. [8]And
by me a decree is put forth about what you shall do
with these Jewish elders to rebuild this house of God,
and from the king's possessions from the taxes of
Beyond the River the expenses shall be paid out
scrupulously to these men, that they not be halted in
the work. [9]And what they require in bulls and rams
and sheep for burnt offerings to the God of the
heavens, wheat, salt, wine, oil according to the
pronouncements of the priest, shall be given to them
each day without fail, [10]so that they may sacrifice
fragrant incense to the God of the heavens and that
they may pray for the life of the king and his children.
[11]And by me is a decree put forth that any man who
alters this word, a beam shall be torn from his house
and he shall be impaled upon it upright and his house
shall be turned into rubble for this. [12]And the God
Who makes His name dwell there shall destroy any
king or people that reaches out a hand to alter or to
damage this house of God which is in Jerusalem. I
Darius have put forth a decree. Scrupulously shall it be
done." [13]Then Tattenai satrap of Beyond the River,
Shethar-Bozenai, and their associates, because King
Darius had thus sent, did it scrupulously. [14]And the
Jewish elders were building and prospering by the

prophecy of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah son of Iddo, and they built and finished it by the decree of the God of Israel and by the decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes kings of Persia. [15]And this house was completed on the third day of the month of Adar, which was the sixth year of the reign of King Darius. [16]And the Israelites, priests and Levites, and the rest of the exiles made a joyous dedication of this house of God. [17]And they sacrificed for the dedication of this house of God a hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred sheep, and he-goats as an offense offering for all Israel twelve for the number of the tribes of Israel. [18]And they established priests in their divisions and Levites in their ranks over the service of the God that is in Jerusalem according to the writ of the Book of Moses. [19]And the exiles performed the Passover on the fourteenth of the first month. [20]For the priests and the Levites had together purified themselves, they all were pure, and they slaughtered the Passover for all the exiles and for their brothers the priests and for themselves. [21]And the Israelites who had returned from the exile and all who had separated themselves from the uncleanness of the nations of the land to seek out the LORD God of Israel ate of it. [22]And they joyously celebrated the Festival of Flatbread seven days, for the LORD had made them joyful and had inclined the

heart of the king of Assyria toward them to strengthen their hands in the task of the house of God, the God of Israel.

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Ahemeta.* The summer palace of the Persian emperors was located here. What seems to be implied is that a search was first conducted in the main imperial archives (the burden of the preceding verse), and the document was not found. Further inquiry discovered the document in a secondary archive at Ahemeta, which may suggest that this authorization to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem was not a major concern for the Persian bureaucracy.

a memorandum. The use of this term may imply that the text which follows is a summary rather than the original document.

3. *In the first year of King Cyrus.* This is 538 B.C.E., eight decades before Ezra arrives in Jerusalem from the Babylonian exile. This chronological gap dictates the need for archival research in order to uncover the text of Cyrus's decree.

4. *one row of timber.* This method of constructing stone buildings with reinforcing timber elements explains how invaders, as in 586 B.C.E., were able to burn down the stone structures.

7. *Leave the work.* These words, cast in an imperative, continue Cyrus's directive, briefly interrupted by the explanatory note of verse 6.

the satrap of the Jews. Tattenai is the Persian satrap appointed over the province of Yehud ("Beyond the River"). The satrap of the Jews would be the civil leader of the Jews, probably Zerubbabel.

8. *from the king's possessions . . . the expenses shall be paid.* This may be an invention of the writer to emphasize Cyrus's generosity. Indications elsewhere are that the expenses of the rebuilding project were covered by collecting contributions from the returned exiles.

10. *and that they may pray for the life of the king and his children.* Cyrus's policy of authorizing the rebuilding of local sanctuaries throughout the empire was intended to enlist the gratitude and loyalty of his subjects.

14. *by the decree of the God of Israel and by the decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes.* Practically, the rebuilding was made possible by the authorization of the Persian emperor, but the writer, from his theological perspective, wants to make clear that the emperors are God's instruments, fulfilling the divine decree with their own.

15. *the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.* This is 480 B.C.E.

18. *And they established priests in their divisions.* At this point, the narrative, having finished its dealing with Aramaic documents and Persian emperors, switches back from Aramaic to Hebrew.

19. *And the exiles performed the Passover.* Of the three pilgrim festivals, it is the Passover that confirms national identity (as in the celebration of Passover at the beginning of Joshua), and so it is appropriately celebrated here. The phrase "performed the Passover" refers specifically to the Passover sacrifice, as is made explicit in the next verse.

21. *all who had separated themselves from the uncleanness of the nations of the land.* This clause is another reflection of Ezra's separatist ideology: there was a population in Judah that had not gone into exile, and those within it who had kept their distance from the Samaritans and other nonindigenous peoples, avoiding both their cultic practices and intermarriage with them, could join in the Passover.

22. *the king of Assyria.* It is puzzling that the Persian emperor should be called the king of Assyria, and "Assyria" may be a scribal slip for "Persia."

CHAPTER 7

[1]And after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes
king of Persia, Ezra son of Seraiah son of Azariah son
of Hilkiah [2]son of Shallum son of Zadok son of
Ahitub [3]son of Amariah son of Azariah son of
Meraioth [4]son of Zerahiah son of Uzzi son of Bukki
[5]son of Abishua son of Phineas son of Eleazar son of
Aaron the head priest—[6]he, Ezra, came up from
Babylonia, and he was a scribe deft in the teaching of
Moses that the LORD God of Israel had given. And
the king gave him, through the power of the LORD
his God over him, whatever he requested. [7]And from
the Israelites and from the priests and the Levites and
the choristers and the gatekeepers and the temple
laborers they went up to Jerusalem in the seventh year
of King Artaxerxes. [8]And he came to Jerusalem in the
fifth month, which was in the king's seventh year. [9]For
on the first day of the first month the going up from
Babylonia began, and on the first day of the fifth
month he arrived in Jerusalem through the beneficent
power of his God over him. [10]For Ezra had readied his

heart to seek out the teaching of the LORD and to do and to teach in Israel statute and law.

[11]And this is the copy of the epistle that King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest-scribe, adept in the words of the LORD's commands and His statutes for Israel: [12]"Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, scribe of the law of the God of the heavens and so forth. And now, [13]by me is a decree put forth that whoever in my kingdom from the people of Israel and its priests and Levites who is moved to go to Jerusalem with you may go [14]because you have been sent from before the king and his seven councillors to inspect Yehud and Jerusalem by the law of your God that is in your hand [15]and to bring the silver and gold of the king and his advisors that they have donated to the God of Israel Whose dwelling place is in Jerusalem, [16]and whatever silver and gold that you may find in all the provinces of Babylonia with the donation of the people and the priests that they donate for the house of their God that is in Jerusalem. [17]Because of this, you shall scrupulously purchase with this silver—bulls, rams, sheep, and their grain offerings and their libations and offer them on the altar of the house of your God that is in Jerusalem. [18]And what it pleases you and your

brothers to do with the rest of the silver and the gold according to the will of your God you may do. [19]And the vessels that are given to you for the worship in the house of your God give over before the God in Jerusalem. [20]And the rest of the needs of the house of your God that fall to you to give, you shall give from the king's treasury. [21]And by me, King Artaxerxes, a decree is put forth to all the treasurers of Beyond the River that whatever Ezra the priest, scribe of the law of the God of the heavens, asks of you, you shall scrupulously perform, [22]as much as one hundred talents of silver and as much as one hundred *kors* of wheat and as much as one hundred *bats* of wine and as much as one hundred *bats* of oil, and salt without limit. [23]All this that is by the decree of the God of the heavens shall be done promptly, lest there be fury against the king's kingdom and his sons. [24]And you do we inform that for all the priests and the Levites, the choristers, the gatekeepers, the temple laborers and the workers of this house of God there is no permission to impose tax, levy, tribute, and land tax on them. [25]And you, Ezra, with God's wisdom that you possess, appoint judges and magistrates that will judge all the people that is in Beyond the River, all who know the laws of your God. And him who does not know, you shall inform. [26]And as to all who do not do the law of your

God and the law of the king promptly, judgment shall be enacted upon him, whether to die, whether to lash him, whether punishment of property or imprisonment.” [27]Blessed is the LORD God of our fathers, who has put it in the heart of the king to glorify the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem. [28]And as for me, He granted me favor before the king and his councillors and the king’s warrior nobles, and I summoned strength as the hand of the LORD my God was upon me, and I gathered chieftains from Israel to go up with me.

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And after these things.* The preceding unit addressed events during the reign of Darius. This phrase, stereotypical in biblical usage, serves to cover a chronological jump forward to 458 B.C.E., when Ezra moved from Babylonia to Jerusalem.

Ezra son of Seraiah son of Azariah son of Hilkiah. This very long genealogy that begins with these words takes Ezra’s lineage all the way back to Aaron (at the end of verse 5) and is meant to establish Ezra’s impeccable legitimacy in the priestly line. He is a man fit through pedigree to oversee the spiritual renewal of the people in its land.

5. *the head priest.* This usage, *kohen haroʾsh,* diverges from the designation of the high priest in earlier biblical literature as *hakohen hagadol* (literally, “the great priest”)

6. *power.* The literal sense is “hand,” but that word sometimes has the meaning of “power.”

7. *the priests and the Levites.* Because the purpose of Ezra'a mission is the renewal of the temple service, all these temple functionaries are listed here.

9. *the going up . . . began.* The Hebrew phrase *yesud hamaʿalah* ("the founding of the going up") is a little strange and may reflect how idiomatic patterns in Late Biblical Hebrew were being pushed in new directions.

10. *the teaching of the LORD.* It is possible that this phrase, *torat YHWH,* is an explicit designation of the Torah, or Pentateuch, especially in light of Ezra's role in making it canonical for the returned exiles.

11. *the copy of the epistle.* Both these nouns are Aramaic, signaling the switch to Aramaic in verse 12, although the rest of this verse is Hebrew.

14. *because you have been sent from before the king and his seven councillors.* It is historically plausible that Ezra's mission to the province of Yehud was officially authorized by the imperial bureaucracy. Whether the empire provided financial assistance for Ezra's project is open to question.

23. *lest there be fury against the king's kingdom and his sons.* This clause was surely not part of the original imperial document. The writer, invoking his own theological perspective, represents the Persian emperor in trepidation before the power of the God of Israel, fearing punishment if the work of the Temple is not carried out strictly as it should.

27. *A*t this point, after the conclusion of Artaxerxes's royal directive, the text switches back from Aramaic to Hebrew and continues in Hebrew through the remainder of the book.

CHAPTER 8

[1]And these are the patriarchal chiefs and their lineage
who came up with me in the reign of King Artaxerxes
from Babylonia. [2]From the sons of Phineas, Gershom
from the sons of Ithamar, Daniel; from the sons of
David, Hattush; [3]from the sons of Shechaniah—of the
sons of Parosh, Zechariah, and through him was traced
a male lineage of one hundred fifty; [4]from the sons of
Pahath-Moab, Elihoenai son of Zerahiah, and with
him two hundred males; [5]from the sons of Shechaniah
son of Jahaziel, and with him three hundred males;
[6]and from the sons of Adin, Ebed son of Jonathan; and
with him fifty males; [7]and from the sons of Elam,
Jeshaiah son of Athaliah, and with him seventy males;
[8]and from the sons of Shephatiah, Zebediah son of
Michael, and with him eighty males; [9]from the sons of
Joab, Obadiah son of Jehiel, and with him two
hundred and eighteen males; [10]and from the sons of
Shelomith son of Josiphiah, and with him one hundred
sixty males; [11]and from the sons of Bebai, Zechariah
son of Bebai, and with him twenty-eight males; [12]and

from the sons of Azgad, Jonathan son of Hakkatan, and with him one hundred ten males; [13]and from the sons of Adonikam who were the last, these are their names: Eliphelet, Jeiel, and Shemaiah, and with them sixty males; [14]and from the sons of Bigvai, Uthai, and Zabbud, and with him, seventy males. [15]And I gathered them by the river that enters Ahava, and we camped there three days. And I inspected the people and the priests but I did not find Levites there. [16]And I sent teachers for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, and Elnathan and Jarib and Elnathan and Nathan and Zechariah and Meshullam—the chiefs. [17]And I charged them concerning Iddo the chief in a place called Casophiah and put words in their mouth to speak to Iddo and his brother, who were located in the place Casophiah, to bring us ministrants for the house of God. [18]And they brought us, as the beneficent hand of the LORD was upon us, a discerning man from the sons of Mahli son of Levi son of Israel, and Sherabiah and his sons and his brothers, eighteen in number. [19]And Hashabiah and with him Jeshaiah from the sons of Merari his brother and their twenty sons. [20]And from the temple laborers whom David and the nobles had appointed for the service of the Levites, two hundred twenty temple workers all of them listed by name. [21]And I proclaimed a fast there by the Ahava River to afflict ourselves

before our God to seek from Him a straight way for us and for our little ones and for all our possessions. [22]For I was ashamed to ask of the king an armed force and horsemen to aid us against enemies on the way, for we had said to the king, saying, The hand of our God is benevolent upon all who seek him, and His power and His wrath are upon all who forsake Him. [23]And we fasted and sought out our God for this, and He granted our plea. [24]And I set apart from the heads of the priests twelve—Sherebaiah, Hashabiah, and with them ten of their brothers. [25]And I weighed out silver and gold to them and the vessels, the donation to the house of the LORD that the king and his councillors and his nobles and all Israel who were there had donated. [26]And I weighed out in their hand six hundred fifty talents of silver and silver vessels a hundred talents and a hundred talents of gold. [27]And twenty golden bowls worth a thousand *adarchons* and two vessels of goodly burnished bronze precious as gold. [28]And I said to them, “You are consecrated to the LORD and the vessels are consecrated and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering to the LORD your God. [29]Be vigilant and watch till you weigh it out before the chief priests and the patriarchal officers of Israel in Jerusalem in the chambers of the house of the LORD.” [30]And the priests and the Levites received the

weighed measure of silver and gold and vessels to bring to Jerusalem to the house of our God. [31]And we journeyed on from the Ahava River on the twelfth day of the first month to go to Jerusalem, and the hand of their God was over us and He saved us from the clutch of enemy and ambusher on the way. [32]And we came to Jerusalem and stayed there three days. [33]And on the fourth day the silver and the gold and the vessels were weighed out in the house of our God by Meremoth son of Uriah the priest, and with him Eleazar son of Phineas and with them the Levites Jozabad son of Jeshua and Noadiah son of Binnui, [34]by count and by weight for everything, and the entire weight was written down at that time. [35]Those who came from the captivity, the exiles, offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel, twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams and seventy-seven sheep, twelve he-goats as offense offering, all burnt offering to the LORD. [36]And they gave the king's orders to the king's governors and to the satraps of Beyond the River, and they bolstered the people and the house of God.

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And these are the patriarchal chiefs and their lineage.* The list that follows complements the list of returning exiles in chapter 2. The present list is specifically those who joined Ezra in returning (Hebrew "going up") to the land of Israel in the mid-fifth century B.C.E. The two lists share the impetus to provide a kind of honor roll of those who chose to return and to establish their pedigree of legitimacy.

15. *And I gathered them by the river that enters Ahava.* This is a location in Babylonia (its precise identification is unknown) that serves the exiles as a kind of staging ground before they begin their long trek westward. Although "Ahava" might look like an English transliteration of the Hebrew word for "love," it is actually spelled quite differently in the Hebrew and is presumably a Babylonian place-name.

21. *to seek from Him a straight way.* The returning exiles are about to journey several hundred miles through largely uninhabited territory, much of it desert, with of course no maps or compass, and so they entreat God to guide them on the way, first fasting to demonstrate their contrition and their staunch commitment to returning to their land. The next verse spells out that their fear is not merely finding their way but possible assault by marauders.

26. *six hundred fifty talents of silver.* The silver that was not in vessels would have been in ingots. The precise weight of the talent (Hebrew *kikar*) is not known, but it was definitely very large, so this is a vast amount of precious metal.

36. *And they gave the king's orders to the king's governors and to the satraps of Beyond the River.* It seems that not only was the Temple project authorized by the Persian emperor but also Ezra's standing as leader was authorized. This suggests that Ezra, before he returned to Jerusalem, was known in imperial circles and enjoyed some kind of recognized position in the court.

CHAPTER 9

[1]And when all of these things were finished, the nobles approached me, saying, “The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not kept apart from the peoples of the lands whose abominations are like the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, the Ammonite, the Moabite, the Egyptian, and the Amorite. [2]For from their daughters they have taken as wives for themselves and for their sons, and the holy seed has mingled with the peoples of the lands, and the hand of the nobles and the officers was first in this betrayal.” [3]And when I heard this thing, I rent my garment and my cloak and I tore out hair from my head and my beard and I sat desolate. [4]And all who trembled for the words of the God of Israel over all the betrayal of the exiles gathered by me while I was sitting desolate till the evening grain offering. [5]And at the time of the evening grain offering I arose from my fast, and I was in my torn garment and my cloak, and I kneeled and spread my palms to the LORD my God. [6]And I said, “My God, I am too ashamed and mortified

to lift my face to you, my God, for our crimes have multiplied over our heads and our guilt is great up to the heavens. [7]From the days of our fathers we have been in great guilt to this day, and through our crimes we, our kings, our priests have been given into the hands of the kings of the lands, to the sword and to captivity mand to pillage and to shame as on this day. [8]And now, in a mere moment, there has been grace from the LORD our God to leave us survivors and to give us anchorage in His holy place and to give light to our eyes, O our God, and to grant us a bit of livelihood in our labor. [9]Though we be slaves, in our slaving we have not forsaken our God, and He has inclined kindness for us before the kings of Persia to grant us a livelihood to raise up the house of our God and to build up its ruins and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem. [10]And now, what can we say, O our God, after we have forsaken Your commands [11]that You commanded through Your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land that you have come to take hold of is a land of defilement through the defilement of the peoples of the lands with their abominations, as they filled it from end to end with their uncleanness'? [12]And now, do not give your daughters to their sons nor marry their sons, and never seek their well-being nor their good, so that you may be strong and enjoy the

land's bounty and bequeath it to your children forever.
13And after all that has befallen us through our evil
deeds and through our great guilt, You, O our God,
have gauged our crime less than it was and have
granted us this surviving group. 14Shall we again thwart
your commands to enter into marriage with the
peoples doing these abominations? Would You not be
incensed against us so as to bring an utter end to us
without remnant or survivor? 15LORD God of Israel,
You are righteous, for we have remained a surviving
group as on this day. Here we are before You in our
guilt, for one cannot stand before You because of
this."

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the nobles.* The Hebrew *sarim* equally designates people fulfilling high public functions—in court contexts, high royal officials; in military contexts, commanders.

the peoples of the lands. This regularly refers in Ezra to the non-Jewish population of Judah. The list that follows includes five of the seven indigenous peoples of Canaan (in fact, long since destroyed or assimilated) repeatedly mentioned in the Torah as well as three other peoples. The point of mentioning peoples that no longer exist is to invoke the Torah's ban on mingling with the local pagans.

2. *the holy seed has mingled with the peoples of the lands.* The traditional reason for avoiding intermarrying was to keep apart from pagan practices.

Although Ezra still has this rationale in mind, here he adds what amounts to a racist view: the people of Israel are a "holy seed" and hence should avoid contamination by alien genetic stock.

the hand of the nobles and the officers was first in this betrayal. The accused are themselves nobles and officers. This suggests a division in the Judahite elite between advocates and opponents of exogamy. Ezra would surely have observed the prevalence of intermarriage on his arrival, so he may have been waiting for this political signal that he had substantial allies in his opposition before giving voice to it.

5. *my fast.* The Hebrew *taʿanit* also could have a more general sense of "mortification," but it seems likely that in Late Biblical Hebrew it already shows the meaning of "fast" that would become standard in rabbinic Hebrew.

6. *our crimes have multiplied.* Ezra is careful to use the first-person plural, taking on the guilt as a collective burden.

8. *anchorage.* The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "tent peg," which is to say, what holds a structure firm and prevents it from being blown away.

9. *a wall.* The Hebrew *gader* is not a city wall (*ḥomah*) but the kind of low stone wall or fence used in fields. In any case, it suggests protection or partitioning.

12. *And now, do not give your daughters to their sons.* Ezra up to this point has been addressing God, but now he turns to the people. This would be a kind of "aside" to them, for in the next verse he continues his address to God.

15. *for we have remained a surviving group as on this day.* After the destruction of the kingdom of Judah in 586 B.C.E. and after well over a century of exile, the very existence of this group that has returned to Zion, dedicated to the renewal of the temple service and the revival of national existence, is living proof of God's righteousness and His compassion for the people that has been so severely punished.

CHAPTER 10

[1]And as Ezra prayed and as he confessed, weeping
and prostrating himself before the house of God, a
very great assembly of Israel gathered round him, men
and women and children, for the people were bitterly
weeping. [2]And Shechaniah son of Jehiel from the sons
of Elam spoke out and said to Ezra, “We have
betrayed our God and brought back foreign wives, but
now there is hope for Israel concerning this. [3]And now,
let us seal a covenant with our God to send away all
the wives and those born by them according to the
counsel of the Master and of those trembling for the
command of our God, and let it be done according to
the Teaching. [4]Arise, for the matter is for you to do,
and we are with you. Be strong and act.” [5]And Ezra
arose and made the officials of the priests and the
Levites and all the people swear to do this thing, and
they swore. [6]And Ezra arose before the house of God
and went to the chamber of Johanan son of Eliashib
and went there. Bread he did not eat nor water did he
drink, for he was mourning over the betrayal by the

exiles. [7]And they sent out a proclamation in Judah and
Jerusalem to all the exiles to gather in Jerusalem. [8]And
whoever would not come for the three days according
to the counsel of the nobles and the elders, all his
property would be seized and he would be kept apart
from the assembly of the exiles. [9]And all the men of
Judah and Benjamin gathered in Jerusalem for the
three days, which was in the ninth month on the
twentieth of the month. And all the people sat in the
square of the house of God shaking because of the
matter and because of the rains. [10]And Ezra the priest
arose and said to them, “You have betrayed and
brought back foreign wives to add to the guilt of Israel.
[11]And now, confess to the LORD God of your fathers
and do His will, and keep yourselves apart from the
peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.” [12]And
all the assembly answered and said in a loud voice,
“Thus, according to your words we must do. [13]But the
people are many, and it is the rainy season, and there
is no strength to stand outside, and the task is not for
one day nor for years, for we have greatly trespassed in
this matter. [14]Let our nobles, pray, stand forth for all
the assembly and for all who are in our towns who
have brought back foreign wives. Let them come at set
times, and with them the elders of each town and its
judges until the smoldering wrath of our God over this

matter is turned back.” [15]But Jonathan son of Asahel
and Jahaziah son of Tikvah stood forth for this, and
Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite aided them.
[16]And so the exiles did. And Ezra the priest and men
who were the patriarchal chiefs according to their
patriarchal houses kept themselves apart and all were
listed by name. And they sat on the first day of the
tenth month to inquire into the matter. [17]And they
finished with all the men who had brought back
foreign wives by the first day of the first month. [18]And
there were found from the sons of the priests that had
brought back foreign wives from the sons of Jeshua
son of Jozadak and his brothers, Maaseiah and Eliezer
and Jarib and Gedaliah. [19]And they pledged to send
away their wives, and guilty, to offer a ram from the
flock for their guilt. [20]And from the sons of Immer,
Hanani, and Zebadiah. [21]And from the sons of Harim
Maaseiah and Eliah and Shemaiah, Jehiel and Uzziah.
[22]And from the sons of Pashhur, Elioenai, Maaseiah,
Ishmael, Nethaneel, Jozabad, and Elasah. [23]And from
the Levites, Jozabad and Shimei and Kelaiah—he
from Kelita—Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer. [24]And
from the choristers, Eliashib, and from the
gatekeepers, Shallum and Telem and Uri. [25]And from
Israel, from the sons of Parosh, Ramiah, and Jeziah,
and Malchiah and Mijamin and Eleazar and Malchijah

and Benaiah. [26]And from the sons of Elam, Mattaniah, Zechariah, and Jehiel and Abdi and Jeremoth and Eliah. [27]And from the sons of Zattu, Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, and Jeremoth and Zabad and Aziza. [28]And from the sons of Bebai, Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, Athlai. [29]And from the sons of Bani, Meshullam, Malluch and Adaiah, Jashub, Sheal, and Jeremoth. [30]And from the sons of Pahath-Moab, Adna, and Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezabel, and Binnui and Manasseh. [31]And from the sons of Harim, Eliezer, Isshijah, Malchijah, Shemaiah, Simeon; [32]Benjamin, Mallush, Shemariah. [33]From the sons of Hashum, Mattenai, Mattattah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, Shimei. [34]From the sons of Bani, Maadi, Amram, and Uel, [35]Benaiah, Bedeiah, Cheluhu, [36]Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib, [37]Mattaniah, Mattenai, and Jaasai, [38]and Bani and Binnui and Shimei, [39]and Shelemiah and Nathan and Adaiah, [40]Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai, [41]Azarel, Shelemiah, and Shemariah, [42]Shallum, Amariah, Joseph. [43]From the sons of Nebo, Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jaddai, Joel, and Benaiah. [44]All these had married foreign wives, and there were among them women who had children.

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *but now there is hope for Israel concerning this.* We are resolved to rectify the situation by expelling the foreign wives, and so there is hope.

3. *to send away all the wives and those born by them.* The banishment of wives and children was clearly a cruel and draconian measure, and it certainly must have triggered opposition. The Book of Ruth, probably written at this time, shows an antithetical view, affirming the legitimacy of intermarriage.

the Teaching. By this late date, "the Teaching" (*torah*) was probably coming into use as a designation for the Five Books of Moses, which Ezra would endow with canonical authority.

4. *the matter is for you to do.* More literally, "upon you is this matter."

8. *whoever would not come . . . all his property would be seized and he would be kept apart.* Ezra and his allies impose harsh measures of coercion in order to ensure compliance with their policy.

11. *His will.* The Hebrew noun *ratson,* which in earlier texts means "what is pleasing," here appears to be moving into its later sense of "will."

13. *there is no strength to stand outside.* One may infer that Ezra's harangue was lengthy, and so they complain of their physical discomfort before going on to speak of the difficulty of implementing the program of mass divorce.

the task is not for one day nor for years. If intermarriage has been going on for generations, as appears to be the case, sorting out who is a foreign wife and who is a legitimate Israelite woman is likely to constitute a huge bureaucratic challenge, and it is not something that can be done overnight. The nobles—or "officials"—will need to organize a concerted project of inquiry, town by town, as the next verse states.

16. *Ezra the priest.* He is probably given this epithet here (instead of the more common "Ezra the scribe") because the priestly line had to be scrupulous about preserving its genealogical purity, and that is what he now proposes to do for the entire community of returning exiles.

17. *And they finished with all the men who had brought back foreign wives.* The Hebrew syntax of this clause looks rather shaky, but this is the evident sense.

by the first day of the first month. Ezra and his associates thus have managed to compile the list of men with foreign wives in just two months. One does not know how valid this list would have been.

19. *and guilty, to offer a ram.* Again, the Hebrew syntax looks suspect, and "to offer" is merely implied. The full list of men who have married foreigners begins in the next verse and continues through the penultimate verse of the book. Although there are many familiar Hebrew names in the list, there are many strange names as well. Quite a few names recur in different families because, as in most societies, different people would use the same names for their children.

44. *and there were among them women who had children.* While this is the likely sense of this clause, the Hebrew wording is quite odd—literally, "and there were among the women, and they put children." It is unclear whether the text has been corrupted in scribal transmission or whether this is an instance of Late Biblical Hebrew in which the idiomatic usage and the syntactical coherence of classical Hebrew are loosened.

Nehemiah

CHAPTER 1

[1]The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. And it happened in the month of Kislev in the twentieth year [of Artaxerxes] when I was in Shushan the capital, [2]that Hanani, one of my brothers, came, he and men, from Judah, and I asked them about the Jews, the surviving group that remained from the captivity, and about Jerusalem. [3]And they said to me, “Those who remain from the captivity there in the province are in great trouble and in disgrace, and the wall of Jerusalem has been breached and its gates ravaged by fire.” [4]And it happened when I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I was fasting and praying before the God of the heavens. [5]And I said, “Please, LORD, God of the heavens, great and fearsome God, keeping the covenant and the trust for those who love Him and keep His commands. [6]Let Your ear, pray, be attuned, and Your eyes be open, to listen to Your servant’s prayer that I pray before You today, day and night, for the Israelites Your servants, and I confess the offenses that the Israelites have committed against You—I, and my father’s house,

have offended. [7]We have surely injured You and not kept the commands and the statutes and the laws with which You charged Moses Your servant. [8]Recall, pray, the word with which You charged Moses Your servant, saying, ‘Should you betray, I on My part will scatter you among the peoples. [9]And if you turn back to Me and keep My commands and do them, though your scattered ones be at the end of the heavens, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I chose to make My name dwell there.’ [10]And they are Your servants and Your people that You redeemed with Your great power and with Your strong hand. [11]Please, O Master, let Your ears, pray, be attuned to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name, and make Your servant, pray, prosper today, and let him find mercy before this man.” And I was cupbearer to the king.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The words of Nehemiah.* Much of the book is, in fact, a first-person narrative, and it is plausible that what we have is an edited text actually originating with Nehemiah. The Hebrew style is lucid and hews to many of the norms of the First Commonwealth language, perhaps reflecting Nehemiah’s own style.

[of Artaxerxes]. This identification has been added for clarity, and it is quite possible that it was originally in the text and then dropped through a scribal error. We are not informed of Nehemiah's significant role in the Persian court until the end of this chapter.

2. *one of my brothers.* Given the flexibility of the Hebrew noun, this could mean that Hanani was actually Nehemiah's brother, residing in Jerusalem, or that he was viewed by Nehemiah as a colleague because of his position of leadership.

3. *in the province.* That is, the province of Yehud, as it was designated by the Persians.

4. *the God of the heavens.* Nehemiah's use of this epithet in Hebrew probably reflects the currency in this period of the Aramaic equivalent *ʾela di shemaya.*

6. *I, and my father's house, have offended.* In taking on the role of intercessor for Israel, Nehemiah does not want to appear to be in no way implicated in the people's transgressions, so he makes a point of adding these words.

8. *the word with which You charged Moses.* What follows seems to echo the reiterated doctrine of Deuteronomy: if Israel betrays the covenant, it will be scattered among the nations; if it turns back to God, He will put an end to the exile.

10. *And they are Your servants.* Nehemiah concludes his prayer by reminding God, as it were, that this people is, after all, God's people, a people He has redeemed in the past (the language suggests the redemption from Egyptian slavery).

11. *let Your ears, pray, be attuned to the prayer of Your servants.* This echo of the beginning of the prayer (verse 6) gives it a shapely envelope structure. But at the beginning, Nehemiah spoke of himself—"servant" in the singular—whereas now he implies that the whole people is joining him in this prayer. He will then switch back to the singular "servant" because he goes on to refer to his mission to the emperor.

let him find mercy before this man. "This man" is the Persian emperor, whose authorization Nehemiah now needs in order to provide the military means to protect the beleaguered Jews in Jerusalem.

And I was cupbearer to the king. Cupbearer, perhaps the original function, is a symbolic title designating a high-ranking official in the imperial court.

But, as 2:1 shows, Nehemiah also literally poured wine for the king. It is remarkable that someone without Persian ethnicity should be promoted to such an important post, and it reflects the prevalent ethnic tolerance manifested in Persian imperial policy.

CHAPTER 2

[1]And it happened in the month of Nissan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, there was wine before him, and I bore the wine and gave it to the king, and I had not been sad in his presence. [2]And the king said to me, “Why is your face sad when you are not ill? This can only be sadness of heart.” And I was very much afraid. [3]And I said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why would my face not be sad when the city that is the graveyard of my fathers is in ruins and its gates consumed by fire?” [4]And the king said to me, “For what are you asking?” And I prayed to the God of the heavens, [5]and I said, “If it please the king and if your servant seem good before you, send me to Judah, to the city of the graves of my fathers, that I may rebuild it.” [6]And the king said, with the consort sitting by him, “How long will your going be and when will you come back?” And it seemed good before the king, and he sent me off, and I gave him a time. [7]And I said to the king, “If it please the king, let them give me letters to the satraps of Beyond the River that they let

me cross over until I come to Judah, [8]and a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's park, that he give me timber to roof the gates of the temple fortress and the city wall and the house to which I shall come." And the king granted it to me, as the benign hand of my God was upon me. [9]And I came to the satraps of Beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. And the king had sent with me army officers and horsemen. [10]And Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard, and they were very displeased that a man had come to seek good for the Israelites. [11]And I came to Jerusalem and was there three days. [12]And I arose in the night, I and the few men with me, and I told no man what my God had set in my heart to do for Jerusalem, and there were no beasts with me except the beast on which I was riding. [13]And I went out through the Gate of the Valley by night toward the Spring of the Jackals and toward the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been breached and its gates ravaged by fire. [14]And I passed on to the Gate of the Spring and to the King's Pool, and there was no room for the beast under me to pass through. [15]And I went up the wadi by night and inspected the wall and came back and entered the Gate of the Valley and came back. [16]And the prefects had not known where I had gone nor what I was doing, and

to the Jews and to the priests and to the nobles and to the prefects and to the rest of those engaged in the task I had not told till then. [17]And I said to them, “You see the trouble in which we are, that Jerusalem is in ruins and its gates are ravaged by fire. Go, and we will rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and no longer be a disgrace.” [18]And I told them of the hand of God that was benign upon me, and also of the words of the king that he had said to me. And they said, “Let us rise up and build.” And they bolstered their hands to do good. [19]Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard, and they mocked us and despised us and said, “What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?” [20]And I responded to them and said, “The God of the heavens, He shall make us prosper, and we are His servants. We shall rise up and build, and you have no share or right or claim in Jerusalem.”

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *in the month of Nissan.* This would be about three months after Nehemiah resolved to request aid for Jerusalem from the emperor. Either he felt he had to wait for a propitious moment to broach the subject, or there was some sort of rotation of court functions and only now was he called to fulfill his duties as cupbearer.

I had not been sad in his presence. The emperor would obviously not appreciate a gloomy official serving his wine.

2. *And I was very much afraid.* To appear before the emperor looking melancholy might trigger his anger or even lead to dismissal.

3. *May the king live forever.* This hyperbole is standard court etiquette. Bathsheba uses more or less the same words when she addresses the aged and failing David (1 Kings 1).

4. *For what are you asking?* The emperor is shrewd enough to realize that this invocation of the desolation of Jerusalem is a preamble to some sort of petition.

6. *with the consort sitting by him.* This odd notation may indicate that this is a festive occasion, in which female companionship for the monarch is part of the protocol. This would make Nehemiah's gloomy countenance all the more egregious.

7. *letters to the satraps.* It should be recalled that the satraps had received a royal edict to suspend the rebuilding of Jerusalem (Ezra 4), so these letters are both an authorization for the rebuilding and a kind of passport.

8. *the king's park.* The Hebrew term *pardes* is a loanword from the Persian and has entered many languages, including English, where it occurs as "paradise." In modern Hebrew it means "orchard."

10. *Sanballat the Horonite.* He is from Samaria—many have inferred he is the satrap of Samaria. The ethnic or geographical reference of "Horonite" is uncertain.

Tobiah the Ammonite servant. The Ammonites are explicitly singled out in the Torah as a people that shall not come into the assembly of the LORD. Though Tobiah must be some sort of high official, his designation as "servant" (or "slave") may be intended to demean him.

12. *I arose in the night.* Nehemiah makes his survey of the walls of Jerusalem in the dead of the night in order to keep it secret. In verse 16, Nehemiah elaborates the care he took to preserve the secrecy of his mission. Aware that Sanballat and his allies will try to stop the project of rebuilding, he does not want any preparations he makes to be known until active work begins, which he exhorts the people to do in verse 17.

19. *Are you rebelling against the king?* In Ezra 4, the message sent to the king by the Samaritans and their allies was that rebuilding the walls of the city constituted an act of rebellion.

20. *you have no share or right or claim in Jerusalem.* The Samaritans, whatever their ethnic origin, considered themselves legitimate followers of the God of Israel and thus entitled to a full role in the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple and in participation in the cult there. This is a claim that Nehemiah, with his separatist ideology, categorically rejects.

CHAPTER 3

[1]And Eliashib the high priest arose, and his brothers the priests with him, and they rebuilt the Sheep Gate. They consecrated and set up its doors. They consecrated it as far as the Tower of the Hundred, the Hananeel Tower. [2]And alongside him the men of Jericho built, and alongside him Zaccur the son of Imri. [3]And the sons of Hassenaah built the Fish Gate. They roofed it and set up its doors, its locks, and its bolts. [4]And alongside them Meremoth son of Uriah son of Hakkoz repaired. And alongside them Meshullam son of Berechiah son of Meshezabeel repaired. And alongside them Zadok son of Baanah repaired. [5]And alongside them the Tekoites repaired, but their nobles did not put their neck [in the yoke of] their lords. [6]And Jehoiada son of Paseah and Meshullam son of Besodeiah repaired the Jeshanah Gate. They roofed it and set up its doors and its locks and its bolts. [7]And alongside them Melatiah the Gibeonite and Jadon the Meronothite, men of Gibeon and Mizpah, repaired to the point of the seat of the

satrap of Beyond the River. [8]Alongside them Uzziel
son of Harhaiah of the smelters repaired. And
alongside him Hananiah member of the perfumers
repaired. And they restored Jerusalem as far as the
Broad Wall. [9]And alongside them Rephaiah son of Hur
repaired, officer of half the district of Jerusalem. [10]And
alongside them Jedaiah son of Harumaph repaired
opposite his house. And alongside him Hattush son of
Hashabniah repaired. [11]A second parcel Malchijah son
of Harim and Hashub son of Pahath-Moab repaired as
well as the Tower of Kilns. [12]And alongside him
Shallum son of the incantation sayer, officer of half the
district of Jerusalem repaired, he and his daughters.
[13]Hanun and the dwellers of Zanoah repaired the
Valley Gate, they rebuilt it and set up its doors, its
locks, and its bolts—a thousand cubits along the wall
as far as the Dung Gate. [14]And Malachijah son of
Rechab, officer of the district of Beth-Haccerem,
repaired the Dung Gate. He rebuilt it and set up its
doors, its locks, and its bolts. [15]And Shallun son of
Col-Hozeh, officer of the Mizpah district, repaired the
Fountain Gate. He rebuilt it and covered it and set up
its doors, its locks, and its bolts, as well as the feeder
pool for the King's Garden as far as the steps going
down from the City of David. [16]After him Nehemiah
son of Azbuk, officer of the Beth-Zur district, repaired

as far as opposite the graves of David and as far as the artificial pool and as far as the House of the Warriors.
17 After him the Levites repaired; Rehum son of Bani.
Alongside him, Hashabiah, officer of the half-district of Keilah, repaired for his district. 18 After him, their brothers, Bavvai son of Hanedad, officer of the half-district of Keilah. 19 And Ezer son of Jeshua, officer of Mizpah, repaired alongside him a second parcel opposite the armory in the angle. 20 After him Baruch son of Zabbai sedulously repaired a second parcel from the angle to the house of Eliashib the high priest.
21 After him Meremoth son of Uriah son of Hakkoz repaired a second parcel from the entrance of the house of Eliashib to the outer limit of the house of Eliashib. 22 And after him the priests, men of the plain, repaired. 23 After him Benjamin and Hashub repaired opposite their house. After him Azariah son of Maaseiah son of Ananiah repaired by their house.
24 After him Binnui son of Hanedad repaired a second parcel, from the house of Azariah to the angle, to the corner. 25 Palal son of Uzai [repaired] from opposite the angle and the tower jutting out from the upper king's house, which is the court of the prison. After him, Pedaiah son of Parosh. 26 And the temple laborers were living in the Ophel as far as opposite the Water Gate to the east and the tower jutting out. 27 After him

the Tekoites repaired a second parcel from opposite the Great Tower jutting out and to the wall of the Ophel. [28]Above the Horse Gate the priests repaired, each man opposite his house. [29]After him Zadok son of Immer repaired opposite his house, and after him Shemaiah son of Shechaniah, keeper of the East Gate, repaired. [30]After him Hananiah son of Shelemiah and Hanun, the sixth son of Zalaph, repaired a second parcel. After him Meshullam son of Berechiah repaired opposite his chamber. [31]After him Malchijah, member of the smelters, repaired as far as the house of the temple laborers and the traders, opposite the Mustering Gate and as far as the corner loft. [32]And between the corner loft and the Sheep Gate the smelters and the traders repaired.

[33]And it happened when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he was incensed and angered and mocked the Jews. [34]And he said before his kinsmen and the Samaritan force, and he said, “What are the miserable Jews doing? Will they restore? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish on the set day? Will they bring the stones back to life from the dust piles where they were burned?” [35]And Tobiah the Ammonite was by him, and he said, “Even what they

are rebuilding, should a fox climb up, it would breach the wall of their stones.” [36]“Hear, O our God, how we have become an object of scorn, and turn back their insults on their own head and give them as spoil in a land of captivity. [37]And do not cover their crime and their offense before You. Do not wipe it away, for they have provoked the builders.” [38]And we rebuilt the wall, and the whole wall was linked together to half its height. And the people had the heart to do it.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *And alongside him the men of Jericho built.* The entire passage through to the end of verse 32 is articulated in stereotyped formulaic phrases and is surely one of the least interesting in the Bible. Again, it appears that the author—in this case, perhaps the editor rather than Nehemiah himself—wanted to present a kind of honor roll of all those who had played an active part in the rebuilding of the walls of the city. The sundry indications of locations along the walls have been sedulously traced and mapped out by scholars, but, in fact, many of them remain uncertain. In general, biblical literature exhibits a certain attachment to lists and genealogies that is unlikely to be congenial to modern readers. There are some minor linguistic anomalies in this passage, such as “after him” following plural builders, but these do not seem significant enough to be annotated. The names in the list are a mix of familiar Hebrew names and exotic ones. A few of them look like nicknames or epithets, such as Harumaph (verse 10), “pug-nosed,” and Hakkoz (verse 4), “the thorn.”

7. *to the point of the seat of the satrap of Beyond the River.* The Hebrew for “seat” often is used as the term for “throne.” This would presumably be the

place where the satrap's office was located.

12. *the incantation sayer.* The term *loḥesh* is understood in this translation as a professional designation, though it could be simply an odd personal name.

he and his daughters. It is a puzzle why and how young women were involved in the building project. Perhaps Shallum had no sons, and his daughters helped him in tasks that did not involve heavy lifting.

13. *a thousand cubits along the wall.* This slightly confusing notation probably indicates that, in addition to restoring the Valley Gate, they worked on repairing the adjacent wall for a thousand cubits.

15. *Col-Hozeh.* The name, if it is a name and not a professional title, means "visionary of all."

16. *the graves of David.* Since David would have had only one grave, this must mean the graves of David and his direct descendants.

24. *to the angle, to the corner.* The first term, *miqtsoʿa,* may indicate the inside angle and the second term, *pinah,* the outside corner of the intersecting walls.

27. *the Ophel.* The Hebrew word means "fortress" or "tower-fortress." It became the proper name for an area on the heights of the city that was presumably fortified.

31. *member of the smelters.* Though the same word, *ben,* "son," is used in the patronymic listings, here it appears to indicate membership in a professional guild.

33. *we were rebuilding.* The introduction of the first-person plural is a clear indication that the text has returned to Nehemiah's narrative.

34. *his kinsmen.* Literally, "his brothers."

And he said . . . he said. This may be a dittography.

Will they offer sacrifices? While the work under way is on the walls, not the Temple, the restored walls would protect the Temple, the rebuilding of which was equally part of Nehemiah's project.

Will they finish on the set day? "Set" has been added interpretively in the translation. "The day" in Hebrew does seem to mean finishing on schedule.

35. *should a fox climb up, it would breach the wall of their stones.* That is, this rapidly progressing building project can produce only flimsy results—a mere

fox would poke its way through the walls. Moreover, foxes running around the Temple mount are a biblical image of the utter desolation: see Ezekiel 13:4.

36. *Hear, O our God, how we have become an object of scorn.* Nehemiah could not, of course, have heard the actual words of scorn spoken by Sanballat and Tobiah, but, aware of their contempt for the Jews, he conveys the gist of it in invented dialogue.

38. *And we rebuilt the wall.* After the prayer for vindication against Sanballat and his allies (verses 36–37), Nehemiah resumes the narrative report of the rebuilding, which is continued in defiance of the mockers.

the whole wall was linked together to half its height. The plan is first to restore the integrity of the entire circumference of the wall, building only halfway up, and then to complete the building to the full height of the wall.

CHAPTER 4

[1]And it happened when Sanballat and Tobiah and the
Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard
that the walls of Jerusalem had been healed, for the
breaches had begun to be stopped up, they were very
incensed. [2]And all of them conspired together to come
to battle against Jerusalem and to do wrong to us. [3]And
we prayed to our God and set up a watch over them
day and night against them. [4]And Judah said:

Failed is the strength of the basket
bearer,
and there is much rubble,
and we are unable
to build the wall.

[5]And they said, “Our foes will not know and will not
see till we come into their midst and slay them, and we
shall desist from the task.” [6]And it happened when the
Jews dwelling near them came and said to us, “Ten

times over from all the places where you turn back against us . . .” [7]I stationed on the lower levels of the palace behind the walls on the bare rocks, I stationed the people by their clans with their swords, their lances, and their bows. [8]And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, “Do not fear them. Recall the great and fear-some Master and battle for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives, and your homes.” [9]And it happened when our enemies heard that it was known to us, God thwarted their counsel, and we all went back to the wall, each man to his task. [10]And it happened from that day that half my lads were doing the task and half of them were holding lances, shields, bows, and armor. And the commanders were behind all the house of Judah [11]who were building the wall and bearing the rubble baskets while armed, one hand doing the task and the other holding the weapon. [12]And the builders, each had his sword girded on his hip as they built, and the sounder of the ram’s horn was by me. [13]And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, “The task is great and spread out, and we are separated on the wall, each far apart from his fellow. [14]In the place where you hear the sound of the ram’s horn, there you shall gather to us. Our God will battle for us.” [15]And we were doing the

task, and half of them were holding the lances from daybreak till the stars came out. [16]At that time, too, I said to the people, “Each man and his lad shall spend the night within Jerusalem and shall be a watch for us at night, and during the day—the task.” [17]And neither I nor my brothers nor my lads nor the men of the watch would take off our garments. Each man held his weapon in his right hand.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the Ashdodites.* Ashdod was one of the five Philistine cities along the Mediterranean coast. Whether in this late period its inhabitants were still ethnically Philistine is uncertain, but in any case they were not of Israelite origin. Here they are part of a broad alliance of groups hostile to the Jews.

2. *do wrong to us.* The translation, following a cue from the Septuagint, emends the Masoretic Text, which says “to him.”

3. *over them . . . against them.* The first “them” refers to the builders, the second to their enemies. Such mingling of pronominal reference is common in Hebrew.

4. *Failed is the strength of the basket bearer.* This two-line ditty, which refers to the difficulty of the labor, not to the threat of an attack, could be the quotation of a chant sung by the workers.

5. *Our foes will not know.* The builders, rather than waiting to be attacked, plan a surprise sortie against the enemy.

we shall desist from the task. This does not mean that they will abandon the work, only that they will put it aside temporarily in order to carry out the attack.

6. *the Jews dwelling near them.* There was Jewish settlement not only in and around Jerusalem but to the north, near Samaria.

Ten times over from all the places where you turn back against us . . . The translation reflects the incoherence of the Hebrew. It looks as if a clause or at least a phrase is missing from the received text.

7. *on the lower levels . . . on the bare rocks.* The meaning of both terms in the Hebrew is uncertain.

9. *that it was known to us.* What had become known was the plan of the enemies to attack the builders. Lacking the element of surprise, they abandon the plan.

10. *lances, shields, bows, and armor.* These are, then, well-equipped fighting men. Although the verb "to hold" does not work for "armor," it is used because of the momentum of the three previous terms in the list.

11. *armed.* The Masoretic Text has *ʿomsim,* "loading," but this translation follows the Septuagint, which reads *ḥa mushim,* "armed."

12. *the sounder of the ram's horn was by me.* Since the ram's horn is used for mustering troops, if Nehemiah receives any indication of an imminent attack, he has the alarm sounded with the ram's horn.

15. *half of them were holding the lances.* There appears to be a doubling of security measures: half the men constitute an armed guard over the builders, but the builders themselves carry weapons—one hand doing the work and the other grasping a weapon. This is a project undertaken under conditions of extreme danger.

16. *Each man and his lad.* The "lad," *naʿar,* here means "servant," or for the dedicated military men, something like an orderly or armor bearer.

a watch for us at night, and during the day—the task. Nehemiah especially fears a night attack, and so he posts a watch and enjoins everyone to sleep in his clothes with readied weapon. There is also a threat of attack by day, as the preceding verses indicate, but not one great enough to impede the work.

CHAPTER 5

[1]And the people's outcry was great against their
Jewish brothers. [2]And some were saying, "Our sons
and our daughters are many, and we would take grain
and eat and stay alive." [3]And some were saying, "Our
fields and our vineyards and our homes we are
pawning that we may take grain during the famine."
[4]And some were saying, "We have borrowed money
for the king's tax against our fields and our vineyards.
[5]And now, our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers,
and our sons are like their sons, and, look, we are
consigning our sons and our daughters to slavery, and
some of our daughters have already been consigned,
with us powerless, and our fields and our vineyards to
others." [6]And I was very incensed when I heard their
outcry and these words. [7]And I reflected, and I rebuked
the nobles and the officers and said to them, "Are you
dunning your brothers for debts?" And I set against
them a great crowd. [8]And I said to them, "We have
bought back our Jewish brothers sold to the nations as
much as we could, and you on your part sell your

brothers, and they are sold to us?” And they fell silent and found no words. [9]And I said, “The thing that you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of the nations, our enemies? [10]And I, too, my brothers and my lads hold claims against them of money and grain. Let us abandon, pray, this claim of debt. [11]Give them back today, pray, their fields, their vineyards, their olive trees, and the claim of money and of grain, wine, and oil for which you are dunning them.” [12]And they said, “We will give it back, and we will ask nothing of them. So will we do this thing.” And I called the priests and made them swear to do this thing. [13]I also shook out what was in my lap and said, “Thus shall God shake out from his house and from his possessions every man who does not fulfill this word, and thus shall he be shaken out and be empty.” And all the assembly said “Amen.” And they praised the LORD, and the people did according to this word. [14]Also, from the day he charged me to be their satrap in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, twelve years, I and my brothers did not eat the satrap’s bread. [15]But the first satraps who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for bread and wine forty shekels of silver. Their lads, too, lorded

it over the people. But I did not do this because of the fear of God. [16]And also I supported the task of this wall, and I bought no field, and all my lads were gathered there for the task. [17]And the Jews and the satraps, a hundred fifty men who had come to us from the nations that were all around us, were at my table. [18]And this is what was prepared for me for a single day —one ox, six choice sheep and fowl were prepared for me, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance. But for all this, I did not request the satrap's bread, for the service was heavy upon the people. [19]Recall, O my God, to my credit, all that I have done for this people.

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And the people's outcry was great against their Jewish brothers.* At this point, a new problem emerges for the Jewish population of the province of Yehud—economic exploitation within Jewish society.

2. *Our sons and our daughters are many.* The Hebrew shows a syntactic anomaly: "Our sons and our daughters we [are?] many." Some emend "many," *rabim,* to *ʿorvim,* "give in pledge, pawn," the same verb that occurs in the next verse.

4. *money.* In earlier texts, this Hebrew word, *kesef,* is consistently translated as "silver," but the archaeological evidence is that by the fifth century B.C.E. coins were used in Judah and elsewhere in the region.

8. *We have bought back our Jewish brothers sold to the nations as much as we could.* There were Jews languishing as slaves or indentured servants to

foreigners, and we made every effort to pay for their liberation. How, then, could we ourselves reduce our own kin to servitude?

9. *to avoid the reproach of the nations.* "To avoid" is implied by the Hebrew prefix "from." Earlier, the reproach or disgrace of Israel in the eyes of other nations was because of its lowly condition, but here it is because of the injustice it inflicts on its own people.

12. *I called the priests.* It is the nobles and the officials, just rebuked by Nehemiah, who exert economic power. Now, he enlists the priests to help him to exact the vow of restitution.

13. *I also shook out what was in my lap.* This is the equivalent of shaking out all the contents of one's pockets.

14. *did not eat the satrap's bread.* The expression, with "bread" again figuring as a synecdoche for "food," means the financial resources coming from the king to the satrap. There is a parallel idiom in English—it occurs, for example, in Melville's *Billy Budd*—"I have eaten the king's bread," meaning, "I have been given my sustenance by the king."

15. *Their lads.* Here the sense is obviously "their servants."

17. *a hundred fifty men . . . were at my table.* As befits the satrap or governor of a province of the Persian empire, Nehemiah maintains a grand court with sumptuous provisions for many guests.

18. *But for all this, I did not request the satrap's bread.* It can be inferred that Nehemiah had amassed substantial wealth during his service in the imperial court in Shushan, and it is that which he draws on for this regimen of lavish entertainment.

for the service was heavy upon the people. The "service," or "labor," may be corvée labor performed for the emperor or taxes paid to him. If it is taxes, these then would have been used in part to provide the satrap with his grand allowance, and that would be Nehemiah's rationale for using his own funds to cover the expenses of his lavish entertainment.

CHAPTER 6

[1]And it happened when it was heard by Sanballat and
Tobiah and Geshem the Arab and the rest of our
enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and no breach
remained in it, though at that time I had not set up the
gates, [2]Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying,
“Come, let us meet together in Kephirim in the Ono
Valley,” and they were planning to do harm to me.
[3]And I sent messengers to them, saying, “I am doing a
great task and will not be able to go down. Why should
the work stop if I were to desist from it and come
down to you?” [4]And they sent to me in this fashion
four times and I answered them in this fashion. [5]And
Sanballat sent to me in this fashion a fifth time by his
lad, and there was an open letter in his hand. [6]In it was
written: “It has been heard among the nations and
Geshem says, ‘You and the Jews are planning to rebel.
Therefore do you rebuild the wall, and you are
becoming their king, as these words have it. [7]And
prophets, too, you have set up to proclaim of you in
Jerusalem, saying: There is a king in Judah. And now,

it will be heard by the king, as these words have it, and, now, come and let us meet together.'" [8]And I sent to him, saying, "It has not happened according to these words that you say, for you have contrived them from your own heart. [9]For they are all trying to frighten us, saying, 'Let your hands slacken from the task, that it not be done.'" And now, strengthen my hands! [10]And I came to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah son of Mehetabel, and he was confined, and he said, "Let us meet at the house of God within the Temple and close the doors of the Temple, for they are coming to kill you, at night they are coming to kill you." [11]And I said, "Shall a man like me flee? And can the likes of me come into the Temple and live? I will not come." [12]And I realized and, look, God had not sent him, but the prophecy he spoke concerning me—Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him, [13]as he was hired so that I would be afraid and do this and offend, and it would be an evil report for them that they might disgrace me. [14]Remember, O my God, of Tobiah and Sanballat their acts, and also of Naidaiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who are seeking to frighten me!

[15]And the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, on the fifty-second day. [16]And it happened when

all our enemies heard, all the nations that were around us were afraid, and they fell very low in their own eyes, and they knew that this task had been done through the LORD our God. [17]In those days, too, the nobles of Judah were sending many letters to Tobiah, and those of Tobiah were coming to them. [18]For many in Judah were pledged to him, for he was son-in-law to Shechaniah son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berechiah. [19]Of his virtues, too, they would speak before me, and my affairs they would convey to him. Tobiah had sent letters to frighten me.

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *they were planning to do harm to me.* Although different proposals have been made as to the nature of the harm, including merely a scheme to compromise Nehemiah, the most likely possibility is that what he suspects is a plot to kill him.

3. *I am doing a great task.* His reason for refusing to meet them, chosen with some calcu-lation, is precisely what has been infuriating them—that he is too busy supervising the restoration of the walls to take time off.

5. *an open letter.* The previous four communications were confidential. Now Sanballat sends an open letter, hoping that the general knowledge of his message will demonstrate how reasonable he is in asking for a meeting and how suspect Nehemiah's activities are, thus putting pressure on Nehemiah to comply.

6. *and Geshem says.* The Hebrew shows *wegashmu,* an unintelligible word, emended here to *wegeshem.* But the Septuagint appears to have used a Hebrew text that lacked these words.

7. *And prophets, too, you have set up.* This is clearly a fabrication.

And, now, come and let us meet together. Sanballat, having made the grave accusation of rebellion against Nehemiah, attempts to offer him a way out: you are seriously compromised, perhaps even in danger of arrest by the imperial authorities; by meeting with me, it will be evident that you are collaborating with parties in no way hostile to the empire.

9. *And now, strengthen my hands.* These words obviously could not have been addressed to Sanballat. Perhaps they are the brief interjection of a prayer, though that is far from certain.

10. *confined.* The Hebrew *ʿatsur* could mean this, or "detained." But Shemaiah is evidently able to leave the house because he proposes to meet Nehemiah in the Temple.

Let us meet at the house of God within the Temple. Shemaiah proposes the Temple as a meeting place because it is also a sanctuary in the judicial sense, and hence killers, he implies, are not likely to enter its precincts in pursuit of Nehemiah.

11. *Shall a man like me flee?* This defiant posture of courage is in keeping with Nehemiah's previous behavior in the perilous enterprise of building the wall.

And can the likes of me come into the Temple and live? He may mean that the assassins would not hesitate to follow him into sacred space, in which case the Temple would become a death trap. Alternately, he may be saying that because he is not a priest, he would incur punishment by death in entering the Temple. The latter interpretation gains some support from the mention of an "evil report" and of Nehemiah's "offending" in verse 13—that is, he would disgrace himself by violating sacred space.

15. *And the wall was completed.* Nehemiah's real response to the schemes of Sanballat is to pursue the building of the wall to its completion.

16. *all the nations that were around us were afraid.* Seeing that Nehemiah and his men are now surrounded by a solid defensive wall, they feel impotent to carry out any attack on them. They now understand the completion of the

wall against odds as a manifestation of God's support for the builders. They had plotted to frighten Nehemiah, but it is they who are frightened.

17. *the nobles of Judah were sending many letters to Tobiah.* The political situation is revealed to be more complicated than it had appeared: people who should be in Nehemiah's camp are in cahoots with the enemy and are sharing intelligence with him.

CHAPTER 7

[1]And it happened when the wall was rebuilt that I set
up doors, and the gatekeepers and the choristers and
the Levites were appointed. [2]And I charged Hanani my
brother and Hananiah officer of the fortress in
Jerusalem, for he was a truthful man and God-fearing
more than most. [3]And I said to them, “Let not the
gates of Jerusalem be open till the sun grows warm,
and while [the guards] are still stationed, let the doors
be shut and made fast, and set up watches from
Jerusalem’s dwellers, each man on his watch and each
man before his house.” [4]And the city was broad and
large, and the people within it were few, and there
were no built-up houses. [5]And my God put it in my
heart, and I gathered the nobles and the officials and
the people to trace their lineage, and I found the
record of lineage of those who first came up, and I
found within it: [6]These are the people of the provinces
who came up from captivity of exile that
Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylonia had inflicted, and
they came back to Jerusalem and to Judah, each man

to his town, [7]those who came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua,
Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamani, Mordecai,
Bilshan, Misperath, Bigvai, Nehum, Baanah. The
number of the people of Israel—[8]the sons of Parosh,
two thousand one hundred seventy-two; [9]the sons of
Shephatiah, three hundred seventy-two; [10]the sons of
Arah, six hundred fifty-two; [11]the sons of Pahath-
Moab, the sons of Jeshua and Joab, two thousand eight
hundred eighteen; [12]the sons of Elam, one thousand
two hundred fifty-four; [13]the sons of Zattu eight
hundred forty-five; [14]the sons of Zaccai, eight hundred
sixty; [15]the sons of Binnui, six hundred forty-eight;
[16]the sons of Bebai, six hundred twenty-eight; [17]the
sons of Azgad, two thousand three hundred twenty-
two; [18]the sons of Adonikam, six hundred; [19]the sons of
Bigvai, sixty-seven; [20]the sons of Adin, six hundred
fifty-five; [21]the sons of Ater, of Hezekiah, ninety-eight;
[22]the sons of Hashum, three hundred twenty-eight;
[23]the sons of Bezai, three hundred twenty-four; [24]the
sons of Hariph, one hundred twelve; [25]the sons of
Gibeon, ninety-five; [26]the men of Bethlehem and
Netophah, one hundred eighty-seven; [27]the men of
Anathoth, one hundred twenty-eight; [28]the men of
Beth-Azmaveth, forty-two; [29]the men of Kiriath-
Jearim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, seven hundred forty-
three; [30]the men of Ramah and Geba, six hundred

twenty-one; [31]the men of Michmas, one hundred
twenty-two; [32]the men of Bethel and Ai, one hundred
twenty-three; [33]the men of the other Nebo, fifty-two;
[34]the sons of the other Elam, one thousand two
hundred fifty-four; [35]the sons of Harim, three hundred
twenty; [36]the sons of Jericho, three hundred forty-five;
[37]the sons of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, seven hundred
twenty-one; [38]the sons of Senaah, three thousand nine
hundred thirty; [39]the priests, sons of Jedaiah, nine
hundred seventy-three; [40]the sons of Immer, one
thousand fifty-two; [41]the sons of Pashhur, one thousand
two hundred forty-seven; [42]the sons of Harim, one
thousand seventeen; [43]the Levites, sons of Jeshua,
Kadmiel, the sons of Hodaviah, seventy-four; [44]the
choristers, sons of Asaph, one hundred forty-eight;
[45]the gatekeepers, sons of Shallum, sons of Ater, sons
of Talmon, sons of Akkub, sons of Hatita, sons of
Shobai one hundred thirty-eight; [46]the temple laborers,
sons of Hasupha, sons of Tabbaoth; [47]sons of Keros,
sons of Sia, sons of Padon, [48]sons of Lebanah, sons of
Hagabah, sons of Shalmai; [49]sons of Hanan, sons of
Giddel, sons of Gahar, [50]sons of Reiahia, sons of
Rezin, sons of Nekoda, [51]sons of Gazzam, sons of
Uzza, sons of Paseah, [52]sons of Besai, sons of
Meunim, sons of Nephishesim, [53]sons of Bakbuk, sons
of Hakupha, sons of Harhur, [54]sons of Bazluth, sons of

Mehida, sons of Harsha, [55]sons of Barkos, sons of Sisera, sons of Tamah, [56]sons of Neziah, sons of Hatipha, [57]the sons of Solomon's servants, sons of Sotai, sons of Sophereth, sons of Perida, [58]sons of Jala, sons of Darkon, sons of Giddel, [59]sons of Shephatiah, sons of Hattil, sons of Pochereth-Hazzebaim, sons of Amon; [60]all the temple builders and the sons of Solomon's servants, three hundred ninety-two. [61]And these are the ones who came up from Tel-Melah, Tel-Harsha, Cherub, Addon, and Immer, whether their patriarchal house and their seed were of Israel or not: [62]the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, the sons of Nekoda, six hundred forty-two. [63]And of the priests, sons of Habaiah, sons of Hakkoz, sons of Barzillai who had taken as wives from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite and were called by his name, [64]these sought the writ of their lineage and it was not found, and they were unfit for the priesthood. [65]And the governor said to them that they could not eat of the holy of holies till the priest stood with the Urim and Thummim. [66]All the assembly together was forty-two thousand three hundred sixty, [67]besides their male slaves and slavegirls—these were seven thousand three hundred thirty-seven. And they had two hundred forty-five men and women choristers. [68]Their horses were seven hundred thirty-six and their mules two hundred

forty-five; [69]four hundred thirty-five camels, six thousand seven hundred twenty their donkeys. [70]And some of the patriarchal chiefs gave donations for the task. The governor gave to the treasury a thousand drachmas of gold, fifty basins, fifty priestly robes, five hundred thirty. [71]And some of the patriarchal chiefs gave for the task's treasury twenty thousand drachmas of gold and two thousand two hundred minnas of silver. [72]As to what the rest of the people gave, it was twenty thousand drachmas of gold and two thousand minnas of silver and sixty-seven priestly robes. [73]And the priests and the Levites and the gatekeepers and the choristers and some of the people and the temple laborers and all Israel settled in their towns. And when the seventh month arrived, all Israel were in their towns.

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *Let not the gates of Jerusalem be open till the sun grows warm.* This would be midmorning, a rather late hour for the opening of the city gates. One may infer that the gates were locked for an unusually long time because of Nehemiah's perception of possible attacks.

made fast. The Masoretic Text has an imperative, "hold fast."

4. *there were no built-up houses.* Nehemiah is thus faced with still another building project.

6. *These are the people of the provinces.* This list substantially replicates the list in Ezra 2 and is in all likelihood an insertion of an editor, not of Nehemiah. See the comments on Ezra 2 and, on lists, the comment on 5:1.

CHAPTER 8

[1]And all the people gathered as one man in the square
that is in front of the Water Gate, and they said to Ezra
the scribe to bring the Book of the Teaching of Moses
with which the LORD had charged Israel. [2]And Ezra
the priest brought the Teaching before the assembly,
men and women and all who had understanding to
listen, on the first day of the seventh month. [3]And he
read from it before the square that was before the
Water Gate from first light to midday in the presence
of the men and the women and those who had
understanding, and the ears of all the people were
[listening] to the Book of Teaching. [4]And Ezra the
scribe stood on the wooden tower that they had made
for this purpose, and by him stood Mattithiah and
Shema and Ananiah and Uriah and Hilkiah and
Maaseiah on his right, and on his left Pedaiah and
Mishael and Malchijah and Hashum and
Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, Meshullam. [5]And Ezra the
scribe opened the book before the eyes of all the
people, for he was above all the people, and as he

opened it, all the people stood. [6]And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” raising their hands, and they bowed and prostrated themselves on the ground to the LORD. [7]And Jeshua and Bani and Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites were explaining the Teaching to the people and the people kept standing. [8]And they read from the book, from the Book of God’s Teaching, expounding and giving reasons, and they explained what was read. [9]And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and the Levites, explaining to the people, said to all the people, “Today is holy for you to the LORD your God. Do not mourn and do not weep,” for they were weeping when they heard the words of the Teaching. [10]And he said to them, “Go, eat delicacies and drink sweet drinks and send portions to whoever has none prepared, for the day is holy to our Master, and do not be sad, for the rejoicing of the LORD is your strength.” [11]And the Levites were silencing the people, saying, “Hush, for today is holy. Do not be sad.” [12]And all the people went to eat and to drink and to send portions and to make a great joyous celebration, for they had understood the things that had been made known to them. [13]And on the second day the

patriarchal chiefs of all the people, the priests, and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the scribe, to ponder the words of the Teaching. 14And they found written in the Teaching that the LORD had charged through Moses that the Israelites should dwell in booths on the festival in the seventh month, 15and that they should make it heard and pass about a proclamation in all their towns, and in Jerusalem, saying, “Go out to the hill country and bring back leafy boughs of olive trees and leafy boughs of evergreens and leafy boughs of myrtles and leafy boughs of palm trees and leafy boughs of thick-branched trees to make booths, as it is written.” 16And the people went out and brought them, and they made booths for themselves, each on his roof and in their courtyards and in the courtyards of the house of God and in the square of the Water Gate and the square of the Gate of Ephraim. 17And all the assembly of those returning from the captivity made booths and dwelled in the booths, for the Israelites had not done this since the days of Joshua son of Nun till that day, and there was great rejoicing. 18And he read from the Book of the Teaching of God one day after the next from the first day to the last day, and they made a festival seven days, and on the eighth day there was a convocation, according to the law.

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the Book of the Teaching of Moses.* The Hebrew is *sefer torat mosheh.* This is probably still a descriptive rubric rather than a true title. The word for teaching, *torah,* would in time become the standard designation for the Five Books of Moses. The Torah was evidently edited in the Babylonian exile, with Ezra perhaps playing a key role in the final compilation, and this is the text now presented to the people. If rebuilding the walls and the Temple consolidates the physical security and the cultic viability of the people returned to its land, the public reading of the Torah—essentially, a confirmation of its newly minted canonicity—consolidates the spiritual coherence of the people.

2. *all who had understanding.* This would be children old enough to understand what was being read out from the scroll. Thus, the assembly comprises men, women, and older children.

on the first day of the seventh month. This is the first of Tishrei. It would eventually become the New Year, Rosh Hashanah, but that holiday is not yet in place.

3. *he read from it.* More literally, "he read in it." Even these marathon public readings would not have sufficed to read all the way from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Deuteronomy, so one must assume that passages of the Torah were read, perhaps concentrating on the legal sections.

4. *the wooden tower.* This is actually a kind of raised dais or stage from which the reader would be visible and audible to the assembled crowd.

by him stood. The grouping of a kind of honor guard of thirteen men, seven on one side and six on the other, is an expression of the high solemnity of the occasion. Perhaps one name was inadvertently added, and the original text had the consecrated number twelve.

7. *the people kept standing.* There would of course have been no seats in the public square, so the people would have had to stand for several hours, from first light to midday.

8. *expounding.* Some think the Hebrew word refers to translation, from Hebrew to Aramaic, but this presupposes that by the middle of the fifth century B.C.E. Hebrew was already not generally known among the Jewish populace, and that is perhaps questionable. Within a very few centuries, that would be clearly the case.

9. *Do not mourn and do not weep.* The situation is analogous to the response when the Book of Deuteronomy is "discovered" during the reign of Josiah—hearing the many laws of the Torah, the people are dismayed at all they have not fulfilled.

13. *to ponder the words of the Teaching.* It is probably not the case that Nehemiah through this ceremony is establishing a set practice of the public reading and expounding of the Torah, but he is certainly setting a precedent for it. By the rabbinic period, there was a set custom of reading the Torah in an annual or triennial cycle, with brief readings on Mondays and Thursdays (the market days) and longer reading on sabbaths.

15. *leafy boughs.* The Hebrew says merely "leaves," but this is a synecdoche for "leafy boughs," which were used to thatch the booths.

evergreens. The Hebrew is literally "oil trees," the oil probably being the turpentine they contain. In the Aramaic of Kurdish Jews, the pine tree is called *ʾaʿa demishaha,* "oil tree."

thick-branched trees. The specific identification of *ʿets ʿavot* is uncertain. It should be noted that this list of trees corresponds only in part to the lists of trees in Leviticus and Deuteronomy to be used for the Succoth Festival.

17. *for the Israelites had not done this since the days of Joshua.* It is surely not the case that Succoth had not been observed all these centuries since Joshua. Perhaps the least forced explanation is the one proposed by Michael Kuchman—that now the festival was celebrated as a national religious event, not primarily as a harvest festival. The reading from the Torah each day of the festival reflects this religious emphasis.

Joshua. The translation uses this form of the name to avoid confusion, but the Hebrew shows *yeshuʿa,* Jeshua, the later form of the name influenced by the Aramaic.

there was great rejoicing. "Rejoicing," *simhah,* is a term particularly linked to the Fetival of Succoth.

CHAPTER 9

[1]And on the twenty-fourth day of this month the Israelites gathered in fast and sackcloth with soil on their heads. [2]And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all the foreigners, and they confessed their offenses and the crimes of their fathers. [3]And they rose up in the place where they stood and read from the Book of Teaching of the LORD their God a quarter of the day, and a quarter they were confessing and bowing down to the LORD their God. [4]And Jeshua, and the sons of Kadmiel, Shebeniah, the sons of Sherebiah, Bani, Chenani, stood up on the dais of the Levites and cried out in a loud voice to the LORD their God. [5]And the Levites, Jeshua and Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabniah, Sherebiah, Hodijah, Shebaniah, Pethahiah, said, “Arise, bless the LORD your God from everlasting to everlasting, and may they bless Your glorious name, exalted above all blessing and praise. [6]You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, the utmost heavens and all their array, the earth and all that is upon it, the seas and all that is in

them, and You give life to them all, and the array of the heavens bows to You. [7]You are the LORD God who chose Abram and brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees and made his name Abraham. [8]And you found his heart faithful before You, and You sealed a covenant with him to give him the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, and the Perizzite and the Jebusite and the Girgashite, to give to his seed, and You fulfilled Your words, for You are righteous. [9]And You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and You heard their cry at the Sea of Reeds. [10]And You performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and against all his servants and against all the people of his land, for You knew that they had acted arrogantly against them, and You made Yourself a name as on this day. [11]And the sea You split before them, and they passed through the midst of the sea on dry land. And their pursuers You flung into the deep like a stone in fierce waters. [12]And with a pillar of cloud You led them by day and with a pillar of fire by night to light up for them the way on which they should go. [13]And You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from the heavens and gave them just laws and true teachings, good statutes and commands. [14]And Your holy sabbath You made known to them, and with commands and statutes and teachings You charged

them through Moses your servant. [15]And bread from
the heavens You brought to give them for their hunger,
and water from the rock You brought out to them for
their thirst. And You said to them to come to take hold
of the land that You vowed to give to them. [16]But they
and our fathers acted arrogantly and were stiff-necked
and did not heed Your commands, [17]and they refused
to heed and did not recall Your wonders that You did
for them. And they were stiff-necked and turned round
to go back to their slavery in their rebellion. But You
are a God of forgiveness, gracious and merciful, slow
to anger and abounding in kindness, and You did not
forsake them [18]though they made for themselves a
molten calf and said, 'This is your god who brought
you up from Egypt,' and they did great despicable acts.
[19]But You in Your great mercy did not forsake them in
the wilderness. The pillar of cloud did not turn away
from them by day to lead them on the way nor the
pillar of fire by night to light up for them the way on
which they should go. [20]And Your goodly spirit You
gave to make them wise, and Your manna You did not
withhold from their mouth, and water You gave them
for their thirst. [21]And forty years You sustained them,
in the wilderness they knew no want. Their cloaks did
not wear out, and their feet did not swell. [22]And You
gave them kingdoms and peoples, shared them out in

parcels, and they took hold of the land of Sihon and the land of the king of Heshbon and the land of Og king of Bashan. [23]And You multiplied their children like the stars of the heavens and brought them to the land of which You said to their fathers to come to take hold. [24]And the sons came and took hold of the land, and You subjugated before them the Canaanite dwellers of the land, and You gave them into their hand, and their kings and the land's peoples, to do with them as they pleased. [25]And they captured fortified towns and rich soil and took hold of houses filled with everything good, hewed cisterns, vineyards and olive trees, and abundant fruit-bearing trees. And they ate and were sated and grew fat and delighted in Your bounty. [26]But they revolted and rebelled against You, and flung Your teaching behind their back. Your prophets they slayed, who had warned them so as to bring them back to You, and they did great despicable acts. [27]And You gave them into the hand of their foes, who brought them into straits. And in the time of their distress they cried out to You, and You from the heavens heard, and in Your great mercy gave them rescuers who rescued them from the hand of their foes. [28]And when they had respite, they went back to doing evil before You. And You forsook them in the hand of their enemies who held sway over them. And

once again they cried out, and You from the heavens heard and saved them in Your mercy many a time.
[29]And You warned them to bring them back to Your teaching, but they acted arrogantly and did not heed Your commands, and offended against Your laws which when a man does them he lives through them, and they thrust forth a defiant shoulder and were stiff-necked and did not heed. [30]And You kept them on for many years and warned them through Your spirit by Your prophets, but they did not listen, and You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. [31]But in Your great mercy You did not make an utter end of them and did not forsake them, for You are a gracious and merciful God. [32]And now, You are our God, the great and mighty and fearsome God, keeping the covenant and the faith. Let not all the trouble that has overtaken us, our kings, our nobles, our priests and our prophets, our fathers, and all Your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria to this day seem a small thing before You. [33]And You are righteous in all that has come upon us, for in truth You have acted, and we have been wicked. [34]Our kings, our nobles, our priests, and our fathers have not kept Your teaching and have not attended to Your commands and to Your precepts about which You warned us. [35]And they with their kingship and with the abundant bounty that You gave

them did not serve You and did not turn back from their evil deeds. [36]Here are we slaves today, and the land You gave to our fathers to eat its fruit and its bounty, here are we slaves within it. [37]And its abundant yield belongs to the kings that You put over us for our offenses, and they rule over our carcasses and over our beasts as it pleases them, and we are in great straits."

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *read from the Book of Teaching . . . a quarter of the day, and a quarter they were confessing.* In keeping with the emphasis in the previous episode on the public reading and expounding of the Torah, the time at this public confession is equally divided between confessing and reading the Book of Teaching.

6. *You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, the utmost heavens and all their array.* This address, a combination of the celebration of God, historical survey, and confession, is wrought in high rhetorical language. The editors of the *Biblia Hebraica* set it out as poetry, and it is certainly grandly rhythmic, as this translation tries to suggest, but only a few lines actually scan as poetry. It is better to regard this as rhythmic poetic prose. The language is replete with verbal formulas that occur in earlier biblical texts, especially in the Torah. The verbal closeness to many formulations in the Torah and the whole Deuteronomistic History suggest that this large body of narrative was virtually canonical at this moment.

10. *they had acted arrogantly against them.* In keeping with the biblical predisposition to mix pronominal references, "they" is the Egyptians, "them" the Israelites.

11. *You flung into the deep like a stone.* Here we have a virtual quotation of the language of the Song of the Sea, Exodus 15.

15. *bread from the heavens.* This is of course manna.

16. *they and our fathers.* This sounds a bit odd because "they" are also "our fathers." The language appears to be carried along by the momentum of the stereotypical "our fathers," which often occurs in confessions.

17. *to go back to their slavery in their rebellion.* This may refer specifically to the expressed desire of the Israelites in the wilderness to return to Egypt.

22. *shared them out in parcels.* The meaning of the two Hebrew words represented by this phrase is obscure.

25. *they ate and were sated and grew fat.* This is an approximate citation of Deuteronomy 32, the Song of Moses.

27. *rescuers.* The Hebrew *moshiʿim* is the term used for the "judges," the ad hoc military chieftains who periodically liberated their people from foreign oppressors.

28. *when they had respite, they went back to doing evil.* This is the pattern laid out in the Book of Judges.

31. *You did not make an utter end of them.* What is implied is that the people survived the Babylonian exile and did not disappear, as the inhabitants of the northern kingdom exiled by Assyria had done.

36. *Here are we slaves today.* This bold statement would have to refer to domination of the Persian empire. Despite the relatively generous Persian policy toward the exiled Judahites, they perceive themselves as a subject people. This is a moment when Nehemiah's language comes dangerously close to an indirect hint of the political rebellion of which Sanballat and his allies had accused him.

37. *we are in great straits.* This starkly negative assessment scarcely accords with the joyous celebration after the rebuilding of the walls and the public reading of the Book of Teaching. Either it is stereotypical phraseology from a confession that has been inserted here, perhaps editorially, or, despite the manifestations of physical and spiritual national renewal, Nehemiah views the people as being in great straits because it is still subjugated to a foreign power.

CHAPTER 10

[1]“With all this, we make a solemn commitment and
write it down, sealed—our officers, our Levites, our
priests. [2]And on the sealed copies [the signatures of]
Nehemiah the governor son of Hachaliah and
Zedekiah, [3]Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah. [4]Pashhur,
Amariah, Malchijah, [5]Hattush, Shebaniah, Malluch,
[6]Harim, Meremoth, Obadiah, [7]Daniel, Gin nethon,
Baruch, [8]Meshullam, Abijah, Mijamin, [9]Maaziah,
Bilgai, Shemaiah. These are the priests. [10]And the
Levites—Jeshua son of Azaniah, Binnui of the sons of
Henadad, Kadmiel, [11]and their brothers Shebaniah,
Hodijah, Kelita, Pelaiah, Hanan, [12]Micha, Rehob,
Hashabiah, [13]Zaccur, Sherebiah, Shebaniah, [14]Hodijah,
Bani, Beninu. [15]The heads of the people—Parosh,
Pahath-Moab, Elam, Zattu, Bani, [16]Bunni, Azgad,
Bebai, [17]Adonijah, Bigvai, Adin, [18]Ater, Hezekiah,
Azzur, [19]Hodijah, Hashum, Bezai, [20]Hariph, Anathoth,
Nebai, [21]Magpiash, Meshullam, Hezir, [22]Meshezabeel,
Zadok, Jaddua, [23]Pelatiah, Hanan, Anaiah, [24]Hoshea,
Hananiah, Hasshub, [25]Hallohesh, Pilha, Shobek,

[26]Rehum, Hashabnah, Maaseiah, [27]and Ahijah, Hanan,
Anan, [28]Malluch, Harim, Baanah.

[29]"And the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites,
the gatekeepers, the choristers, the temple laborers,
and all who separated themselves from the peoples of
the lands according to God's teaching, their wives,
their sons and their daughters, whoever had conscious
understanding, [30]holding fast with their brothers, their
leaders and entering into the oath and the vow to walk
in God's teaching that was given by Moses servant of
God and to keep and to do all the commands of the
LORD our Master and His laws and His statutes.
[31]That is, we shall not give our daughters to the peoples
of the land and their daughters shall not take our sons.
[32]And as to the peoples of the land bringing wares and
provisions on the sabbath day to sell, we shall not take
from them on the sabbath or on a holy day. And we
shall leave off on the seventh year, and also every debt.
[33]And we shall take upon ourselves commands, that we
give a third of the shekel [34]for the service of the house
of our God for the display bread and the perpetual
grain offering and the perpetual burnt offering for the
sabbaths, the new moons, the festivals, for
consecrations and for offense offerings to atone for

Israel, and for all the tasks of the house of our God.
35 And we have cast lots for the wood offering among
the priests, the Levites, and the people to bring it at set
times to the house of our God by our patriarchal
houses year after year to burn on the altar of the
LORD our God as it is written in the Teaching. 36 And
the firstborn of our sons and of our beasts as it is
written in the Teaching, and the firstborn of our cattle
and our sheep, to bring to the house of our God to the
priests ministering in the house of our God. 37 And the
first part of our dough and our donations and the fruit
of every tree, wine and oil, we shall bring to the
priests, to the chambers of the house of our God, and
a tithe from our soil for the Levites, who are the
Levites taking tithes in all the towns where we labor.
38 And a priest from the line of Aaron shall be with the
Levites when the Levites take the tithes, and the
Levites shall bring up a tenth of the tithe to the house
of our God, to the chambers, to the treasury. 39 For to
the chambers shall the Israelites and the Levites bring
the donations of grain, wine, and oil. And it is there
that are the vessels of the sanctum and the ministering
priests and the gatekeepers and the choristers. And we
shall not forsake the house of our God."

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *a solemn commitment.* The Hebrew noun *ʾamanah*, derived from the same root as "amen," conveys a sense of trust and obligation.

2. *And on the sealed copies.* This phrase could also conceivably mean "those who are sealed [or signed]." The main point is that this appears to be a legal formula, though parsing its precise terms is somewhat uncertain. This looks very much like the actual document of the *ʾamanah,* beginning with the names of all the signatories and then proceeding to the terms of the solemn commitment made by the people and the leaders at this assembly.

29. *all who separated themselves from the peoples of the lands.* This renunciation of exogamy, indicating the people's readiness to enter into a renewal of commitment to God's teaching, is in keeping with Ezra's campaign against foreign wives.

30. *the oath and the vow.* The first of these two terms, *ʾalah*, usually implies an oath in which the person taking it agrees to suffer dire consequences if he does not strictly fulfill it.

31. *That is.* The usual sense of *waʾasher* is simply "and that," but here it is clearly used to introduce the list of conditions to which the takers of the oath commit themselves.

we shall not give our daughters to the peoples of the land. The very first term of the collective commitment follows Ezra's policy of opposition to intermarriage.

32. *bringing wares and provisions on the sabbath.* As one sees in Third Isaiah, the sabbath in this period had become especially central as a sacred obligation and a test of belonging to Israel. The statement here may be an extension of the sabbath regulations in the Torah: even with foreigners, who themselves have no obligation to observe the sabbath, one cannot trade on the seventh day.

we shall leave off. This rather general verb refers to the leaving off of agricultural activities. In the Torah, a different verb is used.

and also every debt. The noun phrase is a second object of the verb "leave off." "Also" has been added in the translation to make that clear.

35. *And we have cast lots for the wood offering.* This system of casting lots for who is to bring wood for the altar fires is an innovation. The phrase "wood offering" is a bit odd because the wood is not an offering, and the proper sense seems to be "the wood for the offering." It is noteworthy that this list of items in the solemn commitment by the people is highly selective: it begins with the ban on intermarriage, then the sabbath, followed by the sabbatical year, with all the stipulations afterward—by far the majority of items—related to the maintenance of the temple cult. This was, of course, the great moment of renewal after the rebuilding of the Temple, but one may detect here evidence of Ezra's priestly agenda. It is certainly surprising that nothing of the ethical injunctions of the Torah and its calls for social justice appears in the *ʾamanah.*

CHAPTER 11

[1]And the officers of the people settled in Jerusalem,
and the rest of the people cast lots in order to bring
one out of ten to settle in Jerusalem the holy city and
the other nine parts in the towns. [2]And the people
blessed all who answered the call to settle in
Jerusalem. [3]And these are the chiefs of the province
who settled in Jerusalem, and in the towns of Judah,
Israel, the priests and the Levites and the temple
laborers and the sons of Solomon's servants each
settled in his holding. [4]Of the Judahites: Athaiah son
of Uzziah son of Zechariah son of Amariah son of
Shephatiah son of Mahalaleel, of the sons of Perez,
[5]and Maaseiah son of Baruch son of Col-Hozeh son of
Hazaiah son of Adaiah son of Joiarib son of Zechariah
son of the Shilohite. [6]All the sons of Perez settling in
Jerusalem were four hundred sixty-eight men of worth.
[7]And these are the sons of Benjamin: Sallu son of
Meshullam son of Joed son of Pedaiah son of Kolaiah
son of Maaseiah son of Ithiel son of Jesaiah. [8]And
after him Gabbai and Sallai—nine hundred twenty-

eight. [9]And Joel son of Zichri was the officer over
them, and Judah son of Hassenuah was second in
command over thecity. [10]Of the priests, Jedaiah son of
Joiarib, Jachin, [11]Seraiah son of Hilkiah son of
Meshullam son of Zadok son of Meraioth son of
Ahitub, prince of the house of God, [12]and their
brothers, doers of the task of the house, eight hundred
twenty-two, and Adaiah son of Jeroham son of
Pelaliah son of Amzi son of Zechariah son of Pashur
son of Malchijah, [13]and his brothers the patriarchal
chiefs, two hundred forty-two, and Amashai son of
Azareel son of Ahzai son of Meshillemoth son of
Immer, [14]and their brothers, the men of worth, a
hundred twenty-eight, and Zabdiel son of Haggedolim
was officer over them. [15]And of the Levites, Shemaiah
son of Hashub son of Azrikam son of Hashabiah son
of Bunni, [16]and Shabbethai and Jozabad were over the
external tasks for the house of God, of the chiefs of
the Levites. [17]And Mattaniah son of Micha son of
Zabdi son of Asaph head of the praise for the prayer
of Judah, and Bakbukiah, of his brothers, was second
in command, and Abda son of Shammua son of Galal
son of Jeduthun, [18]all the Levites in the holy city—two
hundred eighty-four. [19]And the gatekeepers: Akkub,
Talmon, and their brothers, who guarded the gates—a
hundred seventy-two. [20]And the rest of Israel, the

priests, the Levites, in all the towns of Judah, each in his estate. [21]And the temple laborers living in the Ophel, and Ziha and Gishpa were over the temple laborers. [22]And the officer of the Levites in Jerusalem was Uzzi son of Bani son of Hashabiah son of Mattaniah son of Micha, of the sons of the Asaphite choristers who were over the task of the house of God. [23]For the king's command was upon them and a solemn commitment day after day. [24]And Pethahiah son of Meshezabeel of the sons of Zerah son of Judah was agent for the king in everything concerning the people. [25]And in the outlying villages in their fields some of the Judahites settled in Kiriath-Arba and its hamlets and in Dibon and its hamlets and in Jekabzeel and its outlying villages, [26]and in Jeshua and in Moladah and in Beth-Pelet, [27]and in Hazar-Shual and in Beersheba and its hamlets, [28]and in Ziklag and in Meconah and in its hamlets, [29]and in En-Rimmon and in Zorah and in Jarmuth, [30]Zanoah, Adullam, and their out-lying villages, Lachish and its fields, Azekah and its hamlets. And they encamped from Beersheba to the Valley of Hinnom. [31]And the Benjaminites from Geba, Michmash, Aija, and Bethel and its hamlets, [32]Anathoth, Nob, Ananiah, [33]Hazor, Ramah, Gittaim, [34]Hadid, Zeboim, Neballat, [35]Lod, Ono, the valley of

Ge-Harashim. [36]And from the Levites, divisions of Judah were for Benjamin.

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *cast lots.* This procedure replicates the parceling out of settlements in Joshua.

2. *all who answered the call to settle in Jerusalem.* The Hebrew verb here is the one that is used for people taking the lead in battle (as in the Song of Deborah, Judges 5). It suggests that Jerusalem remained on the front line, in danger of attack.

3. *And these are the chiefs.* Here begins another long list, first of the Judahites who settled, then of the places of settlement. Detailed discussion of all the names in the list is not called for in this commentary.

17. *head of the praise for the prayer.* The Hebrew syntactical chain looks odd, but this seems to be the meaning.

24. *was agent for the king.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is “by the king” or “at the hand of the king.”

CHAPTER 12

[1]And these are the priests and the Levites who came
up with Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua:
Seriah, Jeremiah, Ezra, [2]Amariah, Malluch, Hattush,
[3]Shechaniah, Rehum, Meremoth, [4]Iddo, Ginnethoi,
Abijah, [5]Mijamin, Maadiah, Bilgah, [6]Shemaiah,
Joiarib, Jedaiah, [7]Sallu, Amok, Hilkiah, Jedaiah. These
were the heads of the priests and their brothers in the
days of Jeshua. [8]And the Levites: Jeshua, Binnui,
Kadmiel, Sherebiah, Judah, Mattaniah, who was over
the thanksgiving psalms, he and his brothers. [9]And
Bakbukiah and Unni their brothers, opposite them in
watches. [10]And Jeshua begot Joiakim, and Joiakim
begot Eliashib, and Eliashib begot Joiada, [11]and Joiada
begot Jonathan, and Jonathan begot Jaddua. [12]And in
the days of Joiakim, Seraiah, Meriaiah, Jeremiah, and
Hananiah had priests who were patriarchal chiefs:
[13]from Ezra, Meshullam; from Amariah, Jehohanan;
[14]from Melicu, Jonathan; from Shebaniah, Joseph;
[15]from Harim, Adna; from Meraioth, Helkai; [16]from
Iddo, Zechariah; from Ginnethon, Meshullam; [17]from

Abijah, Zichri; from Miniamin [. . .]; from Moadiah,
Piltai; [18]from Bilgah, Shammua; from Shemaiah,
Jehonathan; [19]from Joiarib, Mattenai; from Jedaiah,
Uzzi; [20]from Sallai, Kallai; from Amok, [21]Eber; from
Hilkiah, Hashabiah; from Jedaiah, Nethaneel. [22]The
Levites in the days of Eliashib, Joiada, Johanan, and
Jaddua were written down as patriarchal chiefs down
to the reign of Darius the Persian. [23]The sons of Levi,
patriarchal chiefs, were written down in the book of
chronicles until the days of Johanan son of Eliashib.
[24]And the heads of the Levites were Hashabiah,
Sherebiah, and Jeshua son of Kadmiel and their
brothers were opposite them to praise, to give thanks,
by the command of David man of God, one watch
relieving another. [25]Mattaniah, Bakbukiah, Obadiah,
Meshullam, Talmon, Akkub, were guarding as
gatekeepers in watches at the thresholds of the gates.
[26]These were in the days of Joiakim son of Jeshua son
of Jozadak and in the days of Nehemiah the satrap and
Ezra the priest and scribe.

[27]And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they
sought out the priests from all their places to bring
them to Jerusalem to make a dedication and a
rejoicing with thanksgiving processions and song,

cymbals, lyres, and lutes. [28]And the sons of the
choristers gathered from the plain, from the environs
of Jerusalem, and from the outlying villages of the
Netophathites. [29]And from Beth Gilgal and from the
Geba fields the choristers had built themselves hamlets
all around Jerusalem. [30]And the priests and the Levites
purified themselves and they purified the people and
the gates and the wall. [31]And I brought the officers of
Judah up on the wall and arranged two great
thanksgiving processions, one procession going on the
wall to the south to the Dung Gate. [32]And Hoshaiah
and half the officers of Judah walked after them, and
[33]Azariah, Ezra, and Meshullam, [34]Judah, Benjamin,
Shemaiah, and Jeremiah, [35]and from the sons of the
priests with trumpets, Zechariah son of Jonathan son
of Shemaiah son of Mattaniah son of Michaiah son of
Zaccur son of Asaph, [36]and his brothers Shemaiah and
Azarael, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah, and
Hanani, with the musical instruments of David man of
God. And Ezra the scribe was before them, [37]and as
far as the Fountain Gate, and in front of them they
went up the steps of the City of David on the ascent of
the wall above the house of David and as far as the
Water Gate on the east. [38]And the second thanksgiving
procession was opposite and I was behind it, and half
the people were on the wall above the Tower of Ovens

as far as the Broad Wall, [39]and above the Ephraim Gate and above the Jeshanah Gate and above the Fish Gate and Hananeel Tower and the Tower of the Hundred and as far as the Sheep Gate. And they stopped at the Gate of the Prison Compound. [40]And the two thanksgiving processions stopped at the house of God, and I and half the prefects with me. [41]And the priests, Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Michaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, Hananiah, were with trumpets, [42]and Maaseiah and Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam, and Ezer. And the choristers sounded forth with Jezrahiah the official. [43]And they offered great sacrifices on that day and rejoiced, for God had given them a great rejoicing, and the women and the children rejoiced as well, and the rejoicing of Jerusalem could be heard from afar. [44]And on that day men were appointed over the chambers of the treasuries for the donations, for the first fruits and for the tithes, to store in them from the fields of the towns the portions [as in] the Teaching, for the priests and for the Levites, for the joy of Judah was upon the priests and upon the Levites who were serving. [45]And they kept the watch of their God and the watch of purity, and the choristers and the gatekeepers were according to the command of David and Solomon his son, [46]for as in the days of David and Asaph in time

past were the heads of the choristers and the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. [47]And all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah would give the portions of the choristers day after day and would consecrate to the Levites, and the Levites would consecrate to the sons of Aaron.

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And these are the priests and the Levites.* This is the last of the long lists of names in Nehemiah that document the people who returned to Zion from Babylonia and where they settled.

8. *the thanksgiving psalms.* The received text shows *yadot* ("hands"?, "portions"?), but some Hebrew manuscripts have *hodot,* which is followed in this translation.

13. *from Ezra.* Here and in the listings that follow, this probably means "from the clan of . . ." The more literal sense of the preposition used in the Hebrew is "for."

23. *the book of chronicles.* This rather general designation for chronicles or annals does not appear to refer to the canonical Book of Chronicles.

24. *David man of God.* This recurring epithet reflects the "canonical" version of David that emerged in the Return to Zion. He is never called this in the original narrative in the Book of Samuel, and much of his behavior there is by no means godly.

44. *for the joy of Judah was upon the priests and upon the Levites.* The idea is that the people were jubilant to see these two segments of their sacerdotal class once again celebrating the cult in the Temple, and thus they were happy to shower on them the gifts and donations prescribed by tradition.

46. *for as in the days of David and Asaph.* This grand dedication of the rebuilt temple is seen as a triumphant restoration of the glories of the past after Jerusalem and its Temple had lain in ruins for more than a century.

47. *all Israel . . . would consecrate to the Levites, and the Levites would consecrate to the sons of Aaron.* A perfect harmonious ritual hierarchy is now restored: the common people consecrate gifts (especially of food) to the Levites and the Levites in turn consecrate gifts to the priests.

CHAPTER 13

[1]On that day it was read out from the Book of Moses
in the hearing of the people, and it was found written
there that no Ammonite or Moabite should come into
God's assembly for all time. [2]For they had not
welcomed the Israelites with bread and with water and
had hired against them Balaam to curse them, but God
turned the curse into blessing. [3]And it happened, when
they heard the Teaching, they separated all the mixed
multitude from Israel. [4]And before this, Eliashib the
priest was stationed in the chamber of the house of our
God close to Tobiah. [5]And he made for him a large
chamber, and there formerly they would bring the
grain offering, the frankincense, and the vessels and
the tithe of grain and of wine and of oil, which were
commanded for the Levites and for the choristers and
for the gatekeepers and for the donation for the priests.
[6]And with all this, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the
thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylonia I
had come to the king, and after a period of time I
asked leave from the king. [7]And I came to Jerusalem

and perceived the evil thing Eliashib had done concerning Tobiah, to make for him a chamber in the courts of the house of God. [8]And I was much aggrieved, and I flung all the vessels of Tobiah's house outside the chamber. [9]And I said that the chambers should be purified, and I brought back there the vessels of the house of God, the grain offering, and the frankincense. [10]And I realized that the Levites' portions had not been given, and that the Levites and the choristers, those who performed the tasks, had fled each to his own field. [11]And I rebuked the officials and said, "Why has the house of God been abandoned?" And I gathered them and stood them in their stations. [12]And all Judah brought the tithe of grain and of wine and of oil to the treasuries. [13]And I charged over the treasuries Shelemiah the priest and Zadok the scribe and Pedaiah of the Levites, and alongside them Hanan son of Zaccur son of Mattaniah, for they were deemed trustworthy, and it was their duty to share out portions to their brothers. [14]Recall this for me, O my God, and do not wipe away my faithful acts that I did in the house of my God and on its watches! [15]In those days I saw in Judah people treading winepresses on the sabbath and bringing stacks of grain and loading them on donkeys and also wine, grapes and figs, and all sorts of loads, and bringing them to Jerusalem on the

sabbath day, and I castigated them on the day for selling provisions. [16]And the Tyrians who lived there were bringing fish and all sorts of wares and selling them on the sabbath to the Judahites in Jerusalem. [17]And I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, “What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the sabbath day? [18]Did not your fathers do thus, and our God brought down upon us and upon this city all this evil? And you compound fury against Israel, profaning the sabbath.” [19]And it happened when the gates of Jerusalem fell into shadow before the sabbath that I said that the doors should be shut, and I said that they should not open them till after the sabbath. [20]And I stationed some of my lads by the gates, that no load should enter on the sabbath day. [21]And the merchants and those who sold all kinds of wares spent the night outside Jerusalem, once and a second time. [22]And I castigated them and said to them, “Why do you spend the night in front of the wall? If you do it again, I will lay hands on you.” From that time they did not come on the sabbath. [23]And I said to the Levites that they should purify themselves and come to guard the gates to hallow the sabbath day. This, too, recall for me, O my God, and pity me according to Your great kindness! [24]In those days, too, I saw that Jews had settled in their homes Ashdodite, Ammonite, and

Moabite women. [25]And their children, half were speaking Ashdodite and the language of every people and did not know how to speak Judahite. [26]And I rebuked them and cursed them and flogged them and tore their hair and made them swear by God—"that you shall not give your daughters to their sons and shall not take of their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. [27]Did not Solomon king of Israel offend in these matters? And among many nations there was no king like him. Beloved by his God he was, and God made him king over all Israel. Even him did the foreign wives lead to offend. [28]And to you shall we listen, to do this great evil to betray our God to settle foreign women in your homes?" [29]And one of the sons of Joiada son of Eliashib the high-priest was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite, and I sent him chasing from me. [30]Recall it against them, O my God, for the defilements of the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites! [31]And I purified them of all foreignness and set up watches for the priests and for the Levites, each man at his task, [32]and for the offering of wood at set times and for the first fruits. Recall it for me, O my God, for good!

CHAPTER 13 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the Book of Moses.* This is a novel designation for what is usually called in these later texts, following Deuteronomy, the Book of Teaching, *sefer hatorah.*

no Ammonite or Moabite should come into God's assembly. This is an approximate quotation of Deuteronomy 23:4. The divisions within the community of returned exiles are symptomatically reflected in the exclusion of Moabites. In the Book of Ruth, in all likelihood written around this time, a Moabite woman marries a Judahite man and becomes the progenitrix of King David. The Book of Ruth's gentle and affectionate tolerance stands in sharp contrast to Nehemiah's intransigence on the question of foreigners in the community of Israel.

3. *the mixed multitude.* The Hebrew says merely *ʿerev,* "mixture," but the present translation, like the King James Version, understands the word as an ellipsis for *ʿerev rav* (see Exodus 12:38, where it's rendered as "motley throng").

4. *close to Tobiah.* This might also mean "a relative of Tobiah."

5. *And he made for him a large chamber.* As becomes clear in what follows, this room or hall had formerly been dedicated to sacred purposes, so to use it as a private apartment is considered to be an outrage by Nehemiah.

6. *I was not in Jerusalem, for . . . I had come to the king.* Whatever the particular court functions of a "cupbearer" beyond pouring wine, Artaxerxes evidently felt he could not entirely dispense with Nehemiah's services and so summoned him to return to Shushan. The period of his renewed stay in the court is not specified, but at a certain point Nehemiah requests permission to return to Jerusalem, where he obviously feels he has urgent business to look after.

9. *And I said that the chambers should be purified.* Having been converted to secular private use, the chambers now have to undergo ritual purification.

10. *the Levites and the choristers, those who performed the tasks.* These are all the temple functionaries below the priests in the cultic hierarchy, and Nehemiah appears to be protecting their interests. The "abandoning" of the

Temple in the next verse seems to refer to the neglect of these sacerdotal groups.

15. *people treading winepresses on the sabbath.* Nehemiah in his project of reform now moves on from the Temple and its functionaries to the sabbath. Observance of the sabbath, as we have seen elsewhere, becomes an essential condition for belonging to the community of Israel in Late Biblical texts.

16. *the Tyrians who lived there.* The Phoenicians were a great mercantile people, and this seems to be not a permanent settlement but a quarter in which traders took up temporary residence while they were conducting their business.

20. *I stationed some of my lads by the gates.* Nehemiah is clearly a strong-armed leader. He does not just issue a command to keep the gates shut through the sabbath but appoints men—probably armed men—to make sure it is done.

no load. Another meaning of *masaʾ* is "business," which some translations opt for.

22. *Why do you spend the night in front of the wall?* Although the merchants remain on the outside, their persistence in staying close to the wall suggests that they may be looking for a moment during the sabbath when they might slip inside, perhaps if the closed gates are left slightly ajar by would-be trading partners within. Hence Nehemiah's fury.

24. *settled in their homes.* The verb clearly means "to settle" in the transitive sense. It is not a term used for "marry." An ellipsis is thus assumed in this translation, and "in their homes" has been added to spell out what is implied.

Ashdodite. Ashdod is one of the five Philistine cities along the Mediterranean coast.

25. *half were speaking Ashdodite.* The Philistines had been living in Ashdod for over seven centuries, and it is unlikely that they would have retained their original language, perhaps a version of Greek. "Ashdodite" was probably a Canaanite dialect that preserved an admixture of Greek words.

did not know how to speak Judahite. "Judahite" has to mean "Hebrew" (the language is never referred to by that name in the Bible). It cannot mean Aramaic, so the implication is that at this point the Jewish population was still

for the most part Hebrew-speaking. Linguistic loyalty is taken as a token of ethnic and religious loyalty.

26. *I . . . flogged them and tore their hair.* Again, Nehemiah does not hesitate to use physical coercion, even violence.

30. *Recall it against them.* Nehemiah twice uses this formula to invoke God's favor toward him, but here the use is antithetical. The chapter and the book conclude with the positive enunciation of this formula of prayer.

CHRONICLES

Introduction

Chronicles, fixed in Jewish tradition as the conclusion of the Bible, is, at least from a modern perspective, the most peculiar book of the Hebrew Bible. In all likelihood, it was composed sometime in the late decades of the fifth century B.C.E., after the Return to Zion and after the mission of Ezra and Nehemiah in the middle of that century to renew the Temple cult and establish the canonical authority of the Torah. Given its pervasive interest in the details of the Temple ritual and in the lines of succession of the priests and the Levites, it was probably written by a priest, or at the very least, someone close to priestly circles. The Hebrew Bible in general is much attached to genealogies because in this patriarchal and patrilineal society, following lines from father to son through a series of generations was conceived as a way of establishing origins and confirming the legitimacy of

the descendants who could trace their descent from these origins. In Chronicles, however, the place of genealogies is endowed with a new order of magnitude. The book begins with Adam but races through Genesis to David chiefly by means of genealogical lists. The first nine chapters of [1]Chronicles—as with Samuel and Kings, the division into two "books" is an artifact of the editorial process—are a relentless listing of names, some familiar, many not. Although the lists have provided considerable fodder for scholarly research, it is safe to say that these nine chapters constitute the least readable extended passage in the Bible.

The main focus of the book is on the kings of Judah. 1 Chronicles 10 picks up the narrative in the Book of Samuel with the death of Saul and David's assumption of the throne and his conquest of Jerusalem. From this point onward, there are ample borrowings from Samuel and Kings, often showing a replication of entire passages with only minor changes. Linguistically, because Chronicles hews so closely to the Deuteronomistic History, it does not exhibit a great many features of Late Biblical Hebrew, as one might expect, though not infrequently it reflects a certain loosening of syntactic and idiomatic norms that is characteristic of this late period. In any case, the

obvious question is what the motive of the Chronicler was in producing a historical narrative that is to a large extent a reproduction of an existing historical narrative which had achieved a degree of canonical status after being edited in the Babylonian exile. Most prominently, this is a historical account that is intended to highlight the eternal legitimacy of the Davidic dynasty and its firm integration with the priestly hierarchy, which traces its own origins back to Aaron. Consequently, the portrait of David has been, one might say, airbrushed. There is no report of his acting as a vassal for the Philistine king Agag. The vivid scene in Samuel when David plays the madman and rolls on the ground drooling in order to save himself from the Philistines is eliminated. The representation of David as a canny political player is gone. David's adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband are stricken from the record. David's demise is reported tersely, with no trace of the dense machinations before his death involving Nathan and Bathsheba that brought Solomon to the throne and no mention of his deathbed exhortation to Solomon to pay off scores against his enemies. Instead, David conveys the throne to Solomon and then proceeds to divide the priests and Levites into diverse orders,

which occasions still another long list of names that runs on for some chapters.

David's name recurs fairly often as Chronicles proceeds to later eras, often joined with Solomon's. Repeatedly, he is said to have instituted the regimen of the temple cult and of its musical aspect, even establishing the precedent for which instruments were to be played in the temple service. He is also said to have produced written texts that authorized these sundry procedures, even though there is no hint of his doing any writing of this sort in the Book of Samuel. This is, in sum, a representation of David as an exemplary establishment figure, unswervingly virtuous, providing precedents and a model for the political and cultic tradition that he is seen as having founded.

It should also be noted that Chronicles incorporates a variety of narrative details that appear nowhere in the Deuteronomistic History. Where they come from remains a matter of conjecture. Some scholars conclude that the Chronicler had at his disposal alternative historical texts from which at some points he chose to draw. This may well be the case, but it is also possible that he composed these passages himself—at least a few of them appear to serve his ideological purposes. At the conclusion of the story of each king, he observes, in imitation of the formula

used in the Book of Kings, that “the rest of the acts of King X are written in the book of the kings of Israel and Judah.” In the Book of Kings, this formula probably refers to court annals, which may once have existed but of course have been lost to us. It is unclear what text is referred to in Chronicles, and since it is probably not the canonical Book of Kings, the “book” is not capitalized in this translation. It is also possible that the reference is to a nonexistent text, the Chronicler merely imitating the formula from Kings. At a good many other points, he says that the rest of the acts of the kings in question are written down in a particular book by a prophet or seer. The likelihood of historical reports in such visionary texts is small, so this looks like a literary gesture in part to convey a sense that the Chronicler, a writer who is insistently theological, is familiar with works of a spiritual cast that incorporate information about the figures of his own narrative.

In the end, Chronicles offers an object lesson in how as a tradition evolves it may be prone to domesticate the unruly and challenging traits of its own origins. The tales of the Patriarchs and the story of the troubled founding of the Israelite monarchy in their early formulation are full of human contradictions, moral ambiguities, psychological

probings, and sometimes the intimation of dark and destructive impulses. It is this complexity of imagination that produces some of the greatest narratives that have come out of the whole ancient world. The Chronicler is impelled to rewrite these stories in order to make them yield a picture of divinely ordained political and cultic practice. He speaks of good and bad kings, as something he knows well from reading the Book of Kings, but these are now neatly divided between those who do right in the eyes of the LORD and those who do evil in the eyes of the LORD. The national history is painted in black and white, and the haunting shadows, the chiaroscuro, the sudden illuminations of classical Hebrew narrative, vanish in this work.

1 Chronicles

CHAPTER 1

[1]Adam, Seth, Enosh. [2]Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared.
[3]Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech. [4]Noah, Shem, Ham, and
Japheth. [5]The sons of Japheth, Gomer, Magog, Madai,
Javan, Tubal, Meshech, and Tiras. [6]And the sons of
Gomer, Ashkenaz and Riphath and Togarmah. [7]And
the sons of Javan, Elishah, Tarshish, Kittim, and
Dodanim. [8]The sons of Ham, Cush, and Mizraim, Put
and Canaan. [9]And the sons of Cush, Seba, Havilah,
Sabta, Raama and Sabteca. And the sons of Raama,
Sheba and Dedan. [10]And Cush begot Nimrod. He was
the first mighty man on earth. [11]And Mizraim begot
the Ludim and the Anamim and the Lehabim and the
Naphtuhim [12]and the Pathrusim and the Casluhim,
from whom the Philistines came forth, and the
Caphtorim. [13]And Canaan begot Sidon his firstborn
and Heth. [14]And the Jebusites and the Amorites and
the Girgashites [15]and the Hivvites and the Arkites and
the Sinites [16]and the Arvadites and the Zemarites and
the Hamathites. [17]The sons of Shem, Elam and Asshur
and Arpachshad and Lud and Aram and Uz and Hul
and Gether and Meshech. [18]And Arpachshad begot

Shelah, and Shelah begot Eber. [19]And to Eber two sons were born. The name of the one was Peleg, for in his days the earth was split apart, and the name of his brother was Joktan. [20]And Joktan begot Almodad and Sheleph and Hazarmaveth and Jerah, [21]and Hadoram and Uzal and Diklah, [22]and Ebal and Abimael and Sheba [23]and Ophir and Havilah and Jobab. All these were the sons of Joktan. [24]Shem, Arpachshad, Shelah, [25]Eber, Peleg, Reu, [26]Serug, Nahor, Terah, [27], Abram, who is Abraham. [28]The sons of Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael. [29]This is their lineage: Ishmael's firstborn Nebaioth and Kedar and Abdeel and Mibsam, [30]Mishma and Dumah, Massa, Hadad, and Tema, [31]Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah. These are the sons of Ishmael. [32]And the sons of Keturah, Abraham's concubine. She bore Zimran and Jokshan and Medan and Midian and Ishbak and Shuah. And the sons of Jokshan, Sheba and Dedan. [33]And the sons of Midian, Ephah and Epher and Enoch and Abida and Eldaah. All these were the sons of Keturah. [34]And Abraham begat Isaac. The sons of Isaac, Esau and Israel. [35]The sons of Esau, Eliphaz, Reuel, and Jeush and Jaalam and Korah. [36]The sons of Eliphaz, Teman and Omar, Zephi and Gatam, Kenaz and Timna and Amalek. [37]The sons of Reuel were Nahath, Zerah, Shammah, and Mizzah. [38]And the sons of Seir, Lotan and Shobal

and Zibeon and Anah and Dishon and Ezer and
Dishan. [39]And the sons of Lotan, Hori and Homam
and Lotan's sister, Timna. [40]The sons of Shobal, Alian,
Manahath and Ebal, Shephi, and Onam, the sons of
Zibeon, Aiah and Anah. [41]The son of Anah, Dishon,
and the sons of Dishon, Hamran and Eshban and
Ithran and Cheran. [42]The sons of Ezer, Bilhan and
Zaavan and Jaakan. The sons of Dishan, Uz and Aran.
[43]And these are the kings who reigned in the land of
Edom before a king reigned over the Israelites: Bela
son of Beor and the name of his town was Dinhabah.
[44]And Bela died, and Jobab son of Zerah from Bozrah
reigned in his stead. [45]And Jobab died, and Husham
from the land of the Temanites reigned in his stead.
[46]And Husham died, and Hadad son of Bedad, who
struck down Midian on the steppes of Moab, reigned
in his stead, and the name of his town was Avith.
[47]And Hadad died, and Samlah from Masrekah reigned
in his stead. [48]And Samlah died, and Saul from
Rehoboth-on-the-River reigned in his stead. [49]And
Saul died and Baal-Hanan son of Achbor reigned in
his stead. [50]And Baal-Hanan died, and Hadad reigned
in his stead, and the name of his town was Pai, and the
name of his wife was Mehetabel daughter of Matred
daughter of Me-Zahab. [51]And Hadad died and the
chieftains of Edom were the chieftain of Timna, the

chieftain of Alvah, the chieftain of Jetheth, [52]the chieftain of Oholibamah, the chieftain of Elah, the chieftain of Pinon, [53]the chieftain of Kenaz, the chieftain of Teman, the chieftain of Mibzar, [54]the chieftain of Magdiel, the chieftain of Iram, these are the chieftains of Edom.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Adam, Seth, Enosh.* Chronicles begins abruptly with a patrilineal genealogical list that runs from the first man to Saul, his sons, and his grandsons, at the end of chapter 9. Here at the very beginning, only the names are stated, without even the verb "begot," which is not used until verse 10. For the modern reader, this is scarcely an inviting way to begin a book. In fact, it may not be the actual beginning of the original book but a set of appended "files," as Jacob M. Myers has called it, important to the editor because it makes the history of the line of David a culmination of the history of humankind, which exhibits its first great fulfillment in Abraham and his descendants. The author draws directly on genealogical lists in Genesis and, evidently, on some extrabiblical sources that were available to him. Narrative content emerges only after nine chapters of these "files." The first part of the list here closely follows the Table of the Nations in Genesis 10, and the reader is referred to the comments there.

5. *Javan.* This is one of several names in this early list that reflect contact among cultures in the ancient Mediterranean sphere. In biblical Hebrew, the name would have been pronounced *yawan,* the equivalent of "Ion," which is what some of the Greek peoples called their native realm.

27. *Abram, who is Abraham.* The list duly notes Abram's name change in Genesis 17.

CHAPTER 2

[1]These are the sons of Israel, Simeon, Levi and Judah,
Issachar and Zebulun, [2]Dan, Joseph, and Benjamin,
Naphtali, Gad, and Asher. [3]The sons of Judah, Er and
Onan and Shelah. Three were born to him by Bath-
Shua the Canaanite. And Er, Judah's firstborn, was evil
in the eyes of the LORD, and He put him to death.
[4]And Tamar his daughter-in-law bore him Perez and
Zerah. All the sons of Judah were five. [5]The sons of
Perez, Hezron and Hamul. [6]And the sons of Zerah,
Zimri and Ethan and Heman and Calcol and Dara, five
in all. [7]And the sons of Carmi, Achar, who stirred up
trouble against Israel when he betrayed the ban. [8]And
the son of Ethan, Azariah. [9]And the sons of Hezron
who were born to him, Jerahmeel and Ram and
Chelubai. [10]And Ram begot Amminadab, and
Amminadab begot Nahshon, prince of the sons of
Judah. [11]And Nahshon begot Salma, and Salma begot
Boaz. [12]And Boaz begot Obed and Obed begot Jesse.
[13]And Jesse begot his firstborn, Eliab and Abinadab the
second, and Shimea the third, [14]Nethaneel the fourth,

Raddai the fifth, [15]Ozem the sixth, David the seventh,
[16]and their sisters, Zeruiah and Abigail, and the sons of
Zeruiah, Abishai and Joab and Asahel—three. [17]And
Abigail bore Amasa, and Amasa's father was Jether
the Ishmaelite. [18]And Caleb son of Hezron begot by
Azubah his wife and by Jerioth, and these are her sons,
Jesher and Shobab and Ardon. [19]And Azubah died,
and Caleb took Ephrath as wife, and she bore to him
Hur. [20]And Hur begot Uri, and Uri begot Bezalel.
[21]And afterward, Hezron came to bed with the
daughter of Machir. He took her as wife, and he was
sixty years old, and she bore to him Segub. [22]And
Segub begot Jair, and he had twenty-three towns in the
land of Gilead. [23]And Geshur and Aram took from
them the villages of Havvoth-Jair, Kenath and its
hamlets, sixty towns. All these were the sons of
Machir, father of Gilead. [24]And after the death of
Hezron in Caleb-Ephrathah—and Hezron's wife was
Abijah. She bore to him Ashhur father of Tekoa.
[25]And the sons of Jerah-meel, Hezron's firstborn, were
Ram, the firstborn, and Bunah and Oren and Ozem
and Ahijah. [26]And Jerahmeel had another wife, and
her name was Atarah. She was the mother of Onam.
[27]And the sons of Ram, Jerahmeel's firstborn, were
Maaz and Jamin and Eker. [28]And the sons of Onam
were Shammai and Jada. And the sons of Shammai,

Nadab and Abishur. [29]And the name of Abishur's wife
was Abihail, and she bore to him Ahban and Molid.
[30]And the sons of Nadab, Seled and Appaim. And
Seled died without sons. [31]And the son of Appaim.
And the sons of Ishi Sheshan and Ahlai. And the sons
of Sheshan, Ahlai. [32]And the sons of Jada, Shammai's
brother, Jether and Jonathan. And Jether died without
sons. [33]And the sons of Jonathan, Peleth and Zaza.
These were the sons of Jerahmeel. [34]And Sheshan did
not have sons but daughters, and Sheshan had an
Egyptian slave named Jarha. [35]And Sheshan gave his
daughter to Jarha his slave as wife, and she bore to
him Attai. [36]And Attai begot Nathan, and Nathan
begot Zabad. [37]And Zabad begot Ephlal, and Ephlal
begot Obed. [38]And Obed begot Jehu, and Jehu begot
Azariah. [39]And Azariah begot Helez, and Helez begot
Eleasah. [40]And Eleasah begot Sisamai, and Sisamai
begot Shallum. [41]And Shallum begot Jekamiah, and
Jekamiah begot Elishama. [42]And the sons of Caleb,
Jerahmeel's brother, Meshah his firstborn, who was the
father of Ziph and the sons of Mesha, father of
Hebron. [43]And the sons of Hebron, Korah and
Tappuah and Rekem and Shema. [44]And Shema begot
Raham father of Jorkoam, and Rekem begot
Shammai. [45]And the son of Shammai was Maon, and
Maon was the father of Beth-Zur. [46]And Ephrah

Caleb's concubine bore Haran and Moza and Gazez,
and Haran begot Gazez. [47]And the sons of Jahdai,
Regem and Jotham and Geshan and Pelet and Ephah
and Shaaph. [48]Caleb's concubine Maachah bore Sheber
and Tirhanah. [49]And Shaaph father of Madmannah
begot Sheva father of Machbenah and father of Gibea.
And Caleb's daughter was Achsah. [50]These were the
children of Caleb. The son of Hur. Ephrathah's
firstborn was Shobal, father of Kiriath-Jearim. [51]Salma,
father of Bethlehem, Hareph father of Beth-Gader.
[52]And Shobal father of Kiriath-Jearim had sons,
Haroeh, half of the Manuhoth. [53]And the clans of
Kiriath-Jearim, the Ithrite and the Puthite and the
Shumathite and the Mishraite. From these the
Zorathites and the Eshtaolites emerged. [54]The sons of
Salma, Bethlehem, the Netophatite, Atroth-Beth-Joab,
and half the Manahethite, the Zorite. [55]And the clans
of the scribes that dwelled in Jabez, the Tirathites, the
Shimeathites, the Suchathites. They were the Kenites
who came from Hammath, father of the house of
Rechab.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *These are the sons of Israel.* Oddly, Reuben is missing from the list.

4. *And Tamar his daughter-in-law bore him Perez and Zerah.* The text hews to its agenda of the enumeration of begettings, omitting mention of the freighted narrative in Genesis 38 in which Tamar, languishing in widowhood, takes a bold initiative by dressing as a roadside whore and having sex with her father-in-law.

7. *Achar.* In the story of the violation of the ban in Joshua 7, this figure is called Achan. Here the name has been "corrected" to Achar in order to make it identical with the Hebrew verb that means "to stir up trouble," "to muddy," "to roil."

11. *Boaz.* He is the Judahite who marries Ruth in the Book of Ruth. His line is especially significant for the compiler of these lists because it leads directly to David.

13–14. *And Jesse begot.* In 1 Samuel 16 only the names of the first three sons are mentioned, and then David at the end. It is unclear whether this compiler had access to a document that contained the three missing names or whether he invented them in order to produce an effect of completeness.

16. *the sons of Zeruiah, Abishai and Joab and Asahel.* These three nephews of David—presumably Zeruiah was a much older sister—figure importantly in the David story in the Book of Samuel. Joab and Abishai are his bloody-minded henchmen, and Asahel dies in battle.

20. *Uri begot Bezalel.* Bezalel becomes the chief craftsman of the sanctuary in the wilderness.

23. *father of Gilead.* Somewhat confusingly, though the list is all about fathers and sons, at this point, and at several points farther on, "father" is used in the sense of "founder," and "Gilead" is a geographical region, not a person.

24. *in Caleb-Ephrathah.* This appears to be a place-name, but the Hebrew is ambiguous.

30. *without sons.* The Hebrew is terse and not quite idiomatic—literally, "no sons."

35. *And Sheshan gave his daughter to Jarha his slave.* This may sound surprising, but some slaves were in effect indentured servants and could be granted freedom. Alternately, the Hebrew term could simply mean "servant."

42–43. *Ziph . . . Hebron.* Both these are place-names, not people.

52. *half of the Manuhoth.* This is evidently a place, but the phrase is obscure.

CHAPTER 3

[1]And these were the sons of David who were born to
him in Hebron: the firstborn Amnon, by Ahinoam the
Jezreelite; the second Daniel, by Abigail the
Carmelite; [2]the third Absalom son of Maachah
daughter of Talmai, king of Geshur; the fourth,
Adonijah son of Haggith; [3]the fifth, Shephatiah, by
Abital; the sixth Ithream, by Eglah his wife. [4]Six were
born to him in Hebron, and he was king there seven
years and six months, and thirty-three years he was
king in Jerusalem. [5]And there were born to him in
Jerusalem: Shimea and Shobab and Nathan and
Solomon, four by Bath-Shua daughter of Ammiel.
[6]And Ibhar and Elishama and Eliphelet, [7]and Nogah
and Nepheg and Japhia, [8]and Elishama and Eliada and
Eliphelet—nine, [9]all the sons of David, besides the
sons of the concubines and Tamar their sister. [10]And
the son of Solomon was Rehoboam, his son Abijah,
his son Asa, his son Jehoshaphat, [11]his son Joram, his
son Ahaziah, his son Joash, [12]Amaziah his son,
Azariah his son, Jotham his son, [13]his son Hezekiah,

his son Manasseh, [14]his son Amon, his son Josiah.
[15]And the sons of Josiah, the firstborn Johanan, the
second Jehoiakim, the third Zedekiah, the fourth
Shallum. [16]And the sons of Jehoiakim were Jeconiah
his son, Zedekiah his son. [17]And the sons of Jeconiah
Sheatiel and Assir his son, [18]and Malchiram and
Pedaiah and Shenazzar and Jecamiah, Hoshama, and
Nedabiah. [19]And the sons of Pedaiah were Zerubbabel
and Shimei, and the sons of Zerubbabel, Meshullam
and Hananiah and Shelomith their sister, [20]and
Hashubah and Ohel and Berechiah and Hasadiah and
Jushab-Hesed—five. [21]And the sons of Hananiah were
Pelatiah and Jeshaiah. The sons of Rephaiah, the sons
of Arnan, the sons of Obadiah, the sons of
Shechaniah. [22]And the son of Shechaniah was
Shemaiah, and the sons of Shemaiah, Hattush and Igal
and Bariah and Neariah and Shaphat—six. [23]And the
sons of Neariah, Elioenai and Hezekiah and Azrikam
—three. [24]And the sons of Elioenai, Hodaviah and
Eliashib and Pelaiah and Akkub and Johanan and
Delaiah and Anani—seven.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Daniel.* In the list of David's sons in 2 Samuel 3, there is a different name, Chileab.

6–8. *Ibhar . . . Eliphelet.* For some reason, the mothers of these nine sons are not named.

7. *Nogah.* This name, which means "radiance," is used in modern Israel for girls.

17. *Jeconiah.* As king of Judah, he was taken captive by the Babylonians in their incursion in 597 B.C.E.

18. *Shenazzar.* This is a Babylonian name, as is Zerubbabel, reflecting the acculturation of the Judahites in the Babylonian exile.

CHAPTER 4

[1]The sons of Judah were Perez, Hezron, and Carmi
and Hur and Shobal. [2]And Reaiah the son of Shobal
begot Jahath, and Jahath begot Ahumai and Lahad.
These were the clans of the Zorathite. [3]And these
[were the sons of] the father of Etam: Jezreel and
Ishma and Idbash, and the name of their sister was
Hazelelponi. [4]And Penuel father of Gedor and Ezer
father of Hushah. These were the sons of Hur,
firstborn of Ephrathah, father of Bethlehem. [5]And
Ashhur father of Tekoa had two wives, Helah and
Naarah. [6]And Naarah bore to him Ahuzam and
Hepher and Temeni and Ahashtari. These were the
sons of Naarah. [7]And the sons of Helah, Zereth and
Zohar and Ethnan. [8]And Koz begot Anub and
Hazzobebah, and the clans of Aharhel son of Harum.
[9]And Jabez was more honored than his brothers, and
his mother had called his name Jabez, saying, “Why, I
have born him in pain.” [10]And Jabez called out to the
God of Israel, saying, “May You indeed bless me and
increase my territory and Your hand be with me and

may You act that I be not in pain." And God brought about what he had asked. [11]And Chelub brother of Shuhah begot Mehir, who was father of Eshton. [12]And Eshton begat Beth-Rapha and Paseah and Tehinnah, father of Ir-Nahash. These were the men of Rechah. [13]And the sons of Kenaz were Othniel and Seraiah, and the sons of Othniel, Hathath and Meonothai. [14]And Meonothai begot Ophrah, and Seraiah begot Joab father of Artisan Vale, for they were artisans. [15]And the sons of Caleb son of Jephunneh were Iru, Elah, and Naam. And the son of Elah was Kenaz. [16]And the sons of Jehallelel were Ziph and Ziphah, Tiria, and Asarel. [17]And the sons of Ezra were Jether and Mered Epher, and Jalon. And she conceived Miriam and Shammai and Ishbah father of Eshtemoa. [18]And his Judahite wife bore Jered father of Gedor and Heber father of Sochoh and Jekuthiel father of Zanoah. And these were the sons of Bithiah daughter of Pharaoh whom Mered took as wife. [19]And the sons of the wife of Hodiah sister of Naham father of Keilah the Garmite and Eshtemoa the Maachathite. . . . [20]And the sons of Shimon were Amnon, Rinnah, Ben-Hanan, and Tilon. And the sons of Ishi were Zoheth and Ben-Zoheth. [21]The sons of Shelah son of Judah, Er father of Lecah and Laadah father of Mareshah and the clans of the linen workshop of the house of Beth-Ashbea.

[22]And Jokim and the men of Chozeba and Joash and
Saraph who married among Moab and Jashubi-Lehem.
And these matters are ancient. [23]They were the potters
who dwelled in Netaim and Gederah, with the king at
his tasks they dwelled there. [24]The sons of Simeon,
Nemuel and Jamin, Jarib, Zerah, Shaul, [25]Shallum his
son, Mibsam his son, Mishma his son. [26]And the sons
of Mishma, Hamel his son, Zacchur his son, Shimei
his son. [27]And Shimei had sixteen sons and six
daughters, but his brothers did not have many sons,
and all their clans did not have as many as the sons of
Judah. [28]And they dwelled in Beersheba and Moladah
and Hazar-Shual, [29]and in Bilhah and in Ezem and in
Tolad, [30]and in Bethuel and in Hormah and in Ziklag,
[31]and in Beth-Marcaboth and in Hazar-Susim and in
Beth-Biri and in Shaaraim. These were their towns till
David was king. [32]And their villages were Etam and
Ain, Rimmon and Tochen and Ashan—five towns,
[33]and all their villages that were round these towns as
far as Baal. These were their settlements, and they
traced their lineage by them. [34]And Meshobab and
Jamlech and Joshah son of Amaziah, [35]and Joel and
Jehu son of Joshibiah son of Seraiah son of Asiel,
[36]and Elioenai and Jaakobah and Jeshohaiah and
Asaiah and Adiel and Jesimiel and Benaiah, [37]and Ziza
son of Shiphi son of Allon son of Jedaiah son of

Shimri son of Shemaiah. [38]These were the ones who
came by name, princes in their clans, and their
patriarchal house spread out abundantly. [39]And they
went to the approaches of Gedor as far as the east side
of the valley to seek pasture for their flocks. [40]And
they found luxuriant and goodly pasture, and the land
was spacious and quiet and tranquil, for of Ham were
those who formerly dwelled there. [41]And those written
down by name came in the days of Hezekiah king of
Judah and struck down their tents and their habitations
that were there and utterly destroyed them to this day
and dwelled in their stead, for there was pasture for
their flocks there. [42]And some of them, of the sons of
Simeon, went to Mount Seir—five hundred men—and
Pelatiah and Neariah and Rephaiah and Uzziel and the
sons of Ishi at their head. [43]And they struck down the
surviving remnant of Amalek, and they have dwelled
there to this day.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The sons of Judah.* There is a particular concentration in these genealogical lists on the line of Judah because it leads to David.

3. *and the name of the sister was Hazelelponi.* There is no evident reason the name of a sister or daughter occasionally appears in these emphatically

patrilineal lists. Her name itself is odd, and these lists show a mixture of relatively familiar Hebrew names, often with theophoric suffixes, as was commonly the case, and rather strange names that are not readily associated with a known Hebrew verbal stem.

9. *I have born him in pain.* Like many naming-speeches in the Bible, this one features a loose approximation between the name and its purported meaning. The Hebrew of her son's name is *yaʿbets,* and the word for pain is *ʿotseb*, the same three consonants that appear after the initial *yod* but in a different order.

10. *that I be not in pain.* Jabez prays to escape his mother's fate when she bore him.

14. *father of Artisan Vale.* As noted in the comment on 2:23, this is not a person but a place of which he is the supposed founder. The same is true of "Bethlehem" in verse [4]and "Tekoa" in verse 5.

17. *Mered.* This is perhaps the oddest of the names in this list, for it is a Hebrew word that means "rebellion."

And she conceived. It is an anomaly in the Hebrew text that the childbearing woman is not identified.

18. *Bithiah daughter of Pharaoh.* It should be noted that in earlier periods, reflected in the genealogical lists, the prohibition against foreign wives, so vehemently espoused by Ezra and Nehemiah, was not in force.

19. *Eshtemoa the Maachathite. . . .* There appears to be a gap in the text here, which is indicated by the suspension points.

32. *Ain, Rimmon.* The translation follows the Masoretic Text, which has these as two different places, but there is a known place-name, Ein-Rimmon (Pomegranate Spring), and that might be the original reading.

40. *for of Ham were those who formerly dwelled there.* According to Genesis 10:6, the Canaanites were descended from Noah's son Ham.

41. *And those written down by name . . . and struck down their tents and their habitations that were there and utterly destroyed them.* The pattern of settlement involved ruthless expropriation: these tribal leaders needed more pastureland, and so they wiped out the existing inhabitants.

CHAPTER 5

[1]And the sons of Reuben, Israel's firstborn—for he
was the firstborn, but when he profaned his father's
couch, his birth-right was given to the sons of Joseph
son of Israel, and he did not trace his lineage to the
birthright. [2]Though Judah was more powerful than his
brothers and a prince came from him, the birthright
was Joseph's. [3]The sons of Reuben, Israel's firstborn:
Enoch and Pallu, Hezron and Carmi. [4]The sons of
Joel, Shemaiah his son, Gog his son, Shimei his son,
[5]Micah his son, Reaiah his son, Baal his son, [6]Beerah
his son, whom Tilgath-Pilneser king of Assyria exiled,
he was the prince of the Reubenite. [7]And his brothers
by their clans traced their lineage by their generations.
Jeiel the head and Zechariah [8]and Bela son of Azaz
son of Shema son of Joel, who dwelled in Aroer and
as far as Nebo and Baal-Meon. [9]And to the east he
dwelled as far as the approach to the wilderness and
the Euphrates River, for their cattle had multiplied in
the land of Gilead. [10]And in the days of Saul they did
battle with the Hagrites, who fell into their hands, and

they dwelled in their tents along the whole eastern side of Gilead. [11]And the sons of Gad dwelled opposite them in the land of Bashan as far as Salcah. [12]Joel the chief, Shapham the second, Jaanai and Shaphat in Bashan. [13]And their brothers by their patriarchal houses were Michael and Meshullam and Sheba and Jorai and Jachan and Zia and Eber—seven. [14]These are the sons of Abihail son of Huri son of Jaroah son of Gilead son of Michael son of Jeshishai son of Jahdo son of Buz: [15]Ahi son of Abdiel son of Guni head of their patriarchal house. [16]And they dwelled in Gilead, in Bashan and in its hamlets and in all the pasturelands of Sharon to their edges. [17]All of them traced their lineage in the days of Jotham king of Judah and in the days of Jeroboam king of Israel. [18]The sons of Reuben and Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh had men of valor bearing shield and sword, drawing the bow and skilled in battle, forty-four thousand seven hundred sixty fit for duty. [19]And they did battle with the Hagrites, Jetur and Naphish and Nodab. [20]And they had the upper hand over them, and the Hagrites were given into their hand and all who were with them, for they had cried out to God and He granted their plea, for they trusted in Him. [21]And they carried off their livestock, fifty thousand camels and two hundred fifty thousand sheep and two thousand donkeys and a

hundred thousand people. [22]For many slain had fallen,
and the battle was from God. And they dwelled in
their place until the exile. [23]And the sons of the half-
tribe of Manasseh dwelled in the land from Bashan to
Baal-Hermon and Senir and Mount Hermon. They
multiplied. [24]And these are the heads of their
patriarchal houses: Epher and Ishi and Eliel and Azriel
and Jeremiah and Hodaviah and Jahdiel, men who
were valiant warriors, men of renown, heads of their
patriarchal houses. [25]But they betrayed the God of
their fathers and went whoring after the gods of the
peoples of the land whom God had destroyed before
them. [26]And the God of Israel roused the spirit of Pul
king of Assyria and the spirit of Tilgath-Pilneser king
of Assyria, and he exiled the Reubenite and the Gadite
and the half-tribe of Manasseh and brought them to
Halah and Habor and Hara and the Gozan River till
this day. [27]The sons of Levi were Gershon, Kohath,
and Merari. [28]And the sons of Kohath were Amram,
Izhar and Hebron and Uzziel. [29]And the children of
Amram were Aaron and Moses and Miriam. And the
sons of Aaron were Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and
Ithamar. [30]Eleazar begot Phineas, Phineas begot
Abishua. [31]And Abishua begot Bukki, and Bukki begot
Uzzi. [32]And Uzzi begot Zerahiah, and Zerahiah begot
Meraioth. [33]Meraioth begot Amariah, and Amariah

begot Ahitub. [34]And Ahitub begot Zadok, and Zadok begot Ahimaaz. [35]And Ahimaaz begot Azariah, and Azariah begot Johanan. [36]And Johanan begot Azariah, he who was the priest in the house that Solomon built in Jerusalem. [37]And Azariah begot Amariah, and Amariah begot Ahitub. [38]And Ahitub begot Zadok, and Zadok begot Shallum. [39]And Shallum begot Hilkiah, and Hilkiah begot Azariah, [40]and Azariah begot Seraiah, and Seraiah begot Jehozadok. [41]And Jehozadok went off when the LORD exiled Judah and Jerusalem by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar.

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *when he profaned his father's couch.* The report of Reuben's lying with his father's concubine is in Genesis 35:22, but the phrasing used here is taken from the poem attributed to Jacob, Genesis 49:4. His birthright was given to the sons of Joseph. Though this accords with the long narrative in Genesis in which Joseph is the central figure, the two tribes descended from Joseph did not produce any royal line.

9. *as far as the approach to the wilderness and the Euphrates River.* This is at least one of two fantastic items in this list: there were surely no Israelite settlements all the way out to the Euphrates.

10. *Hagrites.* The name is derived from Hagar, the mother of Ismael, and this indicates Arab peoples living east of the Jordan.

18. *The sons of Reuben and Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh.* This is the tribal group that in Numbers is reported to have settled in the northern region

east of the Jordan.

men of valor bearing shield and sword, drawing the bow and skilled in battle. Moses requires the trans-Jordanian tribes to act as the vanguard in the conquest of the land, and in keeping with this role, martial prowess is attributed to them.

forty-four thousand seven hundred sixty. This number looks inflated.

21. *they carried off their livestock.* All the figures that follow are fantastically large and could not correspond to any historical reality.

24. *men who were valiant warriors.* This phrase also has a nonmartial sense, "men of substance." Either meaning is possible here.

26. *till this day.* What the Chronicler is registering here is that in effect the Israelite population exiled by the Assyrians disappeared in these far reaches of the empire to which they were exiled.

37–39. *Azariah . . . Amariah . . . Ahitub . . . Zadok . . . Shallum*. Names recur in different generations more frequently in the lineage of Levi than in that of other tribes, probably because there was a priestly tradition to use certain time-honored names associated with the sacerdotal function.

CHAPTER 6

[1]The sons of Levi were Gershom, Kohath, and Merari.
[2]And these are the names of the sons of Gershom:
Libni and Shimei. [3]And the sons of Kohath were
Amram and Izhar and Hebron and Uzziel. [4]The sons
of Merari were Mahli and Mushi. These are the clans
of the Levite by their fathers. [5]And Gershom had
Libni his son, Jahath his son, Zimmah his son, [6]Joah
his son, Iddo his son, Zerah his son, Jeatherai his son.
[7]The sons of Kohath were Amminadab his son, Korah
his son, Assir his son, [8]Elkanah his son and Ebiasaph
his son and Assir his son, [9]Tahath his son, Uriel his
son, Uzziah his son, and Saul his son. [10]And the sons
of Elkanah were Amasai and Ahimoth, [11]Elkanah his
son, Zophai his son, and Nahath his son, [12]Eliab his
son, Jeroham his son, Elkanah his son. [13]And the sons
of Samuel were Joel the firstborn and the second
Abijah. [14]The sons of Merari were Mahli, Libni his
son, [15]Shimei his son, Uzzah his son, Shimea his son,
Haggiah his son, Asaiah his son. [16]And these did David
station over the singing in the house of the LORD

from the time the Ark came to rest. [17]And they would minister before the sanctuary of the Tent of Meeting according to their rule concerning their service. [18]And these were the ones serving and their sons, of the sons of the Kohathite: Heman the chorister son of Joel son of Samuel, [19]son of Elkanah son of Jeroham son of Eliel son of Toah, [20]son of Zuph son of Elkanah son of Mahath son of Amasai, [21]son of Elkanah son of Joel son of Azariah son of Zephaniah, [22]son of Tahath son of Assir son of Ebiasaph son of Korah, [23]son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi son of Israel. [24]And his brother Asaph who stood to his right, Asaph son of Berachiah son of Shimea, [25]son of Michael son of Baaseiah son of Malchijah, [26]son of Ethni son of Zerah son of Adaiah, [27]son of Ethan son of Zimmah son of Shimei, [28]son of Jahath son of Gershom son of Levi. [29]And the sons of Merari their brother: on the left, Ethan son of Kishi son of Abdi son of Malluch, [30]son of Hashabiah son of Amaziah son of Hilkiah, [31]son of Amzi son of Bani son of Shamer, [32]son of Mahli son of Mushi son of Merari son of Levi. [33]And their brothers the Levites were set over all the service of the sanctuary of the house of God. [34]And Aaron and his sons would burn incense on the altar of burnt offering and on the altar of incense for every task of the holy of holies and to atone for Israel as all that Moses servant

of God had charged. [35]And these are the sons of
Eleazar his son: Phineas his son, Abishua his son,
[36]Bukki his son, Uzzi his son, Zerahiah his son,
[37]Meraioth his son, Amariah his son, Ahitub his son,
[38]Zadok his son, Ahimaaz his son. [39]And these are
their settlements according to their encampments in
their territory for the sons of Aaron for the clan of the
Kohathite, for theirs was the lot, [40]and they gave them
Hebron in the land of Judah and its pasturelands all
around it. [41]But the field of the town and its villages
they gave to Caleb son of Jephunneh. [42]And to the sons
of Aaron they gave the towns of refuge, Hebron and
Libnah and its pasturelands and Jattir and Eshtemoa
and its pasturelands [43]and Hilen and its pasturelands
and Debir and its pasturelands [44]and Ashan and its
pasturelands and Beth-Shemesh and its pasture lands.
[45]And from the tribe of Benjamin, Geba and its
pasturelands and Alemeth and its pasturelands and
Anathoth and its pasturelands. All their towns were
thirteen towns, for their clans were thirteen. [46]And for
the remaining sons of Kohath, from the clan of the
tribe, from the half-tribe, the half of Manasseh by lot
ten towns. [47]And for the sons of Gershom by their
clans, from the tribe of Issachar and from the tribe of
Asher and from the tribe of Naphtali and from the
tribe of Manasseh in Bashan thirteen towns. [48]For the

Merarite by their clans, from the tribe of Reuben and from the tribe of Gad and from the tribe of Zebulun by lot, twelve towns. [49]And the Israelites gave to the Levites the towns and their pasturelands. [50]And they gave by lot from the tribe of the sons of Judah and from the tribes of the sons of Simeon and from the tribes of the sons of Benjamin these towns that they called by name [51]and from the clans of the sons of Kohath, and the towns of their territory from the tribe of Ephraim. [52]And they gave them the towns of refuge, Shechem and its pasturelands on Mount Ephraim and Gezer and its pasturelands: [53]Jokmeam and its pasturelands and Beth-Horon and its pasturelands [54]and Aijalon and its pasturelands and Gath-Rimmon and its pasturelands. [55]And from the half-tribe of Manasseh, Aner and its pasturelands and Bileam and its pasturelands for the clan of the remaining sons of Kohath. [56]For the sons of Gershom, from the clan of the half-tribe of Manasseh, Golan in Bashan and its pasturelands and Ashtaroth and its pasturelands. [57]And from the tribes of Issachar, Kedesh and its pasturelands, Daberath and its pasturelands, [58]and Ramoth and its pasturelands and Anem and its pasturelands. [59]And from the tribe of Asher, Mashal and its pasturelands and Abdon and its pasturelands [60]and Hukok and its pasturelands and Rehob and its

pasturelands. [61]And from the tribe of Naphtali, Kedesh in Galilee and its pasturelands and Hammon and its pasturelands and Kiriathaim and its pasturelands. [62]For the remaining sons of Merari from the tribe of Zebulun, Rimmono and its pasturelands, Tabor and its pasturelands. [63]And across the Jordan at Jericho on the east side of the Jordan, from the tribe of Reuben, Bezer in the wilderness and its pasturelands and Jahzah and its pasturelands, [64]and Kedemoth and its pasturelands and Mephaath and its pasturelands. [65]And from the tribe of Gad, Ramoth in Gilead and its pasturelands and Mahanaim and its pasturelands, [66]and Heshbon and its pasturelands, and Jazer and its pasturelands.

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *The sons of Levi.* The Chronicler appears to have had two special interests in compiling his lengthy lists—marking out the line of David, presumably in the hope of a restoration of the Davidic dynasty, and accounting for the priesthood, probably because he himself belonged to priestly circles.

34. *Aaron and his sons would burn incense.* By taking the priestly list all the way back to Aaron in the wilderness sanctuary, the writer conveys the idea that this whole line remains faithful to its founding sacred function. The priesthood is in this way genealogically legitimated.

39. *for theirs was the lot.* The dividing of the land by lot harks back to the procedure reported in the Book of Joshua.

45. *from the tribe of Benjamin.* This repeated formula, with the name of the tribe changing, refers to a system in which each tribe allotted certain lands to the Levites because the Levites were not given a defined tribal territory of their own. The list here of places given to the Levites is quite extensive and might be more a reflection of the priestly agenda of the Chronicler than of actual land division in the First Commonwealth period.

CHAPTER 7

[1]And for the sons of Issachar, Tola and Puah, Jashub
and Shimron—four. [2]And the sons of Tola, Uzzi and
Rephaiah and Jeriel and Jahmi and Jibsam and
Shemuel, heads of their patriarchal houses. Tola had
valiant warriors by their generations. Their number in
the days of David was twenty-two thousand six
hundred. [3]And the son of Uzzi, Izrahiah. And the sons
of Izrahiah, Michael and Obadiah and Joel and Ishiah
—five—all of them chiefs. [4]And with them by their
generations according to their patriarchal houses were
thirty-six thousand army troops for battle, for they had
many sons and wives. [5]And their brothers for all the
clans of Issachar were eighty-seven thousand valiant
warriors. All traced their lineage. [6]For Benjamin, Bela
and Becher and Jediael—three. [7]And the sons of Bela,
Ezbon and Uzzi and Uzziel and Jerimoth and Iri—five
—heads of their patriarchal houses, valiant warriors,
and they traced their lineage to the number of twenty-
two thousand thirty-four. [8]And the sons of Becher,
Zemirah and Joash and Eliezer and Elioenai and Omri

and Jerimoth and Abijah, and Anathoth and Alemeth.
All these were the sons of Becher. [9]And they traced
their lineage to their generations, heads of their
patriarchal houses, valiant warriors, twenty thousand
two hundred. [10]And the sons of Jediael, Bilhan, and
the sons of Bilhan, Jeush and Benjamin and Ehud and
Chenaanah and Zethan and Tarshish and Ahishahar.
[11]All these were the sons of Jediael by the heads of
patriarchal houses, valiant warriors, seventeen
thousand two hundred, sallying forth in the army for
battle. [12]And Shuppim and Huppim, the sons of Ir,
Hushim the sons of Aher. [13]The sons of Naphtali,
Jahziel and Guni and Jezer and Shallum, sons of
Bilhah. [14]The sons of Manasseh, Asriel, whom his
Aramean concubine bore. She bore Machir father of
Gilead. [15]And Machir took a wife for Huppim and for
Shuppim, and the name of his sister was Maachah, and
the name of the second son was Zelophehad, and Zelophehad had daughters. [16]And Maachah, Machir's wife,
bore a son and called his name Peresh, and his
brother's name was Sheresh, and his sons were Ulam
and Rakem. [17]And the son of Ulam was Bedan. These
were the sons of Gilead son of Machir son of
Manasseh. [18]And his sister Hammolecheth bore Ishhod
and Abiezer and Mahlah. [19]And the sons of Shemida
were Ahian and Shechem and Likhi and Aniam. [20]And

the sons of Ephraim, Shuthelah and Bered his son and Tahath his son and Eladah his son and Tahath his son,
[21]and Zabad his son and Shuthelah his son and Ezer and Elead. And the men of Gath who were born in the land killed them, for they had gone down to take their cattle. [22]And Ephraim their father mourned them many days, and his brothers came to console him. [23]And he came to bed with his wife and she conceived and bore a son and called his name Beriah for the misfortune that had come to his house. [24]And his daughter was Sheerah, and she built lower and upper Beth-Horon and Uzzen-Sheerah. [25]And Rephah his son and Resheph and Telah his son and Tahan his son,
[26]Laadan his son, Ammihud his son, Elishama his son,
[27]Non his son, Joshua his son. [28]And their holding and their settlements were Bethel and its hamlets and to the east Naaran and to the west Gezer and its hamlets and Shechem and its hamlets as far as Aiah and its hamlets. [29]And alongside the sons of Manasseh, Beth-Shean and its hamlets, Taanach and its hamlets, Megiddo and its hamlets, Dor and its hamlets. In these did live the sons of Joseph son of Israel. [30]The sons of Asher, Imnah and Ishvah and Ishvi and Beriah and Serah their sister. [31]And the sons of Beriah, Heber and Malchiel, who is the father of Birzaith. [32]And Heber begot Japhlet and Shomer and Hotham and Shua their

sister. [33]And the sons of Japhlet, Pasach and Bimhal and Ashvath. These are the sons of Japhlet. [34]And the sons of Shemer, Ahi and Rohgah, Jehubbah and Aram. [35]And the sons of Helem his brother, Zophah and Imna and Shelesh and Amal. [36]The sons of Zophah, Suah and Harnepher and Shual and Beri and Imrah, [37]Bezer and Hod and Shamma and Shilshah and Ithran and Beera. [38]And the sons of Jether, Jephunneh and Pispah and Ara. [39]And the sons of Ulla, Arah and Haniel and Rizia. [40]All these were the sons of Asher, heads of the patriarchal houses, picked men, valiant warriors, and they traced their lineage through the army in battle, their number twenty-six thousand men.

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

21. *the men of Gath.* Gath was a Philistine town, although it is not entirely clear whether these natives were still ethnic Philistines.

for they had gone down to take their cattle. The cattle of Ephraim's sons evidently had strayed into the territory near the coastal town of Gath, and when the owners ventured into this region to retrieve the cattle, they were killed by the locals.

23. *Beriah for the misfortune.* This is an instance of the loose naming etymologies common in the Bible. The phrase "for the misfortune" is a single Hebrew word, *beraʿah,* which sounds something like the name *beriʿah.*

CHAPTER 8

[1]And Benjamin begot Bela his firstborn, Ashbel the
second, and Aharah the third, [2]Nohah the fourth, and
Rapha the fifth. [3]And Bela had sons, Addar and Gera
and Abihud, [4]and Abishua and Naaman and Ahoah,
[5]and Gera and Shephuphan and Huram. [6]And these
were the sons of Ehud, these were the heads of the
patriarchal houses for the dwellers of Geba, and they
were exiled to Manahath. [7]And Naaman and Ahijah
and Gera—he exiled them and begot Uzza and
Ahihud. [8]And Shaharaim begot sons in the steppes of
Moab after sending away Hushim and Baara his wives,
[9]and he begot by Hodesh his wife Jobab and Zibia and
Mesha and Malcam, [10]and Jeuz and Sachiah and
Mirmah. These were his sons, heads of the patriarchal
houses. [11]And by Hushim he begot Abitub and Elpaal.
[12]And the sons of Elpaal were Eber and Misham and
Shemed—he who built Ono and Lod and its hamlets
—[13]and Beriah and Shema, they were heads of the
patriarchal houses for the dwellers of Aijalon—they
put to flight the dwellers of Gath—[14]and Ahio,

Shashak and Jeremoth, [15]and Zebadiah and Arad and
Eder, [16]and Michael and Ispah and Joha, sons of
Beriah. [17]And Zebadiah and Meshullam and Hizki and
Heber, [18]and Ishmerai and Izliah and Jobab, sons of
Elpaal, [19]and Jakim and Zichri and Zabdi, [20]and Elienai
and Zillethai and Eliel, [21]and Adaiah and Beraiah and
Shimrath, the sons of Shimei, [22]and Ishpan and Eber
and Eliel, [23]and Abdon and Zichri and Hanan, [24]and
Hananiah and Elam and Anthothijah, [25]and Iphdeiah
and Penuel, the sons of Shashak, [26]and Shamsherai and
Sheharіah and Athaliah, [27]and Jaareshiah and Elijah
and Zichri, the sons of Jeroham. [28]These were the
heads of the patriarchal houses by their generations.
These heads dwelled in Jerusalem. [29]And in Gibeon
the father of Gibeon dwelled, and his wife's name was
Maachah. [30]And his firstborn son was Abdon, and Zur
and Kish and Baal and Nadab, [31]and Gedor and Ahio
and Zecher. [32]And Mikloth begot Shimeah and they
dwelled in Jerusalem opposite their brothers, with their
brothers. [33]And Ner begot Kish, and Kish begot Saul,
and Saul begot Jonathan and Malchi-Shua and
Abinadab and Eshbaal. [34]And Jonathan's son was
Meribaal, and Meribaal begot Micah. [35]And the sons
of Micah were Pithon and Melech and Tarea and
Ahaz. [36]And Ahaz begot Jehoaddah, and Jehoaddah
begot Alemeth and Azmaveth and Zimri, and Zimri

begot Moza. [37]And Moza begot Binea, Raphah his son,
Eleasah his son, Azel his son. [38]And Azel had six sons,
38 and these were their names: Azrikam, Bocheru, and
Ishmael and Sheariah and Obadiah and Hanan. All
these were the sons of Azel. [39]And the sons of Eshek
his brother, Ulam his firstborn, Jeush the second, and
Eliphelet the third. [40]And the sons of Ulam were
valiant warrior men, drawing the bow, and with many
children and grandchildren—one hundred fifty. All
these were the sons of Benjamin.

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Benjamin begot Bela.* This (repeated) genealogy of Benjamin, perhaps drawn from a different source, has special importance for the Chronicler both because of the tribal alliance between Judah and Benjamin and because it leads to Saul, the nation's first king.

6. *they were exiled to Manahath.* The historical kernel of this reference has been lost to us.

10. *Mirmah.* The list of names continues to be a mélange of recognizable Hebrew names, foreign-sounding names, and occasional odd items like this one. Mirmah is the ordinary Hebrew word for "deceit," but as a proper noun it would have to mean something entirely different.

32. *brothers.* Here the word probably shows its extended sense of "kinsmen."

33–34. *Eshbaal . . . Meribbaal.* It is noteworthy that such names here show their pagan theophoric suffix, perhaps because they are taken from an old

document. In the Book of Samuel, names of this sort are editorially revised with the suffix *boshet,* "shame," substituted for *baʿal.*

40. *valiant warrior men, drawing the bow.* This formula is especially significant for the tribe of Benjamin because it was known for its martial prowess. In Judges 3, Ehud, a Benjaminite fighter, assassinates the Moabite King Elgon and then leads a successful rebellion. In the civil war reported at the end of Judges, Benjaminite warriors nearly defeat the assembled troops of all the other tribes.

CHAPTER 9

[1]And all Israel traced their lineage, and, look, they are
written down in the book of kings of Israel and Judah.
They were exiled to Babylonia because of their
betrayal. [2]And the first settlers who were in their
holdings in their towns were Israelites, priests, Levites,
and the temple laborers. [3]And in Jerusalem there
dwelled from the sons of Judah and from the sons of
Benjamin and from the sons of Ephraim and
Manasseh, [4]Uthai son of Ammihud son of Omri son of
Imri son of Bani, of the sons of Perez son of Judah,
[5]And of the Shilonite, Asaiah the firstborn and his
sons. [6]And of the sons of Zerah, Jeuel and their six
hundred ninety kinsmen. [7]And of the sons of
Benjamin, Sallu son of Meshullam son of Hodaviah
son of Hassenuah, [8]and Ibneiah son of Jeroham and
Elah son of Uzzi son of Michri and Meshullam son of
Shephatiah son of Reuel son of Ibneiah. [9]And their
kinsmen by their generations were nine hundred fifty-
six. All these were men who were heads of their
patriarchal houses. [10]And of the priests, Jedaiah and

Jehoiarib and Jachin, [11]and Azariah son of Hilkiah son of Meshullam son of Zadok son of Meraioth son of Ahitub, prince of the house of God, [12]and Adaiah son of Jeroham son of Pashhur son of Malchijah, and Maasiai son of Adiel son of Jahzerah son of Meshullam son of Meshillemith son of Immer, [13]and their brothers heads of their patriarchal houses, one thousand seven hundred sixty valiant warriors, the force for the task of the service of the house of God. [14]And of the Levites, Shemaiah son of Hasshub son of Azrikam son of Hashabiah from the sons of Merari, [15]and Bakbakkar, Heresh, and Galal, Mattaniah son of Micah son of Zichri son of Asaph, [16]and Obadiah son of Shemaiah son of Galal son of Jeduthun and Berechiah son of Asa son of Elkanah, who dwelled in the villages of the Netophathites. [17]And the gatekeepers, Shallum and Akkub and Talmon and Ahiman and their brothers, with Shallum the head, [18]and till now in the King's Gate on the east they have been the gatekeepers for the camps of the sons of Levi, [19]and Shallum son of Kore son of Ebiasaph son of Korah and his brothers of his Korahite patriarchal house over the task of the service, guardians of the thresholds of the tent, and their fathers had been over the camp of the LORD, guardians of the entrance. [20]And Phineas son of Eleazar the prince was formerly

over them. The LORD was with him. [21]Zechariah son
of Meshelemiah gatekeeper of the entrance to the Tent
of Meeting. [22]All of them picked men as the
gatekeepers at the thresholds, two hundred twelve they
were, in their villages they traced their lineage. David
and Samuel the seer had established them in their
trust, [23]and they and their sons were over the gates of
the house of the LORD, the house of the Tent, in
watches. [24]In four directions were the gatekeepers, to
the east, west, north, and south. [25]And their brothers in
the villages were to come for seven days with these at
set times. [26]For in trust were the four commanding
gatekeepers—they were Levites—and they were over
the chambers and over the treasuries of the house of
God. [27]And round about the house of God they would
spend the night, for the watch was upon them, and
they were over the opening from morning to morning.
[28]And some of them were over the service vessels, for
by count they would bring them in and by count take
them out. [29]And some of them were appointed over the
vessels and over all the sacred vessels and over the fine
flour and the wine and the oil and the incense and the
spices. [30]And some of the sons of the priests
compounded the mixture for the spices. [31]And
Mattithiah of the Levites, who was the firstborn of
Shallum the Korahite, was in trust over the preparation

of baked goods. [32]And some of the sons of Kohath, of
their brothers, were over the preparing of the display
bread each sabbath. [33]And these choristers, heads of
the patriarchal houses of the Levites, in the chamber,
were exempt, for day and night the task was upon
them. [34]These heads of the patriarchal house of the
Levites by their generations, these heads dwelled in
Jerusalem. [35]And Jeiel father of Gibeon dwelled in
Gibeon, and his wife's name was Maachah. [36]And his
firstborn son was Abdon, and then Zur and Kish and
Baal and Ner and Nadab, [37]and Gedor and Ahio and
Zechariah and Mikloth. [38]And Mikloth begat Shimam,
and they too dwelled in Jerusalem before their
brothers, with their brothers. [39]And Ner begot Kish,
and Kish begot Saul, and Saul begot Jonathan and
Malchi-Shua and Abinadab and Eshbaal. [40]And
Jonathan's son was Meri-baal, and Meribaal begot
Micah. [41]And the sons of Micah were Pithon and
Melech and Tarea. [42]And Ahaz begot Jarah and Jarah
begot Alemeth and Azmaveth and Zimri, and Zimri
begot Moza. [43]And Moza begot Binea and Rephaiah
his son, Eleasah his son, Azel his son. [44]And Azel had
six sons, and these are their names: Azrikam his
firstborn and Bocheru and Ishmael and Sheariah and
Obadiah and Hanan. These were the sons of Azel.

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

13. *the force.* The Hebrew term generally has a military sense. It may be used here to suggest that the Temple ministrants were a kind of sacred militia. This would accord with calling these people "valiant warriors" (and it is probably misguided to render that Hebrew term as "men of substance").

26. *commanding gatekeepers.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "warrior-gatekeepers."

29. *sacred vessels.* The distinction between these and the "service vessels" of the previous verse is not entirely clear.

35. *And Jeiel father of Gibeon dwelled in Gibeon.* The genealogical list from here to the end of the chapter replicates 8:29–38. Since the replication is virtually exact, the two lists can scarcely be from different sources. Perhaps the Chronicler or his editor at moments was as confused by the welter of lists as the modern reader is likely to be.

CHAPTER 10

[1]And the Philistines battled against Israel, and the men
of Israel fled before the Philistines and they fell slain
on Mount Gilboa. [2]And the Philistines followed hard
upon Saul and his sons, and the Philistines struck
down Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchi-Shua, the
sons of Saul. [3]And the battle went heavy against Saul,
and the archers, with the bow, found him, and he
quaked in fear of the archers. [4]And Saul said to his
armor bearer, “Draw your sword and run me through
with it, lest these uncircumcised come and abuse me.”
But the armor bearer did not want to do it because he
was very frightened. [5]And Saul took the sword and fell
upon it. [6]And Saul died, and his three sons and all his
house together died. 7And all the men of Israel who
were in the valley saw that [the men of Israel] had fled
and that Saul and his sons were dead, and they
abandoned their towns and fled, and the Philistines
came and occupied them. [8]And it happened the next
day that the Philistines came to strip the slain, and
they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount

Gilboa. [9]And they stripped him and bore off his head and his armor, and they sent throughout the Philistine country to bring the tidings to their idols and to the people. [10]And they put his armor in the house of their god, and his skull they impaled in the house of Dagon. [11]And all [the inhabitants] of Jabesh-Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul. [12]And every valiant man arose, and they bore off Saul's corpse and the corpses of his sons and brought them to Jabesh and buried their bones beneath the tamarisk in Jabesh, and they fasted seven days. [13]And Saul died for his betrayal that he had committed against the LORD, for the word of the LORD that he did not keep, and he had inquired, too, of a ghost. [14]And he did not seek the LORD, and He put him to death and brought round the kingship to David son of Jesse.

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And the Philistines battled against Israel.* The passage beginning here through verse 12 transcribes 1 Samuel 31 with only minor variations. The reader is referred to the commentary on 1 Samuel 31. Observations will be made only on those variations that are significant. After nine chapters of genealogical "files," the switch to narrative—some scholars see this as the actual beginning of Chronicles—is almost startling. It is noteworthy that the dry lists in which Saul and his sons are registered, more than once, are now

unsettled in the violent realm of history as we read of the death of Saul and his sons on the battlefield.

6. *And Saul died, and his three sons and all his house together died.* The account in 1 Samuel reports that the armor bearer, too, fell upon his sword and died. Perhaps the Chronicler wanted to keep the focus strictly on the demise of the house of Saul. In 1 Samuel 31:6, the phrase is "all his men" as against "all his house" here. The Chronicler, with his concern for dynasties, highlights the house of Saul.

7. *[the men of Israel].* This bracketed phrase is taken from 1 Samuel. It appears to have been inadvertently dropped here.

10. *his skull they impaled.* In 1 Samuel, it is rather Saul's body that is impaled. Perhaps the grisly display of a decapitated head appealed to the imagination of the later writer, but the bearing off of corpses in verse 12 clearly reflects the original text, in which the object of impalement is a body.

11. *[the inhabitants].* Again, a missing subject for the verb is supplied in brackets from 1 Samuel 31.

12. *buried their bones.* In 1 Samuel 31, they burn the bones. The Chronicler may have recoiled from the idea of Israelites practicing a form of cremation.

13. *And Saul died for his betrayal.* This verse and the next do not reflect anything in 1 Samuel 31. What they manifest is the moralizing tendency of the Chronicler. While the author of the Saul story offers no explanation for his death, our author wants us to understand that Saul perished and his royal line was displaced because he was not faithful to God and, in particular, because he resorted to the forbidden practice of necromancy on the eve of the fatal battle.

CHAPTER 11

[1]And all Israel gathered round David and Hebron,
saying, “Look, your bone and your flesh are we. [2]Time
and again in the past even when Saul was king, you
were the one who led Israel into the fray, and the
LORD your God said,

‘It is you who will shepherd My
people Israel,
and it is you who will be prince
over My people Israel.’ ”

[3]And all the elders of Israel came to the king of
Hebron, and David made a pact with them in Hebron
before the LORD, and they anointed David as king
over Israel according to the word of the LORD
through Samuel. [4]And David went, and all Israel with
him, to Jerusalem, which is Jebus, and there the
Jebusites were, inhabitants of the land. [5]And the
inhabitants of Jebus said, “You shall not enter here.”

And David captured the stronghold of Zion, which is
the City of David. [6]And David said, “Whoever strikes
down the Jebusite first shall be chief and commander.”
And Joab son of Zeruiah went up first and became
chief. [7]And David stayed in the stronghold. Therefore
did they call it the City of David. [8]And he built the city
round the rampart all around, and Joab restored the
rest of the city. [9]And David grew greater and greater,
and the LORD of Armies was with him.

[10]And these were the chiefs of the warriors who
were David’s, joining forces with him in his kingdom
with all Israel to make him king over Israel, according
to the word of the LORD. [11]And this was the count of
the warriors who were David’s: Jashobeam son of
Hachmoni, head of the Thirty. He brandished his
spear over three hundred slain at a single time. [12]And
after him Eleazar son of Dodo the Ahothite. He was
among the Three Warriors. [13]He was with David at
Pas-Dammim. And the Philistines gathered there for
battle, and there was a plot of ground filled with
barley, and the troops fled before the Philistines. [14]And
they took their stand within the plot and held it and
struck down the Philistines, and the LORD wrought a
great victory. [15]And three of the Thirty went down at

the head to the rock to David at the cave of Adullam while the camp of the Philistines was deployed in the Valley of Rephaim. [16]And David then was in the stronghold, and the Philistine prefect was in Bethlehem. [17]And David had a craving and said, “Who will give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate?” [18]And the Three broke through the camp of the Philistines and drew water from the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate, and they bore it off and brought it to David. But David would not drink it, and he poured it out in libation to the LORD. [19]And he said, “Far be it from me before my God that I should do this. Shall I drink the blood of these men who have risked their lives? For at the risk of their lives they have brought it.” And he would not drink it. These things did the three warriors do. [20]And Abishai brother of Joab—he was the chief of the Three. He brandished his spear over three hundred slain, and he had a name with the Three. [21]Of the Thirty he was the most honored and so he became their commander, but he did not attain to the Three. [22]Benaiah son of Jehoiada son of a valiant man great in deeds from Kabzeel—he struck down the two sons of Ariel of Moab, and he went down and killed the lion in the pit on the day of the snow. [23]And he struck down an Egyptian man, a man of daunting

stature, five cubits tall, and a spear like a weaver's beam was in the hand of the Egyptian. And he went down to him with a staff and stole the spear from the hand of the Egyptian and killed him with his own spear. [24]These things did Benaiah son of Jehoiada do, and he had a name with the three warriors. [25]Of the Thirty, he was honored, but he did not attain to the Three, and David put him over his royal guard. [26]And the warriors of the forces were Asahel brother of Joab, Elhanan son of Dodo from Bethlehem, [27]Shammoth the Harorite, Helez the Pelonite, [28]Ira son of Ikkesh the Tekoite, Abiezer the Anathothite, [29]Sibbecai the Hushathite, Ilai the Ahohite, [30]Maharai the Netophathite, Heled son of Baanah the Netophathite, [31]Ittai son of Ribai from Gibeah of the Benjaminites, Benaiah of Pirathon, [32]Hurai from the wadis of Gaash, Abiel the Arbathite, [33]Azmaveth the Baharumite, Eliahba the Shaalbonite, [34]the sons of Hashem the Gizonite, Jonathan son of Shageh the Hararite, [35]Ahiam son of Sacar the Hararite, Eliphal son of Ur, [36]Hepher the Mecherathite, Ahijah the Pelonite, [37]Hezro the Carmelite, Naarai son of Ezbai, [38]Joel brother of Nathan, Mibhar son of Hagri, [39]Zelek the Ammonite, Naharai the Berothite, armor bearer to Joab son of Zeruiah, [40]Ira the Ithrite, Gareb the Ithrite, [41]Uriah the Hittite, Zabad son of Ahlai, [42]Adina son of

Shiza the Reubenite, chief of the Reubenites, and by
him the Thirty. [43]Hanan son of Maachah, and
Joshaphat the Mithnite, [44]Uzzia the Ashterathite,
Shama and Jeiel sons of Hotham the Aroerite,
[45]Jedaiael son of Shimri and Joha the Tizite his
brother, [46]Eliel the Mahavite and Jeribai and Joshaviah
sons of Elnaam, and Ithmal the Moabite, [47]Eliel, Obed,
and Jaassiel the Mezobaite.

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And all Israel gathered.* The first nine verses here duplicate 2 Samuel 5:1–10. The reader is referred to the commentary there.

5. *You shall not enter here.* This version entirely omits the evidently taunting mention of the blind and the lame by the Jebusites, perhaps because it was too puzzling.

And David captured the stronghold of Zion. This report seems out of place because the stronghold is not captured until after Joab leads the assault. This is either a scribal glitch or a summarizing prolepsis.

6. *And Joab son of Zeruiah went up first and became chief.* In the narrative in Samuel, Joab had been serving as David's captain or commander for years before the conquest of Jerusalem.

10. *And these were the chiefs of the warriors.* This list, with some brief narrative fragments embedded in it, duplicates 2 Samuel 23:8–39. Readers are referred to the commentary on that passage. It appears to be a very old document, registering memories of the military exploits of David's warriors that have anecdotal specificity (the gigantic Egyptian with his huge spear, the fighting on the day of the snow—a rare event in this climate). In this instance, there are quite a few differences from the text in Samuel, and many of the

names of the warriors are different. These differences do not appear to reflect any ideological purpose, and they probably are the result of the Chronicler's using a different manuscript version of the archaic material.

23. *five cubits tall.* Since the cubit is somewhat more than a foot, this would make him close to seven feet tall.

26. *And the warriors of the forces were.* The list that follows is rather longer than the one in 2 Samuel 23. The manuscript used by the Chronicler may have had more names, or he might be exercising his proclivity for the listing of names.

CHAPTER 12

[1]And these were the ones who came to David at
Ziklag while he was still confined because of Saul son
of Kish, and they were the warriors, aiding in battle,
[2]armed with the bow, with either their right hand or
their left, with slingstones, and arrows for the bow, and
they were of Saul's kinsmen of Benjamin. [3]The chief
was Ahiezer, and then Joash, sons of Hashmaah the
Gibeathite and Jeziel and Pelet, sons of Azmaveth, and
Beracah and Jehu the Anathothite; [4]and Ishmaiah the
Gibeonite, a warrior among the Thirty and over the
Thirty; [5]And Jeremiah and Jahaziel and Johanan and
Jozabad the Gederathite; [6]Eluzai and Jerimoth and
Bealiah and Shemariah and Shephatiah the Haruphite;
[7]Elkanah and Isshiah and Azarel and Joezer and
Jashobeam of the Korahites; [8]and Joelah and Zebadiah
sons of Jeroham from Gedor. [9]And of the Gadites
there defected to David to the stronghold in the
wilderness valiant warriors, men of the army for battle,
wielding buckler and spear, their appearance like lions
and swift on the mountains as gazelles. [10]Ezer was the

chief, Obadiah the second, Eliab the third,
[11]Mishmannah the fourth, Jeremiah the fifth; [12]Attai
the sixth, Eliel the seventh, [13]Johanan the eighth,
Elzabad the ninth, [14]Jeremiah the tenth, Machbanai the
eleventh. [15]These were of the Gadites, chiefs of the
army. The least could match a hundred and the
greatest a thousand. [16]These are the ones who crossed
the Jordan in the first month when it was overflowing
its banks, and they routed all the valley dwellers from
east to west. [17]And some of the Benjaminites and
Judahites came to David at the stronghold. [18]And
David went out before them and spoke out and said,
“If in peace you have come to me to aid me, I will
have a heart bound together with you, but if it is to
deceive me on behalf of my foes when there is no
outrage in my hands, may the God of our fathers see
and judge.” [19]And a spirit took hold of Amasai head of
the Thirty:

To you, O David,
    and with you, son of Jesse,
peace, peace to you
    and peace to those who aid you,
        for your God has aided you.

And David accepted them and put them at the head of his band. [20]And some from Manasseh went over to David when he came with the Philistines in battle against Saul, but he did not aid them, for the Philistine overlords had sent to him in counsel, saying, “By our heads, he will go over to his master Saul!” [21]When he went to Ziklag from Manasseh these went over to him: Adnah and Jozabad and Jediael and Michael and Jozabad and Elihu and Zillethai, chiefs of Manasseh’s thousand. [22]And they aided David against the band, for they were all valiant warriors, and they became commanders in the army. [23]For day after day they would come to David to aid him, till there was a great camp like a camp of God. [24]And this is the count of the chiefs of the vanguard that had come to David at Hebron to turn round the kingship of Saul to him, as the LORD had said: [25]the Judahites bearing shield and spear, six thousand eight hundred army vanguard fighters; [26]Of the Simeonites, valiant warriors for the army seven thousand one hundred; [27]Of the Levites, four thousand six hundred; [28]and Jehoiada prince of the Aaronites, and with him, three thousand seven hundred; [29]and Zadok, a valiant warrior lad, and his patriarchal house, twenty-two commanders; [30]And of the Benjaminites, Saul’s kin, three thousand, most of them till then keeping allegiance to the house of Saul;

[31]And of the Ephraimites, twenty thousand eight
hundred valiant warriors, men of renown in their
patriarchal houses; [32]and from the half-tribe of
Manasseh eighteen thousand, who were marked out by
name to come to make David king; [33]and of the
Issacharites who had insight into the times to know
what Israel should do, their chiefs two hundred, and all
their kin abiding by their word; [34]of Zebulun, sallying
forth in the army, arrayed for battle with all the
weapons of battle, fifty thousand, to give aid
wholeheartedly; [35]and of Naphtali a thousand
commanders and together with them with shield and
spear thirty-seven thousand; [36]and of the Danites
arrayed for battle twenty-eight thousand six hundred;
[37]and of Asher, sallying forth in the army to array for
battle, forty thousand; [38]and from across the Jordan, of
the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of
Manasseh with all the weapons of the army for battle a
hundred twenty thousand. [39]All these were men of war,
manning the battle lines with a whole heart who came
to Hebron to make David king over all Israel, and the
rest of Israel, too, had a single heart to make David
king. [40]And they were with David three days eating
and drinking, for their brothers had prepared for them.
[41]And also their relatives as far away as Issachar and
Zebulun and Naphtali were bringing food on donkeys

and on camels and on mules and on oxen, provisions of flour, fig cakes and raisin cakes and wine and oil and cattle and sheep in abundance, for there was a rejoicing in Israel.

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And these were the ones who came to David at Ziklag.* Although 2 Samuel 23 offers a list of David's principal warriors, we have no earlier list of fighters joining him in his time at Ziklag, when he was in flight from Saul.

aiding in battle. The Hebrew verb *ʿazar*, which has the primary meaning of "to help" or "to aid," also has a technical military sense—often invoked in Psalms—that indicates "fighting alongside." It is used frequently in this chapter.

2. *with either their right hand or their left.* The Benjaminite warriors may in fact have trained themselves to be ambidextrous. In Judges 3, the Benjaminite Ehud is able to kill the Moabite King Eglon because, in a surprise attack, he suddenly pulls out his hidden short sword with his left hand.

they were of Saul's kinsmen of Benjamin. There is some reason to question the historical accuracy of this report. The Chronicler may have wanted to make the ideological point that David has so won over the hearts of the people that even Saul's kin turn against him.

16. *These are the ones who crossed the Jordan in the first month when it was overflowing its banks.* The first month would correspond to April, toward the end of the rainy season. This crossing is of course an act of derring-do, and it enables them to take the inhabitants of the valleys (possibly, the Jordan Valley) by surprise and rout them.

18. *If in peace you have come to me.* Especially because some of this group are Benjaminites, David has grounds for suspicion that they may be part of a plot against him.

19. *And a spirit took hold of Amasai.* His being gripped by a spirit motivates his speech in poetry, which is conceived as a kind of vatic utterance. He may be emitting a "prophetic" declaration that the men who have come to David are to be trusted.

20. *By our heads, he will go over to his master Saul.* Seeing the contingent of Israelites who have come to join David, the Philistines are apprehensive that he, their purported vassal, may switch sides and go back to Saul, his king. Although the overlords send a message to David, he is referred to here in the third person—almost as though what is reported is their thinking and not their direct address to him.

22. *And they aided David against the band.* While the same Hebrew word, *gedud*, is used in verse 19 to refer to David's troops, here the reference must be to the Amalekites against whom David was fighting.

23. *like a camp of God.* *ʾElohim* in this instance might simply be an intensive, yielding the sense of "a huge camp."

24. *as the LORD had said.* More literally, "by the mouth of the LORD."

25. *six thousand eight hundred.* The full tally of fighters comes to rather more than 300,000. David at Ziklag probably had no more than a few hundred men. The proposal of some scholars to understand *ʾeleph* as "contingent" rather than "thousand" is strained, both because an army could scarcely have had so many contingents and because the narrative is introduced specifically by the word *mispar*, which means "count" or "number." The fantastically inflated figures reflect the Chronicler's desire to convey a sense that vast numbers from all parts of the nation rallied around David.

39. *who came to Hebron to make David king over all Israel.* There is a chronological leap here from David's time at Ziklag under the aegis of the Philistines to his setting up a temporary capital in Hebron, in Israelite territory. "King over all Israel" is ideologically tendentious, because at this point David reigned over only the two southern tribes.

and the rest of Israel, too, had a single heart to make David king. The fierce civil war that ensued after Saul's death argues against the accuracy of this pronouncement.

CHAPTER 13

[1]And David counseled with the commanders of the
thousands and of the hundreds, with every officer.
[2]And David said to all the assembly of Israel, “If it be
right to you and if it be from the LORD our God, let
us send out widely to our remaining brothers in all the
territories of Israel, and together with them, the priests
and the Levites in the towns of their pasturelands, that
they gather round to us. [3]And let us bring round the
Ark of our God to us, for we did not seek it out in the
days of Saul.” [4]And all the assembly said to do this, for
the thing was right in the eyes of all the people. [5]And
David assembled all Israel from Shihor in Egypt to
Lebo-Hamath to bring the Ark of God from Kiriath-
Jearim. [6]And David went up, and all Israel with him,
to Baalah, to Kiriath-Jearim which is in Judah, to
bring up from there the Ark of God, the LORD
enthroned upon the cherubim, Whose name is called
upon it. [7]And they mounted the Ark of God on a new
cart from the house of Abinadab with Uzza and Ahio
driving the cart. [8]And David and all Israel were playing

before the LORD with all their might in songs and with lyres and with lutes and on tambourines and on cymbals and with trumpets. [9]And they came to the threshing floor of Chidon, and Uzza reached out his hand to take hold of the Ark, for the oxen had slipped. [10]And the LORD'S wrath flared up against Uzza, and He struck him down for reaching out with his hand to the Ark, and he died there before God. [11]And David was incensed because the LORD had burst out against Uzza. [12]And David was afraid of the LORD on that day, saying, "How can I bring to me the Ark of God?" [13]And David did not remove the Ark of the LORD to himself in the city of David, and he had it turned aside to the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite. [14]And the Ark of God remained in the house of Obed-Edom three months, and the LORD blessed the house of Obed-Edom and all that was in it.

CHAPTER 13 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And David counseled with the commanders.* This episode replicates 2 Samuel 6:1–12 with by and large only minor variations. Readers are referred to the commentary on that passage.

2. *in all the territories of Israel.* The plural noun is odd, because it means "lands" (*'aratsot*) but seems to have the sense here of "territories."

5. *from Shihor in Egypt to Lebo-Hamath.* This phrase, which has no counterpart in 2 Samuel 6, is an extravagant rhetorical gesture, for in David's time there was scarcely an Israelite population in Egypt, and Lebo-Hamath ("the approach to Hamath") is probably too far north for Israelites at this time.

6. *Whose name is called upon it.* This translation is conjectural, attempting to unpack the three cryptic Hebrew words that are literally "that is called a name."

10. *he died there before God.* The version in 2 Samuel 6 gives only a spatial location, "he died there by the Ark of God." Our writer seems to want to emphasize a theological point, that Uzza had transgressed by violating the sanctity of the Ark in touching it. For the problematic nature of this archaic conception of the holy, see the first comment on 2 Samuel 6:7.

12. *How can I bring to me the Ark of God?* Although David at this point is somewhere in the vicinity of the Ark, he uses "to me" because he is thinking of his new permanent location in Jerusalem, in the city of David.

CHAPTER 14

[1]And Hiram king of Tyre sent messengers to David
with stonemasons and carpenters to build him a house.
[2]And David took more wives And David knew that the
LORD had set him up unshaken as king over Israel,
for his kingship was exalted for the sake of his people
Israel. [3]And David took more wives in Jerusalem and
David begot more sons and daughters. [4]And these are
the names of those born to him whom he had in
Jerusalem: Shammua and Shobab, Nathan and
Solomon, [5]and Ibhar and Elishua and Elpelet, [6]and
Nogah and Nepheg and Japhia, [7]and Elishama and
Eliada and Eliphelet. [8]And the Philistines heard that
David had been anointed king, and all the Philistines
came up to seek David. [9]The Philistines had come and
deployed in the Valley of Rephaim. [10]And David
inquired of the LORD, saying, “Shall I go up against
the Philistines and will You give them into my hand?”
And the LORD said to him, “Go up, and I will give
them into your hand.” [11]And they came up to Baal-
Perazim, and David stuck them down there. And

David said, “The LORD has burst through the enemies
in my hand like a bursting of water.” Therefore did
they call the name of that place Baal-Perazim. [12]And
they abandoned their gods there, and David gave the
word, and they burned them in fire. [13]And once more
the Philistines deployed in the valley. [14]And David
inquired again of God, and God said to him, “You
shall not go up after them. Turn around behind them
and come up at them from opposite the willows. [15]And
as soon as you hear the sound of marching on top of
the willows, then shall you sally forth in battle, for then
shall God go out before you to strike down the camp
of the Philistines.” [16]And David did as God had
commanded him, and they struck down the camp of
the Philistines from Gibeon to Gezer. [17]And a name
went out for David in all the lands, and the LORD put
his fear upon all the nations.

CHAPTER 14 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Hiram king of Tyre sent messengers.* This chapter replicates 2 Samuel 5:11–25, again with minor variations. The reader is referred to the commentary there. An explanation is proposed in the comment on 2 Samuel 5:24 for the bewildering references to David’s battlefield maneuvers that appears here in verses 14–15.

to build him a house. The “house” is a palace.

10. *And David inquired of the* LORD. It is standard procedure to inquire of an oracle before a military confrontation as to what course to take or whether to go into battle.

12. *and they burned them in fire.* 2 Samuel [5]has "David with his men bore them off." The Chronicler may have felt impelled for theological reasons to show David actually destroying the idols. The idols would have been carried into battle as talismans.

17. *And a name went out for David in all the lands.* This declaration, which has no counterpart in 2 Samuel 5, conveys the idea that David's resounding victory over the formidable Philistines confirms his power in the eyes of all the surrounding nations. Not many years earlier, the Philistines had roundly defeated the Israelites under Saul at Mount Gilboa, and this is a striking reversal of that defeat.

CHAPTER 15

[1]And he made houses for himself in the City of David and readied a place for the Ark of God and set up a tent for it. [2]Then did David say that none should carry the Ark of God except the Levites, for God had chosen them to carry the Ark of the LORD and to minister to Him for all time. [3]And David assembled all Israel at Jerusalem to bring up the Ark of the LORD to the place that he had readied for it. [4]And David gathered the Aaronites and the Levites. [5]For the Kohathites, Uriel the officer, with his kin, two hundred twenty. [6]For the Merarites, Asaiah the officer with his kin, two hundred twenty. [7]For the sons of Gershom, Joel the officer with his kin, one hundred thirty. [8]For the sons of Elizaphan, Shemaiah the officer and his kin, two hundred. [9]For the sons of Hebron, Eliel the officer and his kin, eighty. [10]For the sons of Uzziel, Amminadab the officer and his kin, one hundred twelve. [11]And David called Zadok and Abiathar the priests, and the Levites, Uriel, Asaiah, Joel, Shemaiah, Eliel, and Amminadab. [12]And he said to them “You

are the heads of the patriarchal houses of the Levites. Consecrate yourselves, you and your kin, and bring up the Ark of the LORD to the place that I have readied for it. [13]For you were not there at first when the LORD our God burst forth against us, as we did not seek Him as we should have." [14]And the priests and the Levites consecrated themselves to bring up the Ark of the LORD God of Israel. [15]And the Levites carried the Ark of God as Moses had charged according to the word of the LORD, on their shoulders with poles upon them. [16]And David said to the officers of the Levites to station their kin the choristers with musical instruments, lyres and lutes and loud cymbals to raise up their voice in rejoicing. [17]And the Levites stationed Heman son of Joel, and of his kin, Asaph son of Berechiah and of the Merarites their kin Ethan son of Kushaiah. [18]And with them, their kin of the second rank, Zechariah, Ben, and Jaaziel and Shemiramoth and Jehiel and Unni, Eliab and Benaiah and Maaseiah and Mattithiah and Elipheleh and Mikneiah and Obed-Edom and Jeiel the gatekeepers. [19]And the choristers, Heman, Asaph, and Ethan, to sound out with brass cymbals, [20]and Zechariah and Aziel and Shemiramoth and Jehiel and Unni and Eliab and Maaseiah and Benaiah, with lyres, on *alamoth*, [21]and Mattithiah and Elipheleh and Mikneiah and Obed-Edom and Jeiel and

Azaziah with lutes leading the song on the *sheminith.*
[22]And Chenaniah officer of the Levites in song,
directed the song, for he was an expert. [23]And
Berechiah and Elkanah were gatekeepers for the Ark.
[24]And Shebaniah and Joshaphat and Nethaneel and
Amasai and Zechariah and Benaiah and Eliezer the
priests were playing trumpets before the Ark of God,
while Obed-Edom and Jehiah were gate-keepers for
the Ark. [25]And David and the elders of Israel and the
commanders of the thousands were walking on to
bring up the Ark of the LORD'S Covenant from the
house of Obed-Edom in rejoicing. [26]And it happened
as God aided the Levites bearing the Ark of God's
Covenant, that they sacrificed seven bulls and seven
rams. [27]And David was wrapped in a cloak of fine
linen as were all the Levites bearing the Ark and the
choristers and Chenaniah officer of the chorister's
song, and David had on a linen ephod. [28]And all Israel
were bringing up the Ark of the LORD'S Covenant
with joyous shouts and with the sound of the ram's
horn and with trumpets and with cymbals, sounding
out with lyres and lutes. [29]And it happened as the Ark
of the LORD'S Covenant came up to the City of
David that Michal daughter of Saul looked out through
the window and saw King David dancing and
celebrating, and she scorned him in her heart.

CHAPTER 15 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And he made houses for himself in the City of David.* The passage that follows is based on 2 Samuel 6:11–23, but reworks it extensively.

2. *none should carry the Ark of God except the Levites.* This emphasis reflects the special agenda of the Chronicler. In what follows, he substitutes, in his characteristic fashion, a lengthy catalogue of names of priests and Levites for the arresting narrative in 2 Samuel 6.

20. *on alamoth.* It is not clear whether this is an instrument or a musical mode.

21. *the sheminith.* Since this term clearly is derived from the word for "eight," it might be an eight-stringed instrument or, again, a musical mode.

26. *as God aided the Levites.* This is probably meant to contrast this moment to the previous attempt to transport the Ark, when Uzza was struck dead. Perhaps the "aid" is that God does not allow the oxen to slip.

they sacrificed seven bulls and seven rams. In 2 Samuel 6 they offer sacrifices after every six steps, which may have seemed too extravagant to the Chronicler.

27. *a linen ephod.* This ephod is a kind of apron worn by the high priest.

29. *Michal daughter of Saul looked out through the window.* Though the language here is taken directly from 2 Samuel 6, the clash between David and Michal with its explosive dialogue is erased. The Chronicler evinces little interest in personal relationships.

CHAPTER 16

[1]And they brought the Ark of God and set it up within
the tent that David had pitched, and they offered up
burnt offerings and well-being sacrifices before the
LORD. [2]And David finished offering up the burnt
offerings and the well-being sacrifices, and he blessed
the people in the name of the LORD. [3]And he shared
out to every person of Israel from man to woman a
loaf of bread and a date cake and a raisin cake for
each. [4]And he put before the Ark of the LORD from
the Levites ministers to invoke and to acclaim and to
praise the LORD God of Israel: [5]Asaph the chief and
second to him Zechariah, Jeiel and Shemiramoth and
Jehiel and Mattithiah and Eliab and Benaiah and
Obed-Edom and Jeiel with lyres and lutes and Asaph
sounding the cymbals, [6]and Benaiah and Jahaziel the
priests with trumpets constantly before the Ark of
God's Covenant. [7]On that day then did David first set
Asaph and his kin to acclaim the LORD.

[8]Acclaim the LORD, call out His name,
make His deeds known among the peoples.
[9]Sing to Him, hymn to Him,
speak of all His wonders.
[10]Revel in His holy name.
Let the heart of the LORD'S seekers rejoice.
[11]Inquire of the LORD and His strength,
seek His presence always.
[12]Recall the wonders that He did,
His portents and the judgments He issued.
[13]O seed of Israel His servant,
sons of Jacob, His chosen ones.
[14]He is the LORD our God—
through all the earth, His judgments.
[15]Recall His pact forever,
the word He ordained for a thousand
generations,
[16]which He sealed with Abraham,
and His vow to Isaac,
[17]and He set it for Jacob as a statute,
for Israel an eternal pact.
[18]saying,
"To you I will give the land of Canaan as the
plot of your estate,"
[19]when you were a handful of men,
but a few, and sojourners there.

[20]And they went about
from nation to nation, from one kingdom to
another people.
[21]He allowed no man to oppress them
and warned kings on their account:
[22]“Touch not My anointed ones,
and to My prophets do no harm.”
[23]Sing to the LORD, all the earth.
Bring tidings everyday of His rescue.
[24]Recount among the nations His glory,
among all the peoples His wonders.
[25]For great is the LORD and most praised,
fearsome is He over all the gods.
[26]For all the gods of the peoples are ungods,
but the LORD has made the heavens.
[27]Greatness and grandeur before Him,
strength and joyfulness in His place.
[28]Grant to the LORD, O families of peoples
grant to the LORD glory and strength.
[29]Grant to the LORD his name’s glory,
bear tribute and come before Him,
bow to the LORD in sacred grandeur.
[30]Quake before Him, all the earth.
Yes, the world stands firm, will not shake.
[31]Let the heavens rejoice and the earth exult,

and let them say among the nations: The LORD
reigns.
[32]Let the sea and its fullness thunder,
let the field be glad and all that is in it.
[33]Then shall the trees of the forest joyfully sing
before the LORD, for He comes
to judge all the earth.
[34]Acclaim the LORD,
for He is good, for His kindness is forever.
[35]And say, “Rescue us, God of our rescue,
and gather us and save us from the nations
to acclaim Your holy name,
to glory in Your praise.”
[36]Blessed be the LORD God of Israel
forever and forever.

[37]And all the people said amen and praised the LORD.
[38]And he left Asaph and his kin there before the Ark
of the LORD’S Covenant to minister before the Ark
perpetually for the matter of each and every day. [39]And
Obed-Edom and their kin, sixty-eight of them, and
Obed-Edom son of Jeduthun and Hosah, as
gatekeepers, [40]and Zadok the priest and his kin the
priests before the tabernacle of the LORD on the high
place which is in Gibeon, [41]to offer up burnt offerings

to the LORD on the altar for burnt offerings perpetually for morning and for evening as all that is written in the Teaching of the LORD with which He charged Israel. [42]And with them were Heman and Jeduthun and the rest of the picked men who were marked out by name to acclaim the LORD, for His kindness is forever. [43]And with them, with Heman and Jeduthun, were trumpets and cymbals for loud sounding and instruments for God's song. And the sons of Jeduthun were in charge of the gates. [44]And all the people went, each one to his house, and David turned round to bless his house.

CHAPTER 16 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

4. *And he put before the Ark of the LORD from the Levites ministers.* Hewing to his sacerdotal interests, the Chronicler introduces into the narrative frame taken from 2 Samuel 6 a new emphasis on Levites, articulated as he is wont to do, with a list of names of the functionaries involved (verses 5–7).

7. *Asaph.* Since Asaph is associated with cultic singing, the psalm that follows is often described as "Asaph's psalm."

8. *Acclaim the LORD.* Verses 8–22 replicate Psalm 105:1–15 with only a few minor changes that do not require explication. The reader is referred to the commentary on the verses in question in Psalm 105. This replication is then stitched together with the replication of another psalm, Psalm 96:1–14, again almost verbatim, though with a little rearrangement of the sequence of lines in verses 23–36. The Chronicler's use of these two psalms bears witness to

their canonical status by the end of the fifth century B.C.E. For comments on verses 23–36, see the commentary on Psalm 96.

19. *when you were a handful of men.* Psalm 105 shows, more plausibly, "they" instead of the plural "you" here.

30. *Quake before Him, all the earth. / Yes, the world stands firm, will not shake.* The seeming contradiction between the first half of the line and the second is the unfortunate effect of rearranging the sequence of lines in Psalm 96.

39. *the high place which is in Gibeon.* Once the Temple was built, the Judahite writers would come to condemn these "high places" or hilltop sanctuaries as idolatrous, but at this moment of David's installation in Jerusalem, the building of the Temple is still a generation away.

CHAPTER 17

[1]And it happened when David was dwelling in his house that David said to Nathan the prophet, “Look, I dwell in a cedar-wood house, but the Ark of the LORD’S Covenant is under tent curtains.” [2]And Nathan said to David, “Do all that is in your heart, for God is with you.” [3]And it happened on that night that the word of God came to Nathan, saying, [4]“Go and say to David My servant, Thus said the LORD: It is not you who will build Me a house in which to dwell. [5]For I have not dwelled in a house from the day I brought Israel up till this day, but I have gone about from tent to tent and from one tabernacle to another. [6]Wherever I went about among all Israel did I speak a word with any of the tribal chiefs whom I charged to shepherd My people saying, ‘Why did you not build Me a cedarwood house?’ [7]And now, thus shall you say to My servant, to David, Thus said the LORD of Armies: I Myself took you from the pasture, from following the flocks, to be a prince over My people Israel. [8]And I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I

have cut down all your enemies before you. And I will make you a great name like the name of the great of the earth. [9]And I will set aside a place for My people Israel, and plant them, and they shall abide in their place and no longer quake, and the wicked shall no more afflict them as before [10]as from the days when I appointed judges over My people Israel. And I will bring low all your enemies. And I tell you: the LORD shall build you a house. [11]When your days are full to go to your fathers, I will raise up your seed after you, who will be of your sons, and I will make his kingship unshaken. [12]He it is who shall build Me a house, and I will make his throne unshaken forever. [13]I will be a father to him and he shall be a son to Me, and My loyalty I will not make swerve from him as I made it swerve from the one who was before you. [14]And I will set him in My house and in My kingdom forever, and his throne shall be unshaken forever." [15]In accordance with all these words and in accordance with all this vision, so did Nathan speak to David.

[16]And King David came and sat before the LORD and said, "Who am I, LORD God, and what is my house, that you have brought me this far? [17]And even this is too little in Your eyes, O God, for You have spoken of

Your servant's house in distant time, and You have seen me as a man excelling, O LORD God. [18]What more can David add for You in respect to the honoring of Your servant, when You know Your servant? [19]LORD, for the sake of Your servant and according to Your heart You have done all these great things to make all the great things known. [20]LORD, there is none like You, and there is no god beside You in all that we have heard with our own ears. [21]And who is like Your people Israel, a unique nation upon earth, whom a god has gone to redeem as a people, to make You a name for great and fearsome things, to drive out nations from before Your people whom You redeemed from Egypt? [22]And You made Your own people Israel to be a people for You forever, and You, O LORD, became their God. [23]And now, LORD, the word that You have spoken concerning Your servant and his house, may it be confirmed forever, and do as You have spoken. [24]May it be confirmed and may Your name be great forever, saying, The LORD of Armies is God of Israel, and the house of David Your servant shall be unshaken before You. [25]For You, My God, have revealed to Your servant that a house will be built for him. Therefore has Your servant found the heart to pray before You. [26]And now, O LORD, You are God, and You have spoken of this bounty to Your servant.

[27]And now, have the goodness to bless the house of Your servant to be before You forever, for You, LORD, have bestowed blessing and are blessed forever.”

CHAPTER 17 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And it happened when David was dwelling in his house.* This whole chapter replicates 2 Samuel 7 with minor changes. The reader is referred to the commentary there.

5. *I have gone about.* This verb, missing in the received text, is supplied from 2 Samuel 7:6.

13. *as I made it swerve from the one who was before you.* 2 Samuel 7:15 explicitly states that this is Saul, who lost the kingship.

17. *You have seen me as a man excelling.* The Hebrew is obscure, and hence the translation is conjectural. The parallel clause in 2 Samuel 7:19 is also unclear, and the later writer has doctored the wording without, however, introducing any greater clarity.

CHAPTER 18

[1]And it happened thereafter that David struck down
the Philistines and subjugated them, and he took Gath
and its hamlets from the land of the Philistines. [2]And
he struck down Moab, and Moab became tribute-
bearing vassals to David. [3]And David struck down
Hadadezer king of Zobah on the approach to Hamath
as he went to set up his monument by the Euphrates
River. [4]And David captured from him a thousand
chariots and seven thousand horsemen and twenty
thousand foot soldiers, and David hamstrung all the
chariot horses, leaving aside a hundred of them. [5]And
the Arameans of Damascus came to aid Hadadezer
king of Zobah, and David struck down twenty-two
thousand men from among the Arameans. [6]And David
placed prefects in Aram-Damascus, and the Arameans
became tribute-bearing vassals to David, and the
LORD made David victorious wherever he went. [7]And
David took the golden quivers that had belonged to the
servants of Hadadezer and brought them to Jerusalem.
[8]And from Tibbath and from Chun, the towers of

Hadadezer, David took a great abundance of bronze, with which Solomon made the bronze sea and the pillars and the bronze vessels. [9]And Tou king of Hamath heard that David had struck down all the forces of Hadadezer king of Zobah. [10]And he sent Hadoram his son to King David to ask after his well-being and to salute him for having done battle with Hadadezer and for having struck him down, as Hadadezer was Tou's adversary. [And in Hadoram's hand were] all vessels of gold and silver and bronze. [11]These, too, did King David consecrate to the LORD, together with the silver and the gold that he had borne off from all the nations, from Edom and from Moab and from the Ammonites and from the Philistines and from the Amalekites. [12]And Abishai son of Zeruiah struck down eighteen thousand of Edom in the Valley of Salt. [13]And he placed prefects in Edom, and all Edom became vassals to David, and the LORD made David victorious wherever he went. [14]And David was king over all Israel, and it was David's practice to mete out true justice to all his people. [15]And Joab son of Zeruiah was over the army, and Jehoshaphat son of Ahilud was recorder. [16]And Zadok son of Ahitub and Abimelech son of Abiathar were priests and Shavsha was scribe. [17]And Benaiah son of Jehoiada was over

the Cherithites and the Pelethites, and David's sons were the first ones alongside the king.

CHAPTER 18 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And it happened thereafter.* This chapter replicates 2 Samuel 8, with just a few changes, which will be noted, and some differences in the names. The reader is referred to the commentary on 2 Samuel 8.

2. *And he struck down Moab.* In 2 Samuel 8 David executes two-thirds of the captive Moabites, a detail prudently omitted here.

10. *[And in Hadoram's hand were].* This phrase is provided from 2 Samuel 8:10. In Samuel, the name given for this prince is Joram.

17. *and David's sons were the first ones alongside the king.* This is a substitution for "and David's sons served as priests" in 2 Samuel 8:18. The Chronicler is concerned to preserve the prerogatives of the priestly line, whereas in the early days of the monarchy, it appears that members of the royal dynasty at times could perform priestly functions. "The first ones" is a little ambiguous: while it probably indicates that they had some role as ministers or councillors, it could also conceivably mean the sons born early, as against the many sons David begot during his years in Jerusalem.

CHAPTER 19

[1]And it happened thereafter that Nahash king of the Ammonites died, and his son was king in his stead. [2]And David said, “Let me keep faith with Hanun son of Nahash as his father kept faith with me.” And David sent his servants to console him for his father, and David’s servants came to the land of the Ammonites to Hanun, to console him. [3]And the Ammonite commanders said to Hanun, “Do you imagine David is honoring your father in sending you consolers? Is it not in order to search out and to overthrow and to spy upon the land that his servants have come to you?” [4]And Hanun took David’s servants and shaved their beards and cut their diplomat’s garb in half down to the crotch, and sent them off. [5]And people went and told David about the men, and he sent to meet them, for the men were humiliated, and the king said, “Stay in Jericho until your beards grow back and you can return.” [6]And the Ammonites saw that they had become repugnant to David, and Hanun and the Ammonites sent a thousand silver talents to hire

for themselves from Aram-Naharaim and Aram-Maacah and from Zobah chariots and horsemen. [7]And they hired for themselves thirty-two thousand chariots and the king of Maacah and his troops, and they came and camped in front of Medeba, and the Ammonites gathered from their towns and came for battle. [8]And David heard and sent out the whole army of warriors. [9]And the Ammonites sallied forth and drew up for battle at the entrance of the city, and the kings who had come were apart in the field. [10]And Joab saw that there was a battle line against him in front and behind, and he chose from all the picked men in Israel and drew them up to meet the Arameans. [11]And the rest of the troops he gave into the hand of Abishai his brother, and they drew up to meet the Ammonites. [12]And he said, “If the Arameans prove too strong for me, you will rescue me, and if the Ammonites prove too strong for you, I shall rescue you. [13]Be strong, and let us find strength for the sake of our people and for the sake of the towns of our God, and the LORD will do what is good in His eyes!” [14]And Joab advanced, and the troops that were with him, to face Aram in battle, and they fled before him. [15]And the Ammonites saw that the Arameans had fled, and they too fled before Abishai his brother and entered the city. And Joab came to Jerusalem. [16]And the Arameans saw that

they had been routed by Israel, and they brought out the Arameans who were beyond the Euphrates with Shophach Hadadezer's army commander at their head. [17]And it was told to David, and he gathered all Israel and crossed the Jordan and came up to them and drew up his lines against them. And David drew up his lines to meet the Arameans in battle, and they did battle with him. [18]And the Arameans fled before Israel, and David killed seven thousand charioteers and forty thousand foot soldiers, and Shobah, the commander of the army, he put to death. [19]And Hadadezer's servants saw that they had been routed by Israel, and they made peace with David and became his vassals, and the Arameans no longer desired to rescue the Ammonites.

CHAPTER 19 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And it happened thereafter that Nahash.* This chapter corresponds to 2 Samuel 10. There are a few more changes than in the previous replications of passages from Samuel, but these are either slightly different ways of saying the same thing or minor alterations in the narrative information (e.g., at the end the Arameans "no longer desired to rescue" rather than "were afraid to rescue") that do not appear to reflect an ideological agenda. Readers are referred to the commentary on 2 Samuel 10.

2. *David sent his servants.* It is important to keep in mind that "servants" can also be "court officials"—in this case, ambassadors. This of course makes their humiliation a particularly egregious act. The word also can mean

“vassal” and is used in this sense in a verb at the end of the chapter, playing against the meaning of *ʿavadim,* “servants,” as “courtiers” at the beginning of the same verse.

4. *shaved their beards.* In 2 Samuel 10, it is half their beards, which is more disfiguring. But a man without a beard in this culture would also be shamed. “Beards” is merely implied in the Hebrew but is explicit in the parallel verse in 2 Samuel 10 and surfaces in David’s words to his ambassadors.

CHAPTER 20

[1]And it happened at the turn of the year, at the time when the kings sally forth, that Joab led the army force and ravaged the land of the Ammonites. And he came and besieged Rabbah. And David was sitting in Jerusalem. And Joab struck Rabbah and destroyed it. [2]And David took the crown of their king from his head and found it weighed a talent of gold, and on it were precious stones, and it was set on David's head. And the booty of the city he brought out in great abundance. [3]And the people who were in it he brought out and set them to work with saw and iron threshing boards and axes. And thus did David do to all the Ammonite towns. And David, and all the troops with him, returned to Jerusalem.

[4]And it happened thereafter that there was fighting at Gezer with the Philistines. Then did Sibbecai the Hushathite strike down Sippai, who was of the offspring of titans, and they were brought low. [5]And

there was once more fighting with the Philistines, and Elhanan son of Jair the Bethlehemite struck down Goliath the Gittite, and the shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam. [6]And once more there was fighting at Gath. And there was a man of huge measure, who had six fingers on each hand and foot, twenty-four in all, and he, too, sprung from the titan. [7]And he insulted Israel, and Jonathan son of Shimea, David's kinsman, struck him down. [8]These sprung from the titan, and they fell at the hand of David and at the hand of his servants.

CHAPTER 20 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And it happened at the turn of the year, at the time when kings sally forth.* This initial clause replicates the initial clause in the story of David and Bathsheba, at 2 Samuel 11:1. Nothing could illustrate more strikingly, however, the Chronicler's revision of the portrait of David in the older narrative than what he then proceeds to omit. There is nothing here about David's seeing the beautiful Bathsheba bathing, the subsequent adultery, and his murder of Uriah. The Chronicler is at pains to give us a David who is an exemplary conquering king, and he will have nothing to do with the warts-and-all representation of him in the narrative he has inherited.

2. *And David took the crown of their king.* This version now skips to 2 Samuel 12:30–31.

3. *axes.* The received text has *megeirot,* "saws," which is surely an erroneous scribal replication of the first noun in this series. 2 Samuel 12:31 shows the correct reading, *magzeirot,* "axes."

4. *And it happened thereafter.* Verses 4–8 here replicate, with minor variations, 2 Samuel 21:18–22. Readers are referred to the commentary there, which includes an explanation of the contradiction as to who killed Goliath.

CHAPTER 21

[1]And Satan stood up against Israel, and he incited
David to take a count of Israel. [2]And David said to
Joab and the commanders of the troops, “Go, count
Israel from Beersheba to Dan and bring to me that I
may know their number.” [3]And Joab said, “May the
LORD add to the people a hundred times over. My
lord the king, are they not all subjects of my lord?
Why should my lord request this? Why should it be a
cause of guilt in Israel?” [4]But the king’s word prevailed
over Joab, and Joab went out and went about through
all Israel and came back to Jerusalem. [5]And Joab gave
the number of the census of the people to David: all
Israel had one million one hundred thousand sword-
wielding men and Judah four hundred seventy
thousand sword wielders. [6]But he did not record Levi
and Benjamin among them, for the king’s command
was repugnant to Joab. [7]And it was evil in the eyes of
God on account of this thing, and He struck Israel.
[8]And David said to God, “I have offended greatly in
doing this thing. And now remit, pray, the guilt of

your servant, for I have been very foolish.” [9]And the LORD spoke to Gad, David’s seer, saying, [10]“Go and speak to David, saying—thus says the LORD: Three things I have taken against you. Choose you one of them and I shall do it to you.” [11]And Gad came and said to David, “Thus said the LORD: Choose for yourself—[12]whether three years of famine or three months when you are swept away before your foes and the sword of your enemies overtakes you or three days during which the sword of the LORD and plague are in the land, and the LORD’S messenger destroys throughout the territory of Israel. And now, see what response I should bring back to my Sender.” [13]And David said to Gad, “I am in great straits. Let me fall, pray, into the LORD’S hand, for very great is His mercy, and into the hand of man let me not fall.” [14]And the LORD sent a plague against Israel, and seventy thousand men of Israel fell. [15]And God sent a messenger to Jerusalem to destroy it, and as he destroyed, the LORD saw and regretted the evil and said to the messenger who was sowing destruction, “Enough! Now stay your hand.” And the LORD’S messenger was standing at the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. [16]And David raised his eyes and saw the LORD’S messenger standing between earth and the heavens with his sword unsheathed in his hand

stretched out against Jerusalem, and David, and the elders with him, fell down, covered with sackcloth over their faces. [17]And David said to God, “Was it not I who said to count the people, and it was I who offended and surely did wrong. And these sheep, what have they done? LORD, my God, let Your hand be against me and my father’s house, but against Your people let there be no plague.” [18]And the LORD’S messenger had said to Gad to say to David that David should go up to set up an altar on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. [19]And David went up by the word of God that he had spoken in the name of the LORD. [20]And Ornan turned back and saw the messenger, and his four sons with him were hiding, and Ornan had been threshing wheat. [21]And David came to Ornan, and Ornan looked and saw David and went out from the threshing floor and bowed down to David, his face to the ground. [22]And David said to Ornan, “Give me the site of the threshing floor that I may build upon it an altar to the LORD. Give it to me at the full price, that the plague be pulled back from the people.” [23]And Ornan said to David, “Take it, and let my lord the king do what is right in his eyes. See, I give you the oxen for burnt offerngs and the threshing boards for wood and the wheat for grain offering. I give everything.” [24]And King David said to Ornan, “No, for I will surely

buy it at the full price. For I will not present what is yours to the LORD or offer up burnt offerings at no cost.” [25]And David gave Ornan for the site six hundred weight of gold shekels. [26]And David built there an altar to the LORD and offered up burnt offerings and well-being sacrifices and called out to the LORD. And He answered him with fire from the heavens on the altar of burnt offerings. [27]And the LORD spoke to the messenger, and he put his sword back in its sheath. [28]At that time, when David saw that the LORD had answered him at the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite, he sacrificed there. [29]And the tabernacle of the LORD that Moses had made in the wilderness and the altar for burnt offerings and well-being sacrifices were at that time at Gibeon. [30]And David was unable to go to it to seek God, for he was terrified by the sword of the LORD’S messenger. **22**:[1]And David said, “This is the house of the LORD God, and this is the altar of burnt offering for Israel.”

CHAPTER 21 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Satan stood up against Israel.* This episode replicates 2 Samuel 24, with certain changes, additions, and omissions. That chapter, on the evidence of its style and theology, is not by the same hand as that of the author of the

David story, although the Chronicler surely did not see any differentiation. In 2 Samuel 24 it is God Who incites David, but the Chronicler, not wanting to represent God as perverse, makes Satan the agent. At this late period, it looks as if "The Adversary" (*hasatan*) is moving into becoming a demonic figure, and he appears here without the definite article *ha,* suggesting it has become a name, not just a function. Readers are referred to the commentary on 2 Samuel 24. Notes here will be offered only for significant departures from the Samuel text.

4. *Joab went out and went about through all Israel.* 2 Samuel 24 provides geographical details, here omitted.

15. *Ornan.* In 2 Samuel 24 he is called Araunah, a name probably closer to the Jebusite language.

16. *David . . . saw the LORD'S messenger standing between earth and the heavens.* This supernatural vision of the hovering divine messenger does not appear in 2 Samuel 24.

25. *six hundred weight of gold shekels.* In 2 Samuel 24:24 it is only fifty silver shekels. The increase is no doubt to highlight David's royal munificence.

26. *And He answered him with fire from the heavens.* This divine pyrotechnic display, probably recalling the miracle vouchsafed Elijah at the altar on Mount Carmel, does not appear in 2 Samuel 24. The next three verses also have no counterpart in Samuel.

22.1. *And David said.* Although the conventional chapter division places this verse at the beginning of a new chapter, it clearly is the conclusion of the story of David's building an altar at the site of the threshing floor of Ornan, where the future temple will stand.

CHAPTER 22

[2]And David said to gather in the sojourners who were
in the land of Israel, and he set them as hewers to hew
dressed stone to build the house of God, [3]and iron in
abundance for the nails for the doors of the gates and
for the clasps and bronze in abundance beyond
weighing, [4]and cedar logs beyond number, as the
Sidonians and the Tyrians had brought cedar logs in
abundance to David. [5]And David thought, “Solomon
my son is a tender lad, and the house to be built for the
LORD should be exceedingly great in fame and in
glory for all the lands. Let me ready things for him.”
And David readied things in abundance before his
death. [6]And he called to Solomon his son and charged
him to build a house for the LORD God of Israel.
[7]And David said to Solomon his son, “As for me, it
was in my heart to build a house for the name of the
LORD my God. [8]But the word of the LORD came to
me, saying, ‘Blood in abundance you have shed, and
you fought great battles. You shall not build a house
for My name, for you have shed much blood on the

earth before Me. [9]Look, a son is to be born to you. He shall be a man at rest, and I will grant him rest from all his enemies round about, for Solomon shall be his name and peace and quiet I will bestow upon Israel in his days. [10]He it is who shall build a house for My name, and he shall be a son to Me and I will be a father to him, and I will make the throne of his kingship stand firm over Israel forever.' [11]Now, my son, may the LORD be with you and may you prosper and build the house of the LORD your God as He has spoken concerning you. [12]Only may the LORD give you insight and understanding and may He charge you over Israel to keep the teaching of the LORD your God. [13]Then will you prosper, if you keep to do the statutes and the laws with which the LORD charged Moses for Israel. Be strong and stalwart. Do not fear and do not be dismayed. [14]And, look, from my poor resources I have readied for the house of the LORD a hundred thousand talents of gold and a million talents of silver, and the bronze and the iron is beyond weighing for it is so much, and wood and stones I have readied, and you can add to them. [15]And with you in abundance are craftsmen, hewers and stonemasons and carpenters and every expert in every task. [16]And the gold and the silver and the bronze and the iron are beyond number. Rise and act, and may the LORD be

with you.” [17]And David charged all the officers of Israel to help Solomon his son: [18]“Is not the LORD your God with you? And He shall grant you rest, for He has given into my hand the dwellers of the land, and the land has been conquered before the LORD and before His people. [19]And now, set your heart and your very being to seek the LORD your God, and rise and build the sanctuary of the LORD God so as to bring the Ark of the LORD’S Covenant and God’s sacred vessels to the house being built for the name of the LORD.”

CHAPTER 22 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

4. *the Sidonians and the Tyrians.* The fine wood in question was brought from the cedar forests of Lebanon, in proximity to these Phoenician coastal cities. But in Kings, it is Solomon who conducts these transactions. The Chronicler invents these details in order to convey a sense, in keeping with his promotion of the Davidic dynasty, that David was the virtual though not the actual builder of the Temple.

6. *he called to Solomon his son and charged him to build a house.* The invention is extended here: David imposes the task of building the Temple on Solomon as a kind of last will before his death. Such a last will is strikingly different from David’s deathbed instructions to Solomon in Kings 2, which include a hit list of David’s enemies.

8. *You shall not build a house for My name, for you have shed much blood on the earth.* This is the solution to a quandary that the Chronicler confronts: if David is the great exemplary founder of the everlasting dynasty, why did he

not build the Temple? In order to establish his kingdom, he had to shed blood, and so not he but his son, a man of peace, will build the Temple.

9. *for Solomon shall be his name and peace . . . I will bestow upon Israel.* The Hebrew exhibits a transparent etymology: *Shelomoh,* "Solomon," and *shalom,* "peace." There is, of course, no such report of a name inscribed with a destiny dictated by God in the account of Solomon's birth in Samuel 12.

10. *I will make the throne of his kingship stand firm over Israel forever.* In point of fact, the kingdom broke up into two kingdoms after Solomon's death. The Chronicler hews to the neat contours of ideology, not to historical fact.

13. *Be strong and stalwart.* These words echo God's exhortation to Joshua at another moment of succession (Joshua 1).

14. *from my poor resources.* Literally, "from [or in] my poverty." This is probably a rhetorical gesture of modesty. But the amount of gold and silver David then stipulates is fantastically vast, an expression of the Chronicler's belief that the Temple is the grandest building on the face of the earth.

CHAPTER 23

[1]And David grew old and sated with days, and he made Solomon his son king over Israel. [2]And he gathered all the officers of Israel and the priests and the Levites. [3]And the Levites from the age of thirty were counted and their head count for the males was thirty-eight thousand. [4]Of these, to take charge of the task of the house of the LORD, twenty-four thousand, and overseers and judges, six thousand, [5]and four thousand gate-keepers and four thousand saying praise to the LORD with the instruments that I made to sing praise. [6]And David divided them into orders according to the sons of Levi, for Gershon, Kohath, and Merari: [7]of the Gershonites, Laadan and Shimei; [8]the sons of Laadan, the chief Jehiel, and Zetham and Joel, three; [9]the sons of Shimei, Shelomith and Haziel and Haran, three—these were the chiefs of the patriarchal houses for Laadan. [10]And the sons of Shimei were Jahath, Zina, Jeush and Beriah. These were the sons of Shimei, four. [11]And Jahath was the first and Zina the second, but Jeush and Beriah did not have many sons,

and they were reckoned as a single patriarchal house.
12 The sons of Kohath were Amram, Izhar, Hebron, and
Uzziel, four. 13 The sons of Amram were Aaron and
Moses. And Aaron was set apart to be consecrated for
the holy of holies, he and his sons, forever to burn
incense before the LORD, to minister to Him, and to
bless in His name forever. 14 And Moses, man of God,
his sons were called with the tribe of Levi. 15 The sons
of Moses were Gershom and Eliezer. 16 The sons of
Gershom, Shebuel the first. 17 And the sons of Eliezer
were Rehabiah the first, but Eliezer had no other sons.
And the sons of Rehabiah were very many. 18 The sons
of Izhar, Shelomith the first. 19 The sons of Hebron,
Jeriah the first, Amariah the second, Jahaziel the third,
and Jekameam the fourth. 20 The sons of Uzziel, Micah
the first and Jessiah the second. 21 The sons of Merari,
Mahli and Mushi. The sons of Mahli, Eleazar and
Kish. 22 And Eleazar died, and he had no sons but
daughters, and the sons of Kish their brother married
them. 23 The sons of Mushi were Mahli and Eder and
Jeremoth, three. 24 These were the sons of Levi
according to their patriarchal houses, chiefs of the
patriarchal houses as they were listed in the head count
of names, doing the tasks of the house of the LORD,
from the age of twenty. 25 For David had said, “The
LORD God of Israel has granted rest to His people

and shall abide in Jerusalem forever. [26]And so the Levites need no longer carry the sanctuary and all its vessels for His service." [27]For in David's last words was the counting of the sons of Levi from the age of twenty. [28]For their station was by the sons of Aaron for the service of the house of the LORD over the courts and within the chambers and over the purity of all the holy things and the business of the service of the house of God, [29]and for the bread in rows and for the fine flour and for the grain offering and for the flatbread wafers and for the pan-baked and soaked baked goods and for every kind of measure, [30]and to stand in attendance morning after morning to acclaim and praise the LORD, and so at evening, [31]and for every offering of burnt offerings on sabbaths and on new moons and on festivals according to the rules concerning them, perpetually before the LORD. [32]And they shall keep the watch of the Tent of Meeting and the watch of what is holy and the watch of the sons of Aaron their kin for the service of the house of the LORD.

CHAPTER 23 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *And the Levites from the age of thirty were counted.* The Chronicler now interrupts the narrative momentum of the David story to return to his fixation on the numbers and the genealogy of the Levites. He is less interested in retelling the biblical story than in confirming the legitimacy and the importance of the sacerdotal caste.

27. *For in David's last words.* In 2 Kings 2, David's last words are instructions to Solomon to eliminate old enemies, and they have nothing to do with any census of the Levites. The contrast between the original David story and the agenda of Chronicles is even more striking than in 1 Chronicles 22:6.

CHAPTER 24

[1]And the orders of the sons of Aaron—Nadab and
Abihu and Eleazar and Ithamar. [2]And Nadab and
Abihu died before their father and they had no sons,
and Eleazar and Ithamar served as priests. [3]And David
and Zadok of the sons of Eleazar and Ahimelech of
the sons of Ithamar divided them for their ministering
in their service. [4]And the sons of Eleazar were found
to be more numerous by male head count than the
sons of Ithamar, and they divided the sons of Eleazar
into sixteen patriarchal houses and the sons of Ithamar
into eight patriarchal houses. [5]And they divided them
by lot, both alike, for they were officers of the
sanctuary and officers of God, of the sons of Eleazar
and of the sons of Ithamar. [6]And Shemaiah son of
Nethaneel, the scribe, of the Levites, wrote them down
before the king and the officers and Zadok the priest
and Ahimelech son of Abiathar and the patriarchal
chiefs of the chiefs and of the Levites—two
patriarchal houses held for Eleazar and one for
Ithamar. [7]And the first lot fell to Jehoiarib and the

second to Jedaiah, [8]to Harim the third, to Seorim the fourth, [9]to Malchijah the fifth, to Mijamin the sixth, [10]to Hakkoz the seventh, [11]to Abijah the eighth, to Jeshua the ninth, to Shecaniah the tenth, [12]to Eliashib the eleventh, to Jakim the twelfth, [13]to Huppah the thirteenth, to Jeshebeab the fourteenth, [14]to Bilgah the fifteenth, to Immer the sixteenth, [15]to Hezir the seventeenth, to Happizzez the eighteenth, [16]to Pethahiah the nineteenth, to Jehezkel the twentieth, [17]to Jachin the twenty-first, to Gamul the twenty-second, [18]to Delaiah the twenty-third, to Maaziah the twenty-fourth. [19]These were their ministerings for their service to come into the house of the LORD according to their rule by Aaron their father, as the LORD God of Israel had charged him. [20]As to the remaining Levites—of the sons of Amram, Shubael; of the sons of Shubael, Jehdeiah. [21]As to Rehabiah, of the sons of Rehabiah, Isshiah the first. [22]As to the Izharites, Shelomoth; of the son of Shelemoth, Jahath, [23]and the sons of Jeriah, Amariah the second, Jahaziel the third, Jekameam the fourth. [24]The sons of Uzziel, Michah; the sons of Michah, Shamir; [25]Michah's brother, Isshiah; of the sons of Isshiah, Zechariah. [26]The sons of Merari: Mahli and Mushi, sons of Jaaziah his son. [27]The sons of Merari by Jaaziah his son, Shoham, Zaccur and Ibri. [28]Of Mahli, Eleazar, and he had no

sons. [29]As to Kish, the son of Kish was Jerahmeel.
[30]And the sons of Mushi were Mahli and Eder and
Jerimoth. These were the sons of the Levites by their
patriarchal houses. [31]And they, too, cast lots in
accordance with their kin the sons of Aaron before
King David and Zadok and Ahimelech and the chiefs
of the patriarchal houses of the priests and of the
Levites, the patriarchal chief like his younger brother.

CHAPTER 24 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And the orders of the sons of Aaron.* This is one of six lists of priestly genealogy in Chronicles. The lists and their repetitions will not say much to modern readers, although they have been scrutinized by scholars in an effort to reconstruct the history of the ancient priesthood.

2. *And Nadab and Abihu died.* The Chronicler, interested only in establishing priestly bloodlines, makes no mention of the circumstances of their death reported in Leviticus 10.

before their father. The likely sense is “while their father was still alive.”

CHAPTER 25

[1]And David and the officers of the army set apart for
the service the sons of Asaph and Heman and
Jeduthun who prophesied with lyres and lutes and
cymbals. And the roll call of the men for the task in
their service was: [2]of the sons of Asaph, Zaccur and
Joseph and Nethaniah and Asarelah, the sons of Asaph
alongside Asaph prophesying by order of the king; [3]of
Jeduthun, the sons of Jeduthun, Gedaliah and Zeri and
Jeshaiah, Hashabiah and Mattithiah—six, alongside
their father Jeduthun prophesying with the lyre,
acclaiming and praising the LORD; [4]of Heman, the
sons of Heman, Bukkiah, Mattaniah, Uzziel, Shebuel
and Jerimoth, Hananiah, Hanani, Eliathah, Giddalti
and Romamti-Ezer, Josh-bekashah, Mallothi, Hothir,
Mahazioth. [5]All these were sons of Heman, the king's
seer, to raise up his horn through God's words. And
God gave Heman fourteen sons and three daughters.
[6]All these were alongside their father in song in the
house of the LORD with cymbals, lutes, and lyres for
the service of the house of God by order of the king—

Asaph and Jeduthun and Heman. [7]And their number
with their kin skilled in song to the LORD, every
expert, two hundred eighty-eight. [8]And they cast lots
for the watches, lesser and greater alike, expert and
apprentice. [9]And the first lot fell to Asaph, to Joseph,
Gedaliah the second—he and his brothers and his
sons, twelve; [10]the third Zaccur—his sons and his
brothers, twelve; [11]the fourth Izri—his sons and his
brothers, twelve; [12]the fifth Nethaniah—his sons and
his brothers, twelve; [13]the sixth Bukkiah—his sons and
his brothers, twelve; [14]the seventh Jesharelah—his sons
and his brothers, twelve; [15]the eighth Jeshaiah—his
sons and his brothers, twelve; [16]the ninth Mattaniah—
his sons and his brothers, twelve; [17]the tenth Shimei—
his sons and his brothers, twelve; [18]the eleventh Azarel
—his sons and his brothers, twelve; [19]the twelfth
Hashabiah—his sons and his brothers, twelve; [20]the
thirteenth Shubael—his sons and his brothers, twelve;
[21]the fourteenth Mattithiah—his sons and his brothers,
twelve; [22]the fifteenth, to Jeremoth—his sons and his
brothers, twelve; [23]the sixteenth, to Hananiah—his
sons and his brothers, twelve; [24]the seventeenth
Joshbekashah—his sons and his brothers, twelve; [25]the
eighteenth Hanani—his sons and his brothers, twelve;
[26]the nineteenth Mallothi—his sons and his brothers,
twelve; [27]the twentieth, to Eliathah—his sons and his

brothers, twelve; [28]the twenty-first, to Hothir—his sons and his brothers, twelve; [29]the twenty-second, to Giddalti—his sons and his brothers, twelve; [30]the twenty-third, to Mahazioth—his sons and his brothers, twelve; [31]the twenty-fourth, to Romamti-Ezer—his sons and his brothers, twelve.

CHAPTER 25 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the sons of Asaph and Heman and Jeduthun.* The list that follows is of temple choristers and musicians.

who prophesied with lyres and lutes and cymbals. The verb here is a little surprising. From several reports in the Book of Samuel, we know that wandering bands of prophets in the early biblical period used musical instruments to work themselves into a vatic frenzy (a phenomenon that can still be observed among "Holy Rollers" in the United States). In their case, the verb for immersing in ecstasy is the same root but in reflexive conjugation. Here, the passive conjugation (*nifʿal*) occurs, which is the form used when the so-called Literary Prophets deliver their message. One may infer a kind of domestication of ecstasy in the temple music: it induced an elevated state, and the words sung—probably the set words of psalms—were regarded as a kind of gateway to the sacred. Thus in verse 3, Jeduthun is said to be "prophesying with the lyre, acclaiming and praising the LORD," and those paired verbs appear regularly in the psalms of praise.

4. *Giddalti and Romamti-Ezer.* There is something peculiar about these names. They are two overlapping Hebrew verbs and they appear in direct sequence in Isaiah 1:2—*banim giddalti weromamti,* "Sons I have nurtured and raised." Could the Chronicler be inventing names that are intended as an allusion to Isaiah?

5. *Heman, the king's seer.* Heman is a musician or composer of psalms, so the link between music and visionary experience is reinforced.

CHAPTER 26

[1]For the orders of the gatekeepers, for the Korahites,
Meshelemiah son of Kore of the sons of Asaph. [2]And
Meshelemiah had sons, Zechariah the firstborn, Jediael
the second, Zebadiah the third, Jathniel the fourth,
[3]Elam the fifth, Jehohanan the sixth, Eliehoenai the
seventh. [4]And Obed-Edom had sons, Shemaiah the
firstborn, Jehozabad the second, Joah the third, Sacar
the fourth and Nethaneel the fifth, [5]Ammiel the sixth,
Issachar the seventh, Peulthai the eighth, for God had
blessed him. [6]And to Shemaiah his son were born sons
in authority over their patriarchal houses, for they were
substantial men. [7]The sons of Shemaiah were Othni
and Rephael and Obed and Elzabad—his brothers
were substantial men, Elihu and Semachiah. [8]All these
were of the sons of Obed-Edom, they and their sons
and their brothers, substantial men and able for the
service—sixty-two did Obed-Edom have. [9]And
Meshelemiah had sons or brothers, substantial men,
eighteen, [10]And Hosah of the sons of Merari had sons,
Shimri the head, though he was not the firstborn, his

father made him head. [11]Hilkiah the second, Tebaliah the third, Zechariah the fourth; all the sons and brothers of Hosah were thirteen. [12]These orders of the gate-keepers, according to the chief men, were in watches matching their kin to minister in the house of the LORD. [13]And they cast lots, the least and the greatest alike, according to their patriarchal houses, for each gate. [14]And the lot on the east fell to Meshelemiah, and for Zechariah his son, a discerning councillor, they cast lots, and the lot fell out to the north. [15]For Obed-Edom, to the south, and for his sons, the storehouse. [16]For Shuppim and for Hosah, to the west were the Shallecheth Gate on the road going up, one watch corresponding to the other. [17]On the east, six Levites, on the north four each day, four on the south each day, four at the storehouse, two and two. [18]At the colonnade on the east, four, two on the road and two at the colonnade. [19]These are the order of the gatekeepers for the sons of Korah and the sons of Merari. [20]And the Levites: Ahijah over the treasuries of the house of God and over the treasuries of the consecrated gifts; [21]the sons of Laadan, the sons of the Gershonites belonging to Laadan, Jehieli; [22]the sons of Jehieli, Zetham and Joel his brother over the treasuries of the house of the LORD; [23]of the Amramites, of the Izharites, of the Hebronites, of the Uzzielites:

[24]Shebuel son of Gershom son of Moses supervisor
over the treasuries, [25]and his brothers: Eliezer,
Rehabiah his son and Jeshaiah his son and Joram his
son and Zichri his son and Shelomith his son, [26]he is
Shelomith with his brothers over the consecrated gifts
that King David consecrated with the heads of the
patriarchal houses, the officers of the thousands and
the hundreds and the army officers. [27]From the battles
and from the booty they consecrated to maintain the
house of the LORD. [28]And all that Samuel the seer
and Saul son of Kish and Abner son of Ner and Joab
son of Zeruiah had consecrated, all that was
consecrated was under Shelomith and his brothers.
[29]Of the Izharites: Chenaniah and his sons were over
Israel for the external tasks, for the overseers and the
judges. [30]Of the Hebronites: Hashabiah and his sons,
substantial men, one thousand seven hundred, over the
matters of Israel west of the Jordan for all the tasks of
the LORD and for the king's service. [31]Of the
Hebronites: Jerijah chief of the Hebronites, they were
searched out in the fortieth year of David's reign
through their generations in patriarchal houses, and
there were found among them substantial men in
Jazer-Gilead. [32]And his kin, two thousand seven
hundred substantial men, heads of the patriarchal
houses, and King David appointed them over the

Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manassites for all affairs of God and affairs of the king.

CHAPTER 26 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

28. *And all that Samuel the seer and Saul son of Kish and Abner son of Ner and Joab son of Zeruiah.* This historical note briefly amplifies the long catalogue of gatekeepers and their stations around the Temples (the details of which are not easy to sort out). It is another attempt by the Chronicler to confirm the legitimacy of the Temple in his time by tracing its treasures all the way back to the first founding of the monarchy.

CHAPTER 27

[1]And the Israelites according to their count, heads of
the patriarchal houses and officers of the thousands
and the hundreds and their overseers ministering to the
king in every affair of the orders coming and going
each month during all the months of the year, each
order having twenty-four thousand men. [2]Over the first
order for the first month: Jashobeam son of Zabdiel,
over his order of twenty-four thousand men. [3]Of the
sons of Perez, head of all the army officers for the first
month; [4]and over the order of the second month,
Dodai the Ahohite, and Mikloth was the supervisor,
and his order was twenty-four thousand men. [5]The
third army officer for the third month was Benaiah son
of Jehoiada the head priest, and his order was twenty-
four thousand men. [6]This was the Benaiah who was a
warrior among the Thirty and was over the Thirty, and
over his order was Ammizabad his son. [7]And the
fourth for the fourth month Asahel brother of Joab
and Zebadiah his son after him, and his order was
twenty-four thousand men. [8]The fifth for the fifth

month was the officer Shamhuth the Izrahite, and his order was twenty-four thousand men. [9]The sixth for the sixth month was Ira son of Ikkesh the Tekoite, and his order was twenty-four thousand men. [10]The seventh for the seventh month was Helez the Pelonite of the sons of Ephraim, and his order was twenty-four thousand men. [11]The eighth for the eighth month was Sibbecai the Hushathite of the Zarhites, and his order was twenty-four thousand men. [12]The ninth for the ninth month was Abiezar the Anathothite of the Benjaminites, and his order was twenty-four thousand men. [13]The tenth for the tenth month was Mahrai the Netophathite of the Zarhites, and his order was twenty-four thousand men. [14]The eleventh for the eleventh month was Benaiah the Pirathonite, and his order was twenty-four thousand men. [15]The twelfth for the twelfth month was Heldai the Netophathite of Othniel, and his order was twenty-four thousand men. [16]And over the tribes of Israel, of the Reubenites Eliezer son of Zichri was supervisor. Of the Simeonites Shephatiah son of Maachah. [17]Of the Levites Hashabiah son of Kemuel of Aaron, Zadok. [18]Of Judah, Elihu of the brothers of David. Of Issachar, Omri son of Michael. [19]Of Zebulun, Ishmaiah son of Obadiah. Of Naphtali, Jeri-moth son of Azriel. [20]Of the Ephraimites, Hosea son of Azaziah.

Of the half-tribe of Manasseh, Joel son of Pedaiah.
[21]Of the half of Manasseh in Gilead, Iddo son of
Zechariah. Of Benjamin, Jaasiel son of Abner. [22]Of
Dan, Azarel son of Jeroham. These were the officers
of the tribes of Israel. [23]And David did not count their
numbers from the age of twenty and below, for the
LORD had said to multiply Israel like the stars of the
heavens. [24]Joab son of Zeruiah began to count them
but did not finish, and this became grounds for fury
against Israel, and their count was not included in the
count of the acts of King David. [25]And over the king's
treasuries was Azmaveth son of Adiel, and over the
treasuries in the open country, in the towns, in the
villages, and in the citadels, Jehonathan son of Uzziah.
[26]And over those doing the tasks of the open country
for the tilling of the soil, Ezri son of Chelub. [27]And
over the vineyards, Shimei the Ramathite, and over
what was in the vineyards for the stores of wine, Zabdi
the Shiphmite. [28]And over the olive trees and the
sycamores that were on the coastal plain, Baal-Hanan
the Gederite. And over the stores of oil, Joash. [29]And
over the cattle grazing in Sharon, Shitrai the Sharonite.
And over the cattle in the valleys, Shaphat son of
Adlai. [30]And over the camels, Obil the Ishmaelite. And
over the she-asses, Jehdeiah the Meronothite. [31]And
over the sheep, Jaziz the Hagrite. All these were the

officers of the property that belonged to King David.
[32]And Jehonathan, David's uncle, was councillor, a
discerning man and a scribe. He and Jehiel son of
Hachmoni were with the king's sons. [33]And Ahithophel
was the king's councillor, and Hushai the Archite was
the king's companion. [34]And after Ahithophel were
Jehoiada son of Benaiah and Abiathar, and the
commander of the king's army was Joab.

CHAPTER 27 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *each order having twenty-four thousand men.* The total number, then, of functionaries taking monthly turns would be 288,000. Either this is a truly extravagant exaggeration, intended to convey the grandeur of David's kingship, or the word *ʾelef* here, as some have proposed, means "unit," not "thousand."

7. *Asahel.* This could scarcely be historical because Asahel was killed in the civil war well before David conquered Jerusalem.

33. *Ahithophel . . . Hushai.* In 2 Samuel 16 these two engage in a dramatic confrontation after Ahitophel has gone over to the usurper Absalom and Hushai comes to Absalom's court as David's secret agent to foil Ahitophel's counsel. The Chronicler, as usual avoiding such complications, mentions nothing of all this.

the king's companion. This term indicates not a personal relationship but an official role in the court.

CHAPTER 28

[1]And David assembled in Jerusalem all the officers of Israel, the officers of the tribes and the officers of the orders ministering to the king and the officers of the thousands and the officers of the hundreds and the officers of all the property and livestock of the king and his sons with the eunuchs and the warriors, every valiant warrior. [2]And King David rose on his feet and said: “Listen to me, my brothers and my people: I—it was in my heart to build a resting house for the Ark of the LORD’S Covenant and as a footstool for the feet of our God, and I prepared to build. [3]But God said to me, ‘You shall not build a house for My name because you are a man of war, and you have shed blood.’ [4]But the LORD God of Israel chose me of all my father’s house as king over Israel forever, for He had chosen Judah as prince and in the house of Judah my father’s house and my father’s sons. Me did it please Him to make king over all Israel. [5]And all of my sons—for many sons did the LORD give me—He chose Solomon to sit on the throne of the LORD’S kingship

over Israel. [6]And He said to me, ‘Solomon your son, it
is he who will build My house and My courts, for I
have chosen him for Me as a son, and I will be a father
to him. [7]And I will make his kingship stand firm
forever if he holds strong to do My commands and My
laws as on this day.’ [8]And now before the eyes of all
Israel, the LORD’S assembly, and in the hearing of
our God, keep and seek out all the commands of the
LORD your God, so that you may inherit the good
land and pass it on to your children after you forever.
[9]And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your
father and serve Him with a whole heart and an eager
self, for the LORD searches all hearts and discerns
every devising of schemes. If you seek Him, He shall
be found for you, but if you forsake Him, He shall
abandon you. [10]See, now, that the LORD has chosen
you to build a house as a sanctuary. Be strong and do
it.” [11]And David gave to Solomon the plan of the
entrance hall and the plan for the house and its
storerooms and its upper chambers and its inner rooms
and the space for the Ark covering, [12]and the plan of
all that was in the mind of his people for the courts of
the house of the LORD and for all the chambers
around the treasuries of the house of God and the
treasuries of the consecrated gifts, [13]and for the orders
of the priests and the Levites and for every task of the

service of the house of the LORD and for all the vessels of the service of the house of the LORD, [14]for the gold by weight of gold, for all the vessels of each and every service, for all the vessels of silver by weight, for all the vessels of each and every service, [15]and the weight for the golden lampstands and their lamps, gold by weight, each and every lampstand and its lamps, for the silver lampstands by weight, for the lampstand and its lamps like the service of each and every lampstand, [16]and the gold by weight for the tables of the bread in rows for each and every table, and silver for the silver tables, [17]and the forks and the basins and the jars, pure gold, and for the golden bowls by weight for each and every bowl, and for the silver bowls by weight for each and every bowl, [18]and for the incense altar, refined gold by weight, and for the model of the chariot, the golden cherubim spreading wings and screening the Ark of the LORD'S Covenant. [19]"Everything in writing by the word of God to me He granted understanding of all the tasks of the plan." [20]And David said to Solomon his son, "Be strong and stalwart and do it. Do not fear and do not be terrified, for the LORD God, my God, is with you. He will not let go of you and will not forsake you until the completion of all the task of the service of the house of the LORD. [21]And here are the orders of the

priests and the Levites for all the service of the house of God, and with you in every task for everyone answering the call with skill. And the officers and all the people are there for your every bidding."

CHAPTER 28 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

9. *every devising of schemes.* This phrase is a pointed citation of Genesis 6:5, where God, before unleashing the Flood, expresses His knowledge of the inclination of humankind to do evil.

11. *And David gave to Solomon the plan.* 2 Samuel and 1 Kings make no mention of David's conveying the plan of the Temple, here said to be written down for him by God, to Solomon. This invention is in keeping with the Chronicler's agenda to represent David as the virtual though not actual builder of the Temple.

the plan for the house. The translation follows the reading of two ancient versions. The Masoretic Text has "its houses," a puzzling plural, with no "plan of."

12. *for the courts of the house of the LORD and for all the chambers.* The hortatory momentum of David's speech to Solomon is now broken by a long list of temple spaces and the sumptuous furnishings of the Temple, with gold and silver. Again, the Chronicler pursues his concern with cultic procedures and the grandeur of the cult.

21. *for your every bidding.* The literal sense of this phrase is "for all your words."

CHAPTER 29

[1]And King David said to all the assembly: “Solomon
my son, him alone has God chosen, an untried lad, and
the task is great, for the structure is not for a human
being but for the LORD God. [2]And with all my force I
have readied for the house of my God the gold for
what is to be gold and the silver for what is to be silver
and the bronze for what is to be bronze, the iron for
what is to be iron, and the wood for what is to be
wood, onyx stone and inlays, stone of antimony and
for mosaics and every precious stone and marble in
abundance. [3]And yet more, in my fondness for the
house of my God I have given of my own treasure gold
and silver for the house of my God beyond what I
readied for the holy house [4]three thousand talents of
gold from the gold of Ophir and seven thousand talents
of refined silver to overlay the walls of the house, [5]gold
for what is to be gold, silver for what is to be silver and
for every task in the hands of the craftsmen. And who
will answer the call today to dedicate himself to the
LORD?” [6]And the officers of the patriarchal houses

and the officers of the tribes of Israel and the officers of the thousands and of the hundreds answered the call for the king's task. [7]And they gave five thousand talents of gold and ten thousand drachmas and ten thousand talents of silver and ten thousand talents of bronze and one hundred thousand talents of iron for the work of the house of God. [8]And whoever had with him gemstones gave them to the treasury of the house of the LORD through Jehiel the Gershonite. [9]And the people rejoiced for having answered the call, for with a whole heart they answered the call to the LORD, and King David, too, greatly rejoiced. [10]And David blessed the LORD before the eyes of all the assembly, and David said: "Blessed are you, O LORD, God of Israel, our father from everlasting to everlasting. [11]Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the might and the splendor and the triumph and the grandeur, indeed, all in the heavens and on the earth. Yours, O LORD, is the kingship, and what is exalted as head over all. [12]And wealth and glory are before You, and You rule over all. And in Your hand are power and might, and it is in Your hand to magnify and strengthen them all. [13]And now, God, we acclaim You and praise Your splendid name. [14]And who am I and who is my people that we should summon power to answer the call in this way? For all things are from You and from Your own hand

we have given to You. [15]For we are sojourners before
You and fleeting settlers like all our fathers. Like a
shadow are our days on the earth, and there is no
gathering together. [16]O LORD our God, all this wealth
that I have readied to build You a house for Your holy
name is from Your hand, and all is Yours. [17]And I
know, O my God, that You probe the heart and delight
in uprightness. I in my heart's uprightness have
answered the call with all these things, and now Your
people who are here I have joyfully seen them
answering the call for You. [18]LORD, God of Abraham,
Isaac, and Israel our fathers, keep this forever as the
inclination of the plans of Your people's heart, and
make their heart stay firm toward You. [19]And to
Solomon my son grant wholeheartedness to keep Your
commands, Your precepts, and Your statutes, to do
everything, to build the structure that I have readied."
[20]And David said to all the assembly, "Bless the LORD
your God." And all the assembly blessed the LORD
God of their fathers, and did obeisance and bowed
down to the LORD and to the king. [21]And they
sacrificed to the LORD and offered up burnt offerings
on the morrow of that day—a thousand bulls, a
thousand sheep and their libations, and sacrifices in
abundance for all Israel. [22]And they ate before the
LORD on that day with great rejoicing, and they made

Solomon son of David king a second time and
anointed him to the LORD as ruler and Zadok as
priest. [23]And Solomon sat on the throne of the LORD
as king instead of David his father, and he prospered,
and all Israel obeyed him. [24]And all the officers and the
warriors and also the sons of King David gave their
hand in fealty to King Solomon. [25]And the LORD
made Solomon very great in the eyes of all Israel and
conferred upon him a majesty of kingship that no king
before him had possessed over Israel. [26]And David son
of Jesse had been king over all Israel. [27]And the time
that he was king over Israel was forty years. Seven
years he was king in Hebron, and in Jerusalem he was
king thirty-three years. [28]And he died in ripe old age
sated with days, wealth, and honor, and Solomon his
son was king in his stead. [29]And the acts of King
David, early and late, are written down in the records
of Samuel the seer and in the records of Nathan the
prophet and in the records of Gad the visionary [30]with
all his kingship and his valor and the times that passed
over him and over Israel and over all the kingdoms of
the lands.

CHAPTER 29 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the structure.* The Hebrew *birah* generally means something like "citadel," although here it obviously refers to the Temple. Perhaps the term is used to intimate the imposing mass of the future building.

3. *my own treasure.* The Hebrew *segulah* indicates a private treasury.

4. *three thousand talents of gold.* The Chronicler, following his commitment to convey the sumptuousness of Solomon's temple, begins here a tally of the vast amounts of gold, silver, bronze, and iron that runs on through verse 7.

10. *Blessed are you, O* LORD. David now launches on a celebration of God's greatness that is a kind of doxology.

14. *For all things are from You and from Your own hand we have given to You.* The Chronicler, at this late, post-exilic moment, expresses an uncompromising monotheism in which all things come from an omnipotent God.

15. *sojourners . . . fleeting settlers.* The Hebrew shows a breakup of a common hendiadys, *ger wetoshav,* which essentially means "resident alien" and has a connotation of temporary, unrooted residence. The adjective "fleeting" has been added to "settlers" in the translation in order to convey this sense.

there is no gathering together. Some understand the Hebrew *miqweh* to refer to "hope," one meaning of this verbal stem. But in Genesis 1:10 it is used for "the gathering" of waters, and in the present context, life that is like a shadow dissipates, achieving no coherent gathering together.

18. *the inclination of the plans of Your people's heart.* This phrase, previously used in a negative sense, is now given a positive turn. In keeping with that reversal, *maḥashavot,* rendered above as "schemes," is translated here as "plans."

22. *they made Solomon son of David king a second time.* According to the narrative in 1 Kings 1, Solomon was hastily crowned in order to forestall the usurpation of the throne by his half brother Adonijah. None of that is mentioned here, but the Chronicler does assume that Solomon was previously anointed king. The invention of a second coronation is a means of confirming the absolute legitimacy of Solomon's succession to the throne.

25. *no king before him had possessed.* Of course, there were only two kings before him, David and Saul. But the grandeur of Solomon's court is repeatedly evoked in Kings.

29. *the acts of King David . . . are written down in the records of Samuel . . . and . . . of Nathan . . . and . . . of Gad.* Though this wording resembles a recurring formula used in Kings at the conclusion of the report of a particular reign, in Kings the reference is always to royal annals, whereas here the source is books, never mentioned elsewhere, by three different prophets. The evident intention is to suggest a spiritual seal of approval for David's career.

2 Chronicles

CHAPTER 1

[1]And Solomon son of David entrenched himself in his kingship, and the LORD his God was with him and made him very great. [2]And Solomon spoke to all Israel, to the officers of the thousands and of the hundreds and to the judges and to every leader in all Israel, the heads of the patriarchal houses. [3]And Solomon and all the assembly with him went to the high place that was in Gibeon, for there the Tent of God's Meeting was that Moses servant of God had made in the wilderness. [4]But the Ark of God David had brought up from Kiriath-Jearim as David had readied for it, for he had pitched a tent in Jerusalem. [5]And the bronze altar that Bezalel son of Uri had made was there in front of the LORD'S tabernacle, and Solomon and the assembly sought it out. [6]And Solomon offered up there on the bronze altar before the LORD, which was at the Tent of Meeting, offered on it a thousand burnt offerings. [7]On that night God appeared to Solomon and said to him, "Ask what I should give you." [8]And Solomon said to God, "You, Who did great kindness with David my father and

made me king in his stead[9]—now, LORD God, may
Your words to David be confirmed that You have
made me king over a people as multitudinous as the
dust of the earth. [10]Now, give me wisdom and
knowledge, that I may lead this people, for who can
judge this great people?" [11]And God said to Solomon,
"Inasmuch as this was in your heart, and you did not
ask for possessions and honor nor the lives of your
foes nor for long life did you ask, but you asked for
wisdom and knowledge with which you might judge
My people over whom I made you king, [12]the wisdom
and knowledge are given to you, and wealth and
possessions and honor I will give you, the like of
which no kings before you had nor after you will
have." [13]And Solomon came from the high place that
was in Gibeon. [14]And Solomon gathered chariots and
horsemen, and he had one thousand four hundred
chariots and twelve thousand horsemen, and he placed
them in the chariot towns and with the king in
Jerusalem. [15]And the king made silver and gold in
Jerusalem as abundant as stones, and cedars like the
sycamores that are in the lowlands. [16]And the source of
Solomon's horses was from Egypt and from Kue, and
the king's merchants would take them from Kue at a
set price. [17]And a chariot coming from Egypt cost six
hundred silver shekels and a horse a hundred fifty, and

they would bring them out to all the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Aram.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *the Tent of God's Meeting . . . that Moses servant of God had made in the wilderness.* Even though there is no historical possibility that the Tent of Meeting could have been preserved until Solomon's time, this is still another way of confirming the sacrosanct legitimacy of the cult overseen by Solomon.

7. *Ask what I should give you.* The passage from here through verse is based on 1 Kings 3:5–14, but with abridgements and some alteration of the phrasing.

10. *lead this people.* The idiom is primarily military and thus in 1 Kings 3:7 it is translated as "lead into the fray." Here, the military usage seems less relevant.

judge. This verb also means "to govern." In 1 Kings 3:9 its judicial sense is especially relevant.

13. *from the high place.* The Masoretic Text has "to the high place," but this is surely a scribal error because he is going from the high place at Gibeon to Jerusalem.

14. *And Solomon gathered chariots.* The passage from here to the end of the chapter is taken from 1 Kings 10:26–29 with only a few minor differences in wording. For elucidation of these verses, see the commentary on 1 Kings 10.

CHAPTER 2

[1]And Solomon resolved to build a house for the
LORD's name and a house for his kingship. And
Solomon gathered seventy thousand porters in number
and eighty thousand quarriers in the hill country and
twelve thousand horsemen and, directing them, three
thousand six hundred. [2]And Solomon sent to Huram
king of Tyre, saying, "As you did with David my
father, sending him cedarwood for him to build
himself a house in which to dwell, [3]look, I am about to
build a house for the LORD my God to consecrate to
Him, to burn before Him fragrant incense and the
perpetual bread in rows, and burnt offerings for
morning and for evening, for sabbaths and for new
moons and for the LORD's festivals, and this is upon
Israel forever. [4]And the house that I am about to build
shall be great, for greater is our God than all gods.
[5]And who can muster strength to build Him a house?
For the heavens and the heavens beyond the heavens
cannot contain Him, and who am I that I should build
for Him save to burn incense before Him? [6]And now,

send me a skilled man to work in gold and in silver
and in crimson and in purple and in indigo and who
knows how to engrave with the skilled men who are
with me in Judah and in Jerusalem whom my father
David readied. [7]And send me cedarwood, cypress, and
algum wood from Lebanon, for I know that your
servants know how to cut down the Lebanon trees,
and, look, my servants shall be with your servants [8]to
ready for me wood in abundance, for the house that I
am about to build shall be wondrously great. [9]And,
look, for the woodsmen, for the tree-fellers, I have set
aside as provision for your servants twenty thousand
kors of wheat, twenty thousand *kors* of barley, and
twenty thousand *bats* of wine and twenty thousand *bats*
of oil." [10]And Huram king of Tyre said in writing and
sent to Solomon, "In the LORD's love of His people
He has set you over them as king." [11]And Huram said,
"Blessed is the LORD, God of Israel, Who made the
heavens and the earth, Who gave King David a wise
son, possessing insight and discernment, who will
build a house for the LORD and a house for his
kingship. [12]And now, I have sent a skilled man, Huram
my master craftsman, [13]the son of a woman of the
Danite daughters, and his father is a Tyrian man,
knowing how to work in gold and in silver, in bronze,
in iron, in stone and in wood, in crimson, in indigo, in

fine linen, and in purple, to engrave and to do every plan that will be given him with your skilled men of my master David your father. [14]And now, the wheat and the barley, the oil and the wine of which my master spoke, let them be sent to your servants. [15]And we on our part shall cut down the trees from Lebanon according to all your needs and bring them to you as rafts on the sea to Jaffa, and you shall bring them up to Jerusalem." [16]And Solomon made a count of all the sojourning men who were in the land of Israel after the count that David his father had made, and they came to one hundred fifty-three thousand six hundred. [17]And he made of them seventy thousand porters and eighty thousand quarriers in the hill country and three thousand six hundred directing the people's work.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1.*And Solomon resolved to build a house for the LORD's name.* This passage on Solomon's construction project utilizes material from 1 Kings 5 and 1 Kings 8 with expansions, deletions, and changes.

2. *Huram.* This is an alternate spelling of Hiram, the form used in Kings.

4. *greater is our God than all gods.* This phrase may be a linguistic fossil from the earlier phase of Israelite history because by this late date, there was no question of the existence of other, lesser gods.

5. *For the heavens and the heavens beyond the heavens cannot contain Him.* This clause is a quotation of Solomon's speech at the temple dedication, 1 Kings 8:27.

9. *provision.* The received text has *makot* ("blows"?). This translation follows the reading in 1 Kings 5:25, *makolet.*

11. *Blessed is the LORD, God of Israel, Who made the heavens and the earth.* This monotheistic flourish is not part of Hiram's message to Solomon in 1 Kings.

12. *Huram my master craftsman.* The Hebrew appears to say "Huram my father." But that was not the name of King Huram's father, nor was he a half-Danite (that is, Israelite). The translation follows the proposal that *ʾav* can also mean "master"—here, master craftsman. For the confusing fact that both the king and the master craftsman appear to have the same name, see the comment on 1 Kings 7:13.

13. *my master.* Here, another word, *ʾadoni,* is used as a diplomatic form of address, and the same is true in the next verse.

16. *all the sojourning men.* This verse and the next repeat the beginning of the chapter, but now it is stipulated that the forced laborers enlisted after the census are resident aliens, *gerim.* That idea is not present in the parallel account in 1 Kings. One may infer that the Chronicler wanted to avoid the notion that Solomon exploited the labor of indigenous Israelites to build the Temple and the palace.

CHAPTER 3

[1]And Solomon began to build the house of the LORD
in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah where He had
appeared to David his father at the place that David
had readied at the threshing floor of Ornan the
Jebusite. [2]And he began to build in the second month
on the second day in the fourth year of his kingship.
[3]And these are the measurements that Solomon
established to build the house of God: the length
according to the former measure was sixty cubits and
the width twenty cubits. [4]And the great hall in front
had a length the same as the width of the house,
twenty cubits, and the height one hundred twenty. And
he overlaid it inside with pure gold. [5]And the great
house he paneled with cypresswood and overlaid it
with fine gold and ornamented it with palms and
chainwork. [6]And he overlaid the house with splendid
precious stones, and the gold was gold from Parvaim.
[7]And he overlaid the house—the beams, the thresholds
and its walls and its doors—with gold and carved
cherubim on the walls. [8]And he made the Holy of

Holies, its length along the width of the house twenty cubits and its width twenty cubits, and he overlaid it with fine gold, and he overlaid it with six hundred talents of fine gold. [9]And the weight of the nails was fifty shekels of gold, and he overlaid the upper chambers with gold. [10]And he made two cherubim in the Holy of Holies, exquisite work, and he overlaid them with gold. [11]And the wings of the cherubim were twenty cubits in length, each wing five cubits touching the wall of the house and the other wing five cubits touching the other cherub. [12]And the wing of each cherub was five cubits touching the wall of the house and the other wing clinging to the wing of the other cherub. [13]The wings of these cherubim spread were twenty cubits, and they were standing, facing the house. [14]And he made the curtain indigo and crimson and purple in fine linen, and put cherubim on it. [15]And he made in front of the house two pillars thirty-five cubits high, and the capitals on top were five cubits. [16]And he made chainwork in the inner sanctuary and put it on top of the pillars and made a hundred pomegranates and set them in the chainwork. [17]And he set up the pillars in front of the Temple and called the one on the right Jachin and the one on the left Boaz.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Solomon began to build the house.* This passage corresponds to 1 Kings 6:14–38, although much of the wording and some of the details are different. No confident reconstruction of the layout and furnishings of the Temple is feasible, but for an elucidation of some of these items, the reader is referred to the commentary on 1 Kings 6.

10. *in the Holy of Holies.* The Hebrew reads “in the house of the Holy of Holies,” but what is indicated by “house” is unclear. Perhaps it means “area” or “housing,” but it may well be an inadvertent scribal repetition, triggered by the multiple recurrences of “house” in the surrounding text.

CHAPTER 4

[1]And he made the bronze altar, twenty cubits its
length and twenty cubits its width and ten cubits its
height. [2]And he made the sea of cast metal, twenty
cubits from rim to rim, entirely round, and five cubits
its height, and thirty cubits its circumference. [3]And the
figures of oxen were beneath it, around it on all sides,
ten cubits, encircling the sea all around, two rows of
oxen, cast in a solid piece with it, [4]standing on twelve
oxen, three facing north and three facing west and
three facing south and three facing east, with the sea
over them above and all their hindquarters toward the
inside. [5]And its thickness was a hand-span and its rim
like the fashioning of a cup's rim, like a lily blossom. It
held three thousand *bats*. [6]And he made ten
washstands and put five on the right and five on the left
to wash in them. The articles of the burnt offering they
would rinse with them, but the sea was for the washing
of the priests. [7]And he made ten golden lampstands as
they should be, and he placed in the Temple five on the
right and five on the left. [8]And he made ten tables and

set them in the Temple, five on the right and five on the left, and he made a hundred golden basins. [9]And he made the court of the priests and the great court and doors for the court, and its doors he overlaid with gold. [10]And the sea he set on the right side toward the southeast. [11]And Huram made the pails and the shovels and the basins. And Huram finished doing the task that he had done for King Solomon in the house of God: the [12]two pillars and the globes and the two capitals on top of the two pillars and the two sets of network that were on top of the pillars, [13]and the four hundred pomegranates for each set of network to cover the two capital globes that were on top of the pillars, [14]and he made the stands, and the washstands on the stands he made, [15]the one sea and the twelve oxen under it, [16]and the pails and the shovels and the forks and all their vessels did Huram his master craftsman make for King Solomon for the house of the LORD—burnished bronze. [17]The king cast them in the Jordan plain in molds in the earth between Succoth and Zeredah. [18]And Solomon made all these vessels in very great abundance, for the weight of the bronze could not be reckoned. [19]And Solomon made all the vessels that were in the house of God and the altar of gold and the tables upon which was the show bread, [20]and the lampstands and their lamps to burn as should be done

before the inner sanctuary of fine gold, [21]and the blossoms and the lamps and the tongs of gold, purest gold; [22]and the snuffers and the basins and the ladles and the fire-pans—fine gold, and the entrance of the house, its inner doors to the Holy of Holies, and the doors of the house, of the Temple—gold.

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And he made the bronze altar.* This passage follows 1 Kings 7, at some points closely, at others with divergent details and deletions. The mention of a bronze altar here at the beginning has no counterpart in Kings. Again, the reader is referred to the commentary on the corresponding passage in Kings.

7. *the Temple.* Whereas earlier biblical Hebrew more consistently uses *bayit,* "house," to mean "temple," this later text often shows a specialized term, *heykhal,* which means "temple" and, in some other contexts, "palace."

CHAPTER 5

[1]And the task that Solomon had done for the house of the LORD was finished. And Solomon brought the consecrated things of David his father; the silver and the gold and all the vessels he put in the treasury of the house of God. [2]Then did Solomon assemble the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the patriarchal chieftains of the Israelites, to Jerusalem to bring up the Ark of the LORD's Covenant from the City of David, which is Zion. [3]And every man of Israel assembled around the king on the festival which is in the seventh month. [4]And all the elders of Israel came, and the Levites carried the Ark. [5]And they brought up the Ark of the Covenant and the Tent of Meeting and all the sacred vessels that were in the Tent. The levitical priests brought them up. [6]And King Solomon and all the community of Israel meeting with him before the Ark were sacrificing sheep and bulls in such abundance that they could not be counted nor numbered. [7]And the priests brought the Ark of the LORD's Covenant to its place in the inner sanctuary of

the house, to the Holy of Holies, beneath the wings of the cherubim. [8]And the cherubim spread wings over the place of the Ark, and the cherubim sheltered the Ark and its poles from above. [9]And the poles extended outward, and the ends of the poles could be seen in front of the inner sanctuary but could not be seen from without. And they are there to this day. [10]There was nothing in the Ark except the two tablets that Moses had put there on Horeb, when the LORD sealed a covenant with the Israelites as they came out of Egypt. [11]And it happened when the priests came out from the sanctuary, all the priests there consecrated themselves, without distinction of orders, [12]and the Levite choristers, all of them, Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun, and their sons and their brothers were dressed in fine linen with cymbals and lutes and lyres, standing to the east of the altar, and with them a hundred twenty priests sounding the trumpets. [13]And in unison did the trumpeters and the choristers raise a single voice to praise the LORD, and when the sound went up with the trumpets and with the cymbals and with the instruments of song and when there was praise to the LORD, “for He is good, for His kindness is forever,” the house, the house of the LORD was filled with cloud. [14]And the priests could not stand up to minister

because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of God.

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Then did Solomon assemble.* This passage corresponds to 1 Kings 8:1–11. Readers are referred to the commentary there.
the City of David. This is a special precinct within Jerusalem.

3. *the festival which is in the seventh month.* This festival is Succoth. Because it took place just after the completion of the autumn harvest, it was of the three pilgrim festivals the one that drew the largest crowds to Jerusalem, hence its appropriateness for this ceremony of dedication.

8. *its poles.* In the wilderness, the Ark was carried from place to place and needed these poles for the carriers.

10. *put there.* "There" is merely implied.
when the LORD sealed a covenant. The Hebrew says merely "sealed," but the verb, *karat,* is the one used for sealing covenants.

12. *and the Levite choristers.* All the details here about the Levite choristers and musicians are added to the text drawn from 1 Kings 8, in keeping with the Chronicler's interest in cultic performers.

13. *the house of the LORD was filled with cloud.* "Cloud" is repeatedly the physical manifestation of God's presence or "glory" (see the next verse), and so this cloud is not from the incense or the burning sacrifices but a miraculous manifestation of the divine.

CHAPTER 6

[1]Then did Solomon say:

"The LORD meant to abide in thick
fog.
[2]As for me, I have built You a
lofty house,
and a firm place for Your
dwelling forever."

[3]And the king turned his face and blessed all the assembly of Israel with all the assembly of Israel standing. [4]And he said: "Blessed is the LORD God of Israel Who spoke with His own mouth to David my father and with His own hands has fulfilled it, saying, [5]'From the day that I brought out My people Israel from the land of Egypt, I have not chosen a town from all the tribes of Israel to build a house for My name to be there, and I have not chosen a man to be prince over My people Israel. [6]But I chose Jerusalem for My

name to be there, and I chose David to be over My people Israel.’ 7And it was in the heart of David my father to build a house for the name of the LORD God of Israel. 8And the LORD said to David my father, ‘Inasmuch as it was in your heart to build a house for My name, you have done well, for it was in your heart. 9Only you will not build the house, but your son who issues from your loins, he will build the house for My name.’ 10And the LORD has fulfilled His word that He spoke, and I arose in place of David my father and sat on the throne of Israel as the LORD spoke, and I have built the house for the name of the LORD God of Israel. 11And I have set there the Ark in which is the Covenant of the LORD that He sealed with the Israelites.” 12And he stood before the LORD’s altar over against all the assembly of Israel and spread his palms. 13For Solomon had made a bronze stand five cubits in width and three cubits in height, and he stood on it and he kneeled over against all the assembly of Israel and spread his hands to the heavens. 14And he said, “LORD God of Israel: There is no god like you in the heavens and on the earth, keeping the covenant and the kindness for Your servants who walk before You with all their heart, 15which You kept for Your servant David my father, what You spoke to him, and You spoke to him with Your own mouth, and with

Your own hand You fulfilled it as on this day. [16]And
now, LORD God of Israel, keep for Your servant
David my father what You spoke to him, saying, ‘No
man of yours will be cut off from before Me, sitting on
the throne of Israel, if only your sons will keep their
way to walk in My teaching as you have walked before
Me.’ [17]And now, LORD God of Israel, may Your
words be shown true that You spoke to Your servant,
to David. [18]But can God really dwell on earth with
humankind? Look, the heavens and the heavens
beyond the heavens cannot contain You. How much
less this house that I have built. [19]Yet turn to the prayer
of Your servant and to his plea, LORD my God, to
hearken to the glad song and to the prayer that Your
servant prays before You, [20]so that Your eyes be open
to this house day and night, to this place of which You
said to set Your name there, to hearken to the prayer
that Your servant prays in this place. [21]And may You
hearken to the pleas of Your servant and of Your
people Israel, to which they will pray in this place, and
You, may You hearken in Your dwelling place in the
heavens and hearken and forgive. [22]Should a man
offend against his fellow and bear an oath against him
to bring a curse on him, and the oath come before
Your altar in this house, [23]You will hearken in the
heavens and judge Your servants to condemn the

guilty, to bring down his way on his head, and to vindicate him who is right to mete out to him according to his righteousness. [24]And if Your people Israel are routed by an enemy, for they will have offended against You, and they turn back and acclaim Your name and pray and plead before You in this house, [25]You will hearken from the heavens and forgive the offense of Your people Israel and bring them back to the land that You gave to them and to their fathers. [26]When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain, for the Israelites will have offended against You, and they pray and plead before You in this house and acclaim Your name, they will turn back from their offense, for You will answer them. [27]You will hearken in the heavens and forgive the offense of Your servants, Your people Israel, for You will teach them the good way in which they should go, and You will give them rain upon Your land that You have given to Your people in estate. [28]Should there be famine in the land, should there be plague, blight, or mildew, locusts, caterpillars, should his enemy besiege him in the land in his gates, any affliction or any disease, [29]any prayer, any plea that any man have in all Your people Israel, that every man know his affliction and his pain, he shall spread his palms in this house, [30]and You shall hearken from the heavens, the firm place of Your

dwelling, and You shall forgive and grant to a man according to all his ways, as You alone know the heart of humankind. [31]So that they may fear You to walk in Your ways all the days that they live upon the land that You gave to their fathers. [32]And to the foreigner, too, who is not from Your people Israel and has come from a distant land for the sake of Your name and Your strong hand and Your outstretched arm and comes and prays in this house, [33]You will hearken from the heavens, from the firm place of Your dwelling, and do as all that the foreigner will call out to You, so that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name to fear You as does Your people Israel and to know that Your name has been called on this house that I have built. [34]Should Your people go out to battle against its enemies on a way that You sent them, they shall pray to You through this city that You have chosen and the house that I have built for Your name. [35]And You shall hearken from the heavens to their prayer and to their plea, and You shall do justice for them. [36]Should they offend against You, for there is no man who does not offend, and You are furious with them and give them to the enemy and their captors take them off to a distant or nearby land, [37]but they turn back their heart in the land where they were brought captive and turn back and plead to You in the land of their captivity,

saying, ‘We have offended and have done wrong and
have been evil,’ [38]and they turn back to You with all
their heart and all their being in the land of their
captivity where they were taken captive, and they pray
to You through the land that You gave to their fathers
and the city that You chose and the house that I have
built for Your name, [39]You shall hearken from the
heavens, from the firm place of Your dwelling, to their
prayers and to their pleas and do justice for them and
forgive Your people who have offended against You.
[40]Now, my God, may Your eyes, pray, be open and
Your ears attentive to the prayer of this place.

[41]‘And now rise, O LORD God, to
Your resting place,
You and the Ark of Your strength.
Let Your priests don victory
and Your faithful ones rejoice in
what is good.
[42]LORD, God, do not turn away
Your anointed ones.
Recall the faithful acts of David,
Your servant.’ “

CHAPTER 6 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Then did Solomon say.* Everything that follows, with the exception of the last two verses of the chapter, replicates Solomon's speech in 1 Kings 8:12–50. The differences between the two texts are quite minor (on the order of "in the land of their captors" in Kings and "in the land of their captivity" here) and require no comment. The reader is referred to the commentary on 1 Kings 8.

13. *For Solomon had made a bronze stand.* This detail is absent from 1 Kings 8.

41. *And now rise, O LORD God, to Your resting place.* This poetic insertion at the end of Solomon's speech is taken from Psalm 132:8–10, though there are two divergent formulations, one at the end of the second line of poetry and the other in the second verset of the last line. It is possible that the Chronicler was drawn to quote the psalm because of its representation of the triumphant role of the priests alongside the Davidic monarch.

CHAPTER 7

[1]And when Solomon finished praying, fire came down
from the heavens and consumed the burnt offering and
the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the
house. [2]And the priests could not come into the house,
for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the
LORD. [3]And all the Israelites were looking on as the
fire and the glory of the LORD came down upon the
house, and they kneeled with their faces to the ground
on the pavement and bowed down, acclaiming the
LORD, “For He is good, for His kindness is forever.”
[4]And the king and all the people were offering
sacrifices before the LORD. [5]And the king offered a
sacrifice of twenty-two thousand cattle and a hundred
twenty thousand sheep, and the king and all the people
dedicated the house of God. [6]And the priests were
standing on their watches and the Levites with their
instruments of song that David had made to acclaim
the LORD, “For His kindness is forever” as David
praised with them, and the priests were blowing the
trumpets over against them, and all Israel was

standing. [7]And Solomon consecrated the midst of the court that was before the house of God, for there he did the burnt offerings and the fat of the well-being sacrifices. For the bronze altar that Solomon had made could not contain the burnt offering and the grain offering and the fat. [8]And at that time Solomon performed the festival seven days, and all Israel his people was with him, a very great assembly from Lebo-Hamath to the Wadi of Egypt. [9]And they made a solemn convocation on the eighth day, for they had performed the dedication of the house seven days, and the festival was seven days. [10]And on the twenty-third day of the seventh month he sent off the people to their tents joyful and of good cheer over the good that the LORD had done for David and for Solomon and for Israel His people. [11]And Solomon finished the house of the LORD and the house of the king, and in all that had come to Solomon's mind to do in the house of the LORD and in his house he prospered. [12]And the LORD appeared to Solomon in the night, and He said to him, "I have hearkened to your prayer and chosen this place for Me as a house of sacrifice. [13]Should I shut the heavens and there be no rain, and should I summon the locusts to consume the land, and should I send the plague against My people, [14]My people on whom My name is called shall humble

themselves and pray and seek My presence and turn back from their evil ways, and I will hearken from the heavens and forgive their offense and heal their land. [15]Now, My eyes shall be open and My ears attentive to the prayer of this place. [16]And now, I have chosen and consecrated this house for My name to be there forever, and My eyes and My heart shall be there forever. [17]As for you, if you walk before Me as David your father did, to do as all I have charged and you keep My statutes and My laws, [18]I shall raise up the throne of your kingship as I sealed a covenant with David your father, saying, 'No ruling man of you in Israel shall be cut off.' [19]But if you turn back and forsake My statutes and My commands that I have given to you and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, [20]I will uproot you from My land that I gave to you, and this house that I have consecrated to My name I will fling away from My presence and turn it into a byword and a mockery among all the peoples. [21]And this house that was exalted, all who pass by it will be dismayed and say, 'Why did the LORD do this to this land?' [22]And they will say, 'Because they forsook the LORD, God of their fathers, Who brought them out of the land of Egypt, and they held fast to other gods and bowed down to them and served them. Therefore has He brought upon them all this harm.'"

CHAPTER 7 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *fire came down from the heavens and consumed the burnt offering.* This descent of celestial fire does not appear in the parallel passage in Kings and is probably inspired by the miraculous fire that consumes Elijah's offering in 1 Kings 18. There are quite a few verses that do not appear in 1 Kings 8. What is replicated from Kings in this chapter are verses 5, 7, 8, 9, and 10.

12. *And the* LORD *appeared to Solomon.* The passage from here to the end of the chapter replicates, with some minor changes, 1 Kings 9:1–9. The reader is referred to the commentary on those verses in Kings.

CHAPTER 8

[1]And it happened at the end of twenty years after
Solomon built the house of the LORD and his house,
[2]and the towns that Huram had given to Solomon,
Solomon had rebuilt and settled Israelites there. [3]And
Solomon went to Hamath-Zobah and prevailed against
it. [4]And he rebuilt Tadmor in the wilderness and the
storehouse towns that he had built in Hamath. [5]And he
rebuilt Upper Beth-Horon and Lower Beth-Horon as
fortified towns with double doors and bolts, [6]and
Baalath and all the storehouse towns that Solomon had
and all the chariot towns and all the towns of the
horsemen and every desire that Solomon desired to
build in Jerusalem and in Lebanon and in all the
territory under his rule. [7]All the people left of the
Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the
Hivvite and the Jebusite who were not of Israel, [8]of
their sons who were left after them in the land whom
the Israelites had not wholly destroyed, Solomon
subjected them to forced labor till this day. [9]But of the
Israelites whom Solomon had not made slaves for his

tasks, they were men of war and commanders of his captains and commanders of his chariots and of his horsemen. [10]And these were the commanders of King Solomon's prefects, two hundred fifty holding sway over the people. [11]And Solomon brought up the daughter of Pharaoh from the City of David to the house that he had built for her, for he said, "I will not have a woman dwelling in the house of David king of Israel, for it is holy, as the Ark of the LORD came there." [12]Then did Solomon offer up burnt offerings to the LORD on the altar of the LORD that he had built in front of the great hall, [13]what was due every day to offer up according to the command of Moses, for sabbaths and for new moons and for the festivals three times a year, on the Festival of Flatbread and on the Festival of Weeks and on the Festival of Huts. [14]And according to the practice of David his father he set up orders of the priests over their service and the Levites in their watches to praise and to minister over against the priests for what was due every day, and the gatekeepers in their orders for every single gate. Thus was the command of David man of God. [15]And they did not swerve from the king's command concerning the priests and the Levites in all matters and concerning the treasuries. [16]And all the tasks of Solomon were firmly established until the day the

foundation of the house of the LORD was laid and until the house of the LORD was entirely finished.
17 Then did Solomon go to Ezion-Geber and to Eloth on the seacoast in the land of Edom. 18 And Huram sent to him in charge of his servants ships and servants adept in the sea, and Solomon's servants came to Ophir and took from there four hundred fifty talents of gold and brought it to King Solomon.

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And it happened at the end of twenty years.* This passage corresponds to 1 Kings 9:10–28, although with a few substantial deletions and additions as well as some variant formulations. Readers are referred to the commentary on 1 Kings 9.

2. *the towns that Huram had given to Solomon.* In Kings, Solomon gives twenty towns to Huram (called Hiram there), evidently in payment for the cedarwood and the skilled laborers. The Chronicler may have found it distasteful to represent Solomon giving away real estate.

8. *whom the Israelites had not wholly destroyed.* 1 Kings 9:20 has "could not wholly destroy," an expression of incapacity that the Chronicler decides to erase.

11. *I will not have a woman dwelling in the house of David.* He is motivated not by misogyny but by a concern for ritual purity in a consecrated place: a menstruating woman would impart impurity.

14. *he set up orders of the priests.* The details here are absent from 1 Kings 9 and once again reflect the Chronicler's interest in establishing sacerdotal procedures and attributing them to David.

David man of God. For understandable reasons, David is never given this epithet in the Book of Samuel. It reflects the Chronicler's agenda of idealizing David and transforming him into a figure of piety.

16. *until the house of the* LORD *was entirely finished.* The Hebrew here does not sound entirely idiomatic. 1 Kings 9:24 at this point shows an enigmatic word, *milo',* and since its root may suggest "full," the Chronicler tries to solve the problem by substituting, albeit awkwardly, a more familiar term, *shalem,* "complete."

CHAPTER 9

[1]And the Queen of Sheba heard the rumor of
Solomon, and she came to try Solomon with riddles in
Jerusalem with a very great retinue and camels bearing
spices and gold in abundance and precious stones, and
she came to Solomon and spoke to him all that was in
her heart. [2]And Solomon told her all her questions, and
there was no question hidden from Solomon that he
did not tell her. [3]And the Queen of Sheba saw
Solomon's wisdom and the house that he had built,
[4]and the food on his table and the seat of his servants
and the standing of his attendants and their garments
and his cupbearers and their garments and the ascent
by which he would go up to the house of the LORD—
and she was breathless. [5]And she said to the king, "The
word that I heard in my land about your doings and
your wisdom is true. [6]And I did not believe their words
until I came and my own eyes saw, and, look, the half
of it was not told to me. You exceed in wisdom the
rumor that I heard. [7]Happy are your men, those who
stand in your presence perpetually and listen to your

wisdom. [8]May the LORD your God be blessed, Who has desired you to sit on His throne as king for the LORD your God through your God's love for Israel to make them stand forever, and has set you as king over them to do judgment and justice." [9]And she gave to the king a hundred twenty talents of gold and spices in great abundance and precious stones—and there was nothing like that spice which the Queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon. [10]And Huram's servants as well and Solomon's servants who had brought gold from Ophir brought sandalwood and precious stones. [11]And the king made from the sandalwood ramps for the house of the LORD and for the house of the king and lutes and lyres for the singers—the like of them had not before been seen in the land of Judah. [12]And King Solomon gave to the Queen of Sheba all she desired, for which she had asked, besides what she had brought to the king. And she turned and went to her land, she and her servants.

[13]And the weight of the gold that came to Solomon in a single year was a hundred and sixty-six talents of gold, [14]besides what he had from what the traders and the merchants and all the kings of Arabia and the governors of the land were bringing—gold and silver

to Solomon. [15]And King Solomon made two hundred
shields of beaten gold, six hundred measures of gold
he put on each shield, [16]and three hundred bucklers of
beaten gold, three hundred measures of gold he put on
each buckler. And the king put them in the House of
the Lebanon Forest. [17]And the king made a great ivory
throne and overlaid it with pure gold. [18]Six steps the
throne had, and the throne had a golden footstool
attached to it, and arms on each side at the seat, and
two lions standing by the arms. [19]And twelve lions
were standing there on the six steps on each side. Its
like was not made in all the kingdoms. [20]And all King
Solomon's drinking vessels were gold, and all the
vessels of the House of the Lebanon Forest pure gold.
Silver counted for naught in Solomon's days. [21]For the
king had ships going to Tarshish with Huram's
servants. Once every three years would the Tarshish
ships come bearing gold and silver, ivory, apes, and
parrots. [22]And King Solomon was greater than all the
kings of the earth in wealth and wisdom. [23]And all the
kings of the earth would seek Solomon's presence to
hear his wisdom that God had put in his heart. [24]And
they would bring each his tribute, silver vessels and
golden vessels, robes, weapons, and spices, horses and
mules, what was done each year. [25]And Solomon had
four thousand stables for horses and chariots and

twelve thousand horsemen, and he led them to the chariot towns, and with the king in Jerusalem. [26]And he came to rule over all the kings from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and as far as the border of Egypt. [27]And the king made silver in Jerusalem like stones, and cedar he made like the sycamores in the lowlands in abundance. [28]And they would bring out horses for Solomon from Egypt and from all the lands. [29]And the rest of the acts of Solomon, early and late, are they not written in the words of Nathan the prophet and in the prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite and in the visions of Jedo the seer concerning Jeroboam son of Nebat? [30]And Solomon was king in Jerusalem and over all Israel forty years. [31]And Solomon lay with his fathers, and they buried him in the City of David his father. And Rehoboam was king in his stead.

CHAPTER 9 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And the Queen of Sheba heard the rumor of Solomon.* This entire chapter is nearly identical with 1 Kings 10. Readers are referred to the commentary there. The hyperbolic representation of Solomon's vast wealth and profound wisdom (itself probably a relatively late text) clearly appealed to the Chronicler and motivated him to replicate it integrally.

29. *And the rest of the acts of Solomon.* This coda diverges from the one in 1 Kings 11:41, which refers us to a book of court annals, not to collections of prophecies. Again, the Chronicler wants to associate his subject with the realm of the divine.

CHAPTER 10

[1]And Rehoboam came to Shechem, for all Israel had
come to Shechem to make him king. [2]And it happened
when Jeroboam son of Nebat heard—and he was in
Egypt where he had fled from King Solomon—that
Jeroboam came back from Egypt. [3]And they sent and
called to him, and Jeroboam and all Israel came and
they spoke to Rehoboam, saying, [4]"Your father made
our yoke heavy, and now, lighten the hard labor of
your father and his heavy yoke that he put on us, that
we may serve you." [5]And he said to them, "Come back
to me in another three days." And the people went off.
[6]And King Rehoboam took counsel with the elders
who stood in the service of Solomon his father while
he was alive, "How do you counsel to respond to this
people?" [7]And they spoke to him, saying, "If you will
be good to this people and show favor to them and
speak good words to them, they will be your servants
always." [8]And he forsook the counsel of the elders that
they had given him and took counsel with the young
men who had grown up with him, who were standing

in his service. [9]And he said to them, “What do you counsel that we should respond to this people who have spoken to me, saying, ‘Lighten the yoke that your father put on us’?” [10]And the young men with whom he had grown up spoke to him, saying, “Thus shall you say to the people who spoke to you, saying, ‘Your father made our yoke heavy, and now lighten it from upon us.’ Thus shall you say to them, ‘My little finger is thicker than my father’s loins. [11]And now, my father burdened you with a heavy yoke, and I will add to your yoke. My father scourged you with whips, and I will scourge you with scorpions.’ ” [12]And Jeroboam, and all the people with him, came to Rehoboam on the third day as the king had spoken, saying, “Return to me on the third day.” [13]And the king answered them harshly, and the king forsook the counsel of the elders, [14]and he spoke to them according to the counsel of the young men, saying, “My father made your yoke heavy and I will add to it. My father scourged you with whips, and I will scourge you with scorpions.” [15]And the king did not hearken to the people, for it was brought about by the LORD in order to fulfill His word that He had spoken through Abijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam son of Nebat. [16]And all Israel [saw] that the king had not hearkened to them, and the people responded to the king, saying,

"We have no share in David
nor an estate in the son of Jesse.
To your tents, each man of Israel.
See to your house, O David!"

And all Israel went to their tents. [17]As to the Israelites dwelling in the towns of Judah, Rehoboam was king over them. [18]And King Rehoboam sent out Adoram, who was over the forced labor, and the Israelites stoned him and he died. Then King Rehoboam hastened to mount a chariot to flee to Jerusalem. [19]And Israel has rebelled against the house of David to this day.

CHAPTER 10 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Rehoboam came to Shechem.* This chapter is virtually identical with 1 Kings 12:1–19. The few minor differences are inconsequential—e.g., instead of "To your tents, O Israel" (1 Kings 12:16), verse 16 here has "To your tents, each man of Israel," the addition of a single syllable in the Hebrew. Readers are referred to the commentary on 1 Kings 12.

16. *And all Israel [saw].* The verb is missing and is supplied from 1 Kings 12:16. This is a simple error in the scribal copying of the text from Kings.

CHAPTER 11

[1]And Rehoboam came to Jerusalem and assembled all
the house of Judah and Benjamin, a hundred eighty
thousand picked warriors to do battle with Israel to
bring back the kingship to Rehoboam. [2]And the word
of the LORD came to Shemaiah man of God, saying,
[3]"Say to Rehoboam son of Solomon king of Judah and
to all Judah and Benjamin, saying, [4]Thus said the
LORD, 'You shall not go up and you shall not do battle
with your brothers. Go back each man to his house,
for from Me this thing has come about.'" And they
heeded the words of the LORD and turned back from
going against Jeroboam. [5]And Rehoboam dwelled in
Jerusalem and built fortified towns in Judah. [6]And he
built Bethlehem and Etam and Tekoa, [7]and Beth-Zur
and Socho and Adullam, [8]and Gath and Mareshah and
Ziph, [9]and Adoraim and Lachish and Azekah, and
[10]Zorah and Aijalon and Hebron, fortified towns that
are in Judah and Benjamin. [11]And he reinforced the
fortified towns and put officers in them and stores of
food and oil and wine, [12]and in every single town

shields and spears, and he reinforced them very strongly. And so Judah and Benjamin were his.

13 And the priests and the Levites who were throughout
Israel from all their territory took a stance before him.
14 For the priests and the Levites had abandoned their
pasturelands and their holdings and had come to Judah
and to Jerusalem because Jeroboam, with his sons, had
excluded them from serving as priests to the LORD.
15 And he set up for himself priests for the high places
and for the satyrs and the calves that he had made.
16 And after them there came to Jerusalem from all the
tribes of Israel those who devoted their heart to seek
the LORD God of Israel to sacrifice to the LORD God
of their fathers. 17 And they strengthened the kingdom
of Judah and supported Rehoboam son of Solomon for
three years, for they went in the way of David and
Solomon for three years. 18 And Rehoboam took him as
wife Mahahlath daughter of Jerimoth son of David,
and Abihail daughter of Eliab son of Jesse. 19 And she
bore him sons—Jeush and Shamariah and Zaham.
20 And after he took Maachah daughter of Absalom,
and she bore him Abijah and Attai and Ziza and
Shelomith. 21 And Rehoboam loved Maachah more
than all his wives and his concubines, for he had

married eighteen wives and sixty concubines, and he
begat twenty-eight sons and sixty daughters. [22]And
Rehoboam put at the head as prince over his brothers
Abijah son of Maachah, for [he meant] to make him
king. [23]And he wisely spread all his sons through all
the regions of Judah and Benjamin to all the fortified
towns, and he married them off with wives.

CHAPTER 11 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Rehoboam came to Jerusalem.* The passage from here to the end of verse 4 replicates 1 Kings 12:21–24. What then follows in this chapter has no counterpart in Kings, although it is uncertain whether the Chronicler was drawing on another old source or composed the section himself.

6. *And he built Bethlehem and Etam and Tekoa.* Again the Chronicler displays his propensity to buttress his narrative with lists of names.

13. *throughout Israel.* Because of the report of Jeroboam's actions that follows, "Israel" must refer to the ten northern tribes.

15. *And he set up for himself priests for the high places and for the satyrs and the calves that he had made.* This assertion picks up the contention of the Deuteronomist that Jeroboam's northern cult was idolatrous and takes it a step further by adding "satyrs" (demonic goat-gods) to "high places" and "calves," which were the cult-icons set up by Jeroboam.

16. *from all the tribes of Israel those who devoted their heart to seek the* LORD. In the version presented by the Chronicler, there was a moment of revulsion against Jeroboam's pagan practices among the population of the northern tribes. The historicity of this report is questionable.

17. *they . . . supported Rehoboam son of Solomon for three years.* It is not clear why their support lasted just three years. Perhaps, after better acquaintance with the dubious character of Rehoboam, they concluded that he was no better than Jeroboam.

18. *Abihail daughter of Eliab son of Jesse.* She would be Rehoboam's aunt, thus posing two questions: marriage with an aunt is prohibited, and as daughter of David's oldest brother, she probably would have been rather old. The main point, of course, is that Rehoboam takes pains to ally himself with David's family in order to reinforce his dynastic claims.

22. *for [he meant] to make him king.* A verb appears to have dropped out before the infinitive, and a likely one is supplied in brackets in the translation.

23. *and he married them off with wives.* The Hebrew text here looks corrupt. It reads *wayishʾal hamon nashim,* literally, "and he asked many wives." The verb *shaʾal* is not ordinarily used for seeking wives, and the word for "many," *hamon,* also looks idiomatically suspect. This translation adopts one proposed emendation, reading *waysiʾa lahem nashim.* This involves a respacing of the consonants (the kind of error a scribe might easily make) and it assumes that the consonant *nun* at the end of *hamon* was introduced by dittography because the next word begins with *nun* and that the vowel before it was then inserted in order to turn *h-m-n* into a known word.

CHAPTER 12

[1]And it happened when the kingship of Rehoboam was
firmly established and when he gained strength, that he
abandoned the teaching of the LORD, and all Israel
with him. [2]And it happened in the fifth year of King
Rehoboam that Shishak king of Egypt went up against
Jerusalem, for they had betrayed the LORD, [3]with
twelve hundred chariots and sixty thousand horsemen,
and the troops who came with him from Egypt were
beyond numbering—Lybians, Sukkites, and Nubians.
[4]And he captured the fortified towns of Judah and
came up to Jerusalem. [5]And Shemaiah the prophet
came to Rehoboam and the commanders of Judah
who had come to Jerusalem because of Shishak, and
he said to them, “Thus said the LORD: You on your
part have abandoned Me, and I as well have
abandoned you into the hand of Shishak.” [6]And the
commanders of Israel and the king humbled
themselves and said, “The LORD is in the right.” [7]And
when the LORD saw that they had humbled
themselves, the word of the LORD came to Shemaiah,

saying, “They have humbled themselves. I will not destroy them, but I will grant them a measure of survival, and My wrath shall not pour out against Jerusalem by the hand of Shishak. [8]But they shall become his servants, that they know My service and the service of the kingdoms of the lands.” [9]And Shishak king of Egypt went up against Jerusalem and took the treasures of the house of the LORD and the treasures of the house of the king. He took everything, and he took the golden bucklers that Solomon had made. [10]And King Rehoboam made in their stead bronze bucklers and entrusted them to the officers of the royal sentries who guarded the entrance of the king’s house. [11]And it happened when the king would come to the house of the LORD, the royal sentries would carry them and bring them back to the chamber of the royal sentries. [12]And when he humbled himself, the LORD’s anger turned back from him so as not to utterly destroy, and throughout Judah, too, there were good things. [13]And King Rehoboam grew strong in Jerusalem and he reigned, for Rehoboam was forty-one years old when he became king, and seventeen years he was king of Jerusalem, the city that the LORD had chosen to set His name there from all the tribes of Israel. And his mother’s name was Naamah the Ammonite. [14]And he did evil because he did not

ready his heart to seek the LORD. [15]And the acts of Rehoboam, early and late, are they not written in the words of Shemaiah the prophet and Iddo the seer in tracing lineage? And there was constant war between Rehoboam and Jeroboam. [16]And Rehoboam lay with his fathers and was buried in the City of David. And Abijah his son was king in his stead.

CHAPTER 12 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Shishak king of Egypt went up against Jerusalem.* See the comment on the parallel verse, 1 Kings 14:25. Most of the material in this chapter does not draw directly on Kings, with the exception of verses 9–12 (parallel to 1 Kings 14:26–28) and verses 15–16 (parallel to 1 Kings 14:29–30).

3. *Lybians, Sukkites, and Nubians.* These peoples all lived in areas adjacent to Egypt, and mercenaries were recruited from them.

7. *a measure of survival.* In practical terms, this meant that the Judahites paid a heavy tribute to the Egyptians, including the contents of the Temple and palace treasuries, but their city was not destroyed. The phrase “they shall become his servants” in the next verse essentially means that they will become vassals to Shishak.

15. *in tracing lineage.* In the Hebrew this is an infinitive and a single word, “to trace lineage.” Its meaning in context is not altogether clear. What might be indicated is that the king’s acts were included in genealogical lists. Such lists, as we have seen, had paramount importance for the Chronicler.

CHAPTER 13

[1]In the eighteenth year of King Jeroboam, Abijah was
king over Judah. [2]Three years he was king in
Jerusalem, and his mother's name was Michaiah
daughter of Uriel from Gibeah. And there was war
between Abijah and Jeroboam. [3]And Abijah joined
battle with a force of four hundred thousand warriors,
picked men, valiant warriors, and Jeroboam arrayed
his troops for battle, eight hundred thousand picked
men, valiant warriors. [4]And Abijah arose on Mount
Zemaraim, which is in the hill country of Ephraim,
and said, "Hear me, Jeroboam and all Israel. [5]Do you
not know that the LORD God of Israel has given
kingship over Israel forever to David and to his sons,
in a covenant of salt? [6]And Jeroboam son of Nebat,
Solomon's servant, arose and rebelled against his
master. [7]And there gathered round him empty
worthless men, and they were hard against Rehoboam
when Rehoboam was but a lad and soft-hearted and
could not stand strong against them. [8]And now you
mean to prevail in strength over the LORD's kingdom

in the land of David's sons when you are a great crowd
and have with you the golden calves that Jeroboam
made as gods. [9]Have you not driven off the LORD's
priests, the sons of Aaron, and the Levites, and made
yourselves priests like the peoples of the lands?
Whoever comes to consecrate himself with a bull from
the herd and seven rams becomes a priest to ungods.
[10]But we, the LORD our God we have not forsaken,
and priests, sons of Aaron, minister to the LORD, and
the Levites are at the task. [11]And they offer to the
LORD burnt offerings every morning and every
evening and aromatic incense and the bread in rows on
a pure table and the golden lampstand and its lamps
burning morning and evening, for we keep the watch
of the LORD our God, but you have forsaken Him.
[12]And, look, at our head is God and His priests and the
sounding trumpets to sound out against you. O men of
Israel, do not battle with the LORD God of your
fathers, for you shall not prosper!" [13]And Jeroboam
had laid an ambush to come from behind them, and
they were in front of Judah while the ambush was
behind them. [14]And Judah turned, and, look, the battle
was in front of and behind them, and they cried out to
the LORD with the priests blasting the trumpets.
[15]And the men of Judah shouted, and it happened
when the men of Judah shouted that God routed

Jeroboam and all Israel before Abijah and Judah.
16And the men of Israel fled before Judah, and God
gave them into their hand. 17And Abijah and his troops
struck them with a mighty blow, and the slain that fell
of Israel were five hundred thousand picked men.
18And the men of Israel were brought low at that time,
and the men of Judah prevailed for they relied on the
LORD God of their fathers. 19And Abijah pursued
Jeroboam and captured towns from him—Bethel and
its hamlets and Jeshanah and its hamlets and Ephrain
and its hamlets. 20And Jeroboam could not muster
power again in the days of Abijah, and the LORD
struck him and he died. 21And Abijah grew strong and
took himself fourteen wives and begot twenty-two
sons and twenty daughters. 22And the rest of the acts of
Abijah and his ways are written in the record of the
prophet Iddo. 23And Abijah lay with his fathers, and
they buried him in the City of David. And Asa his son
was king in his stead. In his days the land was quiet for
ten years.

CHAPTER 13 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *his mother's name was Michaiah daughter of Uriel from Gibeah.* 1 Kings 15:2 reports the mother to be Maachah daughter of Absalom. In fact, the rest

of this chapter conveys an account of Abijah's reign and his military activities that does not appear in Kings, and it is perhaps drawn from another source.

3. *four hundred thousand warriors.* As is usual, this number and the ones that follow are highly inflated.

5. *a covenant of salt.* The idiom suggests an irrevocable covenant.

6. *his master.* This strategically chosen term makes Jeroboam an underling rebelling against his legitimate master, Rehoboam, the Davidic monarch.

9. *Whoever comes to consecrate himself.* The illegitimate priesthood is the cultic counterpart of the illegitimate king of the northern tribes.

10. *priests, sons of Aaron.* The Chronicler is true to his agenda in stressing cultic purity as the chief manifestation of the legitimacy of the Judahite monarchy. This suggests that he has either composed this text himself or doctored it.

12. *men of Israel.* This phrase (literally, "sons of Israel") usually means "Israelites," but that English term might suggest the subjects of both the northern and the southern kingdoms, whereas here and below the clear reference is to the men in the forces of the northern kingdom, Israel.

15. *the men of Judah shouted.* This is probably a battle cry, meant to strike fear in the enemy.

20. *the LORD struck him and he died.* The "striking" suggests the infliction of a disease or stroke or heart attack. Such an end of Jeroboam's life is not mentioned in Kings, but the Chronicler wants to emphasize that Jeroboam is punished for his acts.

21. *grew strong.* The implication is that with his military superiority assured, he had abundant time to assemble a harem and beget many children.

22. *the record.* The Hebrew term used is *midrash*, which occurs only once more in the Bible, also in Chronicles. It is an all-purpose term that can mean "expounding," "inquiry," and more, and it later became a set term for biblical exegesis by the early rabbis.

CHAPTER 14

[1]And Asa did what was good and right in the eyes of
the LORD his God. [2]And he removed the foreign
altars and the high places and shattered the cultic
pillars and hacked down the cultic poles. [3]And he told
Judah to seek the LORD, God of their fathers, and to
do the teaching and the commands. [4]And he removed
the high places and the incense stands from all the
towns of Judah, and the kingdom before him was
quiet. [5]And he built fortress towns in Judah, for the
land was quiet, and he faced no war in those years, as
the LORD had granted him respite. [6]And he said to
Judah, “Let us build up these towns and circle them
with walls and towers, double doors and bolts, while
the land is before us, for we sought the LORD our
God. We sought, and He granted us respite all
around.” And they built and prospered. [7]And Asa had
a force of three hundred thousand men bearing spears
and shields, and from Benjamin, two hundred eighty
thousand bearing bucklers and drawing the bow. All of
these were valiant warriors. [8]And Zerah the Cushite

sallied forth with a force of a million, and three hundred chariots, and he came to Mareshah. [9]And Asa sallied forth against him, and they deployed for battle in the Valley of Zephita by Mareshah. [10]And Asa called to the LORD his God and said, “O LORD, with You there is no difference whether to help the great or the powerless. Help us, LORD our God, for we have relied on You, and in Your name we have come against this multitude. Let no mortal hold You back.” [11]And the LORD routed the Cushites before Asa and before Judah, and the Cushites fled. [12]And Asa pursued them, together with the troops who were with him, as far as Gerar. And many of the Cushites fell, unable to revive, for they were broken before the LORD and before His camp. And they bore off very abundant booty. [13]And they struck the towns around Gerar, for the fear of the LORD was upon them, and they plundered all the towns, for there was much to plunder in them. [14]And tents of herdsmen they struck as well and captured sheep in abundance and camels. And they went back to Jerusalem.

CHAPTER 14 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Asa did what was good and right in the eyes of the* LORD. The Chronicler hews to the theology of the Deuteronomistic History: Asa imposes cultic purity on Judah, and as a reward he is granted respite from his enemies and then an impressive military victory

6. *while the land is before us.* In context, this phrase means: while the land is at our disposal, free from the interference of invaders.

8. *Zerah the Cushite.* There are two peculiarities here. "Cushite" consistently refers to Nubians, and it is somewhat improbable that an expeditionary force of Nubians, whose homeland is south of Egypt, would invade Judah far to the north. Some scholars contend that there were Nubian mercenaries in the Egyptian army, but there is no mention here of Egyptians, and a mercenary would not have been put in charge of a vast military force. This Nubian general, moreover, bears a perfectly good Hebrew name. In sum, the historicity of this entire episode is doubtful. It should be said that the Book of Kings has an entirely different narrative about Asa.

12. *as far as Gerar.* This is a coastal town in Philistine territory.

13. *And they struck the towns around Gerar.* It is questionable that these towns could have been Nubian possessions. Asa's army (if in fact this happened) does what armies sweeping everything before them generally do—it destroys, and plunders whatever in its path offers gain, regardless of whether this population is hostile.

CHAPTER 15

[1]And the spirit of God was upon Azariah son of
Oded. [2]And he came out before Asa and said to him,
“Hear me, Asa and all Judah and Benjamin. The
LORD is with you when you are with Him, and if you
seek Him, He will be there for you. But if you
abandon Him, He will abandon you. [3]And for a long
time Israel was without a true God and without priest
and teacher and without teaching. [4]And when it was in
straits, it turned back to the LORD God of Israel and
sought Him out, and He was there for them. [5]And in
those times it was unsafe for the wayfarer, for there
were great upheavals for all the dwellers of the lands.
[6]And nation was ground against nation and town
against town, for God had panicked them with every
sort of distress. [7]As for you, be strong and let not your
hands slacken, for there are wages for your acts.” [8]And
when Asa heard these words, and the prophecy of
Oded the prophet, he summoned strength and took
away all the digusting things from all the land of Judah
and Benjamin and from the towns that he had captured

from the hill country of Ephraim, and he restored the altar of the LORD that was in front of the great hall of the LORD. [9]And he gathered all Judah and Benjamin and those sojourning with them from Ephraim and from Manasseh and from Simeon, for many of Israel had crossed over to him when they saw that the LORD his God was with him. [10]And they gathered in Jerusalem in the third month of the fifteenth year of Asa's kingship. [11]And they sacrificed to the LORD on that day from the plunder. They brought seven hundred oxen and seven thousand sheep. [12]And they entered into a covenant to seek the LORD God of Israel with all their heart and with all their being. [13]And whoever did not seek the LORD God of Israel would be put to death, from the least to the greatest, from man to woman. [14]And they vowed to the LORD in a loud voice and with shouting and with trumpets and with ram's horns. [15]And all Judah rejoiced over the vow, for with all their heart they vowed and with all their will they sought after Him, and He was there for them. And the LORD granted them respite all around. [16]And Maachah, too, King Asa's mother, he removed from being queen mother, as she had made a horror for Asherah. And Asa cut down her horror and pulverized it and burned it in the Kidron Wadi. [17]But the high places did not disappear from Israel, yet the

heart of Asa was whole all his days. [18]And he brought his father's sacred things and his own sacred things to the house of God—silver and gold and vessels.

CHAPTER 15 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *He will be there for you.* Literally, "He will be found for you."

5. *for all the dwellers of the lands.* The plural "lands" implies a condition of political upheaval extending beyond the borders of Judah.

9. *many of Israel had crossed over to him.* That is, they switched their allegiance from the northern kingdom to Asa.

15. *their will.* In this context, the Hebrew *ratson,* which usually means "favor" or "being pleased," appears to show the meaning it has in rabbinic Hebrew, "will."

16. *And Maachah, too.* This verse and the next are the only ones in this chapter that closely reproduce textual material from the Deuteronomistic History, replicating 1 Kings 15:13–14.

17. *the heart of Asa was whole all his days.* 1 Kings 15:14 has "was whole with the LORD all his days," which is more coherent, and the two missing Hebrew words may simply have been skipped in the transcription of the earlier text.

CHAPTER 16

[1]In the thirty-sixth year of Asa's kingship Baasha went
up against Judah and built Ramah so as not to allow
anyone to come and go who belonged to Asa king of
Judah. [2]And Asa took out silver and gold from the
treasuries of the house of the LORD and the house of
the king and sent them to Ben-Hadad king of Aram
who dwelled in Damascus, saying, [3]"There is a pact
between you and me and between my father and your
father. Look, I have sent you silver and gold. Go,
revoke your pact with Baasha king of Israel, that he
withdraw from me." [4]And Ben-Hadad heeded King
Asa and sent the commanders of the troops that he
had against the towns of Israel, and he struck down
Ijon and Dan and Abel-Mayim and all the storehouses
of the towns of Naphtali. [5]And it happened, when
Baasha heard, that he left off building Ramah and
brought his task to an end. [6]And King Asa took all
Judah, and they bore off the stones of Ramah and its
timbers with which Baasha had built, and with them he
built Geba and Mizpah. [7]And at that time Hanani the

seer came to Asa king of Judah and said to him, “Because you relied on the king of Aram and did not rely on the LORD your God, the force of the king of Aram has escaped from your hand. [8]Were not the Cushites and the Lybians a vast army with very many chariots and horsemen, and because you relied on the LORD, He gave them into your hand? [9]For the LORD —His eyes roam through all the earth to lend strength to those wholeheartedly with Him. You have been foolish in this, for from now on you will have wars.” [10]And Asa was vexed with the seer and put him in stocks because of his anger against him over this. And Asa abused some of the people at that time. [11]And, look, the early and late acts of Asa are written in the Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel. [12]And in the thirty-ninth year of his kingship Asa was ailing in his feet until his ailment was acute, but even in his ailment he did not seek the LORD but rather physicians. [13]And Asa lay with his fathers, and he died in the forty-first year of his reign. [14]And they buried him in his tomb that he had dug in the City of David, and they laid him out in his resting place, which was filled with spices of various kinds compounded by the perfumer’s art, and they lit a very great fire for him.

CHAPTER 16 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Baasha went up against Judah.* The passage from here through verse 6 reproduces 1 Kings 15:17–22 with only minor changes. See the comments there.

7. *Hanani the seer.* Although he is mentioned in 1 Kings, there is no report there of this extended prophetic exhortation.

8. *the Cushites and the Lybians.* The historical reference of this invasion from Africa of Nubians and Lybians is elusive.

10. *And Asa abused some of the people at that time.* The most plausible reason for his acting harshly (the literal sense of the verb is "to shatter") toward these people is that they somehow expressed support for Hanani's castigation of the king.

11. *the Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel.* Since the common designation, "the book of the acts" is not used, this is in all likelihood a reference not to royal annals but to the text we call the Book of Kings.

12. *ailing in his feet.* See the comment on 1 Kings 15:23.

14. *filled with spices of various kinds.* The obvious motive would be to mask the odor of the corpse in its early stages of decomposition. This detail does not appear in 1 Kings 15.

they lit a very great fire for him. This is not, strictly speaking, a funeral pyre, because cremation was not practiced in ancient Israel. One infers that it was a grand public gesture of commemoration, celebrating the life of a person regarded, at least by some, as a great and virtuous king.

CHAPTER 17

[1]And Jehoshaphat his son was king in his stead, and
he became strong over Israel. [2]And he stationed forces
in all the fortified towns of Judah and stationed
garrisons in the land of Judah and in the towns of
Ephraim that Asa his father had captured. [3]And the
LORD was with Jehoshaphat, for he walked in the
former ways of David his father and did not seek the
Baalim, [4]but the God of his fathers he sought and by
His commands he walked, not like the acts of Israel.
[5]And the LORD made the kingship firm in his hand,
and all Judah offered tribute to Jehoshaphat, and he
had wealth and honor in abundance. [6]And his heart
was exalted in the ways of the LORD, and what is
more, he removed the high places and the cultic poles
from Judah. [7]In the third year of his kingship he sent
out to his commanders Ben-Hail and Obadiah and
Zechariah and Nethaneel and Michaiah to teach in the
towns of Judah. [8]And with them were the Levites
Shemaiah and Nethaniah and Zebadiah and Asahel
and Shemiramoth and Jehonathan and Adonijah and

Tobijah and Tob-Adonijah, the Levites, and with them
Elishama and Jehoram, the priests. [9]And they taught in
Judah, and with them was the book of the LORD's
teaching, and they went round in all the towns of
Judah and taught among the people. [10]And the terror
of the LORD was upon all the kingdoms of the lands
that were round Judah, and they did not do battle with
Jehoshaphat. [11]And from the Philistines they were
bringing tribute to Jehoshaphat, tribute of loads of
silver. The Arabs, too, were bringing him flocks—
seven thousand seven hundred rams and seven
thousand seven hundred he-goats. [12]And Jehoshaphat
grew greater and greater, and he built fortress towns
and storehouse towns in Judah. [13]And he had vast tasks
in the towns of Judah, and men of war, valiant
warriors, in Jerusalem. [14]And this was their muster by
their patriarchal houses in Judah, over the
commanders of the thousands Adnah was commander,
and with him were three hundred thousand valiant
warriors. [15]And by him was Jehohanan the
commander, and with him were two hundred eighty
thousand. [16]And by him was Amasiah son of Zichri the
commander, who answered the call for the LORD, and
with him were two hundred thousand valiant warriors.
[17]And from Benjamin: Eliada the valiant warrior, and
with him armed with bow and buckler two hundred

thousand. [18]And by him Jehozabad, and with him were a hundred eighty thousand vanguard fighters. [19]These were the ones ministering to the king besides those the king had stationed in the fortress towns throughout Judah.

CHAPTER 17 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *over Israel.* The designation "Israel" here for what appears to be the southern kingdom of Judah may reflect later usage, when there was no longer a northern kingdom and "Israel" came to refer to all that was left. Alternately, the preposition here could also mean "against," in which case the report of fortifications that follows would indicate Jehoshaphat's consolidating military strength against his northern rival.

4. *not like the acts of Israel.* Here the reference must be to the northern kingdom, viewed by the Judahite establishment as idolatrous. This might lend support to construing the phrase in verse 1 as "against Israel."

9. *the book of the LORD's teaching.* This could be Deuteronomy (although, in historical terms, it was not actually written yet) or the Five Books of Moses.

14. *And this was their muster.* As repeatedly elsewhere, the Chronicler gives way to his propensity for providing roll-call lists, perhaps out of a sense that the catalogues of names were necessary to authenticate his narrative.

three hundred thousand valiant warriors. The total number of fighting men is over a million, many times the number of troops that Judah mustered at any point in its history. As elsewhere, numerical hyperbole is in full display.

19. *These were the ones ministering to the king.* The sense is that these were the troops stationed in Jerusalem. Many others, as indicated, were deployed in the fortress towns throughout the kingdom.

CHAPTER 18

[1]And Jehoshaphat had wealth and honor in abundance,
and he married into the family of Ahab. [2]And he went
down at the end of some years to Ahab in Samaria,
and Ahab slaughtered sheep and cattle in abundance
for him and for the people with him, and he enticed
him to go up to Ramoth-Gilead. [3]And Ahab king of
Israel said to Jehoshaphat king of Judah, “Will you go
with me to Ramoth-Gilead?” And he said to him, “I
am like you, my people like your people in battle.”
[4]And Jehoshaphat said to the king of Israel, “Inquire,
pray, this day, the word of the LORD.” [5]And the king
of Israel gathered the prophets, four hundred men, and
he said to them, “Shall we go against Ramoth-Gilead
for battle, or shall I desist?” And they said, “Go up,
that God may give it into the king’s hand.” [6]And
Jehoshaphat said, “Is there still here any prophet of the
LORD, that we might inquire of him?” [7]And the king
of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “There is still one man
through whom to inquire of the LORD, but I hate him,
for he does not prophesy good about me but all his

days, evil. He is Michaiah son of Imla." And Jehoshaphat said, "Let not the king say thus." [8]And the king of Israel called to a certain eunuch and said, "Hurry here Micaiah son of Imla." [9]And the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat king of Judah were each sitting on his throne dressed in royal garb, sitting on the threshing floor at the entrance gate of Samaria, and all the prophets were prophesying before them. [10]And Zedekiah son of Chenaanah made himself iron horns and said, "Thus says the LORD: 'With these you shall gore the Arameans until you destroy them.'" [11]And all the prophets were prophesying thus, saying, "Go up to Ramoth-Gilead and prosper, and the LORD shall give it into the hand of the king." [12]And the messenger who had gone to call Michaiah spoke to him, saying, "Look, the words of the prophets with one mouth are good for the king. Let your word, pray, be like one of them, and you should speak good things." [13]And Michaiah said, "As the LORD lives, that which my God says will I speak." [14]And he came to the king, and the king said to him, "Michaiah, shall we go up to Ramoth-Gilead to battle, or shall I refrain?" and he said to him, "Go up and prosper, and they shall be given into your hand." [15]And the king said to him, "How many times must I make you swear that you shall speak to me only truth in the name of the

LORD?” [16]And he said, “I saw all Israel scattered over the mountains like sheep that have no shepherd. And the LORD said, ‘These have no master. Let each go back home in peace.’” [17]And the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “Did I not say to you that he will not prophesy good about me but evil?” [18]And he said, “Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on His throne with all the army of the heavens standing in attendance at His right hand and His left. [19]And the LORD said, ‘Who will entice Ahab king of Israel, that he go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead?’ And one said this way and one said another way. [20]And a spirit came out and stood before the LORD and said, ‘I will entice him.’ And the LORD said to him, ‘How?’ [21]And it said, ‘I will go out and become a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ And he said, ‘You shall entice and you shall also prevail. Go forth and thus do.’ [22]And now, look, the LORD has placed a lying spirit in the mouth of these prophets, but the LORD has spoken evil against you.” [23]And Zedekiah son of Chenaanah approached and struck Michaiah on the cheek and said, “In what way has the spirit of the LORD passed from me to speak to you?” [24]And Michaiah said, “You are about to see on that day when you will enter the innermost chamber to hide.” [25]And the king of Israel said, “Take Michaiah

and bring him back to Amon the commander of the town and to Joash the king's son. [26]And say, 'Thus said the king: Put this fellow in the prison-house and feed him meager bread and meager water until I return safe and sound." [27]And Michaiah said, "If you really return safe and sound, the LORD has not spoken through me." [28]And the king of Israel went up, and Jehoshaphat king of Judah with him, to Ramoth-Gilead. [29]And the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "I will disguise myself and go into battle, but you, don your royal garb." [30]And the king of Aram had charged his chariot commanders, saying, "You shall battle against neither small nor great but against the king of Israel alone." [31]And it happened, when the commanders of the chariots saw Jehoshaphat, they said, "He must be the king of Israel," and they swerved against him to do battle. And Jehoshaphat cried out, and the LORD aided him, and God drew them away from him. [32]And it happened, when the commanders of the chariots saw that he was not the king of Israel, they turned back from him. [33]And a man drew the bow unwitting and struck the king of Israel between the joints of the armor. And he said to the charioteer, "Turn back your hand and take me out of the fray, for I am wounded." [34]And the battle surged on that day, and the king of

Israel was propped up in the chariot facing Aram till evening, and he died as the sun went down.

CHAPTER 18 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

3. *And Ahab king of Israel said.* Everything from this point to the end of the chapter replicates 1 Kings 22:3–35, with only a few minor variations. Readers are referred to the commentary on the parallel passage in Kings.

31. *God drew them away from him.* 1 Kings 22 has no report of divine intervention, and the Arameans' recognition that this is not Ahab (verse 32) makes such intervention unnecessary. The verb in the received text, *wayesitem*, means "enticed them," but several ancient versions show *wayesirem*, "drew them away" or "removed them."

34. *the king of Israel was propped up in the chariot.* 1 Kings 22:35 has his blood pooling on the floor of the chariot, a detail the Chronicler chooses to omit.

CHAPTER 19

[1]And Jehoshaphat king of Judah returned safely to his house in Jerusalem. [2]And Jehu the seer son of Hanani went out to meet him and said to King Jehoshaphat, “Would you aid the wicked and love those who hate the LORD? For this there is fury against you from before the LORD. [3]Yet good things are found with you, for you rooted out the cultic poles from the land and readied your heart to seek God.” [4]And Jehoshaphat dwelled in Jerusalem, and he went out among the people from Beersheba to the hill country of Ephraim and led them back to the LORD God of their fathers. [5]And he stationed judges in the land in all the fortified towns of Judah, in every single town. [6]And he said to the judges, “See to what you are doing, for not for the sake of humankind do you judge but for the sake of the LORD, and He is with you in matters of judgment. [7]And now, may the fear of the LORD be upon you. Watch and do, for there is no injustice or favoritism or bribe taking with the LORD our God.” [8]And in Jerusalem as well Jehoshaphat stationed the

Levites and the priests and some of the patriarchal chiefs of Israel for the LORD's judgment and for disputes. And they came back to Jerusalem. [9]And he charged them, saying, "Thus shall you do—in the fear of the LORD, in good faith, and with a whole heart. [10]And any dispute that may come to you from your brothers dwelling in their towns, whether about bloodshed or about the teaching, the commands, the statutes, or the laws, you shall warn them so that they do not incur guilt to the LORD and fury come upon you and your brothers. Thus shall you do and you shall not incur guilt. [11]And, look, Amariah the high priest is over you for every matter of the LORD and Zebadiah son of Ishmael the prince of the house of Judah for every matter of the king, and the Levites are before you. Act firmly, and may the LORD be with him who is good."

CHAPTER 19 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And Jehoshaphat king of Judah returned safely to his house.* There is no counterpart in Kings to the material in this chapter. The subject matter interests the Chronicler, whether he culled it from an old source or composed it, because it involves administrative details of the monarchy and a judicial bureaucracy in which the Levites and the priests play a role.

2. *Would you aid the wicked and love those who hate the LORD?* Given what has immediately preceded in the narrative, the probable reference of Jehu's words of denunciation is to the recent alliance with Ahab, a northern monarch who easily qualifies to be called "wicked."

3. *Yet good things are found with you.* Jehoshaphat, despite his ill-considered alliance with the nefarious Ahab, has, after all, devoted himself to purging pagan practices in Judah.

7. *there is no injustice or favoritism or bribe taking with the LORD our God.* In the legislation against these practices in the Torah, the grounds are that they constitute wrongdoing and exploitation in the social and legal realm. Here, however, the rationale is ultimately theological: God in His divine perfection constitutes the absolute standard of justice—"not for the sake of humankind do you judge but for the sake of the LORD" (verse 6)—to which we must aspire.

8. *for the LORD's judgment and for disputes.* Some scholars think that the former term here refers to cultic regulations and the latter to what we would call torts. This proposal may be questioned because as has just been made clear in verses 6–7, all legal issues ultimately refer to God. The two terms here, then, may be virtually synonymous or even a hendiadys.

11. *And, look, Amariah . . . is over you for every matter of the LORD and Zebadiah . . . for every matter of the king.* The division is not between cultic and secular but rather between general laws, which include items governing moral behavior and social and economic justice, all assumed to be God's commands, and matters having to do with the obligations of the populace to the monarchy. Given the reference to going out to the towns in the preceding verse, it may be that Amariah and Zebadiah were thought to preside over a court of appeals in Jerusalem.

CHAPTER 20

[1]And it happened afterward that the Moabites and the Ammonites, and with them some of the Meunites, came against Jehoshaphat to do battle. [2]And [people] came and told Jehoshaphat, saying, “A great multitude has come against you from the other side of the sea, from Edom, and here they are in Hazazron-Tamar, which is Ein-Gedi. [3]And Jehoshaphat was afraid and turned to inquire of the LORD and proclaimed a fast for all Judah. [4]And Judah gathered to seek the LORD, even from all the towns of Judah did they come to seek the LORD. [5]And Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah in the house of the LORD in front of the New Court. [6]And he said, “O LORD God of our fathers, are You not God in the heavens, and You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations, and in Your hand are power and might, and none can stand up against You? [7]Have not You, O our God, dispossessed the dwellers of this land before Your people Israel and have given it forever to the seed of Abraham who loved you? [8]And they settled within it and built in it for

You a sanctuary for Your name, saying, [9]"If evil comes upon us, sword or flood or pestilence or famine, we shall stand before this house and before You, for Your name is in this house, and cry out to You from our straits, and You will listen and rescue.' [10]And now, look, the Ammonites and Moab and Mount Seir, whom You did not let Israel come among them when they came from the land of Egypt, for they swerved away from them and did not destroy them—[11]and, look, they are paying us back by coming to drive us out of our inheritance that You gave us. [12]Our God, will You not judge against them? For we have no strength before this great multitude coming against us, and we do not know what we should do, for our eyes are upon You." [13]And all Judah were standing before the LORD, their little ones, their wives, and their children, too. [14]And the spirit of the LORD came upon Jahaziel son of Zechariah son of Benaiah son of Jeiel son of Mattaniah the Levite of the sons of Asaph in the assembly. [15]And he said, "Listen closely, all Judah and dwellers of Jerusalem, and King Jehoshaphat: Thus said the LORD of you: You, do not fear and do not be terrified by this great multitude, for not yours is the battle but God's. [16]Tomorrow, go down against them. They are about to come up the Ascent of Ziz, and you shall encounter them at the end of the wadi

facing the wilderness of Jeruel. [17]It is not for you to do
this battle. Take your stance, stand still, and see God's
rescue of you, Judah and Jerusalem. Do not fear and
do not be terrified. Tomorrow sally forth before them,
and the LORD will be with you." [18]And Jehoshaphat
bowed, face to the ground, and all Judah and the
dwellers of Jerusalem prostrated themselves before the
LORD to bow down to the LORD. [19]And the Levites,
of the Kohathites and of the Korahites, arose to praise
the LORD God of Israel in a very loud voice. [20]And
they awoke early in the morning and went out to the
wilderness of Tekoa, and as they went out,
Jehoshaphat stood and said, "Hear me, Judah and
dwellers of Jerusalem. Trust in the LORD your God
and staunchly trust in His prophets and prosper." [21]And
he counseled with the troops and stationed choristers
for the LORD and praise-sayers for the holy majesty
as they went out before the vanguard, saying,

"Acclaim the LORD,
for His kindness is forever."

[22]And as they were beginning with glad song and
praise, the LORD set ambushes against the
Ammonites and Moab and Mount Seir who were

coming to Judah, and they were routed. [23]And the
Ammonites and Moab stood against the dwellers of
Mount Seir to wipe them out and to destroy them, and
when they had finished off the dwellers of Seir, each
aided his brother to destroy his fellow. [24]And Judah
had come to Mizpah, to the wilderness, and they
turned to the multitude, and there they were, corpses
fallen to the ground, and there were no survivors.
[25]And Jehoshaphat and his troops came to plunder
their booty, and they found among them in abundance
possessions and garments and precious vessels, and
they despoiled them beyond carrying, and three days
were they plundering the booty, for it was great. [26]And
on the fourth day they assembled in the Valley of
Blessing, for there they had blessed the LORD.
Therefore have they called the name of the place the
Valley of Blessing to this day. [27]And all the men of
Judah and Jerusalem came back with Jehoshaphat at
their head to come back to Jerusalem in rejoicing, for
the LORD had given them joy over their enemies.
[28]And they came to Jerusalem with lutes and with lyres
and with trumpets to the house of the LORD. [29]And
the terror of the LORD was upon all the kingdoms of
the lands where they heard that the LORD had done
battle with Israel's enemies. [23]And the kingdom of
Jehoshaphat was peaceful, and his God granted him

respite all around. [31]And Jehoshaphat was king over Judah. He was thirty-five years old when he became king, and he was king in Jerusalem twenty-five years. And his mother's name was Azubah daughter of Shilhi. [32]And he went in the way of his father Asa and did not turn away from it, to do what was right in the eyes of the LORD. [33]Only the high places were not removed, and the people still did not ready their heart for the God of their fathers. [34]And the rest of the acts of Jehoshaphat, early and late, are written in the records of Jehu son of Hanani, which are included in the book of the kings of Israel. [35]And afterward Jehoshaphat joined forces with Ahaziah king of Israel —he acted wickedly. [36]And he joined forces with him to build ships to go to Tarshish, and they made the ships in Ezion-Geber. [37]And Eliezer son of Dodavah from Mareshah prophesied against Jehoshaphat, saying, "As you have joined forces with Ahaziah, the LORD shall wreck what you have made." And the ships were broken up and were unable to go to Tarshish.

CHAPTER 20 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *the Meunites.* The Masoretic Text has "the Ammonites," which cannot be right because the Ammonites have already been mentioned. The Septuagint shows "Meunites," although the precise identification of this people remains uncertain. This entire narrative of a victory over forces invading from east of the Jordan and from the Dead Sea, through verse 30 here, does not appear in Kings.

2. *from the other side of the sea.* The sea in question is the Dead Sea, referred to in Hebrew as the Salt Sea.

6. *are You not God in the heavens.* The Chronicler is careful to make his Jehoshaphat theologically correct, invoking God's omnipotence as he pleads for help in this hour of national distress.

10. *Mount Seir.* This is obviously an ellipsis for "the inhabitants of Mount Seir," which was a central site for the Edomites, still another trans-Jordanian people, but not mentioned in the report in verse 1.

11. *they are paying us back.* This is sarcastic because the Israelites had refrained from attacking these peoples on their way into the land of Israel.

22. *as they were beginning with glad song and praise.* The picture that emerges is an odd one, though framed to make a theological point: the kingdom of Judah, ominously threatened by a large invading force, exhibits not grave concern but exultation because of the people's confidence that, in the words from Psalms just sung by the Levites, God's "kindness [also, loyalty] is forever," and He will grant them victory.

the LORD set ambushes. This is a crucial, if tricky, moment in the report of the victory. Evidently, what happened was that Jehoshaphat's army managed to defeat a force of superior numbers by trapping it in ambushes. Since this is a strategy of cunning, not dependent on a frontal assault against the enemy, it is attributed to God, presumed to have inspired the Judahites with the military wisdom to set the ambushes.

23. *And the Ammonites and Moab stood against the dwellers of Mount Seir.* Evidently, the alliance was a fragile one. Perhaps the Ammonites and the Moabites thought that it was the dwellers of Mount Seir who had led them into the Judahite trap, and so they turned against them.

each aided his brother to destroy his fellow. The dwellers of Mount Seir having been destroyed, a general sense of distrust and dissent broke out in the

ranks of the invaders, and they began to slaughter each other. Such panic and confusion among enemy troops are regularly ascribed in the Bible to God's intervention.

25. *garments.* The received text reads "corpses," which does not make sense in a list of objects of plunder. Some Hebrew manuscripts have *begadim*, "garments," a reading also reflected in three ancient versions and followed in this translation.

30. *And the kingdom of Jehoshaphat was peaceful.* The period of peace is attributed to this dramatic victory over the invaders from the east, which is imagined to persuade the surrounding countries that Judah cannot be attacked because it is protected by its God.

31. *And Jehoshaphat was king over Judah.* At this point, the Chronicler picks up the narrative of Jehoshaphat's reign from 1 Kings 22:41–49.

34. *the book of the kings of Israel.* This text cannot be canonical Book of Kings or court annals because it incorporates the writings of Jehu the seer. This could be an old document available to the Chronicler, or it could be his invention.

36. *to build ships to go to Tarshish.* This appears to be based on a mistaken understanding of "Tarshish ships" by the Chronicler. Tarshish was a destination far to the west in the Mediterranean, and ships built in Ezion-Geber, which is on the Gulf of Akabah far to the south of the land of Israel, could not possibly sail there. "Tarshish ships" probably refers not to the destination of the ships but to a type of craft constructed for long voyages.

37. *As you have joined forces with Ahaziah, the* LORD *shall wreck what you have made.* All that is said in 1 Kings 22:49 is that the ships were broken up —perhaps, exposed to a fierce storm after their construction. The Chronicler on his part feels the need to introduce a theological explanation: Jehoshaphat's joint venture with Ahaziah proves to be ill fated because it was wrong—"he acted wickedly"—for him to enter into any sort of alliance with Ahaziah, the son of the evil King Ahab.

CHAPTER 21

[1]And Jehoshaphat lay with his fathers and was buried
with his fathers in the City of David, and Jehoram his
son was king in his stead. [2]And he had brothers, sons
of Jehoshaphat, Azariah and Jehiel and Zechariah and
Uzziah and Michael and Shephatiah. All these were
the sons of Jehoshaphat king of Judah. [3]And their
father gave them many gifts of silver and of gold and
of valuables together with the fortified towns in Judah,
but the kingship he gave to Jehoram, for he was the
firstborn. [4]And Jehoram rose up over his father's
kingdom and grew strong and killed all his brothers by
the sword and also some of the commanders of Israel.
[5]Thirty-two years old was Jehoram when he became
king, and eight years he was king in Jerusalem. [6]And
he went in the ways of the kings of Israel as the house
of Ahab had done, for Ahab's daughter was wife to
him. And he did what was evil in the eyes of the
LORD. [7]But the LORD did not want to destroy the
house of David because of the covenant that He had
sealed with David, and as He had said to grant him

and his sons a lamp for all time. [8]In his days did Edom
rebel from under the hand of Judah, and they set a
king over themselves. [9]And Jehoram crossed over with
his commanders and with all his chariots, and it
happened as he arose in the night, the Edomites
surrounding him struck him and the chariot
commanders. [10]And Edom has rebelled from under the
hand of Judah until this day. Then did Libnah rebel at
that time from under his hand, for he had forsaken the
LORD God of his fathers. [11]He also made high places
in the hill country of Judah and led the dwellers of
Israel to go whoring and made Judah stray. [12]And a
letter came to him from Elijah the prophet, saying,
“Thus said the LORD God of David your father:
Because you have not gone in the ways of Jehoshaphat
your father and in the ways of Asa king of Judah, [13]but
you went in the ways of the kings of Israel and led the
dwellers of Jerusalem to go whoring as the house of
Ahab led them to go whoring, and even your brothers
of your father’s house, who were better than you, did
you kill, [14]the LORD is about to afflict your people and
your wives and all your possessions with a great
plague. [15]And as for you, you will be stricken with
great illnesses, with illness of the bowels, till your
bowels come out because of the illness after days upon
days.” [16]And the LORD stirred up against Jehoram the

spirit of the Philistines and the Arabs who were alongside the Cushites. [17]And they came up against Judah and breached into it and captured all the possessions that were in the house of the king and also his sons and his wives, and there was left him no son except Jehoahaz the youngest of his sons. [18]And after all this the LORD afflicted him in his bowels with an incurable illness. [19]And it happened as the days passed, at the end of two years, that his bowels came out because of his illness and he died in terrible throes; and they did not light a fire for him like the fire for his fathers. [20]Thirty-two years old he was when he became king, and eight years he was king in Jerusalem, and he went off in unseemly fashion, and they buried him in the City of David but not in the tombs of the kings.

CHAPTER 21 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *And he had brothers.* Most of the material in this chapter does not appear in 2 Kings 8, the parallel chapter on Jehoram. The one exception is the passage from verse 5 to verse 10, which corresponds to 2 Kings 8:17–22.

Uzziah. The Masoretic Text has "Azariah," already mentioned. This translation adopts a proposed emendation.

4. *Jehoram rose up over his father's kingdom and grew strong and killed all his brothers.* The murder of his brothers is a means of consolidating his

"strength," his position on the throne. Fratricide for this reason is all too common in the historical record of royal houses in many kingdoms.

9. *the Edomites surrounding him struck him.* The received text says that he struck the Edomites, but the context makes clear that the opposite was the case. See the explanatory note on 2 Kings 8:21.

11. *led the dwellers of Israel to go whoring.* "Whoring" is the standard metaphor for idol worship in biblical usage.

12. *And a letter came to him from Elijah the prophet.* The letter is surely fictitious. It is unlikely that Elijah was still alive at this point, and the stories about him are all concerned with his confronting the royal house of the northern kingdom, not Judah. There is also no indication elsewhere that prophets used written correspondence to castigate kings. Elijah was no doubt introduced because he figures as the implacable castigator of the vices of Israelite kings.

15. *illness of the bowels.* Jehoram's death by a ghastly intestinal disorder is absent from Kings. It may be that the Chronicler drew on a source that reported this painful and humiliating end, which the writer in Kings felt was indecorous to include.

20. *he went off in unseemly fashion.* The meaning of the Hebrew adverbial phrase is uncertain. It would seem to mean, literally, "without desire." Some propose the sense is "unlamented" or "unpraised," without much philological warrant.

CHAPTER 22

[1]And the dwellers of Jerusalem made Ahaziah, his
youngest son, king in his stead, for the band that had
come into the camp with the Arabs had killed all the
older ones, and Ahaziah son of Jehoram became king
of Judah. [2]Forty-two years old was Ahaziah when he
became king, and one year was he king in Jerusalem,
and his mother's name was Athaliah daughter of Omri.
[3]He, too, went in the ways of the house of Ahab, for
his mother would counsel him to act wickedly. [4]And
he did evil in the eyes of the LORD like the house of
Ahab, for they were councillors to him after his
father's death to his ruination. [5]By their counsel, too,
did he go, and he went with Jehoram son of Ahab to
battle against Hazael king of Aram at Ramoth-Gilead,
and the Arameans struck Jehoram. [6]And he turned
back to heal in Jezreel from the wounds they had
inflicted in him at Ramah, and Ahaziah son of
Jehoram king of Judah came down to see Jehoram son
of Ahab in Jezreel, for he was failing. [7]And the defeat
of Ahaziah was from God for coming to Jehoram. And

when he came, he went out with Jehoram to Jehu son of Nimshi, whom the LORD had anointed to cut off the house of Ahab. [8]And it happened when Jehu was carrying out judgment against the house of Ahab, that he found the commanders of Judah and Ahaziah's nephews ministering to Ahaziah, and he killed them. [9]And they searched for Ahaziah and captured him when he was hiding in Samaria, and they brought him to Jehu and he was put to death. And they buried him, for they said, "He is the son of Jehoshaphat, who sought the LORD with all his heart." But there was no one in the house of Ahaziah to muster strength for the kingship. [10]When Athaliah, Ahaziah's mother, saw that her son was dead, she arose and destroyed all the royal seed of the house of Judah. [11]And Jehosheba, the king's daughter, took Joash, Ahaziah's son, and stole him away from the king's sons who had been put to death, and she put him and his nurse in the bedchamber and hid him. Jehosheba, daughter of King Jehoram, wife of Jehoiada the priest hid him from Athaliah, for she was Ahaziah's sister, and they did not put him to death. [12]And he was with them hiding in the house of God six years, while Athaliah reigned over the land.

CHAPTER 22 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

2. *Forty-two years old was Ahaziah.* This is clearly a mistake because that would make him two years older than his father. 2 Kings 8:26 gives his age as twenty-two.

6. *Ahaziah.* The received text erroneously has "Azariah," but some Hebrew manuscripts and three ancient versions read "Ahaziah."

9. *they brought him to Jehu and he was put to death.* The account in 2 Kings 9 differs somewhat in its report of Ahaziah's execution.

10. *she arose and destroyed all the royal seed of the house of Judah.* The Masoretic Text has "she spoke with all the royal seed." Some Hebrew manuscripts have instead of the Masoretic *watedaber* the verb *wate'abed,* "she destroyed." It may be that the Chronicler was so horrified by the spectacle of the queen mother murdering her grandchildren that he substituted a more innocuous term. Verses 10–12 closely follow 2 Kings 11:1–3, and readers may consult the commentary on those verses in Kings.

CHAPTER 23

[1]And in the seventh year Jehoiada gained strength and
took the commanders of the hundreds, Azariah son of
Jeroham and Ishmael son of Jehohanan and Azariah
son of Obed and Maaseiah son of Adaiah and
Elishaphat son of Zichri into a pact with him. [2]And
they went round through Judah and gathered together
the Levites from all the towns of Judah and the
patriarchal chiefs of Israel, and they came to
Jerusalem. [3]And all the assembly sealed a pact with the
king in the house of God. And he said, “Look, the
king’s son shall be king as the LORD spoke
concerning the sons of David. [4]This is the thing that
you must do: a third of you, who of the priests and of
the Levites begin your weekly duty, shall be for the
gatekeepers of the thresholds, [5]and a third in the king’s
house, and a third at the Foundation Gate, and all the
people shall be in the courts of the house of the
LORD. [6]And none shall enter the house of the LORD
except the priests and those ministering to the Levites.
They may enter, for they are holy. And all the people

shall keep the LORD's watch. [7]And the Levites shall draw round the king, every man with his weapon in hand, and whosoever enters the house shall be put to death. And be you with the king when he comes in and when he goes out." [8]And the Levites and all Judah did as all that Jehoiada the priest had charged, and each took his men, those beginning their weekly duty with those finishing their weekly duty, for Jehoiada had not dismissed the divisions. [9]And Jehoiada the priest gave the commanders of the hundreds the spears and the shields and the bucklers that were King David's, which were in the house of God. [10]And he stationed all the people, each man with his weapon in his hand, from the south corner of the house to the north corner of the house, by the altar and by the house, all round the king. [11]And they brought out the prince and put the crown and the regalia on him, and they made him king. And Jehoiada and his sons anointed him and said, "Long live the king." [12]And Athaliah heard the sound of the people and the sentries and those praising the king, and she came to the people at the house of the LORD. [13]And she saw, and, look, the king was standing by his pillar at the entrance, and the commanders and the trumpets were by the king, and all the people of the land were rejoicing and blowing the trumpets, and the choristers were with instruments

of song, proclaiming to praise. And Athaliah rent her garments and said, “A plot, a plot!” 14And Jehoiada the priest brought out the commanders of the hundreds, the mustered men of the force, and said to them, “Take her out from the colonnades, and whoever comes after her by the sword shall be put to death,” for the priest said, “Let her not be put to death in the house of the LORD.” 15And they locked hands around her, and she came by way of the Horse Gate to the king’s house. 16And Jehoiada made a pact between him and all the people to be a people of the LORD. 17And all the people came to the house of Baal and shattered it and smashed its altars and its images, and Mattan the priest they killed in front of the altar. 18And Jehoiada appointed guards in the house of the LORD in the hands of the priests and the Levites whom David had placed over the house of the LORD to offer up burnt offerings to the LORD as written in the teaching of Moses, in rejoicing and in song, as ordained by David. 19And he stationed gatekeepers over the gates of the house of the LORD, that no person unclean in any respect should enter. 20And he took the commanders of the hundreds and the leaders and the rulers of the people and all the people of the land and brought the king down from the house of the LORD, and they came in through the Upper Gate of the king’s house

and seated the king on the throne of the kingdom.
[21]And all the people of the land rejoiced, while the
town was quiet. And Athaliah they had put to death by
the sword.

CHAPTER 23 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *And in the seventh year.* This report of the coronation of Joash and the overthrow and execution of his murderous grandmother corresponds closely to 2 Kings 11:4–20, with only minor divergences in wording. The names of the commanders in this verse, for example, do not appear in 2 Kings 11, but their inclusion is in keeping with the Chronicler's concern with listing names. Readers may consult the commentary on 2 Kings 11.

2. *And they went round through Judah.* In Kings, the plot against Athaliah is organized within Jerusalem. Mustering support throughout the kingdom may reflect the Chronicler's desire to show that the nation as a whole took part.

4. *a third of you.* The arrangement by thirds as stipulated in Kings is somewhat confusing, and the Chronicler does a certain amount of rewording in an effort—not particularly successful—to clarify the maneuver.

6. *And none shall enter the house of the* LORD *except the priests and those ministering to the Levites.* This detail is added to the account taken from Kings in accordance with the concern in Chronicles for sacerdotal purity.

CHAPTER 24

[1]Seven years old was Joash when he became king, and
forty years he was king in Jerusalem and his mother's
name was Zibiah from Beersheba. [2]And Joash did
what was right in the eyes of the LORD all the days of
Jehoiada the priest. [3]And Jehoiada took for himself
two wives, and he begat sons and daughters. [4]And it
happened afterward that Joash thought to restore the
house of the LORD. [5]And he gathered the priests and
the Levites and said to them, "Go out to the towns of
Judah and gather from all Israel silver to repair the
house of your God from one year to the next. As for
you, hurry in this matter." But the Levites did not
hurry. [6]And the king called to Jehoiada the head and
said to him, "Why did you not demand of the Levites
to bring from Judah and from Jerusalem the impost
fixed by Moses servant of the LORD and the assembly
for Israel for the Tent of Meeting? [7]For wicked
Athaliah and her sons had breached the house of God
and even rendered all the sacred things of the house of
the LORD to the Baalim." [8]And the king spoke, and

they made a certain chest and set it in the gate of the house of the LORD on the outside. [9]And they made a proclamation in Judah and Jerusalem to bring to the LORD the impost fixed by Moses servant of God over Israel in the wilderness. [10]And all the commanders and all the people rejoiced and brought it and flung it into the chest till it was full. [11]And it happened whenever the chest was brought for the king's inspection by the Levites and they saw that there was abundant silver, the king's scribe would come with the official of the high priest and empty the chest and bear it off and return it to its place. Thus did they do day after day, and the silver was collected in abundance. [12]And the king and Jehoiada gave it to those doing the tasks of the work for the house of the LORD, and they hired masons and carpenters to renovate the house of the LORD and also workers in iron and bronze to repair the house of the LORD. [13]And those performing the tasks did them, and the task went well in their hands, and they put the house of God in its proper form and made it sound. [14]And when they finished, they brought the remaining silver before the king and Jehoiada, and they made it into vessels for the house of the LORD, vessels for ministering and pails and ladles and vessels of gold and silver, and they offered up burnt offerings in the house of the LORD perpetually, all the days of

Jehoiada. [15]And Jehoiada grew old and sated with days,
and he died, a hundred thirty years old he was when he
died. [16]And they buried him in the City of David with
the kings, for he had done good in Israel and with God
and with His house. [17]And after the death of Jehoiada
the commanders of Judah came and bowed down to
the king. Then the king heeded them. [18]And they
abandoned the house of the LORD God of their
fathers and served the cultic poles and the idols, and
there was fury against Judah and Jerusalem because of
this guilt of theirs. [19]And He sent among them
prophets to turn them back to the LORD and they
warned them, but they did not listen. [20]And the spirit
of God invested Zechariah son of Jehoiada the priest,
and he stood over the people and said to them, “Thus
said God: Why are you transgressing the LORD’s
command when you will not prosper? For you have
abandoned the LORD, and He will abandon you.”
[21]And they plotted against him and stoned him by the
king’s command in the court of the house of the
LORD. [22]And King Joash did not recall the kindness
that Jehoiada his father had showed him, but he killed
Jehoiada’s son, who as he was dying said, “Let the
LORD see and seek it out.” [23]And it happened at the
turn of the year that the force of Aram came up
against him, and they came to Judah and Jerusalem

and destroyed all the commanders of the people and sent all that was plundered from them to the king of Damascus. [24]For the force of Aram had come with few men, but the LORD gave a very large force into their hands, for they had forsaken the LORD God of their fathers. And against Joash they exacted punishment. [25]And when they went off, for they left him with grievous wounds, his servants plotted against him because of the bloodshed of the son of Jehoiada the priest, and they killed him in his bed. He died, and they buried him in the City of David, but they did not bury him in the tombs of the kings. [26]And these were the plotters against him: Zabed son of Shimeath the Ammonite and Jehozabad son of Shimrith the Moabite. [27]As to his sons and the many declarations against him and the renovation of the house of the LORD, they are written in the elaboration of the book of kings. And Amaziah his son was king in his stead.

CHAPTER 24 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Seven years old was Joash when he became king.* While this initial formula is the same as the beginning of 2 Kings 12, most of the material here is different from that in Kings. The chapter in Kings does include the story of the chest with the hole or slot for putting in silver, but even in that instance many of the details diverge.

5. *But the Levites did not hurry.* There is no indication in Kings of this delay by the Levites. It is hard to see how such a detail would serve the agenda of the Chronicler, so one may assume that he was drawing on a source that reported this behavior.

7. *For wicked Athaliah and her sons had breached the house of God.* In the account in Kings, she figures only as a ruthless murderer. The Chronicler adds to this condemnation the crime of her violating the sanctity of the Temple by introducing pagan worship there.

10. *rejoiced and brought it.* The sense might be, joyfully brought it.

14. *vessels of gold and silver.* Evidently, some of the donated silver was set aside to purchase gold, which was then used for fashioning some of the sacred vessels.

15. *a hundred thirty years old he was when he died.* As a rule, such notations of extravagant longevity are not used after the patriarchs and Moses (who made it to 120, an age that would become proverbial in Hebrew and Yiddish): the Chronicler evidently wanted to enhance Jehoiada's stature as a supremely virtuous character.

18. *And they abandoned the house of the* LORD *God of their fathers and served the cultic poles and the idols.* This turning of Joash to paganism after the death of his mentor Jehoiada is not reported in Kings. The version in Kings does provide an account of Joash's murder by conspirators, but only here—on what historical basis we cannot know—is it said that he was killed in vengeance for having ordered the death of Jehoiada's son Zechariah.

22. *he killed Jehoiada's son.* The Hebrew says only "he killed his son," but the name has been added in the translation to avoid the suggestion that Joash might have killed his own son.

25. *they left him with grievous wounds.* Presumably, the weakened condition of the wounded Joash made him an easy mark for the assassins.

26. *Zabed son of Shimeath the Ammonite and Jehozabad son of Shimrith the Moabite.* The fact that both assassins had foreign mothers may have meant that they had fewer compunctions about killing a Judahite king.

27. *the elaboration.* The Hebrew is the multiple-purpose term *midrash.* It probably does not mean "commentary" here (its common later signification),

and since it clearly contains narrative material, a sense such as “elaboration” seems plausible.

CHAPTER 25

[1]Twenty-five years old was Amaziah when he became
king, and twenty-nine years he was king in Jerusalem,
and his mother's name was Jehoaddan from Jerusalem.
[2]And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD
but not with a whole heart. [3]And it happened when his
kingship was firmly in his grasp that he killed his
servants who had struck down the king his father. [4]But
their sons he did not put to death, for as it is written in
the Teaching, in the Book of Moses as the LORD
charged, saying, "Fathers shall not die over sons, and
sons shall not die over fathers, but each man shall die
for his own offense." [5]And Amaziah gathered Judah
and set them out by patriarchal houses with the
commanders of the thousands and the commanders of
the hundreds for all Judah and Benjamin, and he
counted them from twenty years old upward and found
them to be three hundred thousand picked men
mustered to the army, wielding spear and shield. [6]And
he hired from Israel one hundred thousand valiant
warriors with a hundred talents of silver. [7]And a man

of God came to him, saying, “O king, let not the army of Israel come with you, for the LORD is not with Israel, with all the Ephraimites. [8]But you yourself, come, do it, be strong for battle, [else] God will make you stumble before the enemy, for there is power in God to aid or to make stumble.” [9]And Amaziah said to the man of God, “And what is to be done about the hundred talents that I have given to the Israelite troop?” And the man of God said, “God can give you much more than this.” [10]And Amaziah set apart the troop that had come to him from Ephraim in order for them to go back to their place, and their anger against Judah flared up fiercely, and they returned to their place in flaring anger. [11]And Amaziah gathered strength and led his troops, and he went to Salt Valley and struck down ten thousand Seirites. [12]And the Judahites captured ten thousand alive and brought them to the Rock and flung them from the top of the Rock, and they were all dashed to pieces. [13]And the members of the troop whom Amaziah turned back from going with him to battle raided the towns of Judah from Samaria to Beth-Horon and struck down from them three thousand and plundered abundant booty. [14]And it happened after Amaziah had come from striking down the Edomites that he brought the gods of the Seirites and set them up for himself as

gods and bowed down before them, and to them he would burn incense. [15]And the LORD's anger flared against Amaziah, and He sent him a prophet. And he said to him, "Why did you seek out the gods of the people who did not save the people from your hand?" [16]And it happened as he spoke to him that he said to him, "Have they made you a councillor to the king? Cease! Why should they strike you down?" And he said, "For God has counseled to destroy you, for you have done this and not heeded my counsel." [17]And Amaziah king of Judah took counsel and sent to Joash son of Jehoahaz son of Jehu king of Israel, saying, "Come let us face each other down." [18]And Joash king of Israel sent to Amaziah king of Judah, saying, "The thistle which is in Lebanon sent to the cedar which is in Lebanon, saying, 'Give your daughter to my son as wife,' and the beast of the field which is in Lebanon came by and trampled the thistle. [19]You thought, you have struck down Edom, but you are carried away by your own heart to gain glory. Now, stay in your house. Why should you provoke evil and fall, you and Judah with you?" [20]But Amaziah did not heed, for it was from God in order to give him into his hand, for he had sought out the gods of Edom. [21]And Joash king of Israel came up, and they faced each other down, and Amaziah king of Judah was in Beth-Shemesh which is

Judah's. [22]And Judah was routed by Israel, and every man fled to his tent. [23]But Joash caught Amaziah son of Joash son of Jehoahaz in Beth-Shemesh and brought him to Jerusalem and breached the wall from the Gate of Ephraim as far as the Corner Gate, four hundred cubits. [24]And [he took] all the gold and the silver and the vessels that were found in the house of God in charge of Obed-Edom and the treasuries of the king's house and the hostages, and he went back to Samaria. [25]And Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah lived fifteen years after the death of Joash son of Jehoahaz king of Israel. [26]And the rest of the acts of Amaziah, early and late, are they not written in the Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel? [27]And from the time Amaziah swerved away from the LORD, they hatched a plot against him in Jerusalem, and he fled to Lachish, and they sent after him to Lachish and put him to death there. [28]And they bore him off on horses and buried him with his fathers in the City of Judah.

CHAPTER 25 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Twenty-five years old was Amaziah.* From here to the end of verse 4 is a replication, with minor changes, of 2 Kings 14:1–6. Verse 11 reproduces 2

Kings 14:7, and verses 17–28 pick up 2 Kings 14:8–20. Readers are referred to the commentary on 2 Kings 14 for all this material.

6. *And he hired from Israel one hundred thousand valiant warriors.* Hiring mercenaries from the northern kingdom was an extraordinary step, and a man of God is quick to rebuke Amaziah for this act.

7. *all the Ephraimites.* Ephraim is a synonym for the northern kingdom.

11. *Seirites.* This is another name for the Edomites, who dwelled on Mount Seir.

12. *the Rock.* This may be what is called in Hebrew to this day Sela Edom, the site later of the Nabatean city of Petra.

13. *And the members of the troop . . . raided the towns of Judah.* Angered by being turned back from the battle—where they might have augmented their payment as mercenaries by taking booty—they despoil Judahite towns.

from Samaria. Samaria is in the territory of the kingdom of Israel, but the phrase here may mean "from the border of Samaria."

14. *he brought the gods of the Seirites and set them up for himself as gods.* This detail of Ahaziah's idolatry may be introduced by the Chronicler to spell out the bill of accusations against him and explain his subsequent downfall. It does not appear in Kings.

16. *God has counseled . . . my counsel.* The prophet sarcastically flings back the term that Ahaziah has used in confronting him. The next verse, even as it picks up verbatim the narrative in 2 Kings 14, adds "took counsel" in order to underscore that the king of Judah is now following a plan counter to God's counsel, one that will lead to disaster.

20. *for it was from God.* The spelling out of a divine plan to punish Ahaziah does not occur in Kings.

into his hand. The received text merely says "in hand," but two ancient versions attest to the possessive.

24. *[he took].* The Masoretic Text lacks a subject and a verb, and the translation here follows the Syriac.

27. *from the time Amaziah swerved away from the* LORD. This causal explanation, indicating that the conspiracy was a righteous reaction to Amaziah's cultic dereliction, does not appear in Kings.

28. *the City of Judah.* This locution is odd because it is not elsewhere used as an epithet for Jerusalem or any part of it. The parallel text in Kings has the expected “the City of David,” as do a few Hebrew manuscripts, and that may well be the correct reading.

CHAPTER 26

[1]And all the people of Judah took Uzziah, when he
was sixteen years old, and made him king in Amaziah
his father's stead. [2]He built up Eloth and settled it for
Judah after the king lay with his fathers. [3]Sixteen years
old was Uzziah when he became king and fifty-two
years he was king in Jerusalem, and his mother's name
was Jecoliah from Jerusalem. [4]And he did what was
right in the eyes of the LORD as all that Amaziah his
father had done. [5]And he sought out God in the days
of Zechariah, who imparted instruction in the fear of
God, and in the days he sought out the LORD, God
made him prosper. [6]And he sallied forth and did battle
against the Philistines and breached the wall of Gath
and the wall of Jabneh and the wall of Ashdod, and he
built towns near Ashdod and among the Philistines.
[7]And God aided him against the Philistines and against
the Arabs dwelling in Gur-Baal, and the Meunites.
[8]And the Ammonites gave tribute to Uzziah, and his
name went as far as the approach to Egypt, for he had
become very strong. [9]And Uzziah built towers in

Jerusalem by the Corner Gate and by the Valley Gate
and by the Angle, and reinforced them. [10]And he built
towers in the wilderness and hewed many cisterns, for
he had abundant cattle and farmers and vintners on the
plain and on the mountains and on the cropland, for he
loved the soil. [11]And Uzziah had a force doing battle
mustered for the army as a troop in the number of
their complement under Jeiel the scribe and Maaseiah
the overseer under the direction of Hananiah of the
king's commanders. [12]The full number of the heads of
the patriarchal houses for the warriors was two
thousand six hundred. [13]And under them was an army
force of three hundred thousand five hundred doing
battle with the strength of the force to aid the king
against the enemy. [14]And Uzziah readied for all the
army shields and spears and helmets and armor and
bows and slingstones. [15]And he made cunningly
fashioned devices to be in the towers in Jerusalem for
shooting arrows and large stones. And his name went
out afar, for he was wondrously aided, and so he grew
strong. [16]And as he grew strong, he became so
overweening as to act ruinously, and he betrayed the
LORD his God and came into the LORD's temple to
burn incense on the incense altar. [17]And Azariah the
priest came in after him, and with him were priests to
the LORD, eighty valiant men. [18]And they stood up

against King Uzziah and said to him, “It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD but for the Aaronide priests who are consecrated to burn incense. Get out of the sanctuary, for you have betrayed, and it is no glory for you from the LORD God.” [19]And Uzziah was angry, the censer for burning incense in his hand, and as he raged against the priests, skin blanch broke out on his forehead in front of the priests upon the incense altar. [20]And Azariah the high priest turned toward him with all the priests, and look, he was stricken with skin blanch on his forehead, and they rushed him out of there, and he, too, pressed to go out, for the LORD had infected him. [21]And King Uzziah was stricken with skin blanch to his dying day, and he stayed in the quarantine house, for it was decreed from the house of the LORD, and Jotham his son was over the king’s house judging the people of the land. [22]And the rest of the acts of Uzziah, early and late, Isaiah son of Amoz the prophet wrote down. [23]And Uzziah lay with his fathers, and they buried him with his fathers in the burial field that belongs to the kings, for they said, he was stricken with skin blanch. And Jotham his son became king in his stead.

CHAPTER 26 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Uzziah.* In the parallel text in 2 Kings 15, followed here loosely, and, intermittently, he is called Azariah. Some claim that Uzziah was a throne-name, but the contradiction may be the result of a confusion in transmission.

4. *as all that Amaziah his father had done.* Amaziah ended up devoting himself to pagan practices, so the wording may reflect the sheer momentum of a formulaic phrase.

5. *in the fear of God.* The Masoretic Text has *bireʾot,* "in the visions [?]," but many manuscripts and four ancient versions show *beyirʾat,* "in the fear of."

10. *he built towers in the wilderness.* There is some archaeological evidence for this extensive project of building fortifications.

11. *a force doing battle mustered for the army as a troop.* This was in all likelihood a unit of elite fighters, as the proliferation of military terms in what follows suggests.

15. *for he was wondrously aided.* The verb "aid," *ʿazar,* has a technical sense of being "bolstered in battle."

16. *he became so overweening.* Literally, "his heart grew haughty."

18. *It is not for you, Uzziah.* One notes that they address him abruptly by his name and do not use his royal title, even though the narrator has just referred to him as "King Uzziah."

19. *skin blanch.* The disease, *tsaraʿat*, is traditionally rendered as "leprosy," but the symptoms do not correspond to leprosy—the chief symptom is a loss of pigmentation—hence the coined name in this translation. In any case, it was thought to be highly contagious, necessitating quarantine. In Kings, no mention is made of the violation of the cult as the reason for the affliction.

21. *the quarantine house.* For an explanation of this translation choice, see the comment on 2 Kings 15:5.

Jotham his son was over the king's house. He appears to have served as regent during his father's extended illness.

22. *Isaiah son of Amoz the prophet wrote down.* Although Isaiah and Jotham were contemporaries, this authorship is unlikely, reflecting the Chronicler's

propensity to ascribe further histories of the sundry kings to prophets and seers.

23. *the burial field that belongs to the kings.* More literally, “that is the king’s.” What the phrase indicates is that because of Uzziah’s affliction with an infectious and humiliating disease, he was not buried in the royal tombs but in a burial plot—perhaps adjacent—that belonged to the kings.

CHAPTER 27

[1]Twenty-five years old was Jotham when he became
king, and sixteen years he was king in Jerusalem, and
his mother's name was Jerushah daughter of Zadok.
[2]And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD as
all that Uzziah his father had done, only he did not
come into the LORD's Temple, and the people were
still acting ruinously. [3]He built the Upper Gate of the
house of the LORD, and he built extensively on the
wall of the Ophel. [4]And towns did he build in the hill
country of Judah, and in the woods he built forts and
towers. [5]And he battled with the kings of the
Ammonites and prevailed over them, and the
Ammonites gave him in that year a hundred talents of
silver and ten thousand *kors* of wheat and ten thousand
kors of barley. This did the Ammonites bring back to
him, and also in the second and third year. [6]And
Jotham grew strong, for he made his ways firm before
the LORD his God. [7]And the rest of the acts of
Jotham and all his battles and his ways, look, they are
written in the book of the kings of Israel and Judah.

[8]Twenty-five years old he was when he became king,
and sixteen years he was king in Jerusalem. [9]And
Jotham lay with his fathers, and they buried him in the
City of David. And Ahaz his son was king in his stead.

CHAPTER 27 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Twenty-five years old was Jotham.* This brief notice on the reign of Jotham replicates 2 Kings 15:32–36 and 38.

2. *only he did not come into the LORD's Temple.* This detail, which follows on the episode of Uzziah's presuming to burn incense that appears only in Chronicles, is absent in the parallel text in Kings.

the people were still acting ruinously. 2 Kings 15:35 specifies a cultic transgression: "The people were still sacrificing and burning incense on the high places."

5. *And he battled with the kings of the Ammonites.* Kings does not report this war with the Ammonites, but it may reflect an authentic report from another source on which the Chronicler drew.

CHAPTER 28

[1]Twenty years old was Ahaz when he became king,
and sixteen years he was king in Jerusalem, but he did
not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD like
David his father. [2]And he went in the ways of the
kings of Israel, and he even made molten images for
the Baalim. [3]And he it was who burned incense in the
Valley of Ben-Hinnom and burned his sons in fire like
the abominations of the nations whom the LORD had
dispossessed before Israel. [4]And he sacrificed and
burned incense on the high places and on the hills and
under every lush tree. [5]And the LORD his God gave
him into the hand of the king of Aram, and they
struck against him and took many captives from him
and brought them to Damascus. And he was also given
into the hand of the king of Israel, and he struck a
great blow against him. [6]And Pekah son of Remaliah
killed a hundred twenty thousand in Judah on a single
day, all of them valiant men, as a result of their
forsaking the LORD God of their fathers. [7]And Zichri
the Ephraimite warrior killed Maaseiah the king's son

and Azrikam, prince of the house, and Elkanah, viceroy to the king. [8]And the Israelites took captive from their brothers two hundred thousand women, sons, and daughters, and they also plundered abundant booty from them and brought the booty to Samaria. [9]And a prophet of the LORD was there, Oded was his name, and he went out before the army coming to Samaria and said to them, “Look, in the wrath of the LORD God of your fathers against Judah He has given them into your hand, and you killed from among them in a rage that has reached the heavens. [10]And now, you intend to reduce the Judahites to male slaves and slavegirls for yourselves. Why, there are only guilty acts between you and the LORD your God. [11]And now, hear me and give back the captives whom you took from your brothers, for the LORD’s smoldering wrath is against you.” [12]And men of the chiefs of Ephraim arose—Azariah son of Johanan, Berechiah son of Meshillemoth, Jehizkiah son of Shallum, and Amasa son of Hadlai—against those who had come back from the army. [13]And they said to them, “You shall not bring the captives here, for you intend to add to your guilty acts against the LORD our offenses and our guilt, for great is our guilt and the smoldering wrath against Israel.” [14]And the vanguard left the captives and the plunder before the commanders and

all the assembly. [15]And the men who had been singled out by name arose and took the captives in hand and clothed their nakedness from the booty, clothed them and gave them sandals and fed them and gave them drink and rubbed them with oil and led on donkeys all who had stumbled and brought them to Jericho, city of the palms, to their brothers, and came back to Samaria.

[16]At that time King Ahaz sent to the king of Assyria to aid him. [17]Again the Edomites had come and struck against Judah and taken captives. [18]And Philistines raided the towns of the lowland and the Negeb belonging to Judah and captured Beth-Shemesh and Aijalon and Gederoth and Socho and its hamlets and Timnah and its hamlets and Gimzo and its hamlets, and they settled there. [19]For the LORD had brought Judah low because of Ahaz king of Judah, for he had loosed restraints in Judah and had grievously betrayed the LORD. [20]And Tilgath-Pilneser king of Assyria came against him and brought him into straits, and Tilgath-Pilneser did not support him. [21]For Ahaz had plundered the house of the LORD and the house of the king and the commanders and had given it to the king of Assyria, but with no aid for him. [22]And in the

very moment of his straits, he still betrayed the LORD —this was King Ahaz. [23]And he sacrificed to the gods of Damascus who were striking him down, and he thought, “The gods of the kings of Aram aid them. I will sacrifice to them and they will aid me.” But they served to make him and all Israel stumble. [24]And Ahaz collected the vessels of the house of God and cut to pieces the vessels of the house of God and closed the doors of the house of the LORD and made himself altars in every corner in Jerusalem. [25]And in every single town of Judah he made high places to burn incense to other gods, and he vexed the LORD God of his fathers. [26]And the rest of his acts and all his ways, early and late, they are written in the book of the kings of Judah and Israel. [27]And Ahaz lay with his fathers, and they buried him in the city, in Jerusalem, for they did not bring him to the graves of the kings of Israel. And Hezekiah his son was king in his stead.

CHAPTER 28 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Twenty years old was Ahaz.* Although this text follows the opening and closing formulas for the entry on Ahaz in 2 Kings 16, the details of the narrative are rather different.

3. *the Valley of Ben-Hinnom.* This notorious place—Hebrew *gei' ben-hinnom,* or *geihinnom*—became a term for "hell" in the transliterated form "gehenna."

5. *And he was also given into the hand of the king of Israel.* This version does not make entirely clear what is spelled out in 2 Kings 16, that there was a military alliance between Aram and the kingdom of Israel against Judah.

6. *Pekah son of Remaliah.* He is the monarch of the northern kingdom.

8. *two hundred thousand women, sons, and daughters.* While the number, as usual, is greatly inflated, the capture of women and children indicates that the forces of the northern kingdom penetrated deep into the territory of Judah.

11. *give back the captives whom you took from your brothers.* Though there has been deadly war between Israel and Judah, the two kingdoms remain "brothers," members of one nation, and so the population of Judah cannot be treated by Israel as though it were made up of foreigners who could be enslaved without compunction.

15. *clothed their nakedness . . . and gave them sandals.* This detail suggests that the captive Judahites had been torn from their homes. The deprivation of food and water is an indication that they had been treated roughly.

rubbed them with oil. As with the Greeks, rubbing olive oil on the body was part of the regimen of the good, comfortable life.

16. *to aid him.* As elsewhere, this verb indicates military aid.

20. *did not support him.* Ahaz's request of military assistance from Assyria (verse 16) proves to be futile.

23. *he sacrificed to the gods of Damascus.* In Kings he merely copies the design of the state-of-the-art altar in Damascus, and idolatry is not involved.

they served to make him and all Israel stumble. No real agency is attributed to the Aramean gods. In Ahaz's deluded perception, these gods have the power to help him, and it is this delusion that makes him stumble.

27. *for they did not bring him to the graves of the kings of Israel.* In Kings, he is actually buried in the City of David among the royal tombs. The Chronicler evidently wants to make the point that Ahaz suffered exclusion from the most honored burial grounds because of his paganizing ways. It should also be noted that Chronicles is not consistent in its use of "Israel"; in the war

reported above, “Israel” clearly designates the northern kingdom, but here it is used interchangeably with “Judah.”

CHAPTER 29

[1]Hezekiah became king when he was twenty-five years
old, and twenty-nine years he was king in Jerusalem,
and his mother's name was Abijah daughter of
Zechariah. [2]And he did what was right in the eyes of
the LORD as all that David his father had done. [3]In the
first year he was king in the first month he opened the
doors of the house of the LORD and reinforced them.
[4]And he brought the priests and the Levites and
gathered them in the eastern square. [5]And he said to
them, "Hear me, Levites. Now consecrate yourselves
and consecrate the house of the LORD God of your
fathers, and take out what is impure from the sacred
space. [6]For our fathers betrayed and did what was evil
in the eyes of the LORD and forsook Him, and turned
their faces away from the LORD's sanctuary and
turned their backs. [7]They also closed the doors of the
great hall and extinguished the lamps and did not burn
incense and did not offer up burnt offerings to the God
of Israel. [8]And the fury of the LORD was upon Judah
and Jerusalem, and He turned them into a horror and a

desolation and a hissing as you see with your own eyes.
9And, look, our fathers fell by the sword, and our sons
and our daughters and our wives fell captive because
of this. 10Now it is my intention to seal a covenant with
the LORD, God of Israel, that His smoldering wrath
turn back from us. 11My sons, do not fall away, for you
the LORD has chosen to stand before Him to minister
to Him, to be for him ministers and offerers of
incense.” 12And the Levites arose, Mahath son of
Amasai and Joel son of Azariah of the Kohathites, and
of the Merarites Kish son of Abdi and Azariah son of
Jehalelel, and of the Gershonites, Joah son of Zimmah
and Eden son of Joah. 13And of the sons of Elizaphan,
Shimri and Jeiel, and of the sons of Asaph, Zechariah
and Mattaniah. 14And of the sons of Heman, Jehiel and
Shimei. And of the sons of Jeduthun, Shemaiah and
Uzziel. 15And they gathered their brothers and
consecrated themselves and came, according to the
king’s command by the words of the LORD to purify
the house of the LORD. 16And the priests came inside
the house of the LORD to purify, and they took out to
the court of the house of the LORD whatever was
unclean that they found in the LORD’s temple, and the
Levites received it to take it out to the Kidron Wadi.
17And they began consecrating on the first of the
month, and on the eighth day of the month they came

into the great hall of the LORD and consecrated the house of the LORD for eight days, and on the sixteenth day of the first month they finished. [18]And they came inside to King Hezekiah and said, “We have purified all the house of the LORD and the altar for burnt offerings and all its vessels and the table for the bread in rows and all its vessels. [19]And all the vessels that King Ahaz had shunted aside during his kingship through his betrayal we have readied and consecrated, and here they are before the altar of the LORD.” [20]And King Hezekiah rose early and gathered all the commanders of the city and went up to the house of the LORD. [21]And they brought seven bulls and seven rams and seven sheep and seven he-goats as an offense offering for the royal house and for the sanctuary and for Judah, and he said to the Aaronide priests to offer them up on the altar of the LORD. [22]And they slaughtered the cattle, and the priests took the blood and sprinkled it on the altar, and they slaughtered the sheep and cast the blood on the altar. [23]And they presented the offense-offering goats to the king and the assembly and placed their hands on them. [24]And the priests slaughtered them and purged the altar with their blood to atone for all Israel, for the king had said that the burnt offering and the offense offering were for all Israel. [25]And he set the Levites in the house of

the LORD with cymbals, with lutes, and with lyres, as by the command of David and Gad the king's seer and Nathan the prophet, for by the LORD was the command through His prophet. [26]And the Levites stood with the instruments of David and the priests with trumpets. [27]And Hezekiah said to bring up the burnt offering to the altar, and as the burnt offering began, the song of the LORD began with trumpets and the instruments of David king of Israel. [28]And all the assembly were bowing down and the song was sounding forth and the trumpets were playing—all of it till the burnt offering was done. [29]And as the offering was finished, the king and all those with him kneeled and bowed down. [30]And King Hezekiah, together with the Levite officers, said to praise the LORD with the words of David and of Asaph the seer, and they praised in utmost rejoicing and did obeisance and bowed down. [31]And Hezekiah spoke out and said, "Now you have consecrated yourselves to the LORD. Approach and bring sacrifices and thanksgiving offerings to the house of the LORD." And the assembly brought sacrifices and the thanksgiving offerings, and all whose heart urged them—burnt offerings. [32]And the number of the burnt offerings that the assembly brought came to seventy bulls, a hundred rams, two hundred sheep, all these for burnt offering

to the LORD. [33]And the consecrated gifts—six hundred bulls and three thousand sheep. [34]But the priests were too few and could not flay all the burnt offerings, and their brothers the Levites supported them until the task was finished and until the priests had consecrated themselves, for the Levites were more devoted to consecrate themselves than the priests. [35]And besides the abundance of burnt offerings there was the suet of the well-being sacrifices and the libations for the burnt offerings. And the service of the house of the LORD was firmly established. [36]And Hezekiah and all the people rejoiced that God had established it for the people, for the thing had come about in a trice.

CHAPTER 29 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Hezekiah became king*. The corresponding report about Hezekiah in the Deuteronomistic History begins in 2 Kings 18, but all the details are different, with the two sources agreeing only that Hezekiah was a pious king who initiated cultic reforms.

3. *he opened the doors of the house of the* LORD. His predecessor Ahaz had closed them.

4. *And he brought the priests and the Levites and gathered them in the eastern square*. Hewing to his sacerdotal agenda, the Chronicler concentrates on Hezekiah's consecrating the temple officiants and then on the details of the

sacrificial cult. In Kings, the emphasis is on Hezekiah's removing the hilltop sanctuaries.

6. *turned their backs*. Literally, the back of the neck.

9. *our fathers fell by the sword*. The reference may be to the incursion of the Assyrian emperor Sennacherib into Judah, though that would be the case only if this rededication took place after 701 B.C.E.

10. *it is my intention*. Literally, "it is with my heart." In biblical idiom, the heart is the organ in which thoughts are framed and plans are devised.

12. *And the Levites arose*. Once again, the Chronicler proceeds to provide a list of names as a kind of authentication of his report.

22. *the priests took the blood and sprinkled it on the altar*. As elsewhere, blood in cultic contexts is thought to have a purgative power. See verse 24.

26. *the instruments of David*. In the Book of Samuel, David is identified as a singer and a player of the lyre, but by this late date, the general ascription of Psalms to him was taking hold, so the instruments of the singers of psalms are imagined to be ones for which he had established a precedent.

28. *were bowing down . . . was sounding forth . . . were playing*. The repeated use of the participial form of the verb is meant to convey a continuing action and to evoke the presentness of the grand scene of celebration in the Temple.

31. *you have consecrated yourselves*. A different expression is used here from the one that appears in verse 15. Its literal sense is "you have filled your hands."

34. *the Levites were more devoted*. Literally, "were more straight-hearted."

36. *God had established*. The grammatical form of the verb is anomalous and may reflect the loosening of Hebrew usage in the Second Temple period.

CHAPTER 30

[1]And Hezekiah sent out to all Israel and Judah, and he also wrote missives to Ephraim and Manasseh to come to the house of the LORD in Jerusalem to perform the Passover to the LORD God of Israel. [2]And the king and his officers and all the assembly in Jerusalem took counsel to perform the Passover in the second month. [3]For they could not do it at its set time for the priests had not consecrated themselves in the required numbers and the people had not gathered in Jerusalem. [4]And the thing seemed right in the eyes of the king and in the eyes of all the assembly. [5]And they set word to send about a proclamation through all Israel from Beersheba to Dan to come to perform the Passover to the LORD God of Israel in Jerusalem, for they had not for the most part done as was written. [6]And the couriers went with missives from the hand of the king and his officials through all Israel and Judah and by the king's command, saying, "Israelites, turn back to the LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, that He turn back to the survivors remaining of

you from the grip of the kings of Assyria [7]And be not like your fathers and like your brothers, who betrayed the LORD God of your fathers, and He made them a desolation, as you can see. [8]Now, do not be stiff-necked like your fathers. Pledge yourselves to the LORD your God and come into His sanctuary that He sanctified for all time, and serve the LORD your God, that His smoldering wrath turn back from you. [9]For when you turn back to the LORD, your brothers and your sons will be given mercy before their captors and will return to this land, for gracious and merciful is the LORD your God, and He will not take His presence from you if you turn back to Him." [10]And the couriers were passing from town to town in the land of Ephraim and Manasseh and as far as Zebulun, but they were laughing at them and mocking them. [11]Yet men from Asher and Manasseh and Zebulun submitted and came to Jerusalem. [12]In Judah as well the hand of God was at work to give them a single heart to do the command of the king and the officials by the word of the LORD. [13]And a great crowd gathered in Jerusalem to do the Festival of Flatbread in the second month, a very great assembly. [14]And they rose up and removed the altars that were in Jerusalem, and all the incense stands they removed and flung them into the Kidron Wadi. [15]And they slaughtered the Passover sacrifice on

the fourteenth of the second month, and the priests and the Levites were ashamed and consecrated themselves and brought burnt offerings to the house of the LORD. [16]And they stood at their station according to their rule, according to the teaching of Moses man of God, the priests sprinkling the blood which they got from the hand of the Levites. [17]For many were there in the assembly who had not consecrated themselves, and the Levites were over the slaughter of the paschal lambs for all who were unclean, to consecrate to the LORD. [18]For most of the people, many from Ephraim and Manasseh, Issachar and Zebulun, had not been purified, yet they ate the Passover sacrifice not as it was written. So Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, “May the good LORD atone for everyone [19]who has readied his heart to seek the LORD God of his fathers, though not in the purity of the sanctuary.” [20]And the LORD heard Hezekiah and healed the people. [21]And the Israelites who were in Jerusalem performed the Festival of Flatbread seven days with great rejoicing, the Levites and the priests praising the LORD with loud-sounding instruments for the LORD. [22]And Hezekiah encouraged all the Levites skilled in deft skill for the LORD, and they completed the festival in seven days, offering well-being sacrifices and confessing to the LORD God of their fathers. [23]And all

the assembly took counsel to do another seven days, and they did seven days in rejoicing, [24]for Hezekiah king of Judah had contributed to the assembly a thousand bulls and ten thousand sheep. And the priests consecrated themselves in large numbers. [25]And all the assembly of Judah and the priests and the Levites and all the assembly coming from Israel and the sojourners coming from the land of Israel and the dwellers in Judah rejoiced. [26]And there was great rejoicing in Jerusalem, for since the days of Solomon son of David king of Israel there had not been its like in Jerusalem. [27]And the levitical priests arose and blessed the people, and the LORD heard their voice, and their prayer came up to His holy abode, to the heavens.

CHAPTER 30 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *to all Israel and Judah*. Hezekiah came to the throne in 715 B.C.E., six years after the northern kingdom of Israel had been destroyed by the Assyrians. If the report here is grounded in historical fact, it provides evidence that, although many of the subjects of the northern kingdom were deported by the Assyrians, substantial numbers of them remained. Hezekiah's political move, then, is to unite the whole Israelite population, north and south, around the Temple cult in Jerusalem.

to perform the Passover. Of the three pilgrim festivals, it was Passover that confirmed the notion of national identity. Compare the celebration of Passover at the beginning of Joshua just before the conquest of the land.

2. *to perform the Passover in the second month*. The prescribed time for Passover is in the first month, but provision is made to observe the holiday a month later for persons on a journey who are then unable to come to the Temple at the fixed time. By analogy, then, because in this instance many of the priests were not yet consecrated—and evidently the northern population could not arrive in time—the festival is postponed for one month.

7. *He made them a desolation*. This is an explicit reference to the destruction of the northern kingdom by Assyria.

8. *Pledge yourselves*. Literally, "give a hand."

9. *will be given mercy*. The Hebrew says merely "for mercy." This may be an ellipsis or may reflect loose usage.

10. *Ephraim . . . Manasseh . . . Zebulun*. All these are to the north.

12. *the hand of God was at work*. The Hebrew says merely "the hand of God was."

14. *the Kidron Wadi*. This was a site for the disposal of rubbish.

15. *were ashamed*. Presumably, because they had not previously consecrated themselves.

16. *which they got*. This is merely implied by ellipsis.

18. *had not been purified*. What is at issue is ritual purity. These northerners, having come from a long journey to Jerusalem, did not have time to undergo the required ablutions before the Temple ceremony.

20. *healed the people*. The verb here is a little surprising. It may simply mean in this context "made whole," because there is no suggestion that the pilgrims were suffering from some illness. The verb "to heal" does have extended meanings in biblical usage.

22. *encouraged*. Others understand this as "persuaded." The literal Hebrew idiom is "spoke to the heart."

they completed the festival. The Masoretic Text reads *wayoʾkhlu,* "they ate" the festival. This translation follows the Septuagint, which evidently had before it a Hebrew text that showed the more likely *wayekhalu,* "they completed."

27. *the LORD heard their voice*. The received text reads “and it was heard in their voice,” which is dubious Hebrew usage. Both the Septuagint and the Vulgate show YHWH as the subject of the active form of this verb, which makes much better sense and follows a familiar pattern: God hears and the prayer reaches Him.

CHAPTER 31

[1]And when all this was finished, all Israel who were
present went out to the towns of Judah and smashed
the cultic pillars and hacked down the cultic poles and
shattered the high places and the altars throughout
Judah and Benjamin and Ephraim and Manasseh to
the last one, and all the Israelites went back, each to
his holding, to their towns. [2]And Hezekiah set up the
orders of the priests according to their orders, each
according to his service for the priests and for the
Levites, for the burnt offerings and for the well-being
sacrifices to minister and to acclaim and to praise in
the gates of the LORD's camps. [3]And the king's
portion for the morning and evening burnt offerings
and the burnt offerings for sabbaths and new moons
and festivals was as written in the Teaching of the
LORD. [4]And he said to the people, to those dwelling
in Jerusalem, to give the portion of the priests and the
Levites, so that they could devote themselves to the
Teaching of the LORD. [5]And as the word spread, the
Israelites gave abundantly the best of the grain, wine,

oil, and honey, and all produce of the field, and the tithe of all in abundance they brought. [6]And the people of Israel and Judah dwelling in the towns of Judah on their part also brought tithes of cattle and sheep and tithes of sacred gifts consecrated to the LORD their God, and they put them in piles. [7]In the third month the piles began to heap up, and in the seventh month they were completed. [8]And Hezekiah and the officials came and saw the piles, and they blessed the LORD and His people Israel. [9]And Hezekiah inquired of the priests and the Levites about the piles, [10]and Azariah the high priest of the house of Zadok, said to him, “Ever since the gift offering began to come to the house of the LORD, there has been eating to the full and much left over, for the LORD has blessed His people, and this vast amount was left over.” [11]And Hezekiah said to ready chambers in the house of the LORD, and they readied them. [12]And they faithfully brought the gift offering and the tithe and the sacred gifts. And over them as supervisor was Conaniah the Levite and Shimei his brother as assistant. [13]And Jehiel and Azaziah and Nahath and Asahel and Jerimoth and Jozabad and Eliel and Ismachiah and Mahath and Benaiah were officials under the authority of Conaniah and Shimei his brother by the designation of King Hezekiah, and Azariah was supervisor of the house of

God. [14]And Kore the son of Imnah the Levite was the gatekeeper on the east over the freewill offerings to God to distribute the gift offerings of the LORD and the most sacred donations. [15]And alongside him were Eden and Miniamin and Jeshua and Shemaiah, Amariah, and Shechaniah in the towns of the priests to distribute to their brothers in the orders, great and small alike, [16]besides the males from three years old who traced their lineage, for all who came into the house of the LORD for daily obligations for their service in their daily watches according to their orders [17]and the lineage of the priests according to their patriarchal houses and the Levites from twenty years old in their watches, in their orders [18]and the lineage of all their little ones, their wives and their sons and their daughters, for all the assembly, for they faithfully consecrated themselves in holiness, [19]and for the Aaronide priests in the pasturelands of their towns, in each and every town, men who had been singled out by name, to give portions to every male among the priests and to all who traced their lineage among the Levites. [20]And Hezekiah did in this manner throughout Judah, and he did what was good and right and true before the LORD his God. [21]And in every act that he undertook in the service of the house of God and in

the Teaching and in the commands to seek his God with all his heart he did and prospered.

CHAPTER 31 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *all Israel who were present*. In the somewhat confusing switch between the two meanings of "Israel," the reference here is to Judahites.
all the Israelites. Now the term refers to the subjects of the northern kingdom.

2. *And Hezekiah set up the orders of the priests*. Hezekiah's religious reform reported in 2 Kings 18 is translated here by the Chronicler into an elaboration of the arrangements for the cultic bureaucracy, with only a brief mention of eliminating idolatry at the beginning.
the gates of the LORD's camps. This is a somewhat surprising designation for the Temple.

5. *the best*. Some understand this in its more literal sense, "the first."

11. *And Hezekiah said to ready chambers*. These would be storerooms to house the huge surplus of donations in produce that had piled up.

15. *And alongside him were*. These words begin a run-on sentence that continues all the way to the end of verse 19. It is another instance in which the Chronicler's control of Hebrew style seems questionable.

16. *from three years old*. This could well be a mistake for "thirty" since the males referred to have come to serve in the Temple.
who traced their lineage. This recurring term seems syntactically a little fuzzy, but the general point is clear—that these portions to be given to the priests and Levites are for males who can confidently trace their lineage within the tribe of Levi.

20. *Hezekiah did in this manner throughout Judah*. In Kings, Hezekiah is seen as an exemplary king chiefly because he rooted out idolatry in his kingdom. Although that is of course mentioned by the Chronicler, the king's principal

doings “in this manner” are his establishing the sacerdotal hierarchies and his instituting a system of gifts—which is to say, material support—for the priests and the Levites.

CHAPTER 32

[1]After these faithful acts, Sennacherib king of Assyria
came, and he came into Judah and encamped against
the fortified towns and meant to breach them to take
them over. [2]And Hezekiah saw that Sennacherib had
come, intent on doing battle against Jerusalem. [3]And
he took counsel with his commanders and his warriors
to stop up the waters of the springs that were outside
the city, and they supported him. [4]And many people
gathered and stopped up all the springs and the wadi
surging through the land, saying, “Why should the
kings of Assyria come and find abundant water?” [5]And
he mustered strength and rebuilt the breached wall and
put up towers on it and outside it another wall and
fortified the Millo in the City of David and made
abundant weapons and shields. [6]And he appointed
battle commanders over the troops and gathered them
around him in the square of the city gate and
encouraged them, saying, “[7]Be strong and stalwart. Do
not be afraid and do not be terrified by the king of
Assyria and by the great throng that is with him, for

there are more with us than with him. [8]He has the power of flesh, but the LORD our God is with us to aid us and to fight our battle." And the troops relied on the words of Hezekiah king of Judah. [9]After this, Sennacherib king of Assyria sent his servants to Jerusalem—he and all his commanders with him being at Lachish—to Hezekiah king of Judah and to all Judah that was in Jerusalem, saying, [10]"Thus said Sennacherib king of Assyria: 'In what do you trust that you sit besieged in Jerusalem? [11]Is not Hezekiah enticing you to make you die in hunger and in thirst, saying, The LORD will save us from the grip of the king of Assyria? [12]Has not Hezekiah taken away His high places and His altars and said to Judah, saying, Before a single altar you shall bow down and upon it you shall burn incense? [13]Do you not know what I and my fathers have done to all the peoples of the lands? Were the gods of the lands able at all to save their land from my hand? [14]Who among all the gods of these nations that my fathers utterly destroyed was able to save his people from my hand, that your god should be able to save you from my hand? [15]And now, let not Hezekiah delude you and let him not entice you in this fashion, and do not put faith in him, for no god, no nation or kingdom was able to save its people from my hand and from the hand of my fathers. How much

more so your gods will not save you from my hand.’”
16And his servants spoke still more against the LORD
and against Hezekiah His servant. 17And he wrote
letters to insult the LORD God of Israel and to say
about him, saying, “Like the gods of the nations of the
lands that did not save their people, so Hezekiah’s god
will not save his people from my hand.” 18And they
called out in a loud voice in Judahite to the people of
Jerusalem who were on the wall to frighten them and
panic them so that they might capture the city. 19And
they spoke about the God of Jerusalem as about the
gods of the peoples of the land, the work of human
hands. 20And King Hezekiah and Isaiah son of Amoz
the prophet prayed about this and cried out to the
heavens. 21And the LORD sent a messenger and he
wiped out every valiant warrior and prince and
commander in the camp of the Assyrian king, and he
turned back in disgrace to his land. And he entered the
house of his god, and the offspring of his own loins
took him down there by the sword. 22And the LORD
rescued Hezekiah and the dwellers of Jerusalem from
the hand of Sennacherib king of Assyria and from
everyone’s hand and gave them respite all around.
23And many were bringing tribute to the LORD to
Jerusalem and precious gifts to Hezekiah king of

Judah, and he was exalted in the eyes of all the nations thereafter.

[24]In those days Hezekiah fell mortally ill. And he prayed to the LORD, and He answered him and gave him a sign. [25]But Hezekiah did not respond according to what had been granted him, for his heart grew haughty, and there was fury against him and against Jerusalem. [26]And Hezekiah humbled himself after his heart had been haughty, both he and the dwellers of Jerusalem, and the LORD's fury did not come down on them in Hezekiah's days. [27]And Hezekiah had very great wealth and honor, and he made for himself treasuries for silver and for gold and for precious stones and for spices and for shields and for lovely vessels, [28]and storehouses for the yield of grain and wine and oil, and stables for every kind of beast, and for the flocks—pens. [29]And towns did he provide for himself and herds of sheep and cattle in abundance, for God gave him very abundant possessions. [30]And he, Hezekiah, stopped up the upper outlet of the waters of the Gihon and directed them down to the west of the City of David. And Hezekiah prospered in all he did. [31]And so in the affair of the spokesmen of the Babylonian commanders who sent to him to

inquire about the sign that was in the land when God abandoned him to test him to know what was in his heart. [32]And the rest of the acts of Hezekiah and his loyal deeds, they are written in the vision of the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz in the book of the kings of Judah and Israel. [33]And Hezekiah lay with his fathers, and all Judah and the dwellers of Jerusalem did him honor in his death. And Manasseh his son was king in his stead.

CHAPTER 32 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Sennacherib king of Assyria came*. The story of the Assyrian assault against Jerusalem and of the sudden withdrawal of the besieging army is reported in 2 Kings 18–19. Although the general outline of the narrative here is similar to the one in Kings, the details are different, and only at a few points is the actual wording taken from Kings.

3. *And he took counsel with his commanders and his warriors*. The sundry defensive measures enumerated here do not appear in Kings. Perhaps the Chronicler did not want to present Hezekiah as entirely passive in the face of the Assyrian onslaught.

7. *Be strong and stalwart*. Hezekiah's exhortation to the troops also does not appear in Kings.

10. *In what do you trust*. The "you" is plural because the Assyrian emissaries are addressing the people, trying to split them off from their king, whom they represent as misleading his subjects.

12. *Has not Hezekiah taken away His high places and His altars*. See the first comment on 2 Kings 18:4.

13. *the gods of the lands*. There is a list of lands in the parallel text in Kings, perhaps omitted here because the names were no longer familiar.

18. *Judahite*. This is of course Hebrew. In Kings, Hezekiah's courtiers plead with the Assyrians to use Aramaic instead so that the people will not understand, but it is precisely to the people that the Assyrians want to address their words.

21. *and the offspring of his own loins took him down there*. In Kings, their names are given. See the first comment on 2 Kings 19:37.

24. *In those days Hezekiah fell mortally ill*. The parallel account appears in 2 Kings 20, though the details are not the same.

gave him a sign. The sign is specified in Kings—the shadow of the sundial is made to go backward.

25. *his heart grew haughty*. Hezekiah's arrogance is not part of the report in Kings, but the reference may be to his showing all his wealth to Babylonian ambassadors (2 Kings 20:12–19).

26. *the LORD's fury did not come down on them in Hezekiah's days*. The Chronicler adds this note because of his awareness that "the fury" overtook Judah in 586 B.C.E.

31. *the affair of the spokesmen of the Babylonian commanders*. This also probably refers to the Babylonian delegation that visited Jerusalem as reported in 2 Kings 20:12–19. The inquiry about the sign would be about the miraculous sign or portent of the sundial, word of which is here supposed to have reached as far as Babylonia.

CHAPTER 33

[1]Twelve years old was Manasseh when he became
king, and fifty-five years he was king in Jerusalem.
[2]And he did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD
like the abominations of the nations that the LORD
had dispossessed before the Israelites. [3]And he rebuilt
the high places that Hezekiah his father had smashed
and put up altars to the Baalim and made cultic poles
and bowed down to all the array of the heavens and
worshipped them. [4]And he built altars in the house of
the LORD of which the LORD had said, “In
Jerusalem My name shall be forever.” [5]And he built
altars to all the array of the heavens in both courts of
the house of the LORD. [6]And he passed his sons
through the fire in the Valley of Ben-Hinnom and
performed sorcery and divined and did witchcraft and
conjured ghosts and familiar spirits. He did much that
was evil in the eyes of the LORD to vex Him. [7]And he
placed in the house of God a sculpted image that he
had made of which God had said to David and to
Solomon his son, “In this house and in Jerusalem,

which I have chosen from all the tribes of Israel will I set My name forever. [8]And I will no longer remove the feet of Israel from the soil on which I set your fathers —but only if they keep to do what I charged them in regard to all the teaching and the statutes and the laws through Moses." [9]And Manasseh led Judah and the dwellers of Jerusalem astray to do what was evil more than the nations that the LORD had destroyed before the Israelites. [10]And the LORD spoke to Manasseh and to his people, but they did not listen. [11]And the LORD brought against them the army commanders of the king of Assyria, and they captured Manasseh with hooks and bound him in fetters and led him off to Babylonia. [12]And in his distress he implored the LORD his God and greatly humbled himself before the God of his fathers. [13]And he prayed to Him and entreated Him, and He heard his plea and brought him back to Jerusalem to his kingship, and Manasseh knew that the LORD was God. [14]And afterward, he built an outer wall for the City of David west of the Gihon in the wadi on the approach to the Fish Gate, and it encircled the Ophel. And he raised it very high, and he posted military commanders in all the fortified towns in Judah. [15]And he removed the alien gods and the image from the house of the LORD and all the altars that he had built on the mount of the house of the

LORD in Jerusalem, and he flung them outside the city. [16]And he repaired the altar of the LORD and sacrificed upon it well-being sacrifices and thanksgiving sacrifices and said to Judah to worship the LORD God of Israel. [17]But the people were still sacrificing on the high places, though only to the LORD their God. [18]And the rest of the acts of Manasseh and his prayer to his God and the words of the seers who spoke to him in the name of the LORD God of Israel, they are in the acts of the kings of Israel [19]and his prayer and the granting of his entreaty and all his offense and his betrayal and the sites on which he built high places and set up cultic poles and idols before the time he humbled himself, they are written with the words of his seers. [20]And Manasseh lay with his fathers, and they buried him in his house, and Amon his son became king in his stead.

[21]Twenty-two years old was Amon when he became king, and two years he was king in Jerusalem. [22]And he did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD as Manasseh his father had done, and to all the idols that Manasseh his father had made he sacrificed and he worshipped them. [23]And he did not humble himself before the LORD as Manasseh his father had humbled

himself, for he, Amon, incurred even more guilt.
[24]And his servants hatched a plot against him and put
him to death in his house. [25]And the people of the land
struck down all the plotters against King Amon, and
the people of the land made Josiah his son king in his
stead.

CHAPTER 33 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Twelve years old was Manasseh*. Verses 1–10 replicate 2 Kings 21:1–9 with only minor changes. Readers are referred to the commentary on 2 Kings 21.

11. *And the* LORD *brought against them the army commanders of the king of Assyria*. This episode does not appear in the parallel passage in Kings.

12. *greatly humbled himself before the God of his fathers*. The writer in Kings does not record any such act of contrition on the part of a king whom he regards as relentlessly evil. Perhaps the Chronicler was uncomfortable with this entirely bleak portrait. It is questionable whether Manasseh was actually exiled for a time as reported here.

19. *and his prayer*. This looks like an inadvertent repetition of "his prayer" in the previous verse.

his seers. The Masoretic Text has *ḥozay,* "my seers." Some think it is a name, but "his seers," reflected in the Septuagint, is more likely.

20. *And Manasseh lay with his fathers*. The passage from here to the end of the chapter replicates 2 Kings 21:18–26, and readers may consult the one extended comment on that passage. There are a few minor changes of the text from Kings, with the one salient difference being in verse 23, "And he did not humble himself before the LORD as Manasseh his father had humbled

himself," which of course could not appear in Kings because the writer in Kings knows nothing of this episode of contrition.

CHAPTER 34

[1]Eight years old was Josiah when he became king, and
thirty-one years he was king in Jerusalem. [2]And he did
what was right in the eyes of the LORD, and he went
in the ways of David his father and did not swerve to
the right or to the left. [3]And in the eighth year of his
reign, when he was still a lad, he began to seek out the
God of David his father, and in the twelfth year he
began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places
and the cultic poles and the idols and the molten
images. [4]And they shattered the altars of the Baalim in
his presence, and the incense stands above them he
hacked down, and the cultic poles and the idols and the
molten images he smashed and pulverized and threw
them over the graves of those who had sacrificed to
them. [5]And the bones of the priests he burned on their
altars, and he purged Judah and Jerusalem. [6]And in the
towns of Manasseh and Ephraim and Samaria as far as
Naphtali in their squares all around [7]he shattered the
altars, and the cultic poles he ground into dust, and all

the incense stands he hacked down in all the land of Israel. And he returned to Jerusalem.

[8]And in the eighteenth year of his reign after purging the land and the house, he commissioned Shaphan son of Azaliah and Maaseiah the governor of the city and Joah son of Joahaz the recorder to repair the house of the LORD his God. [9]And they came to the high priest Hilkiah and gave him the silver brought to the house of God that the Levites, guardians of the threshold, had gathered from Manasseh and Ephraim and from all the remnant of Israel and from all Judah and Benjamin, and he returned to Jerusalem. [10]And they gave it to those appointed over those doing the tasks in the house of the LORD, and they in turn gave it to those doing the tasks in the house of the LORD to repair the breaches of the house. [11]And they gave it to the carpenters and to the builders to buy quarried stone and wood for the couplings and for the roof-beams of the buildings that the kings of Judah had let fall into ruin. [12]And the men were doing the tasks faithfully, and over them were appointed Jahath and Obadiah the Levites, of the Merarites, and Zechariah and Meshullam, of the Kohathites, to direct them, and Levites expert in musical instruments [13]were over the

porters and directing all who did the tasks and every kind of labor, and from the Levites there were scribes and overseers and gatekeepers. [14]And when they took out the silver brought to the house of the LORD, Hilkiah the priest found a book of the teaching of the LORD by Moses. [15]And Hilkiah spoke out and said to Shaphan the scribe, “I have found a book of teaching in the house of the LORD.” And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan. [16]And Shaphan brought the book to the king, and furthermore brought back word to the king, saying, “All that has been given into the hand of your servants they are doing: [17]They have melted down the silver that is in the house of the LORD and given it over to those appointed and to those doing the tasks.” [18]And Shaphan the scribe told the king, saying, “Hilkiah the priest gave me a book,” and Shaphan read it to the king. [19]And it happened when the king heard the words of the teaching, that he rent his garments. [20]And the king charged Hilkiah and Ahikan son of Shaphan and Abdon son of Micah and Shaphan the scribe and Asaiah the king’s servant, saying, [21]“Go, inquire of the LORD on my behalf and on behalf of those remaining in Israel and in Judah concerning the words of the book that has been found, for great is the wrath of the LORD that has been poured down on us because our fathers have not kept the word of the

LORD to do as all that is written in this book." [22]And Hilkiah and those the king had charged went to Huldah the prophetess, wife of Shallum son of Tokhath son of Hasrah keeper of the wardobe, and she was living in Jerusalem in the Mishneh, and they spoke to her in this manner. [23]And she said to them, [24]"Thus said the LORD: 'I am about to bring evil on this place and on its inhabitants, all the imprecations written in the book that they read out to the king of Judah [25]in return for their forsaking Me and burning incense to other gods so as to vex Me with all their handiwork, and My wrath will pour down on this place and will not be extinguished.' [26]And to the king of Judah who has sent you to inquire of the LORD, thus shall you say to him: Thus said the LORD God of Israel—'The words that you have heard, [27]inasmuch as your heart has quailed and you humbled yourself before Me, and you rent your garments and wept before Me, I, too, have heard, said the LORD. [28]I am about to gather you to your fathers, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace, and your eyes shall not see all the evil that I am about to bring on this place and on its inhabitants.'" And they brought back word to the king. [29]And the king sent out and gathered all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. [30]And the king went up to the house of the LORD, and every man of Judah and the

inhabitants of Jerusalem and the priests and the Levites and all the people from the greatest to the least with him, and he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that was found in the house of the LORD. [31]And the king stood on his platform and sealed the covenant before the LORD to walk after the LORD and to keep His commands and His precepts and His statutes with all his heart and with all his being to do the words of the covenant written in this book. [32]And he made all who were in Jerusalem and Benjamin stand by it, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem acted according to the covenant of God, God of their fathers. [33]And Josiah removed all the abominations from all the lands that were the Israelites', and he impressed all who were in Israel to serve the LORD their God. All his days they did not swerve from the LORD God of their fathers.

CHAPTER 34 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Eight years old was Josiah*. Verses 1 and 2 replicate 2 Kings 22:1–2, omitting only the name of Josiah's mother.

3. *And in the eighth year of his reign, when he was still a lad, he began to seek out the God of David his father*. This is not part of the report in 2 Kings 22. The Chronicler may have wanted to emphasize that Josiah's fabled piety began when he was still an adolescent.

in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem. This would be 628 B.C.E., seven years before the discovery of the book of teaching in the Temple. In Kings, the purging of the apparatus of idolatry is said to take place after that discovery (2 Kings 23:4–20), and the details are different.

6. *in the towns of Manasseh and Ephraim*. This is still the region of the northern kingdom of Israel, at this point extinct for nearly a century. It provides another indication that a substantial Israelite population may have remained in this part of the country after the Assyrian deportations of 721 B.C.E.

in their squares. The Masoretic Text here reads, enigmatically, *behar bateyhem* ("in the mountain of their houses"?). This translation follows the Syriac reading, *bereḥovoteyhem*.

8. *And in the eighteenth year*. Everything from this point to the end of verse 32 closely replicates 2 Kings 22:3–23:3. Readers are referred to the commentary on that section of the text in Kings.

9. *all the remnant of Israel*. This phrase is an explicit statement that the inhabitants of the northern region were the descendants of a population that survived the Assyrian exile.

33. *And Josiah removed all the abominations*. This verse serves as a summary of the detailed report in 2 Kings 23:4ff. of Josiah's purging the kingdom of idolatry.

CHAPTER 35

[1]And Josiah made a Passover to the LORD in
Jerusalem, and they slaughtered the paschal lamb on
the fourteenth of the first month. [2]And he stationed
priests on their watches and made them stalwart for
the service of the house of the LORD. [3]And he said to
the Levites instructing all Israel, who were consecrated
to the LORD, “Put the Holy Ark in the house that
Solomon son of David king of Israel built. You no
longer have to bear it on your shoulders. Now serve
the LORD your God and His people Israel. [4]And be
ready according to your patriarchal houses, according
to your orders, as by the writ of David king of Israel
and the writing of Solomon his son. [5]And stand in the
sanctuary according to the divisions of the patriarchal
houses for your brothers who are of the people, by the
divisions of patriarchal houses for the Levites. [6]And
slaughter the paschal lamb and consecrate yourselves
and prepare it for your brothers according to the word
of the LORD through Moses.” [7]And Josiah
contributed sheep and goats for the people, everything

for the Passover sacrifices, for all who were present, thirty thousand in number, and three thousand cattle. These were from the property of the king. [8]And his officials for the freewill offering for the people, for the priests, and for the Levites, Hilkiah and Zechariah and Jehiel, overseers of the house of God for the priests, gave for the Passover sacrifices two thousand six hundred, and three hundred cattle. [9]And Conaniah and Shemaiah and Nethaneel, his brothers, and Hashabiah and Jeiel and Jozabad, the Levite officers, contributed on behalf of the Levites for the Passover sacrifices five thousand five hundred cattle. [10]And the service was firmly set, and the priests stood at their station, and the Levites according to their orders by the king's command. [11]And they slaughtered the paschal sacrifices, and the priests cast the blood while the Levites did the flaying. [12]And they removed the burnt offering to give it to the people according to the people's divisions of patriarchal houses to offer to the LORD as written in the book of Moses, and the same for the cattle. [13]And they roasted the paschal sacrifice over fire according to the regulation, and the consecrated gifts they cooked in pots and cauldrons and pans and rushed them to all the people. [14]And afterward they prepared for themselves and for the priests because the Aaronide priests were busy offering

up the burnt offering and the suet until nightfall, and the Levites prepared it for themselves and for the Aaronide priests. [15]And the Asaphide choristers were at their station according to the command of David, and Asaph and Heman and Jeduthun, the king's seers, and the gatekeeper for each and every gate, did not have to turn away from their service, for their Levite brothers prepared it for them. [16]And all the LORD's service was firmly set on that day to do the paschal sacrifice and to offer up burnt offerings on the altar of the LORD according to the command of King Josiah. [17]And the Israelites present did the paschal sacrifice at that time and the Festival of Flatbread seven days. [18]And no Passover like it had been done in Israel from the days of Samuel the prophet, and all the kings of Israel had not done like the Passover that Josiah and the priests and the Levites and all Judah and Israel present and the dwellers of Jerusalem did. [19]In the eighteenth year of Josiah's kingship this Passover was done.

[20]After all this by which Josiah had readied the house, Necho king of Egypt came up to do battle at Carchemish by the Euphrates, and Josiah sallied forth to meet him. [21]And he sent messages to him, saying,

“What do I have to do with you, king of Judah? It is
not against you today but against the house at war with
me, and a god has said to me to hurry. Desist from the
god that is with me, lest he destroy you.” [22]But Josiah
did not turn away from him, for he had donned his
armor to do battle with him and did not listen to
Necho’s words from God, and he came to do battle in
the Valley of Megiddo. [23]And the archers shot at King
Josiah and the king said to his servants, “Bear me
away, for I am grievously wounded.” [24]And his
servants bore him away from the chariot and put him
in the second chariot that he had and carried him to
Jerusalem. And he died and was buried in the tombs
of his fathers, and all Judah and Jerusalem were
mourning for Josiah. [25]And Jeremiah wrote a lament
for Josiah, and all the male and female singers recited
it in their lamentations, and they are written in
Lamentations. [26]And the rest of the acts of Josiah and
his deeds of loyalty as is written in the Teaching of the
LORD, [27]and his acts early and late, they are written in
the book of the kings of Israel and of Judah.

CHAPTER 35 NOTES

Click here to advance to the next section of the text.

1. *Passover . . . paschal lamb*. The same Hebrew word, *pesah*, sometimes refers to the festival and sometimes to the sacrifice of the lamb that is the key element in the celebration of the festival. The meaning must be judged according to context, and this initial verse clearly uses the term in the two different senses.

2. *And he stationed priests*. None of this cultic detail appears in Kings.

4. *as by the writ of David king of Israel and the writing of Solomon his son*. There is no mention in Samuel and Kings of any such writing, but, once again, the Chronicler seeks to confirm the legitimacy of the practice of the cult through the legitimacy of the Davidic dynasty elected by God.

7. *everything for the Passover sacrifices*. Here the term is used in the plural and includes animals other than lambs.

11. *cast the blood*. There is no object of the verb in the Masoretic Text, but three ancient versions show "the blood."

15. *the king's seers*. The received text has "seer," but some Hebrew manuscripts show a plural, appropriate for the chain of several names to which this term is in apposition. There is a tradition that the priesthood included visionaries.

20. *Necho king of Egypt came up to do battle at Carchemish*. This and what follows have a parallel in 2 Kings 23:29–30, but the details here differ and only a little of the language is drawn from Kings. Necho was joining his Assyrian allies in a battle against the Babylonians.

21. *the house at war with me*. Literally, "the house of my war." Though it is not certain, "house" may refer to the royal house of Babylonia.

22. *for he had donned his armor*. The usual meaning of the Hebrew verb translated as "donned" is "disguised himself," and so the conjectural translation is based on context. The death of the king in his chariot at the hand of an archer is reminiscent of Ahab's death on the battlefield (1 Kings 22:30–35), and in that scene, Ahab in fact disguises himself, so a confusion may have crept into the transposing of the story from Kings.

Necho's words from God. Necho was surely speaking about one of his own gods, but our writer wants to convert this into an oracle from the one and only God.

he came to do battle in the Valley of Megiddo. This is in the Land of Israel, far to the west of Carchemish on the Euphrates. Megiddo, however, is a kind of crossroads, and Josiah may have engaged the Egyptian force there on its way to the Euphrates.

24. *the second chariot that he had*. This would appear to be a kind of auxiliary vehicle—some speculate, for carrying arms. Perhaps Josiah's chariot was damaged by arrows at the same time its rider was hit. Alternately, it might have been a lighter, faster vehicle for conveying the wounded king.

25. *they are written in Lamentations*. This looks like a reference to the Book of Lamentations, but there is scant evidence in it of a lament for Josiah. In any case, this passage is one trigger for the tradition that Lamentations was composed by Jeremiah.

CHAPTER 36

[1]And the people of the land took Jehoahaz son of
Josiah and made him king in his father's stead in
Jerusalem. [2]Twenty-three years old was Jehoahaz
when he became king, and three months he was king
in Jerusalem. [3]And the king of Egypt removed him in
Jerusalem and imposed a levy on the land of a
hundred talents of silver and talents of gold. [4]And the
king of Egypt made Eliakim his brother king over
Judah and Jerusalem and changed his name to
Jehoiakim. And Necho took Jehoahaz his brother and
brought him to Egypt. [5]Twenty-five years old was
Jehoiakim when he became king, and eleven years he
was king in Jerusalem. And he did what was evil in the
eyes of the LORD his God. [6]Nebuchadnezzar king of
Babylonia came up against him and bound him in
fetters to bring him to Babylonia. [7]And
Nebuchadnezzar brought some of the vessels of the
house of the LORD to Babylonia and placed them in
his palace in Babylonia. [8]And the rest of the acts of
Jehoiakim and his abominations that he did and what

was found against him, they are written in the book of the kings of Israel and Judah. And Jehoiachin his son was king in his stead. [9]Eighteen years old was Jehoiachin when he became king, and three months and ten days he was king in Jerusalem. And he did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD. [10]And at the turn of the year King Nebuchadnezzar sent and had him brought to Babylonia with the precious vessels of the house of the LORD, and he made Zedekiah his brother king over Judah and Jerusalem. [11]Twenty-one years old was Zedekiah when he became king, and eleven years he was king in Jerusalem. [12]And he did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD his God. He did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke from the LORD. [13]And also against King Nebuchadnezzar he rebelled, and he was too stiff-necked and too hard-hearted to turn back to the LORD God of Israel. [14]And also all the priestly officers greatly betrayed as with all the abominations of the nations, and they defiled the house of the LORD that He had consecrated in Jerusalem. [15]And the LORD God of their fathers had sent His messengers to them, constantly sending, for He had pity on His people and on His abode. [16]But they insulted God's messengers and scorned His words and mocked His prophets until God's wrath came up against His people beyond

remedy. [17]And He brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, and he slew their young men by the sword in their sanctuary and had no pity on young man and virgin, elder and graybeard—everything God gave into his hand. [18]And all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD and the treasures of the king and his officers—he brought all to Babylonia. [19]And they burned the house of God and shattered the walls of Jerusalem, and all its citadels they burned in fire, destroying all its precious vessels. [20]And he exiled the survivors of the sword to Babylonia, and they became slaves to him and to his sons until the reign of the kingdom of Persia [21]to fulfill the word of the LORD through Jeremiah, “Until the land expiates its sabbath years, all the days of the desolation that it kept a sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.”

[22]And in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, as the word of the LORD through Jeremiah was completed, the LORD roused the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, and he sent round an oral proclamation through all his kingdom, and also a writing, saying, [23]“Thus said Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth has the LORD God of the heavens given me, and He

has charged me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever be among you of all His people, may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up."

CHAPTER 36 NOTES

1. *And the people of the land took Jehoahaz son of Josiah and made him king*. The first five verses of this concluding chapter correspond fairly closely to the passage that starts with the second sentence in 2 Kings 23:30 and continues through verse 37. Readers are referred to the commentary on that passage in 2 Kings.

6. *Nebuchadnezzar . . . bound him in fetters to bring him to Babylonia*. This report of the deportation of Jehoiakim to Babylonia does not appear in Kings.

9. *Eighteen years old was Jehoiachin*. The Masoretic Text has "eight," which cannot be right because he would scarcely have been old enough to do evil in the eyes of the LORD. The parallel text in 2 Kings 24:8 has "eighteen," as does the Septuagint. The following account of his exile by Nebuchadnezzar is confirmed by Kings, though the two narratives differ in details.

12. *He did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet*. The conflict between Zedekiah and Jeremiah, including the king's burning the scroll of Jeremiah's prophecies, is recounted in several narrative segments in Jeremiah.

who spoke from the LORD. Literally, "from the mouth of the LORD," with no verb.

15. *His messengers*. These are the prophets.

17. *everything God gave into his hand*. The Hebrew merely says "He gave into his hand," but the translation supplies "God" in order to avoid the confusion between the divine "He" and the "he" who is Nebuchadnezzar.

21. *Until the land expiates its sabbath years*. This verse, or at least a close approximation, actually appears in Leviticus 26:34, not in Jeremiah. The Chronicler is drawn into this attribution through the invoking at the end of the verse of Jeremiah's prophecy of seventy years of desolation (Jeremiah

25:12). That prophecy would become a kind of touchstone for hopes of a future restoration after the period of destruction. The Book of Daniel, written in the second century B.C.E., still clings to this prophecy and tries to rescue the relevance of the numbers by interpreting "seventy" as seven seventies.

all the days of the desolation that it kept a sabbath. Here, "kept a sabbath," *shavatah,* has a negative meaning, referring to the long period when the land lay untilled and desolate.

23. *All the kingdoms of the earth has the LORD God of the heavens given me*. In keeping with his pious theology, the Chronicler represents Cyrus as a staunch monotheist.

and let him go up. This is a single word in the Hebrew, *weyaʿal,* and according to the Hebrew canonical order, which this translation follows, it is the very last word of the Hebrew Bible. Jewish tradition has accordingly made much of the appearance of this word at the very end: it is the verb used for "going up" from the Diaspora to the Land of Israel (and retained as such in modern Zionist usage), and it concludes this story of exile and Scripture as a whole on a literally upbeat note, Cyrus's urging the exiled people to go back up to its native land. The long narrative of the Book of Kings ends with a description of Jehoiachin's comfortable circumstances in Babylonian exile, granted a place of honor among exiled kings. The text in Chronicles, produced perhaps a century and a half later, after the Return to Zion, chooses to jump forward to Cyrus's decree and thus to an intimation of the nation restored to its homeland.